A Trauma-Informed Approach to Working with Prisoners’ Families

A REPORT FOR THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST – FELLOWSHIP YEAR 2015
SAM HART, APRIL 2016
This report examines trauma-informed ways of working with prisoners’ families. It is based on findings from visits to various organisations in the United States in July and August 2015.

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I visited:

**New York City:** Children of Promise, the Osborne Institute, Echoes of Incarceration, Hour Children, the Vera Institute

**Des Moines, Iowa:** Orchard Place and members of the Trauma Informed Care network

**Little Rock, Arkansas:** Voices of the Children Left Behind

**Durham, North Carolina:** Our Children’s Place, MATCH

**Washington DC:** Families and Friends of Incarcerated People, Scholarships, Iron Kids, Urban Institute, International Association of Chiefs of Police

**San Francisco:** Project What!, Youth Wellness Centre, One Family Programme
Acknowledgements

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Background

Issues Facing Prisoners’ Families
Prisoners’ families are damaged by the criminal justice system in numerous ways. Yet the trauma families experience is often ignored, and they are viewed as collateral damage in the quest to punish wrong doers.

Although the difficulties faced by prisoners’ families have been well-documented elsewhere, I will outline them briefly before moving on to the main body of the report. There are currently around 85,000 people in prison in England and Wales, most of whom have left loved-ones behind to deal with the aftershock. As well as dealing with the loss of the imprisoned person, families are expected to navigate a complex and sometimes hostile system as best they can without statutory support.

Families may be plunged into poverty and lose their homes. They may face hostility and violence from the local community, including bricks through windows and physical attacks.

Children are often left confused, angry and without a voice. They may experience night terrors and bullying at school. They are more likely to truant, limiting their chances of success in later life. They are two to three times more likely to experience mental health problems than their peers.

Mass incarceration means that families in the US are facing similar problems, but on a much greater scale. Their plight is arguably worse than that of their UK counterparts, not least because prisoners are often held hundreds of miles away from home in depressed rural areas, and visiting involves epic overnight bus journeys. (Jacobia Dahm’s stark photographs capture the details of one such journey to Attica Prison in upstate New York: http://www.jacobiadahm.com/removed-the-prison-buses). Closed visits (i.e. non-contact visits behind a Perspex barrier) are also much more common.

As in the UK, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) families are disproportionately affected by imprisonment. African Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of white people in the United States, and together, Hispanic and African American people make up nearly 60 per cent of the prison population. (Michelle Alexander’s eye-opening book The New Jim Crow puts forward some fascinating arguments as to why this might be the case.) This mass incarceration has a

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1 Bromley Briefings, Prison Reform Trust http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/o/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Factfile%20Autumn%202015.pdf
devastating effect on communities. As one young woman explains: “It was so normal. We would have family reunions in visiting rooms. Coz it’s like all the men in my family were locked up at one time..it was like..all the men are gone.”

Yet despite (or perhaps because of), such difficulties, there are many dedicated and hardworking individuals and organisations striving to repair or mitigate the damage caused.

**Incarceration of a Parent - A Traumatic Event?**

“Trauma: experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm people’s ability to cope, leaving them powerless.”

There are many definitions of trauma, but the meaning above seems most pertinent in the context of prisoners’ families, as it encapsulates the overpowering feelings of helplessness experienced by those who lose a loved-one to incarceration.

The concept of traumatic stress caused by adverse childhood experiences has gained great currency in the States during the last decade. There is recognition that traumatic events in early life can have a devastating and enduring effect on mental and physical health. The Adverse Childhood Experience Study, conducted by Felitti and Anda, is key to understanding a trauma-informed approach to working with families. The study provides compelling evidence to suggest that repeated exposure to traumatic events causes a build-up of toxic stress which can lead to disease and early death.

The research shows a link between the number of adverse childhood experiences, and poor health in later life. Simply put, the greater the number of childhood traumatic events, the greater the chance of experiencing poor health and early death. In fact, studies show that people who experience six or more ACEs are likely to die 20 years earlier than those who experience no ACEs at all. The public health implications of early childhood trauma are immense.

