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**What happens in a child's world when their parent(s) goes to jail?**

**The voice of a child.**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study provides a unique insight into the lives of six children who have a parent in prison. It adds to the limited research available and affords children an opportunity to share their experiences of parental imprisonment. A New Zealand Māori cultural perspective, which can be used across cultures, was used to engage participants and develop topic headings and questions. Six children, aged nine to sixteen, participated in an audio recorded semi structured interview, which was then transcribed verbatim. An inductive thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse themes within these transcripts. Three main themes emerged from this analysis, including loss, stigma/secretcy and support/coping. Loss played a significant role in the children's experiences, and included not only the loss of their imprisoned parent, but also financial security. The effects of loss are exacerbated by the lack of recognition, and the associated stigma it receives from the wider society. Stigma, along with secretcy appeared as a second theme, and is discussed in the context of participant's awareness of their stigma status, which then elicits the use of secretcy to manage and avoid the negative reactions of others. The theme of support and coping revealed other, more positive coping mechanisms used by participants, which included joining sports and other social groups, along with seeking out adult and peer support. It was evident from these themes, that although parental imprisonment complicates a child's life and brings many adversities, the use of positive coping mechanisms and seeking out supports, may buffer the ill effects of this experience, but not take away the grief they feel.

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## **Daddy, You're In Jail**

Daddy, you're in jail so far, far away  
and it hurts me almost every day  
I knew when I was there  
it was coming to an end  
I knew I should of done something  
right there and then.

Daddy, you're in jail so far, far away  
you can't even be a part of my life today.  
as I go through boyfriends and do other things  
you won't be there to call  
when me and my mom are  
yelling names, cussing at each other,  
and she's putting me to shame because  
I did some of those bad teenage things.

Daddy, you're in jail so far, far away  
I wonder, when you get out  
will things be the same  
will you be the dad that I know or  
will you be someone else 'cause  
jail changed your soul.  
I don't understand the reason for this  
going to prison for drugs when in  
there it's a bigger mess.  
it's like taking a drunk to a bar  
and expecting him to sober up  
when you know he's just  
gonna get more messed up.

Daddy, you're in jail so far, far away  
when you get out I guess I will see  
the answers to the question I have today  
but for right now I will just continue to pray  
and hope for the best until that day.  
I still love you and will write you too  
please don't forget about me because  
I will always care and miss you

Daddy, you're in jail so far, far away  
while I sit here, tears running down my face  
hoping everything will fall into place  
I will never forget the time we had  
and try to be brave and not be sad  
Daddy, I know it's hard and you got a lot on your plate  
but remember there's people willing to wait  
for you to turn straight

Daddy, you're in jail so far, far away  
you got 3 kids and parents too  
that haven't given up on you  
you got a second chance to make it right  
so continue the fight of the battle you've got  
to make it back to the ones you love!!!!

## **Chapter one - Introduction**

There is a population of children who have become known within the literature as the “invisible population” (Hoffmann, Byrd, & Kightlinger, 2010, p.398). The number of children joining this group has been steadily increasing globally and New Zealand is no exception (Gordon, 2011). These children can range in age from 0 to 17 and come from any socioeconomic background and ethnicity. They often, however come from disadvantaged, lower income and minority groups. These children’s lives are often thrown into turmoil due to no fault of their own (Uggen & McElrath, 2014). Experiencing loss, which can be sudden and unexpected, lasting for months or years. The majority of these children receive little or no support from outside of their family, and often develop coping mechanisms that may or may not attract positive reactions from others, to help them get through their grief and trauma (Beck & Jones, 2007). These children can sometimes be encouraged by family to keep their experience a secret and live in fear of how others will react should their secret be revealed. Frequently, those who encounter these children do not understand that these children’s behaviour can be attributed to the secrecy that surrounds their circumstances. These children and their families interact in the many social settings you and I also engage in. The children I am referring to are those who have a parent in prison.

The number of children affected by a parent going to prison is set to increase as imprisonment rates of those with children rises globally (Dawson, Brookes, Carter, Larman, & Jackson, 2013). Although fathers make up the majority of these figures, the number of mothers being sent to prison is on the increase (Clopton & East, 2008). A study by Gordon (2011) reported that within New Zealand, at any one time, an estimated 20,000 children experience parental incarceration, with an average of 87% of female prisoners and 65% of male prisoners having children at the time of their sentencing. This, she identifies, translates annually to around an astounding 30,000 New Zealand children experiencing the loss of a parent or parents to prison. Given New Zealand’s relatively small population, this is a significant number of children affected each year. These statistics highlight the importance of increasing understanding around the impact parental imprisonment has on these children and the losses it entails at both an individual and societal level.



## **Definition of parental imprisonment**

Parental imprisonment during childhood involves the loss of one or both parents or parental figures to the judicial system, during a person's early formative years. As stated in the New Zealand's Care of Children Act (2004) a child is classed as any person under the age of 18 years old. Imprisonment of a parent can involve a short or long term loss for a child. In New Zealand, a conviction for crimes such as murder, can lead to a lengthy prison sentence of at least ten years (Sentencing Act, 2002). This means a child can pass through a large proportion of their childhood without one or even both parents being there to celebrate the achievement of their various milestones as a part of normal childhood development. The lengthier the sentence the more likely it is to have a negative impact on the children involved (Raeder, 2012). Imprisonment may be seen as appropriate by a wide sector of the public, particularly those who advocate for harsher sentences, such as the Sensible Sentencing Trust. For the majority of children involved it can be a long and difficult time, full of loss, grief, trauma and adversities along with limited and strained access to their biological parent during crucial early developmental stages of life.

Parental imprisonment has been defined as an adverse childhood experience (Raeder, 2012), which can be potentially traumatic and as a result a "potential pathway for social, emotional and cognitive neurodevelopmental impairments" (Arditti & Savla, 2015, p.551). These adversities are further compounded by the fact that more often than not, they are experienced in clusters, rather than in isolation. Compounding adversities, isolation and lack of support, can exacerbate and complicate parental imprisonment for the children involved (Novero, Loper, & Warren, 2011).

Many children encounter various adversities throughout their lifetime, but, unlike children who have a parent in prison, they are more likely to receive some form of support and/or understanding from others (Novero et al., 2011). Unlike children who have lost a parent through circumstances such as death, parental separation, or military deployment, there is no socially recognised and accepted ritual or ceremony for children who lose a parent to prison, to help them through the grief and trauma of this experience (Dallaire & Wilson, 2010). As a result, they often endure the difficulties and trauma of separation without external supports and instead face condemnation, judgment and exclusion (Beck & Jones, 2007).

## **Impact of witnessing the arrest**

Kinner, Alati, Najman, and Williams (2007); Murray, Farrington, and Sekol, (2012) identified that for some children the trauma of parental imprisonment begins whilst witnessing their parent's arrest. These children, they pointed out, are at higher risk of trauma and behavioural issues than those who haven't witnessed the arrest. Novero et al. (2011), reports that the witnessing of an arrest can be traumatic as it is often unexpected and can involve physical aggression that can be frightening and confusing for the child. It can create uncertainty about the future of their parent and leave them with a traumatic memory of their parent's departure. Research from Dallaire and Wilson (2010) adds support to this avenue of thought. Their study showed that children who witnessed the arrest of their parent, along with their criminal behaviour, fared worse than those children who didn't. What was interesting and consistent with previous research, was the relationship between children witnessing these events and the parent's and children's reports of maladjustment six months later. This indicates the enduring effect on the children. The negative outcomes they experienced included emotional problems, such as anxiety and depression along with decreased emotional regulation skills and difficulties with receptive vocabulary skills, which interfered with their educational success. They found that the greater the exposure, the larger the maladjustment. Increased witnessing of these events was reported for children who had a mother rather than a father in prison and for those who had resided with their parent prior to the imprisonment. In their study this was more often the mother than the father. Within New Zealand, Gordon (2009), shows that changes are being made in regard to how police manage children during an arrest of their parent. More stringent procedures are being put in place that require them to consider the needs of children present during an arrest. It notes however, that discretion is still left to the arresting officer who may or may not consider the child's needs and possible signs of trauma.

Following arrest and during court proceedings, there are no routine enquires or gathering of information to determine whether people convicted of a crime have children or not (Simmons, 2000). Gordon's (2009), study mentions the lack of tolerance judges have for parents who mention their children or bring them into the court room. One judge she interviewed believed parents use their children as pawns to gain sympathy in the hope of leniency and a lighter sentence. It may well be that the judges do not see the children as impacted by their decision for imprisonment, but rather as non-existent entities that are

invisible to the process. Support for the children is therefore left up to the remaining family. As Simmons (2000) pointed out, families battered and bewildered by the justice system and the lack of support they receive, seek to shield and protect their children and themselves from further stigma and judgment by slipping away in silence.

### **Post arrest and the justice system**

The focus within the justice system, post- arrest, is on finding the offender guilty or not guilty of an alleged offence, and if guilty, the possible placement in an appropriate correctional facility (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003). Consideration is not routinely given to factors such as whether to place a parent in a facility close to their child when sentenced. This is a simple yet important consideration, that could afford the child continued access to their parent without placing further adversities on them. This consideration could reduce potential visitation costs incurred through travel and accommodation and lessen financial pressure on the child's remaining parent or caregiver (Harris, Graham, and Carpenter, 2010). These costs are identified within the literature as a potential barrier for ongoing visitation. Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) pointed out that 54% of prisoners in America had not seen their children since being incarcerated, due to factors such as being placed in a prison away from their families.

### **Ongoing contact**

This time spent away from the parent may well be traumatic for the child, due to attachments being disrupted. This can affect a child's emotional and social adjustment throughout life (Novero et al., 2011). Having contact with the imprisoned parent through phone, letters or visits can reassure the child that their parent still loves them and has a desire for contact, which can help reduce the child's distress (Murray & Murray, 2010). However, as Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) identified, most prisons are not child friendly and visiting a parent in prison can be problematic and distressing for children. They go on to say that before the child even engages with their parent, they are more than likely to experience security measures that involve intrusive activities such as metal detectors, searches, and sniffer dogs. These measures are often unfamiliar to children and can therefore lead to distress that can impact on the contact experience. Once inside the prison they then encounter strong rules and visiting areas that do not provide privacy or activities that engage the child and parent.

Due to this lack of privacy, children can feel intimidated and fearful of the presence of other prisoners and guards (Black, 1992; Dawson, Jackson, & Nyamathi, 2012).

While some professionals believe it is important for children to maintain contact with their incarcerated parent, others have argued that visitation to a prison may well create further problems for the children. Several studies examined children's behavioural problems and school functioning, in relation to contact with incarcerated parents, with mixed findings. Trice and Brewster (2004) found that increased mother and child contact that involved a combination of phone calls, visits, and letters was associated with fewer instances of school dropouts and suspensions from school. In contrast, Dallaire, Ciccone, and Wilson (2010) reported in their study that teachers had indicated that children who visited their parents had trouble concentrating upon their return to school. They did however, make several positive comments about mail correspondence, which reduced children's anxious, depressed and somatic complaints. For example, one teacher, felt that correspondence between a child and their incarcerated mother was positive. This teacher believed it provided the child an opportunity to share private thoughts and feelings. In addition, when the mother wrote back, the child had something tangible to hold on to or refer to when feeling sad or was missing the mother.

### **Impact of parental imprisonment on the children**

Parental imprisonment could act as both a marker for future risks, as well as a unique risk factor for the children involved (Dallaire, 2007). Research with young violent offenders, identified significant loss, particularly a parent and predominantly paternal, as a strong contributing characteristic towards their behaviour and criminal offending (Boswell, 2002). Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, and Shear (2010) highlights that in contrast to selection perspective, which focuses on events prior to an adverse experience, the life course perspective emphasises that further adversities can occur in the child's life after the imprisonment of their parent. This, they pointed out, may mediate the relationship between their experience of parental imprisonment and the difficulties they later experience in the various settings they interact within. The imprisonment of a parent may well be the catalyst for the later difficulties and negative outcomes identified in this population of children.

Arditti and Savla (2015) highlights that following imprisonment of their parent, children are particularly vulnerable to experiencing social isolation, financial hardship, stigmatisation, trauma, unrecognised grief and loss. They identified that parental imprisonment plays a unique role in how these factors impact on the wellbeing of the children and their families. Their study compared trauma symptoms of single parent families, who had lost a parent through imprisonment, with those who had lost a parent in other circumstances. They used a family stress model and found that on both the child and parent reported symptomology measures, children with a parent in prison scored higher in reported symptomology than children from single parent homes without a parent in prison. They reported that trauma levels neared the clinical range for the child's reported symptomology and over the clinical range for the parent's reports of symptomology.

