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The Needs and Experiences of Prisoners' Families during Long Sentences

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A significant proportion of the prison population in England and Wales are currently serving sentences which can be defined as 'long-term'. Almost half (48 per cent, or 34,416 people) are serving long determinate sentences (more than four years) and 13 per cent (9,110 people) are serving indeterminate sentences,[1] with a minimum number of years to be served in custody ('tariff') and no guaranteed release date. The majority of indeterminately sentenced prisoners — almost 7,000 people — are serving life imprisonment, of whom almost a third will serve at least 20 years in prison, with no guarantee of release.[2] Besides the many consequences that long prison sentences have for those serving them, this paper examines the experiences of families related to prisoners — who often suffer their own hardships whilst enduring the relationships from afar.

Our knowledge of prisoner-family relationships has grown considerably in recent years, matched by important policy interest from Lord Farmer's two reports on the status of family relationships within the men's and women's penal estate.[3] However, there remains little research on the experiences of the families of lifers, specifically. This paper will therefore draw on the literature related to the pains of imprisonment for families of long-term prisoners *more generally,* to consider the problems that families of lifers are likely to face.

During the course of this paper, we highlight particular problems for, and needs of, relatives of prisoners serving long sentences. These include: the risk of family relationships weakening or breaking; families' greater emotional struggles digesting the sentence; difficulties coping with the duration of the sentence; hardships planning for the future; and logistical challenges of maintaining visitation. Our paper concludes by suggesting policy recommendations focused on the needs of lifers and their families. First, we outline some of research on prisoner-family relationships.

Prisoner-family relationships and the impact of demographic diversity

One of the challenges in assessing the impact of long sentences on family is the diverse role and significance of family in the lives of prisoners. More traditional understandings of family encompass common ancestry (e.g. parents and children) or contractual union (intimate partnerships). However, these definitions may not take account of other forms of relation, such as same-sex relationships, foster carers, step-parents, as well as self-defined family in the form of close friendships. A large body of research identifies the deleterious effects of imprisonment on intimate relationships and children especially among male prisoners,[4] but there is little research on more diverse forms of familial relationships.

Family ties can vary depending on the age of prisoner. Fears about release and anxieties about familial relationships after release rank highly among adult prisoners, largely due to worries about having less time to re-build ties that may have broken while in prison. This is a feature which Crawley and Sparks argue can be worse for imprisoned men who have a spouse,[5] as research shows that many intimate relationships which exist at the point of entry into custody can break down, for a variety of reasons.[6]

1. House of Commons (2020). *UK Prison Population Statistics*. London: House of Commons Library.
2. Prison Reform Trust (2021). *Bromley Briefings: Winter 2021*. Available at http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Winter%202021%20Factfile%20final.pdf.
3. Farmer, M. (2017). *The importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*. London: Ministry of Justice; Farmer, M. (2019). *The importance of strengthening female offenders' family and other relationships to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*. London: Ministry of Justice.
4. Lopoo, L. M. and Western, B. (2005). Incarceration and the formation and stability of marital unions. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67(3), pp.721-734; Turney, K. (2015). Liminal men: Incarceration and relationship dissolution. Social Problems 62(4), pp.499-528; Brunton-Smith, I. and McCarthy, D. J. (2017). The effects of prisoner attachment to family on re-entry outcomes: A longitudinal assessment. *British Journal of Criminology* 57(2), pp.463-482.
5. Crawley, E. and Sparks, R. (2006). Is there life after imprisonment? How elderly men talk about imprisonment and release. *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 6(1), pp.63-82.
6. See n. 4.

These include tensions arising from the offence committed, financial or emotional strains imposed by the sentence, or the gradual weakening of ties over time. Contrastingly, young prisoners are less likely to have had the time to form stable intimate relationships prior to prison, and consequently, may be more likely to rely on contact from parent/s, other primary carers or guardians, and siblings, where possible.[7] In the main, it tends to be female family members, such as wives, partners, mothers, or sisters, who provide a disproportionate level of care for prisoners (both male and female).[8]