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3 Echoes of Incarceration (2009)
4 [http://www.nonviolenceandsocialjustice.org/FAQs/What-is-Trauma/41/](http://www.nonviolenceandsocialjustice.org/FAQs/What-is-Trauma/41/)
These experiences include neglect, witnessing violence, physical abuse and, crucially for this report, **incarceration of a parent** (for a full list and more information about ACEs see [www.acestudy.org](http://www.acestudy.org)). This trauma is caused both by witnessing the arrest and the ensuing loss of a parent. Prisoners’ children may also be exposed to a higher number of other traumatic experiences and are therefore at greater risk of developing symptoms of traumatic stress.

It does not, of course, follow that everyone who experiences parental incarceration will experience trauma. A variety of factors including parental resilience, existing support networks and strong attachments mean that many children can deal with the experience and lead healthy lives. This report examines how criminal justice and family support agencies can support this resilience and minimize the trauma families’ experience.

**What is a trauma-informed approach?**
The concept of a ‘trauma-informed approach’ is well established in the US. It is not a therapeutic intervention, but rather an organisational practice which recognises the damaging effects of trauma. The approach views people with challenging behaviour as ‘injured’ rather than ‘sick’ or ‘bad’ and poses the question “What happened to you?” rather than: “What’s wrong with you?”

Several bodies have given serious thought to the concept and have attempted to develop the ideas into a framework that can be adopted by a variety of agencies. According to SAHMSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) the challenge for organisations is to: realise that the people they work with may have experienced trauma, recognise that the symptoms of trauma, respond by using trauma-informed principles in working with families and resist re-traumatisation – arguing that even well-meaning organisations can inadvertently trigger traumatic memories in their clients.

SAHMSA have outlined six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer support
4. Collaboration and mutuality
5. Empowerment, voice and choice
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

“They treated me like someone bad who needed changing. Instead, they should have asked what happened to me,” Gerardo Perez, Echoes of Incarceration.
It is becoming increasingly common for organisations, communities and even states to become trauma-informed in the US. I visited one such state, Iowa, where the Trauma Informed Care Project, led by Gladys Alvarez and her team is currently dedicated to ensuring that service providers in the state are fully aware of it and its implications for service delivery. Through training, advice and an awareness raising campaign, the TIC team is dedicated to supporting those who have experienced trauma.

This process of becoming trauma-informed has involved the implementation of many seemingly small but thoughtful interventions in Iowa. For example, in the past, female prisoners who cried out at night in the Women’s Residential Correctional Facility would be admonished and left alone in the dark. Now, an understanding that, for many women, being in the dark can trigger traumatic memories of abuse, the prisoners are instead invited to sit in one of the rocking chairs in the prison’s therapeutic room. There they have a chance to talk to a member of staff and soothe themselves before going back to bed.

But the quest to become trauma-informed is a lengthy one and, according to Kimberley Breakspear from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, requires a thorough review of practices and attitudes and a programme of staff training and development. There are various assessment tools available to support organisations in their mission, but the scale of the task should not be underestimated and can take years.

Indeed, there is an argument that becoming trauma-informed is necessarily a work in progress which can never be fully achieved. There is also concern among some professionals that ‘trauma-informed’ is in danger of becoming a buzz word used to attract funding with little substance behind it. And others believed that the focus on trauma was unhelpful. As one leading academic put it: “I am not sure what value there is on being told you are going to die young.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of projects I visited claimed to be fully trauma-informed but they encapsulated some or all of the principles in various different ways. The remainder of the report will profile some of the agencies I visited and then analyse how they meet with the trauma-informed principles outlined above, before making recommendations for practice in the UK.
Projects Visited

San Francisco Police Department
Trauma-Informed Arrests

The arrest of a parent may be the first time a child has contact with the criminal justice system. This is unlikely to be a pleasant experience and could have devastating and lasting effects. Take for example, the case of Luna Garcia who was five years old and playing at home with her little brothers, when police broke down the apartment door and overturned her bedroom in an attempt to arrest her father. This process, which was repeated several times over the next eight years, meant that Garcia, now a youth spokesperson for the San Francisco-based advocacy group Project What! (see below), is too terrified to answer if someone knocks on her door. Or consider Cheyenne MacKenzie, another Project What! advocate, whose graduation day was destroyed by the arrival of the police who dragged her father away in handcuffs.

