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# Failing Men: masculinities and gendered pains of imprisonment

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## Introduction

**Men are responsible for most crime and correspondingly it follows that the prison population in England and Wales, indeed across many Western countries, remains relatively static at around 95 per cent male. The profile of most of those that fill our prisons are strikingly similar: predominantly undereducated and underemployed men from some of the most deprived neighbourhoods. Popular representations of these men — in the media, policy debates and sadly some academic discourses — are that they are societies failures: that they are lazy, feckless, lacking aspiration, dangerous, violent, predatory, criminals. Despite this type of attention on the men that fill our prisons, there is a lack of specific academic and/or policy focus on these 'prisoners as men' or their gendered identities. When the specific gendered pains of imprisonment feature in penal scholarship it is often in relation to women in prison<sup>1</sup>. The dearth of research into gender and masculinities of male prisoners is a serious omission considering men's overwhelming presence in criminal justice statistics.**

Drawing from a larger qualitative study<sup>2</sup> that explored the classed and gendered trajectories of men in a local prison in England, this paper, both responding to this omission and disrupting oversimplified representations of prisoners, will focus on the less understood and underacknowledged — yet widespread — gendered vulnerabilities of male prisoners. The discussion that follows draws from and contributes to critical men's studies that have shown how masculinity is something that is situationally configured or socially created between people, language and cultural discourse. This body of scholarship convincingly shows how gender intersects

with social categories to create multiple and hierarchically positioned masculinities. More simply, men 'do masculinity' differently depending on their location (space/ place — re prison), class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality and so on.

Through the lens of masculinities, I will offer an alternative look at men in prison by focusing on their gendered pains of imprisonment. After briefly reviewing the early key literature on prison masculinities, I will show how in the penal space, isolated from trusted loved ones and under the constant gaze of others who might exploit any sign of vulnerability, the men from this study had to find hard 'front stage' masculine performances in the face of profoundly traumatic life events. The paper will go on to explore how, for many of the men, doing more 'time inside than the out' meant deep rooted guilt at their 'absence as men' and their failures to live up to the working class culturally exalted masculine role of protector and provider. I show how decades lost to 'revolving door' imprisonment were costly and left many in this group longing for 'normal'. The final section will discuss the men's imagined futures, exploring how they held onto a belief in the outdated breadwinner model of masculinity, from their father's generation, as a route to 'normality'.

The paper concludes by arguing for a much wider policy and research focus on the gendered vulnerabilities of men in prison, suggesting some answers might be found here that support a better understanding and subsequent reduction in the harms and pains of imprisonment for incarcerated men.

## Prison Masculinities

Considering men account for most the UK prison population, there is a surprising dearth of research exploring prison masculinities. This is not to argue that

1. See Carlen, P. (1983). *Women's imprisonment: A study in social control* (pp. 39-44). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). The gendered pains of life imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology*, 57(6), 1359-1378. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azw088>

2. This larger research project was based on participation observation in a local prison and 30 life history interviews with relatively short serving prisoners, described often as 'revolving door prisoners'. The participants were aged between 21 and 44 years old. Names have been changed to protect their anonymity. See Maguire, D (2021) *Male, Jailed Failed. Masculinities and Revolving Door Imprisonment in the UK*. Palgrave.

there is a lack of research on prison, but rather, as Sim<sup>3</sup> points out, much existing research concentrates on 'men as prisoners rather than prisoners as men'. There is a rich body of classical sociological studies on prisons, either centring on debates which claim that prison culture and identities are generated through adaptation to the deprivations of the carceral space<sup>4</sup> or, by contrast, importation debates which suggest that street criminal hierarchies seamlessly import into the prison<sup>5</sup>. Although much of this classical penal scholarship has acknowledged that it is men that fill prisons, there is little or no recognition of the role gender and masculinity play in prison identities.

