CAN FAMILY–PRISONER RELATIONSHIPS EVER IMPROVE DURING INCARCERATION? EXAMINING THE PRIMARY CAREGIVERS OF INCARCERATED YOUNG MEN

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How incarceration affects the lives of prisoners’ family members has received a growing level of interest amongst scholars during the past decade. The majority of research has pointed to the negative affects that incarceration wreaks on family lives. Yet, far less attention has been paid to the countervailing effects of incarceration, and in particular, cases where prisoner–family relations may improve during the sentence. Focusing on primary caregivers maintaining relations with young men in prison, we examine how and why these improvement dynamics exist, and consider what role incarceration may play in helping some families to rebuild relationships with prisoners in the restricted physical context of the prison.

Key Words: imprisonment, families, young offenders, adversity

Introduction

Prison has been overwhelmingly regarded as a criminogenic institution with negative consequences for prisoner outcomes and their family members left behind. More recent work, however, has questioned whether incarceration inflicts wholly negative effects on prisoner–family relationships (Turanovic et al., 2012; Turney and Wildeman, 2013; Turney, 2015). When focused principally on those family members left behind after a relative is incarcerated, the prison sentence is often only one part of a long chain of adversities experienced (Christian and Kennedy, 2011; Arditti, 2012). Social problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, violence and mental health issues can place considerable strain on family members, occurring in tandem with often persistent and long-term intrusion from criminal justice agencies as a result of the crimes committed by a family member (Giordano and Copp, 2015). Whilst not to deny the harmful consequences of incarceration, we know little about alternative instances where the prison sentence can provide an opportunity to settle previous relationship tensions and begin to rebuild ties between family members and prisoners. In light of oft challenging contexts underpinning family–prisoner ties before the sentence, this article attempts to shed light on the conditions under which imprisonment may operate to rebuild or stabilise family–prisoner relationships.

In this study, we focus on the experiences of primary caregivers related to young men serving prison sentences. The primary caregivers of young men (mostly consisting of mothers) have a very different set of relationship dynamics to those studies focusing on

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the effects of incarceration on intimate couples, or separation of children from parents in prison. The deployment of support to young offenders often comes at a cost to caregivers, and especially mothers, who experience major hardships including violence perpetrated by their children (Holt, 2013; Miles and Condry, 2015), impacts on physical and mental health (Green et al., 2006; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2011) and lack of support from family and formal support agencies (McCarthy, 2017). Many of these hardships predate the prison sentence. And, yet despite these issues, parents, and mothers most notably, are commonly those who still maintain an important role in the lives of many young offenders (Schroeder et al., 2010; Halsey and Deegan, 2015).

In this article, we provide analysis of how caregivers reflect on relationship change with young men during incarceration. Data are based on cross-sectional interviews with 61 caregivers visiting young men across two English young offender prisons. Our approach is a rare one in studies of prisoner–family relationships and marks one of the first to examine the case of parents/primary caregivers with young men in prison—the latter a group at the peak age of their offending, combined with inducing particular strains on caregivers prior to incarceration. Unlike purely quantitative studies that have identified change in prisoner–family relationships over the sentence (e.g. Massoglia et al., 2011; Turney, 2015; Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017), such studies have been unable to offer sufficient insight into how and why relationship change occurs using qualitative data. Our findings demonstrate that incarceration of young men can provide an important stage from which some caregivers can begin the process of rebuilding relationships, often after conflict preceding incarceration.

How and why can prisoner–family relationships improve?

Previous studies examining prisoner–family relationships have focused predominantly on intimate couples, especially the effects of parent incarceration on children left behind (Comfort, 2008; Arditti, 2012; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2014). Here research has identified major challenges maintaining relationships, due to the consequence of conflicts existing before prison, as well as difficulties repairing these tensions in unfavourable spaces of prison visitation, which commonly lack privacy and opportunities to communicate openly (Comfort, 2008; Moran, 2013). Financial costs of visitation combined with lengthy journeys and restricted visitation times further limit how far families can maintain contact with relatives in prison (Codd, 2013). The families of prisoners are also commonly impacted by social and economic problems besides having a relative in prison, with poverty, housing insecurity, and mental and physical health problems identified (Arditti, 2012; Turanovic et al., 2012). How and why prisoner–family relationships may improve in prison therefore would appear to be highly challenging due to these adverse circumstances.

