



research article

Relational trauma: the impact on family relationships of maternal imprisonment

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This article presents findings on the impact of maternal imprisonment on wider relationships within the family. Previous research has detailed the significant impact that maternal imprisonment may have on mothers and their children. Relational theory suggests that connections and relationships may be more important for women and that this has an impact on desistance and recovery. This article applies relational theory to the wider impacts of maternal imprisonment, presenting new findings on the intergenerational family impacts. This includes impacts on the mother-child relationship and older children (aged 13+), and mothers' relationships with kinship carers, particularly grandmothers. The evidence presented shows how relationships within the family are often irreparably harmed by imprisonment and what can be termed 'relational trauma'. Findings suggest that the significant impact that maternal imprisonment has on the wider family should be considered when sentencing mothers to custodial sentences.

Keywords family • relational • prison • mothers • trauma

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Introduction

The imprisonment of women, and in particular mothers, is increasingly questioned primarily because the majority of women are in custody for non-violent offences and minor offences (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2022). However, despite rates of female imprisonment continuing to reduce over the last five years in England, 500 additional prison places for women have been proposed by the UK government (Ministry of Justice, 2021). It is already known that women's imprisonment has a greater impact on children in terms of the increased likelihood of children moving out of their home, and being cared for by the state, when a mother is imprisoned (Booth, 2017; Minson, 2019; Baldwin, 2022). What is less well researched, is the traumatic impact on family relationships, particularly those with older children (13+ years old) and kinship carers, which continue to add layers of disadvantage during and after custody.

In recent years, the significance of maintaining family ties for those in prison has been higher on the agenda, primarily as a route to reducing reoffending. Lord Farmer was commissioned by the UK government to review how strengthening family ties could benefit men in custody (Farmer, 2017). The initial report describes family ties as the 'golden thread' that should be running throughout work with people in prison. A second review, focused specifically on women in custody, acknowledges that many women in custody have had profoundly negative family experiences, particularly regarding abuse and intimate partner violence (Farmer, 2019). It recognises that for women, family is not always a safe and positive influence, whereas for men the opposite is often true, with wives, female partners and mothers comprising the majority of visitors to men in custody. The recommendations place an emphasis on diversion from custody and better consideration of the needs of women, particularly mothers.

This article proposes that rehabilitation needs to be thought of more holistically, including the effects on the whole family unit. Relational theory is based on the idea that people interact with the world in an interconnected capacity (Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982). It is proposed that women are more likely to develop a sense of self and self-worth where their actions arise out of and lead back to connections with others (Covington, 1998). Here, theory suggests that women, more so than men, are likely to be motivated by connections and relationships. In terms of maternal imprisonment, this means that disrupting familial relationships will be more harmful and problematic for women than for men. The disruption to relationships caused by maternal imprisonment may be understood as causing 'relational trauma' for both mothers, their children and wider family members (Alexander, 2013).

Previous research has used relational theory to investigate desistance primarily in terms of the positive effects of relationships (Gálnander, 2020; Rutter and Barr, 2021). This article will further consider whether maternal imprisonment results in relational trauma (Alexander, 2013; Schore, 2013) and how this affects those concerned. Relational trauma understood within relational theory, is defined as trauma that arises due to disruption of a relationship with a caregiver, as a child. This can include abuse, enmeshment and abandonment. Relational trauma often disrupts attachment bonds, resulting in emotional and relationship impacts (Weld, 2014). Relational trauma is also cited as leading to difficulties managing emotions, making sense of events and feelings of shame (Weld, 2014). This article widens the definition of relational trauma to include the impacts on mothers and grandmothers, seeing the relationship impacts as bi-directional, rather than solely affecting the child/ren. It will be argued that maternal imprisonment and the resulting enforced separation of mother and child can cause relational trauma depending on the circumstances of the family and the problems that ensue. It is proposed that this relational trauma can also be experienced by mothers and grandmothers widening the definition of relational aspects of trauma. The evidence presented will show that this experience is significant for older children and younger children, and for relationships with kinship carers.

