

**Bubbles, Brick Walls and Connectivity**  
**Families affected by parental imprisonment and their experiences**  
**of community-based support.**

**by**

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of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Central Lancashire

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## **Abstract**

It is estimated that around 200,000 children in the UK experience the imprisonment of a parent. Imprisonment has been described as a family affair, as families suffer the brunt of the punishment supposedly directed at the offender. Despite an awareness of this impact there is a distinct lack of community-based support services for families affected by parental imprisonment, and no central support strategy from government.

This practitioner-researcher study aimed to discover how ‘whole-families’ affected by parental imprisonment (children, parents/carers and parents who are/have been prisoners) experience community-based support. A collective case study approach was utilised. Eight families who were supported by the UK based charity, Person Shaped Support (PSS) contributed their experiences; this comprised 18 participants; 5 children, 8 parents/carers, and 5 parents who had been in prison. All participants took part in one audio-recorded in-depth interview, either at PSS or in their own home. Some participants offered further insights via conversations with the researcher, which were recorded in the form of handwritten notes.

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis; they were analyzed individually and then considered as part of their family grouping. Early themes from each family were then compared and contrasted from family to family. Four major themes were identified: (1) ‘Isolation and Someone to Talk To’; (2) ‘Feeling Understood and Being Judged’; (3) ‘Power, Secrets and Lies and Fighting Back’; and (4) ‘Loss, Contact and Change’. Participants spoke of feeling isolated and marginalized, which some described like ‘being in bubbles’; they also described the ‘brick walls’ they experienced which reflected their frustrations of being judged and their conflict with statutory services, members of their communities and members of their own families. A tentative model centered on ‘Personal Connectivity’ is presented in which personal connectivity is seen to be the over-riding support need for these families. With enhanced personal connectivity, the families reported being able to form and maintain meaningful relationships, which helped them to better cope. Some participants also reported personal growth. Recommendations are that practitioners who aim to help families affected by parental imprisonment should adopt a ‘whole-family’ systemic approach to practice and provide support through non-judgmental listening, conveying understanding, sharing knowledge (of the criminal justice system), providing opportunities for safe family contact, and opportunities for affected families to meet peers.

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## **Glossary**

<b>APF:</b>	Action for Prisoners Families
<b>DCLG:</b>	Department for Communities and Local Government
<b>MoJ:</b>	Ministry of Justice
<b>NGO:</b>	Non-Government Organisation
<b>NOMS:</b>	National Offender Management Service
<b>NVCO:</b>	National Council for Voluntary Organisations
<b>PACT:</b>	Prison Advice Care Trust
<b>POPS:</b>	Partners of Prisoners
<b>PSS:</b>	Person Shaped Support
<b>QUNO:</b>	Quaker United Nations Office
<b>SEN:</b>	Social Exclusion Unit
<b>VCS:</b>	Voluntary and Community Sector

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

This is a study of families' experiences of community-based support when their family is affected by parental imprisonment. Families affected by parental imprisonment, for the purpose of this study, include children of prisoners, non-imprisoned main carers for children of prisoners, and prisoner-parents.

As a practitioner who works in the field of supporting families affected by parental imprisonment, I have a strong commitment to understanding how the support I offer is experienced. I am interested in families' experiences of being supported or unsupported and the reasons for this. Having worked in this capacity for six years I have an awareness of the multiple factors that families affected by parental imprisonment face. Some of these include stigma and marginalization (Arditti 2002), poverty (Smith, Grimshaw, Romeo and Knapp, 2007), shame (Cunningham, 2001), the suffering of assaults, criminal damage and threats from members of the community (Codd, 1998) and the breakdown of family relationships (Salmon, 2007). Children of prisoners typically suffer from emotional trauma resulting from the loss of their parent (Wright and Seymour, 2000), stigmatisation and marginalisation from other children and their families (Mazza, 2002), and many are forced by their own family members to keep the imprisonment a secret, which can lead to their increased anxiety and in-ability to cope (Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2003). Ramsden (1998) also reports that the needs of prisoners' children are often not met in school, and researchers including Eddy and Reid (2003) and Murray and Farrington (2005) find that children of prisoners are at a higher risk of future delinquency or imprisonment themselves.

This study has been conducted at a time when specialized support for families affected by parental imprisonment is a rare commodity both in the UK and worldwide. This study centres around the service 'Family Impact for Prisoners' Children' delivered by PSS (Person Shaped Support) in Merseyside in North West of the UK. This community-based service is the only service of its kind in the region and in some parts of the UK there are no comparable services at all.

This study found that affected families had predominantly negative experiences with statutory services. A key reason emerging from the data was fear of the children being removed which is reflective of wider research which shows that relatives caring for children of prisoners often try to avoid contact with the system as they fear the children will be taken away (Standing Committee on Social Issues 1997; Phillips & Bloom 1998; Shaw 1987). Another key reason raised in this study was that families felt statutory workers tended to be misinformed and therefore were offering poor advice or advice to them that was fundamentally incorrect.

In CHAPTER 1 I set the scene by describing the PSS service ‘Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children’. I clarify that PSS works using holistic ‘whole family’ methods, which reflect a systemic family approach to practice. I then call attention to PSS taking a human ‘rights based’ approach to supporting families affected by parental imprisonment, and pay specific attention to UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and its relevance to children having contact with parents from whom they are separated.

In CHAPTER 2 I explore the literature, providing an in-depth consideration of what support is available for families affected by parental imprisonment both in the UK and other parts of the world. I begin by attending to the extent of the problem and offer an overview of the consequences of parental imprisonment on families. I then briefly consider the link between prisoners’ families and re-offending before moving on to provide a detailed overview of the lack of support that specifically serves these families, what is currently known about what support such families might want and need. I then move on to why working with ‘whole families’ is considered to be a useful approach for families affected by parental imprisonment, before concluding with why this study might offer a valuable contribution.

In CHAPTER 3 I describe the methodology of the study, including my theoretical approach. I also provide my rationale for using a collective case study methodology and why this is a purely qualitative study. I explain the methods I used, including how I collected, recorded, transcribed and analysed the data. I consider the credibility of the study, paying particular attention to the potential for researcher bias, and the ethical considerations that I made. Issues relating to this being a practitioner-researcher led study are also reflected upon in this chapter.

In CHAPTER 4 I present the thematic findings that emerged from the collection of semi-structured interviews and additional conversations. Firstly, an overview of the findings and a description of the participants who volunteered their insights are provided. Attention is then given to the enormity of data (in terms of both quantity and emotional load), which emerged in relation to the families' experiences of social services. It is important to note that in this study the term 'Social Services' refers to local authority social services which are set up to support families and to safeguard children at risk of harm. 'Social services' was the term used by the participating families, and I wanted to use their language to reduce the likelihood of any misinterpretation of their experience.

Following this, each of the four major themes that emerged from the data are described and evidenced. These four major themes are: (1) 'Isolation and Someone to talk to', (2) 'Feeling Understood and Being Judged', (3) 'Power, Secrets, Lies and Fighting Back', (4) 'Loss, Contact and Change'.

In CHAPTER 5 I discuss the concept of 'personal connectivity', and how this meta-theme has been born from the four major themes. This chapter focuses on how personal connectivity (which comprises of the needs 'Be Heard', 'Be Safe', 'Be Informed' and 'Belong') is central to support for families affected by parental imprisonment, and argues that with 'personal connectivity', 'personal growth' is possible.

In CHAPTER 6 I provide a conclusion, reflect on the limitations of this study and offer recommendations for further work.

## **Presentation Style**

This thesis is predominantly presented in the third person. However, as this is practitioner-led qualitative research, some sections are highly reflective, and these are presented in the first person. In addition, many core sections of this work are opened with quotes, to provide the reader with a flavour of what to expect. In the findings chapter, at the start of each theme, a quote, taken directly from the data set, is provided in order to capture the essence of that theme. In the discussion chapter, at the start of each core section, a quote drawn from known writers, is provided to capture the fundamental nature of the discussion that follows.

## CHAPTER 2

### Setting the Scene

In this chapter a description of PSS, and the PSS project ‘Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children’ is given. The rationale behind the approach taken to support families affected by parental imprisonment at PSS is also outlined.

### Overview of PSS

#### PSS

PSS stands for Personal Shaped Support. PSS is a registered charity established in 1919, to address the presenting needs of people in Liverpool following the First World War. PSS is also a social enterprise. Work is conducted across the UK, delivering at neighbourhood level.

PSS believes that every person, no matter what challenges face them should be supported to live their lives to the full. PSS states one key purpose: ‘to help people get the most from life, whether this at home, in their families, in their health and well-being or within their wider support networks’.

PSS delivers a wide array of services. These services fit into four key areas of work: ‘creating homes’, ‘empowering communities’, ‘promoting wellbeing’ and ‘strengthening families’. This study seeks to understand the experiences of service users who are supported through by ‘Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children’, one of the projects within the ‘Strengthening Families’ team. The positioning of this team is shown in the organisation’s flow-diagram below:



## **Strengthening Families**

The children and family services support people from many different walks of life; people affected by imprisonment, children and young people who are caring for a parent or sibling, teenagers who are leaving the formal care system and youngsters who have experienced trauma. PSS aims to help people strengthen ties as a family, enabling them to not only look after each other but to look after themselves as well.

## **Family Impact**

The Family Impact Project was established in 2006 and currently operates in Merseyside, which is situated in the North West of the UK. The Family Impact Team covers two key areas: ‘families affected by alcohol and substance misuse’ and ‘families affected by parental imprisonment’. This study looks at the experiences of service users who have been supported by the latter project, as detailed below:

## **Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children**

An internally driven report (Brookes, 2008) estimated that there are approximately 3,000 children (0-18yrs) in Merseyside at any one time who have a parent in prison. As there was, and still is, no government led statutory support for these children, PSS responded by forming a service to offer support, locally to children with a parent in prison, or children whose parents have been in prison and have recently been released. Although the needs of the child is at the heart of this service, PSS finds it is preferable to support not only the children, but their parents and carers in the therapeutic process. Family Impact, therefore, employs a ‘whole family’ approach. A ‘whole family’ in this service includes child/ren, the child’s community-based parent/carer, and where possible, the prison-parent pre and post-release. In general terms, these families are provided with:

- Advice on what to tell the children about imprisonment
- One to one support for children to discuss their feelings and wishes regarding contact with their parent who is in, or has been in prison
- Assistance with contact, including the supervision of prison visits, and post-release contact for parents who are overseen by probation and/or social services.

- Peer group support for children where they can meet others who share their experience whilst having fun
- A support group for adults who have a loved one in prison
- A support group for adults who have spent time as a prisoner to help them with their re-adjustment to life in the community
- Advocacy support for the whole family

## **The PSS Family Impact Team Approach: A Systemic Approach to Practice**

*“we are always and inevitably a part of any ‘ecology’(or system) we meet”*

*Baterson (1972, p24)*

The Family Impact ‘whole family’ approach fits directly with Family Systems Theory, which, in simple terms encourages people to think of issues in terms of a family or ‘system’. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) reported that working with families as a whole, is the only effective way of working with families experiencing the most significant problems. Arditti (2012) also observes successful programmes that are designed to support the prisoners and their families, are those which are multi-modal and holistic.

Systemic family therapy originated in Milan, Italy with Mara Palazzoli and her colleagues Luigi Boscolo, Gianfranco Cecchin, and Builiana Prata. In the Milan model, the therapist is part of the system, and his/her role is to help systems (families) to change themselves by stimulating a reflective thinking to prompt different perspectives and showing other and healthier possibilities of internal homeostasis.

Traditionally, family therapists believed that to employ a systems approach it was necessary to demand the presence of the whole family. The early Milan team used to draw a clear distinction between family therapy and individual therapy, and chose to do family therapy with all clients referred (Boscolo and Betrando 1996). However, working with families affected by parental imprisonment incurs logistical difficulties. Most obviously, the imprisonment of one parent means physical access to both the imprisoned parent and the parent/carer simultaneously is almost always impossible.

Access barriers are also prevalent post-release. Depending on the nature of the offense, probation or social services impose contact restrictions either between adults within the family, or between parents and their children due to high levels of risk of potential harm. Contact barriers can also be self-imposed by family members themselves who might be too wary or indeed too angry to spend time with someone who has ‘been away’. Nonetheless, this does not deter PSS from working with individuals, despite the fact that delivering ‘whole family’ interventions is considered by PSS to be preferable and generally more effective.

Employing a ‘systemic approach’ has been considered to be quite feasible with individuals. Haley (1971, p273) introduced a different perspective on work with an individual from a family therapy perspective, claiming, *“from the family view, what was once considered individual therapy is seen as one way of intervening in a family or other natural group”*. By 1990, Boscolo and Bertrando were experimenting increasingly with working systemically with individuals, and soon declared that *“most of us have varied our practices out of choice or necessity, so that many practitioners today apply systemic therapy, to a range of situations, including work with individuals”* (Boscolo and Bertrando, 1990, p. vii). Indeed, Jenkins and Asen (1992, p1) stress, systemic therapy is *“not a question of how many people are seen, but refers to the theoretical framework which informs what the therapy does”*.

## **A Rights Based Approach**

‘Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children’ takes a human rights based approach. This approach situates human rights at the very centre of its processes and focuses attention on how the realisation of all human rights, to all people, all of the time is essential to combating issues such as poverty, injustice, conflict and marginalisation. The team takes a deliberate and mindful move away from giving charity based upon peoples’ needs, and instead the team strives towards developing the capacity of families by empowering them with information and skills.

A key objective in the ‘Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children’ team is to uphold the ‘United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (1989). The Convention states categorically that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (Article 3); that they have the right to be heard and have their views taken into consideration. Most significantly Article 9 states that children are not separated from their parents

against their will, and it is further written that ‘states’ parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests’. However, at present, there is no law from which to be guided (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2008). The Convention also states that children should be free to express their views in all matters affecting them (Article 12) to include views on any judicial proceedings. Imprisonment of a parent is undoubtedly one such decision, yet courts do not routinely request such information.

A number of individuals and groups are currently lobbying for increased attention to the issue at the UN. For example, the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) have urged the committee on ‘The Rights of the Child’ to give in depth consideration on how the Convention addresses the rights and needs of children of prisoners (QUNO, 2010). This was the first time this neglected issue had been discussed substantively anywhere in the UN system. More recently (Nov 2012) the European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents (Eurochips, now known as COPE ‘Children of Prisoners Europe’) hosted a conference called ‘*Coping with a Parent in Prison: An Agenda for Policy Reform*’. Findings from a three-year research study “*Children of Prisoners. Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health*” (Jones and Wainaina-Wozna, 2013) in which more than 800 children affected by parental incarceration were interviewed from four countries (Britain, Sweden, Germany and Romania) were also highlighted to help promote the topic of children of imprisoned parents to all levels of the EU judicial and child’s rights arenas. Some child service users and their parents, from PSS, contributed to this research. The conference was hailed as landmark for this vulnerable group of children in gaining recognition amongst international policy-makers, NGOs, and networks. Amongst the topics discussed were the importance of maintaining the child-parent relationship and the right for a child to know the truth about the incarceration.

In sum, PSS has embraced the efforts to uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in relation to children having safe contact with their offending parents, whilst recognizing that for some families this is not appropriate because either the family themselves do not wish contact to take place, or that contact is contrary to the child’s best interests.

## CHAPTER 3

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

This literature review focuses on what support, formal and informal, is currently available for families affected by parental imprisonment. The majority of the literature, however, relates to support for prisoners' families, i.e. the children, partners and relatives of prisoners. Some literature has also been observed which attends to how prisoners are supported within the context of support to maintain their family ties. There is, however, a dearth of literature that considers support for the 'whole family'. 'Whole family' support in the 'PSS Family Impact for Prisoners' Children' team, refers to support for prisoners' children, the child/ren's parent/carers in the community and the parent who is in, or has been in prison. The lack of wider literature, which refers to whole family support for families affected by parental imprisonment, parallels the dearth of specialised services employing a 'whole family' approach for these families. This literature review finds a dearth of support, especially in relation to community-based services, and pays particular attention to the difficulties faced by affected families as a result.

In section 1, I address the prevalence of parental imprisonment and the effects on children and families. In section 2, I consider the relationship between families and reoffending. These first two sections are included to add context but are purposely brief ensuring that 'support' for families affected by parental imprisonment is the over-riding focus of this review. In section 3, I address in greater detail support services for prisoners' children and their families, and support for parents in prison. This leads onto a consideration of family focused approaches to working with families affected by parental imprisonment in section 4. Finally, to conclude this chapter, I examine the issues around why community-based provision for families affected by parental imprisonment should be researched at all.

Working directly in the field as a practitioner as well as a researcher, it was possible to obtain much literature organically, through an extensive network of linked professionals. A detailed literature search was also conducted by searching relevant electronic databases (e.g. ScienceDirect, EBSCO host, Web of Knowledge) for recent

research specifically relating to support for prisoners' children and families, provided in English between 2002 and the present day. Key search terms included: 'Imprisonment', 'Incarceration', 'Prison', 'Jail', AND 'Family', 'Families', 'Parents', 'Parental', 'Children', 'Child', 'Prisoners', 'Mothers', 'Fathers', AND 'Support', 'Help', 'Community-Based', and 'Community'.

Literature dating back to 2002 was considered appropriate for the search criteria as not only does it capture the last decade (the main search was conducted in 2012 and 2013) but in 2002 the UK government Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) produced an influential report which recognised 'family networks' as being a considerable factor which can influence re-offending, an important step in the eyes of those lobbying for change and support for prisoners' families. Of course there has been some significant work conducted prior to this date that will also be included where relevant.

This literature review includes studies undertaken both the UK and worldwide. However, whilst there are many commonalities of experience between non-UK based studies and those that were carried out in the UK, there will be some variance in the specific impacts of parental imprisonment from country to country. The international sources are used to add weight and further understanding in a field where both practice and research is notably limited, whilst recognising differences of context.

## **The prevalence of parental imprisonment and the effect on children and families**

### The prevalence of parental imprisonment

Parental imprisonment is on the increase in many countries (Walmsley, 2005). The European network for children of imprisoned parents, 'Eurochips', reports that one out of every 100 children in the EU has a parent in prison (Eurochips, 2012). In England and Wales, research conducted on behalf of the Ministry of Justice (Williams, Papadopoulou, and Booth, 2012) found that approximately 200,000 children in 2009 were affected by a parent being in, or going to prison, a figure that is set to rise in accordance with the continuing growth of the prison population. The numerous '*Get Tough on Crime*' sentencing laws, passed since the 1980s have been described as

‘engines of growth’ for the escalating incarceration rates witnessed over the past three decades (Johnson, 2007, p1). In America, since 1990 the number of children with a parent in prison has increased overall by 82%, and now, more than 2.7 million children in America have a parent in prison according to a recent study by The Pew Charitable Trusts (Western and Pettit, 2010). Similarly, the number of prisoners in Australia has more than doubled over the last two decades (Baldry, 2008), and increasing incarceration rates, especially for women, inevitably means more and more children are being affected across the globe. Seemingly from the literature, the problem is global, and in most countries, on the rise at relatively similar speeds. Parental imprisonment affects millions, probably tens of millions, of children around the world, who often come from the most disadvantaged and vulnerable sections of society (Robertson, 2007).

Regrettably, however, exact figures available on the numbers of children affected, are unavailable, as authorities seldom hold details about prisoners’ children. In 1987, Shaw conducted the only quantitative study in Britain to try and gauge the numbers of children of male prisoners in England and Wales, and all figures since then have been estimates based on his work. Twenty-five years ago, Shaw estimated that 100,000 children experienced paternal imprisonment each year in England and Wales, based on a survey of 415 men arriving at Leicester prison. Philbrick (2002) believes that one explanation for this is the fact that figures are very difficult to collect because many prisoners do not disclose either for fear of the effects on their children or because they have already lost contact with their children. Yet the fact that these figures remain as estimates is in itself an issue. Despite the prevalence and urgency of the problem, the population of children of prisoners is unmonitored, under-researched and unsupported by the statutory sector (Murray, 2007).

In a national prisoner survey in England and Wales, it was recorded that approximately 32 per cent of male prisoners and 47 per cent of female prisoners were living with children prior to their imprisonment (Dodd and Hunter, 1992). However, information was neither collected on parenthood specifically in this survey, nor on the number of children affected by parental imprisonment. More recently, in 2007, following the tragic death of six women at Styal prison, the Home Secretary asked Baroness Jean Corston to conduct a review of vulnerable women in the criminal justice system. Corston reported that two-thirds of women, or approximately 65%, were mothers living with their

children before they came into prison, approximately one-third of whom had a child under five. Only 9% of children whose mothers are in prison are cared for by their fathers. (Prison Reform Trust, 2010). Around 18,000 children are separated from their mothers by imprisonment each year (Cortson, 2007).

Despite repeated calls from lobby groups, there is, however, still no official monitoring of the number of children who experience parental imprisonment each year in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2011). As Murray (2007, p62) states,

*“we urgently need to update information about how many parents are being imprisoned each year, how many children are left behind and in what circumstances they live to ensure that there are adequate services to support them”.*

The damaging effects of parental imprisonment on children and families are well documented (Murray and Farrington, 2008; Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Wilderman, 2010). Whilst a consideration of the consequences is not the focus of this literature review, some key findings are highlighted below.

### The effect on children

Children of prisoners have been referred to as ‘orphans of justice’ and ‘innocent victims of punishment’ (Johnson, 2007, p2). They are also far likelier to experience more childhood adversities than their peers (Murray and Farrington, 2005). Not least are the wide range of emotional problems that children suffer during and after their parent’s imprisonment, which are consistently reported. These include low self esteem, sorrow, guilt, fear and worry (Brown, 2001, Murray and Farrington, 2008); hyperactivity, aggressive behaviour, withdrawal, regression, clinging behaviour, sleep problems, eating problems, and truancy (Boswell and Wedge, 2002; Centre for Social and Educational Research, 2002; Liebling and Maruna, 2005) and worry and fear for the imprisoned parent’s well-being (Philbrick, 2002). Behavioural problems at school are also common, (Ramsden 1998; Johnston 1995; MuCulloch and Morrison, Mazza 2002, Philbrick, 2002), and nearly two thirds of boys who have a parent in prison will themselves go on to commit some kind of crime (Reducing Re-offending Review,

2009). However, whilst there is a strong correlation between parental imprisonment and poor child outcomes, research does not prove a causal link (Children of Offenders Review, 2007). Existing social exclusion must be taken into consideration. As parents, prisoners are often subject to pre-existing disadvantages: most prisoners have a history of social exclusion before entering the prison system (Social Exclusion Unit Report, 2002) and the effects of parental imprisonment on children may differ according to the wider social context in which the child lives. However, the experience for the child is generally negative (Murray, 2007).

According to attachment theory, separation from a parent during childhood can negatively affect children's sense of security, and can cause severe emotional problems in the short and long term (Bowlby, 1980). Furthermore, separation caused by parental imprisonment may be more harmful for children than other forms of parent-child separation, because the nature of the separation during parental imprisonment tends to be highly traumatic. This is usually due to the fact that parental imprisonment is often unexpected and unexplained. Sometimes the scenario in which the parent is taken away, often in the presence of their children, is extremely frightening and even violent (Murray and Farrington, 2008). Even prior to losing their parent(s) to imprisonment, children of prisoners often have to endure years of trauma and disruption whilst their parents are engaged in criminal activity, and then following the incarceration, suffer a stark lack of support necessary to cope and heal (Beckerman 1998). Of course, it is important to acknowledge that for some children, in some circumstances, the imprisonment of a parent brings relief. Brown (2002-2003) points out that parental imprisonment is not a uniformly negative experience for children. In situations involving domestic violence or child abuse, or even when the child had a bad relationship with the parent, for instance, life may be better following imprisonment.

Children of prisoners are often lied to about what happened, which increases their confusion and stress. They are frightened of what will happen to their imprisoned parent, and for many, their impression of what prison is like is far worse than the reality (Philbrick, 2002). The point is illustrated by Hounslow (1982) who reported a six year old child not being able to sleep at night because she believed her father (in prison) had to live on bread and water. Loneliness and isolation, self-blame, and the burden of taking on additional responsibilities as a consequence of the absence of a parent were also observed (Codd, 2007). Crimes highlighted in the media bring added problems.

Research conducted by Brown and Bilger (2005) shows that children as young as eight years old are aware of and directly affected by discrimination. The social exclusion of prisoners' children is commonplace (Murray, 2007).

Those children who visit their parents in prison often have to put up with long journeys, long periods of waiting upon arrival, intimidating environments, apprehension at the start of a visit, having to leave parents/ adults alone so they can talk, being bored and shut out, and experiencing difficulty leaving their parent at the end of the visit (Brown, Dibb, Senton and Elson, 2002 and Phillips, 2012). Nonetheless many children do report that being able to visit a parent in prison brings much comfort and reduces their overall anxiety (Ball and Smith, 2012) and so researchers advocate increasing children's opportunities to maintain contact with their imprisoned parent, in particular through more child friendly visiting arrangements in prisons (Bernstein, 2005; Trice and Brewster, 2004) such as supervised play areas in domestic visits and welcoming, child friendly staff in the visits centre and visits hall.

The gendered nature of response to parental imprisonment has also been noted. Although behaviours often co-exist, girls are reported to be more likely to display internalised behaviours such as withdrawal, shame, and anxiety, whereas boys are found to be more likely to display externalised behaviours such as anger, aggression and hostility (Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Cummings, Davies and Campbell 2002).

Children of imprisoned mothers are considered to be particularly vulnerable, and at even greater risk of developing behavioural and mental health problems (Lotze, Ravindran and Myers, 2010) than children of imprisoned fathers. This is partly as a result of severe separation anxiety arising from their mothers being taken into custody, and partly because only 5% of children of imprisoned mothers remain in their own home after their mother's imprisonment (Home Office, 2008). A study by Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, Kennon, (1999) in the US, found that children of incarcerated mothers experience internalizing (fear, withdrawal, depression, emotional disturbance) and externalizing (anger, fighting, stealing, substance abuse) problems, as well as heightened rates of school failure and eventual criminal activity and incarceration. It is also observed that children with mothers in prison tend to suffer greater disruptions than children of imprisoned fathers because fathers are less often primary caregivers to children prior to imprisonment (Healy, Foley and Walsh, 2000). Kampfner (1995)

writes that children suffer greatly when their mothers are imprisoned and are taken from them, because prior to the imprisonment these children spent most of their time with their mothers, and looked first to their mothers for support, even when the women were still dependent on their own mothers. Kampfner (1995) also reported that children of imprisoned mothers are perpetually concerned about the possible outcomes of their mother's case, concerned that they might never get their mother back and feel unstable and uncertain about what their future holds. These feelings are reported to be worse for children of imprisoned mothers than of imprisoned fathers, because they are more likely to move from home to home, and from caregiver to caregiver. For these reasons these children are considered to be an especially disadvantaged group.

For both children of imprisoned mothers and those of imprisoned fathers, parental imprisonment has been described as being 'on one side of a coin' on which 'child punishment' is usually on the other (Hounslow, Stephenson, Stewart and Crancher, 1982).

### The effect on prisoners' families

Families of prisoners are 'hidden innocent victims' who experience significant impoverishment, according to a study conducted on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Smith, Grimshaw, Romeo and Knapp, 2007). In their evaluation of services for prisoners' families they conclude that the current criminal justice and social welfare policy combines to impoverish, disadvantage, and exclude the relatives of those in prison. The remaining parent/carer has been conceptualised as an involuntary temporary single parent (Lowenstein, 1986) who is placed under extreme stress, often having to deal alone with children's misbehaviour (Loueiro, 2010). Families experience loneliness, lack of information, lack of official assistance, and difficulties arranging and making visits (Codd, 2007). Partners, as well as children, can experience feelings of isolation, loss, and fear of abandonment (Bouregba, 1992).

Contending with poverty is a common problem. Imprisonment strips the prisoner-parent of income generating capacity, and negatively impacts on the ability of the remaining parent to earn money because of lack of childcare. Smith et al. (2007 p18) report one mother (Amy) explaining her struggle: "*I was doing a cleaning job ... evenings... I had to give that up because he wasn't here to have the kids*". In 2007 it was estimated that

the cost to families of having a family member in prison was £175 per month; this included the cost of transport for visits and money given to the prisoner for canteen items (Smith et al, 2007). Allowing for inflation the cost now is likely to be over £200 per month a cost that must be found from the diminished family income. The loss of a criminal income is still loss of an income.

The media also frequently harasses prisoners' families, and media attention can put children at risk of being bullied by their peers. When the parent has committed a sexual crime or something deemed grossly unacceptable by the community, the severity of this situation is vastly heightened (Boswell and Wedge, 2002). Despite the fact that newspaper editors normally operate with a moral code in mind, based largely on what they think their readers will find acceptable, some newspapers see prisoners' families as being morally corrupt just because they are related to prisoners. There is little public sympathy for prisoners' families (Young and Jefferson Smith, 2000) and the media generally perceives prisoners' families as having fewer human rights and less of a right to privacy (Action for Prisoners Families, 2011).

The problems for prisoners' families do not come to an end when the imprisonment term ends. In addition to the difficulties faced with release and re-entry for offenders that often lead to a failure to desist from crime (Maruna, 2004) the children and family members also suffer a period of challenge and difficulties (Codd, 2007). The majority of post-release parents will have to cope with the difficulty of finding employment and stable housing whilst also trying to re-establish their relationship with their children. The physical and mental health needs of former prisoners are also statistically higher than those of the general population, as is the prevalence of substance misuse (Williamson, M 2006). Unsurprisingly, Schrimmer, Neillis and Mauer (2009) find that when the imprisoned parent is released, they and their children face considerable challenges reuniting.

## **Families and their Link to Reoffending. Benefits and Drawbacks.**

### Benefits

Despite such adversities, families play a critical role in improving the lives of returning prisoners. Families are recognised as highly significant in enabling the successful resettlement of prisoners and an important influence in the re-entry process as they provide much needed support to returning prisoners (Naser and La Vigne, 2006). Condry (2006) demonstrated that female family members (mothers, sisters, grandmothers, wives and partners, as well as aunts and daughters), whilst being frequently caught between conflicting demands and pressures, were the emotional linchpin and key source of support for the prisoner.

The link between strong family ties and desistance is well evidenced (Condry, 2006; Brookes, 2005; Whitehouse and Copello, 2005). A number of publications, including the report of the Social Exclusion Unit (2002) on preventing reoffending by ex-prisoners, and more recent Home Office research findings on resettlement outcomes (Home Office 2005), have reiterated the important role played by supportive family ties in facilitating the successful community re-entry of ex-prisoners and in preventing reoffending. This has, in turn, led to increased official recognition of the value of supporting the family ties of prisoners. For example, the regional resettlement strategy for the North-West in the UK identified families as an 'agency of resettlement' (Codd, 2007) and acknowledged families as instrumental in facilitating community re-entry and reintegration (Christian, Mellow and Thomas, 2006). The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) suggest family ties can reduce the likelihood of reoffending by 39 per cent (MoJ, 2008) and working with families of prisoners could represent significant savings for society as a result of the costs of reoffending and other outcomes, including health, family breakdown, poor child outcomes and inter-generational offending (MoJ, 2009).

In a recent longitudinal study, Williams, Papadopoulou and Booth (2012) found that the majority of prisoners see their families as important to them, and want them to be involved in their lives. The authors thus conclude that as many prisoners believe the support of their family and seeing their children would be significant in stopping them from reoffending in the future, and taking into account the previous evidence that

maintaining family relationships throughout the custody period can help prevent reoffending, it is important that consideration is given to the adequacy of support and mechanisms available for allowing contact and involvement of families in prisoners' sentences. Pat Nolan, Vice President of Prison Fellowship asserts "*of all the factors that help inmates after their release, an intact family is the most important in helping them stay on the right path*" (Criminal Justice Transition Coalition, 2009, p163). Like everyone else, offenders are most influenced to change (and not to change) by those closest to them and those whose advice they respect and whose support they value (McNeill and Weaver, 2007). Families undoubtedly play a considerable part in influencing recidivism.

### Drawbacks

Despite the fact that the Ministry of Justice, in their document 'Reducing re-offending: supporting families, creating better futures' (Department for Children, Schools and Families and Ministry of Justice, 2009), acknowledge the importance of family ties and seeks to maintain and strengthen relationships between offenders and their families to help prevent reoffending, there is still no government driven strategy to support the families of offenders when a parent, or indeed any other person in the family is imprisoned. However, whilst the clear link between families and reoffending brings associated benefits of closer attention being given to the support needs of prisoners' families, practitioners and policy makers should be mindful that the driver behind supporting a prisoner's family should *not* be crime deterrence (Condry, 2007). The focal point should rightfully be around offering support for prisoners' families for reasons of human rights, quite simply because they themselves are not offenders, and for the children of offenders simply because they are vulnerable children, not as potentially useful vehicles in reducing recidivism.

It should also be recognised that often members of a prisoner's family will have actively chosen not to maintain links with the prisoner. Distance between prison and home is a factor, as are restrictive conditions in visits that make interaction between children and their parents unnatural (Sanders and Dunifon, 2011). Prisoners also are known to sever contact with those on the 'outside'. Many prisoners report that 'doing time' is much easier when they are not in contact with loved ones as they serve as a painful reminder of what they have lost. Others find it humiliating to have their children see them

incarcerated or worry a visit will damage their child, and so prefer to cut ties (Martynowicz, 2011). Uninformed welfare systems also have a part to play; often they not aware of criminal justice issues (Codd, 2008) and family members can feel obligated to turn their back on a prisoner parent, for fear that their children will be subjected to ongoing scrutiny by social services and may even be removed if they choose to retain a relationship of any sort with a criminal parent. However, even in cases where the relationship is disconnected, prisoners' families may well still require support. Stigma, separation anxiety, poverty, marginalisation and coping alone will still apply to the prisoners' family whether or not relationships have been maintained with the prisoner. Services with an early intervention agenda in an attempt to prevent inter-generational repetition of patterns of imprisonment, are therefore proposed as being far preferable than those aiming to co-opt families into the resettlement process (Codd, 2007).

Expecting families to play a significant role in desistance can have negative implications and place families that are already experiencing social and financial problems under further pressure (Mills, 2004). Codd (2007) warns that whilst increased involvement between families and prisoners is to be welcomed, any approach to prisoners' families based on resettlement should be treated with caution.

## **Support Services for Families Affected by Parental Imprisonment**

### **The dearth of support**

There is a distinct and recognised lack of support services for prisoners' families across the globe. In the UK there is no single agency responsible for supporting children or families of prisoners and there is no central strategy from the government. Mainstream services do not offer any systematic support and there are only small pockets of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) services, and regrettably "the capacity of voluntary sector services to meet the needs of prisoners' families is geographically inconsistent and internally lacking" (Smith, et al, 2007, p80). Prisoners Families Voices (PVF), a UK online service providing a platform for prisoners' families and friends to voice their opinions, highlights the void with one mother writing in July 2011, "*.... once we have left the prison, we are left with an emotional roller coaster....I would like to*

*think that somewhere there are services, but as of yet, I have failed to come across any*". As a result very little is known about community-based support; the lack of services naturally produces an equivalent gap in the literature.

Children affected by parental imprisonment struggle to access any specialised help. The former UK government Green Paper entitled 'Every Child Matters' (Department for Education, 2003) and the subsequent Children Act passed in November 2004 aimed for every child, whatever their background or circumstances, to have the support they need to 'Be healthy', 'Stay safe', 'Enjoy and achieve', 'Make a positive contribution' and 'Achieve economic well-being'. However, in spite of this, whilst local safeguarding children boards were charged with developing a multi-agency strategy to promote the welfare of children, children of prisoners were not and are still not a distinct priority group. Whilst it is true some social service agencies provide broad services to former prisoners and their families, the delivery of these services tends not to be aligned to reflect the unique demand of the incarceration and re-entry process. For instance, although the strongest message from affected young people is the need to have someone to talk to (Philbrick 2002, Glover, 2009, Loureiro, 2010), and whilst a school may offer counselling to students experiencing difficult life crises, many are not aware that a young person is severely stressed by the impending return of an imprisoned parent (Travis, McBride, and Solomon, 2005). Only three percent of all local authorities' Strategic Children and Young People Plans mention prisoners' children' (Association of Prisoners' Families, 2006) yet over seven percent of each school population will experience the imprisonment of a parent at some point during their time in school (O'Keeffe, 2008).

A recent study conducted in Scotland (Loureiro, 2010) further highlights the distinct and noticeable lack of any formal support available and discusses some of the resulting problems. Largely, Loureiro found that children of prisoners do not have enough help to deal with the traumatic events surrounding the imprisonment of their parent, and often do not speak about it with anyone at all. When interviewed children were asked who talked to them about what had happened, two (out of a sample of 11) said they did not have anyone at all to talk to about the imprisonment and a third young person said he would speak with himself. Other children cited close family members and non-imprisoned carers, but the need for a professional person, who is separate from the family was reported as much desired by a number of the interviewed children. In an

interview with an adult participant who reflects on her father's arrest when she was young, Mary (pseudonym) explained that, when a child has a parent in prison, it is very important to have someone to speak to who is not 'part of the situation', who is independent and objective. She said:

*"It is a very hard period of time in the child's life where a lot is going on, and sometimes it is difficult to know how I could keep going on".*

Mary stressed that sometimes, and in spite of appearing to have a lot of people who a child could talk to, there are "*not a lot of options of whom to speak with*" (Loueiro, 2010 p33).

The lack of support for children and families of prisoners is as pertinent across the world as it is in the UK. Arditti (2012) points out that families affected by incarceration in America have virtually been left off the family preservation agenda, which is noteworthy given their significant and growing number. A study of visitors to a mid-Atlantic jail exemplifies the problem. Interviewees spoke of the lack of support offered to parents and children; non-custodial parents described "*struggling all by myself*", feeling "*like I'm in jail myself*" and having "*no peace, no break, no patience, and no help*" (Arditti, Lambert-Shute and Joest, 2003, p200).

In Australia the prison population, and therefore the numbers of affected children, is also rising. Support systems are, however, also lacking. In Victoria, for example, Sheehan (2010, p.164) points out that there is "*no coordinated response by the child protection and justice systems to managing these children's situations*". Additionally, despite clear evidence frequently linking parental incarceration with a decline in school performance and an emergence of behavioural problems, Woodward (2003) found no formal procedures in place to advise schools when a parent is in custody, so teachers tended to be unaware of children in their class who are in this situation.

