



Operation Paramount

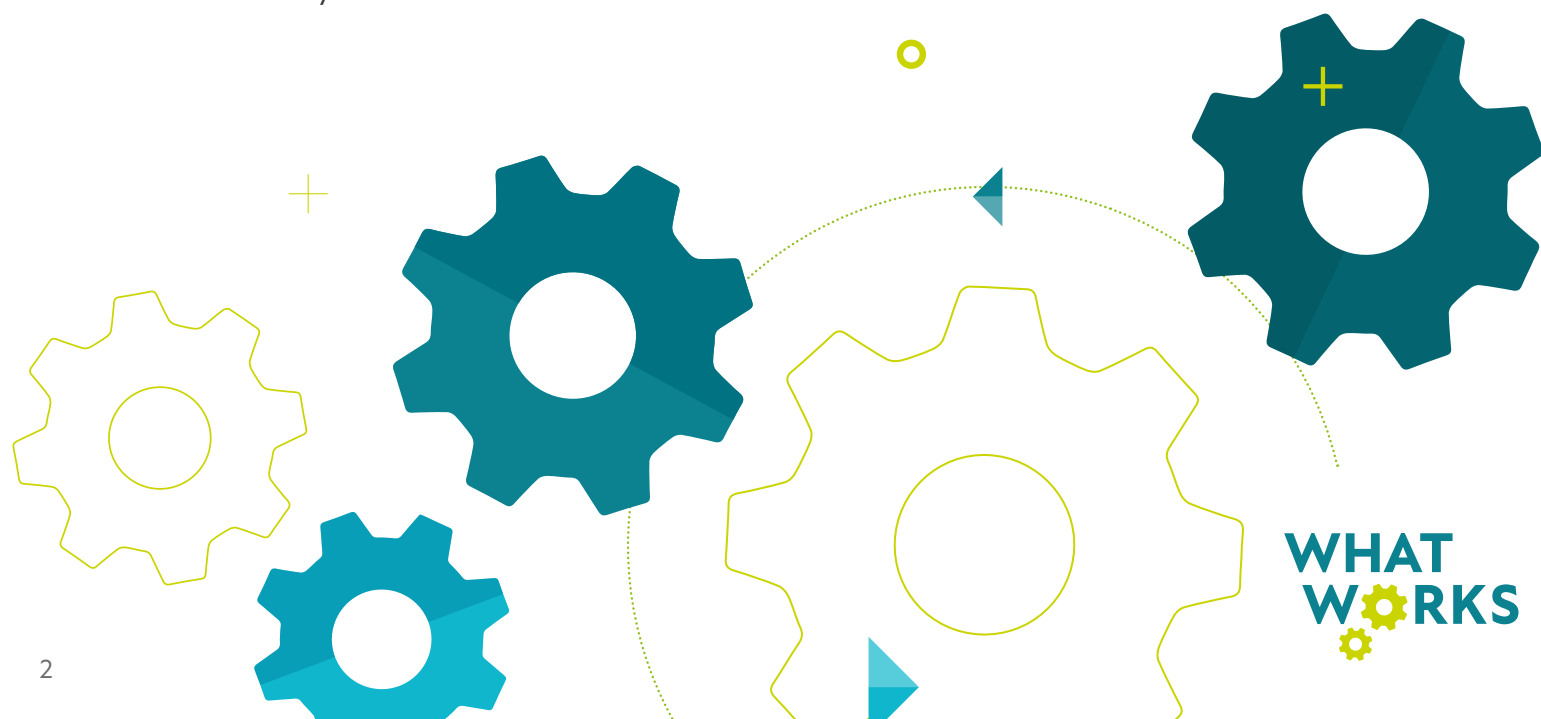
Statistical analysis of children in Oxfordshire affected by parental imprisonment from 2021-2024.



What is the What Works Series?

Welcome to Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership's "What Works" series; a collection of publications which present the results from our intervention evaluations and relevant pieces of research.

- A key role of the Violence Prevention Partnership programme is to invest our Home Office grant into the testing of new intervention approaches; funding not only their delivery in our local areas but to run robust evaluations of those interventions, adding to the evidence base around what works in preventing violence.
- We aim to gather evidence on the effectiveness and impact of interventions in preventing or reducing violence. That evidence is then played back to our local partnership systems to provide learning, and to inform the system change that is needed if we are to shift our focus towards higher impact intervention and diversion approaches.
- Our evaluations and research also contribute to a growing national evidence base, through formal academic publication and sharing with bodies such as the Youth Endowment Fund and the wider network of Violence Reduction Units (VRUs).
- Each of our interventions has been through a rigorous research and design phase, using our Research Project Lifecycle which puts in place a structure around which the highest quality of research projects can be designed and run. The Lifecycle ensures that interventions are based on quality ideas, knowledge of the existing evidence, analysis of data relating to cohort design and expected caseload, and well-documented design decisions. This ensures that the way that we implement and deliver the intervention is consistent, and enables us to deliver the right test of an intervention that is based on evidence, and that can actually be implemented in the real world. This also allows us to run multiple concurrent Randomised Control Trials (RCT), the gold standard approach to determining what works.
- Through the Thames Valley "What Works" series of publications, we provide all our partners with an accessible, yet complete, summary of key findings from our research. We aim to identify next steps and to assist in identifying how the learning could be applied to wider local services, to support that longer term, sustainable approach to preventing and reducing violence in our communities.
- For clarity, this is our local approach and is separate to other "what works" approaches being undertaken by other bodies, such as the Youth Endowment Fund. Although we will be sharing our evaluations accordingly to contribute to the wider evidence base.