Criminalised mothers and family relationships

Increasingly there are calls for a more gender-specific approach to women in prison and across the criminal justice system. Historically, women have been marginalised

within the system due to their small number, and this has led to an approach that often fails to take women's and mother's needs into account (Carlen, 2013). Recently there has been a significant increase in gender-specific approaches and attempts to make changes relating to women's needs. Trauma-informed approaches and research with women in custody have additionally highlighted women's victimisation histories which in many cases relate to their offending (DeHart, 2008; Tripodi and Pettus-Davis, 2012; DeHart et al, 2014). However, many will argue there is still more to achieve (Auty et al, 2023). Probation services in many parts of England also provide female-only groups and services, and in some areas, women's centres provide a number of services in one place (National Offender Management Service, 2013).

For many women, their trauma experiences stem from close relationships either within the family or with intimate partners. It is clear how the role of relationships is intricately tied up with women's offending (Kreis et al, 2016; Barlow and Weare, 2019). Pathways theory, which identifies women's victimisation and life histories, has sought to highlight gender-specific routes into women's offending, arguing that the influences identified can often be very different from those for men and thus require another approach (Daly, 1992; Salisbury and Van Voorhis, 2009; DeHart et al, 2014). Although for men, there is evidence that relationships with intimate partners, family and children may be a stabilising factor with great importance for desistance, this is often not true for women. Some research illustrates how maintaining the mothering role or reconnecting with children can be a positive driver for change in terms of women's offending behaviour (Mignon and Ransford, 2012; Barnes and Stringer, 2014). Whereas the removal of children can lead to a sense of despair and act as a trigger for further offending, women anticipating having custody of their children on release have something positive to strive for (Barnes and Stringer, 2014; Broadhurst and Mason, 2020).

One criticism of trauma-informed approaches and those that focus on victimisation has been the 'responsibilisation' of individual women that this work implies (Rutter and Barr, 2021). Psychological interventions tend to focus more on individual responsibility rather than social factors, which can lead to an emphasis on 'mending' individuals' reactions to events that have been caused in many cases by wider social factors such as gendered violence, poverty, and governmental and state policies. For many mothers in prison, the key trauma that they report is being removed from their children, in many cases for the first time. Research has shown that the impact of this can be both immediate and long-lasting (Baldwin, 2017; Aiello and McCorkel, 2018). There are also significant impacts on other family members, specifically grandmothers who may be suddenly called on to care for children for the foreseeable future (Raikes, 2016; Tasca, 2016). Prison can therefore be viewed as trauma-inducing in itself.

Unlike when a father goes to prison when the majority of children will stay in the family home and continue to be cared for by their mother, only 5 per cent of children stay in the family home when their mother is imprisoned (Corston, 2007). There is a dearth of current data on who cares for children in this situation (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2019). Children will often end up being cared for by grandmothers (25 per cent), or, by other family members or friends (usually female) (29 per cent), with 9 per cent being cared for by their father and 12 per cent ending up in state care (Corston, 2007). Due to this, imprisonment also has a significant effect on many relationships in the wider family. Apart from a few voluntary sector organisations, there is little or no provision in the UK for financial or emotional

support for the carers of children whose parent is in prison and, as entering custody often happens unexpectedly, carers must step in at short notice ([Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2019](#)).

Research with mothers with experience of custody has outlined how separation from their children is one of the hardest parts of imprisonment for mothers ([Slotboom et al, 2011](#); [Baldwin and Epstein, 2017](#)). Researchers have focused on maternal imprisonment specifically and the implications and effects of this ([Masson, 2019](#); [Booth, 2020](#); [Lockwood, 2020a](#); [Baldwin, 2021](#)). For example, [Baldwin \(2017\)](#) interviewed mothers about their experiences of prison, particularly in relation to their emotions and carceral spaces. The painful experience of separation describes the added distress of not being able to help children when they are going through difficult times. For criminalised mothers further relational trauma is created by their involvement with the criminal justice system as this research will outline.

