

# Social Media Survey

Paying the Price:

The Financial Impact of Imprisonment  
and Release

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September 2022

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# Introduction and Objectives: *The Cost of Imprisonment for Families*

Whilst being only one of the many hardships families face when supporting someone in prison, the cost of imprisonment is arguably the most prominent and impactful for them. From being able to afford phone calls, to the cost of travel, as well as simple things such as a coffee at the canteen, the amount families spend on supporting someone in prison can easily build up. Despite this, very little research exists in relation to the financial impact of imprisonment in Scotland, and indeed very little in the UK as a whole.

The first substantial piece of research published on the financial aspect of imprisonment and how this can impact families was carried out by Donald Dickie in 2012, titled *The Financial Impact of Imprisonment on Families*. This explored what happens to Scottish families when a family member is imprisoned and helped highlight issues, particularly surrounding the cost of phone calls, which families expressed as one of the biggest expenses they incur.

More recently, research has been carried out in 2022 by Dr Briege Nugent, [\*Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release\*](#). Working in partnership with Families Outside, Nugent's interviews focused on speaking to families affected by imprisonment to understand the financial impact it can have on them, as well as how this has impacted on both their mental and physical health.

Not everyone affected by the issue of a family member who has gone to prison will want to or be able to take part in face-to-face interviews. For this reason, Families Outside thought it would be beneficial to complement the work of Nugent (2022), and gain insight through a short snapshot social media survey into both the causes of financial difficulties for the families of those in prison and what can be done to help reduce them.

The main aim of the survey itself was to 'sense check' the interview findings by hearing directly from other families about the financial difficulties that can often come with imprisonment/release from prison. In addition, it was hoped that the use of social media would enable a wider audience to be reached.

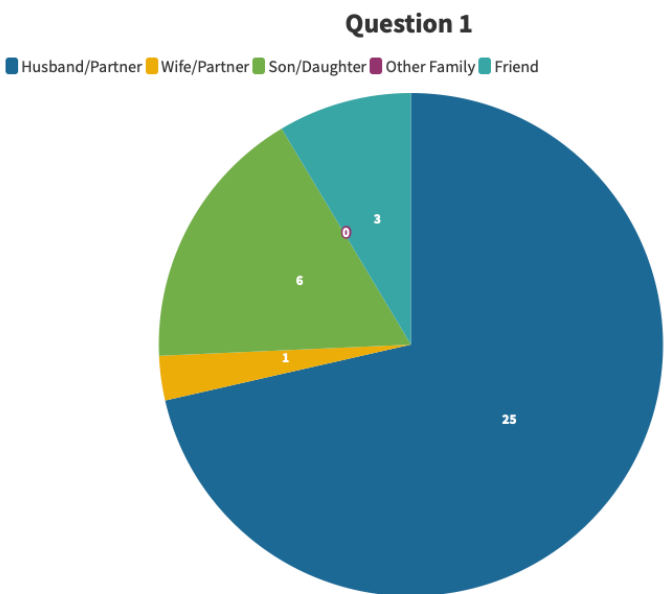
# Methods for the Survey

Consisting of 14 open and closed questions using Microsoft Forms, the survey was circulated via both the Families Outside Twitter and Facebook pages for one month in Summer 2022. A total of 35 responses were collected. Each result helped to identify the key issues families experience when faced with the financial impact of imprisonment. The survey questions are available at Appendix 1.

The profiles of respondents differed to the participants of the research carried out by Nugent (2022). More respondents of this survey were found to be supporting friends, with one supporting a wife, thereby providing additional insights.

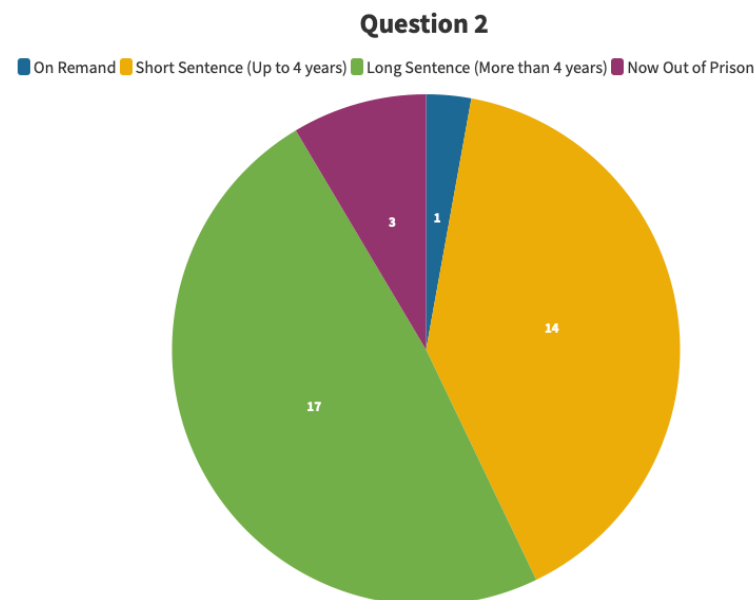
## What We Found: The Price Families Pay

### Who are families supporting in prison?



A majority of participants were supporting husbands/partners: 25 out of 35 respondents. Next, six out of 35 participants were supporting their son/daughter. Three people were supporting friends and one person was supporting their wife/partner.

