

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

July 2018 No 238



Family Matters

A critical examination of family visits for imprisoned mothers and their families

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Whole families can experience serious disruptions and disadvantages when a mother is imprisoned.¹ The enforced separation generated by prison creates challenges for sustaining meaningful mother-child relationships. This paper focuses on 'family visits'; which are visiting opportunities generally designed to provide extended time and interaction between imprisoned parents and their children in the prison setting. The paper draws on the author's doctoral research findings which explored the lives of families following the mother's incarceration in England and Wales. Qualitative data was collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fifteen imprisoned mothers and twenty-four caregivers (comprised of family members and friends) looking after children of female prisoners. Chiming with previous research, thematic data analysis revealed how family visits were highly valued and appreciated by families as they provided a special opportunity to engage in more 'normalised' family practices. However, extending prior knowledge, this study also identified how institutional barriers in the prison setting could hinder or prevent families from accessing and participating in family days. Practical recommendations attempt to respond to these issues, and to improve access and support for mother-child relationships during the mother's incarceration.

Mothers in prison

The criminal justice system may only be charged with the responsibility of the prisoner—but when that prisoner is also a parent then we need to acknowledge that their custodial sentence will interfere with family life. Estimates suggest that 18,000 children experience separation from their incarcerated mothers every year in England and Wales.² Relationships with children will be affected for *all* imprisoned parents, but the upheavals and repercussions are more acute when that parent had lived with their dependent children prior to their sentence. This applies to the majority of mothers in prison; as most were primary caregivers before their incarceration.³ As a result, mother-child relationships are seriously affected, as the daily contact and interactions at home become unachievable when a mother is incarcerated. The 'normal things' which are part of *doing* everyday family life, cannot be performed by imprisoned mothers⁴ as Esther explains below.

Just normal things that I would have been doing, it doesn't have to be anything overly exciting, just something normal. Put them to bed; wash their hair, something like that (Esther, mother of two children)⁵

We know that prison, through its nature and functioning, is not an environment well-suited to mothering practices⁶ or identities.⁷ Nevertheless, most women enter prison for non-violent offences (80 per

1. Booth, N., (2017a) *Maternal Imprisonment: a Family Sentence* in Hudson, J., Needham, C., and Heins, E., (eds) *Social Policy Review 29: Analysis and Debate in Social Policy. The Policy Press and Social Policy Association: Bristol.*
2. Corston, J. (2007) *The Corston Report: A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System.* London: Home Office. www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf.
3. Caddle, D., and Crisp, D., (1997) *Imprisoned Women and Mothers.* London: Home Office Research Study 162.
4. Morgan, D.H.J., (1999) Risk and family Practices: Accounting for change and fluidity in family life. In: E.B. Silvia, and C. Smart eds. *The New family?* London: Sage publications. Morgan, D.H.J., (2011) *Rethinking Family Practices.* London: Palgrave MacMillan.
5. See 1 also.
6. Enos, S., (2001). *Mothering from the inside.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press. See 1 also.
7. Baldwin, L., (2017) *Motherhood Disrupted: Reflections of Post Prison Mothers.* *Emotion, Space and Society.* See 5 also.

cent), and serving sentences which are very short in length, often lasting six months or less.⁸ These circumstances, as well as the maternal and familial status of many women in prison, have contributed to the argument that most women should be diverted away from custody.⁹

Caregivers assuming responsibility for the children of women in prison are often put under immense social, economic and emotional strain. Generally it is family members (often grandparents and female relatives) who take care of the mothers' children; with nine per cent being looked after by their fathers; and 14 per cent going into social care.¹⁰ Yet, there is little welfare support for family members in these circumstances in England and Wales;¹¹ making them the 'unsung heroes' of maternal imprisonment.¹² The caregiver's role also involves supporting mother-child relationships during the sentence; often by facilitating contact.

