



Invisible Harms and Hierarchies of Shame:

The Distinct Challenges Faced by Children With a Parent in Prison for Sexual Offences

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Children
Heard+Seen

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Credits and Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank the children and young people who have contributed the artwork included in this paper. Each drawing included was created by a child whose carer was interviewed as part of this research. By sharing their drawings, the children have provided their own insight into their experience of parental imprisonment. The names attached to each drawing have been changed to protect the anonymity of these children.

Cover painting credit: Sophia, aged 15, about how parental imprisonment made her feel.

About Children Heard and Seen

Children Heard and Seen is an Oxfordshire-based charity established in 2014 to support children and families impacted by parental imprisonment and are currently supporting 270 children across England and Wales. The charity works with families to determine the developmental needs of each child, the nature of the parent's offence and the child's relationship with the imprisoned parent. Children Heard and Seen offer 1-1 support with trained staff, volunteer mentoring, parent support, peer support groups for children, online activities for children, and family activity days.

Abstract

This research paper expands on academic understandings of the experiences of children with a parent in prison, delineating the experiences of those whose parents are imprisoned specifically for sexual offences. This exploratory paper represents the first dedicated effort to identify the unique challenges faced by such children, using semi-structured interviews conducted with participants with a range of lived and professional experience. The findings suggest that the nature of a parent's offence dramatically impacts the way in which young people experience shame and stigmatisation, with participants recognising a hierarchical structuring of the moral culpability of criminal offences from a public perspective. The restructuring of parent-child relationships in the aftermath of learning of a parent's sexual offending had profound implications for how children navigated adolescence and impeded their capacity to form their own identity and sense of self during a crucial developmental stage. Failure to acknowledge and ameliorate these distinct harms represents a non-fulfilment of the residual obligations owed to these children that arise from the pursuit of punitive policies against their parents.



Drawing submitted by Liam, aged 8, about the support he received from Children Heard and Seen.



Drawing submitted by Martin, aged 12, about his emotions when his father went to prison.

1 Introduction

The UK prisoner demographic is made up of individuals with a complex array of characteristics that form the basis of either inherent or socially imposed vulnerabilities (Prison Reform Trust, 2019). Those in prison are significantly more likely to have adolescent experience of family breakdown, poor nurturing, childhood abuse, and trauma (Crest, 2019). It can therefore be inferred that the children of prisoners are also a highly vulnerable and diverse group (Murray, 2005). With regards to parental imprisonment generally, research has consistently shown that children impacted are significantly more likely to face social exclusion regarding material welfare, family, school and leisure activities (Oldrup & Frederiksen, 2018). Current estimates suggest that as many as 312,000 children in the UK are impacted by parental imprisonment each year (Crest, 2019). Whilst this number is significant, the lack of any nationalised database means that the exact size of this group remains unknown. A complete lack of adequate systematic and structural support for these children undermines their faith in and commitment to civic systems and breeds a relationship of distrust towards government institutions that can remain into adulthood (Lee et al, 2014). Parental imprisonment has been recognised as an Adverse Childhood Experience (COPE, 2019), and has been linked to a swathe of negative social and behavioural outcomes, including increased risk of poor mental health and a trend toward antisocial behaviour (Murray, 2005).

Whilst much academic discourse has explored the collective experience of children with a parent in prison, very little research has sought to explore trends within subgroups. Research surrounding prisoners themselves has shown that stigmatisation is experienced differently in the aftermath of sexual offences (Deluca et al., 2017), although the broader implications of this differentiation have not been tested in the context of prisoners' children. Due to the increased potency of this stigmatisation, it is possible to hypothesise that these children may be even more at risk of social exclusion and decline in emotional wellbeing than those with parents imprisoned for other offences. To appropriately support these children and address the unique challenges they face as a result of their parent's crimes, researchers must endeavour to "make these differences salient" (Phillips & Gates, 2011: 287).

The overall aim of this paper is to expand on existing bodies of literature and develop a nuanced and dedicated understanding of the experiences of children when their parent goes to prison for a sexual offence. Although no dedicated studies have yet explored these experiences, it is important to understand neighbouring themes such as the broader stigmatisation of sex offenders, the prevalence of vigilantism in relation to said offences, and the stigmatisation of prisoners' families more generally. Existing literature has the potential to contextualise and inform the findings of this exploratory study. However, consideration of bordering secondary literature alone is insufficient. The collection of focused empirical data is essential in understanding lived experiences of parental imprisonment in the context of sexual offences.

