

**Submission
No 32**

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AFFECTED BY PARENTAL INCARCERATION

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Date Received: 29 April 2022

Submission to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration



Prepared by:

Dr Marietta Martinovic and Grace Stringer (on behalf of 5 Think Tanks)

- 'Changing Faces' Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and Tarrengower Think Tank;
- 'Change on the Inside' Ravenhall Think Tank;
- 'Seeking Change' Loddon Think Tank;
- 'Think for Change' Marngoneet - Karreenga annex Think Tank; and
- 'Voices for Change from Beyond the Stone Walls' Think Tank.

RMIT University

29th April 2022

Five Think Tanks

Since 2015, Dr Marietta Martinovic, Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Justice from RMIT University, has been facilitating the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program at five Victorian prisons, and running four prison-based Think Tanks and one Community-based Think Tank. Inside-Out is a transformative learning environment which increases opportunities for students inside and outside prison (prisoners and university students), to have learning experiences that emphasise collaboration, dialogue and innovative problem-solving, across social barriers. Students are encouraged to become leaders and address issues of social concern specifically related to crime and justice.

Exchanges between inside and outside students in the Inside-Out program provide outside students with an unparalleled, first-hand, real-life experience of seeing the human element of incarceration, the specific struggles, the complexities, and impacts. This leads to them developing a passion and drive to make a difference by improving the incarceration experience, and hence increasing the likelihood that they will desist from further crime. This aligns with the central purpose of the Think Tanks, which is to provide practical strategies to reduce the likelihood of people returning to prison and improving their quality of life upon release.

Following the initial deliveries of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange teaching programs at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (DPFC) in 2015, Marngoneet - Correctional Centre - Karreenga annex in 2017; Ravenhall Correctional Centre in 2018, Loddon prison in 2021, four prison-based Think Tanks commenced. These are:

- 'Changing Faces' Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and Tarrengower Think Tank;
- 'Change on the Inside' Ravenhall Think Tank;
- 'Seeking Change' Loddon Think Tank; and
- 'Think for Change' Marngoneet- Karreenga annex Think Tank.

In 2020 a community-based Think Tank was also established to cater for people who have been released from prison and who are still wanting to engage in discussions about

improving the criminal justice system and contributing to policy making. It is:

- 'Voices for Change from Beyond the Stone Walls' Community Collective (Think Tank).

Think Tanks were approved by Corrections Victoria Executive and RMIT's Global, Urban and Social Studies Executive. Each Think Tank is composed of approximately 20 students [10 inside participants (prisoners/ex-prisoners) and 10 outside participants (RMIT's Criminology and Justice students)] who meet fortnightly. Our goal is to influence positive change inside and outside of the prison system through effective communication with criminal justice system personnel including policy makers and prison management.

To: The Secretariat
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East Melbourne, Naarm VIC 3002
Email: justiceinquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au

29 April 2021

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration. We have addressed the following Terms of Reference of the Inquiry:

- a) *the social, emotional and health impacts on affected children;*
- c) *how effective [the current] services are, including—*
 - (i) *consideration of evaluation of work already done in this area; and*
 - (ii) *identifying areas for improvement.*

Our submission is **led by the voices of incarcerated people**, whose insights and opinions have been collated through the Inside Out programs and Think Tanks over the last seven years. It is divided into two sections, responding respectively to the terms of reference we have selected.

Please find our submission below.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Marietta Martinovic (on behalf of 5 Think Tanks)

Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Justice

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Table of Contents

1.0 Responding to ToR part (a): The social, emotional and health impacts [of parental incarceration] on affected children.....	6
1.1 Background: A Review of the Literature.....	6
1.2 Social wellbeing	6
1.3 Emotional wellbeing	8
1.4 Mental wellbeing	9
1.5 Impacts on Education	10
2.0 Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on parent-child relationships.....	11
3.0 United Nations - The Rights and Voices of Children	11
4.0 The Impact of Imprisonment on Parent-Child Relationships: A Few Personal Stories	12
5.0 Recommendations	20
5.1 Make contact visits with children a right.....	20
5.2 Remove the jumpsuits required to be worn during visits	21
5.3 Change the toilet and strip search protocols surrounding visits.....	21
5.4 Create appropriate spaces for and improve officer attitude toward children in visiting and waiting areas.....	21
5.5 Uphold children’s rights and create a mechanism whereby children can visit parents	23
5.6 Promote contact between schools and imprisoned parents	23
5.7 Celebrate family moments	24
6.0 Responding to ToR part (c): How effective existing services and policies are, what evaluations have shown and how they could be improved.....	26
6.1 Background: A Review of the Literature.....	26
6.2 Care-planning for Children of Imprisoned Parents.....	26
7.0 Current programs.....	28
7.1 Fun with Mums.....	29
7.2 Day with Dads.....	29
7.3 Family Ties.....	29
7.4 Residential Visits.....	30
7.5 School Holiday Visits	30
7.6 Christmas Party	31
7.7 Strengthening Connections.....	31
7.8 Reintegration Permits	31
7.9 Reading with Dad/Mum.....	32
7.10 VACRO Family Virtual Visits.....	32
7.12 Triple-P Positive Parenting Program.....	32
8.0 The Impact of Imprisonment on Parent-Child Relationships: A Few Personal Stories	33
9.0 Impact of COVID-19.....	37
10.0 Recommendations	37

10.1	Recommence and strengthen existing programs	37
10.2	Acknowledge grandparents and other family members	38
10.3	Expand celebratory events	38
10.4	Expand incentive-based permits	39
10.5	Provide education and support for families and carers	39
10.6	Allow incarcerated parents to purchase their children’s food on visits.....	41
10.7	Establish a teens specific program	41
10.8	Establish inter-prison family visits	42
10.9	Continue virtual visitation	42
10.10	Create options for incarcerated parents on remand.....	43
References		44

1.0 Responding to ToR part (a): The social, emotional and health impacts [of parental incarceration] on affected children

1.1 Background: A Review of the Literature

The impacts of parental incarceration on the children of imprisoned parents has been a significant area of research in the past two decades. As a result, a wide scope of correlated outcomes have been found across studies, from social and behavioural issues (Miller, 2006; Saunders, 2018; Weidberg, 2017) to impacts on cognitive development and mental health (Arditti, 2012; Bell et al., 2018; Bocknek et al., 2008; Thulstrup & Karlsson, 2017; Weidberg, 2017). It is important to note that, although they may represent one group in this inquiry, children of imprisoned parents vary in stage of development, thus the impacts of parental incarceration are wide-ranging across factors such as age, gender, and even social class (Brookes, 2018; Thulstrup & Karlsson, 2017). It is also essential to remember that while some associations of parental incarceration are consistently found across studies, every child reacts and copes differently to their parent's imprisonment. Here, we will discuss the current research on the social, emotional, mental, and educational impacts of parental incarceration on children of imprisoned parents. These are not separate impacts, but rather frequently interact with one another. We will then refer to those with lived experiences to further contextualise the cruel reality of being separated from your child and will then close with our recommendations for how this experience could be improved upon for all parties.

1.2 Social wellbeing

The role of stigma in the social health of children of imprisoned parents has been well documented (Miller, 2006; Saunders, 2018; Thulstrup & Karlsson, 2017; Weidberg, 2017). This stigma stems from having a family member incarcerated and can be produced and perpetuated across any facet of a child's life but is perhaps most detrimental when originating at home and school, as these represent the two most frequently inhabited social spaces of children (Miller, 2006; Saunders, 2018). The common forms of stigma experienced by children of imprisoned parents in these environments are perceived and enacted stigma (Saunders, 2018). The former refers to when a child feels the judgement of others whether it is present or not and the latter is where a child experiences discrimination on a tangible level, such as exclusion from social activities (Saunders, 2018). Notably, research has shown that the anticipation of exclusion can be just as damaging as direct discrimination, with both displaying similar outcomes (Saunders, 2018), meaning if a child either experiences or expects to experience rejection on account of stigma, their self-confidence is often negatively impacted. Subsequently, this influences

their social interactions (Saunders, 2018) and can lead to a greater likelihood of these children experiencing social isolation, which has been seen in children's reports of few friendships (Saunders, 2018; Weidberg, 2017). As a result, the levels of social support and resources available to children of imprisoned parents are often low (Saunders, 2017; Weidberg, 2017).

Additionally, these children can experience internalised stigma, which can manifest as an insecure sense of self (Saunders, 2018). This insecurity is often coupled with the fear that their parent's criminal behaviour has somehow tainted who they are and impacts who they will become i.e., that they will inevitably travel down the same path (Roberts & Loucks, 2015; Saunders, 2018). Although research has not indicated this to be a likely outcome (Flynn, 2013), there are some common phrases even in literature that promote this kind of thinking e.g., 'children of imprisoned parents are six times more likely to be incarcerated later in life' – a statistic that is entirely unsupported (Flynn, 2013). In some cases, teachers have also been found to perpetuate this idea for children, either through directly telling them this will happen (sometimes in a poor attempt to 'scare them straight', other times in a purely bullyish capacity), or indirectly, with one study finding teachers held an unconscious bias that children of imprisoned mothers were less competent than their peers (Dallaire et al., 2010; Roberts & Loucks, 2015).

Importantly, as stated by Brookes (2018) "offenders are not more likely to give birth to another offender; rather the child's grief compounded by trauma and stigma [as a result of parental incarceration] can lead to disengagement in school and a mistrust of authority which, in turn, increases their potential to be involved in at-risk behaviour." (p. 271). This suggests that it is not the criminal behaviour of the parent that impacts upon their children's likelihood to commit crime, but the upheaval of a child's life when a parent becomes incarcerated. It is also worth noting that absolutely zero studies have found a causal link between a parent's incarceration and child's future incarceration, and the few correlational studies that have been performed have not been consistent in their findings, nor have they been able to exclude the variety of impacting factors surrounding parental incarceration (Flynn, 2013).

Interestingly, Brookes (2018) found that the closeness between a child and their incarcerated parent can mitigate the internalised stigma and the shame experienced by that child. This was further supported by Saunders (2018) who found that children who felt connected to their incarcerated parent were less likely to report feelings of shame and embarrassment. These findings suggest that maintaining and indeed strengthening the bond between an imprisoned parent and their child is a protective factor against the negative social impacts of parental incarceration.

