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Overlooked and disadvantaged: Report reveals concerning picture for 40,000 children in Australia with a parent in prison

Child advocacy group, SHINE for Kids, has released distressing findings of a national survey which reveals the suffering and compounding disadvantage experienced by the voiceless victims of crime, children.

The findings of a landmark national survey have given a clear snapshot of the serious and compounding disadvantages suffered by the over 40,000 children in Australia who have a parent in prison and the concerning lack of government support. Of the carers surveyed, 30% said their children had been suspended or expelled from school and a staggering 50% reported their children were regularly absent.

The survey also found that these children suffered from disability at rates far higher than their peers, ADHD and anxiety were reported at a percentage three times higher than in the community while depression was similar. Only a third of survey respondents said the children in their care were connected to any support service, sport or hobby.

SHINE for Kids commissioned the study which was conducted by Monash University in conjunction with the Australian National University and Griffith University and information was gathered over a four-month period.

SHINE for Kids CEO, Julie Hourigan, said the findings are an indictment on the plight of children who have a parent in the criminal justice system, and the Government needs to take immediate action.

“This research is a wakeup call for our policy makers in Australia,” Ms Hourigan said.

“We already knew about the discrimination, stigma and emotional toll taken on individual children by the incarceration of a parent, but this is the first time we’ve had such an in depth look at the true struggles and compounding issues families are facing, often with little to no support.

“These children are some of the most disadvantaged and overlooked in our community with a range of complex needs. Not addressing these issues now is leading to lifelong serious consequences for children. They are essentially being punished for their parent’s crime.

“Teachers aren’t trained to help these kids, prison visits can be costly and confronting and any other complicating factors like disability, mental health issues or poverty are dramatically heightened.

“It’s clear that these children require our immediate attention and yet they are not seen as anybody’s responsibility – there’s no government department or Minister looking out for their needs.”

Associate Professor Catherine Flynn of Monash University said the research painted a clear picture of children who are disadvantaged and living in households which are under stress.



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“Over 40,000 Australian children have a parent in prison and this study found they have a substantial range of needs, both practical and emotional,” Associate Professor Flynn said.

“Financially, most of these families are struggling and that has an impact on a child’s ability to participate in their school community as well as contributing to incidences of bullying and anti-social behaviour.

“Particularly distressing is the high proportion of children with diagnosed mental health issues and disability.

“A concerning number of the children surveyed have had contact with the police or youth justice.”

The study made the following recommendations:

- Offer specialised, free and accessible support for children and families during and after imprisonment.
- Offer support before, during and after video visits for children and parents.
- Roll out more services and resources to support family connection during imprisonment.
- Offer more training and support for schools and teachers where a student has a parent in prison.

Ms Hourigan is putting these recommendations to the Australian Government for immediate consideration.

For more information on SHINE for Kids, and to read a copy of the survey report, visit: shineforkids.org.au

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