

Family Matters Grant Programme Context – July 2023

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.

SSGT believes putting families at the heart of the criminal justice system and processes is the 'golden thread' which can reduce the harm of imprisonment and contribute to rehabilitation. Evidence shows that prisoners who manage to maintain family bonds whilst in prison have significantly reduced reoffending risks upon release. Families cannot bear this burden alone and should be supported in this role. SSGT acknowledges family relationships are complex, and systems and practice should take account of the best interests of both the family and the prisoner.

The [SSGT Strategic Plan 2023-2027](#) has a commitment to contribute to the improvement of systems of support for families affected by convictions and imprisonment to improve rehabilitation and resettlement outcomes. Working across the island, an initial three year grant programme (2022–2024) has the following outcomes:

- Family-centred approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration become normalised in the prison system, at the point of imprisonment, during the sentence and on release.
- The voice of prisoners and their families adds to the evidence base and understanding of the value of family-centred approaches to reintegration and maintaining family bonds.
- Government and state bodies are held accountable for reducing the harm of imprisonment to families.

The grant programme will include activities to strengthen the environment within which community-based criminal justice organisations are operating – such as reflective spaces and developing practice and advocacy networks.

SSGT has been working with other groups over the past 4 years in this sector including:

- [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 by IASIO in June 2022.
- A [Profile of Community-based Criminal Justice Services in the Republic of Ireland](#) which includes a high level gap analysis was produced for SSGT in June 2021.

2 Current Context

Families affected by imprisonment are overwhelmingly located in areas with the highest levels of deprivation;¹ 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.² Although

¹ 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.

² 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;

children and families of prisoners have these adverse experiences, they are rarely acknowledged or heard within the system. In Sept 2022 there were 4,178 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,³ with over 10,000 children affected each year.⁴

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 you⁵.

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 and other operational reasons. 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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"⁸. 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

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.

³ See Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE), *Statistics Ireland*, available at: 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>.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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

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

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

⁸ 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

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 prison⁹.

Evidence shows that families are the 'most effective resettlement agency'¹⁰ 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*¹¹.

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.

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.¹² 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.¹³ Although the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) successfully piloted a 'Family Links Programme'¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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

⁹ See the work of TJI at <https://www.ssgt.ie/tpi-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

¹⁰ 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.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/cijj/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/09/Resettlement-thematic-for-print-Sept-2014.pdf>

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

¹² 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/>.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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>

¹⁵ 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.

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 incarceration¹⁶. 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.¹⁷ Family-related needs were identified at three stages of the imprisonment experience – 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 2023, the IPRT's Progress in the Penal System 2022 reported progress in their standard around maintaining family and close significant relationships including in-cell telephones, video call infrastructure and extended access to Sunday visits. They also confirmed the IPS has a key priority in 2023 to recruit a dedicated resource to progress and enhance family links. However there has been no progress on the promised IPS National Families and Imprisonment Group policy on visiting conditions standards across the prison estate and the group is currently not operating¹⁸.

In late 2022, the IPRT recruited a Coordinator for the Children and Families Initiative to expand on a 3 year pilot originally funded by SSGT and the Katharine Howard Foundation. It has clear objectives to address some of the issues detailed above. The objectives of the IPRT and SSGT in this area are closely aligned and we are working collaboratively in some areas. The *Action for Children and Families of Prisoners Network*¹⁹ coordinated by the IPRT is building momentum highlighting the issues and generating opportunities to improve the situation for children and families of people in prison.

¹⁶CDI (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 accessed online in June 2022

¹⁷ 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

¹⁸ IPRT 2023 Progress in the Penal System, Standard 11: Family contact, p49 at https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7216/progress_in_the_penal_system_2022_-_draft_9_web.pdf

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