Parental imprisonment creates not only short term risk factors for these children, but places them at higher risk of maladjustment. This can result in long term outcomes of emotional, social, psychological, physical and cognitive developmental problems, which can persist into adulthood (Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Sykes & Pettit, 2014). Hoffmann et al. (2010) identified that these effects can be expressed in varying degrees through internalising behaviours, such as depression, or externalising behaviours, such as aggression, anti-social personality disorder, conduct disorder, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and sleeping and eating disorders. Novero et al. (2011) compared first generation prisoners with three subgroups of second generation prisoners who had a father, mother, or both parents in prison during childhood. Second generation prisoners showed higher levels of anger, prison violence and rule breaking than first generation prisoners. These were evident even after controlling for elevated levels of childhood adversities, present prior to their parents imprisonment. These prisoners indicated they experienced feelings of shame and anger from having had their parent go to prison, along with elevated levels of adverse experiences. Using the, 'The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study Questionnaire' they found that 44% of participants, in their prison- based sample, experienced at least four of the seven listed adversity categories compared to only 6.2% in a non-prison sample of 8,056 individuals. This indicates that these children are particularly vulnerable to experiencing high levels of adversities as a consequence of parental imprisonment.

Will, Whalen, and Loper, (2014) conducted a similar study with first and second generation prisoners. They found that second generation offenders had more markers for conduct

disorder than first generation offenders prior to age 15. They pointed out that children who have experienced parental incarceration are at greater risk of developing antisocial behaviour and conduct disorder, with a pathway to imprisonment themselves. The earlier these behaviours begin to develop, the higher the risk. They also found that second generation prisoners were exposed to a greater number of adversities, post their parents imprisonment. What emerged, was that as the number of adversities increased, “so too did the number of conduct disorder markers” (p.205) identified. This adds weight to the struggles these children can face and the effect these difficulties have on them with limited support.

Novero et al. (2011); Will et al. (2014), both reported in their studies that larger degrees of violence and adversities were found amongst those who had lost a mother versus a father, or those prisoners who had had both parents in prison during childhood. Dallaire (2007) found in her study that adult children of imprisoned mothers were 2.5 times more likely to be imprisoned than adult children of incarcerated fathers. The greater impact of maternal imprisonment has been attributed to a change in living circumstances, as when a child’s father goes to prison they are more likely to continue residing with their mother. However when a child’s mother goes to prison, they are more likely to be sent to live with extended family or go into care. This can lead onto them having multiple placements and increase the risk of them experiencing abuse and attachment issues. Black (1992) pointed out, that in some cases the father may be the sole caregiver of their children and therefore their imprisonment would have similar effects to maternal imprisonment.

The impact of paternal imprisonment is not missed within the literature on parental imprisonment. Fathers represent a large proportion of the prison population and therefore considerable numbers of children miss out on the opportunities that fathers bring to their lives (Black, 1992). Geller (2013) reports in her study with imprisoned fathers that between 33% and 44% of fathers were residing with their children prior to their imprisonment. Whether living in the family home or not, the majority of fathers contribute to their children’s upbringing in varying degrees and many different ways, including nurturing, financial, social and emotional support (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005). The loss of a father to prison therefore limits this input, adding to the child’s loss and ongoing difficulties. It can plunge a family into single parenthood, creating further problems that go with sole parenting, including a decrease in financial income. Fathers can also engage in play and social activities with their children, which can help strengthen the attachment bonds between father and child.

From an attachment perspective, imprisonment reduces contact and can cut these bonds. This can cause a once securely attached child to develop insecure attachment styles and the anxiety, emotional and behavioural problems that go with this. Fathers also play an important part in role modelling and passing on of specific and unique knowledge, to their children (Dennison, Smallbone, Stewart, Freiberg & Teague, 2014; Geller & Franklin, 2014).

## **Deprivation**

Parental imprisonment, whether short or long term, can particularly affect the financial security of a family whether the imprisoned parent was the main earner or contributed in even a small way, to the family's income (Rodriguez & Margolin, 2014). Wildeman and Turney (2014), pointed out, that fathers, particularly in lower income families, are often the main or only wage earner within a family. Geller & Franklin (2014) pointed out, that 68% of fathers were the primary source of income for their family prior to their imprisonment and could contribute to their children through wages or child support. Imprisonment takes them out of the labour market, and can force mothers or other caregivers to rely on the state, family or friends for financial assistance. This can increase stigma and reduce the family income, along with their level of independence (Anderson & Wildeman, 2014). A family that was already struggling financially can be thrown even further into financial hardship, increasing the economic vulnerabilities of the children and making it harder for the remaining caregiver to pay the bills. This is further compounded by the fact that the imprisonment of one parent may also affect the employability of the remaining parent. This could be due to a potential decrease in their employment availability, because of the need to meet family and home demands, as a sole parent. Arditti et al. (2003) reported that this was the case for many of the mothers in their study, who either had to give up work or lost their job because of the conflict between employment and childcare commitments.

Financial insecurity can increase the risk of families becoming homeless or the need to compromise on other necessities such as food, warmth and medical bills, all of which adds to the stress and struggles for the child, across the many settings they interact within (Black, 1992). Homelessness is a common feature within the literature of parental imprisonment. Wildeman (2014) found in his study that when compared with a comparison group, child homelessness increased by 2 to 4% after the imprisonment of their father, with a slightly smaller percentage when it was their mother. This can impact on the young person's

emotional, psychological and cognitive functioning because of the basic physiological needs not being met (Maslow, 1943). Geller and Franklin, (2014) pointed out that even where homelessness does not technically occur for a parent and their children, frequent moves, living in overcrowded houses, continually struggling to pay rent, doubling up in friends or families houses, can equate to homelessness.

Because of the high level of stress associated with parental imprisonment and the low levels of support, partners of men who are imprisoned are vulnerable of developing mental health difficulties, such as depression and substance abuse (Novero et al., 2011). This Anderson and Wildeman (2014) pointed out, can have a flow on effect for the children in the parent and child relationship, creating further challenges and adversities for the child to manage.

### **Risk of abuse**

Parental imprisonment increases the risk of abuse for the child due to the removal of one or both parents and leads to possible difficulties building safe and secure relationships with later caregivers (Will et al., 2014). This is sometimes the case if the remaining parent enters into a new romantic relationship, which can lead to the arrival of a non-biological parent into the family home (Anderson & Wildeman, 2014). Novero et al. (2011) explained that second generation prisoners reported in higher numbers than first generation prisoners of being psychologically, physically and sexually abused as children. Furthermore, these individuals also reported exposure to parental mental illness, substance abuse and violence towards their mother or stepmother to a higher degree than their first generation counterparts did. These experiences, Novero et al. identified, may well have contributed to some of the violence and rule breaking reported by these prisoners.

### **The impact of loss**

“Isolated in their pain, they are denied the ‘right to grieve’ by the larger society” (Beck & Jones, 2007, p.195).

Loss is a significant feature of parental incarceration and can encompass not only the loss of a parent, but also a magnitude of secondary losses. These can include, but are not limited to, friends, school, community and financial security (Dallaire et al., 2010). Although loss is



prominently recognised within the literature, this is not always reflected in the responses children receive within society. Although the children involved mourn their parent's loss to prison in similar ways to those who have lost a parent through death, they are not afforded the same recognition and support for their grief. Because of this, Arditti (2005) described it as a "social death of a loved one" (p.253), where the circumstances surrounding the loss are not socially accepted or recognised by society as a significant loss. Kenneth Doka labelled this loss as disenfranchised to recognise experiences that do not fit traditional western models of grief (Beck & Jones, 2007).

Arditti (2005) explained, children of prisoners experience disenfranchised grief due to the loss of their parent not being "openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported" (p.253) or validated due to the stigma attached. Beck and Jones (2007) pointed out that this can intensify the grieving process and make the healing and adjustment to the loss much more difficult, enabling the grief to go unresolved. This, they go on to say, may well be a contributing factor to some of the acting out or withdrawing behaviours observed in children of prisoners. Children of prisoners often face the dilemma of whether or not to trust others with their parent's status or continue to keep it a secret. Nesmith & Ruhland's (2008) study, found many children chose to keep their parents incarceration a secret because of the potential negative responses they felt they would receive should others find out.

Disenfranchised grief and the associated stigma have been found to have a long term impact on the individual, leading to experiences of shame and anger (Novero et al., 2011). From an attachment perspective these feelings may well become a part of an internal working model of self, persisting into adulthood and becoming a default response towards others in terms of hostile and violent behaviour (Murray and Murray, 2010). In turn these behaviours can lead to their peers and others rejecting them, which only further adds to the isolation and stigmatisation they commonly feel and experience (Beck and Jones, 2007).

### **Ambiguous loss**

Betz and Thorngren (2006), pointed out, that for children of prisoners there are often many ambiguities in their experience of loss, creating uncertainties and adding to their insecurities. This, they went on to say, can include not knowing where their parent is or fully understanding the circumstances of their parent's sudden removal from their life. This form

of loss, they highlight, is what Pauline Boss identified as ambiguous loss, to emphasise that not all losses are concrete in their physical and psychological presentation. It can occur when the remaining family members become unsure of who is in and present and who is out and absent from the family system (Boss & Greenberg, 1984). Its intangible nature can impede the grieving process, due to the individual not being able to cognitively make sense of what is happening or why. It can leave an individual feeling powerless in the present and insecure about their future. Younger children of prisoners, who are not always able to make sense of their parent's absence and why they have not made contact are particularly vulnerable to confusion (Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2008). As with disenfranchised grief, this can interfere with, and complicate, the grieving process for the child, because of the uncertainty surrounding their parent's whereabouts (Arditti, 2005). A family member may be seen as physically absent, but psychologically present or physically present, but psychologically absent (Boss, 1999).

Parental incarceration can involve both forms of ambiguous loss, particularly for those who visit the parent in prison or have contact in other ways such, as via a telephone or letters (Betz and Thorngren, 2006). Arditti, (2005) identified that within the home environment the incarcerated person is physically absent, but may well be psychologically present in the remaining family members thoughts and memories. She went on to say, although the parent is physically present while being visited by their child, they may not be psychologically and emotionally present, due to the impact of their prison experience. They may present a different persona to how the child remembers him or her pre their imprisonment. This change, Arditti pointed out, has been attributed to the fact imprisonment transforms a prisoners personality in order for them to adapt to the prison environment, including its institutionalised practices, where the prisoner must conform to a particular way of being.

Boss (1999) identified that unresolved grief can occur when the loss involves ambiguities. She explains that traditionally within Western psychology and psychotherapy practices, when an individual is unable to move forward from their grief and let go of the lost object, they are often pathologised as suffering from unresolved grief. This, she pointed out, does not reflect, however, situations where the loss involves ambiguity, where it is the situation rather than the person that makes letting go a challenge. Boss, concluded, it is therefore not the event that determines the level of stress and emotional disturbances, but rather the amount of ambiguity that is present. For children of prisoners, who are not fully informed of their parents

whereabouts, it may well complicate their grief process. This can contribute to the many emotional and behavioural difficulties observed in this population of children, impacting on the various settings they interact within.

From an attachment perspective Murray and Murray (2010) pointed out, that in order to assist a child with parental separation, time needs to be taken to prepare the child for their proposed separation and plan for the reunion. This will help reassure the child of a continued connection with their parent. He went on to say that secrecy can add to the child's trauma and increase their anxiety, along with changing how they view their parent and the representations they hold of them. It can also interfere with their ability to integrate the loss of their parent into their internal working model of self, which can in turn affect their attachment security. Research has shown that where children are given honest and developmentally appropriate information about the whereabouts of their parent they were more likely to form a secure attachment style, which assists in building resiliency (Poehlmann, 2005). Keeping it a secret limits the supports available and opportunities for the children to share their feelings around the loss of their parent. Many children of prisoners isolate themselves, due to not having any means of rationalising or justifying their loss (Lowenstein, 1986). This can also potentially limit a parent's ability to seek support around how to manage their child's distress.

