



# “Yes, I can still parent. Until I die, he will always be my son”: Parental responsibility in the wake of child incarceration

Daniel McCarthy and Maria Adams

University of Surrey, UK

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## Abstract

This paper examines what parental responsibility means when an adolescent child is sent to prison, where the traditional parenting relationship seemingly ends and *parens patriae* or penal control comes into full force. Paradoxically, we argue that even in these restricted spaces of contact, *parenting* continues, albeit in a form which runs into frequent tension with the care/control modalities of the prison itself. Our data further demonstrate the importance of addressing a constellation of social adversities experienced by caregivers, in conjunction with the collateral consequences of offending and incarceration. Data are drawn from interviews with primary caregivers with young men in prison ( $n = 61$ ).

## Keywords

family, imprisonment, parenting, responsibility, young offenders

Research into the experience of primary caregivers who maintain relations with incarcerated children is incredibly sparse. This contrasts with a related (and now vast) body of research which has documented the effects of incarceration on families, typically through the perspective of intimate partners or children whose parents are in prison (e.g. Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2008; Wakefield and

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## Corresponding author:

Daniel McCarthy, Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Surrey, UK.

Email: [d.mccarthy@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:d.mccarthy@surrey.ac.uk)

Wildeman, 2014). Whether the focus of these studies can explain primary caregivers' experiences of parenting young men in prison is certainly debatable. Adolescent (male) child–parent dynamics exhibit unique characteristics compared with other relationship forms (Steinberg, 2001). In the case of parenting young male offenders, it is likely that an accumulation of prior antisocial behavior, combined with the consequences of delinquency, place considerable strain on parenting resolve. Primary caregivers may experience several hardships, ranging from violence and conflict perpetrated by the young men (Condry and Miles, 2014); deteriorations in their own physical and mental health as a result of parental status (Green et al., 2006); and considerable levels of stigma, shame, and social isolation from being blamed as parents for contributing to the delinquency of their children (Condry, 2007; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2011). Therefore, while primary caregivers may serve as a key mode of support for young male prisoners, the delivery of support often comes at a major personal cost.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with primary caregivers (n = 61), our core goal is to explain how caregivers maintain ties with young men in prison and how notions of parental responsibility are shaped by the incarceration process. Caregiver involvement in supporting their children in prison may occur precisely because of the *failure* of the State to offer a safe, rehabilitative space, thereby placing greater pressure on caregivers to fill the void of limitations offered by youth imprisonment. This is despite great challenges for caregivers, whose own lives have suffered considerable adversity following the offending of the young men. This activation of parental responsibility through the seemingly impenetrable walls of the prison is therefore analytically significant.

### **Parenting young male offenders: Reexamining collateral consequences**

Successive studies have argued that the intimate connection which family members have with delinquent relatives can result in multiple forms of disadvantage, which commonly occur in conjunction with preexisting struggles such as poverty (Turanovic et al., 2012; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2014). Through the process of assisting prisoners throughout their sentence and beyond (Uggen and Wakefield, 2007; Western et al., 2015), family members experience major disruptions on personal routines, and deployment in social resources and time (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008). According to Braman's (2004) analysis, the effects of incarceration are to damage the social and economic resilience of families, resulting in considerable stigma and restricted aid for caregivers. In conjunction with research which demonstrates that prisoners' families regularly confront emotions of grief akin to bereavement (e.g. Arditti, 2012), secondary incarceration can place acute pressures on the material and emotional resilience of family members.

Despite considerable developments in collateral consequences research, most studies have failed to examine the perspectives of primary caregivers with young

male children in prison. Young offenders fall between categories of youth/adult. In England and Wales, once aged 18, offenders technically become “adults,” although are incarcerated in specific “young offender” facilities until the age of 21 (Ministry of Justice, 2012). Prior to prison, primary caregivers are among the first modes of response to youth offending, and commonly experience frequent contact with the police and courts in cases where their children’s offending has occurred over several years. Some research has argued that prior quality of prisoner–family relationships may play some role in explaining visitation frequency and resettlement outcomes for prisoners (Beckmeyer and Arditto, 2014; Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017). However, far less is known about visitation from family member perspectives (see Christian, 2005, Comfort, 2008 as two key exceptions), especially how parenting is maintained through incarceration.