2 Literature Review

Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, the term "parent" will follow a broad conception that expands beyond the purely biological model to include any adult who operated in a significant caring capacity for a child before the point of imprisonment.

The term 'sexual offence' utilised within this paper follows the series of legal offences outlined and defined in the Sexual Offences Act, 2003. These include, but are not limited to rape, sexual assault, child sex offences and abuse of a position of trust.

The experiences of children with a parent in prison for a sexual offence

There has been much academic debate about the appropriate frameworks of terminology that should be implemented in discussing the effects of parental imprisonment. To date, these have included collateral consequences (Manning, 2011), and symbiotic harms among others (Condry & Minson, 2020). The language we employ in discussion surrounding these experiences is crucial. The terminology of "collateral consequences" has rightly been criticised for the implications both that harm to children as a result of parental imprisonment is subordinate to the harms experienced by the prisoner, as well as that these consequences are inevitable (Manning, 2011). The concept of symbiotic harms as posited by Condry and Minson (2020) most appropriately responds to the agentic capacity of children, the relational components of harm suffered, and the material consequences of parental imprisonment. Applying a relational perspective is fundamental in understanding the importance of interconnectivity and relationships in a young person's construction of selfhood, and the fact that these relationships are constantly evolving, both prior to, during and after the parent's sentence (Condry and Minson, 2020).

Adopting a universal appreciation of harms suffered informs a more nuanced appreciation of the economic, social, and structural shockwaves that pervade every aspect of a child's life in the aftermath of the imprisonment of a parent. These shockwaves may take the form of a "relationship disconnection" between the child and the imprisoned parent (Poehlmann, 2005: 355), poorer social mobility in school and an increased likelihood of offending alongside a decline in emotional wellbeing (Oldrup & Frederiksen, 2018). The decline in emotional wellbeing experienced by children with a parent in prison may largely be attributed to a sense of ambiguous loss following the removal of the parent (Boss, 1999). This loss is exceptionally damaging in that it represents a long-term condition that immobilises and traumatises children as they flit between "hope and hopelessness" that a return to normality is possible (Boss, 1999: 24). Feelings of loss are exacerbated by the prevalence of secondary victimisation, due to the shame and stigma enforced on these families by others because of a perceived guilt by contagion (Condry, 2007).

Stigma refers to the "negative impact on personal identity formation" (Saunders, 2018: 21) as a result of social shaming on the basis of perceived difference. Those who face stigmatisation are met with labelling, group stereotyping, removal of community status, and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). Nussbaum (2004) argues that stigmatisation represents the primary form of societal 'othering' that aims to place unwanted populations at safe distance from the perceived security of everyday life. This is done with the purpose of reasserting the dominance of the 'normal' class, as the "vulnerable minority bears the burden of the fears of the majority" (Nussbaum, 2004: 296). In the context of convicted sex offenders, this may suggest that non-stigmatised individuals rely on community shaming to isolate and remove offenders from a community in order to maintain an illusion of safety within the realm of their own lives.

Stigmatisation is often felt even more strongly by a prisoner's family than by the inmate themselves, as relatives are forced to share the physical space of the community that shames them (Condry, 2007). It is understood that the nature of shame and stigma faced by those with a family member in prison relates heavily to the nature of the offence (Condry, 2007). Condry

(2007) explores this hierarchy in relation to the experiences of adult relatives who maintain a relationship with a convicted offender. Within this hierarchy, families of sex offenders face an increased risk of stigmatisation in comparison with other offences. This is likely driven by highly incendiary emotive responses from the public towards sex offenders that characterises those who commit these crimes, particularly against children, as irredeemable (Gavin, 2005). Whilst the public may be willing to accept some degree of moral ambiguity that allows for partners to see the “good” in those committing other offences, this nuance is often beyond the bounds of what many can accept in the context of sexual offenders. Condry describes how a relative’s sex offender status often took on the role of a “master status” for the family, defining all elements of their identity (181), and minimising public sympathy for family members seeking to maintain a relationship with the offender.