Mother-child contact

Special attention shall be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the best interests of both (Rule 4 (1))

Prisoners are permitted contact with friends and family through telephone, letter-writing and prison visits. The aforementioned Prison Rule (1999) indicates the importance of supporting prisoners' family ties, and these sentiments extend into several policy and penal documents that have linked family ties to reducing re-offending and better resettlement outcomes.¹³

Prison visits have received considerable academic and policy interest in recent years, especially for parent-child contact.¹⁴ Often, they are the only face-to-face contact which imprisoned parents and their children

can achieve; providing important space, time, and opportunities to (re)connect.

However, because women are a minority group in the prison population, there are only twelve women's prisons serving England and Wales. Therefore, families often have to travel much further to visit a woman in prison, the average journey being 60 miles, meanwhile some families travel up to 150 miles.¹⁵ This can be both time-consuming and costly. Convicted prisoners are permitted one two hour social visit every fortnight which means that children and families could be spending more time travelling to the prison, than with their mother.

Prison guidelines state that support for family ties during visits must be appropriately weighed against public protection and security.¹⁶ However, restrictions imposed during social visits often limit physical interactions (e.g. hugs and kisses) as well as opportunities to move around (e.g. playing with children), which can seriously undermine attempts at sustaining meaningful mother-child relationships.¹⁷ For this reason, family visits are often preferred by families.

What are family visits?

Family time in a more normalised environment [for a] better quality of experience and interaction for prisoners and their children¹⁸

Family visits are sometimes referred to as 'family days' or 'children's days', and are designed to provide extended time and interactions between imprisoned parents and their children in the prison setting. Family visits are typically in place in most prisons and usually take place once a month, or in school holidays. These visits are afforded to prisoners with children (and sometimes grandchildren) in addition to their statutory provision of social visits.

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8. Prison Reform Trust (PRT) (2016) *Bromley Briefing Prison Factfile, Autumn 2016*. London: Prison Reform Trust.
 9. Booth, N., (2017b) Prisoners' Children and Families. *Criminal Law and Justice Weekly*, Vol: 181 (15), pp. 246-248 See 5 & 6 also.
 10. Minson, S., Nadin, R., Earle, J., (2015) *Sentencing of Mothers: Improving the sentencing process and outcomes for mothers with dependent children*. Prison Reform Trust. Accessed at http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/sentencing_mothers.pdf
 11. See 8 also.
 12. Raikes, Ben (2016) Unsung Heroines: Celebrating the care provided by grandmothers for children with parents in prison. *Probation Journal*. ISSN 0264-5505.
 13. Lord Farmer Review (2017) The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime. Ministry of Justice. McCarthy, D., and Brunton-Smith, I., (2017) Prisoner-family ties during imprisonment: Reassessing resettlement outcomes and the role of visitation. *Prison Service Journal*, Issue 233, pp.23 – 27.
 14. Hutton, M., (2016) Visiting Time: A tale of two prisons. *Probation Journal*, Vol. 63 (3) pp.347-361. Sharratt, K., and Cheung, R., (2014) Incentivising Prison Visits: New research findings on the Needs of Children with Imprisoned Mothers and Fathers. *Prison Service Journal*, 216, pp.24 – 29.
 15. See 3 also.
 16. National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2011. *Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 16/ 2011*.
 17. Booth, N., (2016) *Families separated by bars – the home truths about sending mothers to prison*. The Conversation. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/families-separated-by-bars-the-home-truths-about-sending-mothers-to-prison-56626>. Booth, N., (2018) Maintaining Family Ties: The Disparities between Policy and Practice Following Maternal Imprisonment in England And Wales in Gordon, L., (ed) *Contemporary research and analysis on the children of prisoners: invisible children*. Pp.155-171. Cambridge: Cambridge Publishers Ltd. See 1 & 9 also.
 18. See 16 also.

Research evidence has found that family visits are characterised by fewer security restrictions than standard visits, fostering a more relaxed environment.¹⁹ The incarcerated parent is allowed to move around more freely and engage in a range of activities with their children, such as crafts, sports or sharing a meal together.²⁰ These basic family-friendly activities are not generally available to mothers and children during standard visits or at any other point during the custodial sentence.