Studies of prison visitation demonstrate that visits provide important foundations for social support to be developed, with prisoner exchanges with supportive persons creating closer relationships over the sentence (Beckmeyer and Arditti, 2014; Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017; Meyers et al., 2017). Brunton-Smith and McCarthy (2017) show that parents are more likely to maintain close ties as visitors, whereas relations with partners and children are more likely to deteriorate by the end of the sentence. Similar findings can be found in Mowen and Visher (2016) who demonstrate that frequent visits from family members were responsible for positive change, but that offenders with
more convictions, those with mental health issues and those with conflicts with family were more likely to experience weaker ties with family while in prison. The quality of visitation provision and the types of visitation (e.g. extended visits/family days, normal visits or access to phone, email and telephone) may also impact on the ways that family can interact and build up meaningful ties with prisoners.

Different types of family member can also play more direct roles in supporting young offenders during the prison sentence. Most notably, mothers and significant others have been identified as playing a common role in supporting prisoners (e.g. Western et al., 2015) whilst taking on greater levels of responsibility for financial and childcare matters (Lowenstein, 1986; Condry, 2007; Turanovic et al., 2012). These dimensions of responsibility also involve commitment to organization and fulfilment of visits to the prison, activities overwhelmingly carried out by women (e.g. Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2008).

Incarceration can provide some prisoners with time with which to reflect on their past in a way that inspires them to reach out to other family members. Prisoners can establish the initial beginnings of what Giordano et al. (2002) term ‘cognitive transformations’—attitudinal changes helping serve as a foundation for more formalized, structural sources of support at a later date (see also Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Examples include prisoners questioning their past offender identity whilst in prison (e.g. Irwin, 2009; Bullock et al., 2018), which then operates to bring about certain outcomes such as seeking forgiveness or establishing closer ties with family, or to help orientate themselves towards finding work once released from prison.

The outcome of ‘cognitive transformations’ is, however, only productive insofar as the efforts from the offender to change their attitudes are met with belief and sincerity from those around them (e.g. family members, prospective employers). Seeing an offender exhibit behavioural change over the duration of their sentence may be encouraging as a platform from which family may increase their level of support and investment (e.g. Comfort, 2008). In the case of young offenders entering prison in the teenage years, the period of psychological development over the course of the sentence (Monahan et al., 2009), may influence how they engage with their immediate family. From a caregiver perspective, seeing a child mature in prison—showing remorse, seeking forgiveness and signs of wanting to desist from crime—can all be positive attributes underpinning perceived improvement in a relationship. The situation of many young men serving time in prison means that caregivers will rely heavily on their perceptions garnered during the course of the prison sentence to assess any possible changes in the young men.

One of the major deficits of research focusing on prisoner–family relationships is the assumption that it is the prison sentence, and not a variety of pre-prison circumstances, which impose harm on these ties. In the case of young offenders, it is not uncommon to find caregivers managing a variety of challenging behaviours before the prison sentence, throughout childhood and adolescence. Therefore, although the prison sentence may be highly consequential especially for the welfare and future life prospects of young offenders (Goldson, 2005; Scott and Codd, 2010), the precise impact on caregivers is less clear. Time apart from young men involved in chaotic cycles of offending behaviour can, at times, be functional for re-stabilizing family lives, what Halsey and Deegan (2015: 140) refer to as the ‘curious “embrace” of the correctional system as the means for short-circuiting cycles of harm’. Despite prison rarely conceived as a place to help facilitate
rebuilding of family relationships, in certain cases, such as if an offender has severe substance misuse or mental health problems, family respite may be one benefit from the separation (Halsey and Deegan, 2015). Such a reality of caregivers conceiving of prison as one of their last remaining sources of hope for offender change should, however, be cautiously assessed. With few services for caregivers to turn to in cases of severe behavioural problems in young adolescent men, on top of major cuts to an already thin array of support options in areas of youth and family services (Children’s Society, 2016; Local Government Association, 2018), mean that caregivers commonly try to manage the complex needs of their children with limited, or even no formal support.

Although comprising a small number of cases in their analysis of prisoners’ families, Christian and Kennedy (2011: 391) write that ‘incarceration brought a sense of relief compared to when the offender was on the streets and they worried about his whereabouts’. Through the stress of offender’s behaviour before prison, incarceration was regarded by family members as containing the hope of changing the offender. Other studies demonstrate circumspection regarding the respite benefits of incarceration for caregivers. Sturges and Hanrahan (2011) focusing on relations between mothers and delinquent young men write that ‘at best, it seems that the relationship has become manageable—often because the offender is currently incarcerated’ (2011: 995). Sturges and Hanrahan regard the respite effect of incarceration as relative in its improvement to relationships, and depending heavily on the quality and context of relationships. Furthermore, the means by which caregivers begin to engage in activities or hobbies that were previously difficult due to the stress and logistics of parenting young men. Therefore, respite need not just be the absence or reduction of adversity, but the importance of having greater personal control of leisure and everyday routines.