Parents face considerable pressures to control children who become involved in crime. In these situations, the extent to which caregivers perceive responsibility for the outcomes of their children’s offending behavior is complex. Mothers more than fathers are more likely to be involved in core parenting duties involving young offenders, indicating disproportionality in strain and levels of responsibility (Holt, 2009; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2011). Mothers also face considerable pressures in the efforts to prevent their children’s offending, especially in neighborhood contexts where criminal opportunities and criminogenic peer networks are commonplace (Aldridge et al., 2011; Goldson and Jamieson, 2002; Patillo, 1998). It is further possible that youth delinquency weakens parenting resolve inducing major harms on family processes as a result (Gueta, 2017). Harms inflicted on families can occur before imprisonment (e.g. Turanovic et al., 2012), with criminal justice contact up to, and proceeding, incarceration indicative of a process of what Uggen and Stewart (2014) term “piling on”—the accumulation of criminal sanctions which have consequences for the offenders, as well as their families.

While few scholars have examined potential class differences as important factors explaining parental experiences of youth offending and incarceration, it is plausible that class will play a role in shaping caregiver support and responsibility. Middle-class parents are more likely to have the social and material resources to absorb the effects of youth offending, as well as to challenge the conditions of their children’s confinement in prison (see Cutler, 2000; Olivos, 2006 in context of schools). Working class parents’ general frustration, and at times, resignation toward their children’s imprisonment may create different ideas of responsibility, in which emphasis is placed more on children being left to “do their time” (Halsey and Deegan, 2012), without necessarily the same interventionist stance toward the prison.

Some studies demonstrate that black prisoners relative to white prisoners are more likely to report positive change in family relationships during their sentence (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017; Mowen and Visser, 2016). This finding could suggest differences in the emotional commitment which families offer to minority ethnic prisoners. Conversely, a combination of socioeconomic hardships and systematic racism (Hunter and Davis, 1994; Patillo, 1998) may also lead to

incarceration weighing more heavily on minority families (Christian et al., 2006). Black mothers also experience extensive stigma when their children are involved in crime, especially among single mothers who are commonly criticized for failing to offer an adequate male role model for their male children (e.g. Elliot et al., 2017; Patillo, 1998).

In what follows, we seek to answer several questions: how do caregivers conceive of their own responsibility for their children after ending up in prison, how has imprisonment impacted in how they practice parenting, and how do caregivers seek to intervene in cases where their child's welfare is compromised in prison? Caregiver experiences will also likely be shaped by their race, class, and gender, as well as experience of prior strains induced by youth offending before prison. How these factors play out raises important questions about the sustainability of relationships, and indeed the ways by which caregivers grant support to their children and seek to maintain parenting roles during the incarceration period.

## **Methods**

This paper draws from semistructured interviews conducted with main caregivers ( $n = 61$ ), related to a convicted young person (aged 15–21) serving time in prison. The interviewees were recruited from the visitor centers of two of the largest prisons for young offenders in England: the first prison where male inmates were aged 18–21 and serving an average of four-year terms up to life, mostly for serious violent and drugs offences; the second prison including younger prisoners aged 15–21 serving short sentences (average of two years) mostly for drugs offences, robbery, and violence. On average, the young men were first imprisoned between the ages of 17 and 18.

Our interview sample was collected after each participant had completed an earlier survey and declared interest in taking part in an interview. The main inclusion criteria stipulated that participants should be one of the main caregivers for the young prisoner, i.e. playing a key role in supporting them before prison. Interviewees were conducted either in person at a neutral venue (i.e. café, community hall) or by telephone. With many caregivers travelling long distances to the prison, we conducted over half our interviews by telephone. When assessing quality of transcripts, we found no significant differences in the depth or duration of interview data. Interview respondents were also largely comparable to the larger sample of survey respondents ( $n = 214$ ), although with slightly fewer ethnic minority interviewees.