### Type of sentence

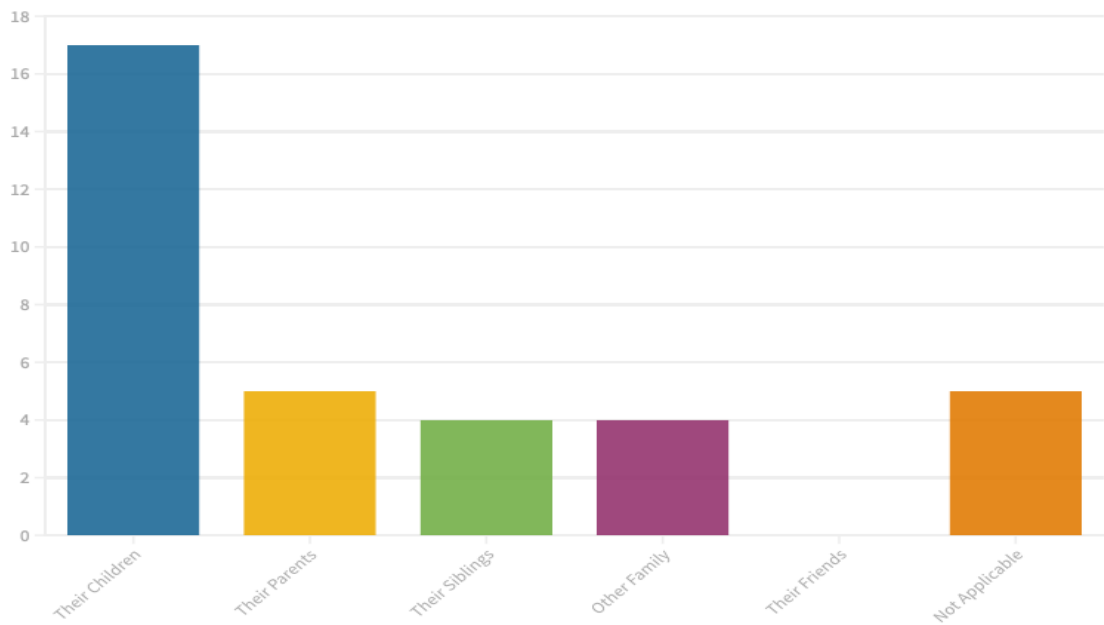


Nearly half of those being supported in prison were facing a long-term sentence. This was closely followed by those serving short sentences, with nearly one third of respondents supporting them. One participant was supporting someone on remand. Those supporting friends also answered that they were helping to support someone who had recently been released from prison, therefore providing us with a varying range of responses.

Supporting others to maintain contact

Those supporting people in prison sometimes also help others to maintain contact with their loved one: support could be provided via methods such as arranging visits, phone calls, video calls, etc.

Question 3

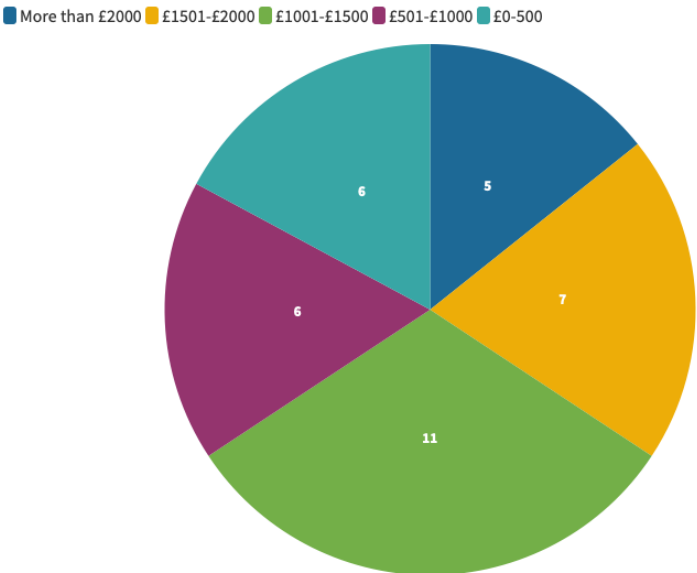


The group experiencing the most help to maintain contact with loved ones in prison were children, with 17 out of 35 participants selecting this option. Next were parents, with five respondents indicating that they aid the individuals’ parents to communicate and maintain contact with their children whilst they are in prison.