But police in some areas are challenging these practices by introducing the idea of trauma-informed arrests, an approach which recognises the fact that children may be damaged by the sight of their parents being taken away in handcuffs.

Chief Gregory Suhr of the San Francisco Police Department, a keen advocate of the approach, has trained his police officers to consider families during the arrest process. This involves:

- Attempting to arrest a parent when their child is not present
- Being alert to the presence of children in a dwelling where an arrest is taking place
- Giving adolescents face-saving time to avoid confrontation
- If children are present, trying to arrest the parent out of view
- Allowing time for the parent to reassure the child if this is possible
- Taking time to explain the process to children or allowing the caregivers to do so when appropriate.
- Asking about alternative caregivers and staying with the child till those caregivers arrive.
- Allowing parents to hand over teddy bears to their children as an extra means of reassurance (these are provided by police officers from a supply carried in the police car).
The SFPD views this approach as a way of building trust with the local community and believes that it will lead to changes in which the police are viewed by the public.

Several police departments throughout the country have adopted trauma-informed principles and the International Association of Chief Police Officers and the Urban Institute have published guides⁶, reports and run webinars⁷ on this issue.

**Echoes of Incarceration**

Children of prisoners are all too often left without information, agency and voice as their family lives are torn apart. Many children are not told the truth about their parents’ incarceration and many of those who know the truth are asked to keep it to themselves.

The New York-based Echoes of Incarceration is an impressive example of how young people are regaining their voices. The project, led by film-maker Jeremy Robins, gives young people the skills, training, tools and confidence to tell their stories through film. There is an emphasis on collaboration as the young people work together and with other agencies to produce powerful, moving films in which young people reflect on their experiences at the hands of the criminal justice system.

During my trip I spoke with Kharon Benson, Francis Adeji and Gerardo Perez*, veterans of the programme who are now working as mentors and youth leaders on the project. They were articulate about the importance of being able to tell their stories, explaining how it helped them to make sense of what happened to them and they stressed the importance of young people knowing the truth.

They were also vehement about the damage that can be done if children are denied a relationship with their incarcerated parents and spoke of the bewilderment, betrayal and loss children feel when this happens to them. They were also keen to point out the importance of combatting the loneliness that children of incarcerated parents can feel: “Kids shouldn't feel alone. They are not. We've been there and we can support each other,” said Francis.

Vitally, Echoes’ messages are gaining a wide audience and there have been screenings at universities, international conferences and even the White House.

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⁷ [http://www.iacp.org/CAPWebinar](http://www.iacp.org/CAPWebinar)
The young film makers see themselves as activists fighting for a voice for the 2.7 million children affected by incarceration. Their testaments make compelling viewing and can be seen on the Echoes of Incarceration website: www.echoesofincarceration.org.

*For more on Gerardo’s story, please see page 18 of this report.

**Project What! San Francisco**

Project What! provides another powerful and impressive example of what young people can achieve if they are given the tools to do so. This San Francisco-based organisation supports young people with a parent in prison to campaign for the rights of prisoners' families.

An important element of the project is a training course which helps young people fully understand the criminal justice system. Zoe Wilmott, project leader explains that journey from arrest to release can be bewildering and alienating. Understanding the process and their place in it, enables the young advocates to campaign more effectively.

The young people are also trained in public speaking and are expected to deliver their messages to people with power and influence. And the project has yielded real and meaningful changes. In 2014, Project What! worked with a wide range of individuals and agencies involved in the criminal justice system to draw up ten policy recommendations. Impressively, four of these recommendations have already been implemented8, including the San Francisco Police Department’s policy of trauma-informed arrest (see above).

**Hour Children, My Mother’s Place**

Coming out of prison can be a frightening time for prisoners and their loved-ones. Families are expected to reconnect after long periods of separation with little or no preparation. Hour Children in New York City, recognizes this fact and has created a sanctuary for New York women and their children recovering from the impact of imprisonment. Prisoners are reunited with their children in the haven of My Mother’s House, a communal home founded by Sister Tesa Fitzgerald in 1985.

8 [http://communityworkswest.org/policy-recommendations-3/](http://communityworkswest.org/policy-recommendations-3/)
As soon as you enter the Hour Children buildings, you are bombarded with signs reminding you that you are welcomed, loved and appreciated. The staff, half of whom were once service users themselves, are warm, friendly and smile a lot. In short, you feel safe.

