

Moving Forward to Stand Still: Social Experiences of Children with a Parent in Prison in Ireland

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Abstract : There is no doubt that parental imprisonment directly alters the social experiences of childhood for many children worldwide today. Indeed, the extent to which meaningful contact with a parent in prison can positively impact on the life of a child is well documented as are the benefits for the prisoner, particularly in the long term and post-release. However, despite the growing acceptance of children's rights in Ireland over the past decade in particular, it appears that children's rights have not yet succeeded in breaking through the walls of Irish prisons when children are visiting an incarcerated parent. In a prison system that continues to prioritise security over all other considerations, little attention has been given to the importance of recognising and protecting the rights of children affected by parental imprisonment in Ireland for children, families and society in the long term. This paper will present the findings which have emerged from a national qualitative research project (the first of its kind to be conducted in Ireland) which examines the current visiting conditions for children and families, and the related culture of visitation within the Irish Prison system. This study investigated, through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the unique and specialist perspectives of senior prison management, prison governors, prison officers, support organisations, prison child care workers, as well as those with a family member in prison who have direct experience of prison visits in Ireland which involve children and young people. The reality of the current system of visitation that operates in Irish prisons and its impact on children's rights is presented from a variety of perspectives. The idea of what meaningful contact means from a children's rights based perspective is interrogated as are the benefits long term for both the child and the offender. The current system is benchmarked against well-accepted international children's rights norms as reflected under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. The dissonance that continues to exist between the theory of children's rights which includes the right to maintain meaningful contact with a parent in prison and current practice and procedure in Irish Prisons will be explored. In adopting a children's rights based perspective combined with socio-legal research, this paper will explore the added value that this approach to prison visiting might offer in responding to this particularly marginalised group of children in terms of their social experience of childhood. Finally, the question will be raised as to whether or not there is a responsibility on prisons to view children as independent rights holders when they come to visit the prison or is the prison entitled to focus solely on the prisoner with their children being viewed as a circumstance of the offender? Do the interests of the child and the prisoner have to be exclusive or is there any way of marrying the two?

Keywords : children's rights, prisoners, sociology, visitation

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