Our interview data consisted mostly of mothers ( $n = 37$ ), followed by fathers ( $n = 13$ ), then a small sample of other family members such as aunts/uncles/grandparents ( $n = 4$ ), plus older siblings ( $n = 7$ ), all of whom were involved in core caregiving roles. In four cases, we interviewed both parents independently of one another to assess experiences of supporting the young offender. The interview consisted of background information about the young person's behavior, experiences of caring for the young person before and during prison, and the wider

impacts of the young person's offending on the family. In the majority of cases caregivers were single mothers ( $n = 24$ ) or in married couple relationships ( $n = 21$ ). Most of our samples were experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage ranging from financial stress, health issues, housing insecurity, and residence in high crime neighborhoods. A minority of caregivers were, however, from more middle-class backgrounds characterized by employment in industries such as banking and teaching ( $n = 8$ ). Twenty-four of the 61 total interviews took place with caregivers from minority ethnic backgrounds, the most common of whom were Black African or Caribbean ( $n = 11$ ) and South-West Asian ( $n = 8$ ).

Data were thematically coded, based on intensity sampling whereby large themes were initially identified during the first stage of coding. After the broad themes were identified, finer coding of specific variations *within* the themes was generated (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The data were coded independently by a minimum of two members of the research team, with agreement of broad themes, but with some minor differences in identification of specific themes. Our analysis of data also involved numerical coding of some elements of qualitative data, including main mitigating factors given for the young person's offending, and evidence of any stigma which was helpful in identifying patterns across characteristics of caregiver.

## Findings

In the following section, we present key themes from our qualitative interviews. These were organized to reflect various stages of caregiver reflections of the young men's criminal pathway—from making sense of their and their children's responsibility for crime, to how responsibility was enacted by caregivers during the sentence, and finally, how caregivers' responsibility to the young men were reignited following fears about their welfare inside prison.

### *Making sense of the offence: Explaining the dimensions of caregiver responsibility*

In assessing how far our caregiver sample conceived of their own parenting as responsible for the outcome of the young men's offending and imprisonment, we captured a diverse set of responses. These ranged from admissions of responsibility which were caveated by caregivers' efforts to prevent the young men's offending, to regret and sadness regarding the offences, to resignation and frustration. Most caregivers had experienced profound disruption to their lives before prison, during which youth offending and other social problems such as mental illness and family violence took place.

Throughout the interviews we found differences in the ways responsibility was articulated by caregivers. Accounts differed especially by gender, namely in relation to the levels of investment and nurturing which mothers displayed.

These accounts were interwoven with both admissions of personal blame as well as defenses of the ways they had operated as parents to support their children:

He normally stayed indoors, and the only night I allowed him out for the night, because he had been good at school, that night, this was when the crime happened. So that only one night he ever went out. I could have kicked myself really. (Bianca, dual parent family, White British—son convicted of gang-related offence)

Bianca's account explains her predicament of protecting her son by keeping him indoors in an effort to prevent his involvement in crime. These examples of regret should be understood in the context of the struggles caregivers had in preventing their children's path into crime. Many caregivers had resorted to protectionist parenting practices including enforcing strict curfews and even corporal punishment in response to living in communities of residence which placed their children at risk of involvement in crime (note Arditti et al., 2010; Patillo, 1998).

Alternative modes of responsibility also featured gender as a major factor, such as in cases of conflict and violence in the home perpetuated by fathers. Through difficult episodes of relationship conflict between married couples, several caregivers (mostly mothers) cited the conditions of family life as having contributed to their male children escalating their delinquency as a reaction formation to these tensions in the home. Through these periods of surviving in considerably arduous home conditions, even greater pressure was placed on mothers to control their children. Shanice's case is a good example, who cited her difficult relationship with a violent ex-partner, and pressure of having to try to reconcile her relationship as an attempt to exert a stabilizing influence on her son's delinquency:

I felt then pressured into getting into contact with his Dad....I called him [the ex-partner] and he didn't want to know. He didn't make an effort to come round. I then felt guilty for going against what I believed in because I knew what a man he is. I wanted to keep my son safe. I felt from every different direction at that time I felt that I had no choice. They were saying 'well maybe he needs a father figure'. I gave into it and felt terrible. (Shanice, single mother, Black Caribbean—son convicted of robbery)

Shanice documents the pressure felt by her family in attempting to rebuild a relationship with her ex-partner. This struggle was common for single mothers, but complicated even further by race whereby Black mothers were sometimes negatively judged for failing to provide a male role model for their male children. With noted problems of gangs and urban violence in their neighborhoods of residence, Black mothers were more likely to resort to protectionist parenting than white counterparts, in light of fears about their son's becoming involved in crime.