For many prisoners' families the support of friends and family is invaluable in helping them 'survive the sentence'. However, for countless others, this kind of informal support is scarce or non-existent. Arditti (2003) observes stigma, generally connected to involvement in systems of criminal justice, intensifies the potential of harm for families. Commonly the tendency for shame to extend to family members is considered to be a major contributing factor in the decline of social support. For example, Schoenbauer

(1986) noticed that unlike other contexts of loss such as death or illness, loss of a family member because of imprisonment rarely elicits sympathy and support from others, and so family members often face the difficulties of separation alone. The situation is worsened in light of the fact that others in the community are generally unaware of the difficulties that prisoners' families face, adding to the lack of sympathy being extended for their situation. Additionally, the stigma attached to imprisonment means families of prisoners are generally reluctant to use mainstream services, a problem that is further compounded by the lack of understanding in these services of the prison culture (Woodward, 2003). Many relatives caring for children of prisoners often try to avoid contact with the child welfare system as they, (and often the prisoner), fear the children will be removed from the caregiver (Healey et al; Standing Committee on Social Issues 1997; Phillips & Bloom 1998; Shaw 1987).

A Hong Kong based study (Chui, 2009) examining the coping strategies employed by prisoners' families, found in most cases, the imprisonment of the sole breadwinner of the family left partners under significant financial strain. When families had exhausted informal support ("*I just can't remember how many times I begged my brothers and sisters for money to feed my kids*" Chui, 2009 p.201) they turned to formal support. Some families naively assumed they would be provided with tangible and immediate help from the Correctional Services Department that simply did not exist. One participant said,

*"The Government should take the lead in offering help to those who are in need. I know that my husband deserves to be in jail for what he did . . . but do we deserve to be punished by the penal system? . . . The [authorities] should help to rehabilitate offenders and help their families to adjust after they are locked up . . ."* (Chui, p201-202).

Chui's (2009, p202) paper paints a very similar picture to the plight of prisoners' families around the world with one participant explaining, "*If I didn't get the help from (a Centre run by a non-governmental organisation), I might have had to steal and live on the streets*".

Unquestionably, non-government organisations (NGOs) do offer extremely valuable sources of help, and deserve just recognition. In fact, the majority of support for children and families of prisoners is provided by charitable and voluntary agencies (Codd, 2008). In the UK, Action for Prisoners' Families (APF), established in 1989 (formerly the Federation of Prisoners' Families' Support Groups) is a significant resource for families of prisoners. The APF, the UK national umbrella organisation for prisoners' families' services, informs the development of good practice in supporting such families through its network, encouraging the exchange of information, skills and ideas. Partners of Prisoners (POPS), founded in 1988 by Farida Anderson MBE who set up the group when her own partner went to prison, runs the recently established national prisoners' families helpline, and numerous prison visitors centres across the North West of England, as well as offering advice to families attending courts in the region. The Ormiston Children and Families Trust, predominantly operating in the South of England, promotes the well-being of children disadvantaged by their circumstances and has a specific objective of supporting children of prisoners. Ormiston has produced a series of 'work booklets' for children to help them understand and process their feelings about the imprisonment of their parent, which have proved successful in reducing levels of anxiety, confusion and apprehension (Light and Campbell, 2006). As well as providing good quality visiting environments for children in a number of UK prisons, they are one of the few organisations that provide support to children and families in community based settings. The Prison Advice Care Trust (PACT), another charitable organisation, also provides practical and emotional support to families of prisoners, offering services from numerous prisons including running prison visitors centres in partnership with KIDS VIP (who pioneer good quality, child friendly visits in custodial settings). As described in Chapter 1, PSS has been offering support to families affected by parental imprisonment, in the community, in Merseyside, since 2008.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but despite tireless efforts, charities alone are unable to provide nationwide, comprehensive provision and there remain numerous regions where there are no direct services at all. What is more, as stressed by Ogilvie (2001), is that *'while these initiatives are commendable, necessary and important, they survive on the basis of rather precarious base funding, inadequate resourcing, and a concerning dependence on volunteer labour'* (Woodward, 2003, p32). The recent closure of SHARP (Support, Help and Advice for Relatives of Prisoners) in the UK exemplifies the problem. Despite successfully offering comprehensive support to

thousands of families each year, the charity closed in 2012 due to a lack of funding. David Doonan, SHARP's chief executive (2012), explained that the unpopular nature of the cause, supporting prisoners' families, makes it is very difficult to raise money. A survey by Clinks (2012), the umbrella group of criminal justice charities and voluntary organisations, found that 77 per cent of its members were using their reserves to survive and 55 per cent had made redundancies in 2011.

The enduring lack of official assistance for prisoners' families means that literally thousands of vulnerable families remain unaware of, or are unable to access the limited help available and so continue to receive no support at all. There are even fewer services that are specifically community-based. Most work is carried out predominantly in prison visitor centres and visits halls, with other services providing assistance over the telephone or perhaps sending advice booklets out in the post. It is rarity to find specialist work for this cohort based in community centres, or in an out-reach capacity where families can access hands on, face to face support in their own neighbourhoods. Furthermore, the current UK Payment by Results (PBR) government strategy (the practice of paying providers for delivering public services based wholly or partly on the results that are achieved) has been viewed by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) as concerning. The NCVO has warned that the instability created for providers by PBR is in danger of making them more risk-averse and less inclined to experiment with new ways to achieve results. This issue is particularly relevant to services that attempt to support families affected by parental imprisonment. The NVCO (2013) stated:

*“Great swathes of services don't have positive outcomes – but act to mitigate the further worsening of negative conditions, social isolation, or social injustice. These aren't 'results' in themselves, but provide important preventative and welfare support to individuals and communities”*

### **What Support do Children Affected by Parental Imprisonment Want?**

To prevent or minimise the consequences of parental imprisonment, it is extremely important to intervene early to be able to identify need and help children to cope (Davis, 1999). A review of the literature has highlighted some key strategies that appear to help children of prisoners cope with the loss of a parent to prison.

## Knowing the truth

There is a growing body of evidence that finds that children who know the ‘truth’ about their imprisoned parents whereabouts fair better than those who are told ‘stories’ such as your dad/mum is ‘working away’. Not telling the children the truth can “*have far reaching consequences and is universally condemned as harmful*” (Woodward, 2003, p30) and when the facts surrounding the incarceration are unclear to the child this can result in increased stress, family and individual dysfunction (Boss, 2002). Children who have been deceived about their parent’s whereabouts have been reported to exhibit disobedience, temper tantrums, destructive or delinquent behaviour (Shaw 1987; Seymour 1998). Telling the truth, on the other hand, has been found to be appreciated from the child’s perspective; “*My Mum and Dad have always been honest with me about what has happened and I’d rather have that than them lying to me....I think I’m better at talking about it.* Mike, 13 years (Boswell, 2002).

Furthermore, when children find out that their parent is in prison, but no explanation is given to them about why, the child might dwell on what possible terrible crime the parent has committed. Prisoners’ children, like the uninformed public, ‘*may believe that those who go to prison are chiefly killers, rapists, vicious and violent thugs and muggers of the lame and elderly*’ (Shaw 1987, p.42). According to Howard (2000), one of their greatest needs is for information, to understand what is happening to their loved one, and to know what to expect in terms of contact. Confusion can be intensified for children whose understanding of the world in general is still developing (Howard, 2000). It can stifle healthy emotional outlets; deceiving the child may make it impossible for them to work through their feelings about a parent’s incarceration (Woodward, 2003). “Telling the Children” produced by Action for Prisoners’ Families, UK, is one helpful resource that can help families and practitioners frame the conversations.

## Safe contact

Telling the ‘truth’ opens doors for further questions about prisons and wishes regarding contact. Safe contact (visits, phone-calls, letters) can bring much comfort to families, although for some, ending the relationship with the imprisoned parent is a relief.

Families of prisoners likely require a more inclusive definition of family (McAdoo 2002); many reported that their incarcerated parent was just as helpful as their non-incarcerated caregivers, suggesting this relationship, whether imagined or based on real circumstances, may serve as a coping strategy for the children (Bocknek, 2009).

‘COPING’, the aforementioned child-centred research project running from 2010-2013, investigated the characteristics of children with imprisoned parents across four European countries (Jones and Wainaina-Wonza (2013). Early findings demonstrate that telephone contact is crucial, as are letters and visits. Children who are given cell phone access to their incarcerated parents seem less anxious and fearful of the conditions in which their parent was living. Frequent communication appears to calm the children. ‘Family days’, where children can spend extended periods of time with their parents in prison and participate in activities in a more relaxed and informal way have also been reported to improve relationships between the offender-parent and child. Many imprisoned parents feel standard visits are not suitable for children and may consequently refuse visits of this sort (Hudson, 2006), meaning Family Days are crucial for children to access face-to-face contact. Unfortunately Family Day provision is scarce or in some establishments’, non-existent, in spite of strategies and policies stating a commitment to support family relationships (Hartworth and Hartworth, 2005). Hartworth and Hartworth (2005) stress that facilities should be made as widely available as possible and should not be considered as privileges.

It should also be acknowledged that some children do not get contact even when both they and their parent in prison wish it. Sometimes this is due to the non-imprisoned parent preventing it, but it may also be due to a lack of understanding and communication by involved services. Pemberton (2012), children’s editor for Community Care (a UK magazine that describes itself as being ‘for everyone in social care’), writes in an online blog that whilst social workers and teachers can work effectively with prisoners’ children, many are not aware of criminal justice issues and imprisonment. To add to the problem, children may become defensive around authority figures, including social workers, if they perceive that their parent has been wrongly blamed or convicted, and so may not feel able to communicate their true wishes regarding contact. Without specific training, social workers can presume that contact is therefore not in the child’s best interest, or too much of a logistical headache to arrange. Many families also face practical barriers attending visits for reasons of distance and

cost. These issues are especially prevalent for children of imprisoned mothers as the mothers are less likely to be imprisoned close to home (Women in Prison Project Group, 2007).

A similar problem is observed in America. In a consideration of children in foster care in the US who have incarcerated parents, Christian (2009) found that caseworkers rarely communicate with parents in prison, inform them of hearings or involve them in case planning. Additionally, in the context of federal and state policies that discourage reunification when a child has been in foster care for an extended period, caseworkers have little incentive to arrange visits and work to preserve parent-child relationships. He writes that the most serious of challenges which children in foster care face as a result of parental incarceration, is “*the risk that the legal parent-child relationship will be permanently severed through legal action by a child welfare agency*” (Christian, 2009, p5).

### Someone to talk to

Bocknek (2009) found prisoners’ children expressed feeling isolated and different from those around them. Most described troubled relationships with children at school and few, if any, friends. VACRO, an organisation in Victoria, Australia that aims to address the material and practical needs of prisoners and their families found that the most frequently raised support-need for prisoners’ families was the opportunity to speak with an independent person who understands the prison system. Prisoners themselves wanted their children to have access to counselling from people who understand the prison system (VACRO, 2000). However, many children may be burdened with ‘keeping the secret’ that their mother or father is in prison; this can add to their trauma. One man explained how keeping the secret of his mother’s incarceration affected him:

*“In my own case, we were actively counselled not to disclose to anyone in our community our plight of who our mother was. This had the effect of stopping us pursuing this topic amongst ourselves (my two brothers and I) and our foster parents. This also had the effect that we never resolved our problems or feelings. Instead of bringing us closer together as it could (have), this silence only pushed us apart” (Standing Committee on Social Issues 1997, p54).*

In a recent study (Bocknek, Sanderson and Britner, 2009) in which 35 school-aged children were interviewed about their parents' incarceration, many by the end of the interview, were displaying bonding behaviours with the research interviewers, sharing secrets, hugging, and holding hands. This seemingly reflects a deep need for attention, connection and understanding. Arguably, prisoners' children crave the opportunity to gain support from someone with whom they can openly discuss the pains of their parents' imprisonment. However, as the authors have stressed, any programs should attend to these bonding behaviours with sensitivity and caution and be aware of the complicated reasons for such bonding to occur so quickly. Mentors who are assigned should, therefore, ideally be able to maintain consistency and longevity in their mentoring relationships with these children. Children were asked in the intake interview what kind of mentor they would like to have and what kinds of things they would like to do with their mentor. As hypothesised by programme staff, children often requested mentors with a gender and characteristics similar to their absent parents. For example, one child, whose mother was an artist, asked for a mentor who could draw with him; another, whose father was incarcerated, likened a mentor to a father or brother who would play with him (Bockneck et al, 2009).

### Support for their Caregivers

Some children do cope optimally with a parent in prison. Findings from the pan-European 'COPING' research (2010-2013) show that children who manage well, despite having an incarcerated parent, is significantly related to the quality of care they receive from their primary caregiver. This is echoed in earlier research in which Lowenstein (1986) found that a mother's personal and familial coping resources actually had a greater impact on children's adjustment following parental imprisonment than the separation itself. However, whilst kinship networks are one apparent source of support, the adults in their lives are often unable to provide effective care because of many contextual factors (Bockneck, Sanderson and Britner, 2009).

A significant proportion of remaining parent-carers do not cope well. Parental imprisonment has been considered to be a well-known feature of cumulative disadvantage (Foster and Hagan, 2007). Cumulative disadvantage is characterized by multiple risk factors in relation to parenting, such as living in poor neighbourhoods,

parental unemployment, single-parent households with three or more children, chronic mental and physical health, and being a member of a socioeconomically disadvantaged group (Ceballo and Hurd, 2008; Puckering, 2004; Williams and Collins, 1995). It has a demonstrated impact on parenting practices (Beck, Cooper, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn, 2009), and in families affected by parental imprisonment typically mothers are left overloaded and over-worked, which is made worse by the paternal incarceration and related decrease in support. Persistent disadvantage can result in parenting practices that are inconsistent, harsh, and largely shaped by the mother's mood, her level of preoccupation, and her response to crisis events (Arditti, 2010, Puckering, 2004). Rationally then, supporting a child with a parent in prison means providing support to their remaining key carers in an attempt to reduce some of the effects of the cumulative disadvantage that have been perpetuated by the incarceration. It is logical to presume that if the remaining caregiver can be assisted to cope, the children will be likely beneficiaries.

The complexity of prisoners' children's lives demonstrates the need for equally complex service provisions. One of the difficulties in the field of wider support is that families may be reluctant to use 'official' services because of the stigma attached to imprisonment and for fear that their children might be removed. There is thus a need for specific non-statutory services for families and children of prisoners in light of the fact that prisoners' families are often suspicious of government agencies, and may not seek assistance needed if they feel they are under scrutiny (Wellesley, 1999).

As previously described there are a number of non-government organisations who work with limited funds to support prisoners' families with a wide range of issues including substance abuse, housing, financial hardship, relationships and access to prison specific information and advice. Availability of such services is scarce. Prisoners' family peer support groups may also be a source of help. Members of support groups can relate to feelings of shock and loss surrounding the incarceration, and will have needed to learn new routines and ways of life. Peers, having had similar experiences, can provide invaluable advice that helps others like themselves steer through the pitfalls (Light and Campbell, 2006).

## **'Family Focused' Approaches for Families Affected by Parental Imprisonment**

Resulting from the UK government's plea to literally 'think family', a 'whole family' approach has become the dominant discourse and mode of proactive intervention for practitioners working with vulnerable families (Cabinet Office, Social Exclusion Task Force, 2008). 'Think Family' means thinking about the child, the parent and the family, with adults, children's health and social care services working together to consider the needs of the individual in the context of their relationships and their environment (SCIE Guide 30, 2009). Tailored individual support is not rejected, but the needs of the whole family are instead incorporated and considered in terms of how each member's behaviour affects another. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) propose this is "*the only effective way of working with families experiencing the most significant problems*" (Think Family ToolKit, p2). Caution, however, has to be taken when considering such statements, when the source is a government document due to the potential for political tailoring in the message of their reports.

Families of prisoners are likely to require a more inclusive definition of family (Bocknek 2009). As is true for other populations experiencing loss of a significant family member, these children often struggled to define and make sense of their families, particularly as related to their imprisoned caregivers. Additionally, Boswell (2002) emphasises that formal support services need to become much more integrated with families and their informal support groups, during and after sentence, in order to shore up the rehabilitation process. Prisoners, partners/carers and children at their different developmental stages all have very particular support needs which, if met, may well make the difference between sustained and broken relationships during this fragile period.

Arditti (2012) finds that the most positive and successful programmes aimed at incarcerated parents and their families are ones that are holistic and 'multimodal', a claim based on robust evidence from a range of different sources. A central purpose of multimodal intervention is to provide incarcerated parents, caregivers, and children with enough support over time to ensure positive change (Eddy, Kjellstrand, Martinez and Newton, 2010). Whilst there might be separate interventions for offenders, their children and the caregivers, there are also components that link all the participants

together at the same time, or in the same way; multiple systemic levels considered include the individual, the family and the community. Clewett and Glover (2009), writing on behalf of Barnardo's, an organisation with a history of supporting children and families affected by parental imprisonment in the UK, echo this. They state that their experience convinces them that providing support to the 'whole family' is the best way of protecting and promoting positive outcomes for children of prisoners. Furthermore, Barry (2009) believes that if projects are able to work with prisoners as well as with families in the community, it is not only an effective way of accessing families in need but it can also highlight to prisoners themselves the issues that their imprisonment may have had on their families.

In the National Offender Management Service (NOMS, p29) Commissioning Intentions for 2013/14, the intent is to "*work with local authorities to promote inclusion of, and maximise benefits to offenders' families*". This tallies with the UK government announcement in Nov 2012 that it is committed to targeting and supporting 120,000 'troubled families'. Troubled Families, (as described by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)) are families which have serious problems, including parents not working, those with poor mental health, children not in school, and families causing crime and anti-social behaviour, and therefore need targeted holistic family-focused services. Troubled families have two characteristics; they face multiple, inter-related social issues likely to lead to poorer outcomes; and they cause problems for others. Prisoners and their families unsurprisingly fall into this cohort, and NOMS have declared that the Troubled Families programme in England (and the comparable Families First, and Integrated Family Support Service initiatives in Wales) affords prisons and probation services huge opportunity to enhance the range of support their offenders can access. In principle, therefore, the agenda should provide opportunities for families affected by parental imprisonment to access more opportunities for support that is designed to with the 'whole family' in mind. These commissioning intentions have prompted swift responses from key offenders' families' organisations. For example, Action for Prisoners' Families (APF) have stressed, amongst their various recommendations, that family work should not consist of a 'one-off' intervention, and family relationships should be supported throughout a prison sentence, and should include supporting the family post-release. The APF also urges that families should be consulted in order to benefit from their insights. In addition, CLINKS suggests that specific reference should be made to areas where commissioners

should engage with local VCS partners, to make best use of the sectors flexibility and specific skills. In sum, the voluntary sectors' expertise value and values should not be ignored.

In 2013, the MoJ in the UK published 'Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform'. This document set out the current government plans for transforming the way in which offenders are managed in the community in order to bring down reoffending rates. In response the Prison Reform Trust (an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system) recommended that the MoJ should ensure that the focus and delivery of the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda is closely aligned with Troubled families programme. The Prison Reform Trust, in their response document to Transforming Rehabilitation emphasise that family support and contact is vital for effective resettlement. Incentivising through the gate provision (resettlement support that flows from pre to post release) must take account of the role family members, and organisations that support offenders' families, can play in supporting individuals to return to their homes or local communities (Prison Reform Trust, 2013).

Fundamentally, being in prison does not prevent a prisoner from acting as a father or mother (Cunningham, 2001). Moreover, in the Children of Offenders Review (2007), although children of offenders were clearly acknowledged as being at risk of poorer outcomes, importantly, despite the correlation being strong, parental imprisonment was not proven to *cause* poorer outcomes. This encouraging finding endorses those striving to support families in this position, and reassures that positive outcomes for affected children are both realistic and achievable.

## **Summary**

The need to pay attention to community-based provision for families affected by parental imprisonment is clear. Firstly, as already stressed, services for prisoners' families are scarce, and support in local neighbourhoods where people can access face-to-face support in their homes and communities, is practically non-existent. Support based in prisons is undoubtedly invaluable, but for a whole host of reasons some family members never visit a prison, this means many families desperately need provision they can access either from, or close to home.

Secondly, Smith et al. (2007) identify ‘community services’ as one of four fundamental policy themes that require attention. The researchers raise concerns that, due to regionally based commissioning, local community links and adequate funding are severely lacking yet are essential for the development of a strong civic voice among families’ organisations. Furthermore, locally based community support is needed in order to meet the specific advice needs of an ethnically diverse population of families in which a parent is in, or has been in prison.

Thirdly, the MoJ (Children of Offenders Review, 2007) notes a lack of knowledge, evidence and understanding about what works for prisoners’ children and finds no single coherent system *around* a prisoner’s family. Prison and probation focus on the offender often with no knowledge of the child/family, whilst services accessed by the child are often unaware of parental imprisonment. As PSS has embraced a family focused model, this deserves closer attention so that lessons might be learnt about family orientated approaches in assisting this cohort.

Finally, studies from the perspective of the prisoners’ children are still rare. A number of researchers including Woodward (2003), Loureiro (2010) and Jones and Wainaina-Wonza (2013) are calling for more research regarding the level and quality of any support received and any outcomes. In addition, Condry (2007) wrote that we know very little about the how offenders’ families manage their everyday circumstances. Thus, in light of the rarity of the PSS service it is considered of significant importance to find out from both children and families what it is like to experience specialised support.

# CHAPTER 4

## Methodology and Methods

### Introduction

This study draws on a qualitative collective case study approach to examine how families affected by parental imprisonment experience support. The purpose of this chapter is to present the philosophical assumptions underpinning this research, and to clarify the research strategy and the techniques applied.

This chapter is divided into four main sections:

#### **1. Methodological Approach.**

This section will discuss why a ‘Collective Case Study’ approach has been adopted, and acknowledges other methodological insights that have further influenced the direction of this work.

#### **2. Methods.**

The context of the study and sampling strategy, inclusion/exclusion criteria, recruitment strategy and sample size are described. Data collection, recording and transcription and analysis are also discussed.

#### **3. Rigour.**

This section reflects on the credibility of the study and includes any unexpected events that occurred during the execution of the study. Specific attention is paid to the potential for researcher bias and how this might have affected the data.

#### **4. Ethics.**

Ethical considerations, to account for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice are discussed.

## 1. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The theoretical lens from which a researcher approaches a study will influence their data (Thorne, 2000) and, as Miles and Huberman (1994) advise, “*it is good medicine for a researcher to make their preferences clear*” (p4). This section will now present the underpinning rationale for the theoretical choices made.

### **A Collective Case Study Approach**

This is essentially a study about families. As PSS adopts a ‘whole family’ approach in which individuals are supported in context of the influence they have on their family members, or how their family members may influence them, it was important to reflect this and consider each of the study’s participants as part of their family unit, or ‘case’. A number of researchers have discussed the benefits of a case study approach. Patton (1990) suggests that case studies are valuable in creating deep understanding of particular people, problems or situations in comprehensive ways. In much the same way, Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Hubey, Avery and Sheikh (2011) find that the case study approach is particularly useful to employ when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural real-life context. Benbasat et al. (1987) have also recommend a case study approach in research that is being conducted in areas where few, if any, previous studies have been undertaken. This undoubtedly is in keeping with this study, as this study seeks to understand experiences of support for families affected by parental imprisonment, at a time where support, and therefore related research, is notably limited.

A *collective* case study approach, in simple terms, is the study of more than one case. Yin (2003, p.46) stresses that multiple case studies are “*considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as more robust*”. For this reason, this study aims to understand multiple-perspectives both within families, and across families. However, whilst some individual family members are happy to participate in research, others are not. This echoes what is known in practice and the way in which families typically engage with PSS; whilst some family members (children or adults) will ask for, or be happy to accept support from PSS, others from the same family are not ready, willing or able to receive it. At PSS, an individual is supported ‘systemically’ regardless

of whether other family members are physically present or not. For this reason, where only one individual from a family agreed to participate in the study, the contribution made by that individual was still viewed as a ‘family case’.

There are two key approaches that guide case study methodology; one proposed by Robert Stake (1995) the second by Robert Yin (2003, 2006). Both base their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists claim that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one’s perspective. The collective case study approach enables the researcher to explore similarities and differences within and between cases, with the overall aim of producing findings that represent the ‘collection’. Stake (1995) places emphasis on a naturalistic approach and the importance of the description of contexts being highlighted. This study fits with Stake’s “*naturalistic*” ontology. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that naturalistic research uses natural settings (to keep realities in their contexts), qualitative methods, purposive sampling, inductive analysis, case study reporting mode, tentative application of findings, and special criteria of trustworthiness.

As this collective case study has gathered data via in-depth interviews and subsequent conversations, this is a purely qualitative study. Qualitative research has traditionally been used to understand oppressed and excluded groups in society, which reflects the socially oppressed and ostracised group, which are the families affected by parental imprisonment considered in this work. Tellis (1997) suggests that the qualitative case study approach enables the powerless and voiceless to be heard. In qualitative studies the participants or informants are the holders of the knowledge, and in this study the aim is to understand the perspectives of the families involved.

There is no prescribed way to conduct a collective case study. The researcher is required to make decisions based on their chosen epistemological and philosophical outlook. There are many lenses from which to choose from, that will guide research. This study, for instance, could arguably fit with a feminist approach, which also highlights experience, qualitative data and is appropriate for sensitive topics.

However, a phenomenological view has been chosen, as this study strives for a close understanding of lived experiences. In addition, Stake’s naturalistic approach, which has been embraced in this work, fits with a ‘somewhat ethnographic view’, because the data

has predominantly been collected in ‘real life’, community-based settings. Both the phenomenological and ethnographic lenses that have influenced this work are described in more detail below.

### **Phenomenological insights**

This study is informed by phenomenological insights. Whilst the collective case study approach has driven the way this study has been structured and processed, the epistemological and philosophical underpinnings of the work are borrowed from phenomenology. The central question of phenomenology is to explore the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for an individual or group of people (Miller and Salkind, 2002; Streubert-Speziale and Carpenter, 2007). It is lived experience that gives meaning to each individual’s perception of a particular phenomenon and thus presents to the individual what is true or real in his or her life (Giorgi, 1997). Through close examination, phenomenological analysts seek to capture the meaning of and essences of an experience or event. The truth of the event, as an abstract entity, is subjective and knowable only through embodied perception. A phenomenological analysis does not aim to explain or discover causes, instead, its goal is to clarify the meanings of phenomena from lived experiences. Keen (1975) explained that unlike other methodologies,

*“...phenomenology cannot be reduced to a ‘cookbook’ set of instructions. It is more an approach, an attitude, an investigative posture with a certain set of goals.” (Keen, 1975, p41).*

This study explores the experiences of families affected by parental imprisonment and has sought to understand more about this phenomenon. Green and Thorogood (2004) propose that talking to people in-depth and allowing them to tell their own stories can provide the researcher with access to their world-view. The following elements of a phenomenological approach have been used in this research.

- This study seeks first hand experiences, a key feature of the phenomenological approach.
- Families are positioned as experts, as ‘the knowers’ of, and ‘holders of’ knowledge.

- This study focuses on the families' interpretation of their experience, and has set out to describe the phenomena of parental imprisonment as experienced and expressed by the families themselves.
- This study acknowledges that there is an inevitable interpretation of meanings made both by participants and researcher.
- A highly reflexive approach has been taken to capture how the researcher's positioning and history may have contributed to the interpretation of the findings. This has been addressed through both supervision and through the regular use of a reflexive diary. It was neither possible, nor desirable to use phenomenological 'bracketing' in this work, due to the close positioning of the practitioner-researcher to the participants in this study.
- The researcher believed that through repeated, iterative engagement with the data and through vigilance against making assumptions that the essence of the participants' experiences could be obtained.

Having decided upon a phenomenological approach, as I intended to build an understanding of how families affected by parental imprisonment experience support, it was then necessary to determine which particular method of phenomenology was most appropriate. In the nursing and 'caring fields' literature, two main phenomenological frameworks are prominent; 'descriptive' (proposed by German philosopher Edmund Husserl, 1859-1938) and 'interpretive' (later proposed by his student, Martin Heidegger, 1889-1976). Both are focused on discovering the meaning of the phenomena, and the researcher assumes a readiness to listen to the descriptions of the lived experiences as described by the participants. However, the two approaches differ in their aim. In the interpretive method, the researcher uses his or her prior knowledge to interpret and uncover hidden meanings (Kleiman, 2004), whilst in the descriptive method the preconceptions of the researcher are held in abeyance so that they do not influence the object of study (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

It was necessary, therefore, to consider my personal biases in advance of conducting this study and whether phenomenological bracketing - the deliberate putting aside of what one already knows about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Carpenter, 2007) - could or could not take place during the study and in particular during the analysis. Interpretative phenomenologists believe it is impossible to rid the mind of preconceptions and approach something in a completely blank or

neutral way. Instead, it is felt that the researcher's experiences can help appropriately guide the research questions. Koch (1995) proposed that as researchers, we are interpreting something in which we ourselves exist; therefore we have no detached standpoint. This resonated with my own perspective. Due to my position as a practitioner and my well-established relationships with my participants as a result of having provided them or their families with support prior to the research project starting, phenomenological bracketing seemed unrealistic. I also wanted to use my experience as a practitioner to guide my semi-structured interview questions. I felt that my prior knowledge of the families would assist me in terms of asking questions in a manner that would minimize the potential for distress, or indeed asking questions that could stimulate a useful discussion. I concluded, therefore, that an interpretive Heideggerian approach was the most appropriate approach to take.

### **A 'somewhat' ethnographic view**

Although this is not an ethnographic study, as it is argued that true ethnography must involve much participant observation so that people can be understood in context (Galanit, 1999), it is fair to say that the work is approached 'somewhat' through an ethnographic lens. Bell (2005, p17) states that in ethnographic studies, "*the researcher has to be accepted by the individuals or groups being studied*". In this study, access to a typically hidden and secretive group is made possible because a practitioner, already known to and trusted by the families, has carried out the research. Condry (2007) argues that because this population can be difficult to reach, there is a tendency to study these kind of research subjects in convenient but non-natural surroundings rather than go into the field; that whilst visiting a public gallery in court or a prison might be significant experiences for relatives of offenders, this only comprises a small part of their lives and one dimensional difficulties they have to manage. In this study, a strong argument has therefore been made for practitioner-led research due to the potential to access data in community-based settings.

Brewer (2000, p6) defines ethnography as "*the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' ...involving the researcher participating directly in the setting*".

Boyle (1994) explains that when a researcher claims to have used ethnographic methods, we can assume that he or she has come to know a culture or group through immersion and engagement in fieldwork. In this study much data have been collected during times spent with participants in their homes, in support groups, in community

outings, on prison visits, or in a car at times when transport has been provided for service users to get to various appointments or places. The benefits of collecting data in naturally occurring settings enables a researcher to share many of the same experiences as his/her subjects and to a certain degree at least, “*see things as those involved see things*” (Denscombe, 1998, p69). Thus, although this research does not claim to be an ethnography, it is fair to say that a unique insider perspective is adopted that is keeping with the ethnographic approach.

## **2. METHODS**

In this section, the PSS context and sampling strategy is described. The inclusion criteria are listed and much attention is then given to the recruitment of the participants. Efforts to ensure that participants have not felt coerced to take part in this study is addressed in detail, as it is recognised that this may be a particular concern in research which is practitioner-led. Following this, methods of data collection, recording and transcription are provided, followed by an in-depth explanation of how the data has been analysed.

### **Context and Sampling Strategy**

PSS is a non-government voluntary sector charitable organisation whose mission is to find innovative ways to help those most in need. ‘Family Impact for Prisoners Children’ is one of the services set up at PSS to support children of prisoners and their families. The service is based in Merseyside, which is situated in the North West of the United Kingdom, and works with an average of 15 families affected by parental imprisonment at any one time. Each family unit might have differing amounts of service users, as numerous people from one family might be accessing the support (children, parents, prisoner-parents, grandparents, other relatives) or as few as only one person within the family might be using the service. On average around 35 individuals are supported at any given time.

This study uses a purposive sample of clients who receive support from the PSS ‘Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children’ team. As Patton (1990) explains, qualitative inquiry typically focuses, in depth, on relatively small samples with a particular purpose in mind. A purposive sample is chosen when it is believed that the participants’ in-depth information will provide a good insight into an issue that little is known about. Services

specifically for prisoners' children and their families are so rare it is acknowledged that, to date, very little is understood about what it means to be a recipient of this type of support.

As PSS supports a relatively small number of families affected by parental imprisonment at any one time, in order to gain as many perspectives as possible, all active families would be invited to participate in the research. In addition, a family would be accepted onto the study regardless of whether one or more members of that family were able or willing to participate. This not only increases the chances of gaining a wide range of perspectives, but it reflects the PSS systemic approach to support in which individuals are viewed as part of their family whether or not other members of the family are physically present.

### **Inclusion criteria**

For family members to be eligible to participate in the study they must

- Speak English.
- Be willing to participate.
- Be a PSS service user.
- Parent/carers participants must have or have had the responsibility for the care of child who has, or still has a parent in prison.
- Prisoners post-release must be a parent.
- Children must have a parent in prison, or a parent who has been in prison.
- Children who are not yet 16 yrs old must have the consent of their parent/carer to be able to participate.

### **Justification of sample**

In this research, the sample was drawn from families who were receiving support from the Family Impact Team at PSS. This decision was reached after careful consideration of the benefits and issues associated with widening the participant base. Whilst 'Family Impact for Prisoners' Children' at PSS is a distinctive and rare service, a few similar projects do exist in other areas of the UK. 'Circle', for example, is a Scottish Charity that provides community-based support to marginalised children and families using a

whole-family approach. One of the programmes provided by Circle, the 'Meet at the Gate' project, seeks to help mothers leaving prison. A relationship is established with the mother while she is still in prison, and support is then provided on a through-care basis. Like PSS, Circle's main focus is on strengthening families. Some thought was given, therefore, whether research participants should and could be sought from similar organisations and projects, to gain a wider perspective of familial experiences of support.

Whilst reaching a wider cohort of participants may have been preferable in that it would certainly have produced a wider base for data collection, and would have provided some insight as to whether experiences of support are regionally, organisationally or in some other way specific, the decision was taken to only recruit from the pool of PSS service using families. The core reasons for this decision are now presented.

Firstly, as an insider-researcher, I had primary access to my organisation by virtue of my position as a member of staff at PSS. However, even with this access, the intensive and sensitive nature of the research meant that ensuring full and meaningful participation was a challenge. Although this research was predominantly a solo venture, the project required a degree of input and flexibility from other staff members at PSS, especially with regards the recruitment process, in addition to their existing work and other commitments. Access to another organisation would have involved some considerable negotiating, and access to their service users even more so. As previously stated, families affected by imprisonment tend to be a secretive group as a result of the ongoing stigma they face. I intended to interview all my research participants face to face, but I anticipated it would be difficult to engage service users from external agencies in this manner. I based this judgment on my knowledge of prisoners' families being fearful of speaking to people they do not know and therefore would struggle to trust. Taking, where possible, a naturalist approach to my work in line with Stake's (1995) naturalist stance on collective case work, I also intended to gather as many in-field conversations as possible during my work as a practitioner, which would not have been possible to do elsewhere.

Even with permission to conduct interviews, there were the added barriers of time due the geographical remoteness of similar services. I was unable to identify any comparable service in Merseyside or the North West. Lengthy commutes to services

outside of the North would have added significant time pressures to the research agenda, which I needed to avoid. Further issues were anticipated in terms of speaking to previously unknown participants from settings I was unfamiliar with and whose speech and colloquialisms could have meant I would have been less fluent in my communication with them. Although these issues can often be overcome by asking clarifying questions, due to the extremely sensitive nature of this particular project, I was concerned that participants who might be asked to repeatedly explain themselves might feel uncomfortable or unnecessarily probed.

Thus, whilst acknowledging the limitations of recruiting from one service, the constraints on the researcher's resources combined with a commitment to a sensitive and naturalist approach meant that I decided to recruit from within my own service. However, I designed my recruitment strategy to gain a diversity of experience. 'Family Impact for Prisoners Children' attracts service users from many different backgrounds and localities across Merseyside. Although imprisonment is commonly positively correlated with social deprivation (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2007) it is also true that imprisonment is an issue that affects all groups in society. As a practitioner with an insiders' knowledge of the pool of families from which I could recruit, I felt confident that I would be able to invite families with enough diversity in terms of their stories, their backgrounds and their family make up to gather a sufficiently wide range of perspectives to meet my research aims.

## **Recruitment**

As PSS typically supports approximately 15 families affected by parental imprisonment at any one time, all current service-using families would be invited to take part, with the hope of a 50-75% uptake.

Taking into account the ethical challenges of practitioner-research as a result of having multiple roles and conflicting obligations (McGinn and Bosacki, 2004), the following steps were taken with the hope that service users would not feel any pressure or obligation to participate in the research, and to reassure all those invited that the support they receive from PSS would neither be positively or negatively influenced by involvement or non-involvement in the research project.

### Parent/Carer Participants, including ex prisoners:

- a) A third party member of PSS telephoned identified potential parent/carers participants. A short, scripted explanation of the research was given (see appendix A) and the service user was asked whether he/she would like to receive some information (see appendices D and E).
- b) For interested parties, an information pack was sent by post. This pack included the information on CD, (as per appendices D and E), which was deemed necessary as some of service users may have had literacy problems. The front cover (see appendix C) of the information pack was a summary sheet to aid understanding using a simplistic, key point style. In the information pack, it was stressed to service-users that non-participation in the study would not compromise the quality of care that they received, nor would participation advantage them. The information was written in user-friendly language.
- c) In the following week, and at least 24 hours later, the third party person identified above made a follow up phone call (see appendix B). It was anticipated that this helped service-users feel able to refuse. If interest was still shown in being involved at the point of this follow up call, the service user was asked whether they would mind direct contact from the researcher.
- d) If the parents / carers / prisoners' post-release were happy to proceed, a meeting was arranged in which the study's objectives were clarified, any questions that the family had were answered, and consent / assent form(s) were signed (see appendices C, D and E). Interested parties were also reminded that they could withdraw at any time.

### Children:

- a) In the initial phone call, the third party recruiter explained to parents and carers that the researcher was interested in speaking to children as well as adults in the family (where appropriate, as some children in the identified families were too young to be considered).