Considerable gender differences exist in the role and levels of contact with family among male and female prisoners. The theme of trauma tends to be more pronounced in the lives of women compared to those of men, which can impact on family ties.[9] Issues of sexual abuse in the family lives of women prior to prison have been highlighted as more acute than for men,[10] placing restriction on their capacities to draw on such familial resources during the sentence. And for those women with children (according to one estimate, around two thirds of the women's prison population),[11] the prison sentence can have major consequences for both the child and the mother. For mothers, these include significant logistical challenges organising care for children whilst in prison, concern about finances[12] and, for female lifers specifically, the psychological impact of worrying about or missing contact with their children over long periods can render their time in prison even more acutely painful and damaging.[13] For children, parental incarceration can cause psychological harm, reduce educational attainment, and increase financial disadvantage.[14]

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For (younger) men in prison, including lifers, research has shown that their ability to draw on parental support (especially from mothers) has been more consistent.[15] Studies have found, for example, the importance of parents offering support during prison visits on outcomes such as improving relationship closeness.[16] Like women in prison, men experience limits on the potential of family relationships to provide effective resources to support them during the sentence, particularly over the course of a long sentence, including 'life'. Issues of family discord during childhood, including witnessing domestic violence, are commonly reported among male and female prisoners,[17] as are issues pertaining to intergenerational patterns of crime within paternal family relationships.[18] With disproportionate numbers of Black and Asian prisoners serving long sentences, the fallback for family can be acute. With nearly half of Black and ethnic minority communities living in poverty,[19] maintaining visits and assistance during and after the sentence is likely to be an even greater struggle compared to White families. These circumstances can limit the opportunities to seek prosocial support from family, especially if relational ties have been damaged prior to prison. If family members are experiencing their own struggles, this can also limit their ability to offer long

7. Halsey, M. and Deegan, S. (2015). *Young offenders: Crime, prison and struggles for desistance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. McCarthy, D. and Adams, M. (2019). Can family–prisoner relationships ever improve during incarceration? Examining the primary caregivers of incarcerated young men. *British Journal of Criminology* 59(2), pp.378-395.
8. E.g., Condry, R. (2007) *Families shamed: The consequences of crime for relatives of serious offenders*. Cullompton: Willan.
9. Corston, J. (2006). *The Corston Report*. London: Home Office; Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2017). The gendered pains of life imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology* 57(6), pp.1359-1378.
10. Prison Reform Trust (2017) *Women's experiences: How domestic abuse can lead to women's offending*. London: Prison Reform Trust.
11. Epstein, R. (2014). Mothers in prison: The sentencing of mothers and the rights of the child. *Howard League: What is Justice? Working Papers 3/2014*. London: Howard League.
12. Baldwin, L. and Epstein, R. (2017), *Short but not sweet: A study of the impact of short custodial sentences on mothers & their children*. Leicester: De Montfort University.
13. See n.9 (Crewe, Hulley and Wright, 2017)
14. Wakefield, S. and Wildeman, C. (2014). *Children of the prison boom: Mass incarceration and the future of American inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
15. See n.9 (Crewe, Hulley and Wright, 2017) and n.7 (McCarthy & Adams, 2019).
16. See n.4 (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy 2017).
17. Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V. and Booth, N. (2012). *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds. Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*. London: Ministry of Justice
18. Farrington, D. P., Coid, J. W. and Murray, J. (2009). Family factors in the intergenerational transmission of offending. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 19(2), pp.109-124.
19. Butler, P (2020). *Nearly half of BAME UK households are living in poverty*. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/01/nearly-half-of-bame-uk-households-are-living-in-poverty.

term support to those serving their sentences. We now turn to the struggles and challenges that face the families of long-term prisoners.

Challenges facing families of long-term prisoners (including lifers)

Whilst research on the specific experiences of families navigating long-term imprisonment remains limited, we provide a review of broader research on prisoner-family ties which we attempt to configure around the challenges of life and long-term imprisonment.