Data and Methods

We initially administered a self-completion questionnaire to family members visiting two large young (male) offender prisons in England (for prisoners aged 15–21). The first prison held young men aged 18–21 and serving an average of 4-year terms up to life; the second prison catering for young men aged 15–21 serving shorter sentences (average of 2 years). Most young men were first imprisoned between the ages of 17 and 18.

Over an approximate period of 3 months in each prison, data were collected during which a member of the research team attended the majority of visiting days. The original goal of the questionnaire was to enable us to capture basic information about the background of prison visitors and to recruit primary caregiver interviewees from this initial ‘screening process’. In total 215 questionnaires were gathered. The questionnaire was issued by a member of the research team within the prison visiting centre prior to the family members’ entrance into the formal security of the prison. Typically, the stay in the visitor centre took an average of 20 minutes, which presented us with the opportunity to administer the questionnaire. Visitor centre staff (civilian volunteers) were briefed about our study and knew the main focus of our research was on primary caregivers of prisoners, and not groups such as

Having a consistent member of the research team in each prison also helped reduce the risks of double counting where questionnaires were administered to prison visitors. In fact, on several occasions where a visitor was asked to complete a survey but had done so previously they identified this to the researcher.
friends. Visitor centre staff had close rapport with many of the families and in some instances helped identify those persons applicable to the study. Data were collected mostly on the demographics of visitors (e.g. relation to prisoner, ethnicity, age, distance travelled to prison).

The second interview phase of the study consisted of using a ‘tear off’ form attached to the earlier questionnaire, which outlined details of the interview component of the study and invited interested participants to provide a contact number or email. This ‘tear off’ form was handed to the researcher in person on completion of the questionnaire. Further information was sent to those potential participants about the study, giving them sufficient time to consider whether or not they wanted to take part in the interview (a requirement of ethical review).

Following the participants’ declaration of interest to participate in the study, an interview was arranged at a neutral location, or in situations where travel was a problem for participants, a telephone interview was conducted instead. Over half of the interviews were conducted by telephone, mostly due to long distances between the caregivers’ residence and the prison/other potential venue for conducting face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted in English by a member of the research team, which lasted approximately 60 minutes each. All interviewee names were changed to pseudonyms, with other distinguishing details of the case also changed to protect their identity. In total, we conducted 61 qualitative interviews with the primary caregivers of young men in prison through this method of recruitment. Interview questions consisted of details about the relationship quality with the young men during childhood and adolescence, parenting challenges, events leading to criminal onset and escalation, as well as detail surrounding the consequences of youth offending and imprisonment on caregivers (e.g. stigma, mental health, social networks of support). Interview data were coded using thematic analysis, based on intensity sampling consisting of a first initial analysis of broad themes, followed by finer coding of within themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Data were independently coded by a minimum of two researchers, with good consistency in generation of themes.

Examining the sample

We began our analysis by assessing whether our interview sample reflected similar trends as our earlier survey sample in terms of relationship improvement. Table 1 illustrates the sample who completed the survey only (choosing not to participate in a later interview), compared to those respondents who completed the survey as well as an interview. This information helps us compare whether or not there are major differences in the demographic characteristics of the two sample groups.

Before undertaking the study, we were mindful that young men in prison may not always have relationships with parents, and instead be cared for by other family members, such as aunts/uncles, grandparents or even older siblings on occasions. Our survey therefore tried to capture this diversity. Yet, on the whole we identified mothers as the most frequent respondents. These overall percentage figures for the survey did, however, include 37 cases of other family members and friends visiting, which affected this result. For the ethnicity of caregivers, we identify a smaller overall proportion of ethnic minority interviewees relative to the survey sample. Although far from insignificant as
a subsample, we do note the possibility of greater distrust and suspicion of taking part in the interview aspect of the study among ethnic minority groups (e.g. George et al., 2014). Our interview sample did include a large volume of caregivers related to young men who had committed serious crimes. The majority had committed violent crimes, followed by drugs offences, and property offences. With reductions in the number of young offenders in prison since 2008/9 in England and Wales, we have witnessed instead a greater proportion of young people having committed more serious crimes in prison over recent years (Ministry of Justice, 2018). We believe this factor contributes to our offence composition in our sample.

Turning to our interview data, we identified general themes involving perceived relationship change or stability with the young men in prison from the perspective of primary caregivers since the sentence began. We coded data and identified three main outcomes—those relations that had stayed the same from negative ties or ties that had worsened during the sentence \( n = 15 \), those ties that had stayed the same from generally positive familial relations \( n = 21 \) and those that reported improvement either from conflictual ties before prison, or more positive ties—that had seen relationships improve from either direction of quality \( n = 25 \). During interviews, we asked direct questions about change in relations during the prison sentence and were able to also capture information about tensions and conflicts in families, arising from the offences of the young men, but also more general patterns of adversity in families, such as poverty, domestic violence and drug use.