### **Maintaining secrecy**

Stigma, secrecy and the resulting isolation consistently feature within the literature on children experiencing parental imprisonment. Families may choose to keep the parents whereabouts secret from the child or provide limited, vague or ambiguous information to them (Bocknek et al., 2008). Although secrecy may be seen as a coping mechanism and help shield the child from unwanted attention, (Rodriguez & Margolin, 2014), unfortunately it can also have negative consequences, as it can place their secret in constant conscious awareness. Gordon, Lyon, & Lee, (2014) pointed out, in order to maintain a secret, an individual must employ suppression of thoughts, in situations where they perceive inadvertent disclosure is possible, causing them potential harm. This, they identify, can put pressure on multiple brain regions at one time, such as working memory and inhibitory control, dividing attention and distracting the child from other tasks. This, they noted, is because individuals must learn to hold numerous pieces of information, while suppressing any thoughts, behaviours and actions,

that may reveal their secret to those, not privileged to the information. This can have undesirable outcomes for an individual, as it can lead to obsessive thoughts and avoidance of situations that may trigger unintentional disclosure of their secret (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009). The child may also become pre-occupied with maintaining their secret, to the point that it intrudes on and consumes other areas of their life. They may therefore find it difficult to stay focused at school, which impacts on their educational success. This can cause them added distress on top of an already stressful situation (Pachankis, 2007).

## **Stigma**

Although it may be perceived that those with hidden stigmas such as parental imprisonment fear better than those with visible stigmas, such as a physical disability, this is not necessarily the case. Pachankis (2007), argues, this is due to the enormous effort it takes to conceal their stigma in order to avoid unwanted negative attention from others. He pointed out, that although it is easy to manage a secret within a private home by restricting access, it is much harder to maintain in public spaces, with those who are not aware of the circumstances. Although it provides them with the option of disclosure or not, it can still lead to stress in deciding when, where and to whom they can safely disclose their secret. Although secrecy may be utilised by parents as a protective factor, research with other stigmatised groups, such as children with HIV, has shown that they are aware of the consequences of sharing the family secret and therefore generally follow their parents lead and continue to maintain the secret outside of their family setting (Daniel, 2015).

The stigma many children of prisoners experience and endure has also been identified as playing a major role in the difficulties they face. Although talking about traumatic or distressing incidents can help with a person's psychological wellbeing, this is often a difficult task for a child with a parent in prison (Frijns & Finkenauer, 2009). Dawson et al. (2013), identified that stigma can include stereotypical labels being placed on the child and their family, which can lead to isolation, anxiety, behavioural and educational problems, along with discrimination. This can be a contributing factor as to why children and their families adopt the coping mechanism of secrecy. The positive side of this strategy is that they are able to avoid the judgment and discrimination that frequently accompanies stigmatised groups (Murray & Murray, 2010). A negative consequence however, is that it restricts access to external support that would otherwise assist the children in coping with their trauma and

grief experiences (Will et al., 2014). This, Laird, Bridges, and Marsee (2001) pointed out, can be because people cannot seek assistance without sharing why they need help and therefore revealing their secret.

Another consequence of stigmatisation is that children, as a way of coping with the isolation and rejection they feel, may begin moving away from mainstream social peers and instead associate with non-conforming groups, in an attempt to be accepted within a social group. Hoffmann et al. (2010), identified, this can put them in situations where they are more likely to engage in antisocial and criminal activity and get in trouble with authority figures, such as teachers, police and even family. These negative behaviours, could be due to a reduction in the level and quality of parenting, particularly where both parents were residing within the family home prior to their imprisonment (Novero et al., 2011). This breakdown in parental partnership is just another adversity, the children of prisoners must face. It provides them an opportunity to act out their emotional turmoil through engaging in delinquent behaviour, as demonstrated through their over representation within the justice system. Sykes and Pettit (2014) reported that the majority of children, who find themselves in the youth justice system, also have a parent in the adult justice system. She went on to say that the likelihood of later imprisonment for a child with a parent in prison is five to six times greater than those children without a parent in prison, thus increasing the risk of these children repeating the generational cycle of imprisonment.

Stigma affects not only their social and emotional needs, but also other areas of life. From an ecological perspective, stigma can have a flow on effect to a child's wider ecological systems that they interact within. For example, relationships with teachers and the expectations of success they hold about their students could be a contributing factor towards behavioural and academic difficulties (Dawson et al., 2012). Dallaire et al. (2010), found that some teachers held lower expectations of children with a parent in prison, compared to children whose parents have separated for other reasons. This may well perpetuate the stigmatisation the child feels, as well as denial of the same opportunities as their peers, and ultimately create a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic failure.

## **Resiliency and coping**

Nesmith and Ruhland (2008), pointed out, the negative outcomes of parental imprisonment dominate the literature, while little focuses on children who are doing well. Despite their adversities, some children with a parent in prison develop coping mechanisms that enable them to live productive lives in the face of overwhelming challenges (Dawson et al., 2012). These individuals have been identified as having a resilient mind-set that enables them to cope and manage with life stressors and are able to bounce back from disappointments, adversity and trauma (Goldstein & Brooks, 2013). Children have many different strategies for managing the imprisonment of their parent that enables them to function well, within their various settings.

Coping has been defined as a person “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.141).

External supports have been found to contribute toward resiliency maintenance. Gordon’s (2009), study identified that families coped better when they received practical and emotional support from extended family, work colleagues and schools. Werner (1989) identified in her longitudinal study, three types of protective factors that assisted in building resiliency from childhood to adulthood. Firstly, dispositional attributes such as sociability and intelligence. Secondly, affectional ties such as family. Thirdly, external supports such as work, school or church. These protective factors, she found to have more generalised effects on adaptation than specific risk factors such as poverty, perinatal stress or parental psychopathology or alcoholism. Although all these factors may well promote coping, they do not identify how an individual manages stressors they encounter and why one situation may create stress while another one may not.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified the role perception and emotion plays in stress and coping. Their Cognitive Attribution Theory (CAT) focuses on how a person perceives and interprets an event. They go on to mention that it centres around the cognitive appraisal of fear, threat or challenge and the integration of the person and their environment, rather than either or. They propose that the environment and the individual are impacted on and impacted by each other. An environment- person relationship is necessary for the stress

system to be triggered. Without a perceived threat within the environment there is not a biological response.

CAT therefore suggest it is not specifically the environment that triggers a reaction, but a person's cognitive appraisal of the situation. Lazarus and Folkman (1984), further pointed out that cognitive appraisal is an evaluative process and refers to the significance and meaning a person places on a particular situation. Stress appraisals they identified, involve three sub headings that include harm/loss, threat and challenge. Harm/loss refers to damage a person has already sustained, including the loss of a loved one. Threats are anticipated harms or losses that are yet to occur, such as potential loss of financial security, and are connected with feelings of fear, anxiety and anger. It is however closely associated with harm/loss, because of the threat of future difficulties occurring. Challenge appraisals are associated with opportunities for growth and achievement and usually elicit feelings of excitement, eagerness and exhilaration. These individuals are more likely to have high morale and feel positive about demanding tasks. They are likely to be confident that they will cope by tapping into available resources and having a sense of control over the person-environment interaction and how they perceive the various adversities they face. For children of prisoners this is critically important, due to them having no control or input into their parent's imprisonment. Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik and Curran (1999), reported in their study that depression and conduct problems were related to children perceiving the divorce of their parents as a threat.

Research into the impact of incarcerated parents on their children has begun to increase. However, despite their vulnerabilities and increasing numbers, this population at both a global and local level remains one of the most invisible within research and society as a whole (Murray et al., 2012). Hoffmann et al. (2010) pointed out that because of this lack of research, these children are often referred to within the literature as the "invisible population" (p. 398). Lowenstein (1986) pointed out that the lack of research and understanding of children with incarcerated parents could be attributed to the secrecy that surrounds the imprisonment and the associated stigma that many children and their families experience. Because of limited research, understanding of their needs and how parental incarceration affects them remains somewhat ambiguous.

Much of the limited research that does exist surrounding children's experiences of parental imprisonment is from an adult's perspective or behavioural observations. This research is

often based on quantitative analysis “with little if any emphasis on the feelings, thoughts, and ideas formulated by the children themselves” (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008, p.1119). Although the non-incarcerated parent or caregiver may be a part of this information gathering, as Nesmith and Ruhland, pointed out, they cannot always accurately represent their children’s thoughts, feelings, and levels of coping or distress. Children can often skilfully keep their distress hidden from other family members. This lack of research from the child’s perspective limits the opportunity for them to voice their lived experiences of parental incarceration.

Within New Zealand only two published studies exist. One is Gordon’s (2009) research, which interviewed the children directly in order to gain their perspective. The other study carried out by the Ministry of Justice in 1996, gained the perspective of children only through the eyes of their imprisoned fathers. Globally there is limited published research on children’s experiences of parental imprisonment with only two American studies reported by Dawson et al. (2012), that provided the direct experiences from the children themselves. Hence the aim of this study is to address this paucity of research in the New Zealand context in the voices of the children whose parents are in prison.

## **Chapter two - Methods**

### **Research design**

A qualitative research approach was used, which allowed the participants to be the expert of their experience and express this from their own perspective. A qualitative approach was chosen, as it was the intention of the study “to get at the inner experience of participants” (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p.12) world, and allow their voice to be heard. Qualitative research techniques involve the researcher and the participant working together in a collaborative manner, in order to understand their experience (Leong & Austin, 2006). It is only when the historical cultural background and context are taken into account, that people, including the researcher, can be more meaningfully understood (Hughes & Sharrock, 1990).



## **Data Analysis**

An Inductive Thematic analysis was used, to identify themes within the children's manuscripts (Willig, 2013). This involves looking for themes that emerge within the manuscripts themselves, rather than a pre-determined coding frame. As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) identified, this approach enables the study's objectives of understanding the child's lived experience from their perspective to emerge, rather than that of the researchers. This occurred in this study through the analysis of the interview transcripts, where themes were identified, first at an idiographic and then a collective level, enabling a diverse analysis to be made.

A thematic analysis involves the researcher reading the transcript several times and making notes in the margins, to ensure they immerse themselves in the data collected and pick up on things they may have missed the first or second time they read it (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This allows for the emergence of themes to occur, which are then clustered into groups. This enables the researcher to find commonalities and to discover how meanings are constructed and shaped by participants (Willig, 2013). Those that stand alone and don't fit within a group are dropped. A second researcher can be used to analyse and critique the interpretations and identification of themes, thus increasing the validity of findings. Entering into this process demonstrates the researcher is open to peer review of their process. This occurred through consultation with my supervisors, who provided feedback and challenged some of the interpretations I had made of the transcribed interviews and the themes I had developed. They also challenged the assumptions I held around parental imprisonment and how these were impacting on my interpretation and development of themes. These assumptions were creating a block in the children's experiences emerging from the text and their voices being heard.

## **Participants**

Recruitment was open to children aged eight to seventeen of all ethnicities and genders. Although I originally sought children who currently had a parent in prison, due to recruitment difficulties, I extended this criteria to include those whose parent had been released from prison. Six participants aged between nine and sixteen took part in this study. Participants included both boys and girls and came from various towns throughout New Zealand. Four

participants had a parent in prison at the time of their interview, while the other two had parents out from prison. All participants identified as Māori.

Participants were excluded if they were diagnosed with a psychological disorder that would impact on their ability to engage and stay focused during their interview, or caused them to become easily distressed. This included Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Any children or parents who were involved in any legal proceedings were also excluded. Participants were also screened for substance use.

## **Recruitment**

All participants were recruited via community organisations that worked with families and children of prisoners. Organisations were approached by myself, or replied to an information poster emailed through community networks. The agencies that expressed a willingness to assist were asked to distribute information sheets to parents of potential participants and display posters in the waiting rooms of their premises. Although unsuccessful as a recruitment tool, posters were also placed in various locations within the community, such as libraries, Citizens Advice Bureau, schools, and community notice boards. A media release in a local community paper was also done. Parents contacted me directly, via email or phone if they were interested in their child participating. For two of the families, they asked that the organisation pass on their details for me to make contact with them.