One key challenge is the duration of the sentence. 'Time' has long been recognised as an attribute of penal power which is exercised over both prisoners and their families.[20] Existing literature finds that families report their experience of time in a similar way to prisoners, who describe 'doing time' alongside their incarcerated loved one. However, many scholars have developed concepts that fit more accurately with families' accounts of 'doing watching',[21] 'doing nothing',[22] or even 'doing the wait'.[23] The essence of 'doing' demonstrates a deeper understanding of activities as continuously repetitive and mundane for both prisoners and their families. Researchers argue that these moments have a 'temporal impact' for both prisoners and their families, which lead to emotions of displacement and emptiness. They can result in families feeling stuck in 'limbo', with no sense of moving on.[24] Adams' conceptualises this as 'hopeful waiting', which describes families' experiences of long periods of waiting while their loved one is on remand. Some families commented that once their loved one was sentenced it was a relief, due to the anxiety and pressure families felt to support their loved ones during the remand period and thereafter the trial. For other families, whose loved one was at a different stage of their custodial experience, hopeful waiting represented the period prior to being reunited again (often for short periods), for example on Release on Temporary License (ROTL).[25] This may be particularly difficult for families of life sentenced or other indeterminate sentenced prisoners, due to the waiting period before ROTL being so long.

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Long term incarceration results in an intensely disrupted role identity for family members, family routines, celebrations and the absence of relatives at crucial life events. For example, Lanskey et al draw on Crewe's interpretation of penal power to understand the emotional responses of families whose loved one is incarcerated [26]. This research, focusing specifically on the experiences of family members with a male father figure in prison, has shown that family members may adopt an alternative father role to fill the gap created by their absence. This is part of a broader strategy to cope that involves having to adapt to an environment that is independent of the imprisoned parent. This has particular implications for families whose loved one is incarcerated over many years and even decades. At the same time, families must negotiate the process of re-incorporating their imprisoned loved one back into their lives on release, if they choose to do so. Comfort explored the experiences of women with partners who were serving long term sentences, in which she found that time was reconstructed to fit family time around the demands of prison life — known as the 'carceral home'.[27] She describes this as being 'between a rock and a hard place'.[28] For these women and their

20. Sykes, G. (1958). *The Society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment. *Punishment and Society* 13(5), pp.509-529; Lanskey, C., Losel, F., Markson, L. and Souza, K. (2018). Prisoners families, penal power and referred pains of imprisonment. In R. Condry and P. Scharff-Smith (Eds.,). *Prisons, Punishment and the family: Towards a new sociology of punishment* (pp. 181-195). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
21. Kohn, T. (2009). Waiting on death row. In G. Hage (Ed.) *Waiting* (pp.128-228.). Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing.
22. Armstrong, S. (2018). The cell and the corridor: Imprisonment as waiting, and waiting the mobile. *Time and Society* 27 (2), pp.113-154.
23. Foster, R. (2019). Doing the wait: An exploration into the waiting experiences of prisoners' families. *Time and Society* 28(2), pp.459-477.
24. See n.23. Also see: Moran, D. (2013). Carceral geography and the spatialities of prison visiting: Visitation, recidivism and hyper incarceration. *Environment and planning D: Society and space* 31(1), pp.174-190; Adams, M. (2017). *"We are living their sentence with them…": How prisoners' families experience life inside and outside prison spaces in Scotland*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the West of Scotland.
25. See n.24 (Adams, 2017)
26. See n. 20 (Lanskey et al., 2018 and Crewe, 2011).
27. Comfort, M. (2009). *Doing time together*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

28 Comfort, M. (2003). In the tube at San Quentin: The "secondary prisonization" of women visiting inmates. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32(1), pp.77-107 (p 491).

partners, time was used to enact family practices that were allowed for some prisoners in the Californian Prison System, including activities such as cooking and eating together; sexual relations; and even getting married. In this way, Comfort indicates that time is centred on reaffirming 'family life' but it is also about the hope for a better life post incarceration.

The experience of receiving controversial and typically lengthy sentences, such as Individual Public Protection (IPP), and convictions secured using the legal doctrine of 'joint enterprise' have led to different outcomes for prisoners, and their families. IPPs (a form of indeterminate sentence) and joint enterprise — a doctrine which has led to many individuals being sentenced to life for a murder committed by another person[29] — have been widely condemned as resulting in disproportionately punitive outcomes. From the perspective of prisoners, perceiving their conviction and sentence to be illegitimate, unfair or unduly harsh in this context can make accepting their imprisonment difficult, potentially impeding the 'settling down' process needed to establish personal stability in prison.[30] There are instances where the perceived injustice of the sentence can help family to support the prisoner further, by feeling aggrieved by their negative treatment.[31] However, we should be careful not to underestimate the personal strain and financial consequences for prisoners' families who are challenging their conviction or sentence. Annison and Condry's study of the families of those convicted under the Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentence highlights the immense difficulties for families left in limbo regarding the status of their relatives' sentence, most profoundly arising out of the indeterminate nature of this type of sentence, chiefly the difficulties being able to plan a life outside, and a lack of hope for the future.[32] The uncertainty associated with such indeterminate sentences, including life sentences, can also inflict significant mental health consequences on prisoners' families.[33] For individuals convicted of murder, the seriousness of the offence, particularly when it is high-profile can further add to the stigma which families experience.[34] Some parallels can be drawn with the forms of 'disenfranchised grief' experienced by families of men and women on death row in the United States, during which their capacities to grieve openly is supressed by the stigma of the crime and sentence.[35]