[Allen et al \(2010\)](#) describe how women talked about the powerlessness they experienced with regard to separation from their children. Shame was also a key theme that arose, along with feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a mother. Research has outlined the impact of maternal imprisonment on dependent children often focusing on those of primary school age, with particular emphasis on the disruption caused by short sentences ([Baldwin and Epstein, 2017](#); [Masson, 2019](#)). What is less well researched is the impact on older children. [Lockwood \(2020b\)](#) discusses the significance of the mothers being absent during transitions to adulthood for older children, highlighting concerns about support and worrying about them navigating their relationships and relationship decisions.

[Easterling et al \(2019\)](#) use the concept of ambiguous loss to understand how mothers and children experience separation due to imprisonment. This concept contests that while family members may be physically absent, they are psychologically present to some extent, which leads to conflicted, confusing emotions. As women cannot perform their usual mothering roles, they are left feeling stressed and uncertain about their relationships with their children. [Arditti \(2012\)](#) additionally describes the traumatic separation and disenfranchised grief which is experienced by families in this situation. This replicates other research which has identified the recurring theme that women in prison experience a great deal of distress due to worrying about those on the outside while feeling helpless to assist them ([Masson, 2019](#); [Baldwin, 2021](#)). Having been socialised to care for others, when this role is not possible due to imprisonment, emotional conflict is created by the disruption to relationships.

Those caring for the children of women in prison are another group affected by imprisonment who are often overlooked by policy and research in this area. Most kinship carers in these circumstances are female and usually grandmothers or in some cases sisters ([Minkler and Fuller-Thomson, 1999](#); [Birchall and Holt, 2023](#)). In many cases, kinship carers have to move house and stop working to undertake the role ([Hairston, 2003](#); [Raikes, 2016](#)). They may already be caring for other children or grandchildren and their physical health may be impacted. Research in this area is particularly sparse in the UK context, with much of the research focusing on the offender or their dependent children. In many cases, carers feel they have no choice but to take on the role, as the children may otherwise end up in the care system. [Bachman and Chase-Lansdale \(2005\)](#) detail the impact that caring full time for grandchildren has on grandmothers, who are often already on low incomes. The main factor observed was a decrease in physical health and financial stability. The

added pressure of maintaining contact with the person in prison adds to the burden of care. Carers also have to deal with stigma in the local community and may be left to inform their grandchildren of where their mother is and why (Lockwood and Raikes, 2015; Raikes, 2016). All of this may result in poor mental health and loss of social life, and have an impact on other family members (Young and Smith, 2000; Vallely and Cassidy, 2012).

Relational trauma as an aspect of wider relational theory has not been examined within the context of maternal imprisonment – specifically, considering the impact on the relationship between mother and child and also arguably between grandmother and mother. Relational trauma is defined as that which arises from abusive relationships but also from neglect, abandonment, and significant disruption to relationships. It may leave a child feeling confused, unsafe and with difficulties in forming relationships throughout life (Alexander, 2013; Schore, 2013; Weld, 2014). This article proposes that imprisonment of mothers causes relational trauma with traumatic impacts for both mother, child and wider family members such as grandmothers and can be seen in a wider sense in terms of the destruction of relationships that are key to growth and desistance. This can be observed in situations where mothers are absent because of a custodial sentence and evidence will be discussed from the study in the following sections. Understanding the relational impacts of maternal imprisonment is therefore crucial in safeguarding against ongoing harms to rebuild lives. These ‘relational’ traumas or vulnerabilities (Few-Demo and Arditti, 2014) potentially have wide-reaching and inter-generational effects that go beyond the period of incarceration, producing a cycle of disadvantage for future generations. This article will go on to outline research into the extent of these traumas for mothers with experience of custody.