1.3 Emotional wellbeing

One of the biggest difficulties children of incarcerated parents face are the emotions that accompany this circumstance. They often struggle with the fact their parents cannot physically be with them, with younger children particularly confused and frustrated (Weidberg, 2017). This confusion is especially evident for children who are deceived about their parents' whereabouts during their sentence (Saunders, 2017). This deception can come directly from the incarcerated parent or the parent or carer on the outside, but in all circumstances it can be a struggle for children to come to terms with the idea their parent is simply not there. Additionally, as children grow up, they are more likely to realise the gaps in the explanations they have been given, which can lead to distrust of both their incarcerated parent and their carer (Miller, 2006; Saunders, 2017). This can place strain on these relationships, and again, feeds back into feelings of isolation and lack of social support. It is also often because of the stigma surrounding the parent's incarceration that these lies are told to children, in hopes of protecting them from any pain, embarrassment or loss of innocence (Saunders, 2017; Saunders, 2018).

Beyond confusion and frustration, feelings of injustice and anger at the lack of control they have in these circumstances are also common among children of imprisoned parents (Weidberg, 2017; Saunders, 2017). This is likely impacted by the lack of formal space provided for children to voice their opinion throughout the incarceration process and the lack of support or recognition of their struggle (Flynn & Trotter et al., 2017; Saunders, 2017). As highlighted by one of our Think Tank participants with lived experience, this is raising a generation of children who resent the criminal justice system and those who represent it.

Feelings of guilt, loss and grief have also been found among children of imprisoned parents (Arditti, 2012; Bocknek et al., 2008). In fact, children that have experienced a parent going to prison are reported to experience a grief similar to children that have had a parent pass away (Bocknek et al., 2008). This experience is dubbed 'ambiguous loss', as although children are aware their parent is still alive, they have lost the physical, emotional, and social connection to them and their life (Bocknek et al., 2008). Crucially, it is the ambiguity of this loss that often makes children feel unable to express their grief externally or ask for support (Arditti, 2012; Bocknek et al., 2008). This hesitancy to reach out is compounded by internalised stigma and fear of judgement if they were to disclose their parent's incarcerated status. As highlighted by Brookes (2018) even in circumstances when children are aware that a parent's incarceration is actually protecting them from harm (e.g., in cases of abuse), these children still experience feelings of loss and need assistance and support in dealing with this.

Additionally, when Bocknek et al. (2008) conducted interviews with children of incarcerated parents in hopes to understand the impacts of ambiguous loss, they found most children displayed 'extreme discomfort' when discussing their families and needed to be provided with coping strategies e.g., breathing techniques. They also noted that children with a greater understanding of their parent's incarceration were noticeably more comfortable in the interview. This suggests that the ambiguity surrounding their parent's incarceration may exacerbate the feelings of loss and grief these children experience.

For many children, escaping and avoiding these emotions is a core part of their coping process (Bocknek et al., 2008; Saunders, 2018). This is partly due to the secrecy children often feel they need to maintain about their parent's incarceration, thus the chance to express how they are truly feeling is subsumed by the need to keep others in the dark (Bocknek et al., 2008; Saunders, 2018; Thulstrup & Karlsson, 2017). However, denial and avoidance are not healthy forms of dealing with emotions and can often lead to children feeling more vulnerable and isolated (Saunders, 2018). Additionally, learning to cope in these ways during developmental years will likely have negative consequences on emotional regulation and expression in the years to come. Secret keeping was also described as a significant source of stress, as it meant children needed to be careful not to accidentally mention their parent's whereabouts and were often hypervigilant when interacting with new people (Bocknek et al., 2008; Saunders, 2018; Weidberg, 2017). This was also a major barrier for developing close friendships, as children were extremely hesitant about sharing the status of their incarcerated parent and even described performing 'secret-keeping tests' on potential friends (Saunders, 2018). These tests consisted of telling someone a fake secret and observing their reaction to see whether it became common knowledge in gossiping circles at school. The person's performance on these tests then dictated whether children felt they could be worthy of trust (Saunders, 2018). Here, it is evident that children of imprisoned parents tend to face difficulties developing trust and a sense of security in their social worlds.

1.4 Mental wellbeing

Having a parent forcibly taken away from you, through a process you don't understand and for reasons you may not know is an incredibly traumatic experience for the children of imprisoned parents (Arditti, 2012). This trauma often has impacts on mental health which can be seen in the increased levels of stress - including post-traumatic stress - and higher rates of anxiety and depression experienced by children with a parent incarcerated (Arditti, 2012; Bocknek et al., 2008; Thulstrup & Karlsson, 2017; Weidberg, 2017).

It can also be confronting and traumatising for children to visit their parent in prison (Arditti, 2012). This is typically because prison visits may serve as a reminder of trauma

experienced related to their parent's incarceration (e.g., witnessing parents arrest, separation from their parent) but can also be due to the processes that a visitor must go through prior to entering the prison, such as enduring drug dogs, pat downs, and more recently intense COVID-19 protocols (Arditti, 2012). The physical environment of prison has also been noted as a difficulty of visitation, with some characterised by unclean spaces and occupied by rude correctional officers (Arditti, 2012). For small children, these processes and spaces can be particularly uncomfortable and even frightening. Incarcerated parents who have had their children and family visitors experience this have also shared to us the discomfort and upset of knowing this is happening to your family. In some cases, these experiences can become a stressor or source of trauma and can make families - especially young children - hesitant to return for future visits (Miller, 2006; Weidberg, 2017). Naturally, this increases the strains on the relationship children have with their incarcerated parent and in turn provides another source of stress for those children (Saunders, 2018).

Another impact of separating a child from their parent, especially a primary caregiver, can be seen in the difficulties children of imprisoned parents face developing healthy forms of attachment (Weidberg, 2017). This is influenced by factors such as unstable caregiving, lack of clarity about where their parent is, and restriction of contact with them (Murray & Murray, 2010). As healthy attachment is a core developmental process for children, jeopardising this development can mean significant detrimental impacts on later relationships and diminished ability to meaningfully connect with others (Murray & Murray, 2010). Healthy attachment is also theorised to be central to developing skills of self-regulation, self-organisation and self-control, the jeopardisation of which can lead to increased vulnerability to adverse events in later life (Arditti, 2012). Not entirely separate from this is the finding that incarceration of a parent has been identified as an independent risk factor in the cognitive development of young children (Bell et al., 2018) and consequently, children of imprisoned parents are more likely to face greater social, emotional, and educational difficulties.

1.5 Impacts on Education

The immense personal and often internalised struggles children affected by parental incarceration may experience can also understandably lead to issues at an educational level. This can manifest as difficulty to make and keep close friendships (Saunders, 2018), experiencing bullying (Saunders, 2018; Weidberg, 2017), problems with behaviour (Bocknek et al., 2008), lower educational achievement (Bocknek et al., 2008) as well as low engagement, disinterest with, or withdrawal from education altogether (Roberts & Loucks, 2015). The disruptions to home life that result from parental incarceration, such as changes to caregiving (especially evident in cases of maternal incarceration; Murray

& Murray 2010; Sheehan, 2011), may also produce disruptions in the provision of education entirely (Roberts & Loucks, 2015). Importantly, schools are not simply places where children learn to grow their knowledge of specific topics, they are significant social environments that shape who children are and how they will come to interact with the world. Accordingly, disruptions to schooling can impact upon not only cognitive but emotional and social development (Sheehan, 2011).

2.0 Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on parent-child relationships

The reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic by prisons in Victoria has highlighted many issues regarding organisation of visits and the importance of these visits for incarcerated parents and children alike. During the past two years, harsh lockdowns meant the cancellation of all contact visits. These were replaced with increased phone-time, allocation of an extra allowance to spend on phone calls, and virtual visits. However, as those left outside could attest to, these substitutions were in no way an adequate replacement for being able to physically spend time with your loved ones. For incarcerated parents, having to explain to young children why you can't see them and why you are not with them was listed as an incredibly difficult experience.

3.0 United Nations - The Rights and Voices of Children

It is important to remember that children of imprisoned parents have the same rights as other children. Yet if we examine the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), there are several Articles that imprisonment of a parent can inherently prevent as well as some that are not being accommodated for by our system. For example, Article 9 states:

“States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests [emphasis added]” (United Nations, 1989, p. 3)

In this instance, incarceration of a parent makes it difficult to meet parts of this right in that it prevents personal relations between a parent and child occurring on a regular basis. However, when it comes to ensuring children can maintain regular contact with their parents, it is the failure of our system and its policies that are preventing this from being achieved. For example, children are not entitled to visit their incarcerated parent, rather visits are determined week-to-week based on their parent's behaviour inside prison.

Similarly, in Article 12 it states:

“Children have the **right to say what they think should happen** when adults are making decisions that affect them and **to have their opinions taken into account** [emphasis added]” (United Nations, 2015)

Here, it is again the lack of child-oriented policies and spaces within our justice system that debilitate the opportunity for this right to be upheld (Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015). Indeed, the avenues for children to have their voices heard let alone taken into consideration throughout the care planning process are non-existent (Flynn & Bartlett et al., 2015; Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015).

Due to the typical barriers of confidentiality surrounding children of imprisoned parents as well as an overall lack of data on these children, research that unearths their perspectives is rare (Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015; Saunders, 2017). However, where it has been conducted, it has indicated that children have immense capacity for resilience when they are treated with respect throughout their parent’s incarceration (Brookes, 2018; Saunders, 2017). This would mean ensuring communication is clear, information is provided transparently, and the voices of children are not only heard but given consideration. Although there are obviously circumstances where the wishes of children cannot be adhered to, Brookes (2018) argues “the most effective kind of support for prisoners’ children is that which encourages them to experience life as far more than a catalogue of events that happen to them, but instead events they can make happen.” (p. 273). In her personal experience working with children of imprisoned parents, Brookes has also found that children do not have to simply cope with their parents’ incarceration but can thrive when treated as active partners and collaborators. It is our view that the level to which children are involved and aware of their parent’s incarceration should be an individualised process that considers the development and maturity of the child.

4.0 The Impact of Imprisonment on Parent-Child Relationships: A Few Personal Stories

“It doesn’t matter how old your children are, they’re going through crucial times in their lives and you’re not there for that.”