Fear of stigmatisation for a family member’s offence is likely to be influenced by the prevalence of vigilantism and “paedophile hunters” that observe and respond to sexual crimes. Whilst violent public responses may pose a substantial danger in the aftermath of any offence, Condry’s research shows that family members often perceive an increased danger in the aftermath of sexual offences specifically (2007). This perception is grounded in an observable reality, as research has suggested that the frequency of violent vigilantism against sexual offenders is significantly more common than is broadly understood by the public (Brannon et al., 2007). There is clear evidence that vigilantism in relation to sexual offences is fuelled by a perceived injustice gap, encouraging citizens to take the law into their own hands (Exline et al., 2003). This is made significantly easier by local and national media, as well as government databases, which work to strip affected families of their privacy by publicly identifying convicted sex offenders, thus empowering those who seek to degrade them (Cubellis et al., 2019).

Another defining marker of the experience of convicted sex offenders is their placement on government registers, which may persist for many years after their release from prison depending on the nature and severity of the offence. The sex offender register was introduced via the 1997 Sex Offender Act, and contains the details of any person convicted, cautioned, or released from prison for a sexual offence in England and Wales since its introduction (O’Sullivan et al., 2016). Placement on said register significantly impacts “the range and quality of opportunities for successful reintegration” for the offender into the family unit (Willis et al., 2010: 554). From a family displays perspective, this may raise a series of issues, as Finch posits that “doing family things” lies at the very heart of the way in which we constitute and understand familial relationships (Finch, 2007: 66). By excluding the returning parent from fully engaging with family life, their ability to rebuild a relationship with their child is limited, potentially negatively impacting their caring capacity for decades after release (Zilney, 2020).

State responses to harm

All children impacted by parental imprisonment face an increased risk of social exclusion that limits their capacity to thrive (Oldrup & Frederiksen, 2018). Existing research shows that there is “no state care or support” for children after the trauma of separation from a parent (Minson, 2019). The pursuit of punitive penal policies against offenders has been said to give rise to “residual obligations” towards their children, who suffer indirect harm as a result of the imprisonment (Bülow, 2014: 785). Failure to acknowledge and ameliorate the harms inflicted on children represents a failure to fulfil these obligations, raising a series of issues from a social justice perspective (Condry, 2018). A major barrier to supporting children with imprisoned parents lies in their lack of identification, contributing to a sense that these children represent a

forgotten demographic (Crest, 2019). Recent reports show that when children receive appropriate support, they have a greater capacity for resilience and are able to develop the skills necessary to maximise their potential and break the chain of intergenerational offending (Beresford, 2018). The failure of government policy to identify and support children with a parent in prison also extends to cases where the parent's offence is sexual in nature, despite indications that this group of young people may be even more vulnerable than those experiencing parental imprisonment generally. These distinct harms are rendered invisible both by a lack of research and governmental systems of support.

3 Overall Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this paper is to expand on academic and social understanding of the differential experiences of children with a parent in prison, specifically for sexual offences. In pursuit of this aim, the research has four specific objectives:

1. Identify the harms faced by children with a parent in prison for a sexual offence that are distinct from general offences.
2. Critically evaluate the appropriateness of state and community responses to these harms, and efforts to support and identify these children.
3. Explore the views of those with lived experience and those with professional insight through thematic review pertaining to internalised shaming, community responses, and intra-familial relationships.
4. Formulate recommendations for future research and for development of more responsive policies.

Much existing academic literature surrounding children's experiences of parental imprisonment has envisioned their experiences collectively, with tentative steps only recently being taken towards delineating between them and recognising the complexity and heterogeneity of lived experience (Condry & Minson, 2020). This exploratory paper seeks to build on this delineation by identifying trends in childhood experiences in cases where parental imprisonment flows specifically from a sexual offence.