Methodology

The study was carried out in 2019 as doctoral research by the author within the context of the Criminal Justice System in England. Interviews were carried out by the author with 19 mothers with experience of prison. As children, young people and kinship carers were not spoken to directly as part of this study, the experiences reported are those of the mothers themselves. Women were recruited via a probation service and a voluntary sector organisation. All the mothers apart from one were on probation, 14 of those as a result of their recent period in custody and the remainder (4) due to new offences committed after the previous period of custody. Sentences ranging in length from 6 weeks to 2 years were for fraud, drugs offences, arson and perverting the course of justice, among others. The women’s ages ranged from 22 to 60 years. They were either referred by a probation worker or contacted during their attendance at a women’s probation group. The women had between one and four children each, ages ranging from 6 weeks to 19 years at the time of the period of custody, with six mothers not having children in their care before custody and an additional three becoming permanently separated post-custody. Interviews were conducted at probation offices and women’s probation groups and lasted between 25 and 80 minutes. Interviews focused on the mothers’ stories and experiences of custody and the impacts on their lives, allowing them to have control over what to disclose (Squire et al, 2014).

Ethical considerations including informed consent, anonymity and data protection were prioritised throughout the research and all those who participated were spoken to

in an environment where support was readily available. Information was provided to all women in advance of involvement in the study and again during the interviews. Each interview followed a set procedure, which consisted of a series of measures ensuring that respondents were treated fairly and ethically. This involved informing participants of the aims of the research, how their data would be handled, how anonymity would be ensured and when confidentiality would be broken. Respondents were also informed that participation was voluntary, that they did not have to answer all the questions and could stop the interview at any time. Women who were identified as particularly vulnerable by staff were not selected to take part. Time was provided at the end for additional support if needed. Pseudonyms have been used throughout and minimal personal data were collected and stored. Within the cases presented some personal details have been changed to provide further anonymity (such as sex of children). Ages of children are recorded as the time the mother entered custody. Full ethical consent was obtained for the research prior to its commencement from HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and the host university, in addition to ongoing consultation with the agencies whose services were accessed during the fieldwork.

This article is based on data relating to the women's relationships with their children and wider families/kinship carers. Seventy-six pages of data were analysed for this article, drawn from 12 interviews with rich data relating to this theme. Data were analysed thematically, and interviews were transcribed in full by the author; this commenced while data collection was still ongoing to preserve understanding of the interviews. Transcripts were read and reread multiple times to fully understand the narratives and the stories within them. Mind maps were initially created from the main themes and commonalities within the women's stories. Pen portraits were then created for each woman and basic quantitative data extracted relating to biographical and offence information. A list of codes was produced for each transcript and codes (95 in total) were then combined into themes (15 in total). This article draws on data from four themes relating to separation from children, impact on family members, relationship with kinship carer and reuniting/re-entering mother role. As all the women involved in the study were White, an analysis of the experiences of mothers from minority backgrounds cannot be made. In addition, the narratives reflect the experiences of women within one geographical area in England and the services and women's prisons they accessed.

Impact on relationships with children

Focusing on relational theory and the concept of relational trauma, this section will outline the impacts reported on mothers' relationships with their children during their journey through the criminal justice system. Impacts included severe emotional distress, problems at school and financial and practical issues. The primary frustration for mothers was in not being able to do anything to assist, feeling helpless with no recourse for solutions to the problems being experienced. Mothers were left as onlookers as their families further deteriorated on the outside, all they could do in most cases was be forced to observe this.

