

# Family Matters Grant Programme Context – July 2022

## 1. Background

St Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT) has been working for the past 30 years across the island of Ireland on critical social justice issues. Support for prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families has been a consistent area of interest given the impact of imprisonment, particularly on vulnerable groups of people.

This small grant programme was preceded by an initial proposal to map through-the-gate and post-release supports for people affected by convictions and imprisonment, to document the location and nature of supports and identify thematic and geographical gaps. Following a partnership with the Irish Prison Service (IPS) and Probation Service (PS), a more significant proposal for a public-facing criminal justice directory was developed. IASIO, which provides social inclusion supports to ex-prisoners, was funded by SSGT, the IPS and PS to develop the [The Compass](#), a directory of community support services for people and families affected by imprisonment or convictions. It is the first of its kind in Ireland and was launched for IASIO in June 2022 by the Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee.

During the process to develop the directory a high level gap analysis was produced for SSGT in June 2021 – a summary of which is available [here](#). A gap which emerged as a good fit for SSGT's ethos and track record was to **contribute to improving the system of support for families affected by convictions and imprisonment to improve rehabilitation and resettlement outcomes**. Evidence shows that prisoners who manage to maintain family bonds whilst in prison have significantly reduced reoffending risks upon release.

## 2 Current Context

Families affected by imprisonment are overwhelmingly located in areas with the highest levels of deprivation;<sup>1</sup> and the harmful effects of prison exacerbate disadvantage and discrimination. Families can face significant loss of income resulting in deepening poverty, disruption to childcare and family supports, difficulties related to reintegration and stigma associated with having a family member in prison.<sup>2</sup> Although children and families of prisoners have these adverse experiences, they are rarely acknowledged or heard within the system. In April 2022 there were 3,980 people in prison in Ireland and while data is incomplete, it is estimated that there are upwards of 5,000 children with a parent in prison in Ireland on any given day,<sup>3</sup> with over 10,000 children affected each year.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A 2007 study, for example, has shown that nearly 24% of all prisoners came from 1% of Electoral Districts, while less than 5% of the overall population of Ireland came from the same 1% of Electoral Districts, see IPRT, *"It's like stepping on a landmine..." – Reintegration of Prisoners in Ireland* (2010), at p.12, available at:

[https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6189/its\\_like\\_stepping\\_on\\_a\\_landmine\\_reintegration\\_of\\_prisoners\\_in\\_ireland\\_embargoed\\_to\\_0000\\_tuesday\\_25\\_may\\_2010.pdf](https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6189/its_like_stepping_on_a_landmine_reintegration_of_prisoners_in_ireland_embargoed_to_0000_tuesday_25_may_2010.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> These issues are explored in two reports published by IPRT: IPRT, *"Picking Up the Pieces": The Rights and Needs of Children and Families Affected by Imprisonment* (2012), available at: [https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6320/iprt\\_children\\_of\\_imprisoned\\_parents2.pdf](https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6320/iprt_children_of_imprisoned_parents2.pdf); and IPRT, *Piecing It Together: Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland* (2021), available at: [https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6958/piecing\\_it\\_together\\_supporting\\_children\\_and\\_families.pdf](https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6958/piecing_it_together_supporting_children_and_families.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE), *Statistics Ireland*, available at: [https://childrenofprisoners.eu/facts\\_and\\_figures/statistics-ireland/](https://childrenofprisoners.eu/facts_and_figures/statistics-ireland/); and Department of Justice, *Parliamentary Question 466*, 5 May 2021, available at: <https://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PQ-05-05-2021-466>.

<sup>4</sup> This figure is an estimate, based on the number of children with a parent in prison on any given day and the number of committals to prison each year.

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*I go to bed in my cell at night with the fear, will I get bad news from my family in the morning? You see the cold sweat on fellas queuing for the phone. No matter what happens outside, you're locked inside. Feelings of powerlessness can come on you<sup>5</sup>.*

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Imprisonment increases the risk of relationship breakdown between prisoners and their families as it fractures and de-stabilises family relationships. It is difficult to maintain strong and healthy family relationships in the context of the high cost of travelling often lengthy distances to visit the person in prison and the disruption this brings to employment and education. Prison visiting hours are largely during the working week and can be cancelled at the last minute due to staff shortages. Prisoners can be moved unexpectedly, and families are often not informed.