The survey also highlighted that not only do close family and friends supporting people in prison help parents and children to maintain contact, but siblings (four participants) and other family members (four participants) also receive help to maintain contact with those on the inside. Notably, when asked whether they support any friends of those in prison, no one selected this option, potentially indicating a cause for why, when individuals are released, they often must start their lives again by building new relationships or attempt to salvage ones which once existed.

Income of family members supporting someone in prison

Question 4



Almost a third of participants answered that they were earning between £1001-£1500 per month. The second highest income selected was £1501-2000, with seven out of 35 participants answering this option. Six people selected earnings of £501-1000, whilst a further six selected earnings of £0- £500.

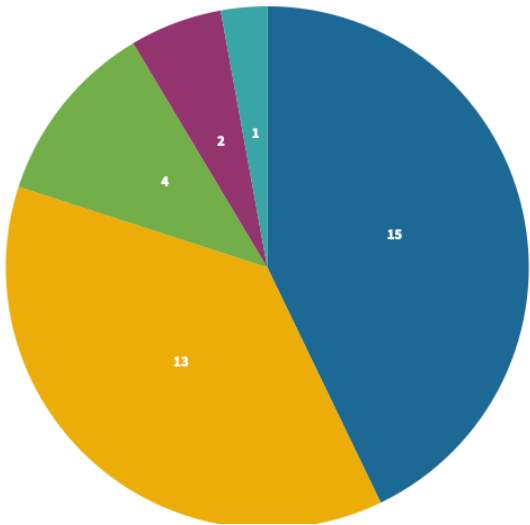
The numbers show that roughly a third of respondents are surviving on £1000 or less whilst trying to also support someone in prison.

Five participants answered that their income was more than £2000 per month after tax.

*How much is being spent supporting someone in prison?*

**Question 5**

Quarter of my money or less    Quarter to half of my money    Half to three quarters of my money  
Three quarters to all of my money    Not applicable

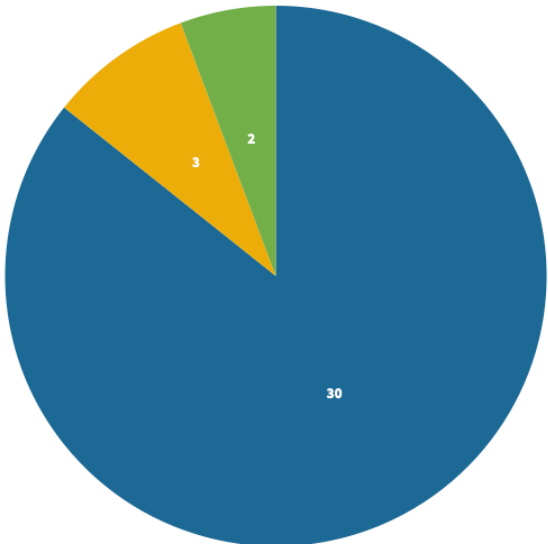


Most commonly, participants highlighted that a quarter of their money or less is often used supporting those in prison (15 of 35). 13 respondents stated that they are having to spend a quarter to half of their money on covering the costs of those in prison. Four participants commented that half to three quarters of their money was going to their loved ones, while two respondents shared that three-quarters of all their money was being sent to their family member in prison. Considering we are currently living through a cost-of-living crisis, as well as having experienced the impacts of a pandemic for the last two years, this demonstrates how imprisonment has impacted and continues to impact individuals’ finances.

*How much time are families spending supporting someone?*

**Question 6**

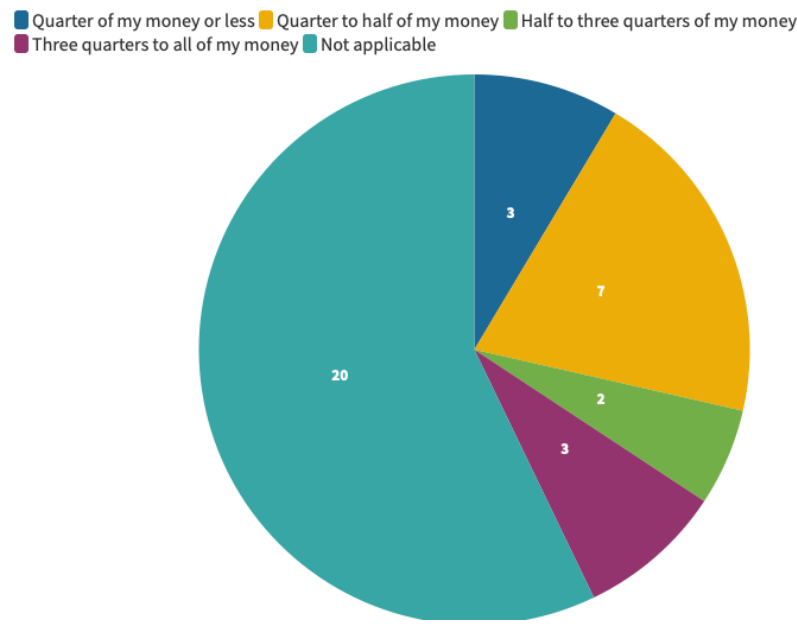
Two days a week or more    One day a week    Less than one day a week



The vast majority of participants (30 of 35) conveyed that two days or more a week are designated by them to support someone impacted by imprisonment. Three respondents commented that they provide one day a week of support to their loved one in prison, whilst two participants stated that less than one day a week is taken up providing support.