4 Methodology

Research strategy

The primary method of data collection took the form of semi-structured, qualitative interviews held with a small number of participants with a range of lived and professional perspectives on the experiences of children with a parent in prison for sexual offences. As so little is known about the experiences of these children, there was an inherent exploratory element to the implemented research design. Interview questions were formulated with the goal of being sensitive to the existing literature whilst also providing room for participants to explore new themes.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted with three distinct Participant Groups:

Group B: Practitioners at Children Heard and Seen, who have extensive experience in supporting children impacted by parental imprisonment, including cases where the offence is sexual (2 participants)

Group C: Adults who, as children, experienced the imprisonment of a parent for a sexual offence (1 participant)

Group D: Adults who are the legal guardians of children with a parent in prison for a sexual offence. (4 participants)

The table below shows an overview of the research participants with lived experience that were interviewed, along with a brief bio as far as is relevant to the study. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

GROUP	NAME	BIO
C	Sylvia	An adult whose father was imprisoned for a sexual offence when she was 14 (historic contact offences against a child)
	Claire	Mother of five children who have a parent in prison for a sexual offence. (non-contact offence, viewing illegal images online)
D	Charlotte	Mother of three children who have a parent in prison for a sexual offence. (contact offence)
	Lucy	Mother of two daughters who have a parent in prison for a sexual offence (contact offence against a child)
	Mary	Mother of three children who have a parent in prison for a sexual offence (contact offence against a child)

Sampling

The original research design for this project included an additional participant group (Group A) which was to be made up of children aged 10–16 years old, who had lived experiences of parental imprisonment for sexual offences. The inclusion of the voices of these children, who are often left to feel “invisible in systems designed to protect them” (Beresford, 2018: 6) was central to the original research proposal. This original design sought to recognise a child’s own perception of their experience as a fundamental part of understanding the implications of the harms that they face (Minson, 2020). However, on account of the pandemic and the high risk involved in conducting such sensitive interviews online, it was not possible to obtain ethical approval to conduct interviews with Group A. The justification for their exclusion lies in the risk of retraumatising children without being able to offer immediate and appropriate aftercare. Whilst it is unfortunate that these hidden voices could not be included in this piece of research, it is inevitable that compromises have to be made when adhering to ethical research principles, particularly in the context of vulnerable young people (Brady & O’Reagan, 2005).

As there is no national framework to identify children impacted by parental imprisonment generally, access to participants with lived experience acts as one of the primary barriers to researchers hoping to conduct any form of empirical research in this area. The sample sizes involved in the study were inevitably small, relying on convenience sampling to conduct interviews with available participants. Children Heard and Seen have access to an extensive database of families impacted by parental imprisonment through their years of supporting this demographic. Practitioners were able to use this database to contact potential candidates who would be eligible for inclusion within this study. This contact from the charity was used to gain initial consent from potential participants, allowing me to then reach out to them with more information.

Ethical considerations

Through telling their stories, research participants automatically place themselves in a position of vulnerability (Stanley, 2018). Every effort was made to ensure participants' comfort. It was recognised that this effort must go beyond pre-determined procedures and shape every aspect of my interaction with the individuals interviewed (Minson, 2020). I continually monitored not only the information provided to participants, but the way in which it was conveyed, and the relationship I formed with them. Despite these efforts, it is acknowledged that the inherent power imbalance between researcher and participant will always remain, no matter how much effort is made to be "fair and respectful" (Condry, 2011: 195).

Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews and the lived experiences of participant groups C and D, there was a significant risk that answering questions about these experiences could be emotionally traumatic. It was therefore fundamental to the research design that each participant be provided with immediate aftercare and one-to-one support following the interview should they wish to accept it. This safe space would be provided by the staff at Children Heard and Seen, who already had existing relationships with the participants.

5 Findings

"I do think, yeah, I think 100% the nature of the offence made it worse" – *Claire, mother*

All of the mothers interviewed believed that their children's experience, either during the period of incarceration or in the long term, was significantly impacted by the nature of the parent's offence. This was corroborated by the professional insight provided by participants in Group B, and by the insight of Group C. One thing that became clear almost immediately once the empirical collection of data began was the breadth and complexity of experiences of children with a parent in prison for a sexual offence. The harms suffered were heavily influenced by factors such as the child's pre-existing relationship with the imprisoned parent, their age, developmental needs at the time of sentencing, and the type of sexual offence their parent was accused of. This confirmed the initial expectation that the experiences of this group of young people are highly dynamic, complex, and unique to individual circumstances. Whilst a comprehensive exploration of the impacts of these intertwining factors would require the analysis of a much larger sample size, several distinct themes became apparent that distinguished the experiences of children with parent imprisoned for a sexual offence from those where the offence was non-sexual.