The effect of imprisonment on families is largely ignored in government policy, with the focus on the offender and their sentence. There is no department or agency which takes responsibility for mitigating the harms of imprisonment on the family, helping them to cope with the pressures. Imprisonment of a household member is identified as one of ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) which can have a significant negative impact on children's long-term health and wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> The Oberstown Children's Detention Campus found loss of a parent due to imprisonment to be one of the characteristics of children in detention, with between 31% and 54% of children on the campus during the period 2017-2019 suffering the loss of a parent either through death, imprisonment, or a lack of long-term contact.<sup>7</sup>

Another aspect of the impact of imprisonment on families is the situation of minority ethnic groups. An April 2022 IPRT report found there were "significant challenges faced by foreign nationals and minority ethnic people in prison concerning access to services, respect for different religious backgrounds, as well as language and communication barriers"<sup>8</sup>. This is exacerbated by limited or no contact with family and friends for many foreign nationals. There is evidence that foreign nationals and minority ethnic groups such as Travellers are over-represented in the Irish prison system. Oberstown Children Detention Campus reported in 2019 that a fifth of young people in their custody are members of the Traveller community, although Travellers account for 0.7% of the Irish population. There are few instances of culturally-appropriate approaches to services for people and families affected by imprisonment and convictions. SSGT's Traveller Justice Initiative (TJI) has a particular objective of improving policy and practice around support for Traveller families with a loved one in prison<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> All quotes used in this paper are from: Madden Siobhán (2021) *"We keep going for each other" – family stories of Travellers through prison times. A collective narrative document by Traveller men in prison and Traveller women as family members*, published by the Travellers in Prison Initiative and Galway Traveller Movement

<sup>6</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study*, available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Oberstown Children Detention Campus, *Key Characteristics of Young People in Detention*, available from: <https://www.oberstown.com/campus-stats/>.

<sup>8</sup> IPRT 2022, "Sometimes I'm missing the word" The rights, needs and experiences of foreign national and minority ethnic groups in the Irish penal system, IPRT and Maynooth University, p5 at [https://iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7076/iprt\\_the\\_rights-\\_needs\\_and\\_experiences\\_of\\_foreign\\_national\\_and\\_minority\\_ethnic\\_groups.pdf](https://iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7076/iprt_the_rights-_needs_and_experiences_of_foreign_national_and_minority_ethnic_groups.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> See the work of TJI at <https://www.ssgt.ie/tji-current-work/> including its most recent publication, a collective narrative document by Traveller men in prison and Traveller women as family members at [https://www.ssgt.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/GTM\\_We-keep-going-for-each-other\\_web.pdf](https://www.ssgt.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/GTM_We-keep-going-for-each-other_web.pdf)

Evidence shows that families are the ‘most effective resettlement agency<sup>10</sup> and, combined with meaningful education and employment, constitute *the third leg of the stool that brings stability and structure to prisoners’ lives, particularly when they leave prison<sup>11</sup>.*

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*Getting to visits with my partner every week is a big part of the stress. In sun, wind or rain, visits mean long walks and standing in queues with your children. No prams, no toys. When the toddler is clingy, or running around, I carry her on one hip and the baby on the other. You queue for the metal detector, for the dogs, for the long walk to the visiting box for your fifty-minute visit. Sometimes you only get fifteen minutes. Once it was eight. When they transferred him to Portlaoise, we were the ones tortured with two hundred miles up and back again. I go through all that to keep our family bonds alive.*

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The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has not specifically recognised children of prisoners as an at-risk group with particular rights and needs, and there is no designated national strategy to address the issues.<sup>12</sup> The IPS downgraded their commitment to supporting this cohort with their most recent strategic plan containing no specific actions for supporting children and families unlike previous plans.<sup>13</sup> Although the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) successfully piloted a ‘Family Links Programme’<sup>14</sup> with the IPS there is no dedicated support worker for children and families. There is no national support service in Ireland dedicated to children and families of prisoners. Any targeted support that is available for children and families is provided by the NGO sector and is local in its reach.<sup>15</sup>

Research carried out by CDI in 2019 identified the negative impacts of imprisonment of a parent on families, particularly children. It sets out the potential to address these through parenting and family supports in the community and the prison system, and improved connections between the two. It outlines how prisoners’ children are at a much greater risk of experiencing negative educational, behavioural and emotional outcomes and are also at greater risk of future incarceration<sup>16</sup>. The report also points to UK research which found that prisoners who have good bonds with their families on release are 38 per cent less likely to re-offend than those who don’t.<sup>17</sup> Family-related needs were identified at three stages of the imprisonment experience –

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<sup>10</sup> A joint thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation and Ofsted, Resettlement provision for adult offenders: Accommodation and education, training and employment, September 2014 [accessed online June 2022 at <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/cji/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/09/Resettlement-thematic-for-print-Sept-2014.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> UK Ministry of Justice, *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners’ Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime* Lord Farmer, 2017 p 28

<sup>12</sup> In 2014, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs included one commitment to ensuring adequate access by children to an imprisoned parent in their *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020*, see at p.82, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/775847-better-outcomes-brighter-futures/>.