Because of the sensitive nature of the study it was recommended by my cultural advisor to use a Māori approach for the initial contact with participants and their caregiver. This approach is about connecting and building rapport and is therefore transferrable across cultures. This took the form of two meetings. The first was the Karanga, or call to participate, which involved an initial meeting with the parent where information was provided to them about the study. The second meeting was with the child and their guardian and involved the mihi whakatau, which enabled introductions to take place between the child, their guardian, and myself through the process of whanaungatanga. During these meetings space was provided for them to ask questions and share any worries or concerns they had about the study. Written consents for both the caregiver and child to participate were also acquired during this meeting. A mutually arranged time and venue to meet with the participant on their own was then agreed upon. Meetings on average lasted for an hour and

were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. If the participant was able to consent themselves, with their parent's knowledge, then the interview started at the first meeting.

### **Interview structure**

Data was gathered directly from participants through a semi-structured interview (see Appendix). As suggested by Willig (2013), a series of topic headings were developed, from which questions emerged during the course of the interview. In consultation with my cultural advisor, the interview schedule took into consideration the four dimensions of Te Whare Tapa Wha model. This model is based on the four dimensions of Māori health, but is transferable to other settings. It uses the metaphor of a house, with its four walls representing different aspects of health, including taha wairua (spirituality), taha hinengaro (Cognitive thoughts and emotion), taha tinana (physical), and taha whanau (family) (Durie, 1998). Evans, Rucklidge, and O'Driscoll (2007) pointed out, that because of its basis on Māori Tikanga, it is well respected and endorsed by the Māori population. This model, Durie pointed out, provides Māori an opportunity to be experts and take leadership roles in Māori health that accurately and appropriately reflects their needs and cultural worldviews. This model was therefore appropriate, as it fits with the studies aim of gaining the participant's voice, seeing them as the experts of their experience. It can also be used with non-Māori participants.

Participants were free to take the interview in whichever direction they wished, with probe questions used to encourage them to elaborate on their answers. Various materials were also provided for the children to use as they wished, and were utilised by some participants while we talked. These materials included paint, clay, and drawing supplies. Scheeringa, Peebles, Cook, and Zeanah (2001) identified that the use of these materials can assist in the child sharing their experiences in a more child friendly manner, and can also be used to help manage anxiety or nerves they may feel during the interview. Children may not have the vocabulary or the cognitive ability to express the internal feelings and sensations they experience, particularly when it focuses on topics that may be traumatic for them (Edelbrock, Costello, Dulcan, Kalas, & Calabro-Conover, 1985). Participant's emotional safety was regularly monitored. I checked in with participants at various intervals, to ensure it was ok to proceed. For some of the younger participants, it was evident that talking about their father and their experiences was difficult for them. The interview process was therefore

managed to enable them to communicate at their pace, with space for breaks and the option to stop the interview if they wished.

Participants received a \$20 voucher for their participation, while parents received a \$20 voucher for their time and travel. To reduce coercion, all participants were informed that they could keep the voucher, even if they chose to withdraw from the study, where they would not need to provide a reason. Before I started the audio recorded interviews, I reminded each child of their right to stop the interview at any point, without the need to inform their parent. Participants were also informed they could say pass to any questions they did not wish to answer and that they could retract any statement or withdraw from the study for up to three weeks after their interview.

### **Cultural process**

I consulted with a cultural supervisor, Nephi Skipwith (Massey University, School of Psychology Kaumatua), and showed him my topic headings and questions, discussed my intended approach and made necessary adjustments, to ensure I provided a culturally safe environment for both Māori and non- Māori participants to engage in. This included the three principals of the Treaty of Waitangi.

### **Ethical considerations**

This study was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. As part of the ethics approval consideration was given to cultural differences including Māori and Pasifika participant's needs. As already mentioned this included seeking supervision with the university's cultural advisor. It was also recognised that my participants were minors, aged 16 or under. Christensen (2004) pointed out, it is important to identify the specific needs of child participants and the power differentials that may be present between them and the researcher. These were therefore identified during the planning stage of the study and were taken into account to ensure the children provided informed consent, felt comfortable during the interview and were able to let me know if they wished to stop or take a break. Children who needed further support post interview were linked in with an appropriate agency.

## **Sensitivity of study**

It was anticipated during the planning and ethics stage of the study that some participants may be triggered or find it difficult to talk about some aspects of their experiences. I was also aware, as Cree, Kay, and Tisdall (2002) pointed out, that participants are not always aware at the time of consenting to participate in a study that particular emotions may be triggered and accessed while engaged in their interviews. Appropriate steps were therefore put in place to address this issue and minimise the potential of causing harm. This included checking in with participants during the interview to ensure it was ok to continue. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the children to take an element of control over the direction of their interviews, affording them opportunities to talk about topics that they felt comfortable discussing. As mentioned above, participants were also informed that they could stop the interview for a break or to cease it completely. While some chose to take breaks, none of the children stopped the interview early or withdrew from the study. Along with the child friendly materials, grapes and other snacks were provided to create a relaxed atmosphere. Where participants indicated, either verbally, or through their actions, that they did not wish to talk about a certain topic or expand on their answers, I moved on.

## **Vulnerability of participants**

This study was of a sensitive nature, due to the topic being investigated, and the level of attached stigma, along with the unresolved and unrecognised grief. Because of these factors and the age and the cognitive ability of the younger participants, it was difficult for some of them to stay fully engaged throughout the interview and share some of their struggles that go with having a parent in prison. This affected the depth of information gathered, but represented the nature and age of the participants. Kendall and Chansky (1991) pointed out, that an interview in itself, where the child is required to say out aloud what their thought processes are, may in fact act as an anxiety provoking activity for them and therefore exacerbate their avoidance strategies and limit the information gained. The transcripts reflected this, in that, while the older children were able to provide comprehensive and fluid accounts of their experiences, the younger children aged nine to eleven provided shorter, less detailed descriptive narratives and at times diverted the conversation to non-related topics, or would become distracted with other things in the room, diverting their attention before coming back to the studies purpose.

Piaget's stage theory of development explains, that as children develop, their cognitive ability increases, allowing them to understand and make sense of their world in more logical ways. As they move from one stage of development to another, they develop more complex ways of understanding their experiences. Adolescents function at a formal operational stage, enabling them to understand and articulate their experiences in a more abstract manner than their preadolescent counterparts. The younger children, who from the age of eight, are functioning from a concrete operational stage of thinking and may not yet have cognitive capacity to fully make sense of and articulate their experiences to the same extent as their adolescent counterparts.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity plays a major role in qualitative research. It challenges the researcher to become aware of their ideology, cultural and political views in regard to gender, race, class ethnicity, sexuality and any other beliefs they hold towards the group and individuals they wish to research (Hertz, 1996). This, Hertz went on to say, can also include the sort of questions they choose to ask or ignore, through to the purpose and reason for choosing to study a particular population or topic. Reflexivity, therefore, serves as a form of self-analysis and can help to increase awareness around the relationship between researcher and participants. Through this awareness, the researcher can attempt to address and reduce the imbalance, to enable them to create a reciprocal relationship, where they are seen to be doing research with, instead of on, a population. This, in turn, gives participants a voice and authority on their own matters, and is more likely to afford the researcher access to knowledge and information that would otherwise be unattainable.

Haverkamp (2005) argues, failure of the researcher to engage in reflexivity when venturing into communities different from their own, can lead to the researcher not fully being accepted by the participants as legitimate research partners. This will therefore have implications on their ability to build relationships and gather the necessary data. Having an understanding of the cultural practices and protocols of the group is therefore important, if the researcher is to be accepted by the group they are studying (Christensen, 2004). Legitimacy can be gained through the researcher being up front with the group they are wishing to engage with, in order

to enable a shift from being an outsider, to being invited into the group dynamics, where ideas and knowledge can be shared (Pillow, 2003).

I have worked as a counsellor with children who had a parent in prison, which provided me with some insight of their experiences. However, it was important for me to recognise that I was in fact an outsider. This was because I had not experienced either of my parents going to prison. It was also important to reflect on the fact I was an adult, while the participants were children. My outsider status was identified on the information sheet handed to participants and organisations, along with the purpose of the study. This included why I was interested in conducting research with this population. This formed part of the discussion, first with organisations and then during the Karanga and Mihi Whakatau stages of engagement with participants.

Reflexivity and legitimacy was achieved in this study through discussing my thoughts with my supervisors, engaging in conversation with several community organisations who work with families of prisoners, as well as gaining insight from a friend who had a family member in prison. All of these sources were able to provide me feedback and insight that challenged some of my preconceived assumptions. This assisted me throughout the interviews and while analysing the interview transcripts and identifying themes. The themes in some cases were seen as being too broad. In other cases several subthemes were brought together and re-labelled under one main theme, where other, more accurate subthemes, were developed. This better reflected the themes present in the transcripts. Feelings and emotions, for example were placed under grief and loss, and seen as a consequence of this process rather than a theme on its own. This enabled the children's voice to be better represented.

My interest in this population began while working as a counsellor with children who had a parent in prison. It became evident to me during this time that there was little support or understanding about this population from the wider community and government agencies. As consistent with the literature, I found many isolated themselves to avoid stigmatisation and discrimination. I believed it was important for the children's voice to be heard and research would be a way of allowing this. Because some families in the past had freely engaged in counselling with me in order to receive support for their children, I believed this would also be the case while recruiting participants for this study. This however, was to be one of the first beliefs and assumptions I needed to reflect on. As raised by my supervisors, I

needed to separate my counselling role from that of my researcher role. They highlighted that those who have sought counselling may only represent a very small percentage of the population and that the majority may not actually engage in counselling, nor wish to engage in research.

My friend, who had a family member in prison, highlighted the stigma these families felt and the sensitivity I would need while engaging with them. She also reminded me of the turmoil they experience and the protection many caregivers will have for their children's emotional safety, not wanting their children to be unnecessarily distressed. Despite my counselling experience, I would need to gain deeper insight and understanding of this population and the stigma they experience. She also, however, reminded me that some of the families are doing particularly well, despite their adversities and therefore may not want to take part in research that they believe could show them in a negative light and increase potential stigma. She questioned my reasons for wanting to engage in research with this population and what the potential outcomes would be. She was cautious but encouraging, warning me of the resistance I may receive, due to the attached stigma and parents' suspicions of me as a researcher. This challenged my assumption of parental imprisonment being an all negative experience for the children. I needed to reflect on my pre-conceived belief that all children of prisoners are destined to emotional and behavioural problems. It encouraged me to investigate the resiliency and positive coping mechanisms the children of prisoners can develop, despite the challenges they face. My supervisors reiterated this and encouraged me to gain knowledge in this area. Coping and resiliency was to also emerge within the children's transcripts as a theme.

To protect the identity of participants, all identifying features have been removed and all the children's names have been replaced with a pseudonym.

### **Chapter three - Findings**

Loss, stigma, secrecy and support and coping are all consistently recognised in the literature as a significant experience for the children of incarcerated parents. These topics were subsequently reflected in the children's interviews as re-occurring themes, evident during the



analysis of their interview transcripts. Each theme and their sub themes shall be explored below in the context of the children's narratives.

### **Theme one – Loss**

Loss significantly features within the literature on parental imprisonment and was subsequently a major theme within this study. Although none of the children directly articulated their feelings specifically as a loss or grief, they used words that referred to and reflected this process. Grief is an emotion that occurs as a direct result of loss and can create changes in a person's emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual wellbeing (Moules, 1998; Graham, 2004). Participants identified the emotional impact of loss in the context of parental imprisonment and the subsequent losses such as friends, supports, family, community and financial security, often as a consequence of this experience. Some of these sub themes are discussed below.

#### **Loss of relationship**

Although some previous research had identified the loss of a parent with positive outcomes, such as in the event of an abusive parent, whose absence provides a sense of reprieve, (Wildeman, 2014) that was not the case with this study. All participants instead associated the loss of their parent, and in this research were all fathers, as being upsetting and producing negative consequences. This impacted on various aspects of their lives. Although some children expressed feelings of anger towards their father, for getting into trouble and going to prison, all participants still had a sense of loyalty towards him and grieved his absence.

Participants explained:

*“I feel angry, because I can't sleep without him ... it's boring because my dad's not around”*  
Rawiri.

*“Some nights I would get really emotional and just cry, and just cause I just missed him, cause I hadn't seen him in a while, so I would just cry”.* Hana.