These judgments questioning the competency of mothers were not strictly confined to minority ethnic caregivers, however. Mothers spoke of managing difficult

tensions within families, most commonly between the young men and their fathers (e.g. Hagel and Newburn, 1994). Within these challenging emotional contexts, caregivers displayed a questioning of their own resilience and capacities to withstand these effects over a longer time period, even withdrawing their support from their children on a temporary basis:

Q: As a mother were there any periods where things were worse than others in terms of the challenges you faced?

R: Oh yes! There were some, definitely, absolutely, you know, the police knocking at your door and then, you know, “Oh, we need you to come down the police station.” And after so many occasions you go, “Well, no, I’m not coming. Well, they need an appropriate adult.” You know, you kind of warn your child, look I’m not doing this anymore, I’m not, you know, it comes down to mum. His dad doesn’t want to know, so, there you go. (Kimberley, single mother, mixed race—son convicted of drugs offence)

Situated in a position of family relationships, the ownership and level of personal accountability for the consequences of the young men’s crimes predominantly fell onto mothers. The details of Kimberley’s account were commonplace across our sample, with the pressure experienced by mothers starkly acute compared with other caregiver groups. Reciting major impacts on their personal lives, namely their physical and mental health, and abilities to hold together work and other responsibilities to family, mothers’ responsibilities to their children had usually already reached a high level of adversity even before incarceration.

For single parent fathers, responsibility was articulated in similar ways to mothers. This was usually the result of majority care roles being carried out by these men, and sometimes in situations where their partners had exited relationships due to a combination of strain and anger toward their son. Fathers explained how responsibility to their son was even stronger in the context of these conditions. An example is Alfie, whose life had been drastically affected by his son’s crimes, including the breakdown of his marriage and struggle to maintain work following stress and additional care responsibilities. These challenges to come to terms with his son’s crimes had resulted in even closer bonds and commitment to support his son:

Certainly it has taught me a great deal about genuine, unconditional love of a father to his son which I think is an important thing and we can all profess that but when it comes down to the test, you know, it’s another thing altogether. You learn about your feelings, and, you know, giving him a second chance and hoping that he’s going to come through. So hopefully our relationship will be immeasurably deeper as a result. (Alfie, single father, White British—son convicted of burglary)

Although the emotional consequences of the young men’s crimes had severely affected caregivers’ lives in many cases, resulting in sustained adversity long

before prison, a strong sense of duty and commitment to the young men were documented through the interviews. Yet, these ideas of responsibility took on new meanings and practical effects when the young men entered prison, resulting in a shift in relations once interactions were confined to physical visitation, and other means of communication, such as telephone and letters.

### *Parenting responsibility during the sentence*

A key stage during which caregivers reflected on their relationship status and their role as a parent was when the young men entered prison. In most cases, caregivers regarded their role as more central than before prison in their commitment toward helping the young men survive their sentence. Even though most caregivers remained disappointed and deeply hurt by the young men's imprisonment, they frequently placed these issues aside, prioritizing their unconditional support—a finding which was universal across different social groups.

Below are two common examples embodying caregivers' commitment and support to the young men in prison. In Jane's case, as a mother who took most responsibility for her son, she reflects on how she pushed aside her anger regarding her son's crimes, arguing that she "had to be strong for him" as a moral duty. Similarly, with Obi, a single father originally from West Africa, his commitment to his son was again expressed as a "duty" as a father, regardless of the severity of his son's crimes:

I had to be strong for Aaron [Son], even though he'd let the family down, I was mum, I have to still be there for him and be strong for him. I can't fall apart back then, because he had no one, there was no one there but me to be... even though I don't condone what he did, I had to be not on his side, but had to... I'm trying to put into words. You know, I had to support him even though I don't condone, and I never condone what he done. (Jane, dual parent family, White British—son convicted of firearms offence)

Yes, I can still parent. Until I die, he will always be my son. How the system is or when talking to the Probation and whatever, parents they quickly give up as soon as their son is 18 and all that. I always surprise them. Now that they are trying to do their reports and they say will I allow him to come back home? I say what do they mean, will I allow it? That is home, it doesn't matter what he does. Even if he kills or whatever, that is home. I will always be his Dad. (Obi, single father, Black African—son convicted for breach of community penalty)