<sup>13</sup> Irish Prison Service, *Strategic Plan 2019-2022* (2019), at p.15, available from: <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents/pdf/Irish-Prison-Services-Strategy-2019-2022.pdf>. The IPS Strategic Plans 2012-2015 and 2016-2018 included reference to family contact.

<sup>14</sup> Bradshaw, D., & Muldoon, O.T. (2017) “Family Links” Evaluation Report. Dublin: Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) at <https://www.cdi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Final-Family-Links-Evaluation-Report-January-2017-1.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> For example, organisations such as New Directions in Dublin and Bedford Row in Limerick provide some support to families / children but only in a localised manner, see <https://familiesofprisoners.ie/> and <https://www.bedfordrow.ie/>. For more information see IPRT, *Piecing it Together*, at p.21, available at: [https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6958/piecing\\_it\\_together\\_supporting\\_children\\_and\\_families.pdf](https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6958/piecing_it_together_supporting_children_and_families.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> CDI (2019), *Prisoners Returning Home: Prisoners and Family Reintegration*, O’Dwyer, K; Kelliher S and Bowes J, 2019 at [www.cdi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CDI-Prisoners-Returning-Home-min.pdf](http://www.cdi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CDI-Prisoners-Returning-Home-min.pdf) accessed online in June 2022

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Justice (2014), “*Parenting and Relationship support programmes for offenders and their families – Executive summary*” [http://www.policis.com/pdf/moj/MOJ\\_BIS\\_Parenting\\_Support\\_for\\_offenders\\_and\\_families\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_280114\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.policis.com/pdf/moj/MOJ_BIS_Parenting_Support_for_offenders_and_families_Executive_Summary_280114_FINAL.pdf)

committal, imprisonment and release. Information for families was needed at committal, during imprisonment there is a need for enhanced family contact, family involvement in sentence planning, services to address offending behaviour and family supports in the community. Needs around release included family involvement in planning and support around reintegration.

In 2022, the IPRT's Progress in the Penal System 2021 report noted that the promised IPS National Families and Imprisonment Group policy on visiting conditions standards across the prison estate has not been published and the group is currently not operating<sup>18</sup>.

In 2020 SSGT gave a small multiannual grant to the IPRT in collaboration with the Katharine Howard Foundation for the development of a *Children and Families Initiative* which had clear objectives for addressing some of the issues detailed above. There was good progress in its first two years, with a particular success being the establishment of the *Action for Children and Families of Prisoners Network*<sup>19</sup> and the building of momentum and generation of opportunities to improve the situation for children and families of people in prison.<sup>20</sup>

The impact of COVID-19 on prisoners and their families drew attention to deficiencies in the system and this, along with the SSGT gap analysis which identified a gap in services is the opportunity for a small grant programme to contribute to systems change.

The gap analysis<sup>21</sup> produced by Quality Matters for SSGT in August 2021 gathered information from community organisations on the type of service provision available for criminal justice service users and/or their families. Out of 250 respondents the highest reported area of service provision was education, training and employment supports (69%) for prisoners and ex-offenders, followed by key working and case management supports (64%) and then information and advice services (56%). By comparison, the three least common forms of service provision available were support for families (27%); counselling and psychotherapy services (27%); restorative justice (19%) and supports for victims of crime (9%).

The analysis also found that services offering support to family members were proportionately distributed across each of the counties, except for Dublin where the number of services was the highest and Co. Leitrim where the fewest number of services exist. The figures also show that self-referrals were proportionately higher for services offering family support which suggests a lack of referral pathways for this stakeholder group.

<sup>18</sup> IPRT 2022 Progress in the Penal System, The need for transparency, p69 at [https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7052/progress\\_in\\_the\\_penal\\_system\\_2021\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7052/progress_in_the_penal_system_2021_-_final.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> For more information on the Network, see: <https://www.actionforfamilies.ie/>.

<sup>20</sup> For example, between Sept and Nov 2021, various opportunities arose to engage with: the Prison Rules 2007; the Open Consultation on Judicial Planning Working Group; the Government Periodic Report on the UNCRC; and feedback to the Courts capital strategy.

<sup>21</sup> A summary of the gap analysis is available on the SSGT website. SSGT 2021, *Profile of Community-based Criminal Justice Services in the Republic of Ireland*, at <https://www.ssgt.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2021-Aug-Criminal-Justice-Services-Profiles-Summary-FINAL.pdf>