Among the improvers category, most often mothers maintained ties with the young men in prison via regular visitation. In 17 cases, it was mothers who reported experiencing improvements, four cases of fathers, and four cases of siblings reporting improvement. No discernible patterns were identifiable by ethnicity in the sample of improvers relative to the wider sample of interviewees.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
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<th>Interviewee sample</th>
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<td>37</td>
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²For the variable ‘caregiver’, 37 cases consisted of other groups including friends and other family members including partners and cousins. These were excluded from the table to allow suitable comparisons to be made with the interview sample.
³A single case of caregiver and ethnicity was coded as missing \( n = 214 \).
Results

Why do relationships improve? The mechanisms of change in family–prisoner relationships

We continued our focus on examining the specific factors responsible for perceived relationship improvement in our caregiver sample. We carried out within-category coding to identify differences in our subsample of improvers.

Figure 1 outlines the process by which improvement occurred within our interview data. Two of the three themes (respite and prisoner trauma) all occurred from more challenging pre-prison relationship contexts. For the rebuilding ties theme, we found this to be split between six caregivers citing conflict before prison and 10 caregivers reporting comparably good relations.

Figure 1 illustrates the subthemes within the broad category of improvers that consisted of three main aspects; respite, recovery and change, which consisted of cases where imprisonment of the young men had brought about a relative period of recovery for caregivers, as well as granting greater control to difficult pre-prison relations; prisoner trauma whereby difficult events in prison such as self-harming and suicide resulted in closer emotional connections between the caregivers and the young men; rebuilding ties and improving trust, which concerned more modest and incremental changes to relationships, with prison serving as an opportunity to review past behaviour and reconsider the meaning and importance of relationships, with developing trust between caregivers and young men at the heart of these improvement contexts.

We now explain the processes by which the four themes operated, drawing on the accounts of primary caregivers in what they regarded as the features underpinning improvement in their relations with the young men.
Respite, recovery and change

Respite, recovery and change were important factors underpinning how caregivers conceived of relationships with the young men having improved from often challenging situations preceding incarceration. Expressing time apart, the prison sentence was regarded by caregivers as an important period from which to escape the problem behaviours of the young men which had imposed considerable strain on them, particularly through co-residence in the same home. Throughout the caregiver accounts we identified patterns of violence and intimidation, drug use and serious criminal offending committed by the young men. Respite was principally concerned with the benefits of the escape from the young men when incarcerated, and how this period apart proved productive in rebuilding ties and allowing time for the caregiver to recover from these struggles. In the majority of the accounts of respite and recovery, we found mothers to be most likely to experience these effects.

Amanda’s account outlined her fears for her son’s life following several episodes of violence in the local area, in which he was attacked. Amanda spoke of feeling highly anxious about her son leaving prison and returning to the same neighbourhood. At the time of the interview, her son’s incarceration was regarded as a ‘mixed blessing’ that despite missing him, his lifestyle outside the prison brought with it a perpetual fear that something more sinister would happen to him on release:

He’s locked up now so of all of the things, psychologically, it’s good for me because I don’t have worry, where we used to, I remember me and my partner used to say every time we heard police sirens we’d be worried is it him? You know, we couldn’t sleep at night until he got in so there was always dramas, there was always virtually every single week. (Amanda, Mother)

We identified cases where caregivers feared for the safety of young men more when they were on the street compared to in prison. Cited were instances where the young men had been seriously assaulted, or otherwise had experienced the bereavement of close friends killed because of violence. Similar situations also existed where substance misuse of the young men had resulted in major pressures being inflicted on family members. Yvette spoke of the strains of living with her son, this time in the context of his struggles with drug abuse that had resulted in dramatic changes to his behaviour, including regular violent outbursts towards his family. Yvette described having to cope with the additional pressures of managing a full-time job alongside care responsibilities to her other children in the family. She called her son’s incarceration ‘something I expected’, but detailed how her relationship with him had improved in prison largely as a result of him not taking drugs and experiencing serious psychological reactions to these substances:

Massive, absolutely massive change, especially in mine and his relationship. I think, purely because he is not on the amount of drugs, or on the drugs that he was taking, he is not with any of, I know he is in the prison with kids like him but, he has got no personal ties to those people whereas at home, you know, there was always big gangs of them and, since he has not been around that and not been around the alcohol and the drugs and especially the cannabis, he was totally addicted to cannabis before he went to prison, smoking it like people smoke cigarettes, if you know what I mean, total massive paranoia, all that seems to have gone. (Yvette, Mother)

Time in prison was for Yvette’s son an important stage through which to ‘get clean’ from drugs in an environment away from peers and familiar social surroundings.
For Yvette, since the sentence there had been a cessation of drug use, with the positive reflections on his changing character during this time, key factors underpinning their improved relationship.