*“I miss him... Um watching tv with him ... [I wish he would] stop being naughty yeah, so stop stealing cars.” Johnny.*

*“Yep it was really hard because I miss dad” Aroha.*

The significance and impact of their loss was also evident in the majority of participants’ accounts of their emotional and physical reactions upon learning of their father’s arrest. For example:

*“[I felt] sad ... I started crying”. Aroha.*

*“um, when I found out I just started crying um, I went into my room and I just wanted to go break him out of the cells, but I know I couldn’t do that”. Huia.*

*“We went back to the marae, me and my sister were playing on the playground, this van came and took dad away and me and my sister were crying and saying why is dad going and mum was hugging us and saying it is ok”. Hana*

For all participants, the loss of their father was a sudden event, with no preparation or awareness of his impending departure. Raveis, Siegel, and Karus (1998) identified that a child is potentially impacted more when the loss occurs suddenly and there has not been an opportunity to prepare for the parent’s departure.

Hana talked about her father being unexpectedly arrested at her paternal grandfather’s funeral.

*“Yeah, that was quite a um, it was quite like I think it will stay with me forever, but was just really, I remember it being at my dad’s funeral, um my dad’s, dad’s funeral and um like I didn’t even get told, mum um, they just took dad away type of thing, it was just really like a real um like aggressive”.*

Likewise, Huia recounted:

*“we only found out before the holiday start. Um and once they, the polices came to the house, um I was pretty angry at my dad because he didn’t, oh he wasn’t, aah, he, it was the holidays and we didn’t get to spend the holiday with our father and then he got locked up”.*

This sudden and unexpected loss of a parent can confound the grief process for children. Being able to make sense of the loss plays a critical role in how they process and manage this experience. Children may find it hard to make sense of and comprehend their parent’s sudden departure, complicating the grief process. This can sometimes be the case in less normative losses such as parental imprisonment, where ambiguities surrounding the loss may also be present. Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer (2006) identify that from a Narrative perspective, it is believed that people construct and carry their own pre-existing assumptions and beliefs about the world, based on prior experiences. They went on to say, children may struggle, after parental loss, to integrate their experience in a way that allows them to reconstruct a cohesive sense of self “within the context of his or her current system of meaning” (p.407). Loss, they argued can destabilize their beliefs about themselves and the world they interact within, shattering their pre-existing assumptive world. This can leave the person struggling to adapt to, and make sense of their loss. Gilbert (1996), further added, a person’s narratives about their lived experience are forever changing and evolving and are subject to reinterpretation. They are not an exact replica of the event, but rather an ever changing and evolving story, where new information gained, increases and deepens the person’s understanding and interpretation of the event. Stories, she highlighted, are influenced by experience. This includes the retelling of the story, which in itself helps the person gain new insights. If the child is not afforded opportunities of retelling their story, as is the case for many children of prisoners, they may continue to struggle to make sense of the sudden loss of their parent.

### **Maintaining relationship**

There are many emotional reactions to loss, but grief is perhaps the most salient. As with ambiguous loss, Moules (1998) pointed out that grief is a way for the mourning person to keep the lost person in their memory, and in relationship. From this perspective, the lost person can be seen as physically absent, but still psychologically present in the bereaved person’s thoughts and actions (Boss, 1999). In the context of parental imprisonment, although the parent is still alive and may still have contact with their child, the physical

relationship has changed. Although physically absent from their lives many participants kept their fathers psychologically present. This was achieved through simply thinking about him at a particular time, or actively engaging in activities and private rituals on an ongoing basis. These rituals were important, because, as already identified there are no publicly accepted rituals or ceremonies for children who lose a parent to prison (Dallaire & Wilson, 2010).

For Wiremu going for bike rides provided opportunity to reminisce about and reflect on his relationship with his father.

He explained:

*“I would go for a long ride on my bike. I would just think to myself ... Um I would think about what my dad would look like and all that”.*

Hana talked about a prayer her and her family would say each night, along with her birthday ritual while blowing out her candles.

*“But mum would be like every night pray and mum taught us this prayer, but I can’t remember it anymore, but me and [my sister] would say it every night and we would always pray for dad to come home and I remember every birthday you would blow your candles out, and every birthday I was always like, hopefully that dad would come to my next, that was always my birthday wish”.*

She went on to say:

*“He always called and um and he sent letters all the time and we sent lots of letters back, so I have all the letters and stuff in a suitcase with all that sort of stuff. Yeah so he sent us all individual letters to each of us and we would read them and we would write back and yeah like he never missed a birthday he would send us birthday cards”.*

For some participants they were able to have their father physically present for a short period of time during visits and phone calls. Visits to prison was also a form of ritual, as it had specific protocols that needed to be followed at each pre-arranged visit. Although all participants expressed a desire to have direct contact with their father, this experience for

various reasons was not always a positive one. Some participants expressed their struggles to connect with the father in such a controlled and contained environment.

Huia explains:

*“Arrr sometimes when we get the letter and the passes [we would visit] ... Yeah [ we went] a couple of weeks ago or months ago ... [I find it] scary, heaps of people looking when we go in, um heaps of people seeing their family or brothers in jail and catching up with them and seeing what it is like in jail and when I went there it was like so blurry, I didn’t even want to go in there but I had to because I wanted to see my father , but yeah it looks pretty evil and pretty not on in jail, it looks like they always have over there, heaps of evilness and heaps of hate and that ... Um I was just happy to see him because when I look at my dad it just feels like I am looking at a younger version of him, but I know for myself he’s getting old and grey”.*

Rawiri shared his conflict between wanting to see his father, but not liking the prison environment:

*Cool, taking for long getting there ... Yep, it’s exciting seeing him ... There is toys, games ... Sometimes when I talk to him I get bored, because when I talk to him I have to mean it ... Like when my dad says what do you play, if I say soccer I have to mean it [I can’t make things up] ... [it is sometimes] boring ... Cause I got nothing to do and it’s not cool [the activities I do] ... [Security is] bad, because when you put your bag on that thing that goes like that, and you have to grab it and those dogs sniff you, I don’t like those dogs ... No, they’re annoying ... Because once a dog sniffed my bum ... No, I don’t like dogs.*

Hana shared the positive and negative aspects of visiting her father:

*“Mum always made it fun for us because we went to like nice parks and stuff and then we would go see dad. We were always excited to go see dad because we never got to see him ... I remember when he was in [name of prison] there was this flying fox, um, there um near it, so we were like every time we would go visit him in Auckland, we would be like mum can we go to the flying fox afterwards, can we go to the flying fox afterwards and she is like yes and we were like yeah”*

*She went on to explain:*

*“Yeah it was, um there was this one, like when he lived in [name of prison] there was quite nasty guards and stuff, they were quite nasty. I remember this one time I had like this encounter with um one of the guards it was like it was like one of those through the glass visits on the phone and stuff. The guard was real, real nasty to me because I was like crying and stuff and saying bye dad and he was ahhh its ok you will see him soon and stuff and it was just, those were quite, I didn't like those parts and stuff, but most of the time it was nice visits ... I didn't like those types of visits, um like at all, they were just like you travelled all that way, just to see them through the glass ... No, yeah you didn't get to like touch him or hug him. It was like what you see on the movies where you get to see him through the glass ... Nar, um like some of the guards were kind of like scary and stuff, you didn't want arr like look at them or anything and stuff ... Yeah that side was and like yeah, some of them were just doing their job, but some of them were actually really nasty, so I didn't like the guards, cause they would just look at you evilly, I just didn't feel comfortable around them”.*

Harris et al. (2010) identified the importance of children maintaining contact with a parent who no longer lives with them. They identify, that often arrangements for continued contact is routine in separations, such as parental divorce, but not for parental imprisonment. They argue, often adults and professionals make a decision based on their own negative assumptive views of the imprisoned parent, rather than that of the “child’s perspective and a developmental, attachment lens” (p.190). Children, they go on to say, construct memories about their parents, which will play a part of how they define their family relationships in later years. From an attachment perspective, Crittenden and Ainsworth (1989) identified, as the child reaches middle childhood and becomes more independent, their attachment needs and dependency change, from that of an infant. They still rely, however, on their attachment figures as a source of comfort, reassurance, and safety. This innate behaviour continues throughout the life span, influencing relationships, with not only the parent but also others they meet. Although parental imprisonment restricts access, and may provide negative experiences for the child, continuing access allows these innate attachment qualities to continue, influencing their internal working models in a positive way through reassuring the child that their parent still loves them (Murray & Murray, 2010).

## **Secondary loss**

The loss of a parent to prison may bring other losses and adversities that go with being raised in a single parent family or with other relatives, (Rodriguez & Margolin, 2014). This can include the loss of financial security and the normality of childhood, which unlike many other single parent homes, are exacerbated by stigma and the lack of support and recognition they receive from the wider society (Beck & Jones, 2007). The loss of normality in this context refers to those everyday things the children identified, as missing out on when compared to their peers. All but one participant, whose father was imprisoned before he was born, had their fathers living with them, in the family home, prior to their imprisonment and were therefore vulnerable to these secondary losses.

## **Loss of financial security**

Financial security was precarious for many of the participants in this study and the loss of financial income was the theme mentioned in some capacity by all participants.

Rawiri, remembered:

*“Um when my dad was with me it’s going better but now when my dad’s in jail it going worsen ... It was fun, cool, we always use to get money, but now he’s gone its gone different”*

Hana, stated:

*“When he went to jail it was more, quite hard on my mum, with um, with all the finances and stuff and all money, so we didn’t get all nice things. Yeah, um like, we didn’t get any like any like cool, we just got the basic things that we needed and we didn’t get any flash anything, we just had the average tv or the same, like no nice food we just had mince, no luxuries, we just had the normals”*

For some participants, financial loss also included not having a family car, which limited their movements. Wiremu, said:

*“Yeah, because mum couldn’t afford a car. Dad bought us a car while he was in jail, but my poppa took it off us ... Because he had no car, and he’s got sore legs ... I wish I could have been able to be driven to school”.*

A decrease in income affected stability in accommodation for some participants, where they had moved houses several times during the course of their father’s imprisonment. For two participants, this also meant moving communities.

*“With the changes um yes we did, we had to move, we use to, but we moved quite a lot, three houses renting and stuff then we went and moved in with my poppa, my mums dad and we still live their now, um but my poppa has passed away um so we moved into my poppas, with my poppa and he was kind of like a dad support type of thing”.* Hana

Moving communities can evoke stress that can negatively impact on a child’s development and add to previous adversities (Pettit & McLanahan, 2003). It can mean not only moving houses, but also schools, sports groups and other community based establishments that may well have brought some stability and normality to the child’s life. This can affect their general functioning, particularly in regards to education and social relationships. Vernberg, (1990), pointed out that research has shown that older children, particularly those entering or progressing through adolescence are particularly vulnerable. As Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory identifies, for children at this developmental stage, peer acceptance and identity become predominant features of their lives. Vernberg went on to say, that moving, especially when it occurs multiple times, makes it difficult for the child to establish strong relational ties with peers, and therefore interrupts this developmental task. It can isolate a child through weakening the establishment of social and community networks. Frequent moving has also been connected to low academic performance, high rates of school dropouts, along with behaviour problems in the classroom (Haynie, South & Bose, 2006). Parental imprisonment therefore has far-reaching consequences. It can create a domino effect with one negative outcome such as a decrease in financial security, leading to housing difficulties, which in turn leads onto schooling and social problems.

Johnny, referenced to financial deprivation when he talked about some of the things he wished he could change, which focused on his dream of having more money for him and his family. He explains:



*“To have money come out of my pocket, so I could bail dad out ... Buy a house, a big as house, yeah, with a pool”*

Compared to two parent homes, single parenthood can reduce the economic security for children (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). Poverty and its effects on children’s wellbeing and cognitive ability have been well documented. Single parent families are at higher risk of living in poverty than families where parents are living together, making it difficult for them to have a decent standard of living. Renwick (1998), identifies that single families are six times more likely to be living in poverty than married couples, with 35% living below the official poverty line. This financial precariousness impacts negatively on these children and their remaining parent or caregiver when single parent homes are stretching their incomes to cover the basic requirements of life. Maslow (1943) identified in his hierarchy of needs model, the importance of children having the basic physiological and safety needs met in order for them to be able to focus on higher needs of love/belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation, which allows a person to strive towards their full potential.

Along with enduring the many losses associated with parental imprisonment, the children also had to manage the negative reactions from others. A second theme identified within the children’s narratives included stigma and secrecy. Stigma is associated with the disenfranchised nature of their loss, while secrecy is a way in which children manage this stigma.

