



# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

May 2022 No 260

## Book Review

### **Maternal imprisonment and family life: From the caregiver's perspective**

By Natalie Booth

Publisher: Policy Press Shorts

Research

ISBN: 978-1447352297 (Hardback)

Price: £47.99

Families of people in prison is a rich and growing field of research. Much of this research focuses on men in prison, but there has also been increasing interest in the experiences of women and maternal imprisonment specifically. This monograph is a valuable addition to the existing research. Although women represent only a small part of the total prison population in the UK, it cannot be denied that the impact of maternal imprisonment on children is significant and negative.

In this monograph, Natalie Booth makes a number of significant contributions to what we already know about maternal imprisonment. She draws on the experiences of 15 imprisoned mothers in England and Wales, and 24 relatives caring for children of imprisoned mothers. Although this is a relatively small sample, she was able to elicit valuable, in-depth, and often touching testimonies. This monograph does not simply quote from the interviews, but often provides in-depth, contextual stories of the participants, which adds richness to the narrative and helps to bring the findings alive, as well as giving voice to families who are very often rendered voiceless and invisible within policy and society.

In chapter 3, Booth makes a convincing case that families in this context should not be narrowly limited to significant others and immediate nuclear blood kin. In her research, she found that 'the repercussions of losing the mothers to prison were felt by many relatives and friends within their kinship networks' (p. 41). Caring for the children left behind was often a collective venture, but one often undertaken by maternal kin as

opposed to paternal kin. This was reinforced by the fact that some interviewees opted to be interviewed collectively as opposed to individually and spoke in collective 'we' terms. Most of the existing research sees impact of imprisonment on families individually — e.g., on a wife, a child — so this perspective is valuable indeed. Notably, friends were a significant source of support for the family left behind — this particular group has not received much academic or policy attention at all. Fathers were present in a minority of the cases in Booth's sample, albeit not always regularly.

A second original point of analysis pertains to children other than those of the imprisoned mothers. This is a group of children which no research has previously discussed. Booth names them 'doubly invisible children' (p. 50) and they include a wide range of children who are impacted, practically and emotionally, when someone has to look after an imprisoned mother's child. For example, there is a story of one woman who took on the care of her imprisoned relative's baby. She herself had young children, and the baby meant they received less attention and had to cope with the usual disruptions of having a baby in the house (such as noise).

In Chapter 4, Booth discusses how family life was renegotiated after a mother's imprisonment. It is well-known that often, a prison sentence is not expected<sup>1</sup> (Masson, 2019), and therefore there are few opportunities to make appropriate preparations. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that many relatives felt shock and a sense of bereavement when a prison sentence was handed down. When children had to move households (for example, to live with their grandparents), significant adjustments to the whole family's life had to be made. Family members also had to negotiate the imprisoned mother's affairs, such as furniture, finances, and so forth. More

interesting is the manner in which Booth describes caregivers adjusting their own identities; for example, one father noted that he had to 'act like a mother' (p. 87) for his son. Older grandparents had to revert to parenting practices

Chapter 5 recounts the well-known issues faced by families of people in prison; the emotional and practical problems associated with the criminal justice system. Chapter 6 focuses on stigma and social support. This touches on a previously under-researched issue — the challenges of being a non-legal guardian. This was especially pertinent for grandparents of children with a mother in prison and included practical challenges such as changing the child's address with the child's GP. There were also financial costs associated with obtaining Residency Orders, running at times into thousands of pounds. Other well-known financial challenges, including inadequate social welfare support, were also identified. The many axes of stigma (in society, online, in prison) were also identified.

Overall, this is an immensely well-written monograph covering some well-known themes but also shedding light on some issues that have not yet received academic or policy attention. Of special note is the issue of children of non-imprisoned parents who are also affected by imprisonment — the needs of these children have not yet been discussed to date. Secondly, the communal nature of caring for children of women in prison is especially interesting and highlights the diffuse, complex nature of the impact of imprisonment on families; it is not simply spouses and children of people in prison affected, but cousins, parents, friends, and other kin. This is especially pertinent to understand as family structures in modern society become more heterogenous.

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1. Masson, I. (2019). *Incarcerating Motherhood. The Enduring Harms of First Short Periods of Imprisonment on Mothers*. London: Routledge.