- Eleni, a previously incarcerated parent (Cormack, 2022).

The experiences presented here contain information that is painful for many of our participants to discuss or recall. Children are not a topic free for discussion in prison and asking about the relationship an incarcerated parent has with their child/children is understood to be ‘off limits’. As such, we wish to acknowledge the significance of the

contributions these parents and carers have provided for this submission. It is greatly appreciated that they felt comfortable sharing their stories with us and indicates just how strongly they feel about the purposes and recommendations we hope will come of this inquiry. Any names included in these stories have been changed to ensure the privacy of those submitting them.

Story 1: The impact of COVID-19 restrictions on incarcerated Fathers

“I am doing jail but my family and kids are serving the sentence.”
Think Tank Member (2022).

My work as a Peer Prisoner for three years (2018-2021) brought me into close contact with many incarcerated Fathers. Of particular concern were the young Dads whose child(ren) were estranged from them. Establishing any form of contact was particularly difficult given such children were generally in the care of another family member or friend or otherwise within DHHS protection. Most prisoners accepted their culpability in the demise of such relationships, but most were also anxious to know that the children were safe and receiving good welfare/community support and care. Unfortunately, the prison based Clinical staff were often cynical about the motives of many Fathers seeking to have family contact – particularly with children. There was a cohort of prisoners who were not allowed via Court Orders to have such contact and therefore much caution needed to be shown when trying to assist. The prisoner’s chances of success were greatly enhanced if their conduct was acceptable, and respect was shown to all prison staff. As a Peer, I would take reasonable notes and present the matter to an appropriate staff member or on-site Agency worker. Many prisoners are suspicious about giving too much personal information to prison staff and so I would do my best to encourage openness on both sides as a mediator. Occasionally we had some success with gradual reunification.

Of course, the advent of the COVID pandemic has for the best part of the past two years made prisoner contact with children extremely testing. Over time I came to understand that many children of prisoners have learning and/or social difficulties. Trying to keep them focussed on a small screen during a short zoom visit with the parent was tough. The children soon became restless and unable to focus. The longer the restriction on personal prisoner visits went on, the worse the issue became. Eventually, many fathers were reporting that they had lost contact with their child(ren) and the relationship(s) were now considered “broken”. This was to become an extra layer of anxiety for the prisoner.

Unfortunately, Corrections Victoria provided no alternative for the fathers to engage with their kids. Via the prisoner Rep Committee, we canvassed various options including supervised “contactless box visits” and a creche type setup with Perspex screens between the parties. Sadly, nothing eventuated. For the children, on top of their

decreased schooling came decreasing contact with their father. The fear is that this generation is going to really struggle to meaningfully reconnect with their father post release.

What were once “white lies” about the father’s whereabouts during his incarceration, became bigger tales and misleading stories as time went by. As the children grew older and there was little or no contact with the father, many became aware of the reality which became an issue for the parents to deal with. There is no substitute for personal contact – but surely some innovative measures could have been tried in order to prevent what was fast becoming an obvious problem.

What I witnessed first-hand with the breakdown of so many previously close families was heart-breaking. It was NOT the children’s fault, and our community leaders now must turn their attention to how this damage can be fully repaired. Providing psychological support, relevant counselling and welfare improvements must be on the agenda.

Reverting to pre COVID times, prisoner conduct would certainly improve if the father had something to look forward to by way of connection with their family and children. Whether it was a Birthday, Father’s Day, Easter, Christmas or whatever, having a “goal” to work toward was an excellent distraction away from the daily humdrum of jail life and culture. A standard visit was always great, but the relevance of celebrating an event motivated the men to undertake activities that would make the day even better. The making of art and toys for the children were hugely popular. Prison management should be encouraged to take every opportunity to have events that bring the family units together.

There are other significant adult groups who are caring (full or part time) for children but become incarcerated. Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, extended family, and friends are often called upon or volunteer to care for children. Many of this cohort became the legal guardians of the same. If any of these folks enter prison, then the welfare of the child(ren) and their now broken relationship with their pseudo parent is just as paramount as any other child/parent relationship. Unless you are the legal guardian, the jail system seems to have difficulty with allowing the same level of interaction as is generally afforded to a paternal party. When this “third party” is gone from the child’s life, what happens to that relationship and how can it be lovingly maintained? This scenario is quite common in the prison setting. Jail management needs to take a more modern and liberal approach to keeping these adapted family units together.

Story 2: Parents wearing visitor jumpsuits during visits with children

The most undignifying part of visits, particularly with children, is that women at DPFC (and all incarcerated people in maximum security prisons) must wear a bottle green jumpsuit which is cable tied at the neck to prevent drugs being smuggled into the facility. The suit

is tight and very uncomfortable. It is not conducive to playing with or sitting on the floor with small children and - in the case of Sunday children-only visits which go for 4 hours - if you need to go to the toilet, your visit is void on the spot. If you have/get your period and need to attend to that, your visit is void and the child/children must go home on the spot. It's a difficult situation for mums, and women will often not drink all morning so they don't have a bathroom emergency threatening the time with their child/children. This process seems unnecessary, given the other security measures which exist.

Story 3: Experiences of correctional staff when visiting a maximum-security prison (DPFC) vs. a minimum-security prison (Tarrengower) from a grandmother visiting with her grandson

On arriving at the prison for our first visit Joel was only 5. I haven't been to Dame Phyllis Frost since the new building opened, so I can only talk of the old entrance, but the waiting room was dirty and crowded, with kids sitting on the floor in the dirt.

Other visitors were kind enough to help me out with procedures and Joel was so focused on seeing his beloved mother that the surroundings did not really impact him. He was very friendly and was just trying to make friends with the other kids. When the door finally opened and the officer called out "Smith" (his mother's last name), we were both shocked. During the years that we spent going to the prison every Sunday, only one officer treated us as if we might not be criminals ourselves.

One officer was prone to calling Joel "The Smith Kid", with myself and my daughter just "Smith". One visit, I worked up the courage and told her that my name was Rose, and he was Joel. But most of the time, the fear of saying the wrong thing and not getting in was very real, so waiting for an hour in that horrific room was not up for complaint. Additionally, Joel being unable to show his mum a painting or a wrist band or any part of his life outside was so very sad, and the same can be said for other kids.

On our first visit to Tarrengower the desk officer called me Rose and smiled. I almost looked behind me to see if someone else was there! The difference in treatment is astounding and so very welcoming. Joel is 11 now and although he hates the three-hour journey, going in is fine and the officers call him by name and are friendly to him.

Story 4: Visitation protocols and processes that families of incarcerated parents endure

In 2015 I was incarcerated at Port Phillip Prison (PPP) and was receiving regular visitation from my ex-wife and my 8-year-old daughter Melody. As is well known, the process that visitors are required to go through to visit prisoners can be quite daunting and uncomfortable for all, not least of all for an 8-year-old child. This is exacerbated in some prisons by the often-demeaning attitudes of some prison officers to the visitors. This was

definitely the experience that my ex-wife had when visiting PPP in particular. It is important to note that the experiences she had at both Marngoneet and Karreenga Correctional Centres were very different to that of PPP. At both of these facilities she was treated with kindness and respect from most, if not all prison staff.

On one occasion at PPP, my ex-wife was asked to undergo a strip search. She said that she was not comfortable doing so, especially in the presence of our daughter. She was then told, in front of our daughter, that if she did not comply she would be banned from visitation for at least 6 months and even then, only with permission from the Governor of the prison. On hearing this, my daughter broke down in tears at the possibility of not visiting me for an extended period. As a result, my ex-wife conceded to the strip search which was conducted in front of our daughter. Witnessing the strip search was very distressing for my daughter who was already extremely emotional because of the overall visit process, the threat of not being able to visit me and the poor and demeaning attitude of the prison officers. Unfortunately, it is an experience that she remembers to this day. It should also be noted that I was not incarcerated for any drug related offence, nor had I ever returned a urinalysis positive for drugs or been suspected of drug use while incarcerated – factors which are usually considered before visitors are required to undergo a strip search.

Story 5: A father estranged from his son, with no process in place to cultivate the relationship

I am the father of a 13-year-old boy named Jackson, who is just starting high school this year. He was school captain last year (in grade six), he's learning to play the trumpet, he goes swimming every week and I am told he is still into Lego. Yet I've missed all of this because I haven't seen him since Father's Day 2014.

I started coming back to prison in 2010 after a six-year gap from my first prison sentence. It was only a 28-day sentence for driving offences, and my son's mother did bring him to visit me once, but this was when her and I separated. After this sentence, I didn't go back inside again until 2012 when I was remanded, at which point I was in contact with my son every couple of weeks, however this was only when his mother would answer the phone and when she did the cost of calls to mobile phones from prison was very expensive. I was placed on a Drug Court Order for two years, during which I received multiple sanctions that meant I would have to complete two-week stints inside. His mother and I had agreed, through mediation, that I would be able to see Jackson every second weekend, which was fine and very fun, as the time I spent with my son was (and still is) the best - he was my little buddy. But in 2014 all of that changed when I was sentenced to prison for four years. Even though I have never had any Child Protection involvement

with him and my offending is not sexually-related, I lost all contact with my son, who was never even asked if he wanted to see me or visit me. It was his mother's choice, and I couldn't do anything to change that. But that didn't stop me from trying, and from the moment this loss of contact was clear to me, I tried everything in my power (whilst incarcerated) to make some sort of contact again and am still trying. However, this was very difficult as I had not spent more than nine-months total out of prison since 2012.

My first attempt to re-establish contact was through the Correctional officers where I was incarcerated. I have been to many prisons across Victoria, MAP, MRC, Port Phillip, Fulham, Hopkins, Karreenga and at every single one I was given one of three answers: "get your families' help"; "get legal aid on the phone"; or my favourite "that's not within our parameters". So, I tried what they suggested and came to more roadblocks and red tape. I was unable to get help from my family because at this point, I was estranged from them, or at least had lost my main supportive family member - my mother - who passed away in 2016. I placed the number for legal aid on my allotted phone call list in prison, but legal aid uses a menu option to direct you to the right department (press #1 to reach department x) and the Arunta phone system meant once you were on your phone call, you didn't have access to a dial pad - so I was unable to choose any options.