## **Theme two**

### **Secrecy and stigma**

While parental absence in families has shown to have a negative impact on a child’s financial, psychological and emotional wellbeing, the degree of this impact can be dependent on the reasons for their departure and whether it is socially approved or not (Beck & Jones, 2007). Those that are not socially approved, such as parental imprisonment, create unique circumstances and carry stigma, which can complicate the parent’s departure and can lead to secrecy (Lowenstein, 1986).

Understanding the dynamics of secrets and the rules around keeping and sharing them is a developmental milestone that is commonly observed during middle childhood (Hagen & Myers, 2003). Understanding of secrets however, begins to develop much earlier, at around age three (Gordon, et al., 2014). Children, at this age learn that a secret is something you don't tell anyone, out of concern that they may tell others. They view it as an exclusive possession that they would lose should they share it. Both trust and keeping promises are aspects of the secrecy dynamics that children learn over time. In this study those children whose parents were in prison from a young age, knew to keep their family situation secret, and maintained this as they aged. Children who come from stigmatised families or groups have shown to keep a family secret, despite parents' concerns to the contrary (Daniel, 2015). Hana talked about her confusion about keeping her father imprisonment secret, but still followed her mother's lead not to tell others.

She explained:

*“At first I was like why, like cause I didn't, because I was so young I didn't know why it was such a big deal, kind of like when people say peoples age out loud ... That was like one of the, mum would say, just say he is not there, say he's away. And so they were like so Hana where is you dad, and I would be like, um my dad is away”*

Aroha also shared she kept the secret from others and that the only person she talked to about her father was her mother.

She explained:

*“Um just to mum, this one and in [where she use to live], Yep, Yeah they are the only two I talk to. No one else”*

While secrecy may be seen as a normal development milestone, for children with a parent in prison, secrecy plays a different role in their lives. Secrecy in this context is seen more as a necessity of survival and is frequently associated as a response to their experiences of stigma and the feeling of shame that goes with being part of a stigmatised group (Daniel, 2015). The greater the stigma the more shame they feel and therefore the more secretive an individual is likely to be (Hagen & Myers, 2003). In this study the theme of stigma and their fear of others

finding out were present in the children's narratives, along with their desire to protect their secret from being revealed. Secrecy may therefore be used to avoid unwanted negative attention, such as bullying Arditti (2005). As with grief, it can evoke emotional responses that may impact on the young person's social and emotional functioning. Daniel also pointed out that even for those who have not directly experienced discrimination and exclusion, the fear of being included in a stigmatised group can lead them to adopting secrecy. Participants in this study indicated, through their narratives, that keeping their parents whereabouts from others, was a consciously active part of their lives. As consistent with the literature, they indicated they were fearful of the response they believed they would receive from others, such as being bullied, should they reveal their secret.

*"I would be too shy, because I didn't really like talking to people. I would only really talk to them if I really, really knew them, because there were heaps of bullies in [where he lived]"*

Wiremu

Another participant, while talking about her struggles, shared about not talking to others about her father being in prison and the resulting emotions she would feel should others find out.

*"Nope, no one ... but then they might tell everybody else, I would get embarrassed".* Aroha

Many participants shared that only a very select few knew about their experience, with their secret being mainly kept within the immediate and extended family. Others privileged with the information included school staff, such as teachers, counsellors, and social workers. For some children a close friend or another child from their school or community became aware after they met while visiting their fathers in jail.

### **Secrecy and friendship**

The literature on parental imprisonment has consistently indicated the difficulties these children have in forming positive long term friendships. Although the children in this study indicated the presence of friendships, they all expressed their struggles in feeling able to trust them and share the whereabouts of their father out of fear they may tell others. Children learn that keeping secrets enables them to have a level of control over their world, whereby

they can include or exclude others from that world (Frijns, Finkenauer, & Keijsers, 2013). All participants, in some capacity throughout their interview, referred to secrecy in the context of friendship.

Wiremu reflected this while stating his preference to keep his situation private from his friends.

*“Yes, I had two friends in collage ... I didn’t really talk to them, but if I wanted to I was allowed to ... I just thought it was none of their business”*

Hana reiterated this:

*“Yeah, you always tried to like, I don’t know, kind of like you didn’t want to lie, but you didn’t want to tell them either, yeah so that part always put me in like a tricky like situation. I would like always, if someone started talking about their dad, I would always like just leave before the conversation got any like more in depth or asking each other, so I would always leave if the topic got close to, because I didn’t want to lie to them”*

Secrecy plays a significant role in friendship development and can either help or hinder its progression. Watson and Valtin (1997), pointed out, that research has shown that sharing secrets helps strengthen friendship intimacy during middle childhood, increasing through adolescence and into adulthood. They go on to say that children are more likely to share secrets with friends compared with non-friends, with them beginning to make the connection between secrets and friendships around the age of six or seven. During this stage, children learn that a secret involves learning to trust others, as well as being trustworthy. This means learning to trust others, that they will not share your secret, while also being trusted not to disclose their secrets. This realisation helps form the foundation of friendship and strengthens interpersonal relationships (Frijns et al., 2013).

Some participants shared their fears of peers betraying their trust. This reinforced their need to maintain their secret.

*“To tell you the truth I don’t trust anyone ... Or friends nar ... Nar I don’t tell them nothing ... They’ll mouth off and tell people, that would turn my world upside down ... Like I will be*

*going insane, I will be going crazy ... Like psycho ... Yeah because they can like talk it out and not tell me if they told someone, that's why I don't depend on other people ... I just get so angry ... Them telling people". Huia*

*"Because they [friends] will tell the other people ... They will all know". Rawiri.*

The stigma and disenfranchised grief these children experience may be a contributing factor to a breakdown in trusting others, either due to experiences or solely because of their awareness of societal views about their situation. Many children manage this through utilising the coping mechanisms of either suppression or avoidance. If trust and secret sharing plays a significant role in making and keeping friends, then this could help explain some of the difficulties children with a parent in prison might have in achieving the goal of making and keeping friends.

Peer relationships are important as it can affect a child's development and functioning in many aspects of their lives including family, school, and the community. Children who are rejected by their peers are often found to struggle at school and are prone to academic and emotional difficulties. In contrast, the development of close friendships can assist in a child's emotional and psychological development, through the promotion of social skills and building a positive self-concept. This revolves around being accepted by another, which reduces the feeling of isolation and loneliness. This affords the youngster the opportunity to develop intimacy and collaboration skills, which become particularly salient during adolescence and adulthood. Friendships also develop turn taking, communication and problem solving skills that are all required as the person goes through the various developmental stages of life (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Peer relations are essential in fostering the development of socialization and interpersonal competence, which influence an individual's long term adjustment and emotional wellbeing. Friendships can also provide emotional support during tough times and buffer the impact of loss (Ladd, 1999).

The third theme that was identified within the children's narratives included how the children coped in positive ways with the many adversities that arose because of their father being in prison. Because of the sudden loss of their father, the attached stigma and the many adversities that go with this experience, the development of coping mechanisms other than

secrecy and avoidance, play a particularly important role in the lives of children with a parent in prison.

### **Theme three**

#### **Support and coping**

The coping mechanisms an individual adopts in the face of adversity and the way they assess a situation, can have an effect on their psychological and emotional wellbeing. While the literature is abundant with references to the difficulties children experience as a result of having a parent in prison, few have explored the positive coping mechanisms children use to help them manage this experience in ways that are conducive to their environment. Within this study it was evident that all participants had developed coping mechanisms that had helped them to navigate the myriad of adversities and obstacles they faced. This assisted them to function within their various environments in a productive manner. These coping processes included seeking emotional and practical support from others, engaging in sports and other activities, along with withdrawal and suppression.

Social support can be seen “as a set of perceived general or specific supportive behaviours that contribute to a person’s physical and mental wellbeing generally, and/or as a buffer for someone under stress” (Demaray & Malecki, 2003, p.471). It can be classed as an environmental resource that is offered by others in the individual’s life (Milgram & Palti, 1993).

Social support is recognised as an important factor in managing adversities and healing from loss. Although stigma can act as a barrier for children to overtly seek out support from others, for some participants in this study, despite facing this struggle, they were able to find people to trust, where they received emotional and practical support within their school and home environment. Having this support can help alleviate some of the effects of stigma through the children being aware that there were some adults or other children in their life who were willing to provide help where needed.

Because financial security is often reduced after parental imprisonment, practical support providing necessary items can help alleviate this, and is of particular importance for children

with a parent in prison. Huia identified the emotional support she received from the school counsellor and the practical support from the social worker, such as providing school lunches, uniforms, and books when needed. She explained:

*“Um she [the school counsellor] was pretty cool, she done it straight away, she helped me out a lot and [the school social worker], he always gives me uniform if I run out of uniform and he will give me lunch and that”.*

Johnny also identified the educational support he received from the school, to help him succeed.

*“The school, like if you need help with your work they would provide it”*

Accessing support from the school social worker and counsellor, helped Huia, not only by providing someone outside of her family to talk to, but also assisting in reducing the effects that poverty, as a result of parental imprisonment, can have on school opportunities. By providing lunches, it meant she could focus on her education and learning rather than hunger. Maslow (1943) and his theory of motivation, stresses the importance of having basic physiological needs met, such as hunger. He pointed out that where an individual is hungry, the motivation to attain other goals is fraught. He argues the urge to engage in other activities associated with education or interests, become of secondary importance to the satisfaction of basic needs. This practical support, therefore, allowed her to focus on her school and sports. This helped her cope with her life circumstances, buffering the effects of parental imprisonment. This was of particular importance due to the lack of sibling support she received from her older brothers, making her life more challenging and adding to the responsibility she felt for her younger siblings. She explained:

*“It’s harder now with dad in prison. So hard, so hard, it’s even harder I don’t even see my older brother and he’s supposed to be up here helping me ... And it is very hard having no parents around it is just your uncle and I am the only girl in the house”*

The providing of a uniform and books helped her attain basic school requirements and assisted her to blend in with her peers, rather than standing out and being different. This could well have assisted with her coping, self-confidence and esteem, rather than further

stigmatising her. Erikson's psychosocial theory of development stresses the importance of culture and society on a person's personality and social development (Blume & Zembar, 2007). A school uniform was a part of the school culture she attended and therefore an important part of helping her fit in with peers. Being supplied books also enabled her to actively take part in school in a practical manner and have the necessities to learn. This was evident in her eagerness to stay at, and do well in her education.

Another participant, Hana, explains the opportunity she got to partake in some research at her school, which she compared to being like counselling. This afforded her an opportunity to share her experiences with a professional for the first time.

*"There was this one time in college there was this counsellor, but he wasn't really a counsellor, he just wanted us, he just wanted to do a survey on us, but like he was the counsellor, so we called it counselling and I was like mum we went to counselling today".*

### **Bullying and support**

Support also extended to managing bullying, and was a theme for some participants, both within and outside of their school environments. Bullying has been widely identified within the literature, as a common theme for children who have a parent in prison and can affect many areas of their lives. Support therefore plays an important role in the context of bullying and has shown to have positive effects on children's emotional and psychological wellbeing, along with decreasing the symptoms of depression, compared to those who do not receive support (Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009). Children within this study identified the emotional and practical support they received from others, to address the bullying they were experiencing.

Hana explained

*" [the school counsellor] Just helps me with all my things, ahh, all my, like, if I am in trouble or if something is going on at school with me or if people are bullying me or something".*

Another participant Rawiri described how teachers supported and protected him against bullying:



*“I can’t do sports now, because friends are starting to pick on me ... They bully me because my dads in jail ... [teachers help] by looking after me ... Ummm by doing things right and looking after me properly ... Like taking care of me, making sure people don’t touch me...because if someone comes up to me and punches me I feel sad ... Like when I am playing at the park, someone might sneak up and push me off the swing”*

Soliciting support from others, therefore, plays an important role in helping children against bullying. As identified within this study and the literature, it can provide them with an ally and someone to turn to, when needed, and was therefore of value. This can also reduce the isolation they feel, which is often associated with this population of children (Connors-Burrow, Johnson, Whiteside-Mansell, McKelvey & Gargus, 2009). Social and emotional support, Flaspohler et al. (2009) pointed out, is seen as critical, to ensure day to day functioning, as well as reducing the long term effects of a stressful event. They went on to say that even when teacher, or peer intervention, does not stop the bullying, it helps the child, by showing that someone does actually care about them and their situation. This they identified may well reduce some of the effects of disenfranchised grief, and their struggles being recognised as important. They also identified that teacher support, in particular, has been shown to help promote social and academic success and can foster greater self-confidence and social skills, as well as reducing internalising problems, such as depression

Some participants acknowledged the peer or sibling support they received while being bullied. For one participant this included having older peers to support him, because of there being a number of bullies where he lived.