Even with the more sophisticated theories of masculinities of the 1980s/1990s that moved from a singular masculinity based on sex roles and instead showed how men situationally 'do masculinity' differently depending on class, race, age, sexuality etc<sup>6</sup>, penal scholars were too few and too slow to turn to this gendered lens on male prisoners. Sim<sup>7</sup>, Toch<sup>8</sup> and Sabo et al<sup>9</sup> were among the limited notable exceptions that explored how men in prison configure and reproduce masculine identities and how masculine status is both formed by and shapes prison hierarchies and culture. This early work on prison masculinities found that in the prison manhood is a tenuous condition that must continuously be earned and is always subject to being quickly lost. It showed that both revered and subordinated masculine identities are organised around the adherence and enforcement of a

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universal prisoner/criminal code. The core ethos of the code centres round not cooperating with '...officials in matters of discipline' and never giving information of any kind, 'especially the kind which may work to harm a fellow prisoner'<sup>10</sup>. Further key elements to the code include being able to 'do your own time' and the often-violent policing of perpetrators of taboo crimes — usually those convicted of sex offences<sup>11</sup>. Adherence to and enforcement of this code, according to Kupers<sup>12</sup>, is what marks a sharp line between those prisoners who are at the top of the prison hierarchy and those who are at the 'feminine' defined bottom.

In much of the limited work exploring gender and men in prison, it has consistently been shown that revered prison masculinities are configured and maintained through physical or fighting prowess and /or showing a propensity for *measured* violence. Sim<sup>13</sup> notes that although violence and aggression is a core part of the prison existence, the type of prison, whether long term (high security), local or open conditions (low security), will determine different forms of masculine hierarchies and performances reliant on varying levels of violence and toughness. Writing on the American penal experience, Toch<sup>14</sup> talks of 'state raised youth' who, after prolonged and multiple levels of exclusions, coming up on the streets and in state institutions have learned to invest in hypermasculinity as a means of self-preservation. A strategy, he suggests, for generating status, avoiding victimization and surviving prison and other spaces of

3. Sim, J. (1994). Tougher than the Rest? Men in prison. In: Newburn, T. and Stanko, E.A. (Eds.). *Just boys doing business?: men, masculinities and crime*, London: Routledge. (p.101).
4. Sykes, G. (2007). *The society of captives: a study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press
5. Irwin, J. and Cressey, D.R. (1962). Thieves, convicts and the inmate culture. *Social Problems* 10: 142–155. DOI: 10.2307/799047 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/799047>
6. See Connell, R. & Messerschmidt, J.W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society* 19(6): 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>
7. Sim, J. (1994). Tougher than the Rest? Men in prison. In: Newburn, T. and Stanko, E.A. (Eds.). *Just boys doing business?: men, masculinities and crime*, London: Routledge.
8. Toch, H. (1998). Hypermasculinity and prison violence. In Lee H Bowker (Ed.), *Masculinities and violence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
9. Sabo, D. F., Kupers, T. A., & London, W. (Eds.). (2001). *Prison masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
10. Clemmer, D. (1958). *The prison community*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.(p.152).
11. Ibid; see also Trammell, R. (2009). Values, rules, and keeping the peace: How men describe order and the inmate code in California prisons. *Deviant Behavior*, 30(8), 746–771
12. Kupers, T. A. (2001). Rape and the prison code. In D. F. Sabo, T. A. Kupers, & W. London (Eds.), *Prison masculinities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. (115).
13. Sim, J. (1994). Tougher than the Rest? Men in prison. In: Newburn, T. and Stanko, E.A. (Eds.). *Just boys doing business?: men, masculinities and crime*, London: Routledge.
14. See 7

exclusion<sup>15</sup>. Drawing on decades of work with male prisoners, Psychologist Kupers<sup>16</sup> proposes the most dominant prison masculinity is 'toxic masculinity' configured through 'misogyny, homophobia, greed, and (the) violent domination' of 'weaker' men. Jewkes<sup>17</sup> in her research on men in the English prison system found that proving male credentials on the streets, which for many working-class young men often leads to criminal behaviour and consequently imprisonment, is itself a prerequisite to successful adaptation to prison life. She goes on to note that the extreme construction of hyper-masculinity is the almost universal response to adapting to the working-class prison culture.