Respite was not just important as a means of caregivers having time apart from the difficult behaviour of the young men, but also a period by which caregivers could begin the process of recovering. Seeking support for themselves and beginning to re-socialize with family and friends who had been neglected due to the devotion of their resources being diverted to the young men before their incarceration were all commonly mentioned by caregivers. The respite period encompassed more than just a ‘cooling off’ time. Rather, it also gave time for caregivers to regain balance and control of their lives in ways that were previously denied. As Susan’s account explained, considerable time was placed on responding to the behaviour of her son before prison, resulting in major hardships to her relationship with her husband, which had deteriorated because of illness. As she frankly remarked during the interview, ‘his [son’s] life was only going one way, and I would either visit him in the morgue, or visit him in prison’. During the course of the sentence, Susan described a rebalancing of her family life, with time to concentrate on helping not only her son in prison, but also her husband who had suffered some physical health problems.

I was so focused on concentrating on the children … I lost sight of just how poorly my husband was getting, but that’s all sorted and he is, I tell you, he’s a lot stronger now (Susan, Mother).

This theme of diverting support away from other family members towards the son in trouble was commonplace and resulted in caregivers feeling guilty for this disproportionate deployment of care and attention. Time apart from the young men in prison, although disappointing and often traumatic for caregivers especially during the first few months of the sentence, did, however, grant caregivers with the ability to re-establish their lives. This time apart was also assisted by knowledge of some change in the young men during their sentence, compared to before prison. Although offender change was evident in the respite theme, this was typically a result of coming off drugs and alteration of psychological state, rather than a version of change more commonly seen in desistance accounts (e.g. Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2004). We argue the process of caregivers having time to ‘take stock’ and regain balance and control in their lives was proceeded by further improvement to relationships with the young men resulting from observations of change in their psychological response, whether through remorse and regret, or efforts to engage in prosocial behaviour inside prison.

A further component of perceived improvement in the relationship with the young men was where efforts had been made to try and remedy their failure to gain an education during their teenage years. Many of the young men had dropped out of formal education before entering prison and saw it as an opportunity to develop some basic qualifications during their sentence. Logistically, this was easiest for those prisoners serving longer sentences (i.e. a minimum of 2 years) who had a chance to settle into the prison and engage in these activities, most of which consisted of basic academic or vocational qualifications. Jane described a multitude of difficulties with her son before prison, encompassing school dropout, problems with him going missing with friends and behavioural problems in the home. As Jane continued, remarking that since the sentence:
We get on a lot better. We talk, obviously not every visit goes well, sometimes I’ve got to remember he’s still a, well he’s a teenage boy and will be a bit sulky and a bit argh, but they are quite rare, they are normally quite rare. He’s quite chirpy. He’s back in education. It’s ironic really, but a lot of the children there go back into education, probably when they’re outside weren’t in education, and he goes, ‘I’m missing this, I’m missing that’ and he looks forward to the education because there’s nothing else to do really, so it’s good in that respect. (Jane, Mother)

Focusing on taking small steps of progress following their sentence, caregivers experienced a comparably positive reflection of the young men’s attitude compared to the period before the sentence. Most caregivers admitted to wanting to support the young men, even if some relationships were deeply damaged prior to imprisonment. Commitment to the young men should be further contextualized as a fear of losing contact with the young men, with sensitization to positive changes during the sentence helping provide a stronger platform to support relationships. At times, however, it would take extreme examples of the young men’s trauma inside prison before caregivers were alerted of the prisoners’ vulnerability. In these rare cases, traumatic events operated as a lever to instigate caregiver response, even in the wake of very conflictual relations occurring before prison.

Prisoner trauma as facilitator of family support

Although comprising a small number of overall cases \((n = 2)\), caregivers cited major traumatic events experienced by the prisoner as a turning point in re-establishing relations. In these reported cases, serious self-harm and suicide attempts were responsible for caregivers’ awakening about the vulnerability of their children in prison. Relationships before prison were conflictual. James described his relationship with his son as extremely difficult after his son had committed a serious violent crime. James as the young man’s father was one of the only family members to remain in contact with his son during his sentence. Experiencing serious psychological struggle during his sentence, James referred to his son eventually attempting to take his own life in his cell. On this occasion, the prison phoned James and invited him into the prison to console his son—a gesture that was significant for James to realize the extent of his son’s internal suffering. After the point of his attempted suicide, James had become closer to his son and more aware of his son’s major ‘internal grief and regret for what happened’. This was then supported by the prison, involving James on a self-awareness course run in prison, which allowed time for him to engage with his son:

We had a family psychologist come in and he rang me up and asked me if I could come in for a session. He used to have a session a week with my son and about every month and a half he’d call me in … he was actually fascinated with the way I’d hold things back from my son just so he wouldn’t get upset and of course he held back, things back from me so I wouldn’t get upset and it turned out we was both lying to each other most of the time so he actually turned that around and said, ‘Right, let’s get it all out there’. (James, Father)

Similar experiences to James were cited by Helen whose son also had experienced major psychological trauma during his sentence. Helen’s son had managed to conceal his self-harming from her for several months. According to Helen, her son felt great
shame for the crime he committed, limiting communication with his family in order to avoid adding even more strain to his time in prison (e.g. Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018):

When I went for prison visits he hid all his self-harm under his jumpers and high neck collars because he tried to hang himself. The prison don’t tell you because you’re just the parent, you’re not their wife. Because parents, they don’t feel they have to tell you. They would only tell me if my son said ‘please let my mum know’. Which obviously he didn’t because he wanted it kept from me. (Helen, Mother)

Helen later continued that ‘since he’s been in prison and he’s opened up we’re even closer, do you know what I mean? Because he’s let me understand him deeper. Whereas he probably didn’t at home’. These identity transitions have been readily understood in the context of desistance research from the perspective of offenders (Gadd and Farrall, 2004; Gadd, 2006), but rarely through family members’ reconstructions of the young men as ‘vulnerable’. These extreme acts of personal suffering experienced by the young men in prison were internalized by caregivers, resulting in expressions of sorrow, sadness and sympathy. Such traumatic incidents became significant moments in their perceived identity transformation from ‘offender’ to ‘child that needs help’, which were fundamental for rebuilding closer communication, and eventually a perceived improvement in the relationship.

It is, however, important to recognize that this theme along with the previous one (respite, recovery and change) was developed from comparable periods of tension in the relationships. Our final theme explores relationship improvement from a more mixed foundation—those whose relationships had developed after some conflict, compared to those with a more solid foundation—where relationships were regarded by caregivers as having improved incrementally over the course of the sentence from a firmer base before prison, compared to the other themes documented.

Re-marking family ties and building trust

Compared to the theme of respite and intimacy through trauma, re-marking ties and building trust were associated more with either positive or negative relationship quality before prison. A combination of trauma placed on caregivers as a result of the offence, and sometimes distrust between caregivers and the young men, resulted in some referring to the prison sentence as an important step in fostering ties again in the aftermath of the offence. We identify that the re-marking of ties and trust often encompassed more modest incremental outcomes such as the role of caregiver’s visits communicating commitment to the young men, with relationships worked on and trust gradually improving out of these interactions. However, there were difficulties regaining trust from comparably different pre-prison relationship conditions, with our analysis highlighting that even despite variations in relationship quality before prison, the processes underpinning improvement were similar for caregivers whose relationships were either more stable, or conflictual before prison.

Caregivers cited how the young men had spent minimal time socializing and engaging in meaningful dialogue with them during the months, and sometimes years, running up to their eventual incarceration. This was typically due to the young men spending time with friends engaged in crime. Most cases involved the young men living
with the main caregiver before prison. Despite the reduced contact, the relationships between caregivers and the young men were not regarded as necessarily conflictual. Common in the accounts of caregivers was the significance of the prison sentence as a ‘wake-up call’ to both the young men and the caregivers, serving to establish a sense of reflection on what went wrong before prison.

Re-marking ties and trust was induced by the prison term reminding both the young men, and the caregivers also, of the value in sustaining good relations, rather than to let these ties dwindle as was the case before prison. Abdul, for example, cited a combination of his expression of love and devotion to his son, combined with his son’s reflection on offending during the sentence as major factors underpinning improvement in their relationship:

I think he loves me more. I think he appreciates everything now. He can see that all his friends were useless (laughs), you know, they all promised him false hope, but he can see now where the money comes from, where the love comes from, and when he needs something his mum and dad are always there for him. (Abdul, Father)

Closer bonds were thus facilitated through a combination of the young men’s perceived shift away from negative peer relationships before prison, together with greater amounts of time to reconnect with caregivers. Although visitation and other means of communication obviously place limits on the extent to which these interactions can take place regularly, the perception of having opportunities to concentrate on ‘family time’ during the sentence (e.g. Jardine, 2017) is important as a driver underpinning relationship improvement. From the perspective of caregivers, (re) developing ties during the prison sentence is paramount for their own coping besides the resettlement benefits that may be achieved from the offenders. Rebuilding ties was a major step for caregivers to put aside their own feelings of disappointment and frustration, in order to prioritize their support for the young men in prison.

Every time I see him, yeah, we get stronger. We get stronger. I mean we was inseparable when he was out anyway, he come everywhere with me. I think he [son] thought I was going to, you know, go off the rails and I did at one stage and I pulled myself back. And you know I was like … got to get my shit together for him. (Neville, Father).