The home boasts a well-stocked play space downstairs and a backyard with slides, swings and a min-basketball net. Women are expected to eat and cook together which allows them to talk over and reflect on the happenings of the day as well as experience of sitting round the table with others – something many of them have never experienced themselves.

Work is a key element of the process and the Working Women’s team provides classes in resume-writing, interview techniques and communication skills. Every effort is made to help women into their chosen careers. And the passage to work is made easier with the provision of childcare, mentoring for children, after school clubs and summer camps.

But it’s not just about creating a safe space for women. Hour Children is having a real effect on community safety with re-offending rates standing at just 3.5% as opposed to around 48% nationally.

Women progress from My Mother’s House to nearby apartments which support more independent living. And, crucially, these are ‘for keeps’ if the women choose to stay there. This puts a huge pressure on accommodation and Hour Children are on the constant look out for affordable housing to add to their stock. But Sister Tesa balks at the very idea of asking people to free-up space by moving on. “These are the women’s homes says Sister Teresa. Why would anyone ask you to leave your home?”

**Children of Promise**

Deep in the heart of un-gentrified Brooklyn, Children of Promise provides a sanctuary for young people battling the effects of parental incarceration. The award-winning facility offers educational support, one to one mentoring, therapy, summer camps and other enrichment activities.

Staff are keen to expand the experiences of the children they serve through enriching after school activities and trips to museums, theatres and parks in nearby Manhattan. This process is enhanced through a mentoring programme.

The building itself is impressive. The former school building is attractive and colourful with murals, soft furnishings and an impressive basket-ball court.
sponsored by the local team, Brooklyn Nets. Children pour in during the holidays and after school to play games, read in the library, take part in dance classes, get support for their homework or just hang out. And you can sense that they are proud of the building “It is something special for them. It is somewhere they can hang out and be themselves,” says LaToyah Williams-Belfort, head of operations and fundraising.

Staff recognise the potentially devastating effects of imprisonment on their clients and offer them trauma screening, and, if required, a range of therapeutic interventions.

MATCH
Visiting prison can be a frightening and unpleasant experience for children. Long journeys, searches, waiting, locked doors, uniformed officers and the possibility of being sniffed by drug dogs can make the run up to the visit stressful and difficult. When they are finally allowed to see their parents, physical contact is limited and children can struggle to interact meaningfully with their parent in the sterile and uncomfortable visits environment.

The MATCH Center nestling just inside the grounds of North Carolina Correctional Facility for Women offers a different visiting experience altogether. Rather than visiting their mothers in a traditional visiting hall, children visit their mothers in a bright, homely apartment-style room. Families are entitled to one three-hour private visit a month, and can relax and read books together on colourful sofas or cook a simple meal in the kitchen. Birthdays and special occasions are celebrated and mothers can choose a gift for their child from the well-stocked ‘birthday closet’.

Mothers don’t automatically qualify for the programme, but must attend classes that seriously address their own parenting styles. The programme has kudos among the inmates, and being a ‘Match Mom’ is considered an honour.
Learning from the Projects

Although the organisations I visited were very diverse, they were all held together by a common thread. This was a recognition that families affected by imprisonment had undergone a traumatic event and that this trauma needed to be addressed. None of the organizations I visited claimed to be fully ‘trauma-informed’, although some were working towards it.

As discussed earlier in the report, SAMHSA, a pioneering body in this work, have outlined six principles of a trauma-informed approach. In this section, I am going to analyse how each of these principles was met by the organisations I visited and then, in the final section, speculate on how they could be adopted in the UK.

Empowerment, choice and voice

Empowerment and its potential to mitigate the helplessness of trauma was an important lesson in my research. Trauma renders people powerless. So it makes sense that one of the principles of trauma-informed care concerns regaining power and having a voice and choice over what happens next.

Prisoners’ children who are left without information, agency and voice as their family lives are torn apart. Many children are not told the truth about their parents’ incarceration and many of those who know the truth are asked to keep it to themselves.

In focusing on the trauma faced by prisoners’ families, it is easy to view them as victims that need to be rescued. A trauma-informed approach moves away from a ‘deficit model’ towards a strengths-based approach, recognizing that families have their own skills and solutions that should be given space and support to develop.