How much is being spent supporting someone upon release?

Question 7



We looked at the proportion of people’s money being designated to support those who have recently been released from imprisonment and the impact this can have.

Despite only three participants conveying that the person they were supporting was now out of prison, it is evident from the figures that many participants have had experience of both supporting a loved one whilst they were in prison as well as upon release. Despite 20 participants replying that this was not applicable to them, there was still a varying range of results. Of the 35 participants, seven replied that a quarter to half of their money was being spent supporting individuals upon release from prison. Three participants selected that they were designating both a quarter or less, and three-quarters to half of their money. Additionally, two respondents shared that they were spending between a half to three-quarters of their money, therefore conveying that both supporting someone whilst they are in prison, as well as upon release, can be a rather costly experience for families.

Maintaining contact with the person in prison

We asked an open question to find out whether our respondents’ financial situation had at all impacted their ability to stay in contact with their loved ones in prison, and if so, how so. Some key issues highlighted by this question included:

- Having money to put in for credit.
- Cost of phone calls.
- Being able to afford bus/train/taxi fares or petrol to get to visits.

Selected quotes show the burden that many faced in staying in contact:



Yes, robbing Peter to pay Paul.



Can’t even afford bus fares for short trips out and food is limited where I skip meals for 4 kids to eat.



Some weeks are tough to find the money being on benefits but you somehow manage to find a way. As staying in touch is crucial for them and us.

““

No I still manage to visit and stay in touch – but at a cost to other areas of my life...My disposable wage basically funds prison life with nothing left for enjoyment or a break.

““

Because I can only work on weekends cause of childcare fees and arrangements while I am at uni in the week it's hard to send money every week so my partner can make calls to check up on myself who has mental health [issues] and his son who is under five but still asks can he speak to daddy a lot