Despite comparatively good ties with the young men in 10 cases, we also encountered earlier tensions between caregivers and the young men before prison ($n = 6$). These tensions included regular arguments and hostility towards caregivers from the young men. Caregivers spoke of the prison sentence as a period from which to rebuild trust with one another. This usually was facilitated by the caregiver in the first instance and was assisted by their efforts to visit the young men in prison, sending a reminder that despite the consequences of the offence that some family members cared for them in prison. We found that in many cases of rebuilding ties from comparably conflictual relations before prison that mothers were the more likely to keep visiting the young men, with other family members such as fathers, siblings and extended family either reducing contact, or sometimes cutting off ties altogether. This reduction in contact was more often because of some family feeling let down by the young men. That mothers were the more likely to forgive and maintain contact is significant in this respect:
Yes, it has, we’ve become really close. I think he trusts me a lot more because I’ve done more for him, maybe badly or not, but I’ve supported him 100% since he’s been inside. Whereas a lot of his family haven’t, and I think he’s trying, I think he’s now learning, he gives them lip service and he actually means what they say. (Clare, Mother)

Clare’s experience is indicative of the tentative bonds that can exist between young men and caregivers during the sentence. Visitation was an important stage from which to re-establish trust, both from the perspective of the young men, but also the caregivers also. The controlled interactions facilitated by visitation also served to allow communication to occur in a structured form where tempers and arguments were often restricted (although not absent). Due to visits occurring every 2–3 weeks for most prisoners, interactions with family were important moments in the rebuilding of ties:

He was quite a handful as a child, and I tended to shout at him more than speak to him, that’s just me. But since he’s been in [prison] there we’ve obviously spoke and we’ve just got a better relationship, our relationship has totally changed.

I: Yes, do you think that’s because of being able to visit or is just …
R: Yes, I think so, because he’s now, he’s now confiding in me and telling me things that before, he’d go to my sister and tell her, he’s now coming to me, and he’s telling me things that happened when he was younger, there was things he used to do that he knows mum wouldn’t have approved of, and, yes. He’s told me quite a lot since he’s been in there, and we actually sat and spoke about things. (Claudette, Mother)

Visitation research has consistently pointed to the sustained benefits that family contact has with prisoners, with the incremental benefits of contact sending a reminder to prisoners that there are people that still care for them (Tasca et al., 2016; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018). We identify with these findings, arguing that at least for some relations between caregivers and young men, visitation can serve as a key mode by which apologies may be announced, trust be developed and clarity about family members who actually care enforced through the efforts and commitment to visit. Although visits totalling approximately 3 hours per month may appear limited for remedying complex relationship difficulties, our data indicate that certain incremental benefits may be achieved through visitation. Signs of reflection and introspection communicated by the young men through conversation with family members can help demonstrate a change in their former selves. The significance besides the obvious ramifications for primary desistance among the prisoners (King, 2013; Bullock et al., 2018) is to revalidate the importance of caregivers supporting the young men during and beyond the sentence—a decision made easier by the positive behavioural reflections exhibited.

Discussion and Conclusion

Focusing on a group rarely understood within the families of prisoners’ literature—primary caregivers of young men in prison—we have sought to shed light on the ways that relationships may be stabilized and in the process of being rebuilt. Our core argument is that the so-called improvement effect that caregivers cite should be carefully contextualized in broader family harms that are experienced, which intersect and produce countervailing effects of incarceration within a distinct subsample of our wider data set. Here we identify a variety of life adversities preceding incarceration as inflicting...
difficulties on caregiver and more general family lives. This corresponds with similar arguments put forward by Turanovic et al. (2012), which identifies the dynamics and quality of relationships with the prisoner over time, and the existence of broader familial support systems, as key attributes underpinning caregiver experiences.

That our results differ from the more common empirical finding that prison has detrimental impacts on family relationships needs to be understood via the unique familial context of parent–child relations. It is our contention that compared to the majoritarian focus of prisoner–family studies examining either intimate couples or children with parents in prison, that parent–child relations are perhaps unique. Although mindful of avoiding any essentialist conceptions about the role of mothers in the lives of young men, it is certainly possible that the investment in nurturing the child throughout their life plays some part in the sustenance of relationships, rather than severing ties with the young men as a result of their behaviour (which did occur only in a minority of instances). The commitment to, and responsibility for, the outcomes of these young men was also strong among our sample, including instances of guilt and shame being exhibited by caregivers (especially mothers; see also Condry, 2007; Halsey and Deegan, 2015). Although perhaps unsurprising given the recruitment base of our sample came from those visiting the young men in prison, there was evidence that supporting these young men was regarded as a duty as a parent, regardless of the crimes committed and problems occurring before prison.