- b) The information pack included a section relating specifically to children participating (see appendix E). It was made clear in the information given, that although the study is interested in ‘whole family’ perspectives, any part of the family (parent/carer, ex prisoner or child) could participate without other parties wishing to do so. All children needed parental consent (see appendix G) to take part.
- c) When the third party recruiter made the follow up call (see appendix B) the parents/carers were asked if they were interested in their children being involved and whether the researcher could meet the children to explain more about what is expected.
- d) The researcher then met the children interested in participating in the study with their parents/carer present. This provided an opportunity for both parents and children to ask questions. If the parents and children wanted to proceed, the parent signed the consent forms. Children were reminded they could withdraw at any point.
- e) On the days the interviews took place the children, in addition to having their parent’s/guardian’s written consent, were also invited to complete a child friendly tick box ‘assent form’ to ensure they understood the research objectives and know that they were still able to withdraw at any stage or not answer any questions they did not wish to answer (see appendix H).

### The dilemma of inviting particularly vulnerable families to participate

Whilst it is typical that those supported at PSS do experience ongoing stress in their lives, there are invariably times when families will face particularly difficult challenges that produce even greater levels of upset, worry and strife. When the recruitment process began, it became clear, due to the positioning of a researcher who was also ‘in practice’, that one of the families was at crisis point. Support was being offered to a mother, whose husband had been sent to prison for a sexual offence. The case had been widely publicised and this mother and her children had to move home as a result of

intense backlash from the local community. Following re-housing to a neighbourhood with which the family members were unfamiliar with, the mother struggled to cope with her children's behaviour and refusal to attend school. After a year of attempted failed interventions, the mother was told that her children could no longer live with her and were placed into care. It was at this point that recruitment for the study was underway.

Having considered with great care and attention the ethical dilemmas that surround using service users as research participants, it was crucial to ensure that the research objectives would not take precedence over service user well-being. The decision was therefore made that 'in-crisis' families should *not* be invited to participate, based on the assumption that such families would not welcome something else to contend with and commit to. It was felt an invitation and/or participation in the study might unduly add unnecessary stress upon their lives.

However, on reflection, it was felt that the 'non-invitation' was potentially smothering the voices of these struggling service users. It was subsequently felt that by removing the opportunity to participate in research, in which time and space is created for clients to be seen as experts and to tell their story, there was the potential of depriving them of a valuable opportunity from which they might actually benefit. This could actually be the time when they needed to be heard the most. Further still, by actively choosing *not* to invite some families to take part in the research, they were being negatively discriminated against, as a direct result of their hardships, even though the intentions behind a 'non-invite' had been for compassionate reasons. The decision was therefore made to return to the original intention of inviting *all* families who were currently accessing support from the service to be involved if they so wished. This was implemented with considerable care, drawing upon many years of practitioner experience working with families affected by parental imprisonment.

It is also noteworthy that some families said that they had initially found aspects of the recruitment approach uncomfortable. They expressed concerns about the amount of written information provided and the use of a third party to make initial contact with them. A number of service users stated that they were taken aback to have someone they did not know ring them. Others said they were a little 'overwhelmed' by the recruitment pack and most admitted in initial meetings that they did not really read the information or listen to the CD. Some commented that, if anything, the recruitment

packs were a bit off putting and made comments such as “*You should have just rang me and asked me. You know I’d tell you if I didn’t want to do it*”. Nonetheless, everyone appeared relaxed when they were able to have the face-to-face meetings about the research in which the intentions of the study were explained in service user-friendly language. It is argued, however, that the recruitment approach taken is justifiable as it helps to prevent any undesired coercion of participants. In addition there does not seem to be any negative effect in terms of the numbers being recruited.

### **Sample size**

In qualitative inquiry there are no rules about sample size (Patton, 1990). Sample size is invariably affected by what the research aims to find out and what can be done in terms of access, available time and resources. Whilst the sample size was not fixed before data collection, the aim was to recruit either a minimum of 75% of families from the active PSS caseload in order that the data could reflect the breadth of families’ experiences of being supported by PSS, or to continue to collect available data until data saturation had occurred.

Recruitment of participants was, in the main, unproblematic and most service users readily agreed to be involved. When the recruitment phase began, PSS had 12 open case files. Eight families were recruited to the study meaning four eligible families did not take part. Taking into account that prisoners and their families are generally considered to be a hard to reach group, it is reasonable to assume that the pre-existing trusting relationship between the family members and the researcher was a key factor that positively affected the recruitment and uptake.

### **Data Collection**

With a collective case study approach in mind, Crowe, Creswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery and Sheukh (2011) advise that to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon, the case study approach usually involves the collection of multiple sources of evidence, which are more commonly qualitative techniques. Crowe et al. (2011) argue by approaching the same issue from different angles, a holistic picture of the phenomenon can be developed.

In this study, two key methods of gathering data were used; in-depth interviews (primary data) and conversations recorded by participants that were gathered in the field (additional data). Although only two methods of gathering data might appear initially limiting, the participants were given the opportunity to have their voice heard in a wide range of settings and ways. Crowe et al. (2011) state that in collective case studies, data collection needs to be flexible enough to allow a detailed description of each individual case to be developed before considering the emerging similarities and differences in cross-case comparisons. The range of opportunities for families to contribute to the research was made possible due to the practitioner-researcher access to participants throughout the duration of the study. Furthermore, the multiple perspectives gathered which include voices of parents/carers, former prisoners and children assist with the development of a holistic picture to capture these families' experiences of support.

Conducting research as someone who the participants already know as a practitioner is hugely beneficial in terms of access, for reasons of already established trust and rapport. However, this can create practical hurdles during the data collection phase. In this study, there were a number of times when an interview was due to take place, but upon arrival the family members instead requested support as a service user due to a recent crisis or challenge they were facing. At such times the research agenda had to be temporarily abandoned, and with a re-role to a practitioner mindset, the family were offered support. The needs of the participants as service users had to take precedence over the research agenda; it was considered to be ethically inappropriate to expect participation in the study at a time when a service user was actively asking for immediate help. There were also times, just after interviews, when family members requested support. Constant work had to be done, therefore, in terms of practitioner-researcher self-monitoring and checking the reactions of families that the intended role of either 'practitioner' or 'researcher' was being fully conveyed.

### Primary Data: In-depth Interviews

Each participant, children and adults alike were invited to participate in an in-depth face-to-face interview. The purpose of the interviews was to explore familial experiences of support when a parent is / has been in prison in the family. Gordon (1975) states that a personal interview is useful in that it provides the researcher with

the opportunity to observe non-verbal indicators, which assist the researcher in assessing the validity of the respondents' answers, and that this is useful when discussing sensitive issues. The other advantage of the face-to-face interview is that there is no significant time delay between question and answer. Opdenakker (2006) remarks that the advantage of this synchronous communication is that the answer of the interviewee is more spontaneous without an extended reflection.

It was important that the participants felt as comfortable as possible during their interviews. Not only was this important for benevolent ethical reasons especially in light of the sensitive nature of this research, but Patton and Cochran (2002) stress that the place where an interview is conducted will have an impact on the answers. Organising the interview space so that interviewee is relaxed is undoubtedly significant (Patton and Cochran, 2002). Preferably then, the choice of venue for an interview to take place should be one where a participant feels at ease. For this reason, the participants were asked to choose whether they preferred to be interviewed either in their own home, or at PSS (an environment familiar to all the families as they were all active service users). Most chose to be interviewed in their homes. Mainly this was for reasons of convenience; many participants said they preferred to be interviewed at home to avoid the commute to the city centre where PSS is based. Avoiding unnecessary hassle or stress before an interview starts, and respecting participant choice of environment were key reasons why most participants were interviewed in their homes. Researcher safety was maintained through adherence to the UCLAN Risk Assessment Form, and the PSS Lone Working Protocol, for which specific in-house (at PSS) training was undertaken.

Three open-ended semi-structured interview schedules were developed, one for each of the three groups of participants, children, parent/carers and prisoners post-release (see appendices I, J and K respectively). Patton (1987) wrote that good questions in qualitative interviews should be open-ended, neutral, sensitive and clear to the interviewee. It is also found to be good practice to begin with questions that the participant can answer easily before moving on to more sensitive questions (Pope and Mays, 2008). Opening questions thus began by asking the interviewee to describe their families and to recall how they became involved with PSS, before moving onto more sensitive questioning regarding the experience of parental imprisonment in the family and their related experiences of support. Bernard (1995) wrote that the key to successful interviewing is learning how to probe effectively, without injecting yourself so much

into the interaction that you only get a reflection of yourself in the data. The probing techniques used included prompt questions such as ‘how did that make you feel?’ and ‘can you tell me more about that?’; silent probes (just waiting for the interviewee to continue), echo probes (mirroring back what the interviewee has said) and encouraging the interviewee to continue with affirmative noises (such as “uh-huh”, “yes I see” and “right, uh-huh”).

Each interview schedule purposely contained few questions. The intentionally simplistic structure was created solely to maintain focus on experiences of support, and not steer too far from this research agenda. Wording was not standardised because it was deemed important to use the interviewees own words when framing supplementary questions, and it was expected that questioning would not necessarily follow the same order from interview to interview. Good qualitative research follows the lead of the participant whilst not losing track of the research objective; using a participant’s own language where possible and appropriate, conveys understanding and helps to prevent misunderstandings (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Once the data collection is underway, a flexible interview structure enables new lines of questioning to be added, to reflect and explore areas of interest emerging in the data.

#### Additional data: In-field conversations

With a view to gaining additional data to add depth and validity to the findings, and with the luxury of practitioner access, further understanding of the family’s experiences of support was made possible by capturing relevant ‘conversations’ that took place between the participating family members and myself as the practitioner-researcher. Gaining permission to do this, however, had to be carefully considered. In anticipation of being privy to potentially useful information disclosed in conversations, it was made clear in the adult information (see Appendix D) that notes would only be made in reference to ‘in-field conversations’ with permission, which would be sought from the participant at that specific moment in time. Conversations would only be captured if they took place between the participant service user and myself as practitioner-researcher. Examples of places where conversations might be captured included the participant’s home, during car/train journeys when accompanying the participant to and from meetings or events, or when supporting the participant on the premises at PSS. In relation to child service users, conversations might be captured when children were

escorted on prison visits, or to and from the PSS children's groups. It is also customary that the Family Impact Team will regularly ring their service users to see how they are fairing. Sometimes conversations that took place over the telephone were deemed relevant to the study. For conversations that occurred where other people were present (professionals, friends and family members), because these other parties were not consenting participants in this study, the possibility of including any part of these conversations was disregarded for ethical reasons.

It was further decided that 'in-field conversations' would only be captured from participants who had *already* taken part in their in-depth interview. This was felt to be important, as by the time an in-depth interview had been completed, the participant would have a much fuller understanding of the study and the part they play in it. Capturing any conversations would therefore be additional data to the study gained from fully consenting and informed individuals.

## **Recording and Transcription**

### **Recording in-depth interviews**

Audio recording in-depth interviews is considered highly useful, because handwritten notes can often interfere with the process of interviewing, and making notes after an interview has finished means vital data are often missed or mis-reported. In this study, as the population under consideration normally suffers oppression, and is therefore often a silent and silenced group in society, it was deemed important to provide a platform for the participating families' voices to be heard as authentically as possible. Audio-recording was therefore chosen so that the in-depth interviews could be transcribed verbatim. This enabled numerous quotes to be extracted from the transcripts which was anticipated would help intended readers to 'hear' as closely as possible the voices of this hidden group.

All participants agreed (parents on behalf of their children) to have their interviews recorded. The information pack specifies that the recording of interviews would only take place 'with permission', and hand written notes would be taken if participants were not comfortable with the use of a recording device (see Appendix D). It was further

stressed that only the researcher would listen to the recorded interview, simply to transcribe the data, and recordings would be wiped soon after transcription.

Careful consideration was also given to issues of data protection and data storage. Identifying data were only seen by myself and were securely locked in a cabinet at home. Data were anonymised through the use of letters and numbers to identify and link data, and omitting identifying place names. Further information on codes used is given below under the sub-heading 'Coding the Data'.

Transcription took place within two to four days so that the interview remained fresh in mind of the researcher. It is important to remember not solely what has been said, but how it has been said, and to remember as accurately as possible participants' body language, tone of voice and any other interesting features of the interview. Sometimes words, or sections of recordings are difficult to hear when listening back to recordings, so it helps to understand the data better when the interview is more easily recalled.

Recorded interviews were listened to at least twice. During a first listening, the data were transcribed. This is time consuming and involved continual stopping, starting and checking to ensure each sentence is accurately represented in written form. In the second listening, it was possible to hear with greater ease the natural flow of what had been said. During this time the transcribed interview was read over, whilst listening to the audio version. This allowed for a closer 'feel' of the data and notes were able to be made on tones of voices to include sentiments of despair, sadness, humour, gratitude and hope, to name just a few.

### Recording in-field conversations

When a participant added to their in-depth interview with additional comments in later conversations, they were asked, at the time of the conversation if their thoughts could be used as contributions to the research. With their verbal agreement, written notes were made in the researcher's reflective diary as soon as possible after the conversation had occurred.

## The reflective diary

Reflections during the process added to the contextual richness of the study. Smith (1999) finds that a researcher's reflexive diary can reveal previously hidden contextual information that enhances the prime ethical and methodological aim of the study; to understand the lived experience of its participants. In this study the reflective diary was simply a note book in which hand written observations were recorded following each semi-structured interview in addition to notes made in regards to in-field conversations.

After each in-depth interview, initial thoughts of key ideas were noted in the diary, as well as the general state of the interviewee (e.g. content, relaxed, angry, cynical etc). Notes were also made with regards to contextual events, such as who was present at the time and where the interview or conversation took place in (e.g. service user's home, PSS office, in a car, over the phone).

Notes were also made with respect to 'non-events'. Non-events, refer to times where an interview was due to be carried out but was cancelled, perhaps because the participant needed immediate support, or perhaps because the interview could not be conducted at all due a change in personal circumstances of the intended respondent.

This diary served as a useful reference point during the data analysis phase. Not only did it help to improve accuracy when recalling what had been said, but was also extremely useful when considering how the data had affected myself as a researcher and to reflect on how this in turn might influence the ongoing generation and analysis of data. Notes that trace the thinking of the researcher can help guide a final conceptualization that answers research questions and offers a theory as an explanation for the answers. Data saturation occurred when 18 in-depth interviews across the eight families had been gathered.

## Coding the Data

It is important to strive to guarantee promises of confidentiality made to research participants, where possible. Corti, Day and Backhouse (2000) stress that whilst not all subjects may be concerned about their anonymity, others are. Anonymisation of data is a traditional means of removing identifying information or disguising real names. Corti

et al. (2000) write that anonymising qualitative data, where practical, typically involves removing major identifying details, (e.g. place and company names) and removing all identifying details, (e.g. first names, street names, and other real names) in addition to those above. These details are replaced with pseudonyms.

To protect the participants' identity in this study, a coding system was used as follows: CH (Child), ExP (Ex Prisoner) or PC (Parent/Carer). Each code also had a number from 1 to 8 that denoted which of the eight families the respondent belonged to. So, quite simply, a child from family 2 would be listed as CH 2.

When an interview had been transcribed and anonymised, it was printed out and placed into a numbered folder, one number for each family. Any notes written in the reflective diary were coded at the point of entry. Later, during the analysis phase these notes were taken from the reflective diary and assigned to the correct family folder.

## **Data Analysis**

Fielding (1993) states that good qualitative analysis is able to document its claim to reflect some of the truth of a phenomenon by reference to systematically gathered data. Transcripts and field notes are the raw data of the research, providing a descriptive record, but not an explanation. Once the transcripts were complete, it was then necessary to make sense of the data through subjective interpretation.

Analysis is a continuous and iterative process. On some levels data analysis took place within the data collection phase. Pope, Ziebland and Mays (2000) stress that continuous analysis is almost inevitable in qualitative research, as new insights influence future lines of enquiry. Nonetheless, the original interview schedules were retained throughout the entire data collection phase, in order to treat all participants as equally as possible. However, some aspects of the already collected data were hard to ignore and so prompted additional lines of enquiry. The advantage of the semi-structured interview is that the interviewer is in control of the process of obtaining information from the interviewee, but is free to follow new leads as they arise (Bernard, 1988). Although new lines of enquiry were pursued as the study progressed, this was only when they fitted naturally within the context of what was already being discussed. Efforts were made to

follow the natural flow of the stories without forcing the interviewee down a particular conversational route.

Most analytical work was, however, conducted after 'leaving the field'. Since this study utilizes contrasting cases, data analysis needed to occur both within-cases and across cases. Merriam (1998) explains that for *within-case analysis*, each case is first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself. Data are gathered so the researcher can learn as much about the contextual variables as possible that might have a bearing on the case. Once the analysis of each case is completed, *cross-case analysis* begins. A qualitative, inductive, multicase study seeks to build abstractions across cases. As more and more interviews are transcribed, common patterns emerge. Studying multiple cases makes it possible to build a logical chain of evidence (Stake, 1995, Yin 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994).

Mapping the data from both interviews and conversations, and across the many participants was a lengthy task. In this study, principal data were generated from 18 interviews. Thirteen of these were interviews that had taken place with adults and captured conversations that had lasted, on average, between one and one and a half hours long. One interview lasted over two hours. The children's conversations ranged in length from approximately 10 to 30 minutes long which corresponded with the age of child participating, as younger children, as anticipated were unable to retain focus for much longer than 10-15 minutes. As planned, further data were derived from the in-field conversations. These interviews and conversations produced a vast amount of transcribed data. A robust systematic approach to analysis was therefore crucial to manage this rich qualitative data set.

The central analysis undertaken in this study was a broad thematic analysis. Lapadat (2010) states that thematic analysis is a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes of cultural meaning by seeking commonalities, relationships and overarching patterns. Whereas Lapadat's focus is on cultural meaning, however, as this study aims to discover family experiences, phenomenological aspects are embedded in the analytical approach. The thematic analyses, therefore, moved beyond counting explicit words or phrases, and focused on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data which became themes.

The order in which interviews were analysed simply followed the order in which the interviews were conducted. This is because transcription occurred soon after an interview had occurred so as not to forget the overall sentiments of what had been conveyed. As analysis inevitably begins to take place during transcription, it made sense that some interviews were analysed as individual transcripts before all the data had been collected.

This study followed a process of ‘inductive’ or ‘bottom up’ thematic analysis. Inductive analysis is data-driven (Patton, 1990). As this is a study of stigmatized and ostracised families who are often ‘hidden’ and therefore ‘unheard’, it was important that the data were treated in a way which allowed the families’ voices to ‘speak for themselves’. The inductive approach allows research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Thomas, 2003). This study’s data were thus coded without trying to ‘fit’ into either any pre-existing theory or framework, or the researcher’s preconceptions. However it is important to note that researchers cannot free themselves from their theoretical commitments and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum. Researcher bias is therefore further discussed under the section ‘Rigour’. In simple terms, the following analytical steps were taken.

### Analysis Phase 1

In the first phase of analysis, ‘data familiarisation’, interviews were read and re-read, and notes were made on salient issues that arose from the text. Recurrent issues, or those that stood out as powerful due to the intensity of language used and emotion conveyed, were highlighted or underlined and key words were written in the margin of the transcripts. To demonstrate the way in which this was actually operationalized, a section of transcript that has been highlighted and has had notes made on it, can be seen in Illustration 1:

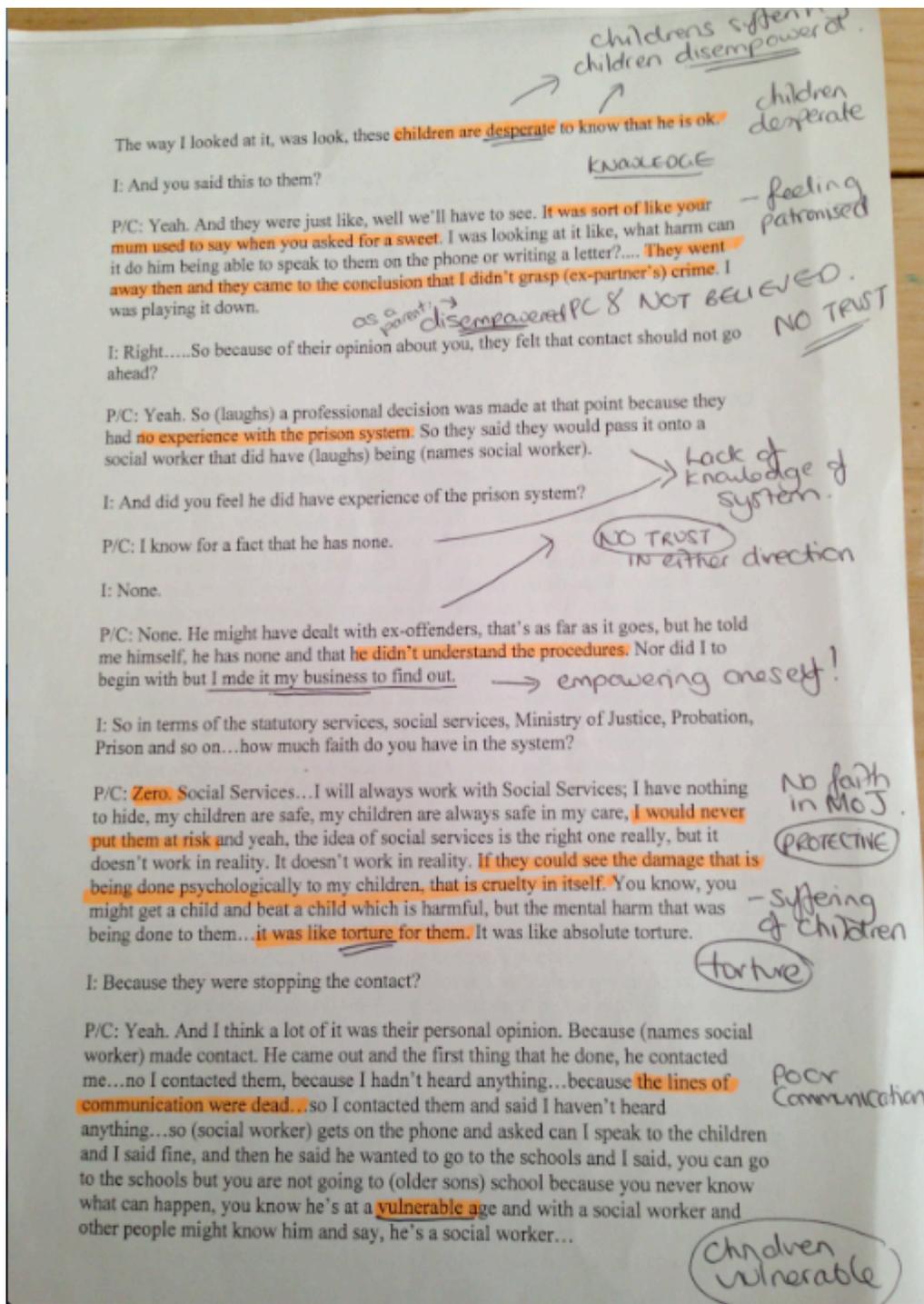


Illustration 1: Section of analysed transcript.

This section of transcript shows some of my early and somewhat messy thinking. Terms such as ‘desperate’ and ‘torture’ in relation the children’s suffering have been highlighted and underlined, and my musings around sentiments of PC 8 experience of having ‘no trust’ in services and her need for her family to be protected have been noted. I was interested in them because I wondered whether the key themes that might emerge would centre on families feeling vulnerable and their desire to be kept safe.

Meaningful extracts as quotations or single words were then taken from the individual transcripts, and placed into the first column of a data table. (See Table 1 below for an example of how I worked with PC8’s transcript). Taking a phenomenological approach, initial thoughts regarding what the meaning might be behind these words and phrases were then described as ‘Early Codes’; these were placed in the second column of the data table. These ‘early codes’ were then considered again and I looked for patterns within each interview. The structure afforded by the table, meant that it was then possible to identify early initial themes. Themes can be described as the “bringing together of components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone” (Leininger, 1985, p. 60). This analysis was often untidy and involved. Table 1 provides a short example of how extracted text was processed into early codes, and then initial themes. Having this structured approach meant that I could more easily see relationships or lack of relationships between the text, early codes and initial themes. It helped to visual the mass of data in a useful way.

Participant: PC 8		
Quotations	Early Codes	Initial Themes
the only way we could deal with it was by cutting ourselves off and sort of putting me and the kids in a box	Fear / protection of self and children / retreat	Vulnerability Vulnerability
Looking back I was extremely vulnerable and extremely, extremely manipulated.	Manipulation	
They see me with my make up on but my life is a mess	Masking the pain	Survival
Sometimes I think do we have heat or do we feed these kids	Poverty	Vulnerability
I asked for some kind of referral straight away	Sought help	
The psychologist said she doesn’t feel they need any help...it’s quite laughable	No help	Lack of trust in services
They told him (husband) if you plead guilty and you will get two years..I thought my arse, nothing has gone on	No Trust/A Corrupt System?	Vulnerability Lack of Trust in service
I was really hurt and they (police) hung on to that....and they exploited it	Hurt / Manipulation	Vulnerability
It was only me being a bit pig-headed and I thought right (social worker) I’ll do that (contact PSS).	Disbelief that PSS would help (as let down by others)	Fighting Back / Survival

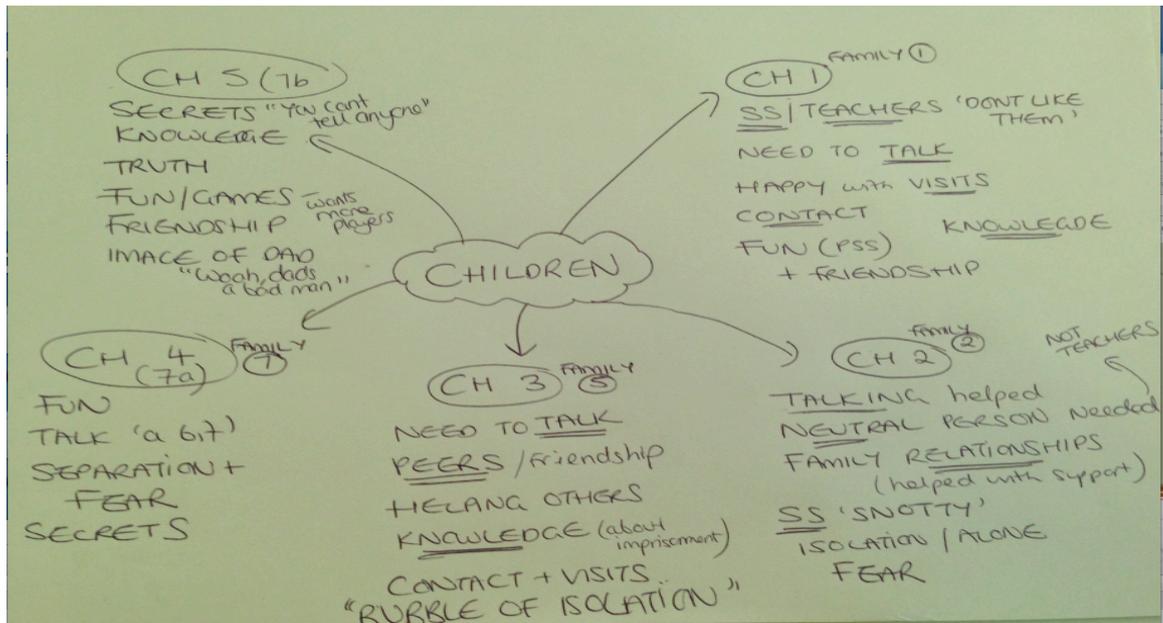
**Table 1: Example of analysed text from an individual transcript**

It is important to note that Table 1 displays only a short analysed section of the interview provided by participant PC 8. The full analysis for this participant was several pages long. From this section, initial themes that were considered included ‘vulnerability’ and lack of ‘trust’. When the whole transcript had been analysed additional themes (‘friendship’, ‘understanding’, ‘corruption’, and ‘belief’) were noted producing around 6 or 7 initial themes in total. This process was repeated for each of the 18 participants.

### Analysis Phase 2:

It was unavoidable that the production of initial themes, which were drawn from the first interviews, influenced what was noticed and extracted from those interviews that were analysed later on. For example, having strongly considered themes such as ‘vulnerability’ and ‘lack of trust’ it was inevitable that I was alerted to these notions in future transcripts. I did, however, need to keep an open mind about the possibility of other themes. For example, although the notion of vulnerability seemed particularly important at that time, I needed to constantly question whether the data was about this or not. As analysis progressed, despite there being evidence provided by the participants that families affected by parental imprisonment often feel vulnerable, as more data were gathered and more clusters considered, my initial musings regarding vulnerability developed more strongly into themes around ‘survival’ and ‘fighting back’.

When initial themes had been extracted from the entire data set and in order to check for key similarities and differences, the data were first considered in three groups; children, parents/carers and prisoners post-release. Three separate visual maps were drawn to create a visual overview of all the ‘Initial Themes’ that had been drawn from each of these three groups. This helped me to organise my data and consider the relationships between each participants from each group and the weight of evidence available for each potential theme. A sample of one of these visual maps, which looked succinctly at the data produced by the child participants, can be seen in Illustration 2 below:



**Illustration 2: Visual overview of themes generated from child participants**

From these maps, I soon saw that there were no considerable differences between these three groups. What mattered to children, mattered to adults; for example the value of having someone to talk to came through strongly from children as young as 7 years through to grandparent carers. Likewise, what concerned prisoner parents' concerned parents in the community, such as their fear regarding the local communities' response, issues around loneliness and experiences on their being few options for help.

Naturally the day to day lived experiences of each group (children, parent/carers, prisoners post-release) were different, but the overall messages conveyed with regards their experiences of parental imprisonment and of support were not just linked to one another but mirrored one another. This served as a reminder that the study was ultimately about families. Each transcript was then returned to its original family grouping and the data were reviewed as eight case studies.

### Analysis Phase 3:

A concentrated process of coding and checking now took place to consider whether the early themes, which had emerged from individual transcripts, resonated within each family case. Each transcript was re-read, considering possible meanings (for instance, the possibility that the families overarching support need was for them to be believed and their need for friendship), and how these fitted with the developing themes. If the theme was evidenced in the 'whole family' it was retained.

The major themes were then developed by studying the themes found in each family case; these were then considered to determine whether these were evident from case to case. To map the data, more visual maps were drawn, one for each family or 'case', to observe patterns. Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg and Coleman (2000) use the metaphor of a kaleidoscope for the purpose of qualitative analysis. They recommend grouping similar data bits together, then comparing bits within a pile. Differentiation creates sub-piles, which eventually become connected by a pattern they share. The maps I drew helped me to succulently visualise my data, and therefore better organise my thoughts. They also helped me to assess the weight of evidence for each of my supposed themes, and in some instances, by moving data around I created new themes. Some of the early findings that had seemed plausible in phases 1 and 2 of the analytical process now appeared insufficiently rigorous and robust enough to survive. For example, it was imagined that 'poverty' might become a major theme as a number of participants had discussed financial hardship resulting from the loss of income from a parent going to prison, or taking on kinship caring responsibilities with no statutory financial support. However, whilst 'poverty' was noted as important and worthy of comment, as the analytical process matured, 'poverty' was viewed as part of a cluster of ideas that were encompassed by 'Loss'. This process requires continual 'back and forth' refinement until a grand concept emerges. This is the analytical process that was followed in this study.

Some themes e.g. 'fear' were not evident across all case-studies so it was deemed to be insufficiently robust enough to be a major theme but was incorporated into some of them. Revisiting the transcripts also unearthed new ideas such as 'secrets and lies' that had not previously been seen but were now seen in context of the major themes that were developing. When no new themes emerged from the analytical process, the presumption was made that the major themes had been identified.

### **3. RIGOUR**

Two German philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer said that what we come to understand is much determined by the life we already have lived (Friedman, 1995). In other words our own histories and positioning inevitably brings unavoidable influences. As an active component in the qualitative research process, a truly objective position is therefore impossible to achieve. Heuristic research draws explicitly on the

intense personal experiences of the researcher (Patton, 1990). For this reason, this section will be written in the first person.

I had to recognise that my ‘researcher eyes’ were influenced both from my own life experiences and as a result of my historical and ongoing experiences as a practitioner in the very field I was researching. This would inescapably bring with it a particular perspective to my analytical work. Braun and Clarke (2006) remind us that themes do not simply ‘emerge’ from the data; rather decisions are made by the researcher about which data become themes and therefore the researcher’s epistemological outlook must also be acknowledged.

I will therefore now reflect on my own narratives in order to provide some understanding of the possible influences, which may have affected the data analysis, and the subsequent choice of themes. I, myself, am a mother and a lone-parent. In each of the families I have interviewed there is a child or children who have been separated from at least one of their parents due to imprisonment. Whilst this is not my story, my own child has been separated from her father and has limited contact with him. Thus the participants’ stories naturally struck chords with my own. Additionally, all the community-based parents I interviewed (excluding the grandmothers) were mothers, raising their children as sole carers. Some of these mothers had been single parents prior to the imprisonment of the other parent; the others had found themselves in an involuntary single parent situation following the incarceration of their partner. As a single mother, this holds certain parallels with my own narrative, and during interviews and analysis it was impossible not to acknowledge the common ground.

It is widely recognised that single parenthood can be associated with much stigma (Dowd, 1999). As previously highlighted in a review of the literature that relates to parental imprisonment, the families of prisoners also bear the burden of much stigma. Whilst the stigma of single parenthood and the stigma of having a prisoner in the family are predominantly and distinctly different, the common ground of parents facing stigma of any form whilst raising children alone cannot be ignored. Lowenstein (1986) conceptualised prisoners’ families in terms of ‘involuntarily, temporary single parenthood’ and too has highlighted the many associated stigmatizing effects. Like these remaining caregivers, I also have found myself in an involuntary single parent position. Like many, if not all of my participants, I did not set out to have and raise a

child alone. Difficult and painful circumstances have, however, rendered me powerless to continue to co-parent with my child's father, and so to some degree at least, I have been able to relate to the parent/carers I have interviewed.

Fraenkel (2006) reminds us that "*no matter how friendly and collaborative the interview, there remains an implicit hierarchy and power differential between the interviewee and the interviewer...the interviewer will be of a higher social class and educational level*" (p245). My single parent status has perhaps helped to break down some barriers in the research process. Indeed, Green and Thorogood (2004) recognise that to some extent, the more social and cultural similarities there are between the interviewer and interviewee, the more we are likely to assume shared meaning. Whilst shared meaning may mean a researcher could potentially fail not to problematize some 'taken for granted' aspects of daily life thus missing out on analytical depth', the benefit of shared meaning is that the participant's story need not be interrupted to seek clarifications. When constant explanations are sought, not only is the '*ordinary flow of a story*' disrupted, but it could imply a '*breach of the communality which is often the basis for rapport and trust*' (Green and Thorogood, 2004, p87). If barriers are raised, less is divulged, and deeply sensitive matters remain hidden.

As practitioner-led research, the challenges likely to arise with regards to the duality of role were carefully considered in the design of the study, throughout the fieldwork and during analysis and writing. Striving to support vulnerable families as a practitioner and striving to research the way in which families' experience support are two linked, but distinct ambitions.

In my capacity as a practitioner I had spent much time building up trust with the service users who were invited to participate in the research, and I was keen that this trust should not suffer when I took on the role of researcher. I acknowledged that I would be inevitably seem a little 'different' to the participating service users. I also recognised that one of the challenges I faced was around striking the balance between asking for 'too little' clarification in the interviews and conversations compared with asking for 'too much'. Having worked for many years in prisons, within and with 'criminal' communities, I assumed a degree of knowledge and understanding about the subject area, and felt at ease with the language and colloquial speech. I believe my ability to be able to 'speak the language' was an important factor in enabling me to build the trusting

relationships I had worked on for some time. I was concerned that if I was to continually to seek clarification from my research participants this could cause feelings of puzzlement and mistrust, which would in turn create barriers to the openness and flow of what I might be told. I had to be careful to avoid ‘over’ or ‘unnecessary’ questioning which could both negatively impact upon the research and also, as importantly, on my work as a practitioner. Equally, however, assumptions are easy to make when you already feel you understand much about the area you are studying. Research is arguably futile unless it is to learn something new. I therefore had to, at all times, remember that I could not understand what I had not myself experienced, and I endeavoured to maintain an inquiring mind and an investigative approach at all times.

Although I chose not to use a bracketing technique in my work, I did attempt to disregard information that I was privy to, but not ethically entitled to use in my study. As a practitioner, I have had access to a much wider reach of information than I have had as a researcher with more limited/constrained access to the field. Having worked in the field for some six years I have gained a detailed picture of many service using families’ histories. I knew that separating this knowledge from the much more limited compilation of stories that have been shared with me for the purpose of my research would not be easy; this was indeed the case.

Greene (2014) writes that the stories shared with qualitative researchers are inevitably influenced by our position as a researcher in relation to our participants. Drawing on her own experiences as an insider researcher, Greene (2014) discusses the issues of ‘positionality’ which is determined by where one stands in relation to another, and argues that of particular importance to the insider researcher is the practice of reflexivity. Doucet (2008) stressed the importance of recognizing and acknowledging our own potential biases, and finds there is much to be learned in determining which biases are important enough to the research process to be revealed explicitly to one’s readers and audiences.

As a result of the knowledge I have gained as a practitioner, I encountered a continuous frustration when analyzing the data. For example, if I was noticing a theme developing, or indeed questioning whether a theme held enough weight to survive, it was enormously difficult not to acknowledge the similarities with the families I had known in my years as a practitioner, with the data provided by the selection of research

participants. There was also a particular frustration of not being able to include the views of families that I met once the recruitment phase of the project had closed. For pragmatic reasons, recruitment needs to be time limited. However, being a practitioner as well as a researcher, I met several families post-recruitment who shared with me experiences that were highly relevant to my research. It was therefore somewhat disappointing and indeed challenging to have to ignore what these non-participating families were saying to me when I was developing my themes. Admittedly, although I worked hard to compartmentalize what I was hearing into distinct camps, the reality was that I tended to find an assurance in my emerging themes when similar and linked observations were showing up in other aspects of my work.

Another dimension of being a practitioner-researcher is the potential for conflict in terms of organizational loyalty. There were times, for instance when my manager(s) at PSS would inquire, with curiosity, what I was finding along the way. This had to be handled sensitively. I encountered an internal conflict of wanting to give them the assurance that what I was finding matched their own organizational views and agendas. It is natural that the management at PSS was hopeful that the research would show PSS to be providing a worthwhile service. However, my research objective was not to assure the managers, but to discover the lived experiences of how families affected by parental imprisonment truly experienced support. I had to remind myself continuously throughout my analysis not to be biased or led by PSS agendas and to instead listen carefully and closely to my participants. I thus needed to be mindful of balancing top-down and bottom-up demands and ensure full and meaningful participation of my participants at all stages of the research process.