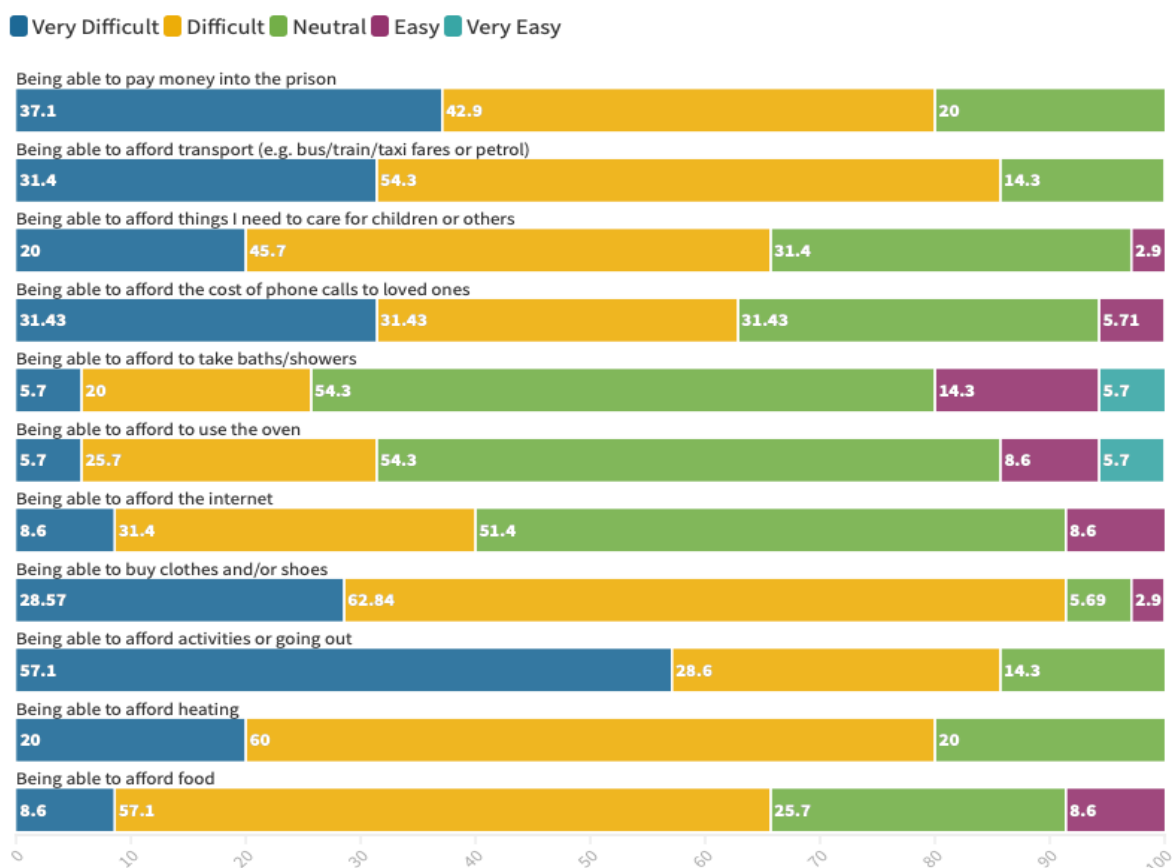
““

Yes. High cost of phone calls...[clothes] must be bought via catalogues. Canteen prices are extortionate. Basic supplies are poor quality. £10 for a video call to maintain relationships with young children. I now have no savings as a result of maintaining family ties.

## Wider impact and current cost of living crisis

We asked people how easy or difficult they found it to buy various necessities, in the context of the cost of living crisis and the pandemic.

### Question 9



### Being able to afford heating and food

The greatest difficulty affecting participants was being able to afford heating and food. In respect to heating, of 35 participants, seven highlighted that they find it very difficult, compared to the majority vote of difficult, which 21 participants selected. It is also important to note that seven respondents believed their ability to afford heating remained neutral.

Being able to afford food varied between the participants. For example, three respondents answered that they found it easy to afford food, in comparison to well over half (20) who felt it was difficult. In addition to this, three respondents found it very difficult. The remaining nine participants conveyed they felt neutral about being able to afford this basic expense.

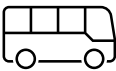
These numbers show that, despite this research taking place before the cost-of-living crisis has properly set in, people are already struggling to afford necessities, never mind having the additional costs of supporting someone in prison.

### ***Being able to pay money into the prison***



Being able to pay money into the prison is perhaps the most crucial incurred cost by those supporting someone in prison, as this is often how they are able to maintain contact with their loved ones. Despite seven respondents stating that they felt neutral about being able to pay money in, the table above shows that 13 participants shared that they find it very difficult to do this, and 15 people conveyed that they find it difficult.

### ***Being able to afford public transport (e.g. bus/train/taxi fares or petrol)***



With regard to transport and how affordable participants consider it to be, eleven found it very difficult, 19 found it difficult, and five participants remained neutral.

### ***Being able to afford things I need to care for children or others***



In response, only one participant stated they found this easy, with eleven commenting they found it neutral. However, 16 people found it difficult to afford to provide this support, with seven people sharing they find it very difficult. In sum, more than two-thirds of participants were having difficulty in affording what they needed to care for children or others.

### ***Being able to afford the cost of phone calls to loved ones***



Being able to afford phone calls to loved ones also proved to be difficult for families to afford, with eleven finding it very difficult, a further eleven respondents stating it was difficult and eleven participants remaining neutral. Only two respondents identified that it is easy for them to stay in contact.

### ***Being able to afford to take baths/showers***



Furthermore, in line with the cost-of-living crisis that the UK is currently experiencing, participants were also asked how easy it is for them to be able to afford everyday things. Of the participants, two said they found this very easy. Five said they found this easy, with 19 individuals saying they felt neutral. However, the survey also highlighted a level of difficulty in being able to afford this expense, with seven in 35 saying they find it difficult to do so, and a further two respondents sharing it is very difficult.

### ***Being able to afford to use the oven***



Two participants said they find it very difficult to be able to afford to use the oven, with a further nine finding this difficult – more than a quarter in total. Most individuals, however, said they remained neutral (19, just over half), as well as three respondents sharing they find it easy, and finally two people answering very easy.

### ***Being able to afford the internet***



With the introduction of the use of video calls to prisons over the pandemic due to restrictions on prison visiting, there was an increased need for internet access. In relation to being able to afford WIFI, there were a variety of results: three respondents said it was very difficult; eleven found it difficult; 18 people were neutral; three participants found it easy.

### Being able to buy clothes and/or shoes



Being able to afford to buy clothes and/or shoes, was also considered to be an expense which those impacted by imprisonment expressed to be a luxury, with ten selecting they found this very difficult, 22 answering 'difficult', two participants remaining neutral, and only one respondent expressing this as easy to afford.

