

## Book reviews

### **The Impact of Youth Imprisonment on the Lives of Parents**

By Daniel McCarthy and Maria Adams

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This is the sixth book in the Routledge series of Studies in Crime, Justice and the Family, edited by Rachel Condry of Oxford University. Other books in the series include Families, Imprisonment and Legitimacy: the cost of custodial penalties by Cara Jardine (2020); Juvenile Lifers: (lethal) violence, Incarceration and rehabilitation by Simone Deegan (2021); and Parental Imprisonment and Children's Rights, edited by Aisling Parkes and Fiona Donson (2021). In this book the authors (the Professor of Criminology and Senior Lecturer in Criminology in Surrey University's Sociology Department), consider the experiences of, and especially the hardships borne by, the families whose young male children have been imprisoned. It seeks to provide a different perspective on the important role that is generally accepted that families play in supporting prisoners during and beyond their time in prison. The background provided by the Farmer report is acknowledged, particularly its emphasis on the role prisons should play in supporting prisoner-family ties.<sup>1</sup>

The fieldwork underpinning the research findings was conducted in two YOIs in 2016/7. It is substantially based on interviews with 61 parents/carers (37 mothers, 13 fathers, seven sibling carers, three aunts/uncles and one grandmother), 62 per cent of whom were White, 20 per cent Black, 15 per cent Asian and three per cent 'mixed'. Questionnaires returned by 214 parents/carers, including the 61 interviewed, also informed the research. Most of the children of those interviewed were serving between two years and Life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the authors note (p. 129 in an Appendix on the methodology) that they found caregivers more willing to participate when their child had served at least two years of their sentence. The sample therefore appears to exclude the parents of the majority of young men imprisoned who receive sentences of two years or less. While the conclusions the authors reach may not be qualified by this, one would assume that the dynamics of family relationships will vary according to the length of time a child/young man is detained.

The subject of the book is approached by considering the complexity of youth-parent relationships; the experience of parent-child relationships before imprisonment; the challenges presented to families by visiting their children in prison; and how imprisonment impacts on parents during their child's imprisonment. At the outset it is recognised that some families can, as the Farmer report noted, have a detrimental

impact on prisoners. But the overarching concern is to understand the burden families carry in sustaining the relationship with their imprisoned sons. The authors argue against describing this as one of the so called 'collateral consequences' of crime and criminal justice. They prefer the concept of 'symbiotic harm' coined by Condry and Minson (2021),<sup>2</sup> which conveys a sense of the interdependence of relationships rather than implying, as 'collateral' does, that the consequences are secondary or subordinate. They also urge that 'we need to move beyond the approach which suggests that parents' roles can only be understood via the lens of criminogenic risk factors in the lives of young men in prison' (p.3). They are dismissive too of the reflex tendency to 'blame the parents': while some parenting may have shortcomings, the adversities the families of all people in prison face, it is suggested, 'should not always be conceived as wilful neglect by parents — a symptom of troubled families...for some it is more the case of families in trouble.' (p. 38). Accompanying a sense of shame, parents often experience a sense of desperation at being unable to deal with their sons' challenging behaviour before they were imprisoned; and they can be victims too.

Much of the fieldwork for the authors' research took place in prison visits facilities. They refer to 'the porousness of prison visitation and prison life' (p. 87) to describe the physical, psychological and emotional challenges parents

1. Farmer, M. (2017). *The importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*. Ministry of Justice.
2. Condry, R., & Minson, S. (2021). Conceptualizing the effects of imprisonment on families: Collateral consequences, secondary punishment, or symbiotic harms? *Theoretical Criminology*, 25(4), 540-558.

experience to see their sons in prison. Acknowledging the theme of the importance of prison visits as an opportunity for positive engagement, the authors conclude, 'our analysis is more circumspect on the capabilities of visits to initiate benefits for family members in particular' (p.87). The need for prisons to be more attentive to visitors' experiences of visiting is a point well made.

Although the authors doubt the extent to which prisons can be

places for high quality family contact, they identify various ways in which visits could at least acknowledge the rights and responsibilities parents retain. They refer to the 'Missouri Model' which appears to be an enlightened approach of engaging parents of young offenders who have been detained.<sup>3</sup> A critique of the Youth Justice Board's 'Constructive Resettlement Framework' would also be interesting,<sup>4</sup> as would a consideration of the effectiveness

of the 'Parenting Contract' and 'Parenting Orders', the role of Youth Offending Teams and the Probation Service. However, understandably, these considerations were outside the scope of the authors' focus. Nevertheless, the book provides a very interesting set of insights into the important relationship of the parents of young male prisoners have and their sons.

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3. Mendel, R. (2010). *The Missouri Model: Reinventing the practice of rehabilitation youthful offenders* Annie E Casey Foundation; and <http://missouriapproach.org/>
  4. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance/custody-and-resettlement>