I went back to Correctional officers on multiple occasions to tell them what was happening, and they eventually offered to request a welfare call for me from the senior officers. This was denied on the grounds that welfare calls are only available when they are in relation to pending court matters. Officers then told me to fill out a form and speak to VACRO, which I did immediately but was told by VACRO they don't have any programs available that allow incarcerated parents to make contact with their children. Instead, they offered me to do a parenting course and I was given a vocational program form to fill in. There were only 15-20 options you could tick as to what you needed help with, none of which related to re-establishing contact. In my last sentence I eventually came to realise that my only option was to wait until I got released and start the process of making contact as soon as possible. I have now been out three-months and am in the process of completing my parole - which is set to finish in five weeks - after which I have an appointment with mediators so I can begin what will undoubtedly be a long journey of meeting my son again.

Story 6: Mothering from prison on a long-term sentence and the experiences of stigma

I am currently incarcerated at Tarrengower Prison after spending 12 years in DPFC. When I began this sentence in 2009 my son, Peter, was 8 years old. In a few weeks he will be turning 21. The single hardest thing about being in prison for me has been being

separated from my son, watching him grow up without me, and constantly worrying about the effect of my incarceration on him.

I remember when he was young, before I came to prison, I always told him to be honest, that he would never need to lie to me. As soon as I came to prison, I had to change this message, and made it very clear to him that if anyone asked where I was, he should lie and never tell anyone the truth. I explained to him that other people would not understand, and that I didn't want him to be judged on what I had done. The last thing I wanted was for anyone to google my name.

Both of our lives were changed in one moment and we have never been the same since. I carry the stigma of my crime, and Peter carries it too, even though he committed no crime other than being my son. From the outside, he appears to be a regular young man. He studies at university, works, rides a motorbike, and loves live music and bands. He has lots of friends and appears to have a bright future ahead of him. Yet I often wonder, is this the real Peter, or is this just an act he puts on for me? I realise I only know him on a surface level, and I'm afraid of what could be buried underneath. Peter has seen several therapists over the years, and still sees a psychologist. He doesn't speak about it much with me, but I'm grateful that he has been able to receive professional help. I believe he is deeply traumatised by my incarceration and the events that led to it, but it is impossible for me to even know the true extent of this while I am still incarcerated.

For the entire period of my incarceration, Peter has resided with his Godparents, who have loved him as their own son and given him everything. Knowing this has allowed me the peace to sleep at night, never having to worry about him. When I was arrested (for a serious crime) the Department of Families Fairness and Housing (DFFH) immediately tried to place him into permanent care (foster care) and remove me as his guardian. Over the next 10 years there were many court cases, but they never succeeded in this aim. The family court lawyers were very professional and caring, and recognised the needs of my son. We are forever grateful to them. As Peter grew to understand things, he began hating the court cases, hating being dragged out of school to talk to lawyers, and he hated DFFH. He recognised their witch-hunt, which only served to bring us closer. I remember one of the happiest days of my prison sentence was Peter's 18th birthday. My mother, him and I sat at the visit centre and celebrated the occasion of his birthday, but the bigger thing we were celebrating was the fact that DFFH could never speak to any of us ever again.

I think when someone is imprisoned for a serious crime and therefore for an extended period, the general mentality is that our rights as a parent should cease. This is the message that we receive from DFFH, Corrections, the prison, and society. However, my

mother didn't see it this way, and all the credit for the loving relationship I have with my son goes to her. After I was arrested my mum dealt with DFFH and was placed in control of all my access with Peter. She brought him to every visit and made sure I saw him every birthday, Christmas, Mother's Day and pretty much whenever she could bring him. She is the sole reason I have kept the closeness and bond with my son because she knew it was the most important thing for Peter and me. Yet Mum had no support in doing any of this. She did it because she loved us.

The best part about the visits with Peter was just spending time with him, as that was something we both craved. The hardest part was watching him leave, every time. He is now waiting for my release, which we believe will be 2025. We have both been waiting for this for so long. When the time comes and I am released, my focus will be on him, and making up for all the things we have missed out on due to my incarceration. This story is very personal and has been incredibly difficult to share. *But the system and its processes need to change, as there is no support for families or for incarcerated mothers.* As for the long-term effects of incarceration on my son, I think this will only be revealed in time. I think the trauma that my son has experienced due to my incarceration is like an iceberg, and we can only see the 10% of it that is above the water, not the 90% situated beneath the surface.

Story 7: The stresses of visitation for children and incarcerated parents and the impacts of correctional officers' attitudes and behaviour

Prior to my first incarceration in 2016 I was the sole caregiver of my 5-year-old son. Him and I were very close (him never knowing his father) and we had never spent (or slept) a night apart. The separation anxiety we both experienced was extreme at the beginning of my sentence, yet this was something we just had to deal with.

The prison environment is no place for most adults, let alone children. It was difficult coming to terms with my sentence, yet the only opportunity to explain everything to my son face-to-face was in a room full of strange people and uniformed officers with keys, radios and stern faces looking like police, staring at us constantly. If we washed our hands, they watched, if we went outside, they followed. There was a lot of hostility and belittling and it felt like the officers wanted us to constantly be aware they were in charge. At times officers would even interject and tell women prisoners 'off' in front of our children, which was unnecessary and degrading. In the visit centre during summer on 40.C days, with no air-conditioning we still had to wear very tight uncomfortable jumpsuits. If the kids splashed water on themselves or us, we were told off by the officers who claimed it was 'a trip hazard' despite it being on the fake grass outdoors. The heat and discomfort we experienced will never erase from our minds.

My son and I were glued at the hip before prison, so despite the poor quality and inconvenient location of visits, every Sunday my mother would drop my son off to me, as she knew this was the only time we could have and that he needed it as much as I did, for we loved and missed each other terribly. The constant scrutiny of officers was uncalled for and overbearing. As the visits went on, I could sense my son was uncomfortable and not as free as a child should be to play and have fun. There was never a chance for one-on-one time with him, even though I was doing well within the prison. I felt the distance between my son and I begin to grow when he was just 6 years old (one year into my sentence).

I have hardly spent any time with my child over the last 2 years due to COVID restrictions. During this time, there has been irreparable damage done to our relationship. *We barely know each other anymore and are uncomfortable and nervous in each other's presence.* Visits have come back a few times since COVID but were never long-lived. Even now, our visitors over 5 years of age must be triple vaccinated to be eligible for contact visits, and we all still must wear N95 masks and safety goggles. When our families visit, we are not allowed to touch them. *Can you imagine sitting across from your child and not being allowed to hug them when they are upset?* It is painful and inhumane. A child not being allowed to hug their mother is not normal. I am due for my earliest release in 12-months. I will not know the full extent of the damage that visiting me in prison has done to my son for some years to come.

5.0 Recommendations

5.1 *Make contact visits with children a right*

In-person/contact visits are currently classified as a privilege of well-behaved incarcerated people rather than a right of their families. This means weekly visits can be cancelled at the discretion of a Corrections Officer. For incarcerated parents, this means not being able to see or touch their child/children even once a week. Revoking these visits, which is intended to punish the behaviour of the imprisoned parents, is in fact punishing their children (as well). Given the impacts on children of incarcerated parents that are due, in large part, to children's separation from their parents, this removal of even minimal contact and engagement is unacceptable and unjust.

It is therefore recommended that contact visits become a right, not a privilege, for all incarcerated persons. In circumstances where contact visits are not possible (such as during the pandemic), incarcerated people should have the option to have a virtual video

call. This will ensure children of imprisoned parents at least have the option of seeing their parent once a week – this should be their right.

5.2 Remove the jumpsuits required to be worn during visits

As highlighted by our Think Tank participants, the current jumpsuits required to be worn by incarcerated individuals in maximum security prisons during visits are extremely uncomfortable. These restrict movement and therefore prevent parents from being able to play with their children, which is a significant barrier for young children who crave opportunities to have fun with their parent. We recommend removing these jumpsuits for incarcerated parents participating in child-only visits/programs. If contraband is found on parents who participate in these programs, then increased supervision and jumpsuits should be reinstated, but only for those who break these rules. All parents should not be punished for the actions of ‘a few’. Incarcerated parents at most prisons can still be scanned for contraband before and after visits; therefore removing jumpsuits would positively impact these relationships without compromising security.

5.3 Change the toilet and strip search protocols surrounding visits

Currently, visitors can be subjected to strip searches at the discretionary decision of a Correctional Officer. According to our Think Tank Members, this has meant that children have witnessed strip searches of their parent/carer. This can be an incredibly traumatising experience for the visitor as well as the child thereby contributing to their reluctance to attend future visits. It is recommended that the protocols surrounding strip searches of visitors be revised to ensure children are not witnessing them.

Once in the visit centre, incarcerated persons are not able to go to the bathroom without ending the visit entirely. For incarcerated parents taking part in the children-only programs that increase visitation time for up to four-hours, this is a very uncomfortable experience that has led many parents to avoid drinking water prior to and during these visits. It is recommended that incarcerated parents are given the ability to go to the bathroom during child-only visits, particularly those that exceed two-hours. To ensure security is maintained, the same scanner used for contraband searches before and after visits could be used before and after these bathroom breaks.

5.4 Create appropriate spaces for and improve officer attitude toward children in visiting and waiting areas

Previous studies have highlighted the discomfort experienced by children who enter prison for visitation purposes (Arditti, 2012; Saunders, 2017; Weidberg, 2017). The

current visiting spaces in prisons lack warmth, colour, and individuality which makes the experience of them feel clinical and unwelcoming. As discussed above, children can be dissuaded from visiting prisons due to environmental factors, meaning it is essential to create comfortable physical spaces for them.

A suggestion from our Think Tanks is related to changing the seating arrangements available in visit centres. Currently there are usually only two seating options: outside on fake grass or inside at metal tables. Neither of these are ideal, as children (especially younger children) can get restless at tables and the parents dressed in jumpsuits (at maximum security prisons) are unable to sit comfortably on the grass outside. A possibility for improving this could be to introduce bean bags or cushioned seating - even couches - that increase the comfort level of both the parent and the child whilst also fostering a more home-like and casual environment. These couches/seating options could be brought out for the monthly children-only visits.

