

INCCIP Survey 1/2020

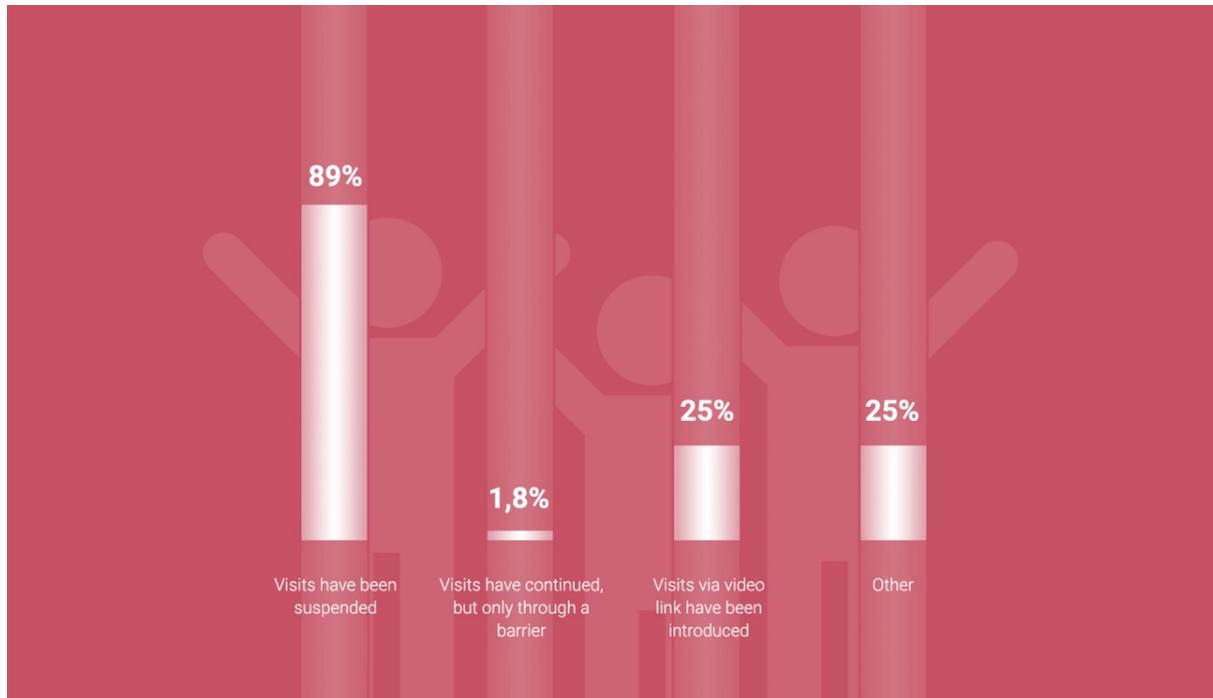
The impact of COVID-19 worldwide on children with an incarcerated parent



Denise Jennings, Families Outside (Scotland) on behalf of
the International Coalition for Children with Incarcerated
Parents (INCCIP). April 2020.

In April 2020, INCCIP circulated a survey to people on its mailing list to gather information about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on children with incarcerated parents around the globe. Responses were received from 57 people in 14 different countries across 6 continents. The questions and results are outlined here.

How have visits to prisons / jails changed since the start of the COVID-19 crisis (if at all)?