Furthermore, on a practical level, carrying out my distinct duties both as a practitioner and as a researcher was a process of continual role changing. It was not as simple as deciding that on one day I would research and on another I would practice. As my roles were flexible and permeable there were times when I felt myself physically in one role and mentally in another. The reality was that I might be running a support group at PSS as a practitioner, but during this group some of the service users who had signed up to the research project may have contributed a useful insight that I would then ask for permission to include in my study. On the same day, I might then go and see a participant in their home to carry out an in-depth interview, but despite the main intention of this visit would be the research agenda, there was naturally a degree of

catching up with the family member to see how they were faring, and the need to extend an appropriate degree of support. This continual flipping of roles required regularly checking in with myself, and checking with the families that they understood that I was interacting with them as either a practitioner or a researcher at any particular moment in time.

On a more positive note, researchers who are also practitioners have the advantage, due to their ongoing access to their 'own' population of service users, whether their findings have merit beyond the time-limited and participant-limited confinements of their study. Potentially, practitioner-researchers, due to ongoing access in their field of interest, are able to develop a greater insight into their particular area of work. I have enjoyed the luxury of noticing, through my continuing practice many issues concerning familial support that resonant strongly with my findings. I have also recently observed issues that I previously had not 'seen' during the research period and although I could not acknowledge these in this piece of work, they have deepened my understanding of this field. A final observation aligns with the work of Dadds (2008) who proposed that practitioner research that is high in 'empathic validity' contributes to positive human relationships. Empathic validity, is described by Dadds (2008) as:

*“the potential of the research in its processes and outcomes to transform the emotional dispositions of people towards each other, such that more positive feelings are created between them in the form of greater empathy”* (Dadds, 2008, p280).

Dadds (2008) makes a distinction between 'internal empathic validity' and 'external empathic validity'. Internal empathic validity creates a positive change in the researcher and/or their beneficiaries; external empathic validity influences audiences. The journey I have taken throughout this research process has, without doubt, had a significant effect on myself as a practitioner-researcher (internal empathic validity). The more participants I interviewed, the more sensitive and empathic I believe my practice became as the interviews enabled me to see the world through my service users eyes more closely than ever before. In addition, as a practitioner who supervises trainee social work students and who also gives regular lectures to social work students, this practitioner-research has also affected the way I provide my training. For instance, I have actively encouraged my trainee social workers to take on board the comments that

families made about their experiences of support from social workers in the hope that this will positively influence their practice and improve the support that families affected by parental imprisonment receive might receive in the future.

#### **4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethics approval for the study was gained from the Ethics Committee for Built, Sport and Health (BuSH) at the University of Central Lancashire. Ethical issues are important in any research. Miles and Huberman (1994, p288) succinctly state that any qualitative researcher “*who is not asleep ponders moral and ethical questions*”. Philosophers Tom Beauchamp and Jim Childress (2001) identify four principles, autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice, which form a commonly held set of pillars for moral life. The ethical considerations made within these following four frameworks will now be discussed.

##### **Autonomy**

The principle of respect for autonomy, also termed *respectful autonomy* is that researchers are obligated to protect confidentiality, respect privacy and tell the truth (Beauchamp and Jim Childress, 2008). A person’s autonomy is protected through the process of obtaining informed consent. Each participant was provided with accurate and clear information about the study, so that they were able to understand the study, the part they played in it and that they were participating voluntarily.

It has been argued that truly informed consent is impossible in qualitative studies because events in the field and the researcher’s actions cannot be anticipated (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Nevertheless the issue required careful attention. McLaughlin (2009) writes of the scandal of babies' organs being retained for research without their parents' knowledge or consent at Alder Hey Hospital in Merseyside UK, the same region in which my own research has been conducted. Shocking reports such as these acutely emphasise the necessity of working transparently, with permission, and reminds researchers of the potential for damage and upset when gaining informed consent has not been made a priority. To ensure that my participants fully understood what they were consenting to, the information pack was made available both in written form and on CD. Providing information on CD format was deemed to be necessary, to account

for the potential of low literacy levels in the target population. To increase understanding, the potential participants were also able to hear a verbal explanation of the study in the initial face-to-face meeting, in which any answer questions they may have had would be answered. The participant's right to withdraw at any stage in the research was made explicitly clear, both in the information pack, during initial conversations and at numerous stages throughout the research. In the information pack it was also stressed that the privacy of each participant and their family would be protected; that the typed interviews would be coded so that no-one could be identified. Names of people, places and prisons were omitted. Additionally, no one heard the recorded interviews apart from myself as researcher and once I had personally transcribed each interview, the recording was deleted. In terms of using the data provided to me during ongoing conversations within the research process, I ensured I always checked at the time that I could use the information I was been given within my project. I reminded the participants at numerous junctures throughout the research that their PSS support would be in no way compromised if they asked me to remove / not include their contributions.

Special consideration also had to be given to the child participants. A child's participation in a study is likely to be shaped and influenced by parents and other adult gatekeepers, such as teachers and social workers (Greig, Taylor and MacKay, 2007; Tisdall et al, 2009). Alderson (1992) argues that research with children requires thoughtful communication, information sharing, and respect and support for children and their parents/guardians. Children might be too young to give informed consent, emotionally too immature to contribute effectively or simply wish not to participate. An integral part of gaining consent is ensuring that participants are fully informed of, and understand the nature, purpose and outcomes of the research (Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher, 2009), which at times can pose difficulties, particularly when working with young children. In practice, therefore, researchers normally gain consent from appropriate adults as well as assent from the child or young person.

In this study, it was decided that children and young people aged 7-16 would only be invited to take part with the consent of their parent/carer. Children under the age of seven were considered too young to fully understand the nature of the research and therefore provide appropriate levels of consent to participate. Seven as a minimum age for the study was also chosen as this mirrors comparable research recently conducted by

the University of Huddersfield known as 'COPING' (Jones and Wainaina-Wozna, 2013) which sought to understand the experiences of children with a parent in prison. Interestingly some PSS children had contributed to this research study. Direct conversations with their researchers revealed that they were confident that children younger than seven would not have been able to fully understand the scope of the research which in turn would have likely affected the reliability of their data. The Royal College of Nursing Research Society (2011) states that young people aged 16 years and older are generally capable of giving their own consent. Children aged 16-18 who participated in this study were therefore able to consent for themselves.

### **Beneficence**

The principle of *beneficence* means acting in the best interests of the participants. Beneficence is action that is done for the benefit of others. Beneficent actions can be taken to help prevent or remove harms or to simply improve the situation of others.

McLaughlin (2009) notes that research is neither intrinsically neutral nor inherently beneficial. The worthiness of a project should always be questioned; the investigative issue should not be trivial and should contribute to knowledge in some significant way. This study has been conducted in an era when the numbers of affected children with a parent in prison is at an all time high. Research into the rare pockets of support for prisoners' children and their families is deemed particularly valuable by those who argue that more help is needed. In light of the uniqueness of the PSS service it is considered of significant importance to find out from the families themselves what it is like to experience a specialised service designed to improve their outcomes. If PSS is to promote the continuation, growth and multiplication of a service such as this, this cannot be done without a comprehensive consideration of the perspectives of the service users and their views on its worth.

By ensuring that there is informed consent, researchers provide participants with the information necessary to understand the scope and nature of the potential risks and benefits in order to make a decision. In the information leaflet it was stated that it was not anticipated there would be any disadvantages to participating in the research project. It was also stated in the information leaflet/CD etc that, in terms of possible benefits of participating, it was hoped that the participants would enjoy their experience and that

the information they provided would help to highlight the experiences that families have when a parent is sent to prison.

Asking children and their parents about their experiences of parental imprisonment is, however, an undoubtedly deeply sensitive and personal issue to explore. In this study, participants were not simply asked to recall painful memories, but, as current PSS service users who were actively living through the many hardships that parental incarceration brings, families would be likely to be discussing challenges that were current and therefore raw. Allmark, Boote, Chambers, Clarke, McDonnell, Thompson and Tod (2009) have, however, reported that participants are not averse to discussing painful issues provided they feel the study is worthwhile. Families who participated said they were happy to participate in research, because of its potential to highlight the support issues for families affected by parental imprisonment, and the hope that contributions could potentially benefit other families in the future who share their experience.

### **Non-Maleficence**

A researcher should always strive for *non-maleficence*, which literally means ‘do no harm’. Munson (2004) stated that if you have knowingly subjected a participant to unnecessary risk you have violated this principle. It is also helpful consider the doctrine of *double effect*, an action which is intended for good yet unintentionally causes harm. In the context of this study, whilst the intention is to raise awareness on issues surrounding support for families affected by parental imprisonment, great care had to be taken to ensure that participants were not disadvantaged or unduly distressed by agreeing to contribute. In particular, it was vital to ensure that their own support needs were not overlooked or superseded by the research agenda, and to ensure that all interviews and conversations were conducted with the utmost sensitivity and care.

### **Justice**

Justice is a concept in research ethics, which refers to the fair selections of research participants (Mertens and Ginsberg, 2009). As a practitioner-researcher, direct and privileged access to potential participants via a pool of service users has been possible. My dual identity has allowed me to explore the families’ perspectives from a very close

vantage point. In the design of the study, the case for practitioner led research was argued in the knowledge that prisoners' families are considered to be a 'hard to reach' or 'secretive' group (Smith, Grimshaw, Romeo, Knapp, 2007). Prisoners' families often mistrust statutory agencies for fear that the children will be removed from the caregiver (Phillips & Bloom 1998; Shaw 1987). Working with service users however, from any setting invariably incurs ethical dilemmas, and these become more complex when those who participate in research are also receiving direct support from the researcher themselves. The problem of dual role has been noted in numerous studies (Borbasi, Jackson, Wilkes, 2005; Haverkamp, 2005; Holloway, 2001). First and foremost the issue of potential coercion needed to be faced. A key concern was that service users using a rare service, have very few, if any, other options for support, and they may have felt obligated to 'help' and worried that if they do not participate that their support might be negatively affected or even withdrawn. Much work had to be done therefore, to enable service users to feel that they could decline to participate without fear of negative repercussions. Consideration had to be given to families feeling obliged to say 'yes' if they 'like' a practitioner-researcher even if secretly they did not want to take part.

A further ethical concern is that a researcher might be drawn into her alter-role during an in-depth interview, and so much work had to be done to ensure everyone was clear which role the practitioner-researcher was filling at which times. As has already been highlighted in reference to data collection, the needs of the participants as service users always took precedence over the research agenda. There were, therefore, times when scheduled interviews needed to be postponed in order for service users to instead, access support. At other times, families wanted to be supported just before or just after they had offered their research contributions. I thus regularly checked that I was being understood correctly as either 'Lorna the practitioner', or 'Lorna the doctoral student' by participating family members.

### Extra Voices

Another notable occurrence is that six participants (ExP 1, ExP 3, PC 5, ExP 5, PC 6) chose to carry out their in-depth interview with other family members present in the same room. Although it was suggested to the participant that they might want to be interviewed alone, in another room of the house for example, and that they might feel uncomfortable speaking openly in front of others, this suggestion was strongly refuted.

On the contrary, it was obvious that it would have made both the participants, and the other family members who were present, uncomfortable to press the issue any further. For these participants this environment was both natural and comfortable and it felt inappropriate to actively encourage separate spaces for the interview to take place in any way that might not feel appropriate from the perspective of the family. As a result, during the interviews other family members would often ‘chip in’ and contribute to what was being discussed which has added richness to the data. It was interesting to note how these families naturally support each other and indeed, although prisoners’ families are defined as a ‘secretive’ cohort, *within* their own families’ openness appears quite typical.

Care was taken, however, to work within ethical boundaries. Contributions from the observing family members were included if they themselves were a recruited participant of the study (i.e. they had already been interviewed or were due to be interviewed), although additional verbal consent was also taken from them at the time to transcribe these ‘extra’ contributions. On reflection, however, actively ignoring the contributions from non-participant family members posed somewhat of an ethical/moral dilemma. By ‘chipping in’, it is clear they wanted to contribute, and so to address this, verbal consent was sought for small/short contributions, and lengthier contributions were included after gaining full written consent.

## **Summary**

To summarise, this qualitative study gathers data from audio recorded in-depth interviews, and subsequent additional conversations that have been gathered by the practitioner-researcher during practice at PSS. Much care has been taken to develop a study with a robust and appropriate methodology that ethically protects its participants and in which practitioner-researcher positioning is carefully considered. The naturalistic collective case study approach adopted in this study was taken in order to capture how families affected by parental imprisonment experience support. As this work aims to understand more about the life world of its participants, phenomenological approaches have been used. The resulting themes have been produced from a process of rigorous inductive thematic analysis, in order to represent the voices of this normally secretive and un-heard population.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the findings. The participants are then described, followed by a summary of the issues that were raised specifically in relation to Social Services. Then, the four major themes that have emerged from this research are described in detail.

#### Introduction

In essence, support provided by PSS was considered to be enormously valuable, by all participants, children and adults alike. Although many aspects of PSS support were considered to be special and distinctive, its most unique attribute was that it existed at all. Most of the children and adults in the study claimed that they were unable to find help from any other source. PC 2, speaking of her experience of becoming a kinship carer following the imprisonment of her granddaughter's mother said, *"If I hadn't of met you, there'd have been no-one"* (PC 2). A former prisoner-parent, who was seeking support following her release, expressed similar sentiments; *"there wouldn't be nowhere else to go. There is nowhere else is there?"* (Exp 5).

It was also starkly apparent that these families were not only suffering from a lack of support available to families with a parent in prison, but were actively 'crying out' for general support to cope with day-to-day life. One mother, remembering a worrying time when her partner had recently been released from prison and she had been concerned that he was going to re-offend, said she had comforted herself by thinking, *"the only good thing I thought is, (PSS worker) can't close the case"*. This mother explained that she had been so grateful and accustomed to the help she had received when her partner was in prison, that she was now nervous about losing access to support once the dominant issue of parental imprisonment had been resolved. Laughing with an air of irony, whilst clearly hoping the help would continue, she declared; *"I might have to get him to go back to jail!"* (PC 3).

In addition to the void of support, many of the interviewed adults spoke of 'a lifetime' of feeling let down by other services, which, in the main, was discussed in terms of

feeling let down by Social Services. One former prisoner father, speaking about his own childhood said:

*“I was put into care when I was 6. They used to say they (social services) were there for me, but they weren’t. They were just terrible. I cannot stand them” (Exp 1)*

In contrast, all the adult participants said they had found support from PSS entirely different to anything they had accessed previously, and all the participants including children spoke of the support they had received from PSS in extremely positive terms. This chapter finds four key challenges faced by families affected by parental imprisonment, and four key ways in which PSS has been able to effectively provide support. These are evidenced as four major themes as defined below:

1. Isolation and Someone to Talk to
2. Being Judged and Feeling Understood
3. Powerlessness and Fighting Back
4. Loss, Contact and Change

Before considering these major themes in detail, a brief overview of the three groups of participants (children, parent/carers and prisoners post release) and key sub-themes they discussed in their separate groups, will now be given.

As a point of grounding and context, a direct quote provided by one of the participants is given at the start of many of the sub themes. This is to provide the reader with a flavour of, and overall essence of the theme that follows.

## **The Participants**

### **The Parents / Carers.**

Eight female parents/carers were interviewed, this number consisting of two grandmothers and six mothers. Although this study did not deliberately set out to recruit only female parent/carers, the fact that this group of carers were all women is

representative of the general population of prisoners' families both in the UK and around the world.

The two grandmother parents/carers were caring for their granddaughters due to the children's mother's being in prison. The other six parents/carers were mothers, caring for their own children during the fathers' imprisonment. For some of these mothers, separation from the children's father had happened as a result of the imprisonment; for some separation had occurred prior to the imprisonment. The parents/carers interviewed comprise a typical representation of prisoners' families in that they are mothers and grandmothers, and that affected children are typically cared for by family members.

The interviewed women talked at length about being unsupported by statutory services, including children's services, prison and probation. They spoke of being given 'no help' or in many cases misleading or uniformed information from such government bodies. They spoke strongly of their dislike and mistrust of social services, the associated stigma, and expressed views that social services were ill equipped, in terms of knowledge and approach, to appropriately support prisoners' families.

These women said that support for prisoners' families was extremely uncommon, especially in the community, and that PSS was the first and only organisation that had supported them. They said they felt lucky to have gained help from PSS. Reflecting on PSS, parents/carers spoke of the relief of having 'someone there' who they could talk to, who would not judge them and would try their best to help them if they could. Parents/carers also greatly valued the support given to their children and spoke of witnessing positive changes in their children's behaviour. For those parents/carers who were unable to facilitate contact between the prisoner parent and their children themselves, they were grateful to have access to a neutral person, who they trusted to facilitate the contact for them. The PSS 'whole family' model was well received.

## **The Children**

Five children from the eight families were interviewed. The children's ages ranged from eight to 16 years old, and included three boys and two girls. All the children had received both one-to-one and peer-group support from PSS.

The children experienced PSS as helpful in that it had enabled them to talk about their parent in prison, gain a better understanding of what their imprisoned parent was doing whilst away, and learn coping strategies to help them reduce their anxiety when missing their imprisoned parent. The children said they enjoyed meeting other children who shared their experience. They said this was useful because they felt understood and not judged by the other children. All the children said they would not speak openly about the imprisonment of their parent in school to their peers. Views about whether they would speak with teachers were divided, but none of the children said they would be comfortable speaking with a social worker.

Having fun with PSS was emphasized as a vital part of being a child recipient of support and key to helping them cope. Indeed, having fun with the PSS practitioners was deemed not only as important, but at times even more important than talking about the imprisonment of their parent. However, having someone to talk to who was outside of their family was seen as helpful, and one young person said that accessing a neutral sounding board through PSS had in turn helped her relationship with her grandmother, who was her kinship carer at home. Like the parents/carers, the children said that “*just knowing someone is there*” (CH 2) if they needed them was a great comfort. Fun, friendship and acceptance were notably key sub-themes in the children’s data.

### **The Prisoners Post-Release**

Five prisoner parents were interviewed post-release. PSS had provided support to their children and their children’s parent/carer when they were away. Four of the five ex-prisoners were men and all these men had returned to the family home directly from prison and were living with their partner and children at the time of interview. The fifth interviewed ex-prisoner was a woman. She had also returned to her former address, and was living with her daughter and her daughter’s grandmother at the time of the interview. PSS was providing intense post-release support to three of these five ex-prisoners. The other three prisoner parents were not interviewed as two were still in prison and the third had refused to accept support from PSS; she had also intentionally and purposely disengaged from her children and family, so access was not possible.

PSS is not always fully aware of the nature of the offences committed. However, normally, when families engage fully in the service, the offence is most likely to be disclosed either by the family themselves or the referring agency. It is therefore possible

to describe, in broad terms, in order to maintain the participants' anonymity, the types of offences committed (see Table 2). It is anticipated that this information is helpful to better portray the struggles faced by these families.

**Table 2: A description of the parents who had been in, or were still in, prison.**

Family	Gender	Offence	Substance misuse		Domestic Violence		Interviewed		
			Y	N	Victim	Perpetrator	Y	N	Reason
1	M	Theft	✓				✓		
2	F	Drug trafficking		✓	✓			✓	Non contactable
3	M	Drug dealing	✓				✓		
4	M	Violence	✓			✓	✓		
5	F	Drug trafficking	✓		✓		✓		
6	M	Violence	✓			✓		✓	<i>Not yet released</i>
7	M	Drug dealing		✓			✓		
8	M	Sex offending	✓					✓	<i>Not yet released</i>

Notably, *every* offence involved either using or selling illegal drugs. Two of the prisoner parents had been trafficking drugs and another two had been dealing drugs. Six out of the eight prisoners had pre-existing personal issues with substance misuse that linked directly to their offending behaviour (dealing, stealing or trafficking to fund a habit, or becoming violent whilst being intoxicated/high at the time of the offence). It is also notable that the two women offenders were both imprisoned for trafficking drugs and both were known to be victims of domestic violence, although a direct causal link between being a victim of domestic violence and trafficking drugs is not assumed.

The five interviewed ex-prisoners spoke highly of PSS and said they were comforted by the fact that their children and partners had been able to access support whilst they were away. They did, however, also speak of their initial anxieties during their imprisonment when they learned that a professional, who they had never met, had entered into their children and families lives. Their fears were that this might lead to scrutiny, judgment, and even losing their children. Some believed their judgment was clouded by previous difficult or unproductive relationships with other services. Nevertheless, these post-release prisoners explained that, over time, their anxieties with PSS had lessened due to the fact that they had witnessed great improvements in their children's mental health and saw too that their partners were also getting valuable help. All five ex-prisoners said

that this in turn helped them through their prison sentence as they worried less about home-life. The ex-prisoners also believed that the PSS service would help them not to re-offend, as their family life was more stable as a result of the service. As noted by parents/carers and children alike, attitudes towards social services were extremely negative, including sentiments of hate, mistrust and even cruelty. The three prisoners who were being supported post-release, spoke of ‘feeling understood’ for the first time and the value of the PSS ‘whole family’ model which was enabling the re-building of healthy family life.

## **Issues with Social Services**

Throughout the findings strong negative reactions were expressed in relation to social services. These views were so consistently present and prevalent, that the findings cannot be accurately represented without attending to the issue in some detail.

Social workers, who were described in such terms as “*the enemy, the baddies*” (PC 4), and were considered by the families to be representatives of an agency they could not trust. Social workers were described as being unhelpful, unskilled, and even corrupt.

Fear of losing the children was, as expected, a key concern. PC3 voiced her concerns saying “*you hear of some, don’t you, who’ve had their kids took for nothing*” (PC 3). This was echoed by PC6 who talked of fears of ‘removal’ when she explained:

*“I think that’s always the risk that social services have, especially when they are going on ‘Child Protection’. I think that’s the first thing you think of, them being removed” (PC 6).*

Other reasons related to the families perception of Social Services; “*with social services, you’ve still got all that stigma stuck in your head*” (Exp 4). Many examples of feeling scrutinized and judged were given. Exp 3, speaking of social workers becoming involved with his family following his release from prison felt;

*“It was always like they were looking for things, looking for mistakes. They weren’t helping us. They were just making us feel less as parents...” (Exp 3).*

Children too, shared the views of the adults. One young person, whose mother was in prison, expressed her dislike and this was typical across the child participants. She emphatically declared;

*“I just don’t like them. I really don’t like them. They’re very snotty. I don’t like them. I really don’t. They’re dead snotty” (CH 2)*

Six of the eight families had previously had children’s services involved in their lives to varying degrees. In four families, social workers had simply made a referral directly to PSS then ended their involvement. In another, the child had been overseen as a ‘child in need’<sup>1</sup> and in a further family, the child had been subjected to a child protection plan<sup>2</sup> resulting in intensive monitoring from Children’s Services. The remaining two families had no prior involvement with social services (although in one of these, the offender had a large amount of experience of social services throughout his own childhood). Interestingly, however, at the time of the interviews, not one family had social worker involvement. Despite this, all eight families harboured extremely negative views about Children’s Services whether or not they had had personal experience with the system or not.

Although the families’ unhappiness with social services was starkly apparent, ‘Social Services’ has not been presented as a stand-alone theme, because the issue emerges throughout each of the major themes. It is also considered perhaps too simplistic to discuss social services as an institutional scapegoat for the woes of these families. Rather, it is proposed that the problems and potential solutions are better understood via a much more intensive ‘drilling down’ of the data and exploration the four major themes, which now follows.

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<sup>1</sup> Under Section 17 (10) of the Children Act 1989, a child is a Child in Need if he/she is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for him/her of services by a local authority.

<sup>2</sup> If a child is the subject of a Child Protection Plan, they have been assessed as being at identified risk of harm and the plan will be the vehicle through which the risk will be reduced. Children’s Social Care has lead responsibility for ensuring that a plan is in place, and agencies named on the plan take an active role in ensuring that it is implemented.

## **Theme 1: Isolation and Someone to Talk To**

### **Introduction**

The families from this study commonly felt isolated. Selected incidents of seclusion, segregation, and marginalization were discussed. It was clear from the analysis how much these families wanted someone, or some people, with whom they could openly discuss their situation, and how powerful and liberating the experience of simply being able to talk openly about their plight was for them. Experiences of feeling different, ostracized, and lonely emerged strongly from all three sets of data. The former prisoners, the parents/carers and the children all talked of experiencing segregation and isolation in one form or another. One father stated:

*“I personally think it’s just amazing how yous (PSS) want to help offenders and their families. Because it’s not easy, you know. It’s not an easy thing for yous to do this, for people like us” (Exp 1).*

For this post release prisoner, it was clear that not only did he feel grateful for the help he and his family had received from PSS, but also that he felt ‘different’, as a member of a distinct and separate group, in his depiction of “*people like us*”.

### **Prisoners’ children at school**

*“I’m not just a kid with a mum in prison...I can have other problems as well”*

All five children who took part in the study said they preferred not to talk to teachers about their parents’ imprisonment. Although one girl (CH 5) did say that her learning mentor in primary school had been helpful and understanding, she still discussed difficulties with other teachers ‘knowing’. In the main, the children in this study did not feel able to trust that if a teacher knew their mother or father was in prison, the information would be handled appropriately. Some children recalled first hand, experiences of the reactions of teachers who did ‘know’. CH 5 said that when teachers

'know' you have a parent in prison, if you feel upset about anything at all, the teacher who 'knows' will automatically presume that it must be in relation to the parental imprisonment. With clear frustration, this young interviewee said that when teachers make assumptions, it made her experience of having a mother in prison "worse". Although experiences of feeling isolated and separate from her peers came through strongly in her interview, she emphasized that being treated only in the context of being a child of a prisoner was unhelpful:

*"if I'm crying it's not always about my mum being in prison. I can have other problems as well, just like anyone else!" (CH 5).*

In much the same way, another child railed against what he felt was the stupidity of adults who were always making connections where there were none to be made, stating:

*"you could like, fall down and hurt your knee or something, and they'll think it's because of your dad being away. It's stupid" (CH 7b).*

As well as being wary of discussing their parents' imprisonment with teachers, these children said they would keep the matter from other children at school. The participating children said they had either experienced pressure from their family to keep the parental imprisonment a secret, or they themselves had chosen not to share the information with their peers, in an effort to self-protect. One boy remembered that when he first learnt his dad was in prison, he had been worried that if other children 'knew' they would question him about it, which would upset him further. He said:

*"I was thinking...woah, my dad's been naughty, you can't tell anybody...I wouldn't want kids at school asking loads of questions, it would upset me" (CH 7a).*

The issue was further stressed by another young boy who, when asked whether he would talk about his dad being in prison to other children in school, replied "No.

*Because, erm, they might pick on me or laugh at me” (CH 1). Similarly, CH 5 explained that she was fearful that if other children knew they might bully her:*

*“I haven’t told no-one. Like none of my mates...because my mum and my nan and everyone just wanted to keep it a secret...if I told someone in school it would be passed around and I was scared of being skitted (colloquial term for teased or bullied) (CH 5).*

This same interviewee (CH 5) drew a picture of herself near other children at school. In the drawing she drew herself in a bubble. She said she was in a bubble because her peers could not hear what she was thinking, or really see what was going on for her. She also said that sometimes she felt that she had to put herself ‘in a bubble’ to protect herself from bullying, but equally that *“bubbles pop easily”*, and so she always felt *“a bit worried”* (CH 5). Her picture, which she gave permission to be included, is seen below.



**Illustration 3: “Being in a Bubble” by CH 5**

All in all, the experiences, as portrayed by the five child participants, provide an unmistakable picture of children feeling isolated, especially when at school where they said they were either treated differently by teachers who ‘knew’ or where they simply felt ‘different’ because of the secret they harboured.

### **Coping Alone**

*“I had no-one”*

Isolation and coping alone was also a typical experience for both the parent/carers and the parents who had been in prison. Access to support from wider family or social networks was said to be scarce. For some of the participating families, family support was limited or non-existent even prior to the offence. One mother, for example, said she had always “*coped alone*” because of poor relationships with the rest of her family; “*the boys don’t go to the rest of my family, only me. I don’t have a good relationship with my mum*” (PC 1). Another mother said she had never had any wider-family support, which she said was mainly due to her parents being deceased, and others family members living out of the area, stating, “*it’s always just been me and him (the father who went to prison) and the kids*” (PC 8). Even those parents/carers who did have family living close by said they tended to struggle most of the time, alone, e.g. “*they (the children’s grandparents) weren’t that good. They never really had the kids for me*” (PC 3). Consequently, for those parents who had always relied predominantly, if not solely on one another to co-parent, when one was sent to prison, the remaining parent/carer felt particularly vulnerable and isolated.

Others said they lost family support since the imprisonment because the wider family felt strong resentment towards the offending parent. One mother, for example, explained that as her own parents disapproved of her relationship with her imprisoned partner she was unable to turn to them for help and support. As a consequence she said:

*“I just felt... on my own. No-one there for me, and you know with a six month old baby on my own.. I just felt that I had no-one, no support. As you know, it is hard bringing up a child on your own. Round here I had no-one” (PC 4).*

Further still, the parent/carers said they felt isolated because the general public does not sympathize with families like theirs and even though they themselves have not been convicted of a crime, the public do not deem families such as theirs to be worthy of help. One mother said, *“they think, after what he’s done, the family deserve the punishment. They’re scum and we won’t help scum”* (PC 8). In the same way, another mother spoke of the lack of compassion afforded to herself and her children since her husband’s arrest, declaring;

*“we haven’t done it, me and the kids, we’ve just ended up in this situation, so they (the public) should be more sympathetic to what is happening to us...but they’re not”* (PC 7).

### **Media Attention and The Community Response**

Media attention unquestionably adds a further problematic dimension. Stories of being harassed and abused by the general public emerged often from the interviews in cases where the crime had being widely publicized.

*“We’ve had it from all angles. People saying things to us in the street, people trying to provoke me. And I was fearful”* (PC 8).

One of the former prisoners, expressing much guilt and remorse, spoke of how difficult it had been for his wife and children to carry on with their day-to-day lives because his crime had been published in the local press.

*“with our case it was all over the papers. They (his children and wife) were having to go to school, to the shops, walk out there where everybody knows (ExP 7).*

Despite the trauma he himself suffered as a consequence of his own imprisonment, this offending parent felt the isolation suffered by his family out in the community, was far worse than his own trauma. He explained:

*“When you are in jail there is support coming out of your ears if you want it...But on the outside it’s a lonely old world for your family. Because let’s not forget that I’m in a place with 1200 other prisoners who, at the end of the day are in the same boat. We’ve all got something in common.... whereas, the kids and the wife, they are suddenly so alone with no one around who understands what that’s like, to be like that, to have that and have no support...” (Exp 7).*

As well being shunned by others, families said they would purposely isolate themselves as a way in which to try and cope. In the same way that CH 5 said *“I sort of put myself in a bubble”* (CH5) a parent/carer said, *“when it was so raw, the only way we could deal with it was by cutting ourselves off and sort of putting me and the kids in a box”* (PC 8).

All in all, the participating families said there were very few people in their lives who were sympathetic to their struggles, and that suffering alone was to be expected. One mother, reflecting on how much her life had changed when her partner went to prison said, *“it was like, I’m going through it but everyone seemed to be getting on with their normal lives”* (PC 3), evoking yet more images of people living in ‘bubbles’ and feeling somehow separated from the rest of the world.

### **The Perception that Social Services ‘don’t care’.**

*“We won’t help scum”*

Experiences of Social Services were also commonly reported to add to, rather than reduce these families sense of isolation. Rather than feeling supported by social workers, families said they often felt abandoned by the service instead. One grandmother carer, who spoke fervently about her family *not* being supported by social workers, said:

*“they couldn’t say goodbye quick enough to me, seriously. I tried to phone them a couple of weeks afterwards and they would not even answer the phone..... “It is the lack of what they do...they do absolutely nothing!” (PC 2).*

Others shared her sense of social worker neglect. A mother argued that social workers she had known were apathetic and unenthusiastic in their work. She claimed, *“even when we had them involved, they didn’t want that role”* (PC 6). Similarly, a father expressed sentiments of feeling abandoned by the service, saying; *“you speak to them and that’s it. You don’t see them for another year”* (ExP 1).

The barriers to engaging with social workers were, however, found to be two-directional. Families admitted that they were worried about what Social Services may, or may not do, if they disclosed that they were struggling to cope, and even in cases where the families did feel they were coping well, parents remained concerned that unfounded negative judgments would be made by social workers about their parenting abilities. A father who had been in prison explained his fear:

*“I worry that the person could end up going too deep, too nosy, and start wanting to know too much...Are they asking, are the kids in the right environment and their fathers in prison and are they being looked after properly, so yeah, you start worrying about things like that”* (ExP 3).

### **The perception that PSS ‘cares’**

*“You seemed to be bothered”*

In stark contrast, families said they experienced PSS as an organisation who are genuinely concerned about the welfare of families affected by parental imprisonment. One former prisoner, discussing his experience with probation led resettlement programs, said; *“on their courses, it’s like, they’re just here to get the pay packet, but with you, it’s like you’re actually here to support and you care”* (ExP 1). Another parent, a mother whose husband was in prison at the time of the interview, shared similar views, explaining, *“you could see that it was a hard thing to go through. And the fact you seemed to be bothered about us meant a lot”* (PC 7). A prevailing sense of relief and gratitude came through from the participants when they spoke of the comfort of finding support workers who they believed truly cared.

## **Someone to Talk To**

*“You need someone to talk to, just somewhere there who you can open up to, to pour it all out to, someone to listen to you”*

All the participants in this study spoke of the importance of having someone neutral to talk to, not necessarily to ask for help for a specified reason, but just to offload. Many said they were not able to talk to other members of their family for fear that this might provoke upset or conflict, or to friends because they felt embarrassed and ashamed. Some said they had lost friends since the imprisonment. One mother, when asked what support from PSS meant to her, she simply said, *“It’s meant having someone to talk to”* (PC 1). Whilst the practical elements of support (such as advice on what to tell the children about the imprisonment, regime information and having access to an advocate) were found to also be extremely important, the emotional support gained from simply being able to talk, was consistently highlighted as the one of the most sought after and valuable aspects of the PSS service. A grandmother kinship carer spoke of her relief to have access to someone with whom she could vent and express her emotions in safety. She said:

*“It’s just someone to talk to. That is the key one. Because when you’re in a state, when you go ‘I can not deal with this’, you just need someone to scream at, at the end of the phone”* (PC 2).

The families also added that the idea of getting ‘talking support’ from social workers was in their view, a ludicrous concept. One mother, for example, said, *“I can talk to you about things, but I wouldn’t dream of talking to a social worker like I talk to you”* (PC 3), and PC 2 graphically declared, *“If social services were to say there’s my number, phone me....I’d rather take a sharp knife and slit my own throat”* (PC 2).

Children too were found to be afraid of saying the ‘wrong thing’ thing to social workers. Some evidence was gathered which demonstrated that children struggle to relax with social workers because they are acutely aware of a social workers influence over the level of contact they might have, or not have with their imprisoned parent. One mother remembered, with much sadness, how traumatic it was for her son, when a social worker asked him to ‘talk’.

*“He came and spoke to (eldest child)...as soon as he (social worker) started talking my son burst into tears. It was the anticipation and the worry and in his (son’s) mind he felt that he had to say the right thing to be able to get contact with his dad. He felt really under pressure and I felt so sorry for him” (PC 8).*

This study found that being able to talk comfortably with someone does not necessarily relate to the longevity in a relationship, but rather how the supportive person is perceived. This father remembers meeting the PSS team for the first time, at a PSS community family day he was invited to attend just a few weeks after his release from prison.

*“Just the way you were in yourselves, I knew I could trust you. When you first meet, you automatically have a perspective of someone...when I first met you, at the park, I knew I could really talk to you, you know if I had a problem” (Exp 1).*

Participants felt that the neutral position held by PSS staff was an important factor. PSS’s positioning as a voluntary sector organisation was found to be effective in cultivating an environment that is a safe haven for families to go to, to offload.

Like their parents, children said they were pleased to have someone neutral, whilst supportive and empathic, to speak with. CH 7 explained, *“it’s good (PSS) because every time you want to talk about it, you can just go there (to PSS) and talk to them”*. As previously stressed, children from this study said that their school is a place where they would be uncomfortable discussing their parents’ imprisonment. The participating children therefore, valued access to a support worker who was not a school staff member. One girl remembered:

*“You used to come over to the house every Monday after school and see how I was getting on. And if I was upset or anything we’d talk about it. I liked that” (CH 5).*

One teenager also said that as she had no one she could talk to at home; “*they (1:1 support sessions) helped... because I could speak to you more than my nan. So I liked them*” (CH 2). The only notable difference between the children and adults in terms of access to talking support was that children also made it clear that the amount of discussion should be balanced with fun activities that did not relate to the imprisonment of their parent. One boy, for instance, defined a good support worker as “*happy to talk about it and happy to play games*” (CH 7b) whilst his brother advised, “*You shouldn’t always always always talk about it. Talk about it a little bit but not too much*” (CH 7a). The children who had experienced prison-based family days, hailed having fun with their parents in prison as being important. Children remembered “*playing ten pin bowling*”, “*a tower building competition*” and “*making stuff*” with their imprisoned parent on these occasions.

A former prisoner also said he really appreciated his partner having someone to talk things over with, with whilst he was ‘away’. He said this had made their relationship much easier to manage when he was released:

*“I think a lot of things would have been built up and when I did come home there would have been a lot of bickering if you get what I mean. Like there is stuff she talked to you about, and because she has talked to you about it, then maybe she will find it easier to then talk to me about it. Whereas without you, it would have been kept in and when I came home then maybe it would have all blown up!” (Exp 1).*

Another family, who wished there had been a neutrally positioned person to talk through concerns with, in the weeks and months following release, expressed similar sentiments. Although the mother talked of them being a “*close family*”, she explained that the post release stage of their experience was “*much harder*” than either of them expected.