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Psychological struggles which long-term prisoners face, especially during earlier stages of adaptation to their sentence,[36] may limit capacities to cope and connect meaningfully with family, with family members facing similar struggles.[37] Kotova writes that long sentences can increasingly risk 'institutionalising' the prisoner, and in so doing, create psychological distance from family members in the process.[38] Institutionalisation can involve a combination of forming new routines both inside (for the prisoner) and outside prison (for family members) creating challenges of synchronising their lives, impeding the ability on both sides to communicate on particular days and at certain times. At more extreme levels, emotional distance and trauma experienced by the prisoner can create frustration and impose difficulties in maintaining relationships with family. For family members, these

29. Williams, P. and Clarke, B. (2016). *Dangerous associations: Joint enterprise, gangs and racism*. London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.
30. Hulley, S., Crewe, B. and Wright, S. (2019). Making sense of 'joint enterprise' for murder: Legal legitimacy or instrumental acquiescence? *British Journal of Criminology* 59(6), pp.1328-1346.
31. See n.27.
32. Annison, H. M. J. and Condry, R. (2019). The pains of indeterminate imprisonment for family members. *Prison Service Journal* (241), pp.11-19.
33. McConnell, M. and Raikes, B. (2019). "It's not a case of he'll be home one day": The impact on families of sentences of Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP). *Child Care in Practice* 25(4), pp.349-366; Straub, C. and Annison, H. (2020). The mental health impact of parole on families of indeterminate sentenced prisoners in England and Wales. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 30(6), pp.341-349.
34. See n.8. Also see: Kotova, A (2015). "He has a life sentence, but I have a life sentence to cope with as well": The experiences of intimate partners of offenders serving long sentences in the United Kingdom. In J.A. Arditti and T. Le Roux (Eds.,). *And Justice for All: Families & the Criminal Justice System* (pp. 85-103). Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing.
35. Jones, S. and Beck, E. (2007). Disenfranchised grief and non-finite loss as experienced by the families of death row inmates, *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 54(4), pp.281-299.
36. Crewe, Hulley and Wright (2017) define these emotional transitions to long sentences as particularly acute at the early stages of the sentence. See n.9.
37. See n.34 (Kotova, 2015). Also see McCarthy, D. and Adams, M. (forthcoming)*The Impact of Youth Imprisonment on the Lives of Parents*. London: Routledge.
38. See n.34 (Kotova, 2015)

ordeals may be significant, resulting in them finding it more difficult to reach out for support from those around them, such as friendship groups or even wider family members.[39] Kotova further notes that some family members may experience threats or perceive their lives to be in danger through their familial association with the prisoner. The use of 'cover stories' by family members to hide the reasons for the absence of their family member in prison can become more stressful to maintain in the event of long-term imprisonment, especially where the crime itself may have been publicised in the media, and thus difficult to conceal.[40] Opportunities for family members to gain support and recognition from others is therefore constrained by the serious nature of the offence. Furthermore, decisions to maintain ties with the relative in prison may also bring condemnation from close friends and family, potentially creating extended periods of shame experienced for those persons closely related to the prisoner.