The environment and ethos surrounding family visits enable imprisoned parents to 'momentarily restore their role as a parental figure',²¹ and can lead to an increased sense of involvement in their children's lives. In comparison to standard visits, the 'normalised' environment which family visits provide is considered to be more conducive for more meaningful and quality parent-child interactions.²² Thus, being able to access and participate in family visits is critically important for several imprisoned mothers and children seeking to remain connected.

Methods

This paper focuses on one theme identified in the narratives of family members experiencing maternal imprisonment in England and Wales. The findings are drawn from the authors' doctoral research which qualitatively explored family after a mother was incarcerated. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between May and November 2015 with fifteen imprisoned mothers, and twenty-four caregivers (family and friends) to female prisoners' children. The study received ethical approval from University of Bath and the National Research Council who are responsible for all research conducted within and around prisons in England and Wales.²³

The imprisoned mothers were recruited from one prison, whilst the caregivers were recruited across four female prisons. Note that the family members in the two cohorts were not related (e.g. the mothers and caregivers were not from the same families). The cohort of mothers opted into the research after

information posters and leaflets were distributed around the prison. The researcher met with every mother before the interview to ensure participation was voluntary, and out of recognition for the sensitive nature of the research topic. All prison interviews were conducted in a private office in the prison. The cohort of caregivers were primarily recruited in prison visitors centres, with a few (n=4) learning about the research through a third party (i.e. prison family engagement worker). Interviews with the caregivers generally took place at their homes or at another location of their choosing, and at a time convenient to them.

Informed consent was gained verbally and in writing, and all participants agreed to have their interview audio-recorded. Interviews lasted anywhere between 40 minutes and 2 hours. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and thematic analysis²⁴ identified key themes. Over half of the families in the study participated in family visits, and although it was evident that these visits were highly appreciated, there were also some issues in their operation. Four key themes are discussed, together with recommendations which suggest ways to improve the support for mother-child relationships during family visits.

'On the family day the officers aren't dressed up as officers, you can get up, you can interact with your children more.'

Valuing family visits: 'It's a chance for us to connect'

On the family day the officers aren't dressed up as officers, you can get up, you can interact with your children more. You can go with money and pay for things at the snack bar, they make it comfortable...and you get 4 hours, 4 and a half hours, so the difference between a 2 hour visit where you're sat on the chair...compared to a family day where you can get up and you can play with your kids and you can make cakes and then you can go to the dining hall and you can have dinner with them (Stephanie, mother of seven children)

19. See 16 also.

20. Ibid.

21. Dixey, R., and Woodall, J., (2012) The significance of 'the visit' in an English category-B prison: views from prisoners, prisoners' families and prison staff. *Community, Work and Family*, Vol: 15 (1) pp.29-47.

22. See 16 also.

23. National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2014. *Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 22/2014*. London: HMSO.

24. Braun, V., and Clarke, V., (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol: 3 (2), pp.77-101.

The families' narratives revealed how family visits were highly valued because they provided time and space where the mothers could interact and connect with their children in a comfortable, relaxed environment. As Stephanie's extract shows, family visits were different from the more restrictive environment found in social visits. She reveals how she preferred the family visits because she could move about and play with her children, and could engage in fun activities with them. In a similar way, Eve explains how eating a meal with her older children (aged 19 and 13) at the family visit provided her with a unique and useful opportunity to connect with them, and better tease out, and discuss, any issues.

We can sit at the table and eat food and discuss any issues, any problems that have been happening...it's a chance for us to kind of connect and deal with any problems or issues and quite often enough there are [problems] and we get them sorted out (Eve, mother of two)

Families were focussed on the interactive nature of family days, highlighting how opportunities to do these 'normal' things were not otherwise available in the prison setting. Interestingly, these findings support recent sociological understandings of contemporary family life which have emphasised the importance of doing family practices and being actively involved in a given role.²⁵

Further, in revealing their appreciation of family days, several of the mothers and caregivers suggested how the children also preferred these visits over social visits. This supports previous findings from research undertaken with children of prisoners in the UK.²⁶ As one Grandmother, Annette, explains, her five year old Grandson always hoped for their visit to be one of the 'special' ones because he knew that this would enable him to play with his mum.