Internalised shame and implications for the self

Confusion, shame, and identity

“Every conversation I’ve had with her about anything surrounding her dad, she’s always had questions, but this time was like a blank canvas, there was no upset, no tears, no questions, she immediately tried to change the subject. We had a difficult weekend with bouts of anger and frustration. She hasn’t spoken about her dad at all since then.” – *Lucy, mother*

All of the mothers interviewed in this study were aware of a hierarchy of offences in the public conscience. Many of the children whose carers were interviewed in this study learned of their parent’s offence in a two-part disclosure. In the first stage, they are made aware of the imprisonment, whilst details regarding the sexual nature of the offence may be revealed later, either when they are slightly older or when they have had time to process the fact of imprisonment to some extent. Where participants’ children were old enough to understand the nature of the offence, discovering the sexual component of their parent’s imprisonment imbued their shame with an additional layer of confusion and anger, where they had beforehand been inquisitive about where the parent was and excited for their return. As young people are often aware of highly emotional social responses to the moral culpability of sex offenders, potentially even sharing these same views, seeing a parent or loved one in this new light can be particularly disorientating.

Project workers explained that, whilst dealing with the conflicting emotions of loving a parent who has ‘done wrong’ is a relatively common feature of parental imprisonment across offences, it was clear that this complexity may be amplified significantly when a child learns of the nature of a sexual offence committed by their parent. Relatives spoke of being tarnished by the offence, as feelings of shame diffused across all aspects of their identity, rather than remaining limited to their relationship with the parent. For adult relatives of offenders, this affront to perceived identity and selfhood is challenging enough (Condry, 2011), however, for those entering adolescence, these feelings can be particularly difficult to deal with, as their identity and sense of self are still in formative stages. The characteristic difficulties of growing up, such as discovering one’s own sexuality and preparing to enter adulthood, are all made more difficult by the revelation that a parent has committed a sexual offence. These difficulties were explained by a project worker in relation to the children he had worked with:

“[W]hen you’re a teenager, you’re going through all this stuff anyway, you’ve got all these hormones raging, and puberty and everything, and you might be starting to experiment yourself with relationships, sex and pornography. And then you find this out, it’s earth shattering for young people.” – *Family and Project Operational Manager, CHAS*

Such a revelation may significantly shape the way a young person viewed their relationship with their parent, and their navigation of adolescence. During adolescence, young people are being exposed to ideas about sexuality, sex, and relationships, often for the first time. To embark upon this journey of discovery whilst also learning that their parent, often a trusted figure in their lives, has committed a sexual offence, inevitably shapes how children approach learning about sex, and how they come to view their coming of age in retrospect. Project workers noted that many children with this experience were afraid to explore their own sexuality, closing themselves off to these experiences, with the effect of compounding isolation, as they see their peers discuss sex and relationships without shame, in a way they may feel unable to engage with. The project workers believed that fears around experimenting with pornography for the

first time were likely to be particularly volatile if the offence in question involved viewing indecent images online.

When the parent's offending behaviour was committed towards children, regardless of whether or not contact was made, this had the potential to incur feelings of guilt in young people. Those whose parent committed such an offence felt responsible for the parent's offending to the extent that they felt that they should have been able to control his or her actions, one project worker described how children would question:

“[W]as my dad just using me to get other girls... so he could offend?” – *Family and Project Operational Manager, CHAS*

This guilt was distinct from feelings of shame, and related to a sense of personal blameworthiness and culpability, rather than being reputationally tarnished by the parent's behaviour (Lickel et al., 2005). Project workers suggested that the internalisation of self-blaming narratives further alienated young people from the desire to explore their own sexuality, whilst bolstering the pervasiveness of shaming from the community. It is possible to infer that stigmatisation from outside sources is legitimised and amplified by a child's existing feelings of guilt, limiting their capacity to maintain a positive self-image during trauma. Whilst not universal among all children with a parent in prison for sexual offences, this interplay between guilt and shame marked a key distinguishing feature that separated the experience of children with a parent in prison for sexual offences from those whose parents were imprisoned for general offences.

The disruption of identity

“[T]hey might have had to move areas, and then they're starting again. But it's almost like a change of identity at a certain age. They're almost being silently told to reinvent themselves.” – *Director, CHAS*

The disruption of identity formation discussed above was exacerbated by fears of community stigmatisation, prompting one participant to move her family across the country. Whilst previous studies have shown that being forced to move home to escape community stigmatisation and threats of violence is not exclusive to the experiences of children with a parent in prison for a sexual offence (Jenkins, 2013), it is clear that the highly emotive and vitriolic community responses to sexual crimes may leave these children at an increased risk of being forced to change homes, schools, or even their names.