Although some prisons (like Ravenhall and Marngoneet) have taken initiative in creating child-friendly spaces, children's specific needs are not always considered. That is to say, the addition of children's toys to a small, enclosed area does not necessitate a positive environment for children. Consideration must also be given to how children can self-regulate/self-soothe, for instance through inclusion of drawing or writing activities or even digitised activities (e.g., iPad use). Such initiatives should be provided in both the visiting centre and the waiting areas. The waiting spaces at the Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital are great examples of how this could be implemented in the waiting areas of prisons. They are a bright and colourful space that comes equipped with interactive digital options designed to engage children. To acquire this equipment for prisons, the social procurement framework of commercial prison businesses could be leveraged, and companies that currently profit from the payment of incarcerated people (e.g., phone companies/JB Hi-Fi) could be called upon to donate.

For children-only visits there also needs to be a calming, less stimulating separate space (one corner/ a few 'pods' within the visits area - like within Parents' Rooms in shopping centres) where incarcerated parents can take their children when they get overwhelmed, upset, or emotional. Our Think Tank members at DPFC suggested this could also be one of the interview rooms that are attached to the visit centre but usually remain locked. The option of having that space where parents can calm and soothe their children with some privacy would be ideal for not only the child, but also the other visitors in the centre.

Additionally, correctional officer' attitude towards visiting family members - especially children - has been reported to be 'scary' and 'demeaning' and in some circumstances even aggressive. Our Think Tank members have also shared to us that *many*

incarcerated people opt out of contact visits with families (that include children) because of this prejudicial behaviour. It is recommended that correctional staff selected to work in the visit centre are cognisant about the importance of expressing empathy as well as speaking warmly and in a caring way to visiting families and especially children.

5.5 Uphold children's rights and create a mechanism whereby children can visit parents

Despite the rights of children outlined by UNCROC, children are rarely asked if they want to remain in contact with their incarcerated parent. They should be granted the right to be in contact with their incarcerated parent in all cases where it is safe for them to do so. In some instances, this right is negated by the carer's choice to withhold information about their parent's incarceration from them, or refusal to assist them in maintaining contact with their parent. Whether children have contact with their incarcerated parent is heavily influenced by their parent or carer's feelings about contact, meaning a carer's refusal to support the parent-child relationship can be detrimental (Saunders, 2017). Ensuring that children of imprisoned parents are empowered to make these decisions about contact themselves is therefore very important. These arrangements would require the assistance of social workers from the Department of Families Fairness and Housing (DFFH) to ensure that decisions being made are in the best interest of the child/children. Family liaison officers and social workers in prison could also be given the responsibility of debriefing visiting children and families about the support available to them.

5.6 Promote contact between schools and imprisoned parents

Schools have been highlighted as being perfectly placed to provide support to children of imprisoned parents (Robert & Loucks, 2015; Thulstrup & Karlsson, 2017). As a primary social environment of children, teachers and other school staff can witness changes in behaviour (such as withdrawal) and are often able to refer these students to help that the school already provides. Given that these staff already have relationships with these children, developing trust is also often an easier process (Roberts & Loucks, 2015).

Yet currently there are no contact channels or pathways that exist between prisons and schools (Flynn & Bartlett et al., 2015; Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015). This is arguably at great detriment to the children of imprisoned parents, as their parents' incarcerated status is often unknown to those responsible for their care, which means teachers and other staff may not be aware when extra support is required. We believe the creation of a partnership between the Department of Education and Corrections Victoria would serve to help both children and their imprisoned parents. Although developing this relationship

would present some initial difficulties regarding coordination, consent and confidentiality, the potential positives that could be realised from this relationship are extensive.

One of our recommendations should this relationship be actualised is the inclusion of incarcerated parents in the education of their children. This could be done through sending copies of school reports for children aged 5-15 to their incarcerated parents, which contain essential information about how the child is performing academically and socially. These reports would enable parents to feel informed and involved in their children's education. More importantly, as school is a central part of a child's life, this offers a further source of connection between a child and their incarcerated parent. However, it is important to note that receiving a child's school-report should require the consent from the incarcerated parent and the child's relevant caregivers. Involvement of incarcerated parents would also need to be made on a case-by-case basis under the guidance of DFFH.

If these communication pathways are made available, these should not be just about sharing academic reports, but also create options for teachers to send incarcerated parents scanned copies or photos of their children's various creative projects as well as pieces of written schoolwork. 'Email a prisoner' programs already exist in most prisons where incarcerated persons can be contacted directly by pre-approved people from the outside through email. Using this technology to keep incarcerated parents involved in their children's school life is therefore a real possibility. Additionally, imprisoned parents could potentially have the option to attend their children's school achievement ceremonies, either through virtual video calls or in person with electronic monitors (this will be elaborated on in our discussion of incentive-based permits). These are moments in a child's life that any other parent would be able to witness and share in, it is a fair request that incarcerated parents are able to as well.

5.7 *Celebrate family moments*

Incarcerated parents and their children have very few opportunities for the shared moments and celebrations that are commonplace in families not affected by incarceration. For example, current protocols around birthday celebrations for children of imprisoned parents entitle the parent to call their children on their birthday, no visit or presents or hugs, just a call. We recommend allowing incarcerated parents to use their 'available spend' allowance to buy their children a birthday present and card that could be sent to them directly. This would allow children to feel special and close with their incarcerated parents, which would undoubtedly help maintain the bond between them.

It is also recommended a special visitation day be created for Mother's and Father's Day, where parents and children can create a card or some physical memento together. An idea for this memento could be for the prison to organise a photobooth that incarcerated parents and their child/children can take photos in together. Both parents and their children would be allowed to leave the day with a copy of these photos that they can cherish between visits. Alternatively, drawing supplies could be provided that enable children and parents to create an art piece together. These moments create opportunities for bonds to be strengthened and are important to share, especially for incarcerated families who are not able to spend their day-to-day lives together.

6.0 Responding to ToR part (c): How effective existing services and policies are, what evaluations have shown and how they could be improved

6.1 Background: A Review of the Literature

The existing services and policies that assist, address or target children of imprisoned parents are primarily run through or supported by non-government organisations (NGOs) such as SHINE for Kids, VACRO and Prison Network. The importance of the volunteers and NGOs that facilitate many of these programs, whose support ranges from provision of funding to picking up and driving children to visits, cannot be understated. The programs and policies we will focus on here will be centred around those that operate from within prisons and encourage parent-child relationship strengthening. We will also highlight the pre-incarceration processes that impact upon children of imprisoned parents, following which we will draw on the lived experiences of currently or previously incarcerated parents and carers to examine what is functioning well and what needs improvement. We will then close with our recommendations for how the policies, services and programs that impact children of imprisoned parents can be further developed, strengthened, or refined.

6.2 Care-planning for Children of Imprisoned Parents

Care-planning for children of imprisoned parents is an unrefined process that lacks formal guidelines and often places the entire responsibility for care of the child on the family members/foster carers willing to take them in (Flynn & Bartlett et al., 2015; Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015). The term care-planning refers to the processes through which the care of a child is decided upon through formal and informal actors. For children of imprisoned parents, this can be seen from the point of arrest through to sentencing and beyond.

In Victoria, the responsibilities police have towards children when arresting a primary caregiver are unclear, with officers typically guided by their own sense of duty of care than any formal policies (Flynn & Bartlett et al., 2015; Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015). This often means informally arranging someone to care for the child while the parent is arrested or detained, and occasionally just bringing them into the station with their arrested parent. Notably, within the station there is no assigned child-caring space or role, simply the front-desk officers who already have their own tasks to be performing (Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015). Formal responsibility only enters the equation if an officer believes the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering significant harm, in which case they are required to contact Child Protection. However, in circumstances where children are left

abandoned or without a temporary carer - such as during the detainment of their parent - Child Protection may still be contacted. At this point, the process of regaining custody of children becomes far more difficult, especially for parents with a criminal record, mental health issues or are single mothers - the intersection of which compounds this difficulty even more so (Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2017). This arrest process has meant that in some instances children have simply returned home to find their parent missing, as parents have feared that Child Protection would become involved and have chosen not to make arresting officers aware of their caring responsibilities. In other cases where officers are not aware of an arrestee's parental status, children have been left waiting for school pickups from a parent they do not know has been arrested. Additionally, Flynn and Trotter et al. (2015) found that during arrest, even when the officer was aware of the arrestee's parenting duties, conversations about childcare only occurred in 41% of cases. In each of these instances, whether it be lack of forethought to the child's safety post-arrest or a lack of knowledge of any relevant children at all, the disregard for the wellbeing of children of imprisoned parents is evident.

Once a parent has been arrested, there are no requirements for the parental responsibilities of the accused to be taken into consideration in decisions of bail, unless it is relevant to their likelihood of absconding or reoffending (see *Bail Act 1977* s 3AAA; Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015). Similarly at sentencing, only when an offending parent's removal from the home and their dependents meets 'exceptional circumstances' as to be 'inhuman to refuse' (a vague and discretionary determiner) will their status as a parent be considered (Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015; *R v Wirth* (1976) 14 SASR 291). Yet the impacts of incarcerating a parent are not unknown, nor are the children of these parents passive or hidden from our justice system and are often present at arrests and in courtrooms. Indeed, the children of imprisoned parents are not simply invisible during these processes and responses but are actively ignored.

Beyond sentencing, and often throughout the pre-sentencing detention of the parent, the actual care of the child typically falls onto the shoulders of the other parent, foster carer or family members willing to take them under their care (also known as kinship carers). Research has indicated that this is more likely to be a grandparent when a mother becomes incarcerated (the father becoming the primary caregiver in only 28-31% of cases) and a single mother when a father becomes incarcerated with mothers becoming/remaining the primary caregiver in 90% of cases (Thulstrup & Karlsson, 2017). In any circumstance, the financial, emotional, and mental responsibilities of the carer increase exponentially, whether they are now the single income parent providing full care for their child(ren) or a kinship carer taking in a loved one's child (Miller, 2006; Stone et al., 2017). However, this hardship is rarely acknowledged, and financial support offered by the state to these kinship carers is non-existent. For grandparents choosing to take in

their grandchildren, this financial burden can be particularly stressful, as finely tuned superannuation packages have been developed to support their financial needs in retirement, not the needs of raising another family (Hutchison, 2021). Beyond this lack of financial support, reports and comments from carers indicate that the children they have taken into their care for the duration of their parent's incarceration are rarely, if ever, checked up on through formal channels such as Child Protection (Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015). Many carers have voiced their concern at this, their ability to support this child simply assumed, unquestioningly, by courtrooms and judges at sentencing (Flynn & Trotter et al., 2015; Sheehan, 2011). Such lack of consideration given to the capability of kinship carers to provide a safe, stable environment for children who have already faced complete upheaval of their life is enormously irresponsible. Notably, the voices and opinions of the children throughout these processes are still completely absent.