The Echoes of Incarceration crew provided a good example of this - developing their skills and confidence as young film makers whilst simultaneously forging solutions to their own difficulties. They are spreading their messages to decision makers, educators and criminal justice staff.

The experiences of the young people at Project What!, were integral to the organization. Self-advocacy skills were nurtured and developed and the young people made real and lasting changes that would affect the lives of countless others.
The Hour Children project focused on the skills of the female prisoners as soon as they left prison, making a concerted effort to find out what they are good at and building on these skills to help them find employment. More than half the staff at Hour Children were former service users.

In the projects I visited, this empowerment went beyond family members speaking at conferences, sitting on steering boards and telling their stories to the press (all of which are important but can be tokenistic if not managed properly) but extended to families having a powerful voice in policy and organizational direction.

**Peer support**

The support of others with lived experience is a vital component in a trauma-informed approach and particularly important for children and families of prisoners who can often find themselves isolated and cut off from traditional routes of support. Many of the projects I visited provided an opportunity for people to share experiences and support each other.

The young people at Children of Promise, for example, were given a well-equipped, welcoming and attractive space to just be themselves. The children welcomed the opportunity to share experiences and speak openly about the issues that most concerned them most.

Summer camps are a common feature of American childhoods and energetic and dynamic leaders of some of the organisations I visited ensured that prisoners’ children didn’t miss out. The children at ‘Children of Promise’ were taken on day trips to museums, parks and theatres and given the chance to take part in sporting activities throughout the summer. During my visit to Hour Children, mothers were anticipating the return of their children from a seven week camping trip involving hiking, swimming and barbecues. New York Park rangers also provided urban overnight camping trips in the city’s parks for those who weren’t able to make the regular summer-long trips.

The ability to support others in a similar situation was very important to the young film makers at Echoes of Incarceration, who stressed the loneliness that can result in the incarceration of a parent and were most concerned that young people should not ‘feel alone’.

An emphasis on sharing meals among the residents at My Mother’s House was an attempt to encourage the mothers to share their experiences of learning to connect with their children after a stretch in prison. Although it was not

"If you really want to create mental health problems, put children through a traumatic situation and tell them it is shameful and they can't talk about it," Dee Ann Newell, Arkansas Voices of the Children Left Behind.
appreciated by everyone, the project founder, Sister Fitzgerald, told me it was a valuable process: “This communal space is important. It’s where they learn to share and process their day and get support from each other. Some are resistant at first. It’s not something they have had in their own backgrounds. But it helps start the next day a little stronger.”

**Collaboration**
A trauma-informed approach values the input all members bring to an organization. There is a levelling out of ‘experts’ and ‘non-experts’ and a recognition of the value brought by those with lived experience.

The young film-makers at Echoes of Incarceration worked together on projects, creating something positive out of their shared difficulties. They also reached out to other communities and groups beyond their immediate environment, offering solace, hope and support. It was telling that Jeremy Robins, the project director, said little during my visit, but referred me to the young people themselves as the real experts, fulfilling the role of facilitator rather than leader.

The Project What! Advocates were given license to tackle issues that they felt most important to them. This resulted in the young people working together to interview a wide range of people from the criminal justice system.

There was also evidence of collaborative working across agencies. The Echoes crew, for example, made films based on the Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights, which had been drawn up by SFCIPP (a prisoners’ families group in San Francisco). And Project What! collaborated with the San Francisco Police Department to help draw up the principles of trauma-informed arrests.

**Safety**
Survivors of traumatic stress often feel unsafe. Seemingly ordinary situations and settings can feel full of threat, making it difficult for them to relax and operate normally. Prisoners’ families for example, whose faith in the criminal justice system may have been destroyed, can view law enforcement agents as a threat rather than a source of safety and support. Children who have seen one parent taken away take some convincing that others in their lives are not about to disappear too.

Many of the projects that I visited recognized that and went out of their way to create welcoming and soothing environments in which families could feel physically and psychologically safe.
Hour Children, for example, bombards visitors with welcome signs and friendly faces, reassuring them that they will be cared for and supported. One young client told me how it gave her the space ‘just to be myself and relax’ after a lifetime ‘high alert’ fending for herself in stressful and hostile situations.