*“....it’s hard to get into your family routine, after nearly two years of it being just me and the kids. It is quite stressful....I’d probably say in your first couple of months, it’s like you need marriage counselling” (PC 7).*

In his own interview, her husband said he had felt “*shocked*” that he had found re-adjusting to life in back in the community, as difficult as he had. He said:

*“That first two weeks, if someone has said do you want to go back (to prison) now, I would have went back! ... .. I used to watch people come back in after being out for four or five weeks. ..and I used to say, are you stupid?...well then after being released myself I can see how it happens” (ExP 7).*

Sharing the views of his wife, he spoke of how he would have welcomed someone for them both to talk to about what they might expect whilst the whole family were re-adjusting to his return home:

*“...that would be amazing yeah...for someone to say look, we’ve found out that in the first month you are possibly going to go through this and to be able talk to someone and say how you feel” (ExP 7).*

## **Peer Support**

*“There’s nothing worse than thinking you’re the only one”*

In addition to reporting much solace in finding neutrally positioned support workers to talk to at PSS, the participating families also found talking to others who shared their experience to be enormously liberating. Both children and adults spoke of the great comfort of meeting other service users at PSS, and being able to talk to someone who ‘really knew’, from first hand experience, what it was like to be affected by parental imprisonment.

The PSS children’s groups, which engage prisoners’ children in fun activities whilst encouraging discussions about their experiences of parental imprisonment were highly thought of by parents and children alike. Predominantly, families found the support groups to be helpful because the child’s sense of isolation and of feeling ‘different’ was eased. One parent said:

*“It’s made a big difference. Because they don’t feel like they are isolated and they are not going to get judged because they are in the same situation. My son still goes on about coming and meeting and playing with other kids and their dads and mums are in prison and he can associate with how they feel” (PC 1).*

Other parents agreed. A mother said the children’s groups are:

*“...very important...because you’re not singled out are you? There’s nothing worse than being singled out is there. Thinking you’re the only person, that your dad’s the only one.... (PC 3).*

Another felt that the groups were “good” and highlighted the usefulness of peer support to help raise confidence and self esteem. She explained

*“...it’s good because it brings them out. If she mixes with other kids whose parents are in jail...she’ll feel better. She’ll think, it’s not only mine whose in jail” (PC 5).*

Like their children, parents also recognized how difficult it was for their children to open up about the imprisonment to other children at school, and so welcomed the safety of the PSS group:

*“I’m made up for her to do it because obviously there are kids there going through what she has already been through so it’s someone she can relate to and someone she can talk to about it. Because she can’t in school. She can’t turn around and speak to other people in school because they’ll judge you. They’ll judge you. You know yourself. The school playground is a cruel place” (ExP 5).*

Children too spoke with passion about how specialized peer support groups at PSS had helped reduce their sense of isolation by being able to discuss, with ease, the matter with other children:

*“I was connecting like with other kids who had the same problem as me...(name’s friend) was just telling me what she was like when her*

*dad went, and how you can get through it....It felt amazing because it felt like a big weight got lifted off my shoulders” (CH 5).*

Others agreed. One boy stated, *“I liked it because I could talk about it to kids...it makes the problems go away a bit” (CH 7b).* He did however, reiterate that having fun is equally as important as talking. When asked if there was anything he would change about the children’s groups he simply said he wished there were more prisoners’ children to meet, *“because then the games we played, we’d have more players” (CH 7b).*

In addition, and in direct reflection of the on-going success of the children’s peer support groups, an adult support group called ‘Stronger Together’ was subsequently established by a service user who had accessed help from PSS when her partner was sent to prison. In her interview she told me that she was motivated to set the group up because she remembered, in her isolation, wishing she could know others with whom she could relate to and learn from. Lack of knowledge about the prison system, and quite simply not knowing ‘what to do’ when a partner or parent is sent to prison were evident issues and added to the sense of feeling lost. She explained:

*“If I’d have had that support, if I’d had somewhere to go to talk to other mothers, maybe they would have already been to see their partners in prison, maybe I would have known a bit more” (PC 4).*

As anticipated, the group was well received;

*“It’s meant having someone to talk to. If it wasn’t for meeting the PSS group I wouldn’t have met my mate who was going through the same situation” (PC 1).*

PSS family activities, where children and their parents (including the prisoner parent post-release) participate together in fun activities in order to increase positive attachment and bonding within the family, were also spoken of positively. These community-based family days were reported as useful by families who took part in the

research, who said that it helped to meet others families facing similar issues to themselves, because this helped to reduce their feelings of isolation.

*“I think it’s done a lot...the family days out. We’ve been on two since I’ve been home. And they were amazing, to see other families there as well...we all understood each other so it was easy to talk about what’s gone on” (ExP 1).*

At the same time, the general lack of community-based support was attributed, in part at least, to devastating consequences for other families in a similar position. One interviewed mother spoke of a friend she had met during prison visits, who had not been able to get any support at all.

*“...if my mate had of had a group like this, she’d have had more of a chance to still having her kids. But because she didn’t, and she didn’t have no support, she lost all her kids. They’re in care” (PC 1).*

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this theme highlights that the participating families habitually feel isolated and alone. All the families discussed limited options for support from their extended family. Children and adults alike said that they feared or directly experienced harassment and bullying from members of the community. The families also said they were afraid to talk openly to social workers or felt that social workers do not care enough to be able to help them. Most children said they were reluctant to talk to their teachers or friends at school. However, when the parents and their children were able to talk, either to a neutrally positioned support worker, or to peers with shared experiences, their sense of isolation was reduced, bringing comfort and relief.

## **Theme 2: Feeling Understood and Being Judged.**

### **Introduction**

The enormous value of ‘feeling understood’ is evident from all three data sets (children, parent/carers and prisoners post-release). In Theme 1, ‘Isolation and Someone to Talk To’, evidence was provided which demonstrated that being free to simply ‘offload’ and talk about their situation, without fear of negative repercussions, provides much comfort to families affected by parental imprisonment. However, ‘feeling understood’ adds a deeper dimension. Families not only found talking about the issue(s) useful, but said they were helped further when they believed their supportive person held real insight into their plight. Whilst it is acknowledged that a practitioner cannot directly experience, first hand, the struggles of his/her client, a supportive person who is able to demonstrate that they ‘really do understand’, as a product of their specialized training, experience and attitude, was experienced by the families as hugely reassuring. Feeling understood by others who had similar experiences was said to be tremendously comforting due to the shared common ground that was implicit in support groups. Furthermore, feeling understood was experienced in direct contrast to being judged. Families said they were unfairly judged often; this experience was voiced as particularly frustrating and upsetting for the members of the family who had not committed any offense, yet were treated with suspicion and criticism in spite of their innocence.

### **Feeling Understood by a PSS Support Worker**

*“finally... finally...someone understands where I’m coming from!”*

One PSS service user, a mother who had been in prison, said she was upset that no-one at home understood her, and could not appreciate how hard it was for her to readjust to community life. She spoke about not being able to find work, a lack of money, not having her own place to live, and issues around parenting her daughter. She said she felt depressed and hopeless since her release and would cry often. Her crying, she said, was seen to be a particular nuisance by her grandmother:

*“...when I cry, I cry because I am upset and I’m depressed. But my nan will say ‘oh all she does is cry every single day’ ... but she doesn’t look at it like, why I am crying? Obviously there is something wrong!” (Exp 5).*

In contrast, she explained that sitting down and talking to a PSS worker made her feel “better”. Her experience of PSS services was that her plight was acknowledged and she was able to gain the understanding she craved. She said:

*“I felt a lot better after talking about it (her struggles with the readjustment process) to you and getting it off my chest and that. I felt able to go out, to my mates after crying to you....you’re the only person that understood” (Exp 5).*

In a similar way, another service user, a parent whose partner was sent to prison, recalled the time when, after many months of struggle she had made contact with PSS for support. She said; *“You were the only person who knew where I was coming from. No-one else, no-one”* (PC 8). She elaborated on the feelings of finally being understood, and the effect it had on her:

*“It was just unbelievable. It really was. It was like a huge weight had been lifted off me. And I don’t think it was long after that, emotionally and physically, that I did let go and have a bit of down time” (PC 8).*

Prior to her involvement with PSS, this mother said she had been exposed to a great deal of questioning and scrutiny from the prison, probation and social services as a result of her ex-husband’s crime, in relation to her endeavour to have her children to visit their father in prison, which statutory workers had opposed. She explained that these statutory professionals directly implied that she was a “bad mother” because she wanted her children to have contact with their convicted father. She discussed her failing battle for her perspective to be understood:

*“It was like, before, I was in this place and it was an awful place, and I was depressed and crying all the time whilst trying to keep professionalism with all these people who were not acting like professionals, but were professionals. And I wasn’t, I was just a mum in this. But you seemed to grasp where I was coming from. You knew!”*  
(PC 8).

Her experience that statutory workers lacked understanding of her circumstances was further discussed in her recollection of a visit from a social worker. She laughed sarcastically when she recalled him saying: *“You know you’re a lovely girl, I’d love to come back in a few years and for you to be settled down with someone else!”* She went on to explain her outraged response:

*“... I said, well really that’s not my agenda right now...what do you suggest I do as a single mum of three boys? Start Internet dating and bringing strange men into my house? I was frowned upon because I wanted to co-parent with my ex”* (PC 8).

This mother emphasised many times throughout her interview her fierce desire to protect her children, and how stressed, hurt and angry she had felt when there had been suggestions made that she was doing anything to the contrary. She emphasised that by continuing to stay in touch with her ex-husband, who she had divorced since his imprisonment, that she was simply trying to reduce the separation anxiety and mental distress her children were experiencing as a result of their father being sent to prison. She explained that she had often attempted to convey this to the statutory workers she was obliged to engage with, but despite her efforts, this mother said her perspective and intentions were continuously misunderstood, which left her feeling exasperated.

### **Being Judged**

*“A lot of people tend to judge...with you lot, you don’t”*

What clearly emerged, in direct contrast to ‘feeling understood’ was the common experience of ‘being judged’. Being judged by social workers was a common grievance, an experience which PC 6 compares to ‘hitting a brick wall’:

*“I felt victimized then by them (social services) because there were a lot of allegations being made and I, I just felt like I was hitting a brick wall. I felt they were looking at me, and judging me, rather than looking more in depth about why this (the children’s worsening behaviour) was happening” (PC 6).*

Children also worried about being judged, although mainly their fears were related to their experiences in school. One child said: *“you can’t tell teachers because they’ll think you are a bad kid just because your mum is in prison”* (CH 5); whilst another said his teacher had directly asked him what his dad had done which made him feel *“upset”* and also that teachers were thinking *“my family is a bad one!”* (CH 5).

Being judged at school was not just experienced by children. Parents too, recalled their discomfort. One grandmother carer demonstrated her need to explain that the offending parent was not her daughter:

*“... you can actually see them (teachers) going, oh God, her (granddaughter’s) mother is in jail...I tend to remind them that her mother is not my daughter....because you do get judged” (PC 2).*

In direct contrast, another parent/carer explained that she experienced PSS as a non-judgemental environment where she could be talk openly about her children’s father being in prison. For this mother, it was important to her to feel that she was not being judged or implicated for her partners’ misdemeanours.

*“They (PSS workers) don’t judge you. I don’t feel that everyone’s looking at me and they hear the word prison and they’re glaring (PC 1).*

PC 1 continued to explain how ‘being judged’ had caused a severely debilitating affect on her life. She recalled the community backlash she and her children had to endure as a result of her partner’s crime. Referring to her experience like being *“a prisoner myself at home”* she said, *“once I got on (the bus) but I had to get back off again. I couldn’t carry on.... And I’d had bottles thrown again at the door the night before”* (PC 1).

Attributing her resilience to cope with these intimidating events to the on-going support

she gained from PSS and being “able to talk to someone without being judged”, she reflected on the experience of others in a similar position without support.

*“I’ve met girls in the prison, from all over, and none of them, none have got the support I’ve got back here...I think (name’s friend) would have had more of a chance with a group like this...too many people judged her on what her ex had done...and she let it get the better of her” (PC 1).*

### **Feeling ‘Known’ and Avoiding the Regurgitation of Painful Stories**

*“You know...you’ve been with us”*

This study observed that being understood, for those who participated, relates closely to the notion of ‘being known’. As well as having someone who understands what is going on, to have a practitioner who takes the time to get to know him or her, personally, was without doubt appreciated by the families.

Families from this study explained that they are often in a position where they have to frequently explain and re-explain what has happened to them. In the main this related to explaining matters repeatedly to children’s services (as affected families are typically exposed to not just one, but numerous social workers and linked practitioners), and also to schools. Having to regurgitate the story over and over again is understandably distressing for the family who have to repeatedly endure the embarrassment, shocked reactions, and remember the pain of what happened. One parent/carer said:

*“You know you try to forget your past but you keep having to relive it, by keeping having to tell your story. It’s not nice” (PC 6).*

Another shared her discomfort saying:

*“I hate going over what happened. And if they (the children) change schools you’ve got to go through the same thing again!” (PC 2).*

An ex-prisoner highlighted the trauma of feeling *not known* in his recollection of a core group meeting with Children's Services. He complains that the practitioners in attendance were in no position to judge his circumstances, as they had not ever come to 'know him'. He protested:

*"I stormed out. I kicked off on them all. Because to me it just seemed like a room with 26 people in it and they were all having their personal opinion on how to be a good father. But no one knew me. No one got to know me first, personally, to see whether I was a decent father" (Exp 3).*

Like this father, a grandmother carer strongly felt that 'being known' is a significant element of any positive experience of support:

*"It's not even discussing the situation really. You know the situation, so we haven't to go over it and explain it and regurgitate it every time, and we haven't got to remind you what's happened because you already know, you know...you've been with us" (PC 2).*

Another carer, a mother, told me how liberating it was being able to walk into the PSS building knowing that the team were aware of her situation, and so constant explanation was not necessary, and she did not need to worry that people would react negatively if the imprisonment of her partner came up in conversation.

*"It doesn't matter if you mention, you know... prison, because they already know what's going on, and it's not a shock to them. And they know the boys as well so that makes it a lot easier" (PC 1).*

### **Effective Advocacy**

As well as avoiding the regurgitation of the story, the value of 'being known' lends itself naturally to effective advocacy. Parents and carers spoke of appreciating having someone who understood them, as an individual and as a family, and so could explain matters effectively on their behalf. One parent/carers admitted to having limited confidence, and that she had felt "*scared*" when her partner went to prison:

*“...he did everything with the kids didn’t he...he was more of hands on dad than I was hands on mum...I was worried how I’d cope, so I needed support” (PC 3).*

She went on to describe what having a trusted advocate, who could speak on her behalf, meant to her:

*“...anything I find tricky, I think, Lorna can help me with that. Instead of worrying all night...knowing you’re going to phone up for me” (PC 3).*

Families said that having someone to speak for them at times was undoubtedly useful. Another parent agreed and raised the positioning of a PSS advocate in comparison to a family member as significant in that a PSS person is very likely to more influence over matters, saying:

*“...you started speaking to people and started to get somewhere...although I would try to be articulate, the way you do it is better...there is no respect for the families is there!” (PC 8).*

Two grandmothers also spoke of the value of having someone who knew their family well enough to advocate on their behalf, and save them the pain of regurgitating the story. One said:

*“...when you said, I’ll come up and have a gab to them (the school) I was thinking thank God I haven’t got to go through all that again...I haven’t got to regurgitate all the stuff!” (PC 2).*

Another stressed that having a professional who could understand her granddaughter’s unique position was key:

*“You know, you’ve got to understand the child...she (granddaughter) was crying and you understood why and went up the school to help about her crying. Well that done a lot. That changed a lot” (PC 5).*

The latter grandmother (PC 5) also recalled how nice it was for her granddaughter to be able to form a positive relationship with another support worker who was based in a visitors' centre where the child's mother was imprisoned. The visitors' centre worker had, through taking the time to 'get to know' the child, found out that the young girl loved art. Focusing then on what 'she knew' about the girl, she spent time teaching the girl to draw so as to make her wait for the visit easier. The grandmother explained:

*"She wasn't a screw. She was the one that signed you in. She was only a young girl like yourself and she (granddaughter) got to like her because she bothered to find out about her...she was the one who drew, she learnt her how to draw" (PC 5).*

Losing access to this prison-based support worker, following her mother's release, was thus seen by the family as a loss for the young girl. Her grandmother explained that was why she was reluctant for the PSS post release support to be phased out. She said;

*"...she still talks about her (the prison-based support worker)...but now obviously can't see her. That's why when you said, you could be near finished, I said to you, 'No, stay involved a bit longer'" (PC 5).*

Within the context of 'being known', there is also 'to know'. This study found that PSS was able to form positive relationships with prisoner-parents before their release, through assisting the prisoners' families when they themselves could not. Parents who had been prisoners said because of this, they felt that they were meeting someone they 'already knew' upon release. One former prisoner explained:

*"She'd (his daughter) come on visits and tell me what she'd been doing with you and I could see the difference in her...she started to look a lot better, so I started relaxing...if I hadn't of heard about you I would have felt defensive, but I felt like I knew you so I was comfortable" (Exp 3).*

Another prisoner said he appreciated the correspondence he had received when he was in prison from PSS, which helped him to understand the PSS role and maintain positive contact with his children:

*“I think having a letter of yourselves, that helped. It was just that bit of reassurance explaining that you’d been there for (partner) and for the boys... just knowing that you were there helping her....and the Easter cards and Father’s day cards you done with them for me and sent me” (ExP 1).*

### **Unspoken Understanding Amongst Children**

*“Now I know I’m not the only one”*

The significant value of peer support has already been highlighted in Theme 1 (Isolation and Someone to Talk To), but it was also significant that some of the child interviewees explained that ‘feeling understood’ is possible without necessarily discussing the issue. In other words, for these children, the shared understanding in the groups was implicit, and quite literally went ‘without saying’. One boy described the children’s groups as:

*“good...because the people I meet with you, they know about it so they’d understand...we don’t always have to talk about it. Sometimes we just like to play games” (CH 7a).*

Another boy directly contrasted ‘feeling understood’ to being treated badly. He said: *“In PSS people don’t be horrible to you or stuff like that. They understand”* (CH 1). It appeared that in his view, if children understood, they would be kind and compassionate, rather than make cruel comments. It was also evident that the unspoken understanding between peers, excused children from having to explain themselves. For some children, this meant they were able to simply enjoy being themselves, in a supportive group, without having to necessarily discuss the issue at all.

### **‘Friendly’ Staff**

*“Having you...it was more like having a friend”*

Perhaps as result of feeling understood, and being known, a number of participants alluded to the fact that they viewed their PSS support worker, ‘like a friend’. This is not

to say that interviewees projected any confusion that the relationship between themselves and PSS was not a professional one. However, it was notable that some service users had come to see their PSS support person as a kind of trusted companion. PC 1, who described PSS as “friendly” said that her support worker was “kinda like a big sister, but also there for help” (PC 1). Another mother who had been in prison recalled being collected by a PSS worker at the prison gate upon release:

*“I couldn’t wait to meet you to tell you the truth...I remember when I first met you thinking she is a really nice person and (name of daughter) always spoke highly of you on visits...so it was more like having a friend coming to get me even though we’d never met” (Exp 5).*

Parents and children alike found it reassuring that children could see their PSS support worker like a friend. One mother told me; “*I think the children can relate to you. They see you and (other PSS worker) as a friend*”. She went on to compare this to her children’s experience of social services, saying, “*with the likes of (the social worker) it’s sort of authoritarian*” (PC 8). Similarly, a grandmother carer said: “*It was the best thing that ever happened to her, meeting you*”. When asked, what specifically her worker did that helped her granddaughter, she explained: “*You really got to know her as a very best friend. And that’s how she looked at you*” (PC 5). A teenage girl, who linked ‘feeling understood’ to seeing a support worker as a friend voiced a similar experience:

*“They should be very understanding, and like, I don’t know, but like you’re mate sort of thing, and get on with you very well like that. Like a friend sort of thing” (Ch 2).*

As mentioned in Theme 1 (Isolation and Someone to Talk To) children emphasised the importance of having fun with their support worker. Having fun at PSS with other children and their support worker was an essential part of their experience. Many favourably discussed the games they played with the PSS staff and other children. In terms of what mattered in a support worker it was therefore understandable that children looked for someone who could “*be fun like a friend*” (CH 1) and “*play games*” (CH 7b).

The interpersonal relationships between family members and their support worker(s) were clearly significant to these families. Markedly, one mother explained that it is not enough for the person to try and be friendly if the context is unnatural and the relationship is not already based on a degree of trust. She recalled a social worker giving her advice she neither wanted nor had asked for. She said: *“he’d sit there like he was my friend, well he’s not my friend... I thought [it] was quite inappropriate”* (PC 8).

The issue of whether service users view staff, in any way as ‘friends’ is clearly a noteworthy one affecting both children and adults who took part in this study. These findings therefore highlight the importance of managing all staff - service user relationships with appropriate professional boundaries and considerable care.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is clear that these families felt that statutory workers often misunderstood their perspectives and intentions. This led to the choices they made as parents being undermined causing them to feel resentment and frustration. In addition to the negative reactions they endured from former friends and the wider community, they perceived they were unfairly judged by many professionals who they felt were in no position to judge them. Generally, they reported that statutory professionals do not have the time or the inclination to get to know them. Access to a support worker who understood them and got to know their family’s unique story was much appreciated. This enabled effective advocacy meaning families were often spared from the regurgitation of painful and difficult stories. Understanding support workers were sometimes described as being like a friend, although the families too acknowledged the professional boundaries.

## **Theme 3: Power, Secrets, Lies and Fighting Back.**

### **Introduction**

When speaking to families about parental imprisonment, it was impossible not to acknowledge the overwhelming degree of powerlessness that families experienced in many aspects of their roles as parents, carers, partners and children, and to recognise that for many this experience was enduring and on-going. Whilst it is accepted that prisoners are automatically disempowered as a result of their imprisonment, *“once you are put away everything is outside your control”* (ExP 7), it was in fact the parents/carers who spoke about their experiences of powerlessness and disempowerment with the most fervour.

### **A Dearth of Information**

*“Nobody tells you anything!”*

Commonly, parents/carers felt extremely frustrated by the lack of access to relevant and useful information regarding processes within the criminal justice system. One mother (PC 7) recalls the time when her husband was first arrested. She told me:

*“You don’t get advised by anybody. The police don’t tell you where they have taken him....and at that time the solicitors can’t get enough information either....they (solicitors) didn’t know anything”* (PC 7).

Even after her husband was sentenced, the confusion remained. For instance, she recalls trying to work out how to get some clothes to her imprisoned husband. Feeling frustrated by her fruitless search for clear information she told me:

*“I just turned up there (at the prison)] ...I thought, well if I just go there someone could just tell me what to do. But they looked at me like I was stupid. They said, ‘You can’t come in, you have to have a visiting order, and no you can’t bring those clothes in, we give you a list’”. And I was*

*like, but 'Where do you find this out'? And they looked at me as if I was stupid. It was awful" (PC 7).*

In much the same way, another mother discussed her experience of being “*told nothing*”, declaring “*I didn't even know where he was. No one would tell me a single thing!*” (PC 8). She continues to describe her frustrating fight for information. Once the whereabouts of her ex-partner had eventually been established, she recalls ringing the prison to book a visit, only to be told that her children had been prohibited from visiting their father. She explained that when she asked why, the receptionist told her “*I don't know, just that there is a restriction*”. She goes on to say, “*I was sort of trying to work with everyone to find out what was going on...but there was nothing...I tried to chase it and they would be like, 'Yeah it's being dealt with', but it never was*”. One avenue she pursued for information was the Public Protection Unit:

*“They (the public protection unit) said 'Where are you phoning from?', so I said, 'I'm not an organisation, I'm an individual', and then they said, 'Oh then we won't speak to you'. At first, when they thought I was from an organisation, you could tell they sort of had a bit of respect for me but when I said I wasn't from an organisation, I was an individual phoning for information, they said 'No, we're not going to put you through'” (PC 8).*

Describing how powerless this made her feel, she said:

*“Not important. Not important enough. When you think, I'm the main carer of these children, I'm their mother, surely I should be allowed information... but no one would ever phone me back” (PC 8).*

Likewise, a grandparent carer spoke of a futile fight for information from social services. She said,

*“...that was the boss I phoned and she would not answer the phone. And the case worker, do you remember her? She wouldn't answer the phone or get back to me either” (PC 2).*

A young mother (PC 4) explained that she “*knew nothing*” about the prison system and with no help from any organisation at this juncture, she relied on her imprisoned partner who had to write to her to tell her how to book a visit. With sparse information at her disposal about what the visit itself might be like, she told me:

*“...the first time I visited a prison, I didn’t have a clue what to do...it was petrifying, so petrifying...I didn’t know what to do...I didn’t even know if I was allowed to reach out and hold his hand” (PC 4).*

The struggle, faced by parents/carers caused by poor access to information was acutely evident. Even in cases where parents/carers welcomed the imprisonment of the criminal parent, there was much frustration regarding little or no information about the prisoner, which in turn rendered them feeling powerless to effectively support and protect their children. In Family 6, for example, a mother and her family had been subject to many years of domestic violence. She explained that whilst it was “*a relief that he was away...it affected the children obviously...they were emotionally attached and missed having him around*”. For the sake of the children she agreed that contact could be maintained if it was formally supervised. Despite this, she bitterly complained, “*I don’t think they (social services) done enough to get information about the father’s release and what was meant to be happening with the children... and told me; “they said they were going to take control of supervised visits but that never happened” (PC 6).*

In addition to poor accessibility to information in and around the criminal justice system, some non-offending parents/carers were also subjected to their offending partners not telling them about their criminal activities. Without full insight into what was happening, parents/carers felt they had little control and influence over the situation, which provoked feelings of much resentment. PC 7 for example, told me how she felt “*quite angry*” with her husband for “*being put in that situation*”, arguing he was wrong not to tell her the extent of what he had been doing. She said:

*“...although we’d tell each other everything...it was not where I thought that could possibly happen...what he did and the consequences would be putting us in that situation...and then just leaving us to deal with it” (PC 7).*

Prisoner parents, whilst incarcerated, were inevitably grossly disempowered from their role as a primary caregiver. P 7 explained; *“I had to just make decisions for both of us because he couldn’t be there and (husband’s name) found that really hard (PC 7).*

Likewise, ExP 5 described how powerless she felt as a protective mother when she was in custody and her daughter went on her first residential trip with her school; *“...that was the worst...I didn’t know what was going on... I was worried that she’d be crying and wanting to go home...And I weren’t here”*. Desperate for updates she told me *“I rang like four times a day to see if she was ok, but they wouldn’t ring me back and tell me how she was or let her ring to speak to me” (ExP 5).*

Children also suffered from not being privy to information that directly affected them. One mother (PC 1) discussed her partner’s child from a previous relationship. She said he had not been told that his dad was in prison, and declared; *“he doesn’t know where their dad is, so he thinks his dad doesn’t give a toss” (PC 1)*. Another mother remembers the confusion her own children felt before they were told the truth about their father’s whereabouts. She remembers her sons saying, *“I don’t like dad working away...why is he doing that job... he’s not with us” (PC 7)*. Her husband (ExP 7) agreed that his family’s position must have been *“confusing”* when they did not know where he was. He explained that on one prison visit his children told him *“to leave this job and go back to your old one because this job is rubbish”*, which led him to tell his children the truth to prevent on-going misunderstanding. This he viewed positively. He explained that whilst it *“opened up a load of other questions”* the outcome was that his sons *“could adapt and cope”* and saw it as *“an experience they can hopefully learn from and not repeat my mistakes” (ExP 7)*. The other children give credence to his view *“honesty is the best policy”*. Ch 5, whose mother had been taken into custody, explained, *“it was scary...because I didn’t know where she had gone and I hadn’t seen her weeks”*. When she eventually learnt that her mother was in fact in prison she said, *“it was a bit of a relief because I knew where she was” (CH 5)*. Another child also demonstrated the value of sharing relevant information with children, in order to reduce worries. He described a time when his dad had not long been released:

*“...he had a tag on his leg and there was one night when I thought, he had to be inside at 7 0’clock but he was home at 10...I was worrying and worrying he might be arrested...but they’d upgraded the tag, but I didn’t know” (CH 7b).*

Families claimed that their struggle for information was much alleviated with support from PSS. PC 1, who complained that “*the probation service seem to fob everybody off, and the prison staff are like that*” explained:

*“... (partner’s name) was moving and it took a lot for me to find out where he was moved to. I had to write a letter to a prisoners’ something or other group and it took them three months to get back in touch. To let me know. Then PSS phoned up a few prisons and we found out where he was. So the support, it’s there with you” (PC 1).*

Another mother, who relied on PSS to take her children on prison visits said that, “*the information you relayed between visits I was happy with*” (PC 6), whilst another recalled:

*“I think I phoned you a few times with stupid questions (laughs) and you always said, if you didn’t know, ‘I’ll try and find out’ and you’d always come back with something...that’s what made me comfortable” (PC 7).*

### **The Families’ Perception that Statutory Workers are Incompetent**

*“They do not have a clue what they are doing”*

As well as not being provided with adequate information, families felt that many statutory professionals lacked sufficient knowledge and training to be able to effectively make the decisions they had the power to make. Parents and carers thus felt extremely aggrieved that those with authority were, in their view, making uninformed decisions that had a direct impact on their lives and the lives of their families.

One mother, discussing her children’s social worker’s knowledge of the criminal justice system stated, “*I know for a fact he has none*” (PC 8), and recalls an upsetting time when he gave her children misinformation regarding visiting their imprisoned father. She said, “*he told the children, ‘you can’t go and see him because the prison won’t let you’...because this is what the social worker believed but he didn’t know what he was talking about*”. She then recounts a further misleading conversation with the same social worker on a separate occasion:

*“...he said, your dad is getting moved to (name of prison)... and the kids were all sitting there nodding... and he told them, as soon as he gets there you can go and see him. He made that promise to them. But he didn't get transferred to the one he said, he got transferred to another one miles away...and still they were stopped visiting him...”* (PC 8).

PC 2 shared her lack of faith in the ability of social workers. In her view:

*“social workers do not have not a clue about what they are doing...not a single clue...I think it's because they don't get it right (correct)...They just don't get it right”* (PC 2).

PC 8 also complained that the probation service *“had no experience of the prison system”* and that she had *“zero faith”* in the justice system as whole. Indignantly, she said: *“It's the Ministry of Justice isn't it, so you'd think, they must do everything right. But they don't. They don't do anything right”* (PC 8).

Furthermore, parents and carers felt that teachers were unaware of the specific issues faced by prisoners' families, and lacked training in how to deal with prisoners' children at school. One mother describes feeling *“a bit concerned about the school”* when her daughter told her she had turned to her learning mentor for support. Worried about a lack of experience to be able to handle the specific needs of prisoners' children, she said, *“I thought she's only like a teacher and she doesn't understand”* (ExP 5). Another ex-prisoner shared her concern. Whilst open to his sons accessing support at school, he felt that teachers were currently ill-equipped to do so. He explained:

*“I think teachers, you know, they spend a lot of hours in the day with them kids...so they really need to start understanding when a kid goes into school and they are upset. I think they tend to try and help, but they don't understand! I think all schools need some training. Because there is more than one kid in each school (affected by parental imprisonment) there is a lot who are going through this”* (ExP 2).

Instead then, of trusting that statutory professionals were sufficiently trained and informed to help them, families felt that people in positions of power were making decisions based on ill-informed opinions. A mother of three complained that, when it came to decisions made by their social worker, that “ *a lot of it was down to his personal opinion*”. She then relayed a similar experience she had, when she went to a legal professional for help; “ *...I sat down and told him the whole story and even he was like, ‘Let him fucking rot’*” (PC 8).

## **Lies**

*“The lies were malicious and blatant”*

As well as enduring a lack of, or misleading information, three of the eight parents/carers claimed they had been purposely lied to and even manipulated by statutory professionals with whom they had been in contact. PC 2, a grandmother carer, stated strongly “ *I know I definitely didn’t trust the social services*”. She explained that social workers had been involved long before the children’s mother had been imprisoned, due to their mother being involved with violent partners. In her interview she complained bitterly about the failings of social services, and said there were times when she was lied to by social workers. One example she gave was regarding checks that social workers alleged they had conducted at the mothers’ home:

*“...they were saying they’d been round to her house and had a look at her house...the house was absolutely disgusting. And they hadn’t been round the house. Because we were there before them”* (PC 2).

She went on to claim “ *knowing they hadn’t told the truth about a lot of things*” and described a time when she rang Children’s Services to complain. She said:

*“...we actually got through to, to head woman and she put the other two to one side and they were like children putting each other to blame!...I don’t care what anyone says, Social Services are corrupt, they’re bent, they don’t care about them kids out there”* (PC 2).

Others shared her view. PC 8 described the Probation Service as “*corrupt*” and told me:

*“I’d briefly met the probation officer...it turned out that a lot of things she was saying weren’t true, to the prison! You wouldn’t think that anyone would be able to get with that but she bloody did for a while. The lies were malicious and blatant” (PC 8).*

Similarly, another parent remembering her experience of Social Services, said “*to be honest it wasn’t really helpful*”. She explained that she “*felt victimized then by them*” and that “*there were a lot of allegations being made, which weren’t true and I, I just felt like I was hitting a brick wall*” (PC 6).

### **Fighting Back**

*“I had to change....I had to speak my mind”*

In response to feeling disempowered either by their family circumstances or by a statutory system that they viewed with disdain and mistrust, families gave accounts of their fight to regain some control over their situation. One mother (Exp 5) described a time where her daughter was being bullied at school as a direct consequence of the stigma associated with parental imprisonment. She explained, “*one of my daughter’s friends in school found out and they’d start saying things...*”. She went on to describe a battle with a teacher and asserting her position as a mother as paramount:

*“When she was upset, I went to the school and I caused murder...I said ‘I am taking her home’ and the teacher said, ‘No, she is under our care now’, and I said ‘Yeah’? and ‘I’m her mother and she’s coming home with me!’” (Exp 5).*

The same mother gave accounts of being a victim of extreme abuse at the hand of her ex-partner. She told me:

*The last time...he battered me that much I woke up and I was in er, (name of a place far away from her home area). I was unconscious in the back of the car. He drove. He fractured my nose. I had two big*

*black eyes and all the inside of my mouth was hanging out like that (pulls her cheek and bottom lip down) (ExP 5).*

In the hope to safeguard herself and her daughter she told me how she regained some power by exposing his abusive behaviour to her probation worker:

*“he was really terrorizing me, every five minutes phoning me, saying ‘I will fucking get you’...so when I was in probation (in the probation office) and I put him on speaker phone” (ExP 5).*

Her grandmother (PC 5) also hoping for control explained that having the former prisoner live with her “was good to keep an eye on her” and told me “I’ve got more control over her here, I’ve got more control over her” (PC 5). Voicing her frustration with her loss of independence, ExP 5 responds, “but I need my own space...and my ex loves me living here because he’s thinking, she’s living with her nan, so she can’t have another fellar”.

A parent, who claimed a probation worker had abused her position of power by telling lies, describes a positive outcome in her fight for the truth to be known. She said, “I’ve since received a written apology for what she did. She’s acknowledged what she did and that she was out of order” (PC 8). Taking further control with regards to the way information is now passed between herself and the authorities, she stated;

*“I won’t speak to Social Services face to face like I am doing with you. I’ve been invited into their offices due to complaints I have made and I’ve said ‘No, I want what you’ve got to say in writing’...so they can’t deny it and they are accountable for the information they are giving me. So many people get their bullshit ” (PC 8).*

Similarly, a mother explained how she felt she had to become more assertive with social workers to generate the changes she wanted for her family, saying simply, “I had to change...I had to speak my mind” (PC 4). Some adult participants credited the support they received from PSS as enabling them to move from a position of disempowerment to one of empowerment. An ex-prisoner father, for example, reflected on his post-

release experience with Social Services, and feeling he lacked control over his life. He explained:

*“...it felt no one was listening to what I wanted, no one was wanting me to get to where I needed to be, there was always a hindrance. Telling me what to do...I had that much pressure on me...I even thought about going back to prison. Because there was that much going on. I even tried to commit suicide...” (Exp 4).*

In contrast, he described how PSS had enabled him to learn the necessary skills he needed to regain some control over his own outcomes. In addition to attending a PSS parenting course, which he described as “*fantastic*”, he gave a glowing account of one-to-one support he received from a member of staff. Describing the PSS support worker as “*one boss (colloquial term for great) fellow*” and someone who gave him “*that drive to carry on*”, he elaborated:

*“he (the PSS worker) actually taught me how to write my letters and put my point across. It gave me confidence to fight them (Social Services) in the right way....if it wasn't for him I'd still be there now arguing black and blue....he helped me realize that I was in control, not them. That's what he taught me, to agree to disagree and we'll discuss it again at the next meeting” (Exp 4).*

Another former prisoner described how support had meant his partner had been empowered to make positive changes in her life, whilst he was in prison. He said:

*“I started feeling a lot better knowing that (partner's name) was getting support...things that she couldn't, she wouldn't do before I was away on her own...then we started getting the help, I seen the change in her as well then. She started going places that she'd never gone before” (Exp 3).*

The collaborative approach adopted by PSS, described by Exp 4 as “*everyone on a level*”, was seen to be key to successfully empowering service users. A teenage girl (CH 2) who was estranged from most of her relatives as a result of a family argument

discussed how much she appreciated that PSS respected her wishes regarding contact. When asked if she wanted anyone to communicate with her family for her at present, she asserted, “no I wouldn’t want you to do that... no, no”, and “I like having the choice”. Happy to be involved in decisions that affected her, she told me “I think you are great”. ExP 3 elaborated on why a collaborative approach empowers families:

*“To me, what was different was (in comparison to social services)...when you came in, you asked us what was wrong, what helps, what can we do for you, you know things like that. What do you need? You didn’t come in and say, ‘Well this needs to change and that needs to change, you need to do this’. You came in and asked us, ‘What do you need help with?’” (ExP3).*

### **Knowledge of the Prison System and Knowledge of Children**

*“A good support worker understands the prison system and the child”*

In contrast to statutory services, families said they trusted that PSS workers were sufficiently skilled to support them. Knowledge of and around the criminal justice system was clearly valued. PC 6, unable to take her children on prison visits, felt at ease with PSS workers conducting the visits on her behalf. Her main concern, which centered on the potential for “*manipulation... using the children to get information*” was alleviated by her trust that PSS “*know the security around the visits, so I was comfortable with that*” (PC 6). ExP 3 agreed that it helps “*to have a good understanding of the prison system...to know the regime*”. He explained that from a prisoner’s perspective it is “*frustrating*” because “*it can take weeks before the information can get from a prison officer, to me, to her*”. He told me that before his family had any support, his partner “*probably visited three times with items she was refused to bring in*” and therefore much appreciated having “*someone to speed up the communication so there’s not a lot of messing going on*” (ExP 3).