This important earlier scholarship and much other work on carceral masculinities has certainly opened the interrogation of prisoners as men. There is much more, however, to prison masculinities than just the brutal, dominant and hypermasculine. As Toch<sup>18</sup> observed, men in prison try to live up to prison hyper masculinity long after they can meet the criteria. Encouragingly recent years have seen a growth of studies showing prison masculinities are much more complex, fluid and nuanced than just the brutally violent hard man performance<sup>19</sup>. Along with covering the well documented hyper masculine, Maycock's and Hunt's<sup>20</sup> edited collection *New Perspectives on Prison Masculinities* has chapters on the lesser explored 'softer' prisoner masculinities configured through resources such as compassion and spirituality. Contributing to more broader representations of men in prison, the following discussion focuses not so much on the pains men inflict on each other but on men's own distinct gendered pains of imprisonment.

### **Gendered pains of imprisonment**

*Life Behind the Door: Absent Men*

Encouragingly recent years have seen a growth of studies showing prison masculinities are much more complex, fluid and nuanced than just the brutally violent hard man performance

Most of the men in this study had spent more time in prison than 'on the out'. In nearly all cases this was not the result of having served one single long-term prison sentence, it was as one participant put it: 'life in prison on a multiple instalment plan'. Labelled as 'persistent' offenders or 'career' criminals most of the participants, at the time of research, were well into double figures in prison sentences, with several claiming to have done up to twenty 'stints in jail'. Most of the men started their prison journeys as children, with 12 being imprisoned before completing formal schooling and a further nine before reaching 18 years. From the point of being given their first sentence, the

men talked of having only short periods out of prison before finding themselves back inside, locked away from the significant life events that help to shape and sustain meaningful masculine identities.

The men's absence as (grand) sons, brothers, fathers, and intimate partners was inherently felt throughout all the interviews but was much more profound when the men talked of coping with extreme 'outside' life events. The cost of life in or having connections to neighbourhoods with high rates of poverty and violence seeped through the prison walls with several reporting of having to deal with some of the most difficult and tragic life events

whilst in prison. 37-year-old Isaac, for instance, had spent much of his life trapped in revolving-door cycles of imprisonment — and had lost his father to a violent murder during one of his short spells of freedom. Just weeks later, back in prison, he lost both his younger brother — to an accidental drug overdose — and, then, his mother, following a short illness:

*.. when my dad got killed in 2007, I kind of blamed myself a bit for that really.....if I was with him, it would never have happened, ....then my brother died on the last sentence...if I'd not come to prison for him,*

15. See also Bengtsson, T.T. (2015). Performing hypermasculinity experiences with confined young offenders. *Men and masculinities* 19 (4): 410-428 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15595083>; Gooch, K. (2017). 'Kidulthood': Ethnography, juvenile prison violence and the transition from 'boys' to 'men.' *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 19(1), 80-97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895817741519>
16. Kupers, T.A. (2005). Toxic masculinity as a barrier to mental health treatment in prison. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61(6): 713-724. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20105> .(716).
17. Jewkes Y (2005) Men behind bars. *Men and Masculinities* 8: 44-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X03257452> (p.51)
18. Toch, H. (1998). Hypermasculinity and prison violence. In Lee H Bowker (Ed.), *Masculinities and violence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
19. Maycock, M., & Hunt, K. (Eds.). (2018). *New perspectives on prison masculinities*. Palgrave Macmillan.
20. Ibid

*he'd still be here. My mam died two weeks after that... (Isaac)*

Another respondent around the same age, Cooper, spoke of his mother's 'suspected' murder just days before he was given a prison sentence. Jerry, whose first of many prison terms was when he was just 15, noted that the toughest jail time he had served was when his partner was violently sexually assaulted while he was inside. He explained another extremely difficult time in prison, when he lost his sister to suicide after she was sent to prison for the first time.