Similarly, the MATCH facility transforms a hostile, potentially frightening, prison environment into a warm, friendly space in which mothers and their children feel safe to interact as a family.

Through its policy of trauma-informed arrests, the San Francisco Police Department tries to ensure that the home remains a relatively safe space even during a police raid.

**Trustworthiness and Transparency**
Families of prisoners often have their faith in the criminal justice system destroyed. Law enforcement agents are seen as a threat rather than a source of safety and support. The San Francisco Police Department has attempted to rebuild this trust through their approach to arrest in which families of the arrestee are considered and catered for.

But for prisoners’ children, this lack of trust can extend to their families. Some of the young people I spoke to eloquently voiced their utter sense of betrayal in finding out their parents were in prison rather than ‘away at work.’ And without fail, the professionals and young people I met stressed the need to be open and honest with children, stressing that shielding them from the truth, however well-meant, only added to the trauma.

**Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues**
A trauma-informed approach is responsive to the cultural, historical and gender needs of the people they serve. Technically of course, anyone can go to prison. But in reality, prisons tend to be warehouses for people who are poor, mentally ill and who are substance misusers. And as we have already seen, black and Hispanic men are incarcerated at a far higher rate than the rest of the population.

At Project What!, the politics of race and incarceration were tackled full on through a course in criminal justice. This course was of vital significance to the young people, giving them a fresh perspective on their own position as ‘prisoners’ children’, helping them to understand the historical and cultural issues which had led to their parents’ incarceration.

“Do not lie to your kid. The truth may hurt but it’s gonna hurt a whole lot more when they realise they have been lied to,” Gerardo Perez, Echoes of Incarceration.
Hour Children is entirely gender sensitive, as it is built around the needs of women. Recognising that many women leave prison with low self-esteem, the project works hard to rebuild their confidence through work, training and peer support. The needs of working mothers are taken into account as are the anxieties felt by women who are being asked to leave their children and, as a result, affordable childcare is provided on site.

**Case History: A culturally sensitive approach**

The Osborne Institute in New York had organized a video conferencing visit between a father and his son. The father was Dominican and his first language was Spanish, although he had learned a little English in prison. The son had been born in New York, and spoke no Spanish. The child was brought into Osborne’s Bronx office, and linked to his father in prison via video link. Although the visit started well, Osborne staff noticed that the visit became tense. The father spoke to his son in Spanish and was disappointed that his son spoke only in English. He also became frustrated at his son’s lack of knowledge. “You’re Domenican, you should speak Spanish. I can’t believe they are not teaching it to you at home.” At a case conference, the staff discussed at length some ways of bridging this cultural and language gap. They believed that the prisoner’s frustration may be attributed to his own difficulties with English and his inability to talk to his son about their shared heritage. Consequently, they arranged an interpreter for the next visit and suggested the father and son play word games etc. that would help them learn each other’s language. They also mooted the idea of the father telling the son stories about his own childhood in Domenica.
Recommendations

Families can be unintentionally, even casually, torn apart by careless practices which do not take into account the trauma caused by imprisonment. And, as the Adverse Childhood Experiences has shown, children are especially vulnerable to the traumatic effects of parental incarceration and may be at greater risk of ill-health in later life as a result. So minimising the trauma experienced by children and families of prisoners should be viewed as a pressing public health issue.

A fully trauma-informed criminal justice system seems a long way off. Becoming trauma-informed is a long and complex process, involving root and branch reform of organisations. In the States, this process has been supported through the millions of dollars which have been poured into infrastructure organisations such as SAHMSA and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network which support organisations to become trauma-informed. Although in the UK there is a growing interest in this area, there is no such national network championing this work.

But this lack of an infrastructure organization should not prevent agencies and individuals being aware of the trauma that imprisonment causes families and adjusting their services accordingly. With a little thought, the criminal justice system could be reframed to consider the needs of families at each stage of the criminal justice system, taking into account the six trauma-informed principles outlines above. For example, defendants’ families could be supported in court, giving them much needed information and support. Prisons could routinely give information to families about the criminal justice system, letting them know what to expect on the first visit and make visits as family friendly as possible. Probation could prepare families properly for the release of a loved-one back into the family home. Below are some specific proposals which could be implemented relatively cheaply.