Mothers described their children becoming withdrawn into themselves, struggling to trust authority and family figures, and experiencing separation anxiety. Relatives in this study believed that this loss was made even more difficult and confusing by having to move homes to escape public shaming. At a time when these young people needed security and a stable environment to grieve the loss of a parent, they were separated from their familial home, the school they knew, and many of their peers. This marked a key feature of Claire's son's experience:

“Relocating meant that he lost out on starting in Y7. He went into a form of denial for a time, and he just kept asking: when can we move back?... He was gaming a lot and friends were able to stay in touch with him, even after it was reported, he'd hear his friends talking about school and this experience they were having, and he wasn't having that. He couldn't be a part of that.” – *Claire, mother*

Here, Claire explains how her son entered a period of denial, longing for a return to their old home and community, which took on a symbolic status as a perceived return to normality. The passage captures the sense of isolation felt by children forced to move homes to escape stigma, unable to share their experiences with their peers, with whom they already have strong relationships. As the motivations behind moving often have to be kept secret, this compounds isolation and leaves children without necessary support. Smith and Henry (1996) suggest that our social groups and relationships form an integral element of our self-identity. Being separated from peer groups during a time of familial upheaval throws a young person's sense of self into further disarray. In cases where the child is asked to legally change their own name to avoid detection, this can be particularly disorienting, amplifying the already devastating affront to identity and sense of self.

“The youngest three have had their name changed by deed poll... so there's that as well, the loss of identity.” – *Claire, mother*

This loss of identity may undermine a young person's feeling of security, with potentially deleterious implications for their physical and emotional wellbeing. For some mothers in the study, perceiving a need lie to their children about the reasons behind such moves has contributed to feelings of guilt that may contribute to division and secret keeping within the family:

“With [my youngest daughter], it's been hard because I have lied to her.” – *Lucy, mother*

These situations proved particularly difficult for carers with children of varying ages and degrees of knowledge surrounding the offence, as older children were often asked to withhold details to protect their younger siblings. This could limit the older children's capacity to speak openly about their emotions at home and to process feelings about the loss of their parent. Additionally, adolescents may feel pressured to step into a “protector” role due to perceived responsibility of shielding their younger siblings from harsh truths, whilst also needing to appear strong for their non-offending parent, who may be grieving the loss of a relationship, a partner, and family life (Sylvia, adult child). Whilst children rely on these roles as a source of internal strength through difficult times, it may isolate them further or make them afraid to ask for support. On account of the heavily disrupted sense of selfhood and core identity being experienced by these young people, the assumption of the role of protector has the potential to become all-encompassing, with implications for the way in which they build and maintain relationships both within and outside of the family in the long term.

Capacity to cope

“I became quite hardened; I imagine to the outside world it would appear that way anyway. Yeah, probably inside my own bedroom wasn't quite so much” – *Sylvia, adult child*

Several mothers described the children they cared for as demonstrating a remarkable capacity to cope with the trauma of separation from the imprisoned parent. However, due to the absence within the implemented methodology of child participants, it is unclear to what extent this capacity to manage emotions represents a comprehensive account of these children's experiences. For children who feel the need to step into a protector role for their family members, this can transform their relationship with the imprisoned parent. This was explained

by Sylvia, who described the need she felt to protect her father during both the pre-sentencing period and post-release:

“I think I grew up essentially overnight, because I had one fewer parent. And also [because my parents had then divorced] I stepped into my mum’s shoes when I was his support. And I remember thinking, I’m the only one on his team... I worry about him to death, and I also see myself as his protector” – *Sylvia, adult child*

“She has a very good poker face as well, but there was a period where she was really up and down” – *Lucy, mother*

Through seeing a parent in a position of extreme vulnerability, a young person’s perception of their family member shifts dramatically. The perceived responsibilities of children adopting the role of protector often involved concealing negative emotions to avoid adding to the emotional distress of the remaining carer. In Sylvia’s case, the role also extended to shielding her offending parent from community shaming. It is possible