Wiremu explained:

*“Yes, I had two friends in college, so if anyone picked on me, they would get picked on”*

Aroha sought out the help of her older siblings.

She explains:

*“I use to get bullied, but my brothers were there when it happened. So yeah my triplet brothers helped ... Yep, every day at school I use to get pushed off the park, I got pushed over umm, and I scraped and cracked my forehead open when I was five”.*

This support is of particular importance, as research indicates that children who are victims of repeated bullying often experience negative peer acceptance and difficulties with social relationships, which further add to their difficulties (Flaspohler et al., 2009). Given that children with a parent in prison already face a multitude of adversities, acceptance by their peers is of critical importance. Peer support has been found to have positive outcomes similar to those associated with teacher support and has even been found to buffer the effects of family discord (Demaray & Malecki, 2003).

### **Family support**

Support from extended family has been shown to play an important role in reducing the impact of adversities, on a child’s wellbeing, particularly in reducing their level of worry (White, Bruce, Farrell, & Kliwer, 1998 ). All participants identified the presence and importance of extended family members in their lives, including grandparents and uncles, who all provided emotional and practical support in a variety of ways.

For some participants this included their uncles taking on caregiving roles while their parents were in prison. This provided them consistency and a stable living environment.

They explained

*“Now our uncle needs to look after us ... Taking us to school all the time”* Rawiri.

*“My dad asked him [uncle] If he could take over the house that we are living in and um that’s where my uncle took over for my dad just until he gets out”.* Huia.

Huia went on to explain the significance of her other uncles in her life and the emotional support and guidance they and her caregiving uncle provided her, particularly in regard to her cultural history and guiding her in a positive direction in life.

*“Umm with all my uncles I always have a lot of respect for them because that’s my dad’s brothers, the one in jail, and I always trust my uncles ... because I am close to my uncles and um my uncles always tell me a lot about Māori history, um what has happened in wars and that and tell me about life and that and what’s short and what’s long in life and to show me the right way in life and to lead me the right way ... Yeah but my uncle that’s with me I am very close as well, yeah he is my closest uncle”.*

Other participants also identified the importance of their uncles in their lives:

*“Um I know all my uncles, except for one and I know them all good... [We would] go for rides on the motor bike ... I think they were all sorry for me, because dad was in prison ... Because they would take, always do fun stuff with me ... I remember going to the pools when I was little, in [where we lived] ... Yeah they would drive me” Wiremu.*

*“My uncles ... there cool as, there good at drawing and I like going over there to play games” Rawiri*

Grandparents also played a significant and special role in helping their grandchildren to cope with the loss of their father. This involved spending quality time with them, which the children indicated was of importance to them.

They explained:

*“She [nana] always used to take me to the park and she would spend a lot of time with me when I was a little baby”. Aroha*

*“Yeah Poppa was there for us and he would pick us up from primary every afternoon and um he would um park up in [town she lived] because we went to [town she lived] primary, he would park up, give us like two dollars each, me and [my sister] and we would go over to the dairy and buy some lollies. Each time he would pick us up it would get more and more, and then it was like up to seven bucks each or something, it was really cool. So Poppa supported my mum and stuff so yeah” Hana*

*“Um my nana when she was alive ... I use to, when we lived in [where he used to live], I use to ask mum if I could go to nanas and she said she would walk me. I would be waiting outside and if I waited more than two minutes, I would run there, because it is only around the corner”.* Wiremu.

The support of extended family are important, as they play a crucial role in assisting individuals to cope with their loss, and can impact positively on their wellbeing. White et al. (1998) identified that it may act as a protective factor in reducing psychological distress, including anxiety. Looking at children’s coping, from a family resiliency approach, Foster, O’Brien and Korhonen (2012) identified that problems are seen as being influenced by a combination of the individual, wider family and socio cultural factors. They went on to say, that from this perspective, families are seen as a unit, containing combined strengths and resources that provide the potential for growth for individuals and the family system as a whole and enables them to overcome the adversities they face. .

This growth emerges through positive relational bonds that occur between family members and the support and resources they provide each other, which in turn strengthens an individual’s resiliency. This is compatible with a Māori perspective on health and Te Whare Tapa Wha model, which sees the whanau as an important and integral part of an individual’s health and wellbeing. The whanau is important, as people are seen as interacting systems that are interdependent upon each other (Love & Whittaker, 1997). An individual’s wellbeing is seen to reflect the functioning of the family as a whole, by how they support and interact with each other (Durie, 1998). Issues are not seen as a burden for an individual but for the whole whanau, which influences and is influenced by the other three dimensions of the model, and in turn affects their health status. Family can therefore play an important role in positively influencing and maintaining an individual’s wellbeing. This is therefore important for children who have a parent in prison, as it can help support them through their grief and the many other stresses they feel. This is particularly pertinent, given their experiences typically go unrecognised and unsupported by the wider society. Gordon (2009), reported that children who had extended family support, coped better than those who didn’t.

## Idioculture

Peer support also came in the form of other children who also had a parent in prison. For some, they become friends outside of the prison settings, such as at school or within the community. For others, they would interact while visiting their fathers. This afforded them an opportunity to connect with peers they perceived as being able to understand their situation, due to them experiencing a similar lived experience. It was the connection with other children, who also had a parent in prison that they felt truly understood their situation.

For Rawiri it was an exclusive secret, they shared together.

*“Only this one person [knows] ... My best friend. He knows that my dad’s in jail, cause he has got a dad in jail ... Cause my dad and his dad met ... Yes, my friend found out my dad was in jail with his, he didn’t know ... I told him ... Yeah, but in different things, different place [wings]”.*

Although they would talk with each other about their fathers, it was something they kept from others within their peer group, who they believed did not understand their situation. Even those who recognised others in their community, but didn’t approach or talk to them, identified the comfort they felt by knowing they were not the only one going through what they were. This provided a sense of connection and understanding during a difficult time.

The importance of this connection was communicated by Hana.

She explained:

*“There was this one um, my mate, oh I didn’t aah, I meet because my dad was like blah blah blah, another inmate, it was one of his mates, um from jail, this was like on a family day and he was like this is your uncle, but he says that about every, all his mates, this is your uncle and I am like hi, hi and then he had two girls that were, his daughters were the same age as me and [my sister] and so we got along on the family day and we were like oh yeah yeah, so then we talked and it was really good, but we went to like different schools and stuff and so on that family day it was really cool that um she was going through the same thing as I was and stuff”*

*She went on to say*

*“Aah like, I could like, I don’t know it just, you didn’t feel like alone that you weren’t the only, because I always felt aah, oh my god I am the only one. Like with my friend, one of my best mates, she gets to hang out with her dad and stuff and when I saw here, I was like orr you only have your mum as well yeah, you can only see your dad once a week or something. Like it kind of puts you in the normal group type thing, yeah because it was weird that we had to go to jail every Sunday”*

For children who have a parent in prison, there is an exclusive culture that they function within and where they felt understood and accepted along with assisting with their coping. Fine (1987), identified this as an idioculture. This, he explained, includes smaller groups that function within a wider cultural context and have their own unique rules and traditions for members. Idiocultures can exist within most cultural settings and can be inclusive of its members and exclusive of outsiders. These sub groups, of the larger cultural network, have particular behaviours, secrets, and rules unique to that sub group. Although a person may be part of the greater wider cultural group, they may still not understand the inner working of the idioculture. Harris et al. (2010), identified, peers who are able to connect with other children who have a parent in prison may be able to provide a reciprocal relationship of empathy and support due to a shared understanding of what each other is experiencing.

A large amount of research has shown the negative effect stress can have on a person’s health and wellbeing (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). Engaging with peers and being accepted by them is important for children. Taking part in sport and activities provides opportunities for this, along with social interaction. For children of prisoners it widens the number of idiocultures they are accepted into, increasing the potential of approval by their peers. It also provides health benefits, including reducing stress and keeping them busy and focused on something positive in their life. Engaging in sports was a common theme among all participants to varying degrees and was something they all engaged in to some capacity.

Aroha identified her involvement in sport:

*“I have only just started when I started basketball ... Yep I am one of the blue belts, I haven't really been practising. I have only just started when I started basketball ... [I like playing] basketball, I have been doing it nearly a whole year and since I use to live in [another city] ... Yep, we won our last game, yep, it was last week ... I have to practice every day”.*

Johnny provided some insight into the various activities he enjoys doing, along with how his bike is both a fun activity as well as a tool for getting to his sports, enabling him to get involved.

He explains:

*“Cool, because I can do some tricks on the skateboard and that ... Yep and [I have] a bike and a scooter... I Just play on it and on my bike. I have biked to [another town] ... to the youth centre, um and people that I know and sometimes I bike to rugby training ... Yep training is on Wednesday and Thursday and our game is on Saturday, this Saturday”*

Hana also shared her involvement in sport and activities:

*“I played like, I played netball and I still play netball, I um went on as many trips as I could like I went on the ski trip and the zoo trip, I went on everything that they [school] offered, yeah I always took up every opportunity they offered and stuff”.*

From a health psychology perspective, much of the literature identifies the benefits of being involved in sport and leisure activities as a way of reducing stress and increasing psychological and physical wellbeing (Caltabiano, 1995). The benefits of leisure activities have been shown to have a particularly positive effect on health for those who are experiencing high levels of stress (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). Caltabiano identified leisure activities and participation in sport have been linked to physiological responses of relaxation and positive mood states. This included the reduction of the development of emotional dysphoria, the opposite of euphoria. It can reduce mental health symptoms, such as depression, and therefore increase a person's capacity for coping with stressful events (Sothorn, Loftin, Suskind, Udall, & Blecker, 1999). From a medical model, health is defined by how much a person is physically suffering. From a more holistic approach, health can be described as a state of being and can include a person's emotional, physical, social and

spiritual health. This fits with Te Whare Tapa Wha model of Māori health, which highlights the importance of having or creating balance between all four dimensions, in order to maintain good health. This, Durie (1998) argues, can only be achieved if an individual is assessed and treated as a whole, on all dimensions, rather than only one aspect, such as their mental wellbeing, to the exclusion of physical, spiritual or social/family. Each system, Durie stressed, interacts with each other and so therefore, each dimension must be in harmony with the others, in order for an individual and their wider whanau to function in a healthy way.

Because sport is often associated with social interaction, it can be seen to foster the development of friendships. This, Sothorn et al. (1999), pointed out, can lead to either direct or indirect social support and buffering the effects of a person's life circumstances. They go on to say, as with friendships, being involved in leisure activities can also increase self-confidence and self-esteem for children. This they agree, is achieved by increasing their competency levels and mastery of certain skills. It has shown to reduce the potential for illness, by boosting the immune system and internal coping resources. The social aspects of leisure based activities have also been found to have a buffering effect on stress and illness development. Caltabiano (1995) highlighted that engaging in social contacts through leisure, has been found to have greater health benefits than other forms of social contact, such as through school. This they pointed out has been found to particularly enhance psychological wellbeing. Lazarus and Folkman (1985) pointed out, that social support can be seen as a structured approach, which focuses on the "relatively stable size or character of one's social network, or how emotionally supported one generally feels" (p.151). This approach, they identify, does not provide information about how a person manages or copes with stressful situations and whether they actually feel supported by their social network.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two forms of coping, emotion focused and problem focused. Emotion focused coping included reducing distress, by employing strategies such as avoidance, minimisation, and distancing and are potentially used to manage their grief. It can also include changing the meaning of the problem, in the form of re-appraisal, without finding a solution. It is often used to preserve hope and optimism during times of difficulties.

Problem focused coping centres around both the environment and the person's internal resources and was used by some participants as a way of coping with the loss of their parent. It seeks to ease environment factors contributing to the stress, while also making cognitive or



motivational changes within oneself, that helps in finding practical solutions to the problem (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Wiremu talked about how he had to learn how to fix his own bike, so he could join in with his friends. He explained:

*“I think it was good, I learnt how to fix up my bike and all that when I was like about six, I learnt by myself to take the wheels off and fix the brakes and all that, so we use to always fix up the bikes and we would have races. That was good ... Because we always had tools in the shed, so I would just go in the shed and see which bit fits on which and then I just took it apart and put it back together again”.*

Focusing on school was identified by Huia, as a solution to finding future employment and potentially escaping financial deprivation.