Pride, respectability, and demonstrations of care and capability as parents were all linked with the will to support their children during the sentence. Yet, deploying support imposes a considerable weight on the lives of caregivers, most notably in cases of single parents—groups usually having to manage a much wider set of social adversities. Again, the accounts of single parents reflected a strong will to



support their children in prison, and despite common financial strains, prioritization of visits was key to their status as responsible caregivers. Damien as a lone parent to his teenage son sent to prison was struggling to maintain visits due to living on a low income. During the interview Damien recognized considerable tension in his family, with most of his family having reduced ties with his son after the prison sentence. Damien continued to make the trips to the prison despite this adversity:

Oh, yes there's a lot of pressure. Especially as he's got no support anywhere else, there's no support network there, it's just me. I travel up there, and try and go see Aaron, you know, there's a lot pressure on me. I send him money every month, every time I see him it costs me £100, I spend about £500 in a month. He's worth it. The way I look at it is, it's my coping mechanism as well, it makes me feel better if I go. (Damien, single father, White British—son convicted of drugs offence)

The deliverance of visitation was no easy task for the caregivers interviewed. While a minority had both the financial means to travel and take time off work, the majority found visiting the prison emotionally and materially challenging. Tensions incurred through the relationship dynamics prior to incarceration further restricted some caregivers' capacities to provide emotional support. Conscious of managing interactions with their children in a way designed to provide love and care, without judgment and scorn, was a delicate balancing act. Unlike fathers whose advice tended to be more practically oriented around ways of coping in prison, mothers were more commonly involved in close emotional attachments and conflict resolution roles with the young men:

Some days, like, sometimes when he writes me a letter, because Jack's got ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] and he was, he was in his head, Jack couldn't cope with jail, and Jack harms himself, he cuts up. When he writes and tells me that, that makes me angry, and we have had disagreements, but other times we get on right as rain, like. But it's just that when he tells me things like that it plays on my mind. (Beryl, single mother, White British—son convicted of robbery)

I tell him when he's wrong, I don't dwell on what the past, I try and look forward and encourage him when I have the visits to talk about what he needs to be thinking, how he needs to think about his future and I actually talk about positive ... and I always try and look for the, what he's doing, what he does well and what his strengths are. (Amanda, dual parent family, Black Caribbean—son convicted of violent crime)

These two examples reflected more general challenges which caregivers faced in seeking to connect and understand their children's experiences and circumstances inside prison. Beryl's account somberly reflected on how her son struggled to cope during his sentence and reached out to his mother—his self-harming seen as a “cry

for help” which Beryl had been deeply affected by emotionally given her impotence of being able to remedy these issues from afar. Amanda by contrast spoke of having to “tread carefully” with her son during visits, who often reacted angrily to “being given lectures” about his behavior which induced a gentler response to visiting him in prison.

How far caregivers could always deliver support was however dictated by the extent to which the young person would confide in them during physical visitation and other communication forms. Prison experiences play a major role in shaping prisoners’ relations with family on the outside (Rodriguez, 2016). We show that certain cultural aspects of inmate behavior play a key role in restricting trust and reciprocity with family:

Yes, I think so, because very hard, you know, I can’t contact James, I can’t every speak to him if something happens, I can’t phone him and say this has happened, I’ve got to wait for him to phone us, and to be honest, because of where he is, because it’s young offenders, they only get an hour out a day. If he’s out that hour doing something he can’t get to phone me or, sometimes he won’t phone me, he’ll phone my mum because it’s cheaper for him. Phone my mum because I haven’t got a house phone. I’ve only got the mobile. He doesn’t really say a lot, he doesn’t like over the phone, obviously, because it’s all recorded so. He doesn’t tend to speak very often unless I go up there. (Claudette, single mother, White British—son convicted of violent crime)

The capacities to perform “responsible parenting” are significantly tested by the combination of financial strain (inability to have a landline phone), together with the practical difficulties of limited privacy induced by the prison’s screening of calls (Comfort, 2008). Caregivers mostly wanted to maintain emotional conversations with the young men in prison, but were aware of the difficulties of doing so with the surveillance and general “inmate code” of prison life in not letting outsiders know too much about life within (e.g. Crewe, 2009; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2017). Some caregivers spoke of having adapted themselves to the cultural surroundings of the prison insofar as altering their persona and level of intimacy with the young men. Grant is a good example, whose 16-year-old son was serving a two-year sentence for a violent crime. Grant admitted to his son having become very introverted and distant since the start of his sentence (e.g. Crewe, 2009) which had consequences for his own behavior as a father:

I tended to leave, keep myself to myself and keep out of it and I just used to warn Daniel, to give him advice, help him when he needed it, but he was much more distant than he used to be and I miss close contact with him. (Grant, dual parent family, White British—son convicted of drugs offence)

Our data also indicate prisoners would often withhold information from family members about traumatic experiences inside prison, in an effort to prevent them

from worrying about their welfare. On several occasions family members came to find out about these experiences, usually in a secondary form via a sibling or other family member. The outcome of prisoners' decisions to disclose was to add to the anxiety which caregivers felt, even if the prisoners' response was intended to protect their family from knowledge of their personal experience inside prison (e.g. Crewe et al., 2014: 17). In cases where prisoners chose to confide, some caregivers took it upon themselves to intervene in an effort to improve their children's welfare, by appealing directly to prison management. These motivations to challenge the prison to develop work or education provision, or otherwise to criticize a general lack of support or supervision in prison, were mostly driven by caregivers' idealistic visions of prison as a place of rehabilitation. In this sense, we explain how caregivers would reframe responsibility by directly challenging prison governance and its alleged institutional neglects—what we call the “penal state as ‘bad’ parent.”

### *The penal state as “bad” parent*

Conceptions of good/bad parenting commonly rest upon the assumption that parents should always be there to support their children during hard times. Caregivers would persistently struggle with the regime restrictions imposed by prison, raising frequent complaints about the quality of care their children were receiving, as well as expressing frustrations in their abilities to deliver support to their children. Common were issues where information about the welfare of their children in prison were not reported to caregivers. Aside from the obvious fears and anxieties regarding the powerless state which caregivers voiced about the prison regime, one significant factor was the barriers placed on caregivers to meaningfully connect with their children without accurate knowledge of their experiences inside prison:

But they [prison] don't involve me in what Kevin [son] does and where he is. It's almost like he's done the crime, he's gone away and nobody's ever spoken to me, from prison and that lot . . . nobody's ever spoken to me about how I feel about it and whether . . . or anything. They've always made me feel as if I'm almost detached. Not considered. It's him in prison doing his time and that's it. (Helen, single mother, White British—son convicted of sex offence)

We find that caregivers from middle-class backgrounds were more likely to “take to task” the prison on its failure to provide basic care and support for their children. Helen's example of feeling detached from the prison as a parent brought with it an even greater commitment to support her son and to voice her frustration with the limited education access her son had been receiving. Among caregivers with few social resources, and more commonly from working class backgrounds, we found advice such as “keep yourself to yourself,” or to “put your head down and do your time,” which were prevalent among fathers (see Halsey and Deegan,

2012). Yet the minority of the sample from more middle-class backgrounds were more likely to directly challenge prison management, enacting similar practices as witnessed in schools (Cutler, 2000; Olivos, 2006).

I mean, whilst he was in, he has been inside there doesn't seem to be much rehabilitation going on at all. You know, from the beginning he has put in for things, he was putting in for courses for this and do that and you know he just wasn't getting anywhere and that's when I said I was writing to the Governor. (Debbie, single mother, White British—son convicted of drugs offence)

Well, the families are actually treated as . . . they're, sort of, you know, they're judged by, they've got family in the prison, and the families are actually, sort of, treated like the prisoners. There's very little respect for them, and I had quite, sort of, an issue over how other people were treated as well, and a lot of them felt that they couldn't complain or make their voices heard because they were worried about repercussions to their young person's inside. But I actually did write and I put all this down that obviously, you know, if there was anything that I'd ever heard of, that there was any repercussions over what I had voiced, then I would certainly be taking it a lot further. (Susan, dual parent, White British—son convicted of violent crime)

Debbie previously worked as a college administrator and was well used to navigating bureaucracy. Her account explains her frustration of her son being repeatedly refused access to certain education programs in prison. Debbie was in the minority of caregivers who had the skills and the confidence to challenge what she deemed to be prison injustices. Most other caregivers did not challenge, largely resigned to their powerless state—a view presented in Susan's account, a view which conveyed perceived fear about the vindictiveness of prison culture—that having “mummy intervene” was not a desirable method of maximizing the welfare of her son, as Dorothy explains:

The worst thing about prison is I've got very little understanding of how it all works. I'm actively discouraged from trying to find out. Because if I have a concern and I phone in, the officer will say to him, 'oh, your mother's been on the phone again', and he [son] gets it in the neck because I've phoned him, as if I'm being annoying and making their lives more difficult. So as a result he [son] tells me less about what's worrying him, which is a worry for me, and he also doesn't like me trying to do anything about it because there are repercussions. (Dorothy, single mother, White British—son convicted of violent crime)

Resistance to penal power is, of course, a product of the caregivers' powerless state, both as outsiders to the prison, and whose direct parental rights have been eroded during their child's imprisonment. The attempts by some caregivers to challenge penal governance through accusations of the prison's failure to provide care and support for their children in prison are a product of their commitment to

their children and norms about what constitutes “good” parental responsibility. Those caregivers were torn in their decisions of whether to “act over” their children by challenging the prison to perform its prescribed mandates—to rehabilitate—or to resign themselves to trusting their children to survive alone.

One component of caregivers’ political will to intervene was to call the prison to task on its failures to take on the proper job of a parent. Lara—a middle-class Black mother who voiced multiple frustrations with the prison system—demonstrated that her role as a parent has become even more intensive after her son’s sentence. As her account explains, as a result of her complaints about the absence of care and rehabilitation for her son in prison, *parens patriae* is actively contested—the prison regarded as “bad parent”:

I feel like I’m having to do their job [the prison] because they’re not doing it as well as the job of a parent, trying to support him and make him feel like he’s still part of the family and that, you know, if he’s serious and he’s going to try properly he’s welcome back here and we’ll support him 100 per cent, you know, like we did when he came out the first time. But no, absolutely, I think, yeah, we do, mainly because. . . Not necessarily because they’re a young person but because they’re not getting anything there to help them, there’s no rehabilitation. (Lara, dual parent family, Black Caribbean—son convicted of violent crime)

Lara’s account is a particularly good description of the prison as “bad parent” where during the interview she recalled her son having been victimized by fellow inmates, with the result that her son had not been let out of his cell for lengthy periods with impacts on his mental and physical health. Her expression of the prison as a “bad parent” reflected her vision that prison should be a place which, especially for young people, could help promote desistance by providing education, support, and employment experience to enable them to turn their lives around on release. While well aware of news stories regarding resourcing problems in English prisons which had led to staffing shortages and reported problems of order, Lara, along with a number of other caregivers, was political in her condemnation of prison, despite her hope, yet broken dreams of prisons fulfilling the goal of rehabilitation for her child.

## Discussion

This paper has focused on a group who are rarely discussed in collateral consequences research, the primary caregivers of young men in prison. In the wake of successive studies examining how incarceration inflicts harms on different familial groups, we have sought to assess whether primary caregivers experience comparable adversities, which interfere with their capacities to support young men in prison. In general, we concur with much of the collateral consequences literature in claiming that incarceration placed major hardships on caregivers’ capacities to parent during the sentence (Braman, 2004; Turanovic et al., 2012; Wakefield and

Wildeman, 2014; Wildeman and Western, 2010). However, we also demonstrate that social adversities experienced through maintaining parenting relationships with the young men before the sentence induced considerable strain on caregiver lives (e.g. Giordano and Copp, 2015).

Despite our findings demonstrating multiple social problems experienced by primary caregivers before prison, the majority of caregivers were unequivocal in their emotional support directed at the young men during incarceration. This was despite caregivers experiencing harms caused by the young men's behavior before prison, as well as managing major logistical challenges of maintaining parenting roles during the sentence. Because of the liminal age of the young men, who fell between categories of youth/adult, caregivers reported being ignored or very rare contact with the prison regarding the welfare of the young men. We highlight how caregivers would attempt to intervene directly with prison management in cases of their children experiencing unfair treatment, such as access to education or work opportunities in prison. These acts most commonly came from middle-class mothers who had greater social resources to open up dialog with senior prison management, yet were rarely successful in their efforts to bring about resolution to their grievance. Yet these are not just efforts to call penal power into check, but methods of reaffirming caregivers' responsibility for their children in prison.