Introduction

Thames Valley Police and Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership jointly launched Operation Paramount in the winter of 2021. Operation Paramount is the first statutory data-led recognition system for children affected by parental imprisonment. It accesses reception data from prisons across England and Wales and analyses it against other statutory systems within a secure data environment to discover parental links to children within the Thames Valley. These children are then offered support via their remaining parent/carer, from the charity Children Heard and Seen.



Parental imprisonment is a recognised Adverse Childhood Experience, but its impact on children is widely unknown, largely due to previous inability to identify those affected

In December 2024, Thames Valley Police partnered with Oxfordshire County Council to conduct a longitudinal study of the impact of parental imprisonment on those children in Oxfordshire who had been recognised in Operation Paramount data between November 2021 and November 2024. This study includes shared knowledge from police, social care and education data systems and was accessed and shared lawfully via a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).



**225 children were included in the analysis;
106 girls and 119 boys**

This analysis has not been conducted with any intention to suggest future outcomes for children. It is intended purely to shine a light on some of the challenges children face prior to and after the imprisonment of a parent, with the aim of assisting ongoing efforts to support all children with a parent in prison



Key findings Education

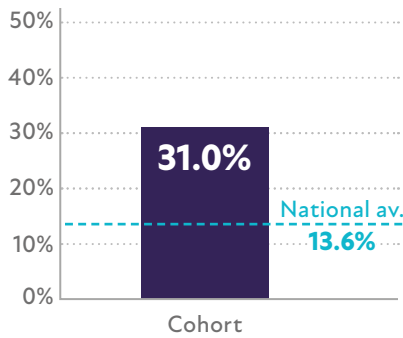
Free school meals



66% of the children were in receipt of free school meals at time of parental incarceration.

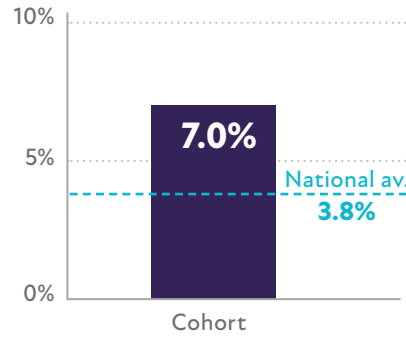
This rises to 86.3% within three academic terms of the parental incarceration

SEN Support



31% of the children were receiving SEN Support (for special educational needs), compared with 13.6% national rate

EHCP



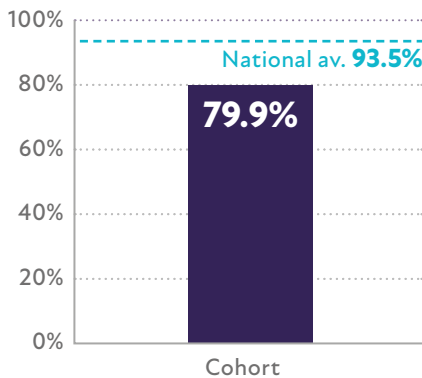
7% had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), compared with 3.8% national rate

School suspension

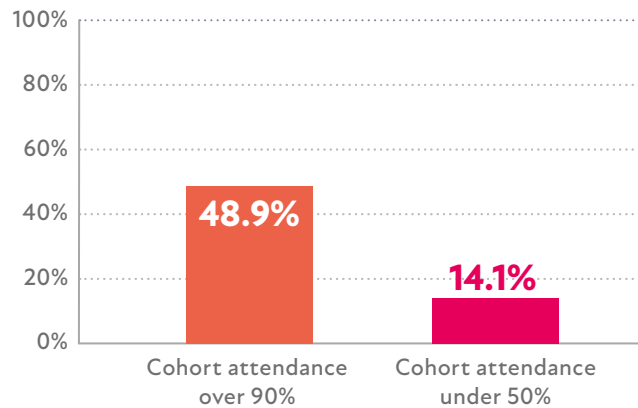


Rate of children being suspended from school was 4.3%, this is the same as the average rate of suspension across the UK

School attendance



Average attendance in the academic term of parental incarceration was 79.9%, much lower than the national average of 93.5%