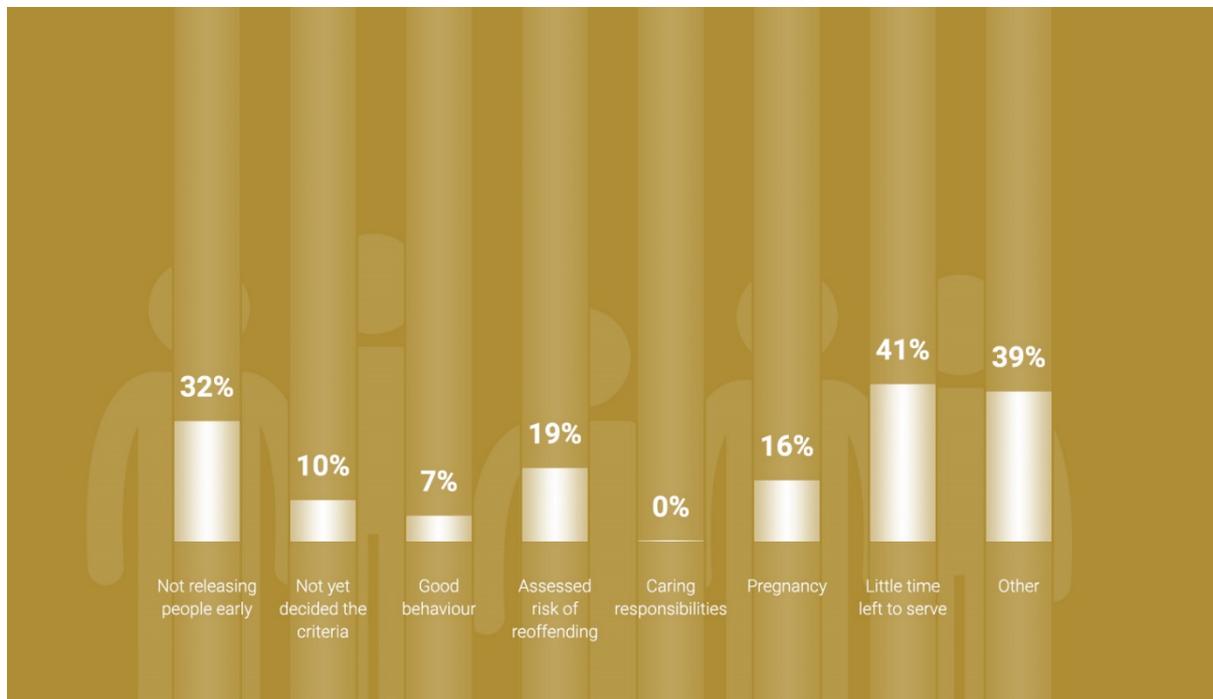
Produced based on info from the INCCIP survey.

With regard to physical visits, 89% of respondents said that visits have been suspended. The exceptions to this are Switzerland, where visits are continuing in certain areas through protective glass ('closed' visits), and South Korea, where visits have resumed (as of April 27th), adhering to certain restrictions. While this decision will have been taken to protect both the people who live and who work in the prisons, and their families, it is understandable but extremely challenging for the families who can no longer see each other.

Replacing the physical visits people are used to with reasonable substitutes will be what makes the difference for families who are now missing out on physical contact with their loved ones. According to the survey, only a quarter of responses suggest that virtual visits (via video link) have been put in place, a practice that seems to be most common in Australia. One respondent in Canada pointed out the challenges families face around the tight restrictions of utilising video visits. These include not having specific and up to date technology, and requiring the presence of parents in order for children to participate, despite relationship breakdowns, therefore many families do not meet the requirements.

Other things that were mentioned as alternatives to visits include an Email-a-Prisoner scheme; providing phone credit that would usually need to be paid for; increasing phone time allowed; and in one instance, providing phones for legal and compassionate calls. One individual highlighted the difficulty of finding accurate information and stated that they were receiving conflicting stories from families and the institutions.

If prisons and jails releasing people early, what are the criteria for this?



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A number of conversations were taking place around early release to reduce the risk and allow for social distancing within prisons and jails. The most common criterion under consideration (41%) is release of people with only a short amount of time left on their sentences. Almost a third of responses tell us that people are not being considered for early release, but where this is being considered, responses were quite varied. They included those at higher risk of serious symptoms, for example, older adults and those with pre-existing conditions; perceived level of risk of reoffending; and if a woman is pregnant.

More than half of responses where early release is being considered included two or more criteria, demonstrating that it is a complex matter which, as a few people suggested, is being influenced by “public outcry”, social media posts, and a general lack of understanding by the public around this subject.

