

Imprisonment, child abuse and poverty – food for thought
Hugh McMichael (working with Quakers in Criminal Justice)

Hugh is a retired physician who also trained as a person-centred counsellor. He has a long-standing interest in working with damaged and stressed people, including 10 years in hospices and latterly worked as a Samaritan and as a volunteer chaplain in a high security prison. He has matched these experiences with researching data showing links of imprisonment rates to both child abuse and poverty.

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Let's look firstly at when parents are unable to give 'due attention' to the needs of their child - for whatever reason. Differences in a baby's behaviour are demonstrable at 6 weeks of age and their brains develop differently anatomically. A baby whose crying is 'always' responded to by receiving attention will have experience that 'society' is caring and will respond to their needs whereas the baby 'left to cry' will come to regard 'society' as unsupportive and relatively hostile. If we consider criminal behaviour to be 'anti-social', then this sequence could be highly relevant.

There are many ways of bringing up children but, since 1998, 10 factors in child-rearing have been identified as defining 'abuse'. These are the so-called ACE studies, Adverse Childhood Experiences. This is a questionnaire which depends on yes/no answers to 10 'simple' questions. (For details, see Wikipedia!). People who answer 'yes' to 4 or more of the questions are the so-called ACE4+ group and this group has been subject to extensive studies on the influence of these factors on future life patterns. These were summarised by the esteemed medical journal The Lancet (2016). The ACE4+ group were compared to their peers who reported no ACEs. For example, ACE4+ people are 4 times more likely to become teenage parents, 4 times more likely to suffer from anxiety and/or depression, and 8 times more likely to be perpetrators and/or victims of violence (almost always associated with violence in their own homes) They are 10 times more likely to suffer problematic drug use. And they are 37 times more likely to attempt suicide. Is their drug addiction their way of coping with life – staying alive?

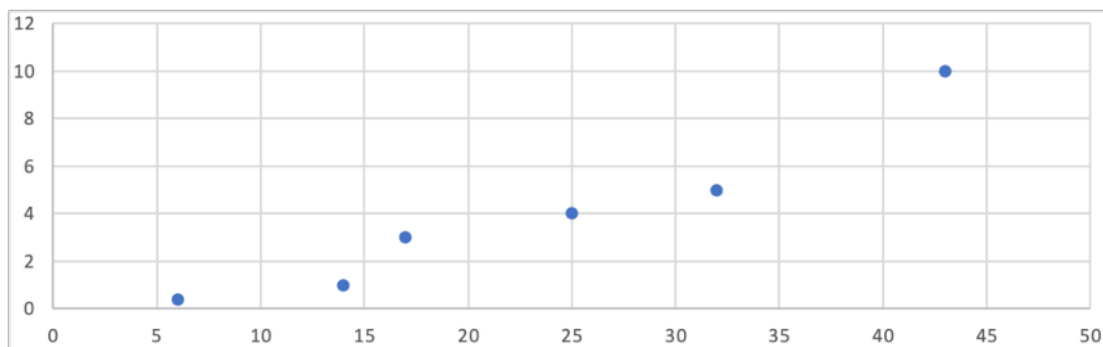
49% of all imprisoned people in one prison had 4 or more ACEs.

Should ACE4+ people be regarded as being seriously damaged people in need of active support and treatment to help them overcome their disadvantaged starts in life?

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Children in the 4+ group are around 10 times more likely to come from poor backgrounds. The government does not publish data on incarceration, ethnic background and poverty but it does publish religious affiliations which are likely to reflect ethnic groups and poverty rates in such ethnic groups are reflected in published rates of Free School Meals. The attached graph shows an extremely strong correlation between poverty and incarceration rate.