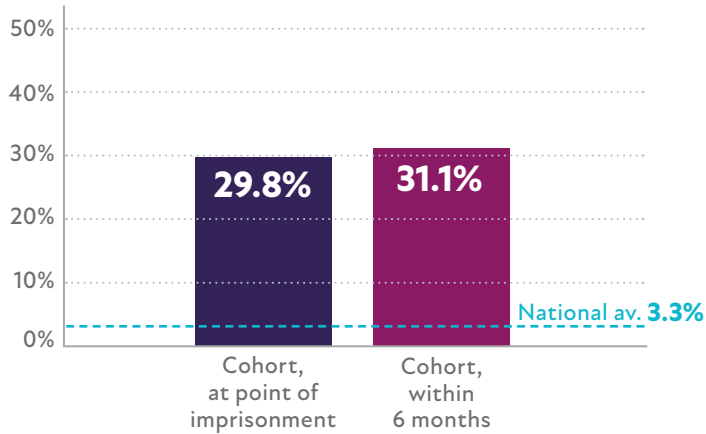


Only 48.9% of children whose parent went to prison had attendance of over 90% in the academic term of their parent's imprisonment, with 14.1% having attendance under 50% in the same academic term



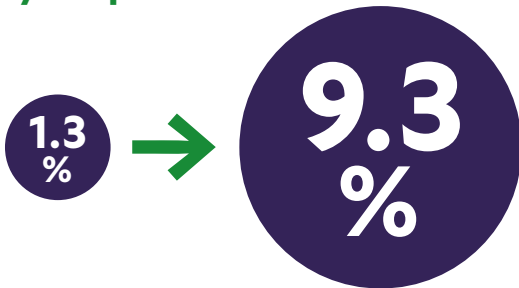
Key findings Social Care

Open to statutory support



29.8% of the cohort are already open to statutory support at the point of imprisonment, rising slightly to 31.1% within 6 months, against a national average of 3.3%

Early Help



Whilst only 1.3% of the cohort are open to Early Help at the point of imprisonment, this rises to 9.3% within 6 months

Identified by social care



75% were identified actively by social care within the data period (1 month before incarceration to 6 months after)



25% of children whose parents were incarcerated do not have an active record with children's social care in the 8 month data period surrounding their parent's incarceration

Methodology

Operation Paramount was started in Thames Valley in winter of 2021, as the first statutory data-led recognition system for children affected by parental imprisonment. Thames Valley is therefore the only area of the country that has data relating to children who were identified in this manner, to be able to identify what was known about them and what provision was in place.

It was determined that there was no other area that had a cohort of children who had been identified at the time of their parent's incarceration, and that we did not know a lot about this group of children and their interactions with education and social care. Therefore a data analysis project was undertaken to match this cohort of children with social care and education data, and to identify where these children were in receipt of social care services, and what was happening with them in the education system.

This study includes shared knowledge from police, social care and education data systems and was accessed and shared lawfully via a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). All children who had been recognised in Operation Paramount data between November 2021 and November 2024 were matched with their social care and education records where those records were available. 225 children were included in the analysis; 106 girls and 119 boys.

Once data were retrieved from social care and education records, the dataset incorporated information relating to the following:

Education data were retrieved at termly intervals for as many academic terms as were available with the child being recorded as being at school, from 12 terms before the referral to eight terms after, though dependent on the time of the referral and the age of the child, these were more limited periods. These data were then reduced to only include terms where the child was between five and 18 years old on the day before the start of the next school year, and where COVID-19 lockdowns were not limiting attendance at schools.

Education data included information relating to receipt of free school meals, special educational needs (SEN) support and whether the child was on an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), suspensions and exclusions, and attendance rates.

Social care data were retrieved at five different data points; the month before the referral, the month of the referral, the month after the referral, within 3 months after the referral, and within 6 months after the referral.

Social care data included information relating to whether there had been referrals made to the multiagency safeguarding hub (MASH), whether there was statutory provision of different levels in place (Child in Need / Child Protection / Child Who We Care For), and whether non-statutory Early Help provision was in place.

These data were then examined in a descriptive analysis to identify what was known about children whose parents went to prison.

Findings – Education

Free School Meals

A child being eligible for and/or in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) has long been used as an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage. The national rate of free school meals eligibility is 24.6%.

66% of the cohort were already eligible for FSM at the point of their parent’s imprisonment. This rose to 86% of the cohort being eligible within three school terms (one year) of the imprisonment of their parent.

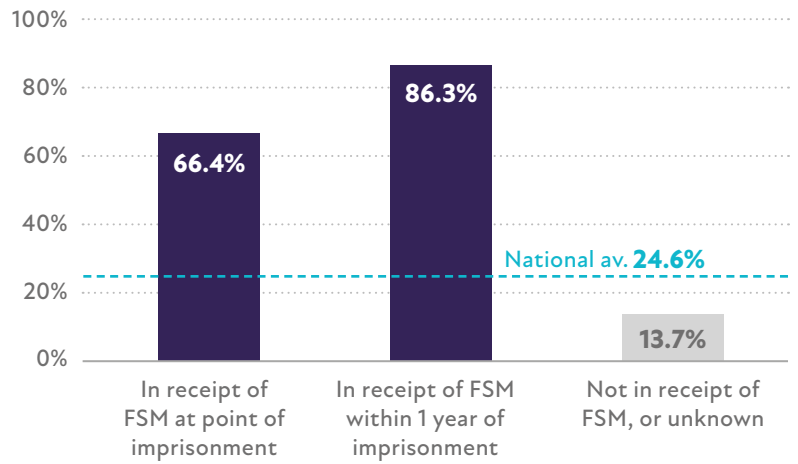


Figure 1. Percentage of children whose parent has been imprisoned who receive free school meals (FSM)

Special Educational Needs

Special Educational Needs (SEN) affect a child’s ability to learn and can cause them to make less than expected progress in school. If a child has SEN they are entitled to additional support. Some students are entitled to a higher level of support which is formalised by an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)

At the point their parent was imprisoned; 31% of the cohort were receiving SEN Support, and 7% had an EHCP. This is against national rates of 13.6% and 3.8% respectively.