He loves it 'cause mummy can get up and play, oh yeah he loves it. He asks every time we visit 'is it one of these special days Nanna?' It does make a lot difference that the prisoners getting up with their children and can go and play with them instead of just sat

there with the child, it makes a big difference (Annette, grandmother caregiver)

There was an overriding agreement that family days provided a special and unique time for families to connect and were, therefore, precious to the families in this study. However, because the family days were organised and executed within the prison, the families also identified some issues with them. These are revealed in the themes below.

Considering family circumstances: 'Are we there yet?'

Family visits often take place in the morning. Considering we know that many families live on average 60 miles from the prison this meant that

caregivers had to get children up, dressed and ready early in the day to make their lengthy journey to the prison. As Terry explains, ensuring his grandson was at the prison for 9 o'clock start involved getting up several hours beforehand.

We found it was not fair on our grandson, having to get him up 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning to get ready and get up there to be there for 9 o'clock (Terry, grandfather caregiver)

There was an overriding agreement that family days provided a special and unique time for families to connect...

The travelling distance was further compounded when family days were held in the week, rather than on a weekend. Usually when the family visits took place on weekdays, this was during school holidays though, on occasion, they ran during term time. This sometimes happened because visiting children lived several miles away from the prison—and in another county with a different term timetable—their school holidays did not necessarily coincide. As one Grandmother, Shelia, explains, travelling through the morning rush hour to get to the prison's family day at 9 o'clock on a Friday, was stressful.

If we go early on a Saturday morning it's not too bad because we can do it in about an hour and 15 minutes, because there's nobody going to work or using the motorway at that time on a Saturday morning, but they've changed the family days recently to a Friday

25. See 11 also.

26. Please note: as this study did not directly engage with the children in these families, the thoughts and feelings expressed by the mothers' and caregivers were not corroborated by the children. See also 16 (Sharratt and Cheung).

and that has been a nightmare because you've still got people going to work and you're queuing up in traffic jams and that and you've got my Grandson in the back [of the car saying] 'How much longer? How much longer? Are we there yet?' (Shelia, grandmother caregiver)

This is not the first occasion when the 'time' of prison visits has received criticism. Social visits which take place mid-afternoon can clash with school times—making it more difficult for children to visit their parent in prison.²⁷ In a similar way, the findings from this study highlight the importance of taking into consideration the needs and circumstances of the families hoping to make the most out of family days. Thus, the first recommendation from this study proposes that prisons acknowledge the long distances families travel to the prison when making plans for the time and date of the family days. On a practical level, this would improve the accessibility of family days, and remove some of the logistical stresses and strains for caregivers.

Prioritising family life: 'It's not enough time'

There can be several hundred women housed in a prison, but each family day can only accommodate a certain number of mothers and children. As we know, family days are highly valued by families; making them popular and, sometimes, also over-subscribed. However, the mothers (and hence the caregivers) were not told whether they had secured a place on an upcoming family day until a few days beforehand. As staff put a lot of time and effort into co-ordinating the family visit in and around the prison, there may be very good reason for the delay in this communication. However, for the caregivers, this causes issues for preparing for the visits in advance.

They tell my daughter say on the Monday and the family day might be on the Wednesday but for me to get time off work, it's not enough time so she said 'just book it anyway Mum, in case I do get it' (Janice, grandmother caregiver)

Janice's extract shows just how important participation on the family day was; as despite not knowing whether a place had been secured, her daughter encouraged her to book the time off work 'just in case'. However, she also explains how the late notice of a secured place did not give her much opportunity to book time off from work, to make sure she could take her grandchildren to see their mum.

In addition to organising this journey around other commitments (e.g. work), this late notice also created challenges for families both logistically (e.g. having access to a car or booking train travel), and financially (e.g. affording the travel costs). As Carly explains, families also spend a lot of time and money planning a visit, especially when travelling from afar, as with her family who were travelling 200 miles from rural Wales.

Because they're coming from so far away, that's why the family day visit is better...but they're not sure what they're doing completely, but I think they're planning to hire a car, and my mum's boyfriend will drive them...but well, we'll just have to see. (Carly, mother of two)

Social visits which take place mid-afternoon can clash with school times—making it more difficult for children to visit their parent in prison.

