

one small thing

One Small Thing's response to the Commission for Young Lives call for evidence, November 2022

About One Small Thing

One Small Thing's vision is a justice system that can recognise, understand, and respond to trauma. Our mission is to redesign the justice system for women and their children. We do this by:

- **Redesigning** the way the justice system responds to women and their children in a way that can be replicated and scaled nationally- we are currently building Hope Street, a pioneering residential community for women and children.
- **Educating** prison residents to understand how trauma can affect them and equip them with the skills to respond; and train frontline staff to understand and respond effectively to trauma and adversity.
- **Influencing** politicians and policy makers to encourage culture change across the justice system and the people who work within it.

One Small Thing Response Summary

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence and to advocate for changes that can support young people affected by the criminal justice system. One Small Thing has a particular focus on reducing maternal imprisonment and we therefore focus predominantly on question 2 *How do we reduce the harms of parental imprisonment?* We also address the impact for young people of maternal imprisonment and contact with the justice system on mental health (question 3), and how to improve outcomes for young people affected by the justice and care systems (question 5).

Key points addressed in our response:

- Maternal imprisonment, often for short sentences for non-violent crimes, causes unnecessary intergenerational trauma affecting many young people. The justice system needs reform and alternatives to custody for women in the community should be supported and expanded.
- For young people who are separated from a parent in prison, communication channels need urgent improvement, and young people should have more voice and agency in decisions regarding their care and contact with their parent.

Our response is informed by our work with women affected by the justice system, alongside the views of our Women's Involvement Advisor Lilly Lewis and her daughter Tiff, who drew on their own lived experience of the justice system to respond to this call for evidence. This response also includes extracts from research and lived experience voices from One Small Thing's parliamentary event on reducing the intergenerational traumatic impact of Maternal Imprisonment held this year.

Call for evidence response

2. How vulnerable families and communities living in high-risk situations can be supported to strengthen their home and support environment, providing strong support for parents who are struggling and building family resilience that gives teenagers more stability, guidance, and protection.

SUGGESTED AREAS OF FOCUS:

How do we reduce the harms of parental imprisonment?

One Small Thing's mission is to redesign the justice system for women and their children, and we are currently building [Hope Street](#), a pioneering residential community for women and children. Hope Street aims to reduce the number of women going to prison, prevent maternal separation and intergenerational trauma and support women and children to lead happier lives free from crime.

As our Women's Involvement Advisor Lilly Lewis suggests, to prevent the harms of parental imprisonment 'Firstly we need to look at the necessity to send a mum to prison in the first place – short prison sentences for non-violent crimes tear women's lives apart. More places like Hope Street should be available to offer rehabilitation and support to women in a trauma-informed way.'

Hope Street is being evaluated over 5 years by the University of Southampton and aims to be a blueprint for change in the justice system.

For parents that are imprisoned, our work has showed us that the impact can be devastating and long lasting. We worked with Dr Sophie Mitchell from Northumbria University to disseminate her [research](#) on the intergenerational traumatic impact of maternal imprisonment which found that:

Separation from children and loss of the mothering role, even for a short time, had devastating effects going forward. In a number of cases the relationship was reported to never be the same.

Visits were often difficult and caused conflicting emotions, some mothers did not want children to get used to prison, some children didn't know mum was in prison, some mothers wanted to see their children, but it was too painful.

To reduce harm, communication needs to be urgently improved as Lilly outlined:

As much communication should be given to the children as possible to ensure they know what is happening and to reduce the feeling of being abandoned, this is something my daughter felt. Better use of the (rotl) release on temporary licence to enable mum to spend more time at home with her children. I feel that this is essential for maintaining relationships and also building relationships with family. Better use of childcare resettlement license would enable women to spend more time at home even if they were not the primary carers before prison (this is currently a stipulation for childcare resettlement). This could help Mums to strengthen relationships and regain family ties that may have been broken.

There also needs to be more financial support for young people with Mums in prison. One of my daughters was unable to go into further education due to living independently from 16, and having to work in a warehouse to pay her bills. She was placed in a flat in an area that was not safe, and I would sometimes go to bed worrying about whether she got home okay, and whether she had everything she needed.

I would have liked to be included in all care meetings about my children, even if over zoom/skype, and to be consulted around visits from them. I was told that they didn't want to see me, but having spoken to them I know this was not their choice. It is so important for young people with parents in the criminal justice system to be included in decision making.

For a recent blog Lilly interviewed her daughter Tiff about the experience of having a mum in prison and her experience also emphasises the need for improved communication:

Tiff's Experience:

When Mum went to prison no one told me anything. There was no communication at all between professionals and me. After about two years I asked why I was in care and I was told that my Mum was unwell, and that was why she wasn't with us. During that time, me and my siblings were never even asked if we wanted to see Mum. When my brother asked our foster carer if we could go, he was told that it wasn't appropriate.

Although we were young and we didn't know what had really happened to our Mum, we wanted to see her, but that decision was taken from us. At the time, because we were in the care system we had no communication from the prison so it was hard to know what was really going on. I think that even if Mum was in prison now, we still wouldn't be allowed to see her even though we are older.

Young people with parents in the criminal justice system need to be included in the decisions that are made about them. Having a parent in prison has a huge impact on your life, and so it's important for young people to have their voices heard.

To young people with a Mum in prison I would say, don't let others suppress your voice as you'll need to fight for your right to see your Mum. I wish I had been supported to do this.