She explained:

*“School sucks (laughs), but I have to stay in school to get my education and to get my grades up... school is for a place to learn and get a education and so why drop out and theres heaps of planning to do at school than rather be on the streets or be somewhere else where you can't learn , so I would rather just stay at school than do those other people who do window washing and that so I will just stay at school ... Yeah, because when I have finished school I am going into the forces , the army, the navy, but to do that is to stay at school and don't have a criminal record ... Yeah I want to try my hardest and stay on the positive side than on the negative side ... Umm being on the negative side, that not cool, being on the easy side and the difficult of life that, that it would just change life and make it easy, if you make it”.*

Hana solution to managing the loss of her father was to keep things as normal as possible, by continuing to attend activities available to her.

She shared:

*“I um went on as many trips as I could like went on the ski trip and the zoo trip, I went on everything that they [school] offered, yeah I always took up every opportunity they offered*

*and stuff. I didn't let anything like bring, weigh me down because I didn't have um, because my dad wasn't there, it didn't stop me from doing anything and I always um just did everything I could I guess"*

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that the style of coping mechanisms a child adopts is important, as it impacts on their ability to adapt to stress and predicts future outcomes. Appraisal they go on to say, has a direct impact on coping, while coping has an impact on symptomology. Children who appraise their situation in a negative, threatening way, may experience higher emotional distress than those who assess it as a challenge and use problem focused strategies. They further mentioned, threat appraisals can lead to stress, which can trigger physiological responses and activation of the person's defence system, in the form of fight and flight, which can lead to unregulated emotional responses that elicit negative responses from others. Using problem focused strategies, enables an individual to find solutions that can help them to overcome or manage their adversity.

#### **Chapter four - Conclusion**

This study has added to the very limited research available around parental imprisonment from the child's perspective. Although only a small sample size of six participants contributed, data was collected directly from children who had a parent in prison. It reflects their lived experiences, affording them a voice. Only a very small amount of research has gathered information in this way, with the majority of research instead obtained from adults or data bases, where the information was initially collected for other purposes. This research has therefore provided a rare insight into the direct experiences of children enduring parental imprisonment. This is important, given they have been identified as "the invisible population" Hoffmann (2010, p.398) within the literature, while increasing numbers of children are affected each year.

Children of prisoners can face a multitude of difficulties and adversities unique to their circumstances. This study supported some previous research findings, while challenging others. The main themes identified in participants transcripts included loss, stigma, secrecy, support and coping. These have also been identified in other studies focused on parental imprisonment. Other issues identified in the literature, such as the development of

psychopathology, parental mental health, school difficulties, and associating with non-conforming peers, were not identified as a concern within this study.

It is consistently mentioned within the literature that children with a parent in prison are at a higher risk of developing psychological problems than their peers without a parent in prison (Will et al., 2014). This risk is increased when children witness the arrest of their parent (Kinner et al., 2007), or are not being raised by a biological parent (Dallaire, 2007). The findings of this research did not support this position. Within this study, two participants identified witnessing their parent's arrest, while three were being raised by an uncle. Despite this, no participants identified or presented with overt psychological problems. Although consisting of a small sample size, this possibly indicates that participants were able to find positive ways of coping, conducive to their various environments.

Participants in general, identified positive relationships with their caregivers, which may have assisted in fostering positive wellbeing. Although parental mental health and substance abuse commonly feature within the literature, there was no evidence of this within this study.

Mackintosh, Myers, and Kennon (2006), identified in their study that children reported less behavioural problems when they felt a sense of warmth and love from their caregivers and increased behavioural problems when they did not perceive this. All the children in this current study identified a stable long term living arrangement with their caregivers, post their father's imprisonment. Mackintosh's et al. study showed that those children who had been with the same caregiver since the beginning, reported more warmth and acceptance than those who had been placed with them some time into the parent's sentence. It is therefore possible that the support and care, along with the stability participants felt from their caregivers, buffered the impact of parental imprisonment and the development of psychological problems.

Grief and loss was seen as playing a significant role in participant's lives. This study supports previous research findings regarding parental imprisonment and children's grief processes. This included the lack of recognition by society around the significance of losing a parent to prison and the magnitude of other losses that accompany it. Although children identified significant others in their lives, grief was something that was done in isolation or maybe with immediate family. This is reflected in other studies such as Nesmith and Ruhland, (2008) and Beck & Jones (2007). Both these studies referred to the disenfranchised nature of

loss in relation to parental imprisonment. As with this study, children in both these previous studies identified they kept their father's status from others, out of fear they may receive a negative reaction should they disclose. This suggests, that disenfranchised grief is possibly an accurate description of what children experience after their parent goes to prison. It could therefore be insinuated that societal attitudes, either directly, or indirectly play a significant role in how children of prisoners manage and cope with their loss. The many emotional and behavioural problems, reported in various studies, may well be connected with this inability to publicly mourn their parent's sudden departure from their lives. Children may struggle to manage the many emotions that go with experiencing grief. Without coping mechanisms, other than secrecy and suppression, it may be difficult for them to continually contain these strong emotions in a constructive manner. This was reflected in Novero et al. (2011) study with adult prisoners who had experienced parental imprisonment as children. Higher levels of aggression were found in second generation prisoners compared to first generation prisoners. This can have implications on the many settings that they interact within, such as school, impacting on both their education and social interactions.

Stigma and secrecy are closely linked and consistently feature in the context of parental imprisonment and secrecy is often used as a coping mechanism. Children in this study referred to using secrecy, with only one participant having access to professional support in the form of the school counsellor and social worker. What was similar with previous research and this study, was the link between stigma and how children expressed or more accurately hid their grief process. The main reason for children not disclosing the status of their father, was the concern of how others may react and the potential of bullying. For many participants, even sharing with friends was difficult. Secrecy was used as a coping mechanism to avoid bullying, but also limited the opportunities for support. This indicates that children are acutely aware of their stigma status and the negative consequences of others finding out.

Some children found other constructive ways such as sport and social groups to navigate the multitude of adversities they faced, which enabled them to build good peer relations and do well academically. Sport has been identified as a way of coping with adversity and potentially provided participants with an opportunity to pursue and interact in normative peer activities. This can provide children an opportunity to feel accepted by their peers and foster the development of positive friendships. This may minimise the risk of them needing to

associate with at risk peer groups and in turn, could reduce the potential of them engaging in criminal behaviour and entering the justice system.

Participants identified various supportive adults in their life, which might have provided the confidence for them to engage in sporting groups. This supports the notion that children with a parent in prison, can, with the right support and encouragement, lead a productive life that helps them overcome some of the adversities they face. Support of adults and peers, was also identified by a number of participants within their school environment. This included addressing bullying, which has been identified as a common difficulty for children with a parent in prison. Although a couple of participants acknowledged occasionally getting into trouble with teachers, this was not identified as a major concern.

### **Limitations**

This study adds to the very limited research, however more research with greater numbers of children would be highly valuable. It would add breadth and depth to the knowledge in this area to explore the perspectives of a wide range of children's experiences of their parent in prison. Although participants in this study identified some of the struggles they were facing, all of them had found positive ways of coping. This study therefore, may not represent children struggling to find supportive adults in their lives or who don't have opportunities to engage in social activities. Those children may tell a different story to that reported in this study. All participants had fathers, rather than mothers, in prison. This is an important consideration, as the literature identifies different consequences for children when a mother, rather than a father, goes into prison. All but two of the participants were pre-adolescent, with the average age being between ten and eleven. The results are therefore limited in knowledge gained about the experiences of both older and younger children, who have a parent in prison. Although parental imprisonment occurs across cultures, for this study all participants identified as Māori . This limited the results in respect to capturing the experiences of children from other cultures, and whether they experience, manage and cope with the imprisonment of their parent differently. Geographically all children were from towns and cities within a specific area of North Island of New Zealand. It would be useful to expand the research to include children from other areas of New Zealand to see whether these children convey a similar or different story to that of the children in this study.

This study has afforded the voices of six children, who have a parent in prison, to be heard. It is evident that children of prisoners face a multitude of difficulties after the loss of their parent to prison. Supportive adults and the engagement in social activities appear to buffer the effects of parental imprisonment, but does not take away the grief these children experience. It is evident that the disenfranchised nature of parental imprisonment, has a significant impact on the children involved, particularly in how they cope with their loss. It is imperative that children of prisoners feel supported and receive the necessary assistance to help them manage not only the primary loss of their parent, but also the many other losses that accompany parental imprisonment.

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## Appendix

### Interview schedule

#### Topic headings and probe questions

The second meeting, the mihi whakataua,

The main topic heading for this phase will be **Where are you from.**

This objective shall be on building relationships and rapport with participant and their family/support people–

#### Probe or follow up questions could include:

1. I shall ask what they know about coming to meet with me.
2. Tell me about where you grew up?
3. Tell me about, or draw, who is in your family?
4. What culture do you identify with – what iwi do you connect with?
5. Tell me about the sort of activities/sports you like to do?
6. Are there social or sports groups you belong to?
7. What school do you go to?
8. Tell me about school
9. What do you and your friends like to do together?.
10. What is one thing that you really like?
11. I shall explain the study.

I shall introduce the study with the following statement:

Think of me as someone writing a story of what it is like for children who have a parent in prison. I am interested in hearing your story, so I can help myself and others understand what it is like, so we can better help children who have had this experience. I have some questions, but I would prefer you to shared what you think is important for me to know, since, your mum/dad was put in prison. If you want to, you can use the clay, paint, or sand tray as we talk. Allow the children to be the expert.

**Topic headings for audio recorded interview will include:**

1. Family
2. Change
3. Education
4. Sports and interests
5. Stigmatisation / isolation
6. Identity
7. Living arrangements
8. Support
9. Loss
10. Connection with others
11. Financial
12. Coping mechanisms
13. Resiliency
14. Social

**Potential probe questions that may be asked – questions where possible shall be weaved into conversation and shall be presented at an age appropriate level.**

**FAMILY/LIVING ARRANGMENTS**

1. Who lives with you, in your house?
2. Where do other family members live?

**CHANGE**

3. What are some of the things that have changed for you since your dad, mum or parental figure was put in prison?
4. What has remained the same?

**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL**

5. Tell me about the sort of activities/interests/sports you like to do?
6. Are there social or sports groups you belong to?
7. What culture do you identify with?

8. How do you connect with you cultural roots.
9. Have you been able to continue with these? (above)
10. Are there any activities you would like to get involved in but are unable to?
11. What might be some of the things that stop you from getting involved in these activities?
12. Is there someone you look up to or see as a role model? How are they connected/related to you?

### **SCHOOL**

13. How is school going?
14. How long have you been at your current school?
15. What do you like most about school?
16. What do you like least about school?
17. If you could change one thing at school what would it be?
18. Is there anyone at school you connect with?

### **PRISON KNOWLEDGE**

19. What did or do you know about prison?
20. How did you find out about dad/mum/parental figure going to prison?
21. What did you do when you found out?

### **MEMORIES**

- 22.
23. What do you remember about mum or dad?

### **STIGMITISATION AND SUPPORT**

- 24.
25. Have you been able to talk with others about your parent/parental figure going to prison?
26. Is there anyone you haven't told, who you wish you could tell?
27. How do others you mix with, react to knowing your dad/mum/parental figure is in prion?  
OR How do you think others would react if they knew your dad/mum/parental figure was in prison?

### **LOSS**

28. What are some of the things you miss since mum/dad went to prison?



29. Are there things you can no longer do or have, since your dad/mum/parental figure went to prison?
30. Is there anyone who has passed over/died who you see as important or special? What was special about them?
31. Is there anyone you no longer see since your dad/mum/parental figure went to prison?
32. Are there new people you now see, since your dad/mum/parental figure went to prison?.

### **CONTACT**

- 33.
34. Have you seen your mum, dad or parental figure since he/she went to prison?
35. What was it like visiting mum/dad/parental figure in prison?
36. What did you like most about visiting mum/dad
37. What did you like least?
38. Have you had contact with mum/dad/parental figure in other ways? - phone calls, writing

### **COPING AND RESILIANCY**

39. Are there others in your life who you feel have helped you cope with or manage the separation from your dad/mum/parental figure?
40. What do you think or worry about the most in regard to dad/mum/parental figure being in prison?

**Miracle question** – if you could change one thing what would that be?