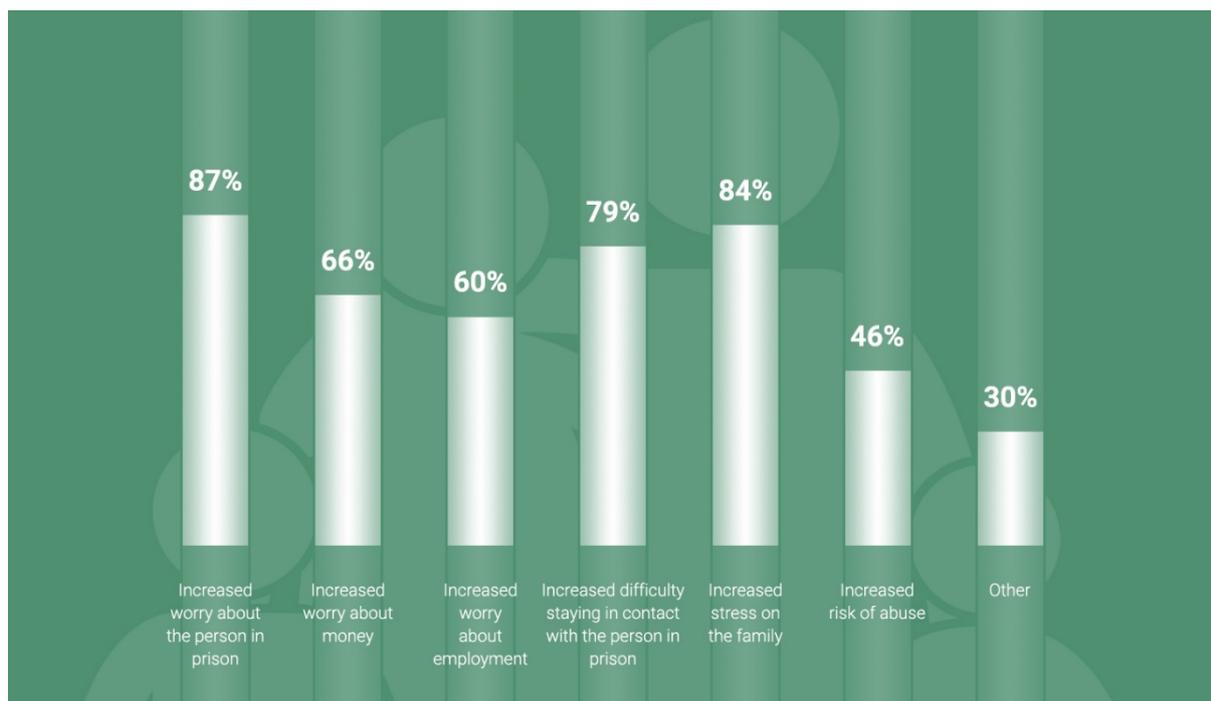
Although all those surveyed who reside in Australia answered that early release is not being considered there, one individual suggested that courts are being more lenient around bail and parole, which will in turn be having a positive impact on population figures. This is in contrast to Uganda, where the government has decided to release 883 people but will have little impact given the extent of the overcrowding in the prisons there.

A response from New York tells us that a large number of people have been released from prison under the criteria of those over 70 years of age, those with pre-existing conditions, people who have been convicted of non-violent crimes, and those with less than a year left to serve.

In Canada, those who have already been granted temporary home leave/parole with strong community supports are being considered.

Other responses note that people have been released, possibly as their sentence has ended, without proper planning put in place for them, and that organisations or families are not being provided with relevant information around it.

What specific challenges are children and families facing in your state / country as a result of COVID-19?



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Another multi-faceted issue concerned the specific challenges children and families are facing as a result of COVID-19. Most of those surveyed (61%) selected two or more areas where families are being affected.

The two main areas of impact, selected by over 80% of participants each, were increased worry about the person in prison and increased stress on the family. One respondent specifically mentioned children being worried that if the virus entered the prisons, their parent would die. The reciprocal nature of this was also highlighted - that people in prison will also be worrying about their families at home during this time.

Along with the emotional challenges, practical concerns were recognised too, with financial and employment concerns selected in almost two-thirds of the completed surveys.

More than 75% identified that a particular challenge facing families in their countries was an increased difficulty staying in contact with the person in prison, highlighting this as a problem worldwide for families affected by imprisonment. Almost half of the responses noted the increased risk of domestic abuse as a result of the COVID-19 virus.

On top of all the extra worries people are having to cope with, they have lost supports that were in place previously, for example counselling services, more casual social interactions, and amenities such as free school lunches. Although only one individual highlighted this specifically, it is what families all over the world are facing where a lockdown and restrictions are in place.

Another challenge people recognised was the lack of technology in some households, or the confidence and resources to use it. While home schooling itself can pose many challenges, the lack of technology means that children may fall behind with their schoolwork, and the family does not have this as an option to connect with friends or family.