As outlined, there is less data about the impact of maternal imprisonment on older children and young adults. Much research has instead centred on the impact on infants and primary-school-aged children (Minson, 2019; Booth, 2020). In this study six of the women had older children over the age of 13. Impacts were not confined to the

period a mother was in custody but began before this – in many cases during the wait between charging and sentencing – and continued afterwards. These impacts need to be further considered when mothers are sentenced to custodial sentences if desistance for mothers is to be achieved. In this study, mothers reported older children and young people expressing strong and complex emotions about the situation that had occurred: ‘My oldest, sometimes he did get angry while I was waiting for the sentencing and everything, he used to get cross with me and constantly ask me “Why?”’ (Samantha, two sons, aged 19 and 14).

Lisa also talked about the anger and discontent that her son harboured throughout her sentencing and beyond: ‘Sometimes he’s very disappointed in me, but I don’t know whether its disappointment or I just can’t work it out, you know ‘cos we had that openness. I think it made him unsafe, I think he felt unsafe’ (Lisa, 1 son, aged 18).

She explained how her son had lost respect for the criminal justice system and raised concern for the impact this would have on his life in the future. These experiences reflect definitions of relational trauma that describe young people feeling unsafe and experiencing relationship difficulties of their own ‘after breaking up with his girlfriend ‘cos he couldn’t cope with me being in prison, a big fight and he lost his job ‘cos he was just lashing out at other people, his anger manifested by him just you know exploding’ (Lisa).

Whereas Lisa’s son became very angry, Tammy grew concerned about how her oldest daughter struggled with visiting her in prison and seemed to turn to alcohol as a way of coping with these difficult emotions: ‘I think it affected me oldest one a lot, like I said she started drinking every day and things like that’ (Tammy, two daughters, aged 17 and 15).

Some children experienced difficulties in school, resulting in fixed-period exclusions. As well as not being confined to a specific time period, the impacts were not confined to specific relationships within the immediate family. Naomi spoke of the wider impact her going to prison had on her teenage son’s friends:

[T]hey came that night when I was released, a couple of them sent us letters while I was in and they are my youngest son’s friends. I mean, they still obviously come now and they always ask, am I all right? And they were like, ‘So pleased that you’re out,’ – now it must’ve affected them as well! But you don’t realise, you don’t know who you’re affecting ... (Naomi, two sons, aged 18 and 21)

Whereas for older children impacts were more likely to manifest as anger or resentment, with regards to younger children, these impacts were often expressed physically:

I’d never left him before and it did affect him, he was weeing the bed and everything, I mean he didn’t know where I was, I didn’t see him or anything, I didn’t want him to come and it affected me obviously because it affected him. (Cheryl, 1 son, aged 5)

Younger children were also less likely to be aware of the whereabouts of their mother while she was absent from their lives contributing to possible feelings of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2010):

I found it really hard actually because my daughter, she's 7 now, so she knows the score, you know what I mean and she was asking questions, 'How have you been on holiday so long?' and stuff like that, so I didn't really like lying ... they're not stupid. (Diane, 1 daughter, aged 7)

Many of the mothers spoken to were understandably greatly concerned about missed time and broken bonds – evidence around the nature of this harm is mixed and may depend on the age of the child, the length of absence and the other consistent figures in their lives (Hodges and Tizard, 1989; Bowlby, 1998) with some research suggesting the impacts can be overcome. One mother quite clearly related this to her guilt:

He went to live with his dad when he was 11, I lost the bond I had with him, I've never left any of my children ever and I haven't met girls, when I did him, I just couldn't seem to get back to that, even though it was only seven weeks it was still like seven weeks is a long time really for a 6-year-old and for a mother to be without their child, I found it hard to forgive me for leaving him. (Cheryl)

Cheryl talks about not being able to forgive herself for being away from her son, with this guilt changing the nature of their relationship from that point onwards. Danielle voiced similar feelings:

I went two weeks without seeing my little girl, which was heartbreaking. And then coming out, the bond I had with my little girl before I went in was unbreakable, now she's really distant, away from us, so this prison sentence made my child distant from us, she'll not even come for a cuddle. (Danielle, 1 daughter, aged 10)

The sentiments expressed here show the long-lasting effects of even short periods of imprisonment. The ongoing and intergenerational relational impacts are what make many question the purpose of maternal imprisonment, in terms of who is ultimately being punished in this situation.