Dwayne, after being outside and out of trouble for 2 years was sent to prison for just 4 weeks for an historical theft offence, was in the process of trying to come to terms with the loss of his new-born son just days earlier.

*I pleaded with the judge to not send me to prison, but he gave me four weeks, which means only doing two — and, with me doing big sentences, I thought 'two weeks is nothing', but I was going to miss...my baby's birth... I've come to jail, missed it and then found out that he was born with brain damage and then died. He lived a week; he lived a week...I need to be out there to look after her. ... (Dwayne).*

Dwayne's moving extract— following his refusal to abandon the interview and insistence on continuing — captures his grief and reflects the difficulty that he experienced at being locked away as a grieving father and unable to be there to 'look after' his partner.

Virtually all of those interviewed talked of having experienced the death of a parent or a significant other whilst they were away. These losses — and the subsequent struggles or suffering of those close to them — brought their absence from the outside world sharply into focus. The men carried a sense of failure and shame for being unable to fulfil what they considered to be their traditional working-class masculine obligations to protect and provide for their families. Adding to Dwayne's grief, for example, was his distress at not 'being there' to look after his partner. Isaac, similarly, felt

that, as the eldest child, he had let his recently deceased father down by 'not being there' to prevent his brother's drug-related death and look after the remaining siblings. Cooper, too — as he expresses below — felt the weight of not fulfilling the responsibilities of the oldest male sibling after the death of his mother:

*...not having my mum, and my brother growing up in jail, it reflects on me, I feel guilty for that, knowing that I showed him what I didn't want to show him if you know what I mean...I sit here and I think that's my fault that.. because I'm like his stepdad in a way... (Cooper)*

It is notable that Cooper felt that his absence as a 'father figure' had contributed to his younger brother following him into the prison system.

#### *Locked Inside*

With such high incidences of tragedy and violence surrounding their lives 'on the out', many were left to deal with incredibly tough life events and the associated emotions alone in a prison cell. Not only were they isolated from the people closest to them at these incredibly difficult and vulnerable times, but they were also among other men that if given the chance would 'ruthlessly' exploit (prolonged)

displays of emotion/grief as a sign of weakness. Aware of this, Isaac expressed his anxiety about the prospect of losing anybody else whilst he was in prison:

*...that's the only thing that scares me these days about coming to prison is if someone else dies, because you can't show that emotion... [When] my brother died, I never came out of my pad for three weeks, I was on a sports course and I never finished that...*

Isaac felt safer hiding himself away in his cell rather than exposing his grief and vulnerability to the other men on the wing. Exploitation and bullying, as many of the men recognised, can often begin under the guise of sympathy or support during difficult times. This is not to suggest that men in prison are not compassionate and supportive to one another. There is evidence in penal

21. See Cohen, S. & Taylor, L. (1981). *Psychological survival: the experience of long-term imprisonment*. 2nd ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin; Laws, B. and Lieber, E. (2020) "King, Warrior, Magician, Lover": Understanding expressions of care among male prisoners, *European Journal of Criminology*. doi: 10.1177/1477370819896207; Tomczak, P. and Bennett, C. (2020) 'Evaluating voluntary sector involvement in mass incarceration: The case of Samaritan prisoner volunteers', *Punishment & Society*, 22(5), pp. 637–657. doi: 10.1177/1462474520915823

scholarship that documents instances of men in prison being compassionate, supportive and caring to each other during difficult times<sup>21</sup>. This was also borne out in my study with several of the men noting they had experienced various forms of support from fellow prisoners including being given toiletries or clothing when they first came to prison, help writing letters or communicating with loved ones outside and support navigating their sentence or with work/education. Others talked of prisoners counselling or supporting them through some of those hardest 'outside' life events.