Conflicting information about how to cope with a crisis –or two, in the case of Croatia, having experienced an earthquake as well– posed additional problems.

On a positive note, one person mentioned that video visits in Australia seem to be improving contact for families, as they were not having to make the journey to the prison.

What support is available for children and families in your area?

Sadly, many people who completed the survey felt that not a lot of support was available for children and families, particularly since most organisations are under instruction to cease all face-to-face services that are not deemed essential.

What has been mentioned is the emphasis on digital support, be that for virtual visits with people in prison, video support for individuals and groups, or online learning for children to continue with their education. As acknowledged previously, this comes with the challenge of reaching families that do not have access to technology.

A lot of the support mentioned seemed to be provided by the charitable / not-for-profit sector. However, some responses mentioned government initiatives that have been implemented to ease the pressure on families and their children, such as by covering wages, welfare increases, or delivering food provisions. Urgent, 24-hour childcare support is available in South Korea where necessary, while energy companies in Scotland are supporting vulnerable families by providing credit for pay-as-you-go gas and electricity metres if people are self-isolating and cannot leave the house.

Very little support specific to families affected by imprisonment seems to exist, apart from the mention of video visits and free phone calls. However, with people in custody now kept in their cells for most of the day, they are not always able to utilise the calls. A small number of respondents mentioned the prison service implementing a national helpline and providing updates through their website or social media.

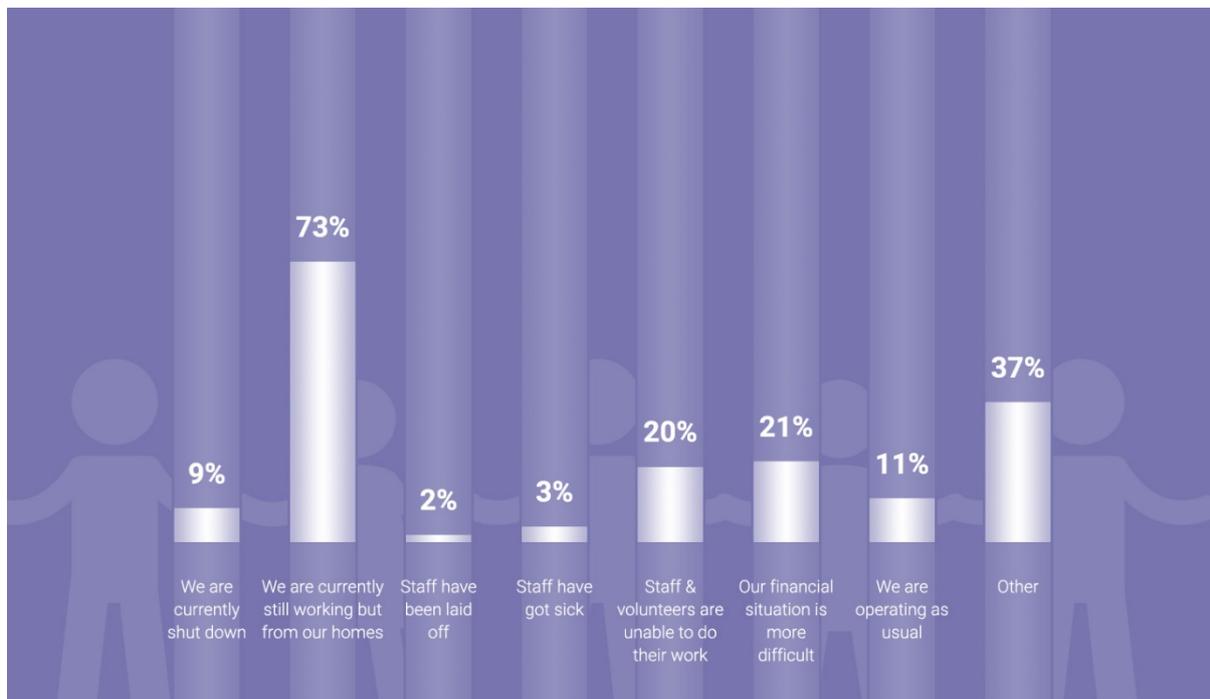
With a focus on children and keeping busy, one organisation has been sending out books and games and even created an activity book for children with a parent in prison. In Sweden, activities are still available in the community for children and families.