In the context of the impact on the family unit, we can see how relationships do not just revert to how they were before the period of imprisonment. The bonds may have been stretched too far and in some cases permanently severed by the trauma of maternal imprisonment. Mothers describe a combination of guilt, shame and stigma surrounding the impact their custody had on the family. However, there were occasional positives – such as for Samantha's son who had gone into the army, which she said she would not have allowed had she been at home. Tammy could also now reflect that becoming a grandma was a reason for endeavouring to provide stability for her family. In another case, although the children were now reunited with their mother, emotionally things were still very difficult: 'There was such a fear of rejection, that I'd let them down. I felt as though they wouldn't forgive me. I thought they would disown me. But they were incredible' (Alison, 2 sons, aged 18 and 20).

For many women reuniting with children on release is made more difficult by issues with housing and finances: 'I still cry now going to sleep because I haven't got my 4-year-old, she slept with me every single night' (Janette, 1 daughter, aged 4, 1 son, aged 14).

Janette did not have access to suitable housing that would allow her daughter to live with her or stay with her, having lost accommodation whilst in custody, partly due to her offence which meant she could not return to her previous home. Tammy wanted to feel ready to take her daughter back home, to make it work this time, and she needed time to get to this point: 'Well, my oldest, she's still in foster care at the moment, we're having issues, she's having some issues, I think it's because I'm out, she wants to come back home and stuff like that, but she's got to realise that I've only been out five months.'

In some cases, children wanted to return to the family home and in others they did not – both created difficult situations. Even where children did return to their previous living arrangements, difficulties were frequently reported regarding those relationships, often tinged by guilt, anger and confusion. These experiences show the relational impacts of maternal imprisonment and how even for older children and young adults this experience can be emotionally damaging and traumatic.

Impact on relationships with kinship carers

The impact of maternal imprisonment on the wider family is less well reported and considered. In many cases, female relatives end up caring for children when a mother is taken into custody. In this study grandmothers and sisters took over care in ten cases, grandparents jointly in three cases, a grandfather in one case, and fathers in four cases, with one woman's children already in foster care. In three of these cases, children were in the care of social services at some point. The burden of care can take a toll financially, emotionally and physically, as detailed later. In many cases relationships between mothers and kinship carers come under a lot of strain and may not recover on release. Children may become caught in the middle of relational issues between the mother and kinship carer. This highlights the ongoing damage that may ensue after a mother is released: returning to the mother role is not always possible or easy, often undergoing fundamental change.

For Lisa, her narrative focused on the visible physical deterioration in her mother, who was looking after her teenage son: 'My mum lost three stone which she couldn't afford to lose, she'd come in [to prison] and she'd aged and it broke my heart, every time she came in she just looked older and older.'

She went on to describe how her mother had a series of strokes and eventually died shortly after her release from prison. Lisa felt that she never really had the chance to make amends with her. Others focused more on the financial impacts for families:

It had a massive financial strain on my mum and my children while I was in there, massive. So because there's no help for them at all, you know, my mum didn't get any benefits to help her raise my children because she was a grandparent, because she was retired, she couldn't claim working tax credits so there was nothing – Child Benefit, that was it. (Samantha)

Financial worries exacerbate relational issues and emotional strain. This point regarding financial support has been raised before and most recently within a UK parliament review ([Ministry of Justice, 2019](#), point 13) and there has still been little move to make any change.

What has been less widely highlighted by research is the emotional impact and the relational impact on mothers and daughters. Women in this study highlighted the

destruction of those relationships in many forms, going against the ‘golden thread’ sought after in the Farmer report (2019). As Samantha describes:

Staying in the home, their things around them, like I say my mum doing that, so he has had that whereas if I didn’t have my mum, it would’ve been a whole different story it really would’ve been, so I’ve got a lot to thank her for but, our relationship will never be the same, the relationship I’ve got with my mum is kind of gone really, so ...