As Dillon suggests, however, it is difficult to strike the right balance; offers of help from the other men in prison — if they are to be accepted at all — have to be accepted with caution:

*...you see, a lad who maybe his girlfriend has left him and the lads try cheering him up, or somebody that's not got any family and they've got no money, there's a lot of guys that help other guys out. But that can also be turned on its head because people can do things for people and they can turn it on the head by saying 'I've done that for you now [you] owe me this, you've got to bring drugs in for me on a visit' and stuff like that, so there is a fine balance...(Dillon)*

Similarly, Mark simply captures the caring and callous nature of his fellow prisoners: 'I've seen cons being caring and considerate sometimes...but they can also be fucking ruthless'. Even at the height of his grief, Dwayne was alert to those who might try to take advantage of him at such a difficult time:

*...when they heard about my bairn dying, all my mates kept asking if I had this or if I need that, but you do see the downside and you see bullies in here...(Dwayne)*

The prospect of being exploited by other prisoners meant that some of the respondents, like Isaac, were very careful about how they managed their grief/emotions outside of their cells. Penal scholars Crewe<sup>22</sup> and Jewkes<sup>23</sup>, building on Goffman's<sup>24</sup> dramaturgical concept, have explored the ways in which men in prison manage their private emotional selves in contrast to their public presentations of identity in terms of 'backstage' and 'frontstage' behaviour. In the prison setting, as Jewkes<sup>25</sup> has noted, backstage — or, in this case, time alone in a cell — is where the 'basic ontological security system is restored' or where men can leave their hard-masculine personas at the door. Frontstage is where — as was the case with these respondents — they publicly present hard masculine performances refined over a 'long process of socialization into male-dominated subcultures as a child, adolescent, and adult'.<sup>26</sup>

Isaac's isolation, until he could return to putting on a convincing and appropriate masculine front, demonstrates the pressure men in prison face in having to continuously maintain frontstage respected prisoner masculine identity. Under the constant gaze of other prisoners this preservation of status and self is, as they explained, exhausting. Because of the level of adversity many of these men

had faced, the hard reality was that they had long learned how vital it was to put on tough masculine 'frontstage' performances — often in the face of deeply painful loss, harm, abuse and violence.

Alongside their feeling of failure and shame about being unable to meet their protector/provider masculine obligations as sons, siblings and partners, many were also absent fathers. A third were biological fathers and several others were stepfathers to the children of their partners. Walker<sup>27</sup> in her study of prisoners with children found that their (compromised) roles as fathers prompted them to reflect on the cost of their imprisonment more than almost any other circumstance. This was shown in the experiences of some of the men in my study, as Andy explains:

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22. Crewe, B. (2009). *The prisoner society: power, adaptation and social life in an English prison*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

23. Jewkes Y (2005) Men behind bars. *Men and Masculinities* 8: 44–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X03257452>

24. Goffman, E. (1969). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Allen Lane.

25. Jewkes Y (2005) Men behind bars. *Men and Masculinities* 8: 44–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X03257452>. P54

26. Ibid p54

27. Walker, L. (2010). "My son gave birth to me": Offending fathers—generative, reflexive and risky? *British Journal of Social Work* 40(5): 1402–1418. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcp063>

*I got three kids and two grandkids. I thought it was about giving my kids everything they wanted, but it wasn't...they'd of [sic] rather have had me around than sat in jail, I provided for them everything that they needed but I wasn't there on an emotional level when they needed me to be there...(Andy)*

Here, Andy acknowledges that although he thought he had 'provided' what his children really wanted, the means that he had used to provide these things, had resulted in a prison sentence which subsequently meant they had lost out on what they really needed. Andy did not go on to detail the impact of his absence on his children but he did express that he 'worries they are a bit too [much] like he was at their age'.

Other participants calculated their failures as fathers by how many of their children's birthdays and Christmases they had spent in prison. These anniversaries, as one of the men explained, marked the 'hardest days in jail' (Christian). For some the sense of failure and the painful reality at the lost opportunity to be fathers were much more profound on release. Mark, one of the longer serving participants, captures this pain and how his means of dealing with it led him back to prison.