Due to many of the relationships having been conflictual before prison, the early period of respite—the separation between caregiver and young person induced by incarceration—was crucial on several levels. Initially, time apart allowed caregivers to recover from what they commonly described as difficult periods preceding incarceration, where they found time to take stock of their lives, and rebalance many aspects of living that had previously been affected through the parenting of the young men. Following other scholars (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2011; Halsey and Deegan, 2015), we also share some reticence to call this improvement substantial. More accurate would be to describe improvement as positive in terms of allowing caregivers to achieve respite and greater control of their own lives outside the prison, rather than necessarily to claim that longer-term relationships with young men in prison will also follow suit. This effect is not, of course, inconsequential for offender outcomes—if caregiver lives are improved, the capacities to offer support to re-entering prisoners will also likely be enhanced (Visher, 2004; Codd, 2013).

This study has further pointed to some of the more general social mechanisms responsible for relationship improvement among caregivers. In most cases, and even despite considerable conflicts in relations before prison, caregivers maintained a devotion to helping support the young men. In similar form to Comfort’s (2008) reference to intimate couple relations during incarceration, we argue that the controlled environment of prison gave some caregivers the ability to rebuild ties in ways that were comparatively orderly and stable by contrast to circumstances preceding imprisonment. At the same time, imprisonment operates as an important event for some caregivers (especially mothers) to reinvest in relationships and dedicate themselves to the task of helping the young men to change their past ways. In close correspondence with desistance research (Schroeder et al., 2010; Gid and Martí, 2012), we found that signs of offender change also served to bridge closer ties between caregivers and the young men. By communicating regret or remorse for past actions, in tandem with changes in
the form of starting education or specific prison programs, we interpret these instances as reinforcing caregiver commitment to the young men.

The belief shared by some caregivers that the prison system could help alleviate the behavioural issues of their male children reflects an unfortunate indictment of the scant modes of formal support (especially for child mental health, parenting and alternative schooling) available in earlier time periods predating the young men’s escalation in offending (Children’s Society, 2016; Local Government Association, 2018). Even despite parental fears about the welfare of their children in prison, the fall back on the prison system as a last resort of rehabilitation is an unfortunate reminder of the neo-liberal tendency to fix complex social problems through criminal justice intervention (Wacquant, 2001; Simon, 2007). Put more directly, even with these highlighted countervailing effects of incarceration, we actively condemn any moral justification that prison works on the basis of our findings. Ultimately, we are committed to the belief that prison life is damaging for many young people, but in conjunction with common cycles of violence and high-risk community conditions, which place considerable strain on both young men and their families. These broader social contexts of youth offending are thus important for understanding the ways that these ‘improvement effects’ are established whilst the young men are in prison.

The task of maintaining relations and providing support for young men in prison disproportionately falls upon mothers more than any other caregiver groups. Following previous research, mothers are more likely than fathers to be involved in direct parenting duties when a child is involved in offending (Hagel and Newburn, 1994; Holt, 2009; Aldridge et al., 2011). It is therefore unsurprising that many of the mothers in our sample had experienced parenting challenges responding to the behaviour of their male children, and with this, also negative impacts on their social lives and emotional wellbeing. Reflecting specifically on the broader ways that mothers, and women more generally, are involved in support for offenders during prison and upon release (Lowenstein, 1986; Condry, 2007) is therefore a key agenda for future studies to concentrate.

Our focus on relationships between primary caregivers and incarcerated young men is a rare one in the growing volume of studies investigating prisoner–family ties. We encourage further research to address the role of bonds between parents and young men (and women) during incarceration. As Giordano (2016: 19) perceptively argues ‘in many studies, “family” remains frozen in time as a set of adolescent risk factors; yet parents do not disappear from the scene in most instances’. We concur with Giordano and call on further studies to examine the continual effects of parents on the lives of young adult children. Such studies should also begin to (re) consider the interaction between young people and parents, where currently we experience a domination of research examining parental risk factors, rather than the social conditions through which parenting occurs. Although our sample is generated from caregivers who have chosen to visit prison, and for whom the prisoner has granted permission to visit, we call on future studies to assess a broader array of support systems (e.g. foster carers, children growing up in care). Further assessment of the longitudinal dimensions of these relations between prisoners and family members is also an important angle to explore, including what these changes mean for the lives of both prisoners and caregivers. Ultimately, aside from some limitations, we conceive of this article as broadening the focus of prisoner–family research, helping shed light on a group whose experiences are rarely heard—the caregivers of young male offenders. We hope that subsequent
work will continue to unpack and redress the often diverse and complex family circumstances of prisoners, with a devotion to the welfare and needs of family members, as well as prisoners.

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**References**