### Being able to afford activities or going out

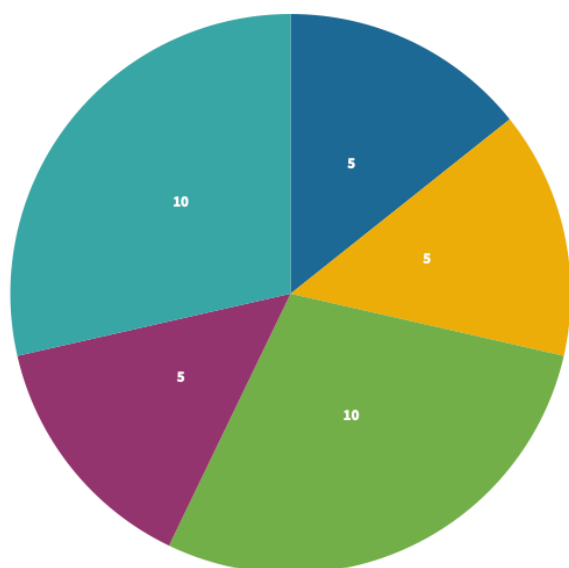


Participants shared that they often find this very difficult to afford with 20 selecting this option, followed by ten selecting difficult, and five respondents said this remained a neutral expense.

## Impact of the pandemic-related restrictions

Question 10

■ A lot less ■ A little less ■ About the same ■ A little more ■ A lot more



People faced with imprisonment of a loved one have been experiencing increased expenditures as a result of pandemic-related restrictions. From having to post in items which incur rather expensive postage costs due to the weight of packages, to the increased cost of phone calls due to the restriction of visits, as well as being able to afford the price of video visits in order to maintain family ties, those supporting people held in prison have not had it easy.

As can be seen in the chart, the results collected provide insight into these additional incurred expenses. Leaning more towards expressing an increase in expenditure, five respondents shared they were sending a little more money, with ten indicating that they were spending a lot more. A further ten reckoned they were spending about the same as before the pandemic. Some participants, however, contributed that they were spending a little less money (five participants) while another five identified that they were spending a lot less.

## Mental and physical health

We explored the mental and physical health of individuals as a result of having to support someone in prison throughout the pandemic. As can be seen below, those who completed the survey conveyed that their health had not improved over this period, with the majority answering that in fact both their mental health and physical health had gotten worse (both 20 out of 35 respondents). Some replied that their physical (six) and mental health (14) had in fact become a lot worse. Others, however, commented that despite the added pressure of the pandemic, as well as the potential to incur additional costs, they did not feel this impacted their physical (nine) and mental health (one respondent), and therefore they felt it stayed the same.

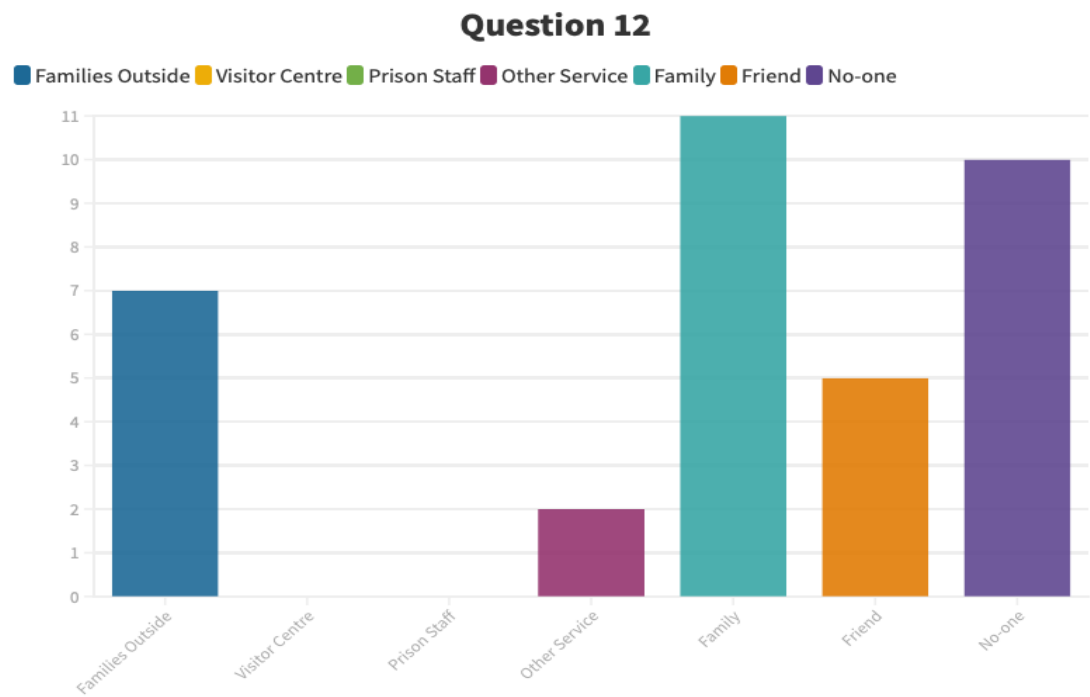
Question 11

■ It is a lot worse ■ It is worse ■ Stayed the same ■ It is a little better ■ It is a lot better



## Support for families

We looked into the support made available to families during their experiences with imprisonment. As can be seen in the graph below, ten participants expressed they did not receive any support over this time. The majority of participants who completed the survey, however, conveyed that they received support from their family throughout this time. The second largest support system for those who took part in the survey was Families Outside, with seven selecting this option. The second largest support system for those who took part in the survey was Families Outside, with seven selecting this option. Two participants said that they received support from other services, in addition to five respondents who said their friends helped them get through it. Finally, the survey also showed that no one selected the prison visitors' centre or prison staff as being a source of support they used.