On the day, the prison controls and steers the running of the family visit. This means that the family day is subject to institutional operations, including delays brought about by staff shortages. Claudia recalls the delays she experienced with her nine year old grandson at the last family day they attended. Of particular concern was that the staff delays caused several family members—including young children—to be left waiting in the rain outside the locked visitors centre, getting cold and wet ahead of their visit.

There was a family day last week and they [the officers] were supposed to be down by quarter past nine [to open the visitors centre], they turned up at quarter to 10 and we were supposed to be in family day for 10 o'clock...it's the waiting and children stood out in the rain...and the kids were soaked, absolutely soaked, it was unbelievable and we only actually got up to the family day at quarter to 11, it were really bad (Claudia, grandmother caregiver)

27. Barnardo's (2014) Just visiting. Experiences of children visiting prisons. Available from: <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/just-visiting.pdf>

Barriers to participation on family visits which are produced by operational delays and procedures within the prison institution, such as those described here, can affect the families overall experience of visiting. Hence, ensuring that families are treated thoughtfully and with respect both before, and during, the family visit is imperative for facilitating quality mother-child contact. These sentiments echo Lord Farmer's review findings²⁸ which reported that family life can often receive little priority or precedence in the prison setting. Thus, the second recommendation from this study proposes that the needs of families are afforded higher status both in the organisation and delivery stages of the family visit.

Prison transfers: 'I was shipped out'

The day before my family day I was shipped out. I was devastated...I was looking forward to it, the kids were looking forward to it, and then they shipped me out...there was a big gap before I saw my kids again.
(Leanne, mother of two)

Prison transfers can occur with or without consultation with the individual prisoner about their wishes and with little notice. The mothers' accounts indicated that they were generally told about their transfer less than a day before it was scheduled. Although this is necessary of security reasons, in some instances, this meant some mothers were moved shortly before a visit with their children—which subsequently delayed their face-to-face contact. As Leanne explains, she was transferred the day before a family visit which left her devastated because it was a few months before she could arrange for her children to visit again. Yet, this is not the first time that prison transfers have been identified as problematic for family ties.²⁹ Thus, the third and final recommendation from this study emphasises how prison transfers should take into consideration the maternal and familial needs of imprisoned women, and most importantly, should not be obstructing or hindering family ties.

Concluding remarks

This paper has drawn on the lived experiences and perspectives of imprisoned mothers and caregivers (family and friends) looking after female prisoners' children in England and Wales. Echoing previous research, it is evident how highly valued and appreciated family visits are for these separated family members. The study reported how the nature and format of family visits provided time and space for mothers and children to (re)connect and do 'normal' everyday activities.

Extending prior knowledge, the findings also highlighted some limitations in the current operations of family visits, and recommendations from the study sought to address these inadequacies by proposing that; 1) prisons acknowledge the long distances families travel to the prison when making plans for the time and date of the family days; 2) the needs of families are afforded higher status both in the organisation and delivery stages of the family visit; 3) prison transfers should take into consideration the maternal and familial needs of imprisoned women.

Effectively supporting mother-child relationships will be beneficial to families and wider society both in the short and long term, as in almost all instances, an imprisoned mother will return to her children once her sentence is served. The quality of visits, rather than the existence of visits, has been identified as a key indicator for positive resettlement outcomes,³⁰ indicating why it is important that family-friendly initiatives, such as family visits, are better supported and available. Indeed, implementing these recommendations has the potential to have a considerable and positive impact the lives and experiences of families.

Of course, if women were appropriately diverted away from custody, then there would be less need to rely on visiting for mother-child contact in the future. However (and for now) failure to take forward the three simple recommendations from this study could unnecessarily hinder quality and meaningful mother-child contact, which is as we know, essential during this period of painful separation, and also for future relationships.

28. See 15 also.

29. Ibid, and Woolf (1991) An inquiry into Prison Disturbances. Available from: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Woolf%20report.pdf>

30. See 15 also.