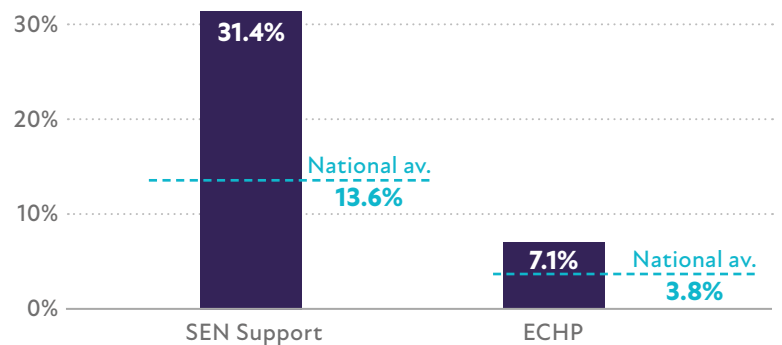


Figure 2. Percentage of children whose parent has been imprisoned who received SEN Support, or who had an EHCP in the academic term their parent was imprisoned

Suspension (and exclusion) from school

Schools can use suspension from school as a behaviour management tool where the behaviour is serious enough to warrant their temporary removal from education. There was only one exclusion from school in the dataset, and so this was incorporated into the same data and examined as suspension and exclusion together.

During the academic term that coincided with the incarceration of a parent, the rate of children being suspended from school was 4.3%, this is the same as the average rate of suspension across the UK.

Whilst there is a slight increase seen in the academic term following incarceration, the numbers of children in this cohort who were suspended are incredibly small, and it is not believed that the behaviour of this cohort is any different from an average cohort of school children, when looking at behaviour that is serious enough to be suspended.

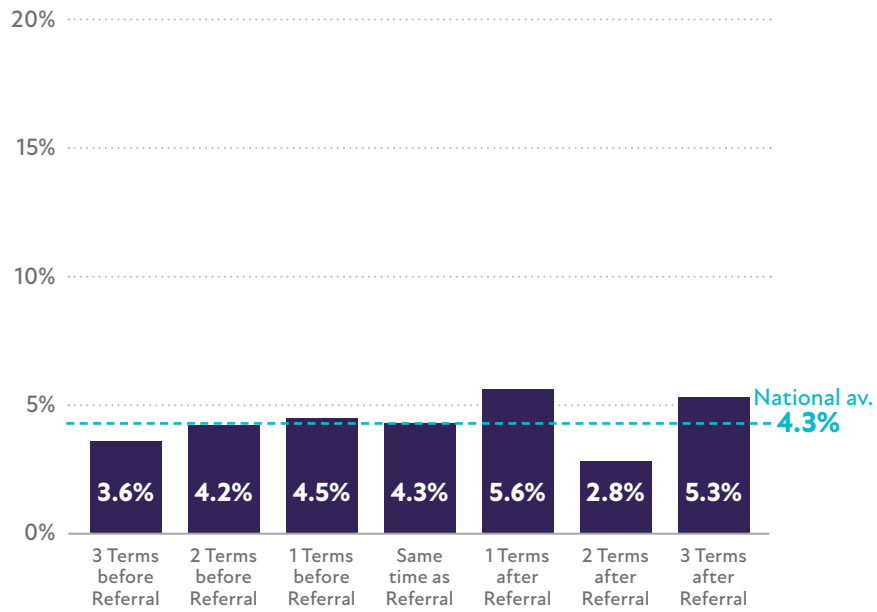


Figure 3. Percentage of children whose parent has been imprisoned who were suspended from school in academic terms before and after the imprisonment of their parent

Attendance Rate

Attendance at school is recorded, and low attendance can pose risks of decreased educational outcomes, or exploitation of the child when not in school.

Levels of attendance at school are lower in this cohort than the national average. This is a consistent finding across academic terms leading up to, and following their parent’s incarceration.

The rate of attendance was also viewed against a cut-off of 90% which is used to identify persistence absence. This equates to missing one day of school every two weeks.

“A pupil enrolment is identified as persistently absent if 10% or more of possible sessions are missed, and severely absent if 50% or more of possible sessions are missed.

10% of sessions translates to around 7 days of absence across the term.”

Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England, viewed on 21st January 2025 at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>

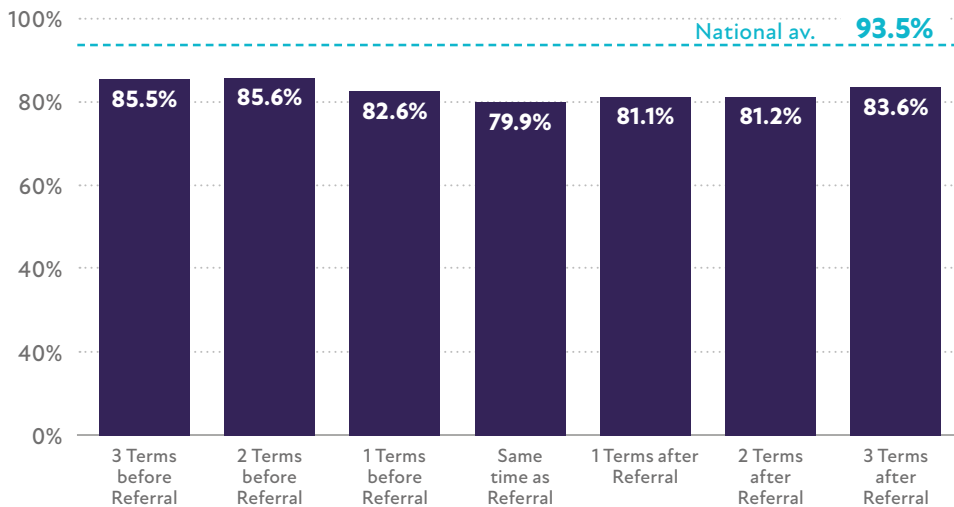


Figure 4. Attendance rates for children whose parents went to prison, by academic term relative to the imprisonment

Only 49% of the children in this cohort had a school attendance rate of over 90% in the academic term that their parent was incarcerated, and this is consistent across terms leading up to, or following the incarceration. This can be compared to the national average of 80.8% in Autumn and Spring 2023/24.

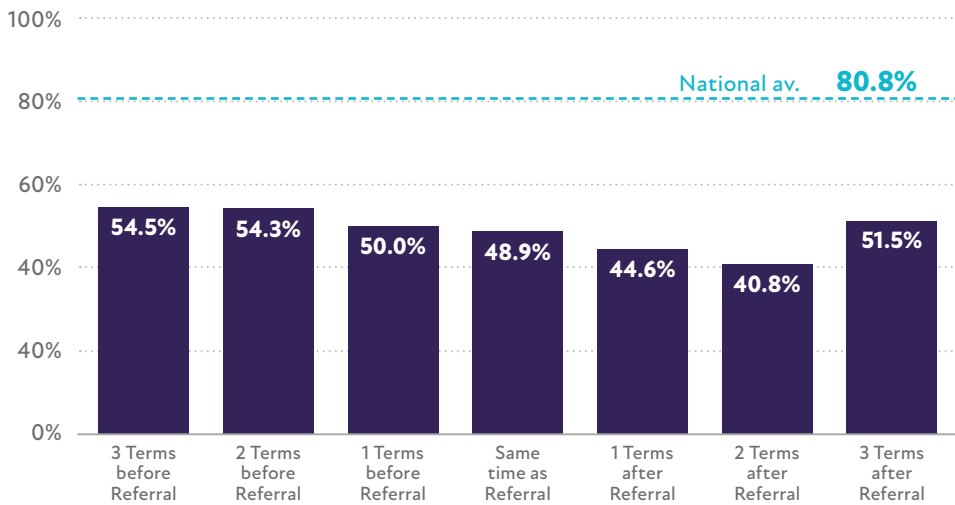


Figure 5. Percentage of children whose parents went to prison who had attendance of 90% or higher

Only 85.9% of the children in this cohort had a school attendance rate of over 50% in the academic term that their parent was incarcerated, and whilst this cohort of children do seem to have a higher rate of severe absence than the national average, the number of children identified as being significantly absent appears to increase in the academic term of the parental imprisonment. This can be compared to the national average of 97.9% in Autumn and Spring 2023/24.

The rate of attendance at school is lower for this cohort than the national average, and the percentage of children in this cohort with attendance rates that would not be identified as being persistent or severe does appear to drop in the academic term before their parent is imprisoned, and again in the academic term of the imprisonment.