More fervently, however, than understanding prison-based matters, PSS workers were hailed for their ability to work with and relate to children. This was considered to be imperative to effectively support families affected by parental imprisonment, as a mother of three explained; “*for someone to be involved they need to have a good*

*knowledge and understanding of children” (PC 8). She gives a specific example of a time when she was struggling with the behaviour of her five year old son and her experience of support from PSS:*

*“There have been times I’ve been despairing thinking there is something wrong with my child...then I’d speak to you guys at PSS and you spoke through the natural reaction that’s kids go through...and I feel now I can coming out the other end. You said give it until November to settle and it’s come true! You are the first organisation I trust” (PC 8).*

Other parents/carers shared her view that good support workers *“definitely need to have a connection with the child” (PC 6)*. Whilst PC 5 stressed that a good worker has *“got to be really trained and know what they are doing”* her focus is child rather than criminal justice related, stating, *“because if you didn’t know what you were doing you could damage the child” (PC 5)*.

### **A ‘Whole Family’ Approach**

*“You help all of us”*

PSS’s approach of supporting the ‘whole family’ (both parents and children), was hailed by many participants as being significant for effective support. PC 6, for example, described her positive experience of PSS in terms of *“everything that you done was what could possibly be done”*, and explained that this was because *“from start to finish you’ve covered every aspect of the relationship with my child, and with myself” (PC 6)*. PC 3, who said without PSS it would have been *“hard, very hard”*, spoke about how it mattered to her that the whole family had been helped. She explained:

*“...you don’t get many of those organisations... where they’ll support all the family. Like social services are just involved for the kids really aren’t they?, the kids, you know seeing how the kids are doing, but not so much on how you’re doing. You help all of us” (PC 3).*

## **Conclusion**

In sum, families often felt both powerless and disempowered by their experience of the criminal justice system, which was angrily depicted as “*a bad joke*” (PC 8). Whilst they placed some blame on the criminal parent, in the main, they attributed their experience to a statutory system in which professionals “*just don’t know what they are doing*” (PC 2). Families were frustrated by not being able to easily obtain suitable information to cope and so had to hunt, often via futile avenues, to get the information they needed. They complained that frequently poorly skilled members of staff gave them inaccurate information, and many decisions made by people in authority were based on uninformed personal opinions. Some claimed that statutory professionals were corrupt and manipulated the truth. Children said that being informed about their parents’ whereabouts and being kept abreast of new developments was preferable to the confusion of not knowing or not understanding what was happening. Prisoner-parents accepted the inevitable loss of power as a result of their imprisonment but many continued to strive to support their children and families, even whilst in custody.

Families regained some power either by solely drawing on their own personal resources and inner strengths, or with the support of PSS staff who they reported to trust. This trust appeared to grow from the collaborative approach adopted by PSS. Families felt that PSS had sufficient knowledge with regards to the issues families face when a parent is imprisoned, and were comforted by PSS staff’s willingness to strive for solutions on their behalf. Parents also said they were particularly reassured by the manner in which PSS staff were able to positively build relationships with and therefore support their children.

## **Theme 4: Loss, Contact and Change.**

### **Introduction**

The actual experience of loss and fear of loss was experienced in one way or another by all the eight families. Loss was discussed in many forms including financial, material, social and the loss of a former self. Families' spoke of unavoidable changes (many negative and some positive) they had experienced, as an inevitable inextricably linked consequence of loss. PSS was discussed as an agency that sometimes provided practical solutions to help families cope with their losses. The most valued way in which PSS helped was by improving the contact between separated family members.

### **Cumulative Loss**

*"It was like so many losses in one go"*

Parent/carers spoke fervently about how much their lives changed when a parent in the family had gone to prison. One mother spoke of the multitude of losses she and her children faced within what she described as a very short space of time. She said:

*"Our whole lives had been turned upside down. We lived in a nice house. That went. Their dad went. All over night. The car...because I had to sell the car to fund the house move. That went. Then when we moved the dog got run over. He died. It was like so many losses in one go" (PC 8).*

The financial hardship described by this mother was a common occurrence across the families. Another mother, PC 7 who said her husband had been "taken suddenly" spoke about her struggle to keep the family business going. She explained: "we had our own business, we had a business loan but everything was in (husband's) name". As a result she explained that "because of data protection...actually sorting the business out, I couldn't, without (husband's) signature, so nothing could be done" (PC 7). Financial loss also affected Family 5. A grandmother (PC 5) caring for her granddaughter due to the child's mother being in prison, found it extremely difficult to fund the prison visits.

She explained that she was not eligible for any financial help at all when she had become the main-carer for her grandchild. She complained:

*“I’ve worked all my life...but because me and (partner) have got two pensions, we didn’t even have free dinners. They wouldn’t give me it. Because we were about five or six pounds over (the benefit threshold)” (PC 5).*

She suggested it might be helpful to have *“a fund, to try and help people who are poor”* stressing that it had cost her *“£60 every time we went there (to the prison)...and another £30 in a taxi”*. She did express, however, much gratitude that PSS was able to facilitate the collection of the child’s mother from prison on the day she was released:

*“I don’t know what I would have done (without support from PSS)... I would have had to have got the National Express and then another bus...but she had all those bags so I would have had to get a taxi home...and from (name’s other city) that would have cost a small fortune and we just didn’t have it” (PC 5).*

Another parent/carers (PC 3) agreed it would be ideal to have a service that could *“maybe pick them (the prisoner parent) up from the prison”* but by the same token said PSS had *“done everything”* she had asked for. In terms of her own financial troubles she gave an example about how she had recently been fretting about how she was going to afford to buy school uniforms for her children. She said *“the uniforms have been worrying me, thinking ‘Oh I’m not going to get this uniform, I’m not going to get that uniform’”*. However, she said she felt a little calmer knowing that a member of staff from PSS had requested a uniform voucher, for free school wear, on her behalf. In her view, this was helpful because *“they (people in a position of authority) take more notice of someone in an official capacity than they’ll do of us”*. She also remembered a time when a PSS worker had assisted her to resolve another financial matter, declaring, *“that’s why I won the DLA (Disability Living Allowance) thing, the benefits thing. I don’t think I would have won it without you” (PC 3).*

In addition to financial loss, the loss of a formed lifestyle and inevitable changes for parent carers was raised. One mother told me she had *“gone from having loads of*

*friends and a social life*” (PC 8) whilst another simply said, *“it was my whole way of life I had to change...it was mad”* (PC 3). Children spoke of the loss of contact with their parent in prison. One boy described it as *“devastating...because I didn’t have my dad home”* (CH 1) whilst a girl whose mother had been in prison simply said *“it just upset me, missing her”* (CH 5). PC 3 told me her daughter *“used to cry herself to sleep...just missing him (her dad) terrible”* and PC 8 described a lack of contact for her sons, between them and their imprisoned father as *“absolute torture”*. Some children spoke of their fears of their imprisoned parent never returning home. One boy disclosed his chief concern was *“mainly was I going to get my dad back?”* (CH 7b); another said he had feared *“he (dad) would never come back”* (CH 7a).

Parents who had been prisoners appeared to accept their inevitable loss of freedom, but remained anxious about the effect on their families. ExP 7 explained, *“I understand that you’ve got no right to anything...you’ve done wrong and you have to accept the consequences”*, but had worried about how his family would cope and was concerned about *“the mechanics and the practicalities of how are they are going to survive financially”* (ExP 7). In much the same way ExP 3 explained that he was not concerned about the loss of his personal freedom, but worried greatly about how his family were going to manage without him. He explained that:

*“To me, going to jail, that wasn’t a problem. It was leaving them out there on their own. Because I knew it would totally...destroy her (his partner). I knew she’d be terrible. And I knew the kids would be bad as well”* (ExP 3).

A key struggle voiced by parents who had been in prison was the real or imagined loss of relationships with their partners and/or children. ExP 7 said he remembered seeing *“so many families break down in there (prison)”* (ExP 7) and reflected on the changes he had seen in fellow prisoners, saying, *“I’ve seen it too many times. That person in prison, they start changing into a different person”* (ExP 7). Another father explained how he feared he would lose contact with his family for good when he was taken into custody:

*“...to be honest, at first I thought that she (his partner) was going to go. Just thought that she was going to have had enough and that was it...that was going to be the end of it” (Exp 2).*

In much the same way, Exp 5, a mother who had been in prison, told me that *“the thing I was panicking over was that I’m not going to be with her (her daughter) for that long that I am going to lose that bond with her”*. She further admitted that this fear has remained with her post release, explaining; *“...even now I say, you’re (her nan) trying to take her off me (to her nan), don’t I Nan?” (Exp 5).*

### **Family Contact**

*“It took a lot of worries and pressures off him by having the contact”*

Fear of losing family ties affected how parents in prison initially perceived PSS. Parents who had been in prison admitted that they were, at first, very fearful that PSS’s involvement with their children might lead to a reduction in access to their children or them being removed from the family. Exp 1 told me that when his partner first wrote to him to say PSS was providing her and the children with support, he was worried that PSS would be *“feeding her a load of crap saying he’s a jellhead, he’s no good for you and the kids”*. In much the same way, when Exp 3 was asked how he had felt when his partner announced to him that she had been accessing the PSS service, he replied, *“Truthfully? I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it at all. I told you didn’t I (to partner)?, I didn’t like it. To me, I didn’t like any type of authority coming into help our family” (Exp 3).* Exp 5 shared these concerns. She said she was worried that someone she did not know was involved with her child whilst she was in prison, saying, *“it was difficult because I wasn’t there. I didn’t know what was going on or anything...at first I was a bit like [takes a sharp intake of breath to express fear]... I was saying, they (PSS) are going to take her (her daughter) away”*.

Despite their initial concerns, former prisoners described becoming increasingly reassured about the PSS service with time. This they based mainly on seeing their children and partners becoming progressively more relaxed during their visits and appearing to cope better with the situation and separation. This, in turn, helped them to

worry less about how their families were managing without them. ExP 5 told me that after some time she felt “*alright because (name of daughter) started improving...she stopped crying*”. Similarly, ExP 3 said he changed his mind about PSS when “*she’d (his daughter) come on the visits...and I could see the difference in her. She was starting to look a lot better...So I started relaxing*” (ExP 3); his partner confirmed their children “*have come out of it strong*” (PC 3). Likewise, another father who had at first thought a worker at PSS “*was another busybody coming into the relationship*” said “*when I actually got the gist of what it was all about then, then that’s when it started to sink in, now hang on, they’re giving my (partner) some help*” (ExP 4).

Four out of the eight interviewed families expressed their gratitude that PSS had directly facilitated contact between separated family members. One mother did not want any involvement herself with her son’s father, as he had subjected her to years of domestic abuse. However, she sympathized with her son and her niece (who lived with her) and their need for contact and was thus very grateful that PSS workers would take the children on prison visits as:

*“...it took away the pressure...it made me feel better for the children because they still had that chance of maintaining that relationship...because I was in no position to do that” (PC6).*

She went on to describe the effect the contact with his father had on her son:

*“...he (son) became a lot more confident and wasn’t as isolated as what he was, sitting in his room all the time...I think it took a lot of worries and pressures off him by having the contact” (PC 6).*

In a similar way, another mother discussed at length her appreciation that PSS was able to successfully present the case for her children to be able to visit their father, and the positive effect this had on her sons. Describing the previous restrictions on contact as “*cruelty in itself*” (PC 8), she stressed, “*the great thing you (PSS) have done is getting them to actually see their dad*”. She goes on to describe the effect that contact has had on her children’s wellbeing:

*“It’s made a massive difference! To all of them! They really are coping better now...for (son) it makes him feel much calmer. He needed the contact because he was having behavioural problems before that, because he was so frustrated” (PC 8).*

In another family PSS had overseen contact between siblings who were living in separate households since the imprisonment of their mother. CH 2 described the time with her sister, who was now living with other grandparents since their mother was taken into custody, as *“good...because like, I got to see her and stuff”* (CH 2). In family 4, PSS had provided supervision for the mother and her young child to have family contact with the child’s father following his release from prison. PC 4 explained that PSS had facilitated contact *“because the social workers they couldn’t do it”*. She explains the difference this had made to her family. *“Without PSS, it would have got frustrating...because at one stage we’d be going like 3 weeks without contact”*. Her partner agreed with her claiming that without help from PSS *“we’d still be under social services now, I’m telling you!”* In his own interview he reflected on his experience of supervised family time with PSS worker had given him.

*“He (PSS worker) was like a mediator...he mediated between myself and (partner) and my daughter. You know it was like a whole family mediation. I don’t know if I am using the right word but it was bringing us closer together and it was that initial link that we needed to get us where we are today...We’re stronger now than we’ve ever been” (Exp 4).*

## **Post-Release Concerns**

*“You still need support when someone comes out”*

In addition to the loss and change faced when a parent is in prison, the post-release phase was also reported by family members as being characterized by stress, change, being judged and feeling uncertain about the future. Ex-prisoners stressed that the months post-release are exceptionally taxing. Exp 7 described this time as *“a thousand times more difficult than you think its going to be”* and said *“in that first two weeks, if someone has said do you want to go back now, I would have went back (to prison)!”*

Another ex-prisoner concurred stating, *“when I first came out I was shocked to be honest with you...at one time I even thought about going back to prison”* (Exp 4).

Parents who had been in prison explained that part of the challenge following release is facing the realization that their former role in the family has now gone, or has been altered. Exp 7 clarified that *“...you’re not needed anymore. It’s your own fault but you know, your role as husband and dad has gone. It had to because you weren’t there”* (Exp 7). Another ex-prisoner shared his anxiety. She described her frustration of living with her nan and daughter following her time in prison. She told me how she had felt *“shut out”* that her daughter was listening to and abiding by her Nan’s rules and ignoring her own wishes. *“I said to (daughter) I want you in early, but then I heard her and my nan whispering and I heard her (nan) say you can come in at 7 o’clock”* (Exp 5). She went on to describe her feelings surrounding what she felt was a loss of her independence:

*“I always was independent...I’d always lived on my own...this is the longest I’ve been here for now (living in her nan’s house)...I want a house, I want a job. I don’t want to sit in all day. I hate it. I hate sitting in all day”* (Exp 5).

It was evident that children also suffered after their parents were released because they were scared that their parents could be re-arrested and that they might lose them once more. In a conversation with CH 5, she explained that she was hopeful that prison had helped her mum *“learn her lesson”* and *“never do the thing she did again”*. She said: *“it (the potential of her mother returning to prison) makes me worry because I’ve always wanted it to be me and my mum, you know. Like, have a nice house and you know, be in a safe place”* (CH 5).

Exp 1, discussing his two children, noticed similar concerns:

*“...it was like really hard, when I first come home, whenever I’d go to the shop or anywhere they’d want to come because they wouldn’t want me going. They were scared of losing me again”* (Exp 1).

The possibility of the offending parent returning to prison also worried partners. PC 3 told me how her partner, since his released, had been offered a bribe to go back to

prison for a short while in return for a considerable amount of money to cover up the criminal activities of another man. Despite struggling financially she told me how she had made it clear to her partner that he was not to consider it, because of how it would affect the children. *“I said to him, it’s not worth it...crying themselves to sleep missing him...he couldn’t put the kids through that again”* (PC 3). Similarly, PC 1 said, *“I couldn’t go through all this again. He’d better be out for good this time. I don’t want me and the boys spending our lives visiting a prison. I couldn’t do it again”* (PC 1).

The two grandparent-carers feared losing the relationship they had nurtured with their grandchildren whilst the prisoner parent (in both cases a mother) had been incarcerated. PC 2 told me that her worse case scenario, when her granddaughter’s mother is released from prison is that *“she (granddaughter) goes back to her mother. And I won’t be able to do anything about that”*. PC 5 shared the same concern. She acknowledged, *“obviously the child wants to be with her mother”* but she was worried about her granddaughter having to *“live like that again”* elaborating:

*“...she’s never missed a day of school when she’s been with me, never been late, unless she’s been sick...and all the worry about where her mother is...it isn’t right...as far as I’m concerned she’ll always have a home here with me, she (granddaughter) knows that”* (PC 5).

### **Positive Change**

In spite of the inevitable hardships resulting from the judgments that families incurred when a parent was sent to prison, some discussed how imprisonment had had positive effects on their lives. EXP 7, speaking of the material losses his children had to experience when he went to prison said *“it was a massive change for them”* because his former criminal lifestyle meant he would buy his sons *“everything”*. However, he told me that his time in prison had given him the chance to reflect, *“to stop and look, and see you’ve actually created some spoilt kids who’ve got no value of things any more”*.

Whilst he remorsefully acknowledged that the financial loss in his family *“was a horrible thing to have happened and really difficult for them”*, he also felt that it was the catalyst for positive changes in his children’s behaviour and attitude. With relief he explained:

*“...what I actually seen happen was my kids turn into, believe it or not, into lovely kids with me not being there...they are a lot more responsible and understand life a lot more” (Exp 7).*

Many others were able to recognise positive changes in themselves and their loved ones as a result of their experience. One parent carer said that over time she realised *“her confidence had grown”* (PC 4) and another agreed that she was able to cope better than she herself expected when her partner went to prison; *“I did do it, but if you would have asked me before if I could do it, I would have said no!”* (PC 3). PC 2 believed that her granddaughter had also gained in self-confidence since her mother had gone to jail. She told me about how she had returned home from school the previous day proudly announcing *“I’ve done a three hour exam in my math, a three hour exam and I know I’ve done really well”*. She explained this was a huge change *“compared to the screaming (in relation to schooling) we had”* (PC 2).

## **Conclusion**

In sum, loss and fear of loss was a normal experience for the eight interviewed families. Following the imprisonment of a parent, families who were ‘left behind’ largely described having to contend with a loss of support at home, a loss of income, and a reduction or loss of a social life. Parents who had been in prison explained that mainly they were worried about how their families would cope without them, and whether they might lose contact or the bond they had with their children and/or partners. Children were reported to suffer greatly if they had little contact with their imprisoned parent, due to their grief from missing them. The children continued to worry even after their parent had been released from prison, as they were fearful that they might lose him or her again.

Despite such hardships, some family members reported becoming increasingly resilient with time, learning new skills, and coping better than they had first thought possible. Parents who had been prisoners observed positive changes in their children and families, which they in part attributed to support from PSS. The PSS support was considered as crucial for a number of families to help them maintain their family ties

both during the imprisonment and post-release phase, which included the maintaining of family ties between non-imprisoned members of the family.

The over-arching finding of this study is that families affected by parental imprisonment want and need to have positive connections with other people. The absence of ‘personal connectivity’, or ‘productive and meaningful relationships’ undoubtedly links their experience of isolation, negative judgements, disempowerment and loss. Conversely, personal connectivity can be easily understood as the conceptual glue which links these families key support needs, which include having someone to talk to, feeling understood, being empowered by being informed, and being able to experience personal growth through improving their relationships with those they hold dear, or forming new relationships which impact positively on their self-worth. The notion of ‘Personal Connectivity’ as the over-arching support needs for families affected by parental imprisonment is explored in detail in the chapters to follow.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

The aim of this project was to discover how families who are affected by parental imprisonment experienced community-based support. Using a collective case study approach, eight families, all of whom were service users from the charitable organisation PSS (Person Shaped Support) in the UK, participated in in-depth interviews and some family members offered further insights in subsequent conversations. A total of 18 individuals from the eight families, comprising of parent/carers, children, and parents who had been in prison, contributed their experiences.

The findings from this study generated four themes: ‘Isolation and Someone to Talk To’, ‘Feeling Judged and Being Understood’, ‘Power, Truth, Lies and Fighting Back’ and ‘Loss, Contact and Change’. Cumulatively they are understood as ‘Personal Connectivity’. Within this study, personal connectivity is seen as positive relationships with other people. Although it is possible that the term ‘personal connectivity’ might have emerged in other settings, (such as in relation to museum visitors (Spock, 2007) or in the context of ‘knowledge creation’ in the field of organisational management (Kolb and Collins, 2011), ‘personal connectivity’ as a term, was directly born from the findings and was fashioned to have specific relevance for this work. ‘Personal connectivity’, or lack of it, is central to the experience of families affected by parental imprisonment. Families felt most supported when they are given opportunities to maintain and form positive connections - ‘personal connectivity’ - with other people.

The families in this study conceptualised their experience of parental imprisonment like “*being in bubbles*” (feeling somewhat separated from society, but in a vulnerable and flimsy casing unable to protect them) and “*being against brick walls*” (being against a hard a rigid barrier, which they found impossible to break through and which they metaphorically bang their heads against in frustration).

The study shows families affected by parental imprisonment found the voluntary sector organisation PSS as an acceptable and extremely valuable source of community-based support. Participants reported that PSS enabled them to emerge from their ‘bubbles’ and

find ways around their ‘brick walls’ to re-connect or connect with other people who previously they have been unable to reach. This study finds that support is most valued by families when it enhances their personal connectedness between themselves and the providers of support, to others who share their experience, and to those within their family. Findings show that as a result of personal connectivity, families affected by parental imprisonment reported that they are not only able to cope better with their adversities, but gained in self-confidence and developed new skills that they previously did not have.

As in the findings chapter, key subsections of this discussion are marked with an opening quote. Where the quotes in the findings chapter have been taken directly from the participants transcripts, in this chapter the quotes have been taken from known academics or writers, and are provided to give the reader a sense of the core message and essence of the discussions which follow.

## **Personal Connectivity**

*“Live in fragments no longer! Only connect...”*

*E. M. Forster*

Brown (2004) stresses that we are profoundly social creatures. At the root of our desires is a need to belong, to be accepted, to connect with others and to be loved.

Psychologists Maslow (1954) and more recently Baumesiter (2005) have repeatedly stressed that a sense of social connectedness is one of our fundamental human needs. Personal connectivity is, in its most simple form, the notion of people being able to connect to each other. Yet despite our long-standing knowledge of its fundamental importance, connectedness – personal connectivity – was lacking in the lives of the families in this study.

A growing body of research shows the importance of positive social relationships (Umberson & Montez 2010; Cohen, 2004). The kinds of relationships, as well as the number of social relationships which people have, are thought to greatly contribute to our overall mental and physical health (Keyes, 1998; Ryff, 1995). For families affected by parental imprisonment, personal connectivity is, however, fragile. Due to the vast number of challenges they face, they are vulnerable to being easily detached from core connections: their families, friends and communities.

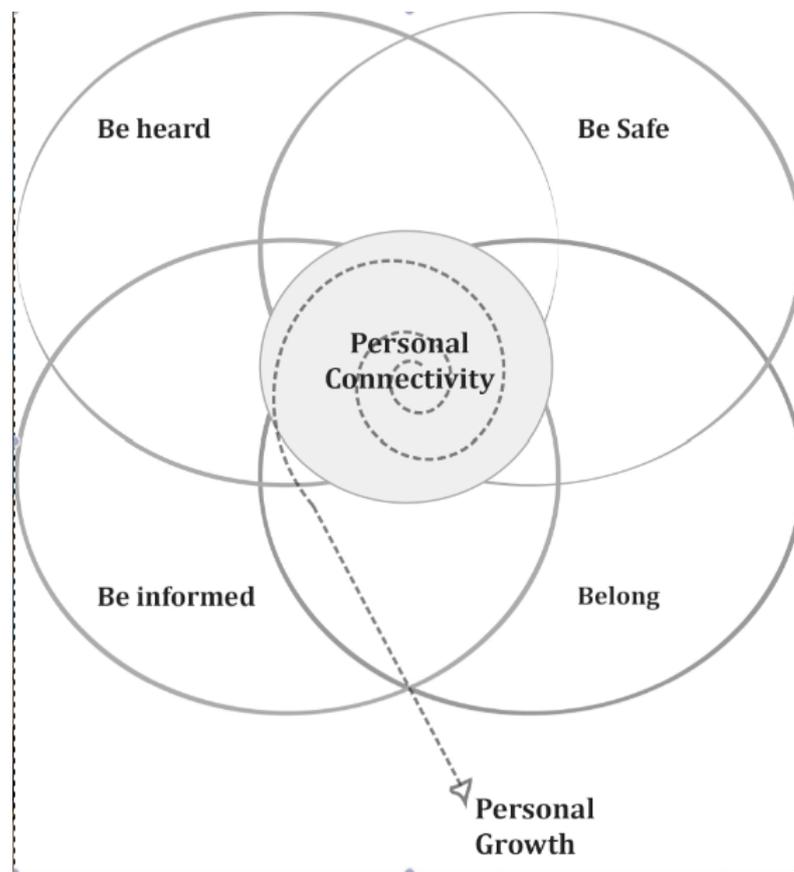
The four themes shed light into why providers of support must position ‘personal connectivity’ centrally for families affected by parental imprisonment, and why personal connectivity is inextricably linked to their coping, survival and, in some instances, revival. The thematic findings presented in the previous chapter can be viewed as factors related to ‘personal connectivity’; in simple terms (and life for these families is never either simple or as binary as Table 3 suggests), there are two key aspects ‘Threats to Personal Connectivity’ and ‘Supports for Personal Connectivity’:

	<b>Threats to Personal Connectivity</b>	<b>Supports for Personal Connectivity</b>
Theme 1	Isolation	Someone to talk to
Theme 2	Judgement	Understanding
Theme 3	Powerlessness	Fighting Back
Theme 4	Loss	Contact

**Table 3: Thematic table to depict ‘Threats to’ and ‘Supports for’ Personal Connectivity**

In reality, personal connectivity is far more complex than the sanitised, binary version presented in Table 3. The human experience of connecting positively with another person is multi-faceted and dynamic. This study does not find singular challenges faced by families affected by parental imprisonment, nor does it find stand-alone solutions. Instead, findings suggest that PSS ably supports personal connectivity through the creation of a carefully considered and multi-layered service operating within a culture where practitioners appropriately promote connectedness within families, between families, and between families and the wider community.

Discussing threats to and supports of personal connectivity in separate theme driven categories, is therefore artificial, due to the inevitable overlap of the issues across all themes. Instead using the information born from the themes, a ‘Building Personal Connectivity’ model is proposed, which depicts and encapsulates the key factors that enhance the personal connectivity for families affected by parental imprisonment. As seen in Illustration 4, all factors enhance personal connectivity, and are overlapping. When all are factors are present, personal connectivity is optimal.



**Illustration 4: Proposed Model of Personal Connectivity**

The ‘Building Personal Connectivity’ proposed model, in crude terms can be described as follows:

- **Be Heard:** Families are listened to and their views are valued. Families are collaborated with in a search of solutions.
- **Be Safe:** Families are supported without judgement. Families are advocated for.
- **Be Informed:** Families are informed, and are able to inform one another.
- **Belong:** Families can maintain relationships with one another (where appropriate). Families access peer support. Families can use their expertise to contribute to the wider community.
- **Personal Growth:** Personal connectivity leads to personal growth.

This discussion will now look at each aspect of the proposed model and will then go onto demonstrate how personal growth is a key outcome of this approach to supporting families affected by parental imprisonment. Throughout the discussion the participating families’ experiences of threats to, and supports of their personal connectivity, as presented in Table 3, will be closely considered. Ultimately, it is argued that building

‘personal connectivity’ is the over-riding support need of families affected by parental imprisonment, and ‘personal growth’ is the key outcome of such support.

## **What’s the Problem with Social Services?**

Before looking at how PSS builds personal connectivity, it is firstly necessary to address a recurrent and unavoidable issue that occurred and recurred throughout the entire data set: the families’ negative experiences of social services. The families did not consider Social Services to be an agency that cultivated their personal connectivity.

It has been impossible to avoid the enormous amount of ill-feeling that the eight families voiced with regard to Social Services and social workers. Amongst the many negative descriptions recorded, the interviewees referred to social workers as ‘*corrupt*’ (PC 8, PC 1) ‘*terrible*’ (Exp 2), ‘*the baddies*’ (PC 4), ‘*snotty*’ (CH 1) and workers who do ‘*absolutely nothing*’ (PC 1). This experience was discussed in direct contrast to the experience families relayed about PSS. In general terms, PSS staff were described as ‘*friendly*’ (PC 4), ‘*great*’ (CH 1, Exp 2), workers who ‘*didn’t judge things*’ (Exp 3), were ‘*there to help*’ (PC 2) and grown ups who ‘*cheer us up*’ (CH 7a).

It is, therefore, pertinent to ask why the participating families describe two agencies, PSS and Social Services, both of whom are set up with the aim of providing better outcomes for children and their families, and who work in partnership with one another, in such contrasting terms.

To begin with, however, it should be acknowledged that this study is inherently biased in that it has only sought the viewpoint of service users. It does not offer a balance of opinions as the views of social workers, or linked professionals, who may well have offered a different perspective, have not been obtained. Without a voice in this study, the social worker is simply unable to defend him/her self. It is also fair to say, as a practitioner who has worked for around six years supporting children and families of prisoners and working closely with social services in order to do so, that I have observed some commendable practice by social workers. In some cases, in my own view, their input has enhanced the well-being of the prisoners’ families they have been involved with. On the other hand, I have also witnessed what I personally believe to be ‘poor practice’ and therefore share some of the families’ frustrations. The study is also

limited by the fact that the researcher was a practitioner working for PSS and known to the families; this will inevitably have shaped the families' responses – to a greater or lesser degree - to be generally positive about PSS.

The experiences of the families in this study are also not unique. The internet is literally littered with websites and blogs from mothers and fathers who offer damning views about social workers, and the phenomenon is noticed world wide. One American mother, for example, in her blog entitled '*Why I hate Social Services*' wrote the following statement below, and it is noticeable that a great many parallels can be drawn to the findings.

*“Ever since meeting my first social worker, I've been trying to figure out what the hell they do...as far as I can tell they do very little of concrete value. They don't physically help with child care or housework; they don't have a list of services they offer; they don't understand the services they refer me to, nor the qualifications for them; they aren't therapists; they don't help fill out applications; they rarely follow through to the end of a bureaucratic wormhole; and, they waste hours of my time asking me the same questions and repeating faulty information previous social workers have given to me. They only thing I have discovered they do well is refer me to other social workers who also don't do anything of real value” (MOTHER, 2011, outrageousfortune.net<sup>3</sup>).*

'Hate sites' are commonplace. 'Social Workers Exposed'<sup>4</sup> and 'Name Shame Social Workers'<sup>5</sup> are just two of many, set up specifically for families to complain about this statutory service. Popular, more generic websites such as Facebook<sup>6</sup>, Netmums<sup>7</sup> and Bebo<sup>8</sup> also have pages and/or threads dedicated solely to enabling families to offload about how, in their view, social workers have had a tremendously negative impact on their lives (e.g. [www. facebook/we hate social services](http://www.facebook.com/wehatesocialservices)). Valentine (1994),

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.outrageousfortune.net/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/socialservicesuk>

<sup>5</sup> [nameshamesocialworkers.blogspot.com/](http://nameshamesocialworkers.blogspot.com/)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.netmums.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bebo.com/>

conceptualising the social worker as a 'bad object', explains that social workers have become the 'containers' for the hate, anxiety, distress, and fear, and finds public fear and anxiety over child abuse has been projected into the social worker. Arguably, this is in part due to the fact that when social workers make mistakes, or worse still when someone under their care dies, the issue is publicised widely in the press. Social workers doing their job well understandably do not attract the attention of the media.

There is also a growing research base that shows it is the norm for vulnerable families to resent involvement with social workers. Relatives caring for children of prisoners will typically avoid contact with the system as they fear the children will be taken away (Standing Committee on Social Issues 1997; Phillips & Bloom 1998; Shaw 1987), a view echoed by PC 6; "*I think that's always the risk that social services have...that's the first thing you think of, them being removed*" (PC 6).

Furthermore, there is the issue of role. It is evident in the findings of this study and has already been well established that when a parent is sent to prison, their families suffer much hardship and live what has been termed by the UK organisation Action for Prisoners Families as '*The Hidden Sentence*'. Paradoxically, however, it is at this point when statutory social support tends to be withdrawn. From the children's social worker standpoint, the imprisonment of the criminal parent equates to a significant reduction in immediate risk to the children. Munro (2004) and Trevithick (2011) point out the overall growth in the bureaucratic demands made of social workers, where the dominant focus is on meeting performance indicators and targets, limiting the time spent on the ground with families. Resources are also increasingly under pressure due to the demographic changes in the UK. Shortage of affordable housing resulting in an increase in homelessness, the UK becoming more ethnically diverse, and the ageing population, to name but a few (Blewett, Lewis and Tunstill, 2007). It seems reasonable then that social workers are forced to focus their energies on families with a 'risky' parent(s) living in the community, and whose children who are considered as being more imminently under threat of harm. This rationale provoked little sympathy, however, from the interviewed families. Certainly the belief that social workers 'can't be bothered' or 'don't care' came through strongly in the data.

The absence of support provided by Social Services when a parent is sent to prison is one reason why the struggling families in this study feel so aggrieved. Yet the situation

is somewhat of a double-edged sword. They emphasised their reluctance to have social workers in their lives but were equally frustrated by the lack of help provided through this statutory system. Although social workers do often re-appear when an offending parent is released - if they consider there to be a potential risk to the children - the lack of useful engagement with the family during the imprisonment period is arguably too damaging from the families' perspective for a productive relationship to develop or resume. Participants in the study emphasised that the post-release stage was much more stressful than they had initially anticipated. It is therefore reasonable to think that the lack of relationship building between families and social workers during the imprisonment phase, causes families to resent and fear the 'suddenly present' social worker with whom they are obliged to engage, yet who they complain knows little or nothing about them; *"they all had their opinion on me, but had never taken the time to get to know me personally"* (Exp 3). Moreover, families have to contend with the added pressure of meeting the social workers' demands at this tremendously difficult time in their lives, which invariably involves much change and upheaval. This was strongly voiced by Exp 4. Reflecting on his experience of Social Services post release, he said, *"I was under so much pressure, I even thought about going back to prison"* (Exp 4).

As well as the tendency for social worker absence during the parental imprisonment phase, consideration can also be given to the contrasting approaches taken by Social Services and PSS to working with vulnerable families. Historically most approaches to social work tend to focus on individual pathology and assume that the problems of a family member are a symptom of family dysfunction (Early and Glenmaye, 2000). This perhaps naturally places families, who are met with a 'problem solving' rather than the 'strengths based' attitude as adopted by PSS, into a position of self-defence. Indeed, Trevithick (2011) argues, *"containing anxieties and working with people in ways that prepare the ground for defences to be lowered is not an approach that is well supported in most areas of social work"* (Trevithick, 2011, p17).

The challenges that the parents raise in regards to their struggles with Social Services' staff - who they report experiencing as un-empathic and un-supportive - are in line with other writers such as Bauman. Bauman (1988) is potentially useful in aiding thinking about social work as his work prompts reflection on how 'care practices' can become corrupted particularly in areas where stigmatized groups are segregated. Having wrestled with the question of how the Jewish Holocaust could have happened, Bauman

(1988) proposed that this was actualized because the Jews were excluded from normal life and ultimately dehumanized. This prompts thoughts about the social exclusion of prisoners and their families. It has been argued that one of the most severe mortifications for any individual is “*involuntary isolation, confinement away from everyday social exchanges*” (Wardhaught and Wilding, 1993, p9). The prisoners themselves are inexorably excluded from society during their imprisonment. However, in this study, it was the children and parent/carers who voiced experiences of social isolation and their resulting struggle to cope with their day-to-day tasks (such as going to school, work, the shops) following the imprisonment of a parent.

The families’ powerlessness was found to further manifest as a result of their struggle to access information on matters that affected them especially in relation to the criminal justice system, and because relevant support services were lacking in general. In line with Bauman’s perspectives, it has been proposed (Wardhaught and Wilding, 1993) that the kinds of groups who are at particular risk of corruption by human services are those groups for whom society has little regard. When groups lack societal value and worth, resources to support them are limited, as they are not deemed worthy of help.

The families’ experiences of powerlessness coupled with their social isolation are significant. Wardhaugh and Wilding (1993) find that most victims of the corruption of care have suffered from powerlessness. The paradox being that those responsible for very vulnerable groups have almost absolute power over them; this is a potentially corrupting situation. In the context of this study, issues are raised concerning the responsibility that Social Services have over the children of prisoners. Of most concern to the participating families is the power that social workers have over the contact arrangements between their children/grandchildren and the criminal parent. It can be argued that if society ostracises families affected by parental imprisonment, the outcome for these families is that they are vulnerable to an abuse of power by those who have power over them; this positions Social Services a potential perpetrator. What might be seen from outside as a harsh criticism of Social Services, perhaps can be better understood when considering Bauman’s perspectives.

This study does not, however, suggest that Social Services have no value or important function when it comes to families with a parent in prison. Rather, it finds that as vulnerable families fear engagement with Social Services, they experience this statutory

service as an undesirable source of support. In contrast, the findings show that the voluntary sector organisation – PSS - is experienced as an acceptable source of support by families and, as a result, is able to offer a valuable contribution. It is also crucial to remember that there are countless families with a parent in prison who will never come into contact with Social Services. A parent being in prison does not automatically equate to his or her children being at risk. Arguably, it is the acceptability of the voluntary sector service that enables families to connect positively with those professionals offering help.

## **Building Personal Connectivity**

This discussion will now look closely at how PSS builds personal connectivity for families affected by parental imprisonment. The proposed model (Illustration 4) shows four key ways which have been found to build personal connectivity, which include ‘Be Heard’, ‘Be Safe’, ‘Be Informed’ and ‘Belong’. These four approaches to building personal connectivity have not been previously expressed within the PSS ‘Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children’ team and are born specifically from this study. Each approach will now be considered in turn, although it is acknowledged that each aspect overlaps and are inextricably linked. This discussion will then conclude with a consideration of how personal connectivity leads to personal growth.

### **Be Heard**

Families affected by parental imprisonment in this study were seldom heard. Experiences of being physically and psychologically isolated were widespread and the families said there were few people with whom they could talk about the challenge of parental imprisonment. These families also said that when they did share their stories, their experiences were often misconstrued or unfairly judged (predominantly in relation to social workers, family members, friends and members of the community). As a result this increased their reluctance to talk about their situation even when the opportunity to talk arose. ‘Be Heard’ - meaning that their views taken seriously and positioned centrally – was, without doubt, a crucial support need of the participating families.

*“Loneliness is proof that your innate search for connection is intact”*

*Martha Beck*

Isolation is immediately recognisable as the most obvious of barriers to personal connectivity. Unearthing experiences of isolation was not unexpected. The issue of stigma and marginalisation for prisoners’ families is widely noted in previous studies in this field (Breen, 2008; Codd, 1998; Lloyd, 1995; Smith, Grimshaw, Romeo and Knapp, 2007).