*...got released ..met up with my son, I felt like the floor was swallowing me because I haven't seen him since he was three, he was about 16 or something, he just done his exams and did real well and I went back to the hostel and started smoking gear [heroin], they asked for a drug test and I refused and came back*

These 'absent father' experiences support Ugelvik's<sup>28</sup> assertion that the deprivation of family life — especially regarding contact with children — is one of the most painful aspects of incarceration. An important aspect of this pain, he notes, is the male prisoner's inability to live up to the modern fatherhood ideal and to meet the shifting cultural expectations of fathers. The participants feelings of failure have intensified in

the context of changing and binary definitions of contemporary fatherhood. 'Good' fathers are expected to be emotionally present and actively involved in the lives and welfare of their children. In contrast to this is the 'deficit model' of the absent 'bad' father who abandons his paternal responsibilities.

The experiences of these imprisoned fathers were more nuanced than those that are suggested by the binary or false dichotomy that has been set up between 'good' or 'bad' fathers. Interviews revealed that they typically had complex and difficult relationships with the mothers of their children and, in many cases, with their children themselves. Some wanted to have a more

active role in their child's life but — as has been well-reported in penal scholarship — the unique conditions of incarceration are incompatible with family life. Further, in attempts to minimize the pain, 'burden' and worry of their loved ones outside — a number of the participants reported that they thought it easier for everyone concerned to cut any outside contact. Severing or limiting contact with those on the outside, including their children, as Isaac decided to do, not only minimized the risk of compromising hard prison masculine fronts with emotional ties, but was also a sacrifice to protect their children:

*I would never let her bring my son to [a] place like this and see me in here. I don't want him to have anything to do with it. I don't even like talking to him on the phone because I have to lie...(Isaac)*

Isaac's painful decisions to minimise contact with his son demonstrates his attempts to be a good father, disrupting oversimplified binary representations of fatherhood.

#### *Imagined Futures: Breadwinners?*

When exploring the men's own relationships with those they looked up to as role models, most of the participants of the study struggled to identify anyone. The few that did named their fathers as the men they most admired. Their reverence and respect for their fathers was linked mostly to their 'work ethic', how they fulfilled their 'breadwinner' obligations:

The experiences of these imprisoned fathers were more nuanced than those that are suggested by the binary or false dichotomy that has been set up between 'good' or 'bad' fathers.

28. Ugelvik, T. (2014). Paternal pains of imprisonment: Incarcerated fathers, ethnic minority masculinity and resistance narratives. *Punishment & Society* 16(2): 152–168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474513517020>

*...he's a proud man and he's done well for himself, he don't drink, he's got a beautiful home...he was like a proper man, he'd make sure we'd have food on the table all the time...(Christian)*

Though most of the respondents admired their fathers because they fulfilled their roles as protectors and providers through legitimate hard work, one of the men in the study, Gibson, identified his because of his more 'dodgy little schemes' for earning money — albeit ones that were 'never real high-risk things'.

In an attempt to further explore what their idealised masculinities might look like, the men were asked what qualities they thought characterised a real man:

*...a man has to...if he's married and got children, go out and work and provide for his family, looks after his family and just respects anyone that respects them...(Joe)*

*...what makes a man, one that works and provides for his kids, I can't stand people that have kids and don't provide for them...(Marvin)*

*...being able to support his family, being able to work for his family, being brave and being sensible and having polite manners...(Cooper)*

These responses capture the core and pervasive masculine discourse that held significant meaning in all their lives — that a man must be a 'protector', 'provider' or 'breadwinner'

Against the powerful backdrop of political and policy-related discourse that propagates the widespread existence of 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness' and criminality among the working classes<sup>29</sup> the high value that the men placed on the 'breadwinner' model was, to a large extent, inspired by the respondents' role-model fathers or other men of that generation from their neighbourhoods.