1. **Recognise that having a family member in prison is a traumatic event.** Criminal justice and family organisations should acknowledge that having a parent imprisoned could be a traumatic event with the potential to cause long-lasting damage to children. Staff should be aware of the effects of this trauma and this recognition should be kept in mind when designing and delivering services.

2. **Trauma-aware arrests.** Police forces could systematically recognize the effect of arrest on a family and implement policies along the lines of those currently employed by the San Francisco Police Department. There is no
reason why these trauma-aware arrests should be restricted to just those situations when there are children present. As one mother of a prisoner put it: “It’s not just bad for children. It’s very traumatic for me, a woman in my 50s, to see my son handcuffed and dragged away.”

3. **Create platforms for children and young people to have a voice.** As this report shows, empowerment is a powerful mitigating factor in minimizing trauma. Although there have been some welcome moves towards hearing the voices of children and young people affected by parental imprisonment, much more work could be done in this area. Children’s views should be listened to and respected at a familial, local and national level. This could be facilitated through arts projects, film projects, advocacy groups or simply by having their needs taken into account by those working in the criminal justice system.

4. **Create spaces for peer support.** There are very few peer support groups active in the UK for prisoners’ families. And the policy of dispersing prisoners to training prisons around the country means that families have fewer opportunities to meet with local families at visitors' centers to share experiences. Families could be provided with the opportunity, funding and expertise to set up groups and offer each other emotional support and practical advice. This is particularly important for young people with a parent in prison who currently have no outlets to talk about the issues they face.

**Next Steps**

- **Trauma-Informed Network**
  As a result of my trip, I have created a new network which aims to share good practice in the UK. Please visit [www.traumainformednet.co.uk](http://www.traumainformednet.co.uk) for updates.

- **Talks/ Workshops**
  I am delivering a programme of talks and presentations on my findings and am currently developing workshops. Please contact me on [sam@sussexprisonersfamilies.org.uk](mailto:sam@sussexprisonersfamilies.org.uk) for more details.

- **Training**
  I will be developing a training package around trauma-informed
approaches to working with families and will disseminate updates via websites and social media (see below).

- **Social Media**
  I will be blogging and tweeting regularly about the need for trauma-informed justice and education systems. Updates from:
  [www.traumainformednet.co.uk](http://www.traumainformednet.co.uk)
  [www.sussexprisonersfamilies.org.uk](http://www.sussexprisonersfamilies.org.uk)
  @sussexprisonfam

**Further Reading**

Below is a small selection of the books and websites helped me understand the complex issues of trauma informed care and criminal justice which I have only been able to touch upon lightly in this report.

*All Alone in the World, Children of the Incarcerated*, Nell Bernstein


*Prisoners Once Removed* The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities, Jeremy Travis (Urban Institute Press)

*Restoring Sanctuary: A New Operating System for Trauma-Informed Systems of Care*, Sandra L. Bloom and Brian Farragher


*The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-blindness*, Michelle Alexander
Case History – Gerardo’s Story

I have included Gerardo’s story as he eloquently expresses the trauma caused by parental imprisonment. He outlines what can happen if young people are disempowered, lose trust in the adults around them and when they feel psychologically and physically unsafe. His story also illustrates the power of collaboration and peer support in fostering resilience and strength. I would like to thank him for his generosity in sharing his story.

Gerardo’s Story

Gerardo Perez was six years old when a man in uniform turned up at his school. The man called him to the classroom door and started to explain that his mother would be away for a while. Gerardo nodded as if he understood, but in reality was bewildered and embarrassed by the whole thing.

“I have to admit I didn’t understand 90% of what that guy was saying to me,” recalls Gerardo, now 22. “I just wanted him to go away so I could get back to my seat.”

However, other kids the class understood that the uniformed man was a parole officer and began to taunt Gerardo, saying that his mum was incarcerated. But Gerardo didn’t really know what that meant. All he knew for certain was that his mum had a great job as an estate agent in Puerto Rico. After all, she told him so herself when she called religiously every day.

Gerardo carried on living his life, cared for by his aunt and grandmother, but at school the bullying increased and his fury began to build: “I already had anger in me as a kid but it got worse as I started to defend myself and my mom’s honour.” His behaviour grew steadily worse until he was 9 years old.