7.0 Current programs

The following section contains a description of several programs that involve or target the children of imprisoned parents. This is not a comprehensive list of programs available, rather all those that have been specifically mentioned and described to us by currently or previously incarcerated parents. Most of these programs are yet to recommence after their collective suspension during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus our first and most pressing recommendation is to reinstate all programs as soon as it is safe to do so. These programs are also not available at every prison, with many only available at minimum security prisons (such as Tarrengower), though we argue there must be ways to accommodate some of these programs in medium and high security prisons. Although all children affected by parental incarceration are impacted by this experience in some way, lengths of parental incarcerations are not consistent across families. Some children may endure their parent's incarceration for three months, while others may face upwards of 10 or more years without them. There are also parents who will be in and out of prisons on a frequent basis for short sentences or on remand. As such, an important point raised in our Think Tank discussions was that incarcerated parents serving long term sentences may be attempting to reconnect to their child when they may no longer be a child at all, but a teen and even a young adult. Though these 'long-termers' are a small group, there needs to be some increased recognition of the difficulties mending these relationships can present.

Other consistent feedback we have found is that programs that attempt to reconnect children with their incarcerated parents only become available in the later stages of a sentence when the relationship is already strained or broken. At this point, mending the relationship is a far more difficult process. Strategies need to be put in place to maintain and build these relationships from the moment a parent is detained or remanded. Initiating

programs near the beginning of this process, when the relationship has not yet been strained due to parental imprisonment, would enable this bond to be nurtured and protected. Too many families affected by parental incarceration are being further strained and even broken because the system is not prioritising sustaining these connections.

It is also important to note that the responsibility for organising, planning, and negotiating how a family will engage in visits/programs often falls upon the incarcerated family member. This requires a massive amount of forethought, communication, and patience with both the family members and any relevant case workers or prison officials and can be a significant source of stress for someone, especially for those who may not have had much experience organising what are evidently complex events. Unfortunately, this can mean incarcerated parents choose not to engage with the programs available as it can be perceived as 'too hard'.

7.1 Fun with Mums

Fun with Mums is a program run monthly on Sundays where children are dropped off at the visit centre to spend time with their incarcerated mother. During this time activities are organised that the mother and child can engage in together, such as arts and crafts, cupcake decorating, making friendship bracelets, colouring in, and playing card games. These sessions and activities are clearly catered to children under the age of 10, and older children will typically spend this time just chatting with Mum. Importantly, this program extends the time allowed for the visit to four hours, as opposed to the regular two-hour visits. The increased visiting hours often makes the travel time and costs for carers and parents outside seem more worthwhile, as the two women's prisons in Victoria are located some distance from family residences (especially Tarrengower).

7.2 Day with Dads

Like Fun with Mums, this program runs in a few male prisons (e.g., Ravenhall) for incarcerated fathers once a month as an additional visit. There are some activities organised, such as barbecues, bands and food-making activities and the amount of time allocated is extended beyond normal visiting times to three-hours. The program also requires children to be dropped off to spend these visits with their incarcerated fathers.

7.3 Family Ties

Family Ties is a type of permit that an incarcerated parent can obtain if they were the primary caregiver of a child under 16-years-old prior to incarceration. They can obtain this permit once 50% of their sentence has been served, regardless of sentence length. Once

this is obtained, a plain clothes officer will drive them to their child(ren)'s residential address for a total visit time of 8 hours including travel. This visit can occur once every six weeks. Currently, Family Ties permits are only available at Tarrengower and Beechworth Prison. However, having this permit excludes the person from being able to participate in Bunkhouse visits and School Holiday Visits within the same six-week period. Family Ties must also be approved by the Case Management Review Committee (CMRC).

7.4 Residential Visits

Also called the bunkhouse, the residential visit for mothers at Tarrengower takes place on prison grounds at a self-contained two-bedroom unit with three beds (two single, one double) where families can visit their incarcerated loved one onsite once every six weeks. The length of these visits progresses over four rounds. In the first round, families can visit for three 6-hour visits, then three 8-hour visits, three 12-hour visits and finally three 24-hour visits (three days). While the person cannot leave the bunkhouse during visits, there is a small backyard attached to provide fresh air and contact with green spaces. Groceries are organised and incarcerated people can cook with their families. These visits are often used to celebrate a family birthday or a special event and allows the family to feel 'normal' again while providing a space in which to bond and spend quality time without officer supervision. Residential visits must also receive CMRC approval.

However, in medium-security prisons residential visits for fathers are quite different. They have a maximum of six-hours and require fathers (as there are no medium-security women prisons) to have had six-months of regular visits with their children before they can be approved. This can be very difficult to accrue, especially as many families live upwards of 3 hours from prison facilities, meaning regular weekly visits are not always possible as they require significant investment of time and money. When these visits have been approved, fathers expressed the long-term joy they bring, stating that they become memories for the men to treasure for the rest of their sentence.

7.5 School Holiday Visits

Like the bunkhouse visits, school holiday visits allow children to visit their incarcerated mothers at Tarrengower during the school holidays for three days. They can take place either in the residential visit centre, or in the mother's room, where a mattress will be set up for the child to sleep on. Children must be either under 16 (if female) or under 12 (if male) to reside with the parent in their room and must also have the consent from the rest of the unit. CMRC approval must also be gained for School Holiday Visits.

7.6 Christmas Party

As the only celebratory event of the year that children can attend in prison, Christmas parties hold a special significance to imprisoned parents and their children. Held once a year in the leisure centre (at DPFC) and elsewhere at other prison locations, parents get to spend several hours (about four) having fun, playing games, and even exchanging gifts with their children (with gifts provided by participating NGOs). The children are dropped off either by their carers or a volunteer, with only children under 15 years of age able to attend. Some of the engagement stations that have been organised in the past include face painting, bounce-houses, and petting zoos. A volunteer from an NGO (e.g., Prison Network) also attends as Father Christmas, and music is played. The food is prepared by the incarcerated parents and others who wish to contribute, both of which are also responsible for decoration. Notably, it is the effort put into this celebration by the parents and participants that make it so special for all involved.

7.7 Strengthening Connections

Run by the Bouverie Centre at Tarrengower prison, this program allows incarcerated people to reach out to someone in their life that has become estranged from them and attempt to rebuild the relationship that once existed. Currently, a participant must be in the final year of their sentence to access this program. The process of reconnection is facilitated by a mediating third party who ensures both parties are motivated to repair the bond and aware of any support available. Prospective participants need to first attend an information session about the program, after which (should they choose to continue) they would have a discussion one-on-one with the mediator. They then get to have a discussion with their chosen contact, then another session with the mediator only. Notably this program is only three sessions and is only run at Tarrengower Prison. Although the idea behind Strengthening Connections is positive and its purpose is wonderful, this program needs significant development and would ideally be initiated much earlier in a person's sentence.

7.8 Reintegration Permits

Reintegration permits allow someone who is 'C rated' and has served at least three-years of their sentence to re-enter the community in a semi-supervised capacity. This is achieved with the assistance of a plain clothes officer, who would accompany an incarcerated person while they perform activities around the local community, such as going shopping for groceries, setting up a bank account, or visiting VicRoads. This helps participants regain some semblance of normalcy and independence in hopes that reintegration will be easier. CMRC must provide the C-rating and approve these permits.

7.9 Reading with Dad/Mum

There are a few programs run through NGOs that enable an incarcerated parent to record themselves reading a bedtime story, burn it onto a CD and send it to their children with the accompanying storybook. These are obviously targeted towards younger children and enable incarcerated parents to feel more present in the child's daily life and part of their routine. Similarly, children can hear their parent's voice before bed, which can provide them with comfort and greater feelings of closeness to their incarcerated parents.

7.10 VACRO Family Virtual Visits

This is a relatively new program that enables children and their incarcerated parents to remain in contact without needing to bring children into prison. However, it is open to more than just parent-child relationships, with grandparents, grandchildren, and even just close friends able to take part. The program itself entails one 30-minute video call a month to your chosen person and is facilitated by a social worker (only when children are present). The involvement of a social worker means conversations between a parent and child can be prompted by a third party when lapses in discussion occur. Although, as noted by our Think Tank participants, the presence of a social worker can also be a point of stress for some parents, with one person sharing that the social worker informed her prior to the call that they are required by law to report any incidents, suspicions, or disclosures of abuse. This could make some parents hesitant about participation, as if one did not have DFFH involvement with their child prior to the program, there is a chance they may have it after. There are also very limited places available in the program, with only five spots advertised at DPFC currently.

7.11 Barbecue Visits

These visits entail incarcerated fathers cooking up some meat on the barbeque for their visiting families, including children. This is only available at medium security prisons such as Fulham Correctional Centre. The initiation of this program was strongly advocated for by the men in these prisons but is unfortunately yet to recommence after its suspension during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.12 Triple-P Positive Parenting Program

Triple P is a more generic parenting program run inside prisons where parents can learn how to appropriately communicate, support, discipline and engage with their children. These programs are incredibly important because they target the parents in prison who may not know how to foster positive relationships with their children. In most cases, the

latter stages of the program allow children to be brought into the prison to enable their incarcerated parents to apply their learning and attempt to reconnect and more positively interact.

8.0 The Impact of Imprisonment on Parent-Child Relationships: A Few Personal Stories

Story 1: Struggles of international parents remaining in contact with their children

I have been incarcerated since June 2017 when I received a sentence of 8 years 6 months to be served at DPFC: a maximum-security prison. At the time I was only speaking French - my mother tongue - I was from another country as well as the only one from Canada. I had no family or friends in Australia.