A young woman, Farhana Ahmed, who we supported to speak at our parliamentary event on reducing the intergenerational traumatic impact of Maternal Imprisonment shared the following testimony of her experience:

Farhana's experience:

I feel like when it comes to children that are dealing with their parents in prison, we're not heard because we're children. And when our mum went to prison, it was just so secretive. And I just wish we were kept in the loop. I wanted to understand what was happening. I wanted to know, what's the next part in this. It's like, you don't have a say in it and that's the worst thing about it. Maybe I was quite young, but I understand to a certain extent, and so do most children. There are ways you can explain to children.

I was 11 or 12 when this all happened. My sister was three years younger than me. At that time, she was the voice for me. Because I was at a point in my life that I had enough of no one listening, no one understanding. She was basically my role model even though she was younger. She didn't understand as much as I did. She was the one speaking because I just got to the point where I was like, 'you know what, whatever happens happens, I don't care anymore'. I felt like this is my case so I should be the main person but no one's there to support us. And I gave up. I just became mute and when I had social workers and legal guardians come in, I'll just keep my head down and I wouldn't even look at them.

My foster carers found out stuff before I did. I know this is bad, but I'd hear them on the phone when I was upstairs in my room. And I'm just eavesdropping, because I can hear what's happening, so I'm

just thinking in my head, when do I find out what's happening, or when am I going to see my mum in prison? We'd be the last people to know when we should be the first because that's our mum. It got so irritating and annoying that we spoke to so many people, but the same thing happened. Because we are children at the end of the day, children don't matter apparently.

I feel like there should be community-based centres to help rather than women going straight to prison. Separating the children and mum is the worst thing to do. If I could do anything to go back to my childhood with mum, I would do it but my mum's missed out on everything. Like my finishing school to college, and everything else she's missed out on. You can never get that time back.

We want to avoid the impact of children's voices going unheard whilst going through the care system. Even better, they should be able to be with their mothers not separated, whether it's in Hope Street or another centre, but definitely something more child friendly.

3. What support young people need to ensure good mental health and wellbeing and the services and support that are needed to deliver it.

We asked Farhana what support she would have wanted as a young woman with a mother in prison and she shared:

Children and young people going through such a tough situation need someone to talk to. There should be always someone to talk with, a helpline, support service or peer support, because I know how low in depression you can get. To feel like, I don't deserve to be here anymore. Like, what's the point? You're in a home with strangers and your mum's in prison, you feel worthless. Feeling alone is the worst depression you can have. It just sort of eats you alive.

Before mum was in prison I used to have a support worker and I absolutely loved it, they used to take us out when my mum had meetings. She had to go to the court and stuff and we had support workers take us to the park or something like that. My sister had her own one as well. And it was nice because we were treated as individuals. Because obviously, we have different emotions and different needs so it was nice that we are treated individually.

For young people who themselves have contact with the justice system there are elements of a system geared towards adults that can cause much mental distress. Lilly reflected from young women she knew in prison that elements of the process are inappropriately traumatic for a child or young person, often causing mental ill health, she suggests:

Unless the offence is extremely violent no child should be placed on remand, this time is exceptionally stressful and can have a huge impact on mental health. Young people should also not have to attend the court process unless absolutely necessary, the court process is extremely traumatic and stressful for adults let alone young people .

Youth offending teams should most definitely be working in a Trauma Informed way with all children and young people they are working with and looking if counselling or therapy is needed.

5 - Why a disproportionate number of children in care are getting into trouble with the law and what needs to change to prevent this and help them flourish

Young people in the care system because of parental imprisonment will have experienced significant trauma as outlined above. This means that practitioners need to work in a trauma-informed way that recognises and addresses the root causes of behaviour, rather than being too quick to look for a way to punish behaviour. As Lilly reflected:

Children in care are more likely to have the police called on them to intervene when in children's homes, parents are less likely to call the police on their own children. Howard league [reported](#) that some children's homes in some parts of England are calling the police as many 200 times in one year. To criminalise these children after the trauma they have already experienced will in no way help them to flourish.

Another key issue for the care system is improving cultural competence. Young people placed inappropriately or not provided with culturally appropriate support are more likely to disengage. Farhana shared from her experience:

There was a lot of issues and miscommunication. For example, I'm Muslim, and our social worker sent us to a Sikh household thinking they were Muslim. And at that time, I was wearing the hijab. And because they saw me wearing a hijab, I was called names. And it was a very horrible experience being in that care.

I just feel like it's a reoccurring cycle that's just going to happen again and again. Because I understand English, it's easy for you guys. But what if I wasn't English? What if I wasn't allowed to speak to you or something? There should be training but obviously, there's only so much training can do. For children who have immigrated into this country and their English isn't great, how would you support them? If they have no idea, you can only get so many translators- how is it possible to support them when they're in a situation where their mum's gone to prison?

I've only seen white social workers, I've never ever come across any other social workers. It's very difficult. I feel like it's the age as well, they were the older generation including the legal professionals. I knew they would look at us a different way, and they think we don't understand. I felt really out of place, you could tell you're not wanted.

Support for young people affected by parental imprisonment, the justice system and care system needs to be trauma-informed and culturally competent. One Small Thing has resources and information on what good trauma-informed practice should look like, including a national [Quality Mark](#).

We welcome the opportunity to share more information and discuss our response further. For more information, please contact: sarahs@onesmallthing.org.uk

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www.onesmallthing.org.uk

Charity Number 1180782