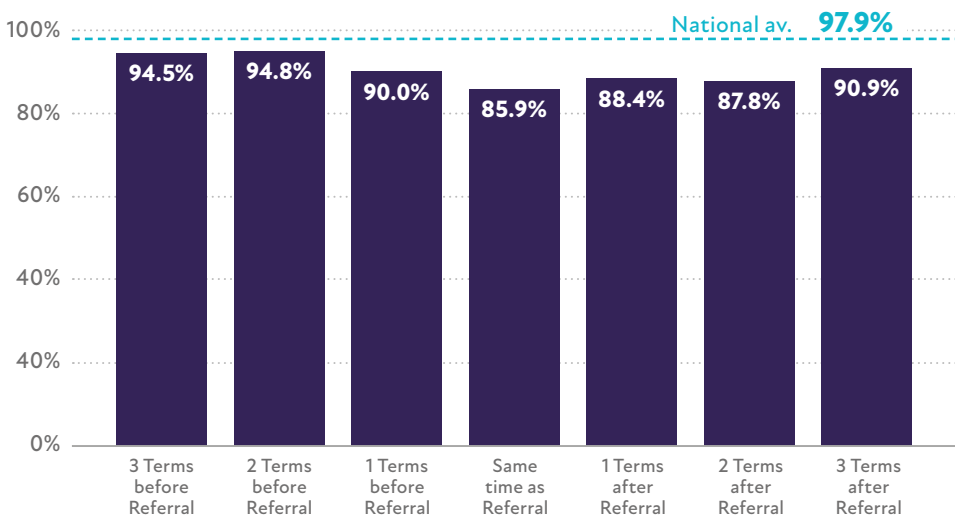


Figure 6. Percentage of children whose parents went to prison who had attendance of 50% or higher

Findings – Social Care

Early Help and Statutory Provision

Early Help is a way of working with families where there is an emerging need and is undertaken within universal services such as schools, health and access to services such as Child/Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Should the needs increase for a child, the Early Help service may become involved via MASH or a Locality Community Support Service (LCSS) whose role it is to support the Early Help process and offer guidance and advice to the professionals working with the family.

More complex risks that persist despite Early Help Plans can be escalated and become statutory interventions such as a Child in Need Plan (CiN – s.17 Children Act 1989) which supports a child who is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development. This in turn can progress to a Child Protection Plan (CP) for children suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (s.47 Children Act 1989). This statutory provision also includes Children We Care For (CWCF). In other areas of the country, this is often known as Looked After Children (LAC).

29.8% of the cohort are already open to statutory support at CiN or above at the point of imprisonment, rising slightly to 31.1% within 6 months, against a national average of 3.3%.

Whilst only 1.3% of the cohort are open to Early Help at the point of imprisonment this rises to 9.3% within 6 months.

The overall rate of children in this cohort under local authority statutory care does not appear to rise dramatically.

There does appear to be a slight increase in the level of social services care that is required, though the numbers of children in each of these care groups are small, so the differences equate to one or two children moving between levels of required statutory care.

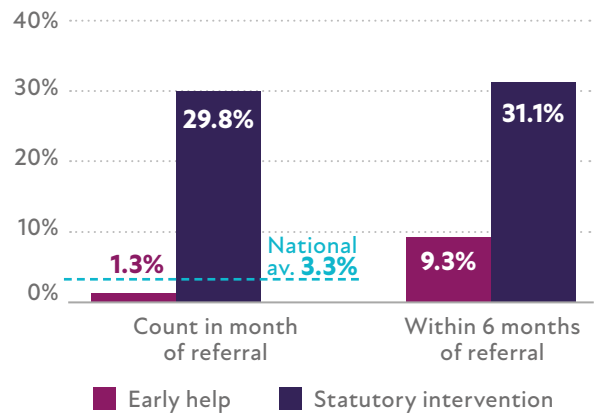


Figure 7. Percentage of children whose parents went to prison who were under early help or statutory child social care provision

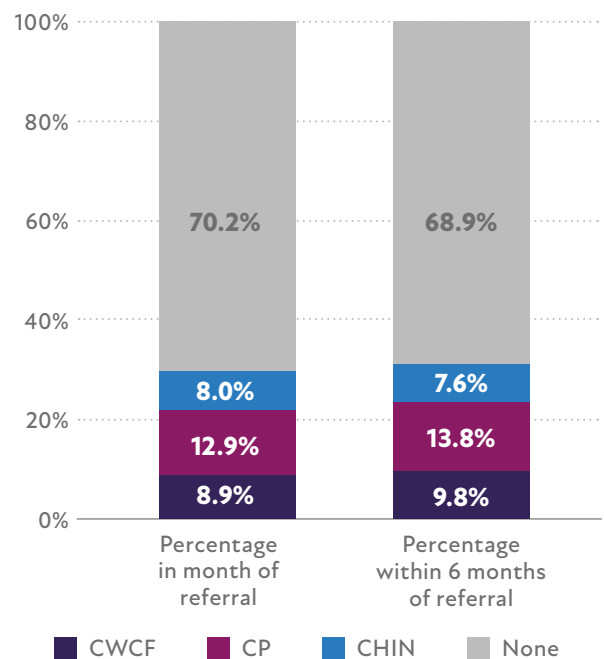


Figure 8. Percentage of children whose parents went to prison who were under early help or statutory child social care provision

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) referrals

Oxfordshire’s Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) enables the sharing of information between services so risks to children can be identified at an early stage.

It is a link between schools, GPs, the police, ambulance service and social care. MASH being aware of or receiving a referral for a child does not necessarily infer harm but it demonstrates that a professional has perceived enough risk to flag the child for assessment.

14% of our cohort were referred to MASH in the month before the parent’s imprisonment which rose to 40% being referred within 6 months, whilst 50% had been referred at any time during the study period.

This does also indicate that around 50% do not appear to come to social care’s attention at present when their parent has been incarcerated.