I had no contact visits, and this prevented me from maintaining a connection with my five children. At the time I was very sad and developed depression. The only option to stay in contact with my children was through video Skype sessions that had to be approved. To get this approval I had to be incident free and apply to the general manager every three months to obtain four skype sessions per year. This process took me 6 months to complete, meaning I saw my children for the first time since incarceration in December of 2017.

At the time I had an 18-month-old baby, as well as a 22, 20, 17 and 14 year-old. How could I be expected to maintain the mother-child bond with this crazy schedule of only seeing them for 30 minutes, four times a year? That leaves just six minutes to talk with each of them! And this meant I was unable to spend any of my Skype time with my mother, father, sister, brother, nieces or any other family and friends.

With the help of my counsellor, I wrote a letter to the general manager asking to have more frequent skype sessions and explaining how keeping in contact with my five children, who are most important in the world to me, is very important. I also discussed the mental health struggles I was having at the time. Despite having spent this entire time incident free, becoming a good worker and trustworthy inmate, the final answer was "No." This is hard to believe but true.

So, in 2020, having seen my children only 12 times over three years, COVID-19 happened and suddenly every prisoner had no access to visits and was becoming depressed and acting out. In April 2020, the general managers announced everyone would have access to two 30-minute Skype sessions a week, providing the visitors are on our lists and still

show their IDs as per normal visits. I was so very excited. This was a massive step for me, to have access to my children for 30 minutes twice a week, as well as getting to spend some of this time in contact with my mum, dad, sister, and niece!

For me in this situation, COVID saved me from depression and has actually helped me to keep going on with my sentence, finally able to keep what little bond I have with my children alive. I am still trying to revive this bond that was lost between us from all this time I've spent not being able to see them when they were needing me.

Story 2: The importance of Grandparent-Grandchild relationships and the impacts of COVID-19

I came into DPFC in December 2018. I left behind my three sons, one daughter-in-law and one two-and-a-half-year-old grandson. Joshua (grandson) and I had a special bond. He would climb into my bed every morning after his parents went to work at 6am. We would have many cuddles and he would go back to sleep until it was time for breakfast and then day-care. After day-care we would often play games or cuddle and watch T.V. until it was dinner time, bath time, and then bed.

Since being incarcerated Joshua has visited many times whilst Nana has worn her 'uniform' (visitor overalls) and been busy at 'work' (prison). Being so young, he didn't need to know where I was or why. His visits were the light in my day. He would hide behind the officers and 'surprise' me every time with the best cuddles and kisses ever.

Since COVID-19 (March 2020) he has only been able to zoom call. He understands what COVID is and why he can't see me but that doesn't mean he hasn't suffered through this time. Joshua is nearly six now and he just wants to cuddle me and touch me, but he is not vaccinated as it is not compulsory outside. So, I won't be able to get that longed for cuddle until I am either released or the rules are relaxed. He has a brother, Bailey, who is now 16-months. I was able to hold him once when he was four-and-a-half months while visits were temporarily allowed for a 2-week period. It has been heart-wrenching not to cuddle, touch, and feel the love from them in person. Yes, I'm incarcerated but I am still a Mum, still a Nana, still a daughter, still a sister, still an aunt. There are many Nanas here, some with new-borns who have yet to have that first cuddle. Yet to smell that baby smell. Yet to bond. COVID-19 has affected us all. It has punished those incarcerated and their families, especially their children, even more than you would understand.

Story 3: Perspective from a primary caregiver for his granddaughter prior to incarceration

As a grandfather to 5 grandchildren, I became a forgotten person when it came to wanting to spend quality one on one time with my grandchildren when I was incarcerated. Just as

children need to have connections with parents who are incarcerated, they also need to be connected with their grandparents. While incarcerated I had to fight battles to be able to spend time with my grandchildren on a one-on-one basis, even though my children wanted me to continue to be involved in my grandchildren's lives. There should be no line in the sand: grandparents are just as important as parents in a child's life.

Story 4: The value of celebrating events

One of the most beautiful things one can witness is the interaction between a parent and their child. One of the ways to foster a good relationship is by spending quality time with them. In prison these opportunities are few and far between, which is one of the reasons the women at DPFC would unite for the Children's Christmas Party.

The Christmas Party would create such a positive buzz around the prison and the women would make plates of food, even women without children, and deliver them to the leisure centre so that they could have the best day. If we were excited, you can just imagine how excited the children were.

We would decorate the leisure centre, one of the volunteers from Prison Network would dress up as Santa and because of the generous donations from the Salvation Army, the kids would be gifted presents from Mum. There would be different stations such as t-shirt and cupcake decorating, a petting zoo and even a bouncy castle.

I would often think that the kids have done nothing wrong, yet they were being punished alongside their parent, which is why expanding visitation programs such as this one is so important. It's important because interactions between parents and their children in a child-friendly setting have such a profound effect on both parties. We need to be strengthening relationships, not dividing them!

Story 5: Issues with care-planning, the responsibility placed on carers and the positive experiences of several parenting programs

When I was taken into custody at court I was never asked or informed about my son. Nobody ever offered any assistance to me or my family in relation to caring for or contacting him. Once I arrived at DPFC I was still not given any information on how to get into contact or have visits with him. I found this out from other women in the prison – and then again days later from the staff. Prior to custody DFFH were not involved with my case, meaning there was no assistance or advice available to my (then) 62-year-old mother who was tasked with the challenge of being responsible for her 5-year-old grandchild physically, emotionally, and financially - a child that had just lost his mother to the criminal justice system, had to move homes and schools, and was experiencing trauma.

For visits, carers or the children could bring money to buy food at the café, or women could purchase canteen food for child-only visits. However, the food from the canteen is pre-packaged which means it is only junk food. As prisoners, we earn between \$30-\$50 a week, but for some reason we were not able to purchase food from the cafe through our 'available spends'. I always felt it was too much to ask my mother to care for my child, pay for petrol and also bring money for food at visits. Some incarcerated women would not even know their children were coming, which meant they were unable to pre-purchase canteen food, or in other cases the family would not send money in, and the kids would have to sit in visits for hours with only tap water. For me, it is unreasonable that I am asking my mother to do a three-hour drive to get here, and I cannot even offer to buy her a coffee or can of coke from the vending machine. The officers can see the frustration and upset on our faces, but they must adhere to strict rules laid out by the government.

I was eventually transferred to Tarrengower Prison. It was an hour further for my family to travel, but my mother said the quality of the visits far outweighed the travel time and associated costs. The School Holiday Program was fantastic. My son was able to come and spend up to 3 nights with me each holiday period, either in the 'bunkhouse' or in my unit with me. It gave us a chance to bond again, and this time was priceless and precious. I was able to be the mother I wanted to be, free of scrutiny from demeaning officers.

There were also child visit activities run by Prison Network every second Sunday, including crafts, games, and other bonding experiences. On two occasions they arranged petting zoos at the visit centre. My son often mentions that as his favourite day. These activities gave us opportunities to break down the barriers and the ability to focus on something together as relaxed mothers and their children. I will always be grateful for those days and Prison Network.

After the first half of my sentence, I was eligible to go on 'family ties'/home visit permits. I went home for the first time in three-and-a-half years. It was amazing to see my son's schoolwork, see him ride his bike and be in the comfort of home – even with an officer by my side. For the first time in my sentence, I had things to focus on and a reason to do well – as you are not granted permits unless you are involved in education, rehabilitation, and work. I was planning my next family ties permit when COVID put that all on hold.

In terms of support offered to my mother (who is now 68), she has only ever been offered a car lift to prison from Prison Network for my son to visit me and a voucher for Christmas from VACRO. There needs to be far more services to keep family connections going. These relationships need support, or they break down. The bond a mother shares with her child is precious and needs nurturing. For me, spending quality time with my child has kept me drug free for many years. I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I have a supportive mother to facilitate the bond between my son and I when it all seemed so dark. I know if I did not have Tarrengower and my relationship with my child to focus on, I would

still be using drugs to block the pain of being a failure and being separated from my son. But I was focused and lucky enough to get classified as a C-rated prisoner and transferred to Tarrengower, where there are excellent child programs and permits. I am anxiously awaiting to see what the future holds for my child and I – we have a lot of catching up to do!

9.0 Impact of COVID-19

One of the most intense impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our imprisoned population was the suspension of all programs that involve contact between incarcerated parents and their child(ren). In the past few months, some of these programs have begun again, but others have fallen through the gaps. This has meant for almost two years children and parents were unable to maintain and strengthen their relationships through visits and programs. The result has unfortunately been the breakdown of many parent-child relationships. It takes far more effort to repair a broken bond than to maintain one that already exists, yet the pandemic has highlighted that our criminal justice system does not prioritise the social connection of incarcerated persons to their families, nor does it care about the impacts this loss of connection is having on the children of imprisoned parents.

10.0 Recommendations

10.1 *Recommence and strengthen existing programs*

Our first and foremost recommendation is to reinstate all the programs mentioned above that were ceased because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These programs have been an incredibly significant part of maintaining the relationships between children and their incarcerated parents. We need to ensure that they recommence as soon as possible, as there will undoubtedly be many relationships that have been strained over the pandemic. However, even though the programs discussed have undoubted benefits, the majority require significant strengthening when it comes to participant limits, eligibility criteria, target groups, time allocation, length of program and advertisement. **One of the greatest barriers to participation in parenting programs is the application process.** Programs should be *encouraging participation by easing and simplifying applications*, not discouraging potential clients through complex approval processes and long waiting times.

More father-oriented programs are required, or at least the expansion of the current Day with Dads program across all male prisons in Victoria. More participant spaces made available in current programs such as the VACRO Family Visits initiative are also needed. *Parents should be encouraged and enabled to reach out to estranged children and family members from prison.* Although the Strengthening Connections program is a step in the right direction, earlier initiation during a sentence is required and the program should be

available at all prisons.