This evidence suggests that much more needs to be done to consider the impact on the wider family beyond children, as these relational problems will also, directly and indirectly, affect children and young people in an ongoing way. The damage caused by maternal imprisonment is less widely reported in terms of the effects on mothers and their relationships with their own mothers, as detailed above. This breakdown in Samantha’s case did not improve on release and she had difficulty re-entering the role of mother for her sons and was left feeling shamed and stigmatised. Her son was left in the middle of this relational trauma that was created. In some of these cases relationships were already strained beforehand and the custodial sentence added further stress. Stacey described the following: ‘Three weeks before I came out my mum tried to get a child arrangement order for my daughter, so that she could have her. I was served with the order three weeks before I came out’ (Stacey, 1 daughter, aged 1).

For Stacey, relations with her mother had deteriorated while she was in custody to the extent that her mother had applied to take custody of her daughter. Again, this shows the stigma that women may be seen as ‘tainted’ or ‘tarnished’ mothers (Baldwin, 2017), seen as not fit to look after their children, even by their own mothers. This was also reflected in Samantha’s comments about not being able to do anything right on her release:

I wanted to just step in and be mum again and my son wanted me to step in and be mum again, but I was stepping on my mum’s shoes – she’d taken over for ten months you know, little things, you’d get little comments, if one day I’d cooked the tea and whatever she’d be like ‘Why have you done that? I would have done that.’ (Samantha)

In some cases, grandmothers felt they were doing the right thing by protecting children from contact with the criminal justice system and with a mother who was now ‘stigmatised’ it seemed:

When I tried to ring her [grandmother] she didn’t answer the phone on my daughter’s birthday so I had to ring my aunty to ring my mam, to ring her and then she was like ‘No, there’s no chance she’s having contact,’ ’cos the jail does visits for children so I was trying to get that and she was like having none of it, like ‘Why would I want to bring her, a tiny child, into a prison?’ (Caitlin, 1 daughter, aged 3)

It is evident here the power that kinship carers have over contact with children – when relationships deteriorate or where they are not strong to begin with then all opportunities for contact cease, further straining these relationships for all parties.

For Tanya contact with her son had completely stopped and she felt unsure as to how to change this:

I got a bit of feedback off his dad saying how embarrassed he [son] was and he didn't look up to us as a role model and how utterly ashamed of us and everything, he was, and it would have to take time before he could come round to speaking to us or seeing us, but that was before I went to jail, so this is like months passed now and there's been no effort made at all, for us to have any contact, not even a phone call, nothing, or a card a letter nothing absolutely nothing so I don't know where to go, I don't know who to turn to about it ... (Tanya, 2 sons, aged 13 and 27)

Funding for family support is sparse – there had previously been additional family contact workers in this area whose role was to increase contact for mothers in this situation. A combination of relationship breakdown with the kinship carer and stigma for mothers who have been criminalised in many cases combines to create difficulties with child contact both during and after the period of imprisonment. This adds to the relational trauma experienced.

For many, the enduring impacts of prison were difficult to navigate. At a time when they were meant to be glad that they were out of custody and making a new start, issues with child contact created unbearable feelings of loss, as with Tanya: 'They've shut us off every time since he was eight, every Christmas and birthday and Mother's Day – no cards and no calls, nothing. I'm not a priority in their eyes.'