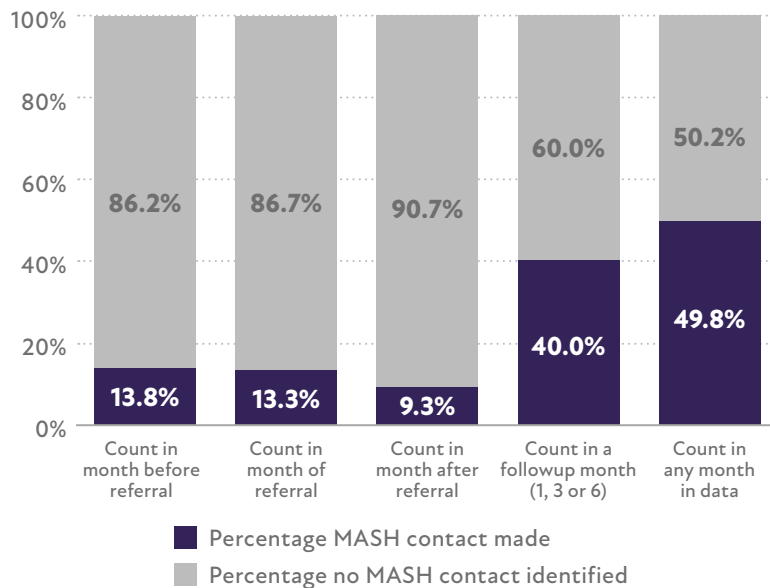


Figure 9. Percentage of children from this cohort who were referred to MASH at different time points surrounding the incarceration of their parent

All Social Care data combined

The level of interaction with, and knowledge of, a child’s circumstances within children’s social care can be estimated by examining and combining the statutory provision, early help and MASH update records.

In the month before the parental incarceration or the month their parent was incarcerated, 54% of children were identified actively by social care.

75% were identified actively by social care within the data period (one month before incarceration to six months after).

There are 25% of children whose parents were incarcerated who do not have an active record with children’s social care in the eight month data period surrounding their parent’s incarceration.

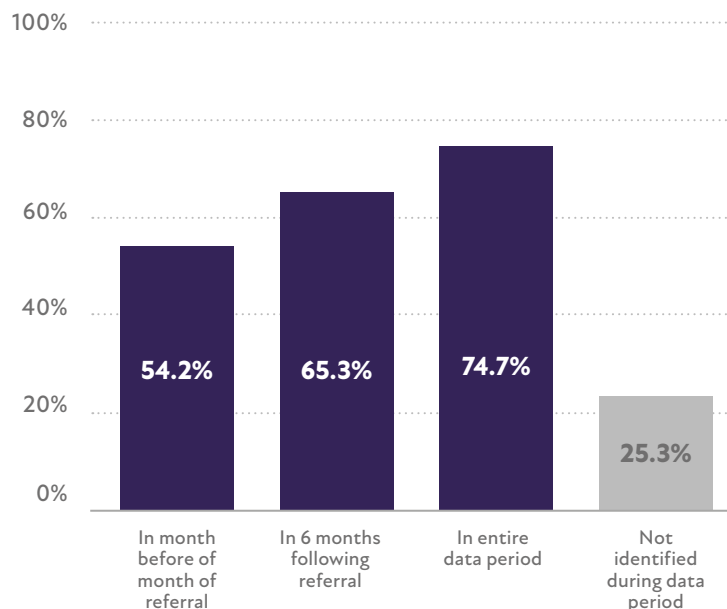


Figure 10. Percentage of children who have had an active social care record for any of early help, statutory provision, or a MASH referral during the data period of one month before the incarceration of a parent to six months after

What does this mean?

▶ **This analysis has not been conducted with any intention to suggest future outcomes for children. It is intended purely to shine a light on some of the challenges children face prior to and after the imprisonment of a parent, with the aim of assisting ongoing efforts to support all children with a parent in prison**

The eligibility for free school meals in the cohort of children who have had a parent go to prison is disproportionately high even before the incarceration, and rises to 86% within three academic terms (one year). This indicates a relationship between parental incarceration and significant financial hardship, in families where they were usually not affluent to begin with. This is likely to also be associated with a reduction in opportunities for the child and the rest of the family.

The cohort are more than twice as likely to receive special educational needs support, or to have an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHCP). When combined with a reduction in opportunities due to low, and further reduced, family income, this identifies that a cohort of children who are likely to have increased needs are likely suffering further hardships.

However, the rate of suspension from school in this cohort was the same as the national average. These children do not appear to have more behavioural problems, or to cause issues at school that would lead them to being suspended or expelled from school.

The rate of absence from school is higher for this cohort than the national average, and the percentage of children in this cohort with absence rates that would be identified as being persistent or severe does appear to rise in the academic term before their parent is imprisoned, and again in the academic term of the imprisonment.

Children who have had a parent imprisoned are more likely to be subject to social care involvement than other children, both before and after the imprisonment. However, whilst social care did have active records for approximately three quarters of the children within the eight month data window, this still means that there are around 25% of these children who have been identified through police and prisons data as having had a parent sentenced to imprisonment who do not have an active social care record within an eight month period surrounding the imprisonment of their parent.