Children from this study emphasised their fears of discussing the imprisonment of their parent with teachers and social workers and in some cases members of their own family. This finding is analogous with the work conducted by Cunningham (2011) who points out that particular attention should be paid to children of prisoners, whose experience of isolation often goes unnoticed. In comparable research Brown (2001) quotes one young interviewee who stressed, *“Someone should ask me what it is like for me. Nobody had ever asked me what I think”*. Similarly, Kampfner (1995, p.94) in a study that compared children with incarcerated mothers with a control group found many children of incarcerated mothers reported having no emotional support; *“they could not identify people...with whom they could talk to about their mothers”*. Unfortunately, even when welfare services are involved with the son or daughter of a prisoner, the problems of stigma and secrecy can often mean that the specific trauma of having a parent in prison does not emerge (Cunningham, 2011).

Human beings are inherently social beings. It has been written that one of the most terrible things we can do to people is to exclude them from society. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) whose work focuses on the importance of social connection reiterate that our brains and bodies are designed to function in aggregates, not in isolation. However, not only did the families discuss attacks and exclusion from their peers and community; *“people saying things to us in the street, trying to provoke me”* (PC 8) and *“kids in my school started saying horrible stuff about my mum”* (CH 5), but also, their own self-induced isolation from society which they engaged in, as a way in which to protect themselves. This shielding reaction was conceptualised by CH 5 as *“a bubble”* that she placed around herself to keep her true feelings hidden from other children in her school. Her experience is in keeping with research by Meek (2007) who found that children

with a sibling in prison were reluctant to disclose the information to teachers for fear of being considered 'bad' like the prisoner(s) in their family, and were worried about fellow pupils finding out. Adult participants also discussed their withdrawal from society (from associating with friends and the general public) and a tendency to self-shield. In a similar way to CH 5, a mother described her imaginary protective place as "a box" in which she placed herself and her children for a while (PC 8) explaining, "they (the general public) think we're scum...putting me and the kids sort of in a box was the only way I could cope" (PC 8).

Such findings emphasise the subjective experience of loneliness. To be lonely does not require you to physically be alone: the participants from this study have been in 'bubbles'; near people, yet separated; isolated and alone. This raises concerns. Windle, Francis and Coomber (2011) stress that social isolation will severely impact on an individual's quality of life and well-being. Bowlby (1973), who pioneered attachment theory, said that to be isolated from your band, and especially when young, to be isolated from your caretaker is fraught with the greatest danger. The organisation Grandparents Plus in the UK, which offers support to grandparent carers warn that children of prisoners will often internalise their feelings, which can result in nightmares, tantrums and withdrawal from others. Kupersmidt and Patterson (1991) also found that peer rejection in childhood has been linked to withdrawal, depression and loneliness in school-aged children.

It is also important to note that whilst the issue of isolation is in part due to some of the families fearing disclosure and the reactions of those around them and therefore purposely retreating into their 'bubbles', the problem is certainly not uni-directional. Some participants said that prior to gaining support from PSS, they had actively pursued formal avenues for talking therapies but to no avail. One mother, for example, discussed how her plea to access counselling for her son when his father went to prison was turned down because the psychologist viewed the child's grief as a 'normal' reaction to the separation. In the eyes of the mother this was not only grossly unhelpful, but ridiculous, declaring; "well a broken arm is a normal reaction to falling out of a tree, but that doesn't mean it doesn't need fixing!" (PC 8).

To make matters even more challenging, poor or non-existent relationships with wider family members was evident in the findings. Four of the five ex-prisoners discussed

turbulent upbringings, e.g. *“I was brought up in care as a kid”* (ExP 1); and *“I watched what drink did to my dad when I was growing up”* (ExP 4), which directly corresponds with evidence that high proportions of prisoners have suffered problematic childhoods (Williams, Papadopoulou, Booth, 2012). Some parent/carers experienced a withdrawal of support from their family following their decision to stay in a relationship with the imprisoned parent, e.g. *“my mum and dad didn’t approve of the relationship...so I had no-one”* (PC 4). Similar difficulties arose for some of the child participants. One girl, who had to move in with her grandparents following the imprisonment of her mother, said, *“I don’t talk to my nan about anything...we don’t get on”* (CH 2). This further resonates with research by Meek (2007) who finds that many children will struggle to discuss their feelings at home as they are worried about causing tension or upset.

*“The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen”*

*Rachel Naomi Remen*

Talking through problems is recognised as helpful and therapeutic (Vaughan, 1998). McLeod and Wright (2009) argue that desires for disclosure and open communication are not trivial or narcissistic but are productive emotional strategies for managing difficult circumstances. However this is a seemingly paradoxical solution for the socially isolated and marginalised group. If there is no-one suitable to turn to for support, how can one talk through concerns and worries, some of which are caused by the very experience of isolation itself?

Families said that talking freely with social workers was not possible and the idea that it could be possible was strongly refuted. Similar sentiments are noted elsewhere. For example, in a recent study on family perspectives of children’s services, one interviewee, discussing social workers stated; *“If you say anything, they twist it. If you get upset, they judge you”* (Children’s Commissioner for England, 2010, p11). Consequently, having access to a PSS Family Impact worker with whom they felt able to talk with freely because they experienced acceptance and empathic understanding is something all eight families spoke of with a huge degree of gratitude and relief. They stressed that the simple act of being respectfully listened to was one of the most useful, if not the most useful, aspect of the service.

The families unmistakable indebtedness of having someone suitable to talk to via PSS fits easily in the context of the plethora of literature that shows simply being listened to can provide immense benefits to an individual in distress. The ‘talking cure’, originating from the work of Dr Josef Breuer when he saw improvements in his patient, Anna O from simply talking with her, was a premise later adapted by Freud in his psychoanalytical work. Parry (1991) argues Freud’s greatest discovery was not of the unconscious, but of the validation that a person receives simply in telling his/her story to an attentive listener. Nowadays, the ‘talking cure’ describes the fact that for many people the simple act of talking about thoughts and feelings can provide much relief (Howe, 2008). Herbert (2012) considers candid disclosure as the cornerstone of a trusting therapeutic alliance and is thus the key to psychological healing and well-being (Herbert, 2012).

Parents and carers reported witnessing improvements in their children’s well-being as a consequence of their children having someone to talk to. In direct contrast to the bubbles of isolation, parents remarked that their children had “*come out of their shells*” (PC 1) and become more “*confident*” (PC 3, PC 6) and “*relaxed*” (Exp 3). For the parents themselves, they predominantly discussed their “*relief*” (PC 8) to finally be heard. The significance of children being listened to has been stressed in findings from a ‘National Family and Parenting Institute Survey’ (MORI, 2000) who out of a sample of 1,174 boys and 1,169 girls, found ‘being listened to more’ as one of the most important changes young people wanted in their lives.

Talking has also been seen to help prisoners cope with their experience. A study by Dvoskin and Spiers (2004) found that correctional, frontline officers are often able to resolve a crisis (e.g. preventing a depressed or anxious prisoner to self harm or even commit suicide) by simply talking things through with the inmate. An interesting point raised in this research is the efficacy of the ‘functional professional’. Anthony and Carkhuff (1997) define a functional professional as a person who, lacking formal credentials, performs those functions usually reserved for credentialed mental health professionals. These researchers observed that the clients of functional professionals did as well as clients of mental health professionals, regardless of the outcome criteria studied. This is of direct interest when the role of the community worker is considered in terms of their ability to effectively help families affected by parental imprisonment. Whilst numerous practitioners at PSS are not psychotherapists or counsellors, they

offer, as part of the service and in their capacity as a ‘functioning professional’, much therapeutic support to their clients by providing opportunities for talking through problems in scheduled face-to-face meetings, or more casually where the worker will telephone the person for a ‘catch up’, to see how they are fairing. Indeed, telephone chats were discussed with as much value as face-to-face support; *“just knowing I can ring you if I need to...that’s the main one”* (PC 2).

Although the parents who had been prisoners in this study were not able to provide positive experiences of talking support during their time in prison, they did discuss their relief that their partners and children were able to talk to someone productively whilst they were away. Despite being initially concerned that PSS might create more barriers between themselves and their families, all five ex-prisoners who participated in the study claimed that, over time, they felt relieved that their loved ones ‘outside’ had someone with whom they could talk. For instance, in contrast to the ‘brick walls’ that might exist, even between one another, one father who had been in prison explained that as his partner had someone to talk to whilst he was away, it made things between them *“far easier”* when he was released. From his perspective, PSS giving his partner the opportunity to talk resulted in better outcomes for the whole family post-release. This study thus strengthens the argument that community practitioners, in their roles as ‘functioning professionals’, have a vital role to play by simply making time for service users to talk. This argument seems especially valid for marginalised groups who feel unable to talk freely elsewhere.

*“Any fool can know. The point is to understand”*

*Albert Einstein*

To be heard requires feeling understood. Children’s author, J.K. Rowling (2000 p680), in ‘Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire’, wrote ‘Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery’. Whilst her novel is set in the realms of fantasy and magic, it does reveal some truths about the real world. Parallels can be drawn to what has been learnt in this study; that ‘feeling understood’ is imperative for a person to feel truly supported. Without feeling understood, the relationship between supporter and supportee is unlikely to be productive.

The participating families said they felt understood by those staff and other clients they had met at PSS. Some said this was the very first time that someone (or some people) had understood what they were going through in relation to their struggles with parental imprisonment. One mother, when asked ‘what helps?’ said, “*One, you understand, and two, you don’t treat us like we’re criminals ourselves*” (PC 7). Many participants admitted to being initially wary about being a recipient of the PSS support service, for fear of being judged as they had been by other services, but said feeling understood had quickly enabled their barriers to come down. One mother said she only approached PSS to appease her social worker. Her prior negative experiences of feeling misunderstood by professionals from probation and social services meant that she did not expect PSS to be of any real use to her. She said, “*I only rang you because he (the social worker) had suggested it...I didn’t really think it would do any good, but I thought I’ll just do what he says so they can’t say I wasn’t taking advice...*” (PC 8). This adds to the evidence that families are eager to avoid negative judgments. It demonstrates that those involved with Social Services experience the pressure of ‘performing well’ and so may ‘play the system’ in order to be viewed as compliant. Nonetheless, in spite of PC 8’s initial reasons behind her engagement with PSS, she admitted being pleasantly surprised, declaring, “*You knew where I was coming from...you understood...it was amazing*” (PC 8).

The usefulness of social workers referring to PSS is significant. Another parent/carer, a grandmother said, “*the best thing the social worker did was put me onto you (PSS)*” (PC 5). This, and the case of the ‘appeasing’ mother, demonstrates wins for Social Services. Even though the research has produced an abundance of data which shows families affected by parental imprisonment experience social workers as largely unsupportive, when social workers make referrals into specialist voluntary sector services like PSS, the families found this to be most helpful. Pocock (1997, p.298) wrote, “*perhaps the most important condition for understanding is the possibility of family members being able to safely report their feelings of being misunderstood*”. Whilst findings from this study suggest that social workers are often unable to convey understanding, in part at least due to their positioning as an authoritarian figure that families feel afraid of, referrals to a third party who are positioned differently means the understanding craved by these ostracized families becomes accessible. Madsen (1999, p14) stressed that the fundamental stance that professionals take powerfully shapes the interactions between themselves and the people they serve, stating:

*“The foundation of clinical effectiveness lies in the basic stance we hold in regard to clients and the way we position ourselves in relation to them...this is particularly true with families we designate as ‘difficult’” Madsen (1999).*

The pertinent question here, therefore, is to ask what approach PSS takes that enables understanding to be so readily conveyed? In the first instance it is important to remember that the PSS ‘Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children’ team approach is taken from ‘family systems theory’, which suggests that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but rather as a part of their family. For this reason the team strives to work, where possible with the ‘whole family’; the children, their parents/carers and their prisoner-parent, as are represented in this study. Secondly, the PSS ‘Family Impact for Prisoners’ Children’ team uses a collaborative approach to providing support to families affected by parental imprisonment. Family systems theorists have emphasized collaboration and consensus in therapy (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988; Madsen, 1999; Hoffman, 1993) and findings from this study show that through collaboration, families feel understood. Collaboration is also as recommended as particularly appropriate in working with families marginalized because of class, race, ethnicity, or other dimensions of difference associated with societal oppression (Fraenkel, 2006), which undoubtedly fits with the families in this study. Collaborative practice does not follow a model but rather adopts a stance, a philosophy, or a way of working, which the families perceived positively as *“everyone on a level”* (Exp 4) and explained *“you didn’t tell us what we needed...you asked, what do we think could help us!”* (Exp 3).

Participants from this study sometimes articulated feeling understood and being heard in terms of ‘being known’. What is interesting, and seemingly paradoxical, is that the approach taken by PSS to supporting prisoner’s children and their families is actually one of ‘not knowing’. In a ‘not knowing’ approach, professionals do not position themselves as holders of the knowledge, but instead consider the clients as experts; experts they strive to understand and collaborate with in a shared search for solutions. Collaborative therapists were the first to specifically propose using ‘not knowing’ in therapeutic interventions (Monk and Gehart, 2003), one of a number of ‘contextual

components' described by Anderson (2005) which he set out as guidelines for practitioners adopting a collaborative stance. This non-hierarchical approach maintains that '*understanding is interpretative...there is no privileged standpoint for understanding*' (Wachterhauser, 1986, p399). PC 8 said she was able to quickly engage with PSS because her views were "*taken seriously*" (PC 8). To be taken seriously is thus found in this study to be an important facet of feeling understood, an argument grounded in wider research. Anderson and Goolishian (1992, p.30) said that collaborative practice is one in which the client's story is taken "*seriously*" and the therapist joins with the client in "*a mutual exploration of the client's understanding and experience*". 'Not knowing' strives for 'cultural curiosity'; clients are the experts of their own experience and their view remains central throughout.

Furthermore, it became clear that the participating families' experiences of feeling heard was not related to the amount of time that a practitioner spent with them, but rather the way the practitioner engaged with them. PC 8 said that even in her very first interaction with PSS, she felt able to talk openly and freely; "*I think I just talked at you, in that first telephone conversation, for ages and ages... to let it all out*" (PC 8). Similarly, a former prisoner, discussing his relationship with a PSS family worker said; "*it took very little time really for that bond to happen*", and ExP 1 recalled, "*the first time I met you in the park I knew I could talk to you*". This further resonates with Madsen (1999, 2009), who finds a collaborative approach is more 'effective and efficient' because clients' experience therapists as being 'in their corner' or 'on their side'.

When someone is heard, they are able to connect positively not just with the person who hears them, but as this increases their feelings of happiness and self worth, they become more able to connect positively with others around them. One former prisoner, for example, reflected on a time when she had needed to talk to PSS about her struggles adjusting to community life post-release. She said, "*I felt much better, knowing you understood where I was coming from...and I felt able to go round to my friends after speaking to you*" (ExP 5). Her report of feeling 'better' resonates directly with research conducted by Lun, Kesebir and Oishi (2008) who found people feel happier and reported greater life satisfaction on days in which they felt more understood by others. 'Feeling understood' gave ExP 5 the motivation to go onto engage in social activities that day, which she said was unusual for her as she normally "*felt depressed*" and "*never went out*" (ExP 5). Conveying understanding might arguably, therefore, be

important in aiding the resettlement of offenders. Numerous stories were shared in this study of the post-release period being much more challenging than the parents who had been in prison had anticipated. Positive social networks have been recognised as a key to the resettlement of offenders (Ministry of Justice 2013). Similarly, in the context of children of prisoners, Dallaire (2006) argues that to keep these children away from risky and delinquent behaviour, it is absolutely essential that any intervention helps to bolster stable and supportive care that will promote strong connections to school, pro-social peers, and family.

Ultimately, findings show that families must be authentically heard to benefit from an offer of support. The study reveals that PSS more easily cultivates understanding because of its positioning as a voluntary sector organization and due to its collaborative practice where the views of the family are taken seriously and positioned centrally. Feeling heard is found to be essential for personal connectivity.

### **Be Safe**

*“If we share our shame story with the wrong person, they can easily become one more piece of flying debris in an already dangerous storm”*

*Brené Brown*

To be personally connected through support was found to be possible, only when families felt safe. To ‘be safe’, families needed to feel free from negative judgments; they needed to trust that sharing their story would be handled with care and understanding, and they needed to know that information provided to them, or to any other significant source on their behalf, would be communicated with sensitivity and accuracy.

One of the biggest barriers to connectivity in this study was the families’ widespread experience of feeling judged. This was evident from their countless experiences of being subjected to negative judgements were recorded in relation to friends, family, people in their community, professional helpers, and most fervently, by social workers. For those parents/carers who had social workers involved in their lives, social worker involvement was discussed as one of the most stressful, and in some cases the most

stressful aspect of caring for a child or children when a parent has been imprisoned. Parents/carers expressed much anger from being continually scrutinized by social workers who they said questioned their abilities as caregivers. Codd (2008, p36) explains that prisoners' families are often reacted to as being themselves criminal, writing, "*it is a rare family which escapes the mechanisms of family-blaming*".

The heightened levels of frustration discussed in terms of feeling judged by social workers, caused feelings of mistrust, resentment and anger towards Social Services. The deep resentment this caused is completely at odds with Stevenson's (2006, p13) description of the '*moral duty*' of social workers to '*try to understand, and thus to alleviate, sources of distress and dysfunction – and plain human misery*'. Barriers, built from fear to keep social workers at arms length, are unquestionably difficult to break down. Participants said, "*I wouldn't dream of talking to a social worker like I talk to you...*" (PC 3), "*as that's always your fear isn't it...the children being removed*" (PC 6).

The problem of feeling judged by social workers is a circular one. When social workers make inaccurate judgments they automatically create barriers between themselves and the families they are given responsibility for, described by one mother like "*... judging me rather than looking in depth as to why this was happening*" (PC 6). At the same time, when families anticipate being judged they withdraw into their 'bubbles of isolation', which prevents the flow of open communication. A particular facet of the families' experiences of being judged was their complaint that those who tended to judge them were normally those who knew very little about them, or their particular set of circumstances. Complaints of 'not being known', especially by social workers, were voiced often.

The crucial nature of a non-judgemental approach for prisoners' families is easily understood within the context of the wider literature which describes prisoners' families as one of the most marginalised groups in society (Prison Reform Trust, 2011). Children feel the stigma of parental imprisonment from their peer group, their family members and teachers, and more broadly, their neighbourhoods (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002; Eddy & Reid, 2002). Codd (2008, p.4) describes the marginalisation of prisoners' families like living in the "*shadow of prison*" making use of the metaphor of the 'shadow' cast by prisons for those living on the outside; where families of prisoners

suffer the consequences of the imprisonment yet whose needs are overlooked. Notably, Codd's metaphorical 'shadows' that are cast from prisons, are well aligned with the 'bubbles' (of isolation) caused by the 'brick walls' (built up from frustration and alienation) that have emerged in this study. A further resonance with Codd's work is the ever-occurring plea made by this study's participants 'not to be judged'. Codd (2008) advises that when family members are feeling alienated, confused and vulnerable it can be of immeasurable assistance to be able to discuss the situation in a non-judgmental setting.

The non-judgmental and collaborative approach taken by PSS workers, which, based on the experiences shared by this study's participants results in families feeling emotionally safe to engage constructively in the support offered by PSS, can be further understood through the lens of modern attachment theory. Although attachment theory originates from the study of infant development, modern attachment theory has recently been extended into the domains of adult adjustment. Bettmann (2006), for example, has given particular consideration to how an understanding of attachment theory might support the treatment of depressed adults. Arguing that attachment theory has significant ramifications for clinical social work with adults, Bettmann (2006) argues that the healing of adults' pain is made possible primarily through the empathic connection between therapist and client. The empathic engagement of a PSS worker may offer an element of healing.

Participants from this study said that before receiving support from PSS they had felt "*suicidal*" (Exp 4), "*in a horrible, dark place*" (mentally) (Exp 8), and a child said she did not want "*to talk to anyone or go to school*" (CH 2). The majority of participants divulged experiences of rejection from their family, friends and members of their communities. The experience of rejection is significant in theories of attachment; Weinfeld (1999) writes that rejecting, angry or hostile caregivers create children who are 'avoidantly attached'.

In contrast to these feelings of rejection and isolation, most participants discussed feeling connected with their PSS support worker in one form or another, e.g. "*I knew I could talk to you as soon as I met you*" (Exp 1); "*you're like a big sister...you made me feel totally comfortable*" (PC 1); "*she (granddaughter) saw you as a very best friend*" (PC 5). This connectivity and sense of attachment with PSS workers was viewed as

*“healing”* (PC 1) and with *“enormous relief”* (PC 8). Noting that some participants said that they had felt at ease extremely quickly, and in some cases immediately with PSS members of staff, resonates with Bettmann (2006) who found an attachment-oriented approach to adult psychotherapy to be useful even in relatively brief episodes, because positive therapist-client attachments are possible in short spaces of time.

Noting also that the families placed greater emphasis on the way in which PSS staff members ‘were with them’, as opposed to the specifics of what staff members ‘said’ or ‘did’ is also significant when looking at the findings through an attachment-based lens. Shore and Shore (2008) suggest that the principle of modern attachment theory applies to a therapeutic relationship because an attachment-based approach highlights unconscious nonverbal factors more than conscious verbal cognitive factors. Arguing that at the core of therapeutic relationship is right-brain to right-brain inter-subjective interactions, because the right brain hemisphere, as described by the authors, is important in the processing of the ‘music’ behind our words, Shore and Shore (2008) thus propose that the true value of the therapeutic relationship is derived not by what the therapist *does* for the patient, or even *says* to the patient, but rather how *to be with* the patient, especially during particularly stressful moments. The participants in this study explained that during their time with PSS, they felt well supported because they saw staff as available, explaining for example that *“I knew I could always ring you”* (PC 2) and *“anything I’ve needed, you’ve been there”* (PC 3). Just as an infant who is positively attached to their parents will seek out their parent in times of distress, the participants in this study stressed they felt able and confident to turn to PSS for support when they needed to and that some of their emotional needs, at least, would be met.

In contrast to the families of experiences of not ‘being known’ on any personal and useful level by social workers, this study found because families felt ‘safe’ with PSS staff, they allowed PSS staff to get to know them better. This experience of ‘feeling known’ further increased their experience of feeling ‘safe’.

Participants explained that when a support worker ‘knows’ them, that worker is less likely to say inappropriate things that could cause upset. As one grandmother explained, *“you know us, you know the situation, so you know what buttons more or less not to pull or push...because a little diddy word, can really make someone blow!”* (PC 2). Paradoxically, once families felt known, they felt excused from no longer having to

discuss their situation should they not wish to; *“you don’t have to worry about explaining yourself...because they already know”* (PC 1). The reassurance that PSS *“gets it”* (PC 8) further increases feelings of emotional safety because it excuses families from the discomfort of continually having to explain themselves and regurgitate difficult memories. Much resentment was aired with regards to repeatedly having to re-tell their stories to the numerous professionals whom they were obligated to engage with, an experience described as both frustrating and painful.

Feeling known also meant families were confident that PSS could effectively advocate for them; for example, *“when you said, I’ll have a gab to them (the school) I was thinking, thank God I haven’t got to go through all that again”* (PC 2). Effective advocacy, therefore, not only encourages emotional safety by providing relief from the pain of regurgitation, but increases connectedness between the family and the people they no longer have to directly explain themselves to, as discussed a grandparent carer; *“knowing you’d talked to the school, I felt I could be myself with them when I next went in”* (PC 5).

This study too unearthed familial experiences of feeling unsafe because of the community’s response to the crime. Prisoners’ families often suffer from being harassed and ostracised by members of their community (Action for Prisoners Families, 2006). Harrowing accounts were given by parents/carers of being directly abused by people in the area in which they lived. Stories included glass bottles being thrown at the house (PC 1), property damage and concoctions of foul smelling waste materials emptied on their home (PC 8), verbal abuse on the bus (PC 1), verbal abuse on the streets where they lived (PC 8), and verbal abuse in or around the children’s schools (Exp 5, CH 5, PC 8). These incidents, which were described as *“terrifying”* (PC 8) and *“cruel”* (Exp 5), resulted in family members wanting *“to just hide away”* (PC 1) and return to their ‘bubbles of isolation’. Condry (2007, 2010), who terms the kin of offenders as ‘secondary victims’, points out that relatives of offenders are typically held responsible by the general public for the criminal activity, because they are viewed to be willing accomplices of, or at the very least, consenting to the crime.

One mother said she approached the police for help when she and her children had been attacked, but said, *“they didn’t want to know”* (PC 8). She felt she had *“been played...they (police) said they would support me when they wanted me as a*

*prosecution witness, but when he (husband) went down, they turned their back! I had been manipulated”* (PC 8). Plainly, these ‘whole families’ were tremendously vulnerable both pre and post release, a situation they said was worsened as public services did little or nothing to help them. Condry (2010) finds the relatives of victims to be frequently dissatisfied with how they are treated by criminal justice agencies, citing problems with poor communication, insensitivity, and a lack of information. Although the kin of victims and the kin of offenders are, analytically two distinguishable groups, Condry (2010 p221) claims, *“it is important to note that in reality much crime is intrafamilial, and many people will be both”*.

The problem of community attitudes is that not only can they cause serious damage to the lives of the ‘secondary victims’ but, in turn, they can diminish the chances of the prisoner being effectively rehabilitated into community life. McNeil and Maruna (2010) in their discussions on desistance, ask what prisoners are expected to desist into? Even if an offender can be ‘rehabilitated’, and rehabilitation is taken to mean ‘a change for the better’ (Robinson and Crow, 2009), there is the problem of former prisoners hitting another ‘brick wall’ when it comes to the reaction of society. McNeill and Maruna (2010, 2012) argue that the responsibility for desistance is collective, and cannot rest solely on the individual to ‘change’. To empower parents who have been prisoners to rehabilitate, a supportive community-response as well as a supportive family-response is key.

It is, however, beyond the parameters of this research to look at what could be done to better encourage the ‘right’ response from the community. This study is restricted to families’ experiences of support and finds that when families have enhanced personal connectivity, they are more able and more likely to contribute positively to society. As the solution should ideally be two-directional, further research is needed to look at what can be done to enhance the connectedness of the community so they might respond with more understanding and compassion, and reap the benefits of a safer society. Regrettably, though, families from this study discussed the community’s response as merciless, and one in which no sanctuary could be sought from the criminal justice system or social services.

Encouragingly, and despite the obvious powerlessness suffered by the families in this study, what also emerged was evidence of their refusal to succumb to a position of

powerlessness, and of them ‘fighting back’. Although some ‘battles’ were discussed as solo ventures, families found the support they gained from PSS empowered them, and gave them “*the strength to carry on*” (PC 1). In the main, PSS was able to help families feel safe to engage, due to an approach that protects families from the pain of judgment and the added pain of having to continually tell their stories and justify their worlds.

### **Be Informed**

Although the parent/carers from this study did make great efforts to sustain regular prison visits, the lack of information available to them in addition to poor staff attitudes made them often feel powerless, quite simply, because they did not know what they were supposed to do. According to Howard (2000) when someone in the family is sent to prison, one of the greatest needs for those left behind is for information, to understand what is happening to their loved one and what to expect in terms of procedures for contact. In spite of this, the study’s participants raised many frustrations in regard to barriers to obtaining information. Loucks (2002) reports that prisoners’ families are often discouraged from attending visits due to a lack of information about visit procedures, inconvenient visiting times, inefficient booking systems, poor staff attitudes, the unpleasant prison environment, and drug detection procedures.

The ongoing struggle to obtain information, also meant there were times when parents/carers could not appropriately update, reassure and comfort their children. One parent/carer (PC 8) said she repeatedly came up against “*brick walls*” in her struggle for information, which made her feel that she was viewed by statutory workers as “*not important*” despite being the main carer of her children. Whilst an Australian study by the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO, 2000) revealed that knowing what to tell the children is considered one of the most difficult challenges for families dealing with the imprisonment of a parent, it is also acknowledged that secrecy and deception can lead to mistrust and further confusion for children (Cunningham, 2001, p36). In addition, Howard (2000) highlights the fact that, as a child’s general understanding of the world is still developing, their confusions are easily intensified, which strengthens the argument that it is helpful to give children as much clear and honest age appropriate information as possible. Even putting aside the immensely difficult and multiple challenges that a prisoners’ child will have to face, childhood in its own right is a period of vulnerability and powerlessness. Kehily (2004)

stresses issues of powerlessness remain central to contemporary discussions of childhood; things happen to them they do not choose and cannot control, and as such children are often positioned as essentially passive. Children in this study expressed powerlessness in relation to information about their imprisoned parent being kept from them, and parent/carers who were not given enough information often felt powerless as a parent. Experiences of feeling “*worried*” (CH 7a), “*scared*” (CH 5) and “*mixed up*” (CH 7b) were dominant in the children’s interviews when they remembered their confusion about what might be happening. In contrast, when kept abreast of developments the interviewed children reported their “*relief*” (CH 5) and feeling “*much better*” (CH 7b). The children’s experience of improved well-being when informed of matters that affected them, fits directly with the sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2005; Mayall, 2002), which emphasises that children are not passive objects but rather competent and active agents.

Ex-prisoners said their experiences of parental-powerlessness whilst incarcerated were somewhat alleviated by the communication they received from PSS which detailed the offer of support which was extended to the whole family. In one father’s view, the letters and updates he received from PSS made him feel like he “*mattered*” (Exp 1). Quite simply, by communicating with the parent in prison, PSS not only further supported connectivity within the family, but also gave the message to the prisoner that, despite the crime committed, they were still a valued member of that family. Hedges (2005 p26) found that “*people are primarily influenced by relationships*”. The PSS ‘Family Impact for Prisoner’s Children’ team approach to working with the ‘whole family’, is based on the belief that the family is a unique social system where in a change in one family member affects both the family structure and each member individually. The growth of evidence that whole family models of work can benefit marginalised groups is recognisable in the current UK Troubled Families agenda, which aims to help the most troubled families in England turn their lives around by 2015, using family-based strategies (NOMS, 2012). This study, thus argues, that providing relevant information, to any member of the family (children, parent/carers or parents in prison) assists the family to be better connected. The families in this study explain that with information they cope better and are better able to support one another.

It is interesting to note the overlap between being informed and feeling emotionally safe. Family members not only felt frustrated but sometimes embarrassed that they did

not know what to do, articulated by one mother who said *“I think I phoned you a few times with stupid questions”*. However PSS’s non-judgemental approach was found to reduce anxiety, enabling service users to feel at ease in asking for help.

Furthermore, as families are positioned as experts of their own experience, opportunities were provided through peer support groups, which enabled families to ably inform one another. One child recalled how much she appreciated another child she met through PSS *“talking to me about her dad being away, and what to do to feel better”*. Later, she spoke of her own desire to want to try and *“help other kids to get through it”* (CH 5). In a discussion paper on peer support, Fulton and Winfield (2001) explain that one of the reasons that peer support is so valuable is that assistance from peers comes from ‘intrinsic understanding’, referencing a member of Peer2Peer (a network of peer led groups) who stated; *“Peer Support sees the person first, understands their distress and can offer true solutions that the Supporting Peer has used themselves”* (Fulton and Winfield, 2001, p5-6). Ultimately, this study finds that having access to information increases feelings of being ‘valuable’, and feeling valuable enables positive connectivity.

## **Belong**

*“You are imperfect, you are wired for struggle, but you are worthy  
of love and belonging”*

*Brené Brown*

As families from this study commonly felt ostracised and alone, increasing their sense of belonging was a vital way in which PSS provided support. This study finds that personal connectivity was predominantly enhanced through the facilitation of family contact, and through peer support. In addition, as personal growth was often born from personal connectedness, as a result of their new confidences, families’ felt more connected with the community because they were more able to offer valuable contributions.

Throughout this study evidence was gathered that highlighted the cumulative losses that prisoners and their families suffer after the imprisonment of a parent. The most commonly discussed loss in this study was the loss of human connectedness. The whole

family, children, prisoner-parents and especially parents/carers spoke of a loss of relationships. In addition to the clear loss of contact endured within the family between partners, and children and their parents due to the imprisonment, numerous stories were shared of friends and the community ‘turning their backs’, as well as family members removing their support if the parent/carer was choosing to ‘stand by’ the prisoner.

*“It doesn’t matter what story we’re telling, we’re telling the story of family”*

*Erica Lorraine Schiedt*

Prisoner-parents spoke of loss, not as might be expected in relation to their freedom, but instead in relation to their bond with their children and partners, and their reduced ability to support their families. Fears of “*losing them*” (Exp 1) and realising “*your role has gone*” (Exp 7) were dominant throughout the five ex-prisoner interviews. One obvious consequence of the imprisonment of the man is his disempowerment (Codd, 2007); indeed, prisons have been referred to as ‘agencies of disempowerment and deprivation’ (de Viggiani, 2007). In his research exploring structural determinants of prison health, de Viggiani (2007) noted that this dominant working class culture maintains a sexual division of labour, where men should work and women should care for their children; particularly evident where respondents sensed they had ‘*lost control over their families*’ (p16-17). In a direct reflection of de Viggiani’s findings, Cunningham (2001), in discussions on the challenges that parents in prison face in terms of maintaining contact with their children, highlights their loss of parental authority and their sense of losing touch with their children. Hairston (2003) points out that the lack of attention played to prisoners as parents is due to the fact that the strategic plans of social services agencies and correction departments have seldom included services and activities that assist prisoners in carrying out family roles and responsibilities.

The degree of influence an imprisoned parent has over their children is predominantly affected by the child’s caregiver and what role they are prepared to take in maintaining the contact (Cunningham, 2001). Family members have been referred to as ‘gate-keepers’ of contact arrangements (Brown, 2001) and many put up metaphorical walls between the children and the parent ‘inside’. Fortunately, from the perspective of the parents who had been prisoners in this study, those looking after their children had

made considerable efforts to enable the children to attend prison visits. Regular contact was experienced as mutually beneficial to both the imprisoned parents and their children in this study. Ex-prisoners spoke of their relief to see their children whilst in prison and how they were able to “*relax more*” (Exp 3) and “*get on with what needed to be done in prison*” (Exp 1) which fits directly with evidence that visitation reduces stressors inherent in the prison environment, enhancing institutional adjustment among inmates (Tewksbury and Connor, 2012).

In addition, all the children interviewed who had been on prison visits spoke of their visiting experiences in essentially positive terms, asserting, “*if you asked me, visit or no visit, I’d always say visit!*” (CH 5). Such views are reflected in the wider literature. Better outcomes in school (Trice and Bewster, 2004), an improvement in happiness and behaviour (de Las Casas, Fradd, Heady, Paterson, 2011), and coping better in general (COPING, 2013) have all been observed in children who maintain regular contact with an imprisoned parent, compared to those for whom contact is either limited or severed.

However, a particular issue for those parents/carers of this study, whose children fell under the gaze of social services, were their battles with social workers regarding the contact arrangements between their children and the offending parent. Aungles (1994), in relation to women who must contend with social services agencies as a result of the risks posed by the offender, explains that they find themselves in the role of the ‘powerless negotiator’. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) specifies that children have the right to have direct and frequent contact with parents from whom the child is separated (Article 9), including the right to be provided with information on the whereabouts of the absent member(s) of the family unless the provision of the information would be detrimental to the well-being of the child (Article 9.4). However, the Children’s Rights Alliance for England (CRAE, 2013), a London-based pressure group set to monitor the UK government’s commitment to upholding this convention have reported that ‘The Convention on the Rights of the Child’ has not yet become a living charter for children of imprisoned parents. This is directly observable in the findings of this study. Parents/carers found professionals, especially teachers and social workers, lacked specific knowledge relating to children and families of prisoners, and so instead made contact decisions that were based “*on their own personal biases*” (PC 8). One mother said; “*I hated the way she (the school receptionist) looked at me...I dreaded asking to take the kids out of school to go and visit their dad because she made*

*me feel so small...so sometimes we didn't go*" (PC 3). Murray and Farrington (2006) in a review of evidence-based programmes for children of prisoners proposed that an increase in children's opportunities to maintain contact with their imprisoned parent is an intervention strategy that could protect children from the harmful effects of separation.

This study finds that the systemic 'whole family' approach taken by the PSS 'Family Impact for Prisoners' Children' team helps to cultivate connectivity in families. Service users are not considered as individuals that exist in isolation, but as part of a family or 'system'. The poor connectivity, caused by blocked contact in the family, was thus alleviated by PSS who would, where possible, advocate for contact, or inform the family of their rights so they could effectively challenge decisions themselves. In some instances the 'Family Impact for Prisoners' Children' team also directly took children on prison visits when there was no suitable adult in the family to do so, or supervised contact between post-release prisoners and their children.

Support from peers was found, in this study, to increase personal connectivity. Being 'heard', 'safe' (free from judgement), and 'informed' were all evident in the findings in relation to peer support. Some, for instance, found the PSS support groups useful to "*have a better idea of what you're supposed to do*" (PC 4) in terms of navigating through problems typically experienced by prisoners' families; others said 'being understood' and accepted by those who shared their experience was what mattered the most. One girl (CH 5) said the feeling of knowing she was not "*the only one*" (with a parent in prison) mattered most. In wider literature, Fulton and Winfield (2011, p6) note "*a sense of belonging*", along with an increase in motivation, self-esteem and confidence, as key benefits of peer support. One mother, who recalled feeling "*terrified*" and "*alone*" when her partner went to prison, said because of her experience she had asked PSS workers to help her to set up a peer support group, "*to help others like me get through it*" (PC 4). For PC 4, the group not only meant she herself "*felt stronger*" (PC 4) when she connected positively with others, but in addition she became the catalyst for many more connections to be made via the 'web of relationships' that was born from the group. Likewise, the children from this study discussed meeting other prisoner's children in terms of "*a weight being lifted*" (CH 5). Comparable work by Meek (2007) demonstrates the importance of close friends for children with siblings in prison. As many children with a prisoner in the family are reluctant to disclose to

school friends for fear of being judged, Meek (2007) reported that those who could access peer support found it to be a great comfort. Parent participants, including those who had been in prison also said they had benefitted greatly from meeting other families who had found themselves in a similar position. However, their greatest enthusiasm was undoubtedly in relation to the benefits that peer support had for their children. One father (Exp 3) said his daughter felt *“happy now with loads of friends and the confidence to speak out* (about the imprisonment) since she had attended a PSS group. This is in keeping with Hagen and Myers (2003, 2005) who attribute social supports for children and a sense of hopefulness are protective factors against the development of both internalizing and externalizing problems, regardless of the number of stressful life events a child may have experienced. Research by Walker (2006) also illustrates that prisoners’ children benefit from the commonality of experience found from peer support, and that the friendships formed are experienced almost as surrogate family relationships.