Our analysis does however identify some characteristics of caregiver as more likely to exhibit emotional and material difficulties courtesy of their relationship with the young men in prison. Adversity before and during the sentence was much more commonplace among single parents, as well as falling most heavily on mothers more than fathers (Gueta, 2017; Holt, 2009; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2011). This contrasts with the findings of Turanovic et al. (2012) who argue that the status of caregiver is less important than the quality and dynamics of relationships within family systems as an explanation of how incarceration effects caregivers. We agree that familial dynamics and support systems within families are crucial attributes underpinning caregiver experiences, but demonstrate that sustained adversity was more common for certain caregiver groups, often bound with ethnic differences in addition to single parent status. For example, ethnic minority single mothers' experienced stigma and exclusion in their own families as a result of assumptions about the capacities to prevent their children's involvement in crime. Previous research has identified major strains experienced by Black mothers in attempting to prevent their (male) children becoming involved in crime (Arditti et al., 2010; Patillo, 1998). We identify with these findings, noting that the contemporary politicization of "absent Black fathers" as a marker of "defective" informal control in families (e.g. Reynolds, 2009), may play some role in fueling single mothers' stigma and feelings of blame for their children's offending.

Our findings also have implications for visitation research. The assumption across visitation research is that physical opportunities for prisoners and their families to engage help maintain relationships which benefit behavior during and after release (see Mears and Cochran, 2014 for reviews). We believe that visitation in the case of young male offenders is more complex than this picture. Our data

demonstrate evidence that caregivers struggle in their efforts to develop emotional ties with their children due to the fear that many prisoners have of offloading concerns about their personal welfare and vulnerabilities in prison (Crewe et al., 2014; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2017). Furthermore, some caregivers noted the careful act of avoiding excessive judgment and scorn toward their children during visits as a means of maintaining relationships. Therefore, we recognize the need for visitation scholars to provide a more nuanced assessment of the social mechanisms and emotional barriers at work during visitation, which may offer important empirical insight into why visitation is more effective for some offenders more than others.

We have chosen to focus our attention in this paper on the practical and emotional challenges in delivering parenting roles over the course of the sentence. This is not a complete picture of relationship dynamics between caregivers and young men, which are obviously vast. In particular, we recognize that further analytic work is needed to explore potential differences in levels of resilience across caregiver groups over time (e.g. Arditti, 2012) as well as possible heterogeneous impacts which incarceration inflicts on caregiver lives (Granja, 2016; Turney and Wildeman, 2015). Our overall sample of 61 caregivers is small by statistical standards, with a need for larger random population-level samples to develop these findings. Our data were also gathered from prison visitor centers thereby creating a selection effect in our sample—those caregivers who had chosen to visit their children in prison. Although previous evidence indicates that most prisoners receive visits (Prime, 2014), we cannot explain nonvisitor experiences. Given knowledge of the challenging reentry pathway on release from prison (e.g. Mowen and Visser, 2015), examining what happens to relationships after release from prison is important for future studies to address. Finally, international comparisons would help shed light on any general processes, or culturally specific factors, underpinning caregiving roles in supporting young male (and female) offenders.

We conceive of this study as an important step toward assessing how different types of family member are affected by incarceration and prior offending. We argue that the experience of primary caregivers is an important development to current collateral consequences research, providing evidence of how hardships weigh heavily on single parents, and considerable challenges maintaining ties with young men in prison. Future challenges for researchers and policy makers will be to investigate ways of best supporting caregivers at an early time frame well before incarceration, rather than to rely upon visitation and other reentry initiatives as methods to respond to caregivers' and other family members' needs.

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**Daniel McCarthy** is Reader in Criminology at the University of Surrey. He has recently served as principal investigator for an ESRC-funded project investigating the experiences of parents with adolescent children in prison. His current research interests relate to the social effects imprisonment on families and prisoners. Recent papers have appeared in *Justice Quarterly*, *Crime and Delinquency*, and the *British Journal of Criminology*.

**Maria Adams** is Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Surrey. She previously conducted her PhD on the experiences of the families of prisoners in the West of Scotland, after which she worked as a research assistant on the Parenting Young Offenders project underpinning this paper.