▶ **Altogether these data indicate that children whose parents have been sentenced to prison have high degree of vulnerability and need. They are more likely to have complex needs, and less likely to have opportunities that would help them to thrive. Therefore it is recommended that additional support is identified and planned for children who are in this situation, alongside the provision of support through Operation Paramount.**

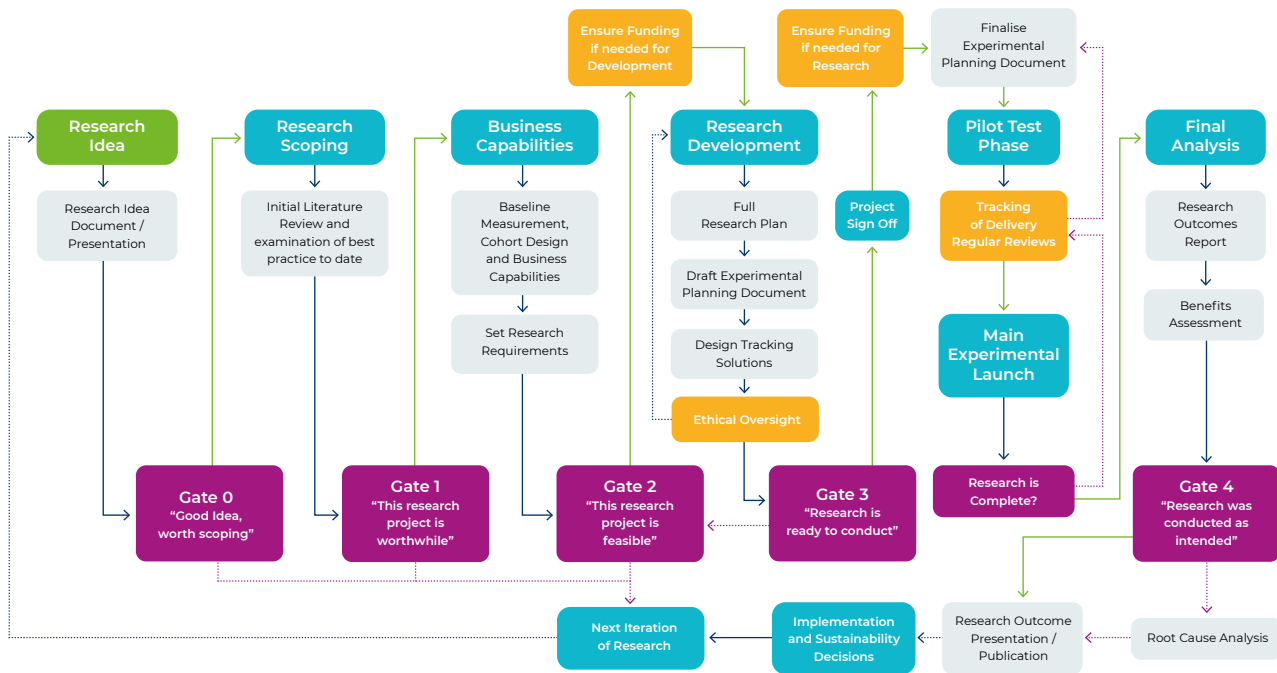
Appendix A: Our Approach: The Research Project Lifecycle

In order to avoid some of the pitfalls often associated with public sector research projects, which often lead to not being able to say what works, or what effect has been had for the money or resource invested, we developed the Research Project Lifecycle.

This is a project management approach to running research projects in the public sector, and allows for the research management team to pause at each stage to ensure that it still meets the needs of the organisation, that it is based in best evidence, that it is possible and feasible to run, and that it is well planned, ensuring the best and most ethical test of something that can actually be implemented.

This approach has enabled Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership to conduct multiple concurrent high quality interventions, including six randomised controlled trials in a range of different areas.

Embedding a “what works” approach



Reference: Adapted from Olphin, T.P.A., (2023). *Research Project Lifecycle: A Structured Approach to Conducting Research in the Public Sector*, Reading, UK: Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit. © Crown Copyright 2023

Authors and referencing

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To reference, please use:

Olphin, T., Massie, R., Miller, O. & Blakemore, R. (2025) What Works Series: Operation Paramount - Statistical analysis of children in Oxfordshire affected by parental imprisonment, Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership: Kidlington, UK.

Funding and Acknowledgements

This research was conducted by Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership and would not have been possible without funding from UK Home Office, as part of the Violence Reduction Unit programme.

This work would also not have been possible if not for the support provided by Thames Valley Police and Oxfordshire County Council in sharing, accessing and matching data.

We are grateful for the support of Children Heard and Seen throughout the Operation Paramount process. They have provided a lifeline of support to children who are in a time of significant need. Thank you for all you do.

Contact Us



If you have any questions please contact the core programme team via vpp@thamesvalley.police.uk



Our website has information on all our projects and evaluations. www.tvvpp.co.uk



You can also follow us on X/Twitter [@TV_VPP](https://twitter.com/TV_VPP)