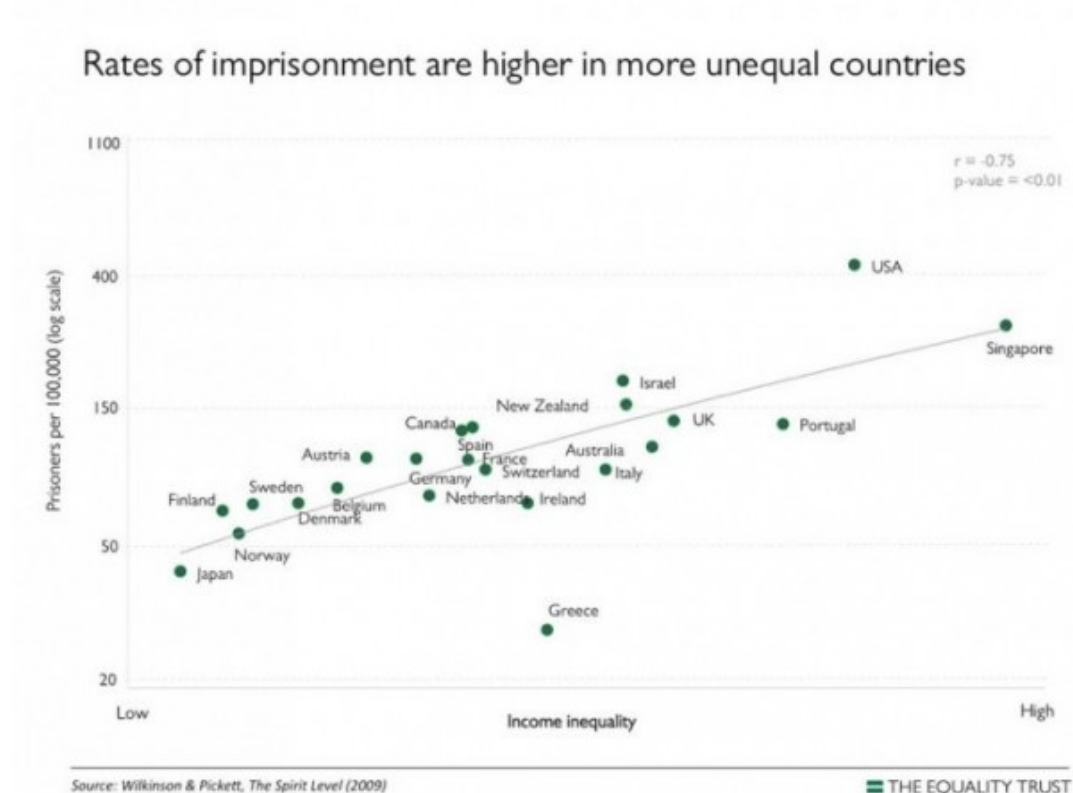
Free school meals (x axis) vs imprisonment rates (y axis) by ethnicity (**White Brit =1**)
 L to R: Indian, Wh Br, Pakistani, Black, Bangladeshi, GRT



The poorer the ethnic group the higher the relative rate of imprisonment.

Note that the least imprisoned group documented are those of Indian origin – brown people, with a lower rate of Free School Meals than white British, and the highest rate of imprisonment is the Gypsy/Roma/Traveller group (white people) who have by far the highest rate of Free School Meals. Moslem groups are in the middle.

There is also a striking relationship in international rates of incarceration linked with wealth inequality in the named country.



(For the technically minded, note that the rate of imprisonment per head of population is on a log scale – so that the rate of imprisonment in the USA is 8 times the rate of Norway.)

It would appear that, if we are all poor together, jealousy, envy or resentment of others' wealth is minimal but when the rich are very rich and the poor very poor, presumably there

is less communal bonding , more resentment and (therefore) crime, with increasing imprisonment rates.

Note that the wealth gap in the UK has increased by some 50% since 1977, as judged by the so-called Palma ratio (which measures wealth of the top 10% compared to the wealth of the bottom 40%). Just one indicator of wealth inequality. The rate of defined child poverty has increased from 14% to 31% in the same period. (Sorry to be technical!)

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47% of people released from prison re-offend within 1 year at an estimated cost of £37billion. Is that 'prison working'? And the government is building yet more prisons!

Very many of the people I met in a high security prison had blatantly abusive childhoods. By listening to and respecting them, it often took only a few minutes for 'that of God' to show itself.

IS IT TIME FOR RADICAL CHANGES IN OUR CRIMINAL JUSTICE POLICIES?

Hugh is from Worcester and Shropshire Area Meeting.