## What can help?

We asked an open question about what would help to reduce the financial impact of imprisonment on the families left behind: a multitude of responses were provided:

“By allowing the prisoner an allowance for me.”

“Reducing cost of essentials to prisoner, mainly phone calls.”

“Having a sort of travel warrant scheme.”

““

More help to seek employment on release. More support for gambling addictions.... Although visiting the canteen is subsidised, it cost additional money every visit sometimes twice or three times weekly. This greatly added to my weekly costs. Employment within prison supported my partners so I rarely had to top up his personal money.”

””

““

Make phone calls cheaper. Allow prisoners internet access so that they can Facetime and video call family from their cells. Offer financial support for petrol and fuel costs if the prisoner is over a certain distance from home.

””

““

For the prison to provide transport for families to stay in touch also give more day releases for families to bond...

””

““

Cheaper phone calls, cheaper canteen, and higher wages.

””

““

Prisoners should be paid a minimum wage for their work. My son effectively works 12 hour days...for £20 per week – doesn't even cover the basics. SPS could provide direct transport services for visitors (i.e. bus services to/from the prison) – I currently have to take 2 buses plus a train to reach the prison, then the same on the return journey, this isn't cheap. Prisons could begin accepting property at visits again, since Covid now have to pay the post office to deliver property by recorded mail, not cheap when sending bulky parcels of clothes etc.

””

““

More support for visits, free postage for stuff into prison and cheaper goods inside for the person in prison to buy.

””

““

Stop charging calls by the minute! A 'package deal' would be more suitable (for selected number/numbers). My husband only rings me and our children (one phone) and uses nearly £30 a week!

””

“Enabling us to phone in – I have a n unlimited minutes contract so it’s ridiculous – especially in 2022 – that we have expensive by-the-minute calls when I could phone in at no cost....”

“Higher means tested threshold and higher pay for prisoners meaning families don’t have to subsidise.”

**The survey also invited additional comments, which included:**

“I feel there should be far more individualised support for prisoners on release.”

“I would appreciate any help given financially and emotionally.”

“More flexible hours for contact face to face.”

“The cost of supporting a loved one in prison is crippling! I am unable to do extra activities with my children or afford luxuries (McDonald’s for the kids etc) so they can maintain a good relationship with their dad.”

“I totally get the need for tight controls of what goes into prisons but i) many rules are clearly designed to make money out of prisoners and family/friends and ii) many officers definitely use rules to antagonise and bully prisoners.”

“The impact of families and loved ones of a prisoner is never spoken about, I currently do a 6 hour round trip for a 1 hour visit, the prison refused to move him closer to home, it’s not rehabilitating and not maintaining family ties, luckily I earn a higher wage than minimum wage, however in order to provide for him and keep our household running I am working 60 hours a week, I’m stressed, I’m tired and burnt out, it’s not easy and I’m grateful that he will be home in 2 weeks. I am exhausted and my mental health has suffered a lot, I barely eat or sleep and I’m constantly worrying. We need support too.”

“It’s our loved one who was sentenced yet the families are doing a tougher sentence for a crime we didn’t commit.”

# Summary and Conclusion

What kinds of costs do families bear when someone goes to prison? And how does this prevent contact and act as a barrier to families being families?

From the reasons presented above, it is fair to conclude that imprisonment, as well as the circumstances which occur when someone is released, can have a significant impact on the income of families left behind.

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## ***Providing support***

The results of this survey evidence that more needs to be done to support those families facing the imprisonment of a loved one, as too often they are left to navigate the system alone. The survey highlighted that well over a quarter of participants did/do not receive any support at all whilst having to live with the ordeal of a loved one going to prison. Therefore, services which have the ability to provide help and guidance to those experiencing such circumstances should make more of an effort to promote their services and thus provide families with the help they so desperately need. Alongside the need for such support, the survey highlights that both mental and physical health can be impacted as a result of supporting someone in prison. Therefore, not only is more support needed to help individuals navigate the system, but so too is support needed to help individuals with their mental health by providing an outsider for them to talk to and help them escape from the trauma and stress that can often come from imprisonment.