Modern attachment theory, previously highlighted as resonant with the ‘Be Safe’ segment of the proposed model of Personal Connectivity, is considered to also be significant in this fourth segment, ‘Belong’. Graham’s (2008) consideration of the neuroscience of attachment explains that the adult brain is still malleable and influenced by ongoing relationships throughout a person’s lifespan. Recent developments in neuroscience show the brain to be a social organ that develops and changes in its interactions with other brains. Relationships stimulate brain structures to activate and mature, and furthers the understanding of why the families in this study cite ‘belonging’ (engaging in support groups, meeting others who share their experience) as an extremely significant factor in what improved their ability to cope with the challenges of parental imprisonment. Siegel (2010) writing about the neurobiology of ‘we’, explains that *“the brain is a social organ, and our relationships with one another are not a luxury but an essential nutrient for our survival”* (Siegel, 2010, p211).

The paradox of secure attachment is that it is liberating. Children who experience secure attachment are able to separate from their primary caregiver without undue anxiety and play well with other children; adults are able to seek social support and are comfortable sharing feelings with friends and partners. The proposed model of ‘Personal Connectivity’ thus aligns with the principles of secure attachment, in that the potential

outcome of personal connectivity, namely, ‘personal growth’, mirrors the liberation that comes from a safe and secure base.

The MoJ, in their recent document ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ (2013), which provides a summary of evidence on reducing reoffending, states that positive social connectedness is a significant factor in reducing re-offending. All five former prisoner parents from this study emphasised strongly their desire to have a positive role within their families and especially with their children; one parent who had been in prison (ExP 4) spoke also of his desire to support others who had experienced similar difficulties. ‘Having something to give to others’ and ‘having a place with a social group’ are listed as two important factors that are considered to help individuals to desist from crime. The MoJ (2013) states that those who feel connected to others in a (non-criminal) community are more likely to stay away from crime. The MoJ (2103) also finds that offenders who have ways to contribute to society, their community or their family, appear to be more successful at giving up crime. In addition, if these achievements are formally recognised, the effect may be even stronger. PSS, therefore, may potentially have an important role to play, not only in supporting parents who are or have been prisoners to have enhanced personal connectivity, but also to give these parents formal recognition for their achievements.

### **Personal Growth**

Ultimately, findings from this study show that when families’ feel personally connected, this may create the conditions that will enable them to flourish. Many stories emerged of personal growth that the participants attributed to support from PSS.

Minuchin, Colapinto, and Minuchin (1998) report that a collaborative approach builds upon families’ resilience in the face of their challenges. As already discussed, collaborative practice was found to be instrumental in building connectedness for this study’s families, due to its non-hierarchical positioning where clients and practitioners are ‘on the same side’ which was found to assist them to cope. In addition to the tales of increased resilience, participants said they were able to develop new skills, in spite of, and because of the adversities they had suffered. This study found that when families are heard, safe, informed, and connected to people who can bring positivity into their lives, they may experience personal growth. Evident throughout the interviews were

parents/carers growing in “confidence” (PC 3, PC 4), “learning how to speak my mind” (PC 4), and learning to “fight them (social workers)...but in the right way” (ExP 4).

The desire to help and inform others who have experienced similar difficulties has been frequently noted in this study. One father, who said PSS “gave me strategies I didn’t have before” was using his new skills and confidence in “training to be a support worker myself” (ExP 4). Similarly, a mother reported feeling “so proud” of her daughter “because she’s been able to make other kids feel better” (PC 3). Giving as well as gaining support is, without doubt, significant to personal growth. Schwatz (1999) for example, in her report entitled ‘helping others helps oneself’, found that peer supporters articulated a dramatic change in their lives in how they thought of themselves and in how they related to others. One child discussed her contributions to a PSS advice booklet (‘Don’t Worry’, 2013) for other children with a parent in prison. When the booklet won a national award in 2013<sup>9</sup> she said; “I can’t believe it... because I never win anything!” (CH 5). This provides a clear illustration of the shift that is possible from a place of disempowerment to one where service users can become advisers and leaders if their views are positioned centrally; not only heard but used to positively influence service delivery.

Burleson and MacGeorge (2002, p347) wrote that supporting others is a fundamental part of human interactions, “just as central to the human experience as persuading, informing or entertaining one another”. Findings from this study thus strengthen the argument that to build personal connectivity in families affected by parental imprisonment, not only must they have the opportunity to access support which will be instrumental in improving their overall well-being, but that their opportunities to give support are equally important.

Parallels can be drawn to research on refugees’ reactions to trauma (Papadopoulos 2007). Papadopoulos (2007, p305) observes that although people could experience the unbearable anguish of substantial losses, they would often emerge transformed, re-viewing life, themselves and their relationships; paradoxically, devastating experiences may help people “reshuffle their lives and imbue them with new meaning”. Conversely, without support to build personal connectivity, families affected by parental imprisonment are highly likely to remain isolated, stuck in their ‘bubbles’ and behind

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<sup>9</sup> The Marsh Christian Award for Volunteer work with Prisoners’ Families

their 'brick walls'. It is suggested that such families can suffer from a phenomenon termed '*stereotype threat*'. Spencer, Steele, and Quinn (1999) and Steele and Aronson, (1995) claim that the threat of being evaluated, judged by, or treated in terms of a negative stereotype can cause individuals to perform worse in a domain in which negative stereotypes exist about a group of which they are a member. This fits with Codd (2008), who has highlighted the persistence of 'family-blaming' of prisoners' families. Gupta and Bhawe (2007) also report that the threat of being stereotyped not only decrements performance but can ultimately impact upon major life decisions and prevent individuals from reaching their full potential.

There is currently a dearth of research into what empowers families in which there is a parent who is either in or has been in prison. Although there is a growing body of evidence that indicates what might help children and families cope better with *and survive* parental imprisonment, little attention has been paid to their revival or positive growth. Examples of positive growth that have been observed in this study include increased confidence and self-esteem, the development of new skills (especially with regards to mentoring and supporting others), the development of healthy relationships, and the uptake of opportunities (such as trying things they would not have previously tried, such as speaking at conferences, developing resources, attending classes and workshops in PSS and in the community).

Kendall (2003) finds that voluntary sector organisations (VCS) contribute in terms of responsiveness and choice. Additionally, VCS organisations provide opportunities for the generation of trust, civic virtue and social capital via participation in community and public life (Putnam, 2000). Carling (1995) said that when people are treated as sick children, they tend to respond in a similar manner; when people are treated like responsible, capable adults, they also respond in a similar manner. Findings from this study suggest that to empower families caught up in the criminal justice sector it may be beneficial to adopt a fundamental shift from viewing them as perpetrators and/or victims, but as families who are can offer important contributions as peer supporters, experts who can advise policy makers and practitioners, and perhaps most importantly, valued members of their own families. Ultimately, in order to support families affected by parental imprisonment, it is helpful to view families through an empowerment lens. In doing so, their journey from oppression to recovery and rediscovery may be possible.

In sum, it is clear that prisoners children and families, and prisoners themselves (during their imprisonment and post release), wanted to feel positively connected to others. Adalist-Estrin & Lee (2004) found that the overarching need of children of prisoners is for meaningful relationships with individuals committed to a lasting connection. Positive social relationships have been reported to be significant in helping the resettlement of prisoners and steer them away from re-offending; the Owers review (2011) for example, recognises that desistance is a social process as much as a personal one. The nature and importance of social support and coping in the management of stress has long since been observed for any challenging family situation (McCubbin, Joy, Cauble, Comeau, Patterson, Needle, 1980). In the context of prisoners' families Codd (2002) reports that self-help groups can provide positive social networks and much needed emotional support in safe spaces in which family members can offload without fear of being judged. This study offers the term 'Personal Connectivity' to be used in the context of providing a singular definition that describes the key need of 'whole families' affected by parental imprisonment. It is argued that if practitioners are able to support the 'personal connectivity' of families affected by parental imprisonment, these families are not just able to cope better but may experience positive personal change and growth.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Families affected by parental imprisonment want and need support. However, support is lacking within their personal networks and across public and voluntary sector services. These families are undoubtedly one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in our society. Families in this study were frequently ostracised by their local community, by their peers and by members of their social networks. They also described a tendency to self-isolate in an attempt to protect themselves from verbal and physical harassment.

As observed by Codd (2007), having difficulty accessing information that affected family members in prison further exacerbated the issues faced by the families, resulting in feelings of extreme frustration and disempowerment. The loss of relationships, familial and social, that is suffered following the imprisonment of a parent is very much marked both in this study and in comparable literature (Bouregba, 1992; Boswell, 2002; Condry, 2006).

Participants from this study used the metaphors ‘bubbles’ and ‘brick walls’ to describe their experiences of isolation and marginalization (bubbles) and frustrations with statutory services, poor access to information, negative reactions from members of the community, and conflict within their own families (brick walls).

Findings show that the support most wanted by families affected by parental imprisonment is help to build their ‘personal connectivity’. Personal connectivity is defined in this study as positive (productive and meaningful) relationships with other people. PSS members of staff helped their service-using families to have enhanced personal connectivity as a result of the positive relationships they formed between themselves and the family members. Additionally, PSS enhanced personal connectivity by building positive relationships *within* families where relationships were under strain because of the parental imprisonment, and by building positive relationships between peers.

Whilst the term ‘personal connectivity’ may have been applied in other settings as previously acknowledged, this is the first study piece of research that positions personal

connectivity as the over-arching support need for families affected by parental imprisonment.

Based on the findings of this study, the approach that organisations working with families where a parent is imprisoned, adopt to building personal connectivity, appears to be critical. Despite the many hardships that the families in this study have suffered, they did not want to be positioned solely as troubled, weak and un-knowing. Although they explained that they were often frustrated with, and lost in a criminal justice system that is hard to fathom, they stressed that when they felt their support provider had listened to them, not only did this bring them comfort and relief, but also the message that their experience was worthy of being heard. Feeling that their experience was understood by and ‘mattered’ to their support provider, families reported coping better with the challenges of parental imprisonment. PSS was found by the families to be an agency that cultivates productive collaborative partnerships, a sharing of knowledge between themselves and their service users, where solutions are found on a journey that is taken together. The collaborative approach enabled families to feel safe, and to be confident that their support worker can advocate for them if needed.

As has been found in other studies (Clewett and Glover, 2009; Arditti, 2012), this study shows that family members, who are considered within the context of their ‘whole family’, meaning they are understood as someone who affects and is affected by the actions of the other family members, feel better supported. It is therefore argued that a systemic approach is particularly helpful in the context of supporting families affected by parental imprisonment, as it encourages the provider of support to pay attention to the connections and disconnections within these families. Family connections and disconnections were a particular concern for families affected by parental imprisonment, who not only suffer separation caused by the imprisonment of a parent, but who are also often re-grouped in new ways because of the imprisonment (such as children being placed with kinship carers). Support appears to be best placed when the provider of support pays attention to the inevitable and ever-evolving shifts in family relationships, which are unavoidably altered not only when a parent is imprisoned but also after a parent has been released. With a ‘whole family’ approach, this study showed that effective support workers can potentially assist with healthy and safe contact between prisoners and their families, or help families cope with their familial disconnections by building up their personal connectivity elsewhere.

In this study, it was difficult to escape the feelings of fear and resentment that the interviewed families had for Social Services. However, this was not unexpected in context of the wider research which finds that relatives caring for children of prisoners often try to avoid contact with the system as they fear the children will be taken away (Standing Committee on Social Issues 1997; Phillips & Bloom 1998; Shaw 1987). Participating families also viewed other statutory services (including criminal justice services and the police) as neither an accessible nor acceptable source of support. Families lacked trust in the competencies of statutory services, and some gave examples of times they felt ignored by, or lied to by statutory professionals. This added to their generalized experiences of abandonment and victimisation, as noted in similar work (Codd, 2008). These families discussed the pain of having to regurgitate their painful stories to workers who they found to be judgemental. Ultimately, the families who contributed to this study felt that statutory bodies worsened their already challenging experience, and placed them at even greater disadvantage. Plainly, whilst families asserted their need for support, they had little desire to engage with services that would bring more pressure, more scrutiny, more questions and more misunderstanding into their lives. Support from schools was, however, welcomed by parents although some felt that teachers should be better informed about the effects of parental imprisonment on families, and therefore be less likely to judge them inappropriately and be more able to support their children. This finding fits directly with wider research on the need for more support for children of prisoners in schools (Woodward, 2003 and O’Keeffe, 2008, 2011). Children from this study, however, said they were averse to speaking with teachers, as they did not trust how the information they gave would be handled and some children gave examples of teachers making inappropriate assumptions and comments.

Participating families described PSS in terms of an acceptable source of support with which they were happy to engage. The positioning of PSS as a voluntary sector organisation is assumed to be significant for reasons of limited authority over the lives of the families in contrast to the statutory sector (Standing Committee on Social Issues 1997; Shaw 1987). Support that builds the personal connectivity of families was talked of in terms of assisting survival *and* revival. An array of enhanced personal skills and attributes were linked to having improved personal connectivity. These included newfound confidence, speaking out in support groups, contributing ideas in meetings

and conferences, developing the ability to support other families, and entering into training and employment opportunities that they would not have otherwise considered.

Finally, although this study aimed to collect families' experiences of support in relation to the imprisonment of a parent, these families also bravely contributed other chapters of their lives, their back-stories, stories of their childhood and their past pains.

Parent/carers spoke of their cumulative disadvantage, their past and present, in which stories of abuse, loss and trauma were common. Some adult participants shared stories of being abused when they had been children. These stories were revealed in an almost matter of fact way, yet were marked by sadness, anger and a dog-eared determination not to let their own children suffer as they had. It was clear that the parent/carers were willing to fight against the injustices they and their children experienced from being victimised as a result of a crime they themselves had not committed. The parents who had been in prison spoke largely with regret that they had let their families down. It was also clear, that as well as being perpetrators of crime, a number of the parents who had been in prison were also victims themselves. These former prisoners offered their back-stories; not as excuses, but simply to add weight and context into how their pasts had influenced their present, and how this in turn had influenced their hopes for their families' future. Such observations tally directly with research conducted in both the UK and US, which has suggested that adverse childhood experiences may lead to future criminality and antisocial behaviour (Farrington, 2000 and Dallaire, 2007).

With a close up and personal view into the broken attachments that these families had endured throughout their lives, it was easy to appreciate why so much gratitude was expressed by the families with regards to their experience of PSS workers as people who genuinely cared for them. The non-hierarchical, empathic approach to support meant that families were able to positively connect with PSS staff. Families termed staff at PSS "*like a very best-friend*" (PC 5), as workers who they were able to find common ground with "*as you know its hard bringing up a child on your own*" (PC 4), and as people who "*really cared about us and was not just in it for the pay packet*" (Exp 1). In related work, 'The Good Lives Model' proposed by Ward and Brown (2006) stresses the impact of therapist attitudes towards offenders, and the importance of adopting a positive approach towards treatment where the language is non-judgemental, humane and respectful. Certainly, from the perspective of families in this study, positive experiences of support were far less about *what* works, and more about *who* works.

Without doubt these families felt most supported when they were seen, not as ‘families affected by parental imprisonment’ but as mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, people with something valuable to offer, and people who might be judged on their futures not their pasts.

## **Research Limitations**

Although care was taken to ensure that the study was robust and reliable, inevitably there are research limitations that will have shaped the findings. First and foremost, this is the first study of this level of complexity conducted by the researcher. Much learning took place throughout the duration of the study on how to appropriately conduct collective case study research, and lessons were invariably learnt along the way.

## **Data Collection and Recording**

In the main, opportunities were missed in the data collection and recording phase. I regret missing some opportunities to gather data and personal reflections that potentially could have added further depth and insight to this research, which may have affected the thematic findings. There were times, for example, when I realised ‘too late’ that I could have sought permission to capture an ‘in-field’ conversation. Without permission at the time the conversation took place (considered important for ethical reasons), and without the dialogue freshly recorded, such conversations could not be used as data in this study. In addition, as ‘in-field’ data were recorded by hand, sometimes I failed to make notes on what had been said sufficiently soon after the conversation had taken place. It was, undoubtedly far harder to make accurate notes the longer I delayed this process. There were also occasional times when I did not record my personal reflections after an in-depth interview in the ‘reflective diary’. The contents of the reflective diary proved to be extremely useful, and therefore significant, in the analysis phase. In future research projects I would strive to be more mindful not to miss opportunities to collect data, and to even more consistently capture my personal reflections throughout the process.

## **Recruitment**

Families who participated in this study provided essentially positive accounts of their experience of support they have received from PSS. However, it is feasible to assume that if service users had negative experiences with PSS that they would be less likely to volunteer their time to contribute to the research. This study is, therefore, potentially limited in that the voices of any un-satisfied PSS service users are unlikely to have been heard.

Even in respect of the family members who were interviewed, despite the careful recruitment process, the possibility remains that these family members may still have been eager to discuss their experiences of support in relation to PSS in positive terms because they might have felt it would benefit them in terms of the support they may or may not receive in the future. The potential for the results to be positively skewed cannot be ignored.

## **Scale of the study**

Whilst data saturation was reached when 18 participants had contributed their views during in-depth interviews, as this study has only heard the voices of these individuals who have used the services of one organisation in a singular geographical location, generalisations about the experiences of support for families affected by parental imprisonment cannot be made. This being said, this study did not set out to generalise the experiences of families affected by parental imprisonment. However, it is important to acknowledge that this study is limited in that it can only 'speak' on behalf of the participating families. Case study research makes no claims to be typical.

This study is also invariably limited as the voices of families affected by parental imprisonment who never needed or wanted support, i.e. non PSS families will not have been heard, as the recruitment pool was drawn from PSS service users only. In the pan-European 'Coping Project' (Jones and Wainaina-Wonza, 2013) for example, the researchers affirmed that many members of prisoner's families cope well despite the imprisonment of a parent. Not all families affected by parental imprisonment need or

want support, and not all children affected by parental imprisonment are considered by Children's Services to be at risk of harm.

### **Methodological Approach**

This study generated large amounts of data as is typical in collective case study research. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) point out that because choices must be made about which data to include as findings, other aspects of the stories are unintentionally concealed. Arguably then, it is possible, and indeed likely, that revisiting the data would reveal other issues that are equally interesting and important.

Guba and Lincoln (1981, p738) raise further concerns with case study research, identifying that there is the “*unusual problems of ethics*”, explaining, “*an unethical case writer could so select from among available data that virtually anything he wished could be illustrated*”. The problem for potential biases, introduced by the subjectivity of the researcher must be taken into account. Researchers who are practitioners, who are loyal to their practice might, despite good intentions, subconsciously preference positive feedback over negative feedback during the editing process. Guba and Lincoln (1989) regard member checks as “*the single most critical technique for establishing credibility*” (p. 239). However member checks were not carried out in this study, due to research time constraints that arose from the study being undertaken by one researcher. Despite this, Sandelowski (1993, p3) argues that if reality is assumed (as per naturalist approaches) “*repeatability is not an essential (or necessary or sufficient) property of the things themselves*” (p. 3), and we should, therefore, not expect other researchers to arrive at the same themes.

Stake (1995) stated that using multiple sources of data is important for ensuring construct validity. In this study, however, only two sources of data were used; in-depth interviews and in-field conversations and these were robust methods. Future studies might, therefore, consider expanding the number of data sources as this might promote the generation of alternative interpretations in the analysis.

Despite these limitations, and because of an awareness of these during the course of the study, the care taken to ensure non-coercion of service users to participate, the fact that a large quantity of data was generated by those who did participate, and in light of the

comprehensive and systematic analysis that was carried out, the reader should have confidence in the findings and recommendations.

## **Recommendations for Practitioners**

1. Service providers who support families affected by parental imprisonment should carefully consider how they might build the personal connectivity of their service users. Practitioners can consider the building of personal connectivity in three key ways; with the service provider, with peers, and with the family.
2. ‘Fun activities’ are recommended as an essential part of practice when supporting children affected by parental imprisonment. Ensuring children have fun is recommended, not only to make things more pleasant for the child/ren, ‘because they are children’, but also that this is especially relevant to children of prisoners who might be missing the ‘fun’ they had with their parent who is now imprisoned. This study strengthens the argument that fun is an essential element of the therapeutic process for children with a parent in prison.
3. Practitioners are advised to provide families with someone who they can simply talk with. The opportunity to talk with a non-judgmental practitioner should be seen as central to practice, and not just as a ‘pleasant addition’ to other core services such as the offer of advocacy support or the provision of supervised contact.
4. Families affected by parental imprisonment should, where possible, be given the opportunity to access peer support. It is recommended that service providers offer opportunities for peer support to ‘children of prisoners’, ‘parent/carers’ and ‘parents who have been in prison’ in these respective groupings.
5. Practitioners working with families affected by parental imprisonment should strive to adopt a collaborative approach in their practice, which will empower affected families during the process of support.
6. Practitioners working with families affected by parental imprisonment should strive to adopt principles based on systemic family practice and work with the

‘whole family’ where possible. A systemic approach to practice is recommended even when the practitioner is only able to work with one family member.

7. Post-release has been identified in this study as a time of particular concern for families, who describe the months following the release of a parent as “*much harder*” (Exp 7) than they would have expected. Practitioners are thus advised to pay heed to this as a significant phase of the imprisonment cycle. It is recommended that practitioners inform families of the possible challenges they are likely to face post-release.
8. Families affected by parental imprisonment should, where possible, be given the opportunity to access peer support. It is recommended that service providers offer opportunities for peer support to ‘children of prisoners’, ‘parent/carers’ and ‘parents who have been in prison’ in these respective groupings

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

1. In light of the fact that this study recommends a collaborative approach to supporting families affected by parental imprisonment, future research might gather the perspectives of professionals about their experience of providing support.
2. As the families in this study provided such negative accounts of their experiences of Social Services and other statutory services, future research could gather perspectives from statutory workers who have had experience working with families affected by parental imprisonment. It is anticipated that this would help to further understanding into barriers for engagement between statutory workers and affected families, and obtaining the statutory workers’ voice would produce a more balanced viewpoint of support issues for affected families.
3. Future research could also critically examine the potential for the implementation of the approach to building personal connectivity with other voluntary support workers to assess the value of the proposed model.

4. Based on evidence found in this study that demonstrated personal connectivity and strong relationships between PSS staff members and PSS service using families, future research is required to evaluate when, how and if these supportive relationships should be terminated.
5. In this study, whilst 8 parent/carers participated across the 8 families who engaged in the research, only 5 children and 5 ex-prisoner parents were able to contribute. Another further area for potential research could be to obtain the voices of more children and former prisoner parents, as the bulk of data in this study were generated from parent/carers. Gathering additional perspectives from a greater number of parents who had been prisoners, and children of prisoners, would potentially generate further insights and alternative themes.
6. Further research into the interventions offered by PSS could be beneficial in how their service might be improved to help the lives of families affected by parental imprisonment.

Despite the considerable contributions this study makes to the field, there is much work to be done and there are many opportunities for improving the lives of families affected by parental imprisonment.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Third Party Initial Recruitment Telephone Call Script**

#### **Prisoners' Families Support Project**

#### **Third Party INITIAL Recruitment Telephone Call script**

Please can I speak to "*identified potential participant*".

My name is.....and I am currently based with the PSS Family Impact for Prisoners Children Team.

I was wondering if it's ok for me to explain briefly about a project called the Prisoners Families Support Study?

Lorna Brookes, who you may know, will be doing the research.

The aim of the project is to look at family experiences of getting support when a parent is sent to prison.

The project involves doing interviews. Parents, children and ex-prisoners can all take part.

It would be helpful for the project to know about your experiences of support.

Children aged 7yrs or older could take part if you were ok with this.

Prisoners, once released can take part as well if they want to.

If it's ok with you, we will send you an information pack out which will tell you a bit more? The information will also be on a CD. This doesn't mean you have to be in the project.

We will ring you back in about a week to see if you are interested. Thanks very much.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Third Party Follow Up Recruitment Telephone Call Script**

#### **Prisoners' Families Support Project**

#### **Third Party FOLLOW UP Recruitment Telephone Call**

Please can I speak to "*identified potential adult participant*".

My name is.....and I am currently based with the PSS Family Impact for Prisoners Children Team.

I spoke to you around a week ago about the Prisoners Families Support Study?

I was wondering whether you might consider being interviewed?

Or do you have a child 7 yrs or over wants to take part?

If no....thank you anyway for your time in considering this. Do let us know if you change your mind.

If yes....would it be ok if Lorna Brookes who is doing the research gives you a ring to make arrangements to meet you (and/or your children) and answer any further questions?

You are not committed to anything by meeting her, or indeed at any stage in the process.

Thanks very much.

Lorna will be in touch soon.

## APPENDIX C

### Participant Information Pack Front Cover

#### Prisoners' Families Support Project

##### Front Cover

**This project is being done by Lorna Brookes.**

Lorna's project is about the sort of support families need or get when a parent is sent to prison. She is interested in your good and bad experiences of support.

#### **In this information pack you will find**

Information for parents and ex-prisoners  
Information for children (7 years plus)

The information is also on the CD.

#### **What else do you need to know?**

Someone from PSS will ring you in a few days to see if you are interested.

You do not have to take part if you don't want to.

If you do want to take part, it does not matter if only an adult OR a child from each family wants to be involved.

**Thank you very much**

## APPENDIX D

### Information for Adult Participants

#### Prisoners' Families Support Project

#### Information Leaflet for Interviews with Parents/Carers and Prisoners post-release

**Researcher: Lorna Brookes**

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for reading this information sheet. You are being invited to take part in a research project that is reviewing the experiences of families about the support they get in the community when a parent is sent to prison.

Before you make your decision it is important for you to understand why the project is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If anything is not clear to you or if you would like more information then please feel free to contact us (details are at the end of this sheet).

#### **What is the purpose of this project?**

The study wants to look at the experiences of community support that children and their parent/carer receive when a parent is sent to prison. The project will also look at the experiences of the ex-prisoner after they have been released from prison. The aim of the project is to find what families find useful or not useful and the gaps in community services.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

We are asking you to take part as members of your family currently are, or have recently, received support from PSS. We will be talking to other families who receive support from PSS. In this study we would like to hear from different people in your family. We would like to talk to parents/ carers, children (who are 7 years old or older) and the imprisoned parent once they have been released. It is OK if only one or two people in your family takes part.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No, it is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you take part in this project. If you do decide to take part you can change your mind at any time and you can withdraw from the study.

#### **What will happen to me if I decide to take part in the project?**

We will ask you to take part in a maximum of two interviews. The first one will be the main one. We may ask you some follow up questions in a second interview. Only you and the

researcher will be present during the interview process. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. This is simply so the researcher does not have to take extensive notes when you are talking, and she can type up the conversation afterwards. No one will hear the recording apart from the researcher and once the tape has been transcribed (by the researcher) it will be deleted. To protect you and your family's privacy, the typed interview will be coded so that no-one can be identified. Names of people, places and prisons will be omitted. Adults will be referred to as a 'mother', 'father' or 'carer', and whether or not they are/have been the parent in prison. Children will be identified only by age and gender (e.g. 'girl, aged 6').

### **How do I give my consent?**

If you are willing to take part in this project then we will ask you to sign a consent form before the interview starts, when you have had time read this information and talk to the researcher.

### **How much of a time commitment will this be for me?**

The main interview will take around one to two hours. We appreciate you are busy and the time will be arranged to suit you. We will interview you either in the PSS office in a private interview room, or in your home if you are more comfortable. The second interview should take between 5 to 30 minutes and this interview might be done by telephone if this is OK with you.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

We do not think that there are any disadvantages for you taking part in this project. We will take great care of anything that you tell us and will not share it with other people.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

We hope that you will enjoy taking part in this project. The information that you share with us will help highlight the experiences that families have in terms of community support when a parent is sent to prison.

### **What happens when the research study stops?**

Once you have taken part in the interviews, you will not need to do anything else. The main researcher (Lorna Brookes) is doing a course (a MPhil/PhD) at the University of Central Lancashire. She will write articles and do presentations at conferences on what she has found out from the study.

### **Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All the information that is collected during the research will be kept strictly confidential. We will not tell anyone what you have told us unless you have told us something that by law we have to share.

### **Who is funding this study?**

The study is funded by the UCLAN School of Health.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been reviewed by an ethics committee within the University of Central Lancashire.

**Who can I contact for further information?**

If you would like further information on this study please contact:

Lorna Brookes (the main researcher)

PSS Head Office. 18 Seel Street, Liverpool, L1 4BE

[info@lornabrookes.co.uk](mailto:info@lornabrookes.co.uk)

0151 702 5577

07748 531165

Professor Bernie Carter (Director of Studies for the project at the University)

Professor Bernie Carter,

School of Health, University of Central Lancashire

[bcarter@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:bcarter@uclan.ac.uk)

**Thank you very much for your time in reading this information  
and for considering taking part in the study.**

## APPENDIX E

### Information for Child Participants

#### Prisoners' Families Support Project

#### Information Leaflet for Children and Young People.

**Hello, my name is Lorna Brookes**



Thanks for taking the time to hear about the study and for thinking about whether you want to take part.

We know that your mum or dad is in prison, or was in prison not long ago. When this happens sometimes children and their families get help from a community worker. The community worker is there to listen to your worries and wishes, and to try to make things a bit easier for you and your family during this time.

#### **What is our project about?**

We want to know what it was like for you when you got support from the community worker.

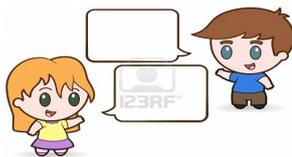
#### **What would happen if I took part in the project?**

If you want to take part we will be ask the person who cares for you to sign a consent form to say its ok.



If you take part in the study, Lorna Brookes – the researcher - will talk to you about the support you got from the community worker.

You can decide to talk to the researcher



- On your own (just you and the researcher) OR
- With a parent or an adult you trust

The researcher will record what you say on an audio recorder. This is so they can listen to you properly when you are talking without having to make lots of notes. The only person who will listen to the recording will be the researcher. After the interview she will type up what was said and she will destroy the recording. None of her notes will use your name, or any names of your family. She will not use your address or anything that identifies you. In the report we will only say that you are a boy or a girl and how old you are.

### **Will anyone else know I'm doing this?**

Your parent/carer will know that you are taking part but we will not tell anyone else.

### **Do I have to take part in the project?**

You do not have to take part if you don't want to.

If the researcher is helping you and your family, it will not affect the help you get at all if you say no.

### **What if I don't want to do the study anymore?**

If you don't want to do the research anymore, just tell your parent/carer or the researcher. No-one will be cross with you if you say **STOP**.



**Thank you very much for reading or listening to this information and for considering taking part.**

# APPENDIX F

## Adult Consent Form

### Prisoners' Families Support Project

#### Consent form for adults to participate in interviews.

**Researcher: Lorna Brookes**

**Please initial box**

I confirm that I have read and understand the relevant Information Sheet (or listened to the Information CD) for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected.

I understand the interviews I take part in will be as part of the Prisoner's Families Support Project.

I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded with my permission and that some of the things I say may be quoted in the project final report or any publications. I understand that these will be anonymised

I agree to take part in the above study.

**Name of Participant**

**Date**

**Signature**

**Name of Researcher**

**Date**

**Signature**

## APPENDIX G

### Parental Consent Form

#### Prisoners Families' Support Project

#### Parental Consent for children (7<16yrs) to participate in an interview

**Researcher: Lorna Brookes**

**Please initial box**

I confirm that I have read or have had read to me or heard on the CD provided, the Parent Information Sheet and the Children's Information Sheet for the above project. I understand this and I have had the opportunity to ask questions.

My child has been read the information sheet and he/she understands why the researcher wants to talk to him/her.

I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that he/she is free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

As my child's parent/guardian I understand I can chose to withdraw my child's participation in the study at any time.

I understand the interview or focus groups my child takes part in will be used as part of the Prisoners' Families Support Project

I understand that the interviews and focus groups will be audio recorded with my permission and that some of the things my child says may be quoted in the projects final report or any publications and I understand that these will be anonymised

I understand that if my child is receiving direct support and he/she says something to Lorna that relates to the research, she may ask him/her if it is ok to note down these thoughts for the study. I understand this information will be anonymised, and that my child has the right to say no.

I agree for my child to take part in the above study, and I am the child's legal guardian.

**Name of Child/Young Person  
(7<16yrs)**

**Male/Female**

**Age of Child/Young Person**

**Name of Parent/Carer**

**Date**

**Signature**

**Name of Researcher**

**Date**

**Signature**

NB: Young people aged 16-18 can consent for themselves.

# APPENDIX H

## Child Assent Form

### Prisoners' Families Support Project

#### Child/Young Person Assent Form

Name of Researcher: Lorna Brookes

Please tick the small boxes if you agree

<p>I have seen the information sheet</p>  <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>I have asked my family or Lorna questions and got them answered</p>  <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>I understand that I can talk Lorna, either on my own or with other children. I will talk about the help children get when a parent is in prison</p>  <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>I know I can stop at any time and do not have to give a reason</p>  <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>I know if I have any more questions I can ask them</p>  <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>I am happy to take part in the project. I know that some things I say might go into the report. I know they will not use my name in the report.</p>  <input type="checkbox"/>

To be completed by child/young person.	To be completed by the researcher
<p>I agree to take part in the project</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Signed by child/young person                      Date</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Your name in capital letters</p>	<p>I have given the named child/young person the chance to discuss the research study.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Signed by researcher                      Date</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Researchers' name in capital letters</p>

## APPENDIX I

### Interview Schedule for Children

#### Prisoners' Families Support Project

##### Children's Interview Schedule

Prior to interviewing each child there will be some warming / settling in questions, such as how are you today, what have you been up to? (school, hanging out with mates, relaxing at home etc). Then explain, I am going to talk to you today about the help you received when your mum or dad went to prison, or when they came out of prison.

**Remind the child:** If I ask you anything you don't want to answer just say pass or I don't want to talk about that. If you want a break, to go to the loo or just to have a rest, just ask or say PAUSE. And if you want the interview to stop altogether just say STOP. You don't have to tell me why. It's perfectly fine to do this if you want to.

*Then tell the child that recording is beginning at this point.*

##### Interview questions / prompts

So what was it like when mum or dad went away?

Can you tell me a bit about who helped you?

When you met the support worker what did they do with you?

What was this like?

Did you ever attend groups and meet any other children who know what it feels like to have a parent in prison?

What was this like?

What *should* support workers do to help children who have a parent in prison?

What should a support worker be like?

Is there anything they don't do that would be good?

Is there anything that they should not do?

Did the support worker do anything with other people in your family? What did they do?

Did they help your mum / dad when they came out of prison? What did they do? What was this like?

## **APPENDIX J:**

### **Interview Schedule for Parent/Cares**

#### **Prisoners' Families Support Project**

##### **Parent / Carer Interview Schedule**

Before the recording begins there will then be some general settling in questions, asking the interviewee how they are feeling on the day, making sure they are comfortable with where they are sitting in the room, that refreshments are available, and they know where the toilets are.

The interviewee will then be reminded that if they feel uncomfortable about any question at all that they can say “pass” and the researcher will move onto another question, or that they can ask for a “pause” to give them chance to reflect or a “comfort break” at any point. They will also be reminded that the interview can be stopped completely any time they wish and there is no need to give an explanation for ceasing the interview.

Then when the interviewee feels ready the recording will begin.

##### ***Questions to set the scene***

I will start the recording now if you are comfortable with that.

Can you begin by describing your family to me?

How many children do you have and who lives with you?

As you know this interview is to ask you about your experiences of having community based support (even if you feel you didn't have enough).

And is your partner/ex partner currently in prison or now released?

So what was it like for you when your partner/ ex partner went away?

##### ***Core questions and prompts***

At what point did you get any support?

(pre sentence/custody, during custody, post release?)

How did this come about? Did you seek it out yourself?

Were you referred into support by an agency

(such as social services, someone from your child's school, a health practitioner etc).

Can you tell me a bit about the help you had?

What was offered to your child/ren?

What was offered to you?

Was any support offered to the person sent to prison?  
(during prison?, post release).

What did you find useful?

What did you feel was missing?

Has the support made things easier for your family?

What do you value in a community practitioner?

Do you feel that there is enough community-based support for  
prisoners families in general?

Do you feel having support can help offenders not to re-offend?

**When the interview comes to its natural conclusion the recording will stop and the interviewee will be advised that the conversation is no longer being recorded.**

**Thanks and de-briefing.**

## APPENDIX K

### Interview Schedule for Prisoners Post-Release

#### Prisoners' Families Support Project

##### Prisoner Parents Post-Release Interview Schedule

Before the recording begins there will then be some general settling in questions, asking the interviewee how they are feeling on the day, making sure they are comfortable with where they are sitting in the room, that refreshments are available, and they know where the toilets are.

The interviewee will then be reminded that if they feel uncomfortable about any question at all that they can say “pass” and the researcher will move onto another question, or that they can ask for a “pause” to give them chance to reflect or a “comfort break” at any point. They will also be reminded that the interview can be stopped completely any time they wish and there is no need to give an explanation for ceasing the interview.

Then when the interviewee feels ready the recording will begin.

##### *Questions to set the scene*

I will start the recording now if you are comfortable with that.

Can you begin by describing your family to me? How many children do you have and who lives with you?

How long ago was it you came out of prison?

As you know this interview is to ask you about your experiences of support provided in the community for your family when you were in prison and post release (even if you feel there wasn't enough).

What do you think it was like for your family when you went away?

Thinking about your family accessing support, do you know how this came about? (did they seek out help themselves? Was it due to a social services or school referral for example?)

Can you tell me a bit about the help your family and you had?

How did it make you feel, knowing they were getting some assistance whilst you were in prison?

Did the community worker support *you* in any way whilst you were in custody?

What about post release?

What did you find particularly useful? Either for yourself or your family?

What did you feel was missing?

How did the support provided affect things for your family?

Do you feel that there is enough community-based support for prisoners' families in general terms?

What do you value in a community worker who is there to help prisoners and their families?

Do you feel having support for families helps offenders not to re-offend?

What should NOT be done?

**When the interview comes to its natural conclusion the recording will stop and the interviewee will be advised that the conversation is no longer being recorded.**

**Thanks and de-briefing.**