Overarching concerns for prisoners' families during long sentences also involve the significant challenges that surround visitation. These include long distances to travel to the prison, high costs of travel, difficulties taking time off work/caring, and at times, the perceived unsuitability of the visitation environment for family interactions. If family members continue to maintain contact for the duration of a long sentence, the cumulative process of long-term visitation is likely to be great in terms of financial cost and both physical and emotional resources. Maintaining contact with children can be a particular challenge, especially where the prisoner may have been a main caregiver prior to the sentence, as is more typically the case for incarcerated women than their male counterparts. Although a higher volume of children is affected by paternal imprisonment, the caregiving consequences for mothers in prison can be more acute, with higher risks of children being taken into care in cases where no alternative carers are available. Estimates suggest that approximately 312,000 children in England and Wales are impacted by parental imprisonment annually.[41] While 45 per cent of male prisoners and 62 per cent of female prisoners reported living with their children before custody, around half of women reported living alone with their children, compared to less than one in ten men.[42] In cases of long-term imprisonment, the absence of normative time spent with children is likely to result in considerable challenges in building or re-building relationships on release, if contact is possible at all. In this way, maintaining contact depends on the extent to which family members wish to continue the relationships, or in some situations, whether prisoners may choose to cut relational ties.[43]

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Policy implications

We have sought to provide a brief overview of some of the main problems impacting prisoner-family relationships and how these are likely to apply in the context of prisoners serving life sentences. Despite the growth in research on long-term imprisonment,[44] assessments of the specific impact of life-sentences on families are limited. Highlighted below are several key policy implications, which build from the insights outlined in this paper.

Different stages of a life sentence may create different challenges of coping and maintaining connections with family. Based on accounts of the prisoner journey through long life sentences,[45] it is probable that 'family' may take on a different form of meaning and importance during different stages of the sentence. This warrants specific interventions to support positive family interactions during these periods. Prisoners in the early phases of their sentence may not have sufficient Incentives Earned Privileges (IEP) to allow more visits, particularly if their behaviour (linked to the initial emotional impact of the sentence) has led to a reduction in IEP level. Given the importance of visits especially during early adjustment to the sentence, specific interventions at this stage may help

39. See also n.8.
40. See n.8.
41. Kincaid, S., Roberts, M. and Kane, E. (2019). *Children of prisoners*. London: Crest.
42. See n.17 (pp. 19-20).
43. Pleggenkuhle, B., Huebner, B. M. and Summers, M. (2018). Opting out: The role of identity, capital, and agency in prison visitation. *Justice Quarterly* 35(4), pp.726-749.
44. E.g., Irwin, J. (2010). *Lifers: Seeking redemption in prison*. New York: Routledge; Appleton, C. (2010). Life after life imprisonment. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
45. See n. 44 (Crewe, Hulley and Wright, 2020).

alleviate some of the aforementioned challenges. Family-friendly visitation, especially facilities which reflect the needs of children, should also be prioritised.[46] Access issues regarding prison visits remain a challenge, including high financial costs of visiting for many families. Although the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme remains available to provide financial help to families visiting, many families continue to find this a struggle to undertake and request assistance in completing the necessary paperwork.

There needs to be further access to counselling and family therapy to meet the needs of families of life sentenced prisoners and the distinct pains they face. This would also be an effective mechanism to help address potential conflicts in prisoner-family relationships, as well the need to facilitate open and confidential surroundings to communicate.[47] Wider approaches aimed at delivering therapeutic goals in prison and prisoner management can assist in cultivating a more positive penal environment for desistance and other outcomes of personal (and familial) growth.[48] Finally, opportunities for more regular pre-release family contact, such as planned time with family integrated as part of Release on Temporary License (ROTL), would also be a worthwhile policy suggestion to consider, enabling smoother transitions into the community following resettlement.

Conclusion

In amongst the growth in the use of life sentences, and recognition of the harms which these sentences can cause prisoners, this paper has provided a brief outline of the issues which also impact family members. We conclude by arguing that the specific needs of both prisoners and their families need to be more paramount issues for prison policy and practice. We highlight many of the hardships which families face, together with insight into the greater burden which certain groups face more than others based on, for example, gender and racial differences. Finally, we also raise questions about the limits of family support, and the challenges sustaining relationships — factors which can have important influence on prisoners' coping mechanisms, particularly during life sentences.

46. See n.3 (Farmer, 2017).
47. Roberts, A., Onwumere, J., Forrester, A., Huddy, V., Byrne, M., Campbell, C., Jarrett, M., Phillip, P. and Valmaggia, L. (2017). Family intervention in a prison environment: A systematic literature review. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 27, pp.326-340.
48. Smith, P. and Schweitzer, M. (2012). The therapeutic prison. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 28(1), pp.7-22.