10.2 Acknowledge grandparents and other family members

The prioritisation of contact with Mothers and Fathers who are incarcerated has been clear in several of the programs discussed. However, the family unit can be defined in a large variety of ways and currently only the qualification of 'immediate family' is being recognised. That is to say, the significance of carers outside of an incarcerated Mum and Dad are frequently ignored. For example, grandparents often have a significant connection with their grandchildren and in many cases have helped provide physical and financial support for them. Yet when a grandparent becomes incarcerated, there are no programs designed for them to maintain a relationship with their grandchildren, nor is there any recognition of the significance of the grandchild-grandparent relationship. Our recommendation for changing this is to offer contact-visit programs that are grandparent-grandchild specific - like Fun with Mums or Daily Dads. This will ensure the participant limits of the current parent-child programs are not impacted. Alternatively, expanding the participant places in these parent programs to include grandparents who wish to be involved, as well as aunts, uncles and other incarcerated family members could also be an option.

10.3 Expand celebratory events

Feedback from those with lived experience indicates that celebratory events, such as the Christmas parties discussed above, are a highly valued and positive experience for both incarcerated parents and their children. Unfortunately, Christmas seems to be the only holiday celebration children can experience with their incarcerated parents. It is recommended that other holidays become an option for celebration, such as Easter, Diwali, Lunar New Year, End of Ramadan, Mabo Day, Waitangi Day, and Anzac Day. Upon entry to prison, parents could nominate what holidays they would like to celebrate with their children, which would give ample time to ensure that arrangements could be made. Celebrating these diverse cultural holidays with children is not only important to the families of incarcerated people but is also an opportunity for other incarcerated parents to understand and appreciate the cultural diversity of their peers. During events that are significant cultural holidays, it would be important to make culturally specific food for the occasion. This could be organised with the prison kitchen and cafes, with insight and assistance from those incarcerated who celebrate these holidays. Incarcerated parents have even shared to us that they would be willing to financially contribute to the organising of such events, though assistance from NGOs would be ideal. Another option would be to include a sports day, where children and their incarcerated parents can

participate in various sporting activities together.

In addition, there needs to be creation of a space where children can celebrate the achievements of their incarcerated parents, for instance when they complete a program. An example of this - though requiring further strengthening - has been the graduation of Inside Out program participants, who have occasionally been able to bring a family member into prison (virtually and physically) to experience their graduation day with them. As many children are unaware of the programs offered in prisons, let alone any positive aspects of prison, these events would enable children to share in the accomplishments of their parents whilst also providing them with insight into the life their parent is experiencing on the inside. This would likely have positive impacts on the parent-child relationship and serve as another step toward strengthening their bond.

10.4 Expand incentive-based permits

Permits that allow incarcerated persons to create some sense of normality outside prisons, such as the Reintegration Permits and Family Ties, are an incredible initiative. Expanding on this by creating incentive-based permits that could be used to enable incarcerated parents to attend events outside of prison with an electronic monitor is recommended. This would be a great option for incarcerated parents who wish to attend their children's graduations, award ceremonies and even weddings. Permits for these events would be something that the parent must apply for and then work towards by demonstrating their ability to be trusted through good behaviour. Incarcerated parents would need to be of a C-rating and have approval from the CMRC. Giving incarcerated parents the chance to attend these kinds of events would undoubtedly benefit the parent-child relationship as well as ease transition back into the community for when parents are released.

10.5 Provide education and support for families and carers

Educating families about the realities of prison, stigma, and the programs and supports available to them is a current gap in the support of families affected by parental incarceration. Providing this information as a form of general education to high schools could also be a positive step in ensuring the public have some understanding about the difficulties of having a family member incarcerated.

Many families also have no knowledge about what goes on inside prison and the impacts it can have on a person. They are typically not aware of how to navigate the criminal justice system and its channels, nor the support groups and NGOs they may be able to ask for help. Often the onus is on the family to find out these things for themselves, but

this is not an acceptable responsibility to place on a family that is already facing upheaval and loss. The current prison websites provide very limited information to families seeking it, typically only covering topics such as the length of phone calls, what can and cannot be brought into visits, and how much money can be sent to an incarcerated family member.

We suggest Corrections Victoria (with assistance of an NGO) establish a family/visitor-oriented website that provides easy to understand information and straight forward portals to pre-existing supports and programs. Information included on this page should first emphasise the importance of maintaining contact with an incarcerated family member, whether it be through visits, phone calls or letters. Alongside this information there should be links embedded on the website to any programs and resources that would enable them to reconnect with an estranged family member who is incarcerated. Portals to this website could be added to the existing prison websites, should be easy to interact with and available in a range of languages. This website would be an incredible resource for families of incarcerated people and would further ease the process of remaining in contact with (as well as reconnecting to) incarcerated family members.

10.5.1 Provide financial support for families and carers

Financial support should also be provided to families affected by parental incarceration to ensure that the children can be provided for in terms of physical and educational needs. As parental incarceration often disrupts caregiving, these children need to be in an environment that can at the very least financially survive the responsibility of taking in a child/children. However, there has been feedback from kinship carers that they struggle to be officially recognised as a carer which has meant they are ineligible for support payments already offered. It is therefore recommended that a monthly or fortnightly payment (which is means-tested) be provided through Services Australia (Centrelink). It is important that this payment would enable anyone who becomes the primary caregiver of children with a parent incarcerated to be recognised legally and granted access to this financial support. Provision of fuel vouchers or a fuel card for families required to travel long distances to attend contact visits are also recommended as a source of financial support

As many of these kinship carers will be grandparents, there also needs to be some recognition of the mental, physical, and financial strain becoming a primary caregiver when one expects to be entering retirement (Hutchison, 2021).

10.6 Allow incarcerated parents to purchase their children's food at the café during visits

Although currently closed due to COVID restrictions, the visiting centre cafes allow incarcerated persons and their visitors to enjoy a coffee and some small food items during the visit; these are typically purchased by the visiting family member. In child-only visits - such as the Fun with Mums and Daily Dads programs - this means children are required to bring money into prison with them so they can purchase themselves something. This can be an uncomfortable request for incarcerated parents to ask of their children's carers and can even make parents feel ashamed they cannot purchase food for their own children. Although incarcerated parents can pre-purchase snacks from the canteen to bring with them to these visits, the options are very limited and only include plastic packaged products which are often not nutritious. We recommend allowing parents to use their own money to purchase the food eaten on child-only visits, as well as ensuring that healthy options are made available for purchase (e.g., muesli, yoghurt, wraps, fresh cut fruit and vegetables). Orders could be pre-arranged to allow time for payment to be made from the incarcerated parent's account. This ordering system would also ensure that the desired food would be available during the visit.

Additionally, the current pricing of the food items available at these cafes has been noted by some of our participants as being too excessive. Although this issue was raised mainly in relation to privately-run prisons, it demonstrates a lack of awareness of the financial means available to incarcerated persons and their families. As such, ensuring the costs of these items are manageable to incarcerated parents and carers is necessary.

10.7 Establish a teens specific program

The importance of maintaining contact for younger children who are still developing their understanding of who their family are and how they can be present for them is relatively accommodated by the existing programs oriented towards having fun with an incarcerated parent such as Fun with Mums, Daily Dads, or the annual Christmas parties. However, these kinds of programs/activities are not appealing for teens (those aged between 13 and 16 years old). It is therefore recommended that a program be established for these children where they can experience the longer visit times as the programs above. It could involve the option of either watching a movie, playing video games on an Xbox or iPad, making a meal, or simply providing a space for some quality one-on-one discussions that the parent and child can participate in together.

Another recommendation from Think Tank members was the inclusion of a small educational element in these visits for older children that can provide them with some

understanding of what their parents experience inside prison. This could take the form of a 'my day in photos activity' where children and their incarcerated parents are able to exchange a small photo book with annotated messages that take you through the activities each complete on a given day. Notably, incarcerated parents would need to acquire authorisation from anyone in their photographs if they wished to include them.

10.8 Establish inter-prison family visits

For a small group of children affected by parental incarceration, both parents are simultaneously imprisoned and, due to the gender-separation of prisons, this means Mum and Dad are held at different facilities which impose different visitation requirements. This can be a significant inconvenience for children's carers to accommodate for, especially if the facilities are not close to one another or their residence. Our recommendation is to allow children with both parents incarcerated to have inter-prison visits, where parents are brought to one location (probably either the male or female facility) where the children see them both for a minimum of two-hours. This simplifies the visit responsibility for the carers as well as the emotional and physical exhaustion of children attending visits, which are characterised by long travel and waiting times for small visiting hours.

Alternatively, when a child of an incarcerated parent experiences incarceration themselves, whether they are in youth or adult justice systems, there still needs to be some form of support for them to maintain connection with their incarcerated parents. As a minimum, inter-prison video calls should be made available, as they would provide a manageable and achievable solution to both situations. These video calls should be a minimum of one-hour (as opposed to the current 30 minutes) and should occur on a weekly basis (as opposed to every three-months currently).

10.9 Continue virtual visitation

One of the few blessings of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the introduction of frequent virtual visits. While these do not provide a quality substitute for contact visits, for children that live in separate jurisdictions or even separate countries to their incarcerated parent, these virtual visits have been very beneficial. Prior to the pandemic, even limited access to video calls had to be approved by the prison general manager. If approval was gained, this only entitled an incarcerated person to four video calls of 30 minutes each per year. This meant children were only able to see their incarcerated parent for a total of 2 hours a year - and even then, that time and attention would likely be split between siblings. Due to the introduction of virtual visits, this has now increased to two video calls of 30 minutes per week.

It is recommended that these video call visits are extended to one-hour sessions twice weekly for incarcerated parents with children interstate and overseas, as regular phone calls (particularly international calls) are too expensive for many to afford on a regular basis. Now that this technology exists within prisons, it should be utilised - there is no reason it should become obsolete as we acclimate to a new COVID-normal. The regular-length (half an hour) virtual visits should remain an option to all incarcerated persons to ensure their connection with loved ones can be maintained, especially where long distances have prevented this connection from strengthening in the past.

10.10 Create options for incarcerated parents on remand

Only incarcerated parents serving a sentence have access to the programs outlined above, with parents on remand generally unable to participate. The period for which a parent is placed on remand can vary widely and can extend to several years imprisonment. Parents incarcerated for any length of time, whether on remand or sentence, deserve to be recognised as parents and should be made eligible to participate in parenting programs. However, due to the difficulty of determining the length a parent will be placed on remand, participation would need to be determined on a case-by-case basis by case managers. Those expected to be remanded for six-months or less should be able to participate in any intensive parenting programs, while those expected to be present for over six-months should be given access to any of the other parenting programs/opportunities available.

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