“That’s when my dad stopped calling,” says Gerardo. “He and my mom weren’t together – he lived in Colombia working for the DEA. I spoke to him maybe 100 times in my life. He would say ‘I love you. Come and visit me in Colombia’ and
would tell me about my brothers and sisters out there. But then he just stopped. I thought ‘Oh well maybe he just forgot he had a kid’.”

It was around this time that Gerardo found out the truth about his mum. “I had got into a fight in school again and my mom was on the phone saying, “What are you doing? You’re gonna end up like me.” I was like: ‘Mom – isn’t that the point? I am supposed to end up like you – you have this great job.’ She went quiet. That’s when I put the dots together. I said ‘Wait – Mom – you’re in jail?’ She hung up on me.”

From then on, Gerardo pretty much went ballistic. “I had always been attracted to bad stuff but I went to a whole new level I didn’t know I had. I got into drugs, gangs, fights. I was looking on the streets for what I didn’t have at home.”

The one bright part of his life was that he was now allowed to see his mum for the first time in five years. He had to fight for it (his family did not see visiting prison as healthy for a child) but eventually he was allowed regular visits on the condition that he performed well at school. “She stuck to that. A couple of times she wouldn’t see me because my grades weren’t good enough.”

When he was 13, Gerardo found out for the first time why his father had stopped calling: “Basically he was a corrupt cop. He became a major drug lord.” He died in a deluge of bullets on the streets near his home in Columbia – the victim of a rival gang.

That was about the time that Gerardo got arrested for the first time on a charge of attempted murder: “Basically this guy had been on my case for a while. I came into school in a bad mood and he started to bully me. I asked the teacher if I could move but he wouldn’t let me. I happened to drop some pictures of me and my mom and he started to attack my mom. I kind of blacked out and the next thing I knew I was watching myself beat this kid up. It was like an out of body experience. I tried to stop myself but it got to the point where he was lucky to be alive.”
Gerardo escaped a custodial sentence and was asked to attend a restorative justice programme where he was expected to apologise to the victim and his family. The trouble was – he just didn’t feel that sorry. “I just felt like they should all apologise to me. I’d been wound up to this point where I blacked out. I know it was wrong now but didn’t get it then. I felt I had everyone against me.”

Life for Gerardo became a self-fulfilling prophecy. “My family would say: ‘You are going to grow up to be a criminal. I would say ‘Oh no you are very much mistaken. I am already a criminal.’ I would say that with pride.”

He accepts that well-meaning adults tried to help him, but says they went about it in all the wrong way. “I felt judged. They treated me like I was someone bad who needed changing. They would say: ‘What’s wrong with you? Why aren’t you better?’ They wanted to erase me and re-programme and remodel me to the way they wanted me to be. They didn't appreciate how hard it is was for me just to have a day to day life as a kid.”

He wanted someone to see him as a kid with potential rather than a criminal in waiting. “They could have asked themselves what had happened to make me like this”

Things began to change in 9th grade when his mum came out of prison. “That made a huge difference to me academically. I was failing horribly but when she came out I passed 9th, 10th and 11th grades all in one year.”

But socially he was still raising hell with drugs, fights, alcohol and gangs. “My mom wasn’t expecting to deal with such a complicated kid,” he says.

He was eventually referred to the Osborne Association, an organisation which offers a non-judgemental, strengths-based approach to supporting children of the incarcerated. It was through Osborne that Gerardo met Echoes of Incarceration a group which allows young people to tell their story though film. In his first video, you can still see the emotional scars – he is slightly edgy and tense – not quite at ease with himself. Five years on, his progression is easy to see in a new Echoes
video released this month. He is comfortable in his own skin, telling his story with ease and discussing his dream of a career in martial arts.

He is passionate about the rights of children of the incarcerated and has important messages for professionals and caregivers: “Do not lie to your kid,” he says emphatically, “The truth may hurt but it’s gonna hurt a whole lot more when kids realise they have been lied to.”

He also believes in the ability of mothers and fathers to parent from jail. “My mom continued to do her best for me even though she was locked up. She got the report cards, she gave me support, she was there for me – even though she wasn’t in person. And I think that saved me. So the message is: COMMUNICATE COMMUNICATE COMMUNICATE COMMUNICATE. Write that in capitals.”