

# To what extent do children of parents who have been in prison feel stigma?

## A systematic review

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### Introduction:

**Background:** Parental imprisonment is among the childhood experiences associated with subsequent illness or antisocial behaviours in adolescence or adulthood. Explanations for such associations are almost certainly multifactorial. One which has received little attention is the extent to which the child feels or is stigmatised by the parent’s situation and how this relates to later problems.

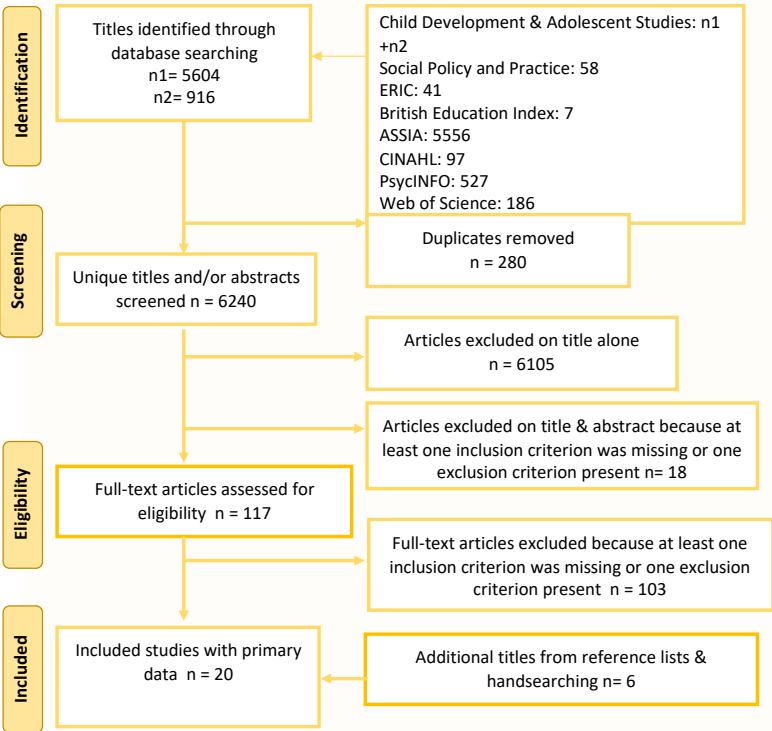
**What is stigma?** Stigma in the context of a parent’s imprisonment would be a term used to refer to a state of being scarred and/or having a sense of being scarred emotionally by the experience of losing the parent to imprisonment coupled with a sense of actual or presumed negative responses from others.

**Why is this important?** Stigma is associated with a sense of shame and, thus, of avoidance and distancing, possibly posing a barrier to help-seeking. In this way, stigma is linked to reduced emotional processing and reduced ability to heal, thus leaving stigmatised children vulnerable to psychopathology. If stigma is a barrier against help-seeking among adults, is it also so among children? Could similar helping strategies be effective?



### Methods

The protocol was registered with PROSPERO (CRD42021261627) and the review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA statement. Search terms included those for imprisonment and stigma. Reliability of paper selection was >95% on blind ratings. Two of us completed blinded data extraction.



**Inclusion Criteria:**

- personal accounts of being stigmatized or experiencing stigma while under age 18, whether reported contemporaneously or in later recall; OR -
- direct observations or ratings of the child’s experience of stigma observers by researchers or people who knew them during childhood at the likely time of the experience of stigma; AND
- the experience must relate to one or both of the child’s parents/primary care givers having at least one period of imprisonment

**Exclusion Criteria:**

- anticipation of stigma (explicit observation)
- stigma experienced exclusively in adult life
- stigma reported as related to experiences exclusively other than imprisonment

### Results:

- 18 of the 20 papers that could be included for data extraction and analysis covered interviews with the children, three the imprisoned parent, 12 the other parent/carers, with some overlap.
- None of the studies quantified data relating to stigma, so meta-analysis was not possible.
- In narrative synthesis, we found themes of secrecy, shame, isolation and resilience.
- It was striking that, although all these papers considered stigma, only two set out to measure it.
- No study trialled or recommended interventions for such children. Routine offer of safe spaces to talk about the experience of an imprisoned parent could be trialled, given that children said being able to speak about the situation in private, with people who they could trust, was helpful.

### Conclusions

**Conclusions:** Research into the possible stigmatising impact of a parent’s imprisonment on their children is a neglected area, with the child’s voice apparent in only 18 papers across the world literature. Papers found were small-scale and restricted to qualitative methodology, with convenience sampling. As in other fields and with adults, children wanted to maintain secrecy about their ‘stigma’, but where openness had been a safe option, the fact that children seemed to welcome that suggests that future research should look at understanding how to optimise constructive openness. Furthermore, it was suggested by several studies that school involvement may hold potential for future interventions.