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## ***Reducing the cost of phone calls***

Participants highlighted that they want to remain in contact with their loved ones in prison, however the cost-per-minute calls can simply be outwith their financial reach, thus contact is limited. Participants have suggested the idea of creating a 'package deal', much like the phone contracts that can be accessed by families outside of prison, which would result in them paying a sum of money to get a designated number of minutes a month. The exploration and introduction of such an idea would enable family members simply to make one payment a month to cover phone call costs, as well as provide the opportunity for their loved ones to phone more than once a week and maintain proper relationships with those outside prison. In addition to this, people in prison with children would be enabled to not miss out on milestone achievements, as well as connect with their children outside of in-person visits.

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## ***Subsidising transport costs***

Transport was another major issue highlighted by participants - more specifically, being able to get to multiple visits a week. This was in addition to the general costs of living outside prison, as well as sending in money to cover canteen costs and phones calls.

When completing the survey, some participants spoke about the introduction of a designated bus which travels to and from the prison, subsequently making it easier for them to get to visits, thus simplifying the travel process.

In addition, participants also discussed the need for a potential travel warrant scheme to be introduced. Presently, some can claim back travel expenses through the Help With Prison Visits scheme, if they are in receipt of certain benefits. However, the process for getting money back can often take time, leaving families out of pocket. Therefore, participants argued that if a travel warrant scheme were to be introduced, families would have the ability to relocate the money saved, enabling them to organise a trip for their children, or even be able to afford things such as new clothes, or more relevant to today's cost of living crisis, put the money towards paying for gas and electricity bills and food.

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The findings of this survey support and add further nuance to prior research, including Families Outside's most recent research (Nugent 2022) and subsequently convey that imprisonment can impact the families of those in prison in a multitude of ways.

## Appendix 1: Survey Questions

### Section 1 – Background information

1. Who are you supporting?
  - ☐ Husband/Partner
  - ☐ Wife/Partner
  - ☐ Son/Daughter
  - ☐ Other Family
  - ☐ Friend
2. What is their current situation?
  - ☐ On Remand
  - ☐ Short Sentence (Up to 4 years)
  - ☐ Long Sentence (More than 4 years)
  - ☐ Now Out of Prison
3. If helping them to maintain contact with other people (e.g., arranging visits, phone calls, video calls etc.), who are you helping them to stay in contact with?
  - ☐ Their children
  - ☐ Their parents
  - ☐ Their siblings
  - ☐ Other family
  - ☐ Their friends

### Section 2 – Loss of household income and current income

4. What is your income each month (after tax)?
  - ☐ More than £2000
  - ☐ £1501-£2000
  - ☐ £1001-£1500
  - ☐ £501-£1000
  - ☐ £0-500

### Section 3 – Costs: Time and money needed to support person in prison

5. How much of your income is being spent supporting the person in prison?
  - ☐ Quarter of my money or less

- ☐ Quarter to half of my money
- ☐ Half to three quarters of my money
- ☐ Three quarters to all of my money
- ☐ Not applicable

6. How much time per week do you spend supporting the person (calls, visits, etc.)?

- ☐ Two days a week or more
- ☐ One day a week
- ☐ Less than one day a week

#### Section 4 – Costs: Supporting the person on release

7. How much of your income is being spent supporting the person when they have left prison?

- ☐ Quarter of my money or less
- ☐ Quarter to half of my money
- ☐ Half to three quarters of my money
- ☐ Three quarters to all of my money
- ☐ Not applicable

#### Section 5 – Impact

8. Has money affected your ability to stay in touch with the person in prison (if so, how)?

9. How easy would you rate the following now:

*Please tick the box which best describes your situation*

	Very difficult	Difficult	Neutral	Easy	Very Easy
Being able to afford food					
Being able to afford heating					
Being able to afford activities or going out					
Being able to buy clothes and/or shoes					
Being able to afford to use the oven					
Being able to afford to take baths/showers					
Being able to afford the cost of phone calls to loved ones					
Being able to afford things I need to care for children or others					
Being able to afford transport (e.g., bus/train/taxi/fares or petrol)					
Being able to pay money into the prison					

10. Over the pandemic, whilst supporting the person in prison, I spent:

- ☐ A lot less
- ☐ A little less

- ☐ About the same
- ☐ A little more
- ☐ A lot more

11. How would you describe the impact on your mental and physical health as a result of these costs?

*Please tick the box which best describes your situation*

	It is a lot worse	It is worse	Stayed the same	It is a little better	It is a lot better
Mental health					
Physical health					

12. Who would you say your main support has been over this time?

- ☐ Families Outside
- ☐ Visitors Centre
- ☐ Prison Staff
- ☐ Other Service
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Friend
- ☐ No-one

13. In your view, what would be the best way(s) of reducing the financial impact of imprisonment on the families left behind?

14. Any further comments?