The difficult truth of the situation not lost on the respondents was that the attributes for 'being a man' that they held so uncompromisingly close were impossible to fulfil from a prison cell. Further, it was notable that even when 'on the out' most of them had failed to attain or sustain legitimate routes to the breadwinner masculine ideals. It was concerning to find that nearly all the respondents were heavily reliant on this breadwinner ideal when talking about their imagined crime- and prison-free futures post release. One respondent, Billy, insightfully confronted the reality and challenges he faced pursuing a pathway to 'normality' through traditional working class masculine ideals.

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*...I always used to think, if I had a good girlfriend...I had a place with her and a decent job, I used to think them things would be the things to keep me out of prison, but they haven't, because I've had them all...I don't think you ever become rehabilitated fully.. There is always that voice inside you, you could have it so good and have a good job, a good family life but there'd always be, to me personally, the side to me was [sic] somebody could offer you something and you would risk it and end up losing all that...no matter how much money I'm earning, how much I love or marry...*

Billy was among a small minority of respondents who acknowledged past failures of domesticity or work to 'settle' them down. Nearly all, however, believed that a legitimate job and 'keeping' a 'good' woman (and children) would release them from the cycle of crime and imprisonment. Having spent more time in prison than on the outside most of the men had little experience or knowledge of the fundamental societal and economic changes that render their breadwinning hopes ever more remote. Women's increased economic independence and growing presence in a 'feminised' service-based labour market built on deference, precarity and low pay or 'poor work'<sup>30</sup>, leave many

29. See Macdonald, R., Shildrick, T. & Furlong, A. (2014). In search of "intergenerational cultures of worklessness": hunting the Yeti and shooting zombies. *Critical Social Policy* 34(2): 199–220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018313501825>

30. McDowell, L. (2014) The sexual contract: youth, masculinity and the uncertain promise of waged work in Austerity Britain. *Australian Feminist Studies* 29(79): 31–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2014.901281>

(undereducated/ under-skilled) working class men, without the criminal histories or street/prison battled bodies of these respondents, struggling to meet the outdated breadwinner ideal. Reliance on a provider model from their fathers' generation(s), that most failed to meet previously, is evidently a shaky foundation to build their crime and prison free futures.

### **Conclusion**

In shifting from the usual focus on the brutally violent hyper masculine prisoner, this paper has highlighted some of the less-recognised aspects of prison masculinities. It has charted the men's vulnerabilities, failings, fragilities, and desires to live up to the masculine respectability of past generations. The revolving cycle between the streets of impoverished housing estates and prison, from as early as 15 years old for many, was extremely damaging on many levels for these participants and those closest to them. Their prolonged absence and perceived failures at being the kind of men they looked up to left them carrying profound shame and guilt. The Respondents' perceived failures were compounded by the necessity to manipulate and suppress their grief and/or profound emotional pain 'backstage' in the isolation of their prison cell. Such adaptation strategies, though, can only serve to contribute to the continued construction of problematic and dysfunctional forms of masculinity, arguably culminating in the men being released back

into their troubled environments with few solutions and, perhaps, more difficulties than before they were most recently imprisoned.

Their imagined futures, free from these gendered pains of imprisonment, rested heavily on the prospect of the 'breadwinner' model that — for most of the men — had been unattainable or unsustainable in the past. Prison has not equipped these men in a way that enables them to readily navigate the structural challenges that they will face on release. Rather, the experience of imprisonment has served to intensify the same masculine traits that led to their marginalisation and exclusion in the first instance, thereby contributing to trapping these men in the revolving-door cycle of imprisonment. Their experiences have shown that the more sentences they serve the more entrenched their exclusion on the outside becomes and with it their desire to be the men they aspire to be gets further out or reach.

In offering a snapshot of some of the vulnerabilities of a small group of male prisoners, this paper has shown, following much of the valuable scholarship and advocacy focusing on the gender of women in prison, that men 'do gender' too. A greater academic focus and better recognition in policy debates on the gender related pains of imprisonment and struggles experienced by men will go some way to increase our understanding and offer answers to reducing the harms of imprisonment for this group that account for most of the prison population.