Despite Croatia having the extra challenge of a second crisis - an earthquake – some good support seems to be in place. There are helplines providing psychological support, and authorities are providing information and answers to their citizens via websites. The Ombudsman for children has requested

child-friendly information around COVID-19 from the Department of Justice along with procedural information around many relevant circumstances children and families may find themselves in.

One organisation in Uganda is continuing to provide support for some children, despite the schools being closed, as they either have no home, or would be at risk of abuse were they to return there. The organisation is providing them with food and essentials while continuing with their education. The children who have returned home are being provided with financial support for food and educational materials, as families cannot afford these.

How is your own, or your organisation's ability to respond to the needs of the families and children of prisoners at this time?



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The largest proportion of respondents is still operating a service, with almost three-quarters of those surveyed now working from their homes. Only 10% of organisations are continuing to operate as usual, and fewer than 10% stated that they have shut down. Only one organisation said that staff had been laid off (although in the UK, one organisation has furloughed¹ the majority of their staff), and a very small proportion (<4%) of places had staff off sick. Around a fifth of organisations acknowledged that staff and volunteers have been unable to do their work, and a similar number noted that their financial situation is more difficult.

¹ 'Furlough' is a short-term Government-funded scheme to cover 80% of salaries for posts suspended due to COVID-19.

On the other hand, some organisations have expanded their services due to increased demand or are supporting families with technical issues and assisting them to access video visits. This demonstrates the plasticity of organisations being able to meet the needs of families during a crisis by developing new ways of working and adapting services.

One individual raised a perturbing point, namely the potential challenge their organisation may face with regard to future funding. This is because a large amount of their funding was provided by the state and, due to the unexpected increase in demand they are facing now, the Government will likely have to adjust future spending, making cuts to certain organisations.

What new innovations have been put in place to support children with incarcerated parents as a result of the pandemic (if any)?

For innovative support, again there was a large focus on digital support groups and communities and delivering activities and reading stories virtually, although one respondent acknowledged the challenges that online security brought with this. Some prisons have implemented video visits when they were not available previously. Another organisation has been able to provide Google notebooks for school children to complete homework. They are also attempting to fund broadband packages for disadvantaged families so they can stay connected.

Some non-digital innovations included supporting children to write songs and plays about having a parent in prison, encouraging them to document their experiences, and teaching them about other countries and how they are responding to the current situation.

Practicalities that have been put in place in Scotland include allowing families to transfer money electronically into prisoner accounts since they cannot do so in person, and the Prison Service is providing the people in prison with extra phone credit. They are looking to introduce secure mobiles and tablets for the people in prison to contact their families with greater ease, but this has not yet been implemented.

Unfortunately a large proportion responded that there were none, or nothing that they were aware of, being put in place in their areas.

Any good practice worth sharing?

All organisations are showing examples of good practice by their ability to adapt to the unusual circumstances we find ourselves in. Common examples provided include staying in regular contact (with organisations and families); keeping families updated to any changes and raising awareness around facts whilst disproving misinformation, thus alleviating stress. Many organisations are

organising activities / providing support online (whilst establishing professional boundaries), whereas some are sending out activity packs to families.

Practice specific to prisons include liaising between prisons and families around the implementation and functionality of the video visits and preparing families for possible scenarios in relation to their loved one who is in prison being released. One person spoke of prison staff being more empathetic with prisoners and sensitive to the impact this is having on families.

In New Zealand, the Government is providing technology to all school children who do not have access to it and is looking to providing an internet connection for them.

Any practice that needs to improve? What can we learn from this?

The general consensus around whether we can learn from this was, yes, we absolutely can. Some people reserved judgement around what that may be just yet, whereas others felt that improved communication between family members and those in prison, particularly via video, had been extremely important during this time. Respondents also noted that some of the measures implemented are things that had been requested for quite some time, with some discontent that it has taken a crisis for policy and practice to change.

Other areas identified as having potential for improvement are inter-organisational communication; the level of preparedness with regard to health and procedures within prisons; and having low-cost or free phone calls for people in prison at all times to aid greater communication with their families.

Finally, technology is an essential resource. We have now witnessed the impact the lack of technology has on the disadvantaged families during this time. There should be greater awareness around this, and other impacts this crisis has had on those families.