Relational theory emphasises the importance of empathic, nurturing relationships for women's wellbeing and desistance (Covington, 1998) so these issues are of key importance. It is evident that relational issues are compounded by maternal imprisonment affecting not just children but also those caring for them in the community.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the traumatic relational impacts of maternal imprisonment, particularly those less researched including the impacts on older children and the potential breakdown in relationships with kinship carers. Taking into account these relational traumas with reference to relational theory (Covington, 1998; Weld, 2014), it is clear that maternal imprisonment has wide-reaching and long-lasting effects across the generations. This relational trauma exacerbates practical and financial issues that already exist when leaving custody. Viewing maternal imprisonment's effect on the wider family and relationships enables us to build a more detailed picture of the harms experienced and therefore identify where additional work needs to be carried out.

Relational theory suggests that the way women connect with the world may place more emphasis on relations with others and the importance of these for growth, stability and mental health. Current criminal justice policy, although recognising the importance of relationships, is harm-inducing in itself by removing mothers from their children and providing little or no support for carers and children in the community (Comack, 2018; Anderson, 2021). Children continue to be suddenly removed from their mother on the day of sentencing with little notice or time to prepare practically, financially or emotionally. This article has outlined the disruption to relationships that

ensues, in terms of kinship carers and both younger and older children. Since kinship carers may be the gatekeepers to child contact, disruption to these relationships has additional effects on the mother-child relationship (Tasca, 2016).

The disruption to relationships detailed in this article shows how many relationships were deemed to be 'never the same' after custody suffering a sense of loss, that something deep down was missing with that relationship either with a grandparent or a child. In some cases, there were also physical reminders of the trauma of the period of imprisonment. Research has indicated that mothers leaving prison are at a particularly vulnerable point and this period is also important for consideration of desistance (Few-Demo and Arditti, 2014; Gålnander, 2020). It is likely that these post-custody relationship issues or vulnerabilities will be harmful for mothers' wider lives (Few-Demo and Arditti, 2014) and may impact on further offending. In terms of relational work, the relationship with probation workers has also been highlighted as a key potential strength in women's lives post-custody (Aisling et al, 2021) providing trust, empathy and consistency of care. Further research into this area of work would be beneficial.

Further consideration of the range of alternatives to custody and whether they are effective and being used appropriately is imperative. Within the UK, there has been a reluctance to make changes to how mothers and children in custody are cared for. Although suggestions have been made that custody should always be a last resort and that alternatives should be used where possible (Ministry of Justice, 2018), the creation of new alternatives has not materialised. Pre-sentence reports have been suggested as a useful tool for taking full consideration of a mother's caring responsibilities, personal circumstances and relationships before sentencing occurs. However, evidence suggests that the utilisation of these is still patchy (Centre for Justice Innovation, 2018).

In Germany, mothers in some circumstances are able to continue parenting their children while in custody and take on responsibility for their children in the daytime, returning to custody in the evenings (Dolan, 2019). This maintains their bonds with their children and requires mothers to work on developing and sustaining their parenting skills. It seems likely that given the chance most women would choose this route if offered and it could offer the possibility of confronting their experiences, offending and moving forward and growing, rather than causing irreparable damage to relationships. This would also remove the pressure from grandparents who would carry less of the burden, potentially also maintaining these relationships for the future. There is a large amount of scope for dealing with the relational trauma that is produced by maternal imprisonment.

As outlined in the Farmer report (2019), positive, nurturing relationships can be seen as the 'golden thread' or a 'criminogenic need' for women who have offended. There is a conflict between the impact of maternal imprisonment on families, with research showing that it is harmful to relationships and criminal justice policy which continues to rely on custodial sentencing. In conclusion, the evidence presented on the relational impacts of maternal imprisonment highlights a need for additional support for families when leaving custody. However, as the data this article is drawn from are based on a sub-section of data from a larger project, it is important to note that these limitations could impact the quality of the findings in terms of reliability and validity. Further work could take place in prison before release in the form of peer support to discuss parenting issues and consider how children may have been affected by absence from their mothers. On release, group sessions delivered by probation services can also be an opportunity to provide additional

support around these important relational issues in addition to family workers who can assist with navigating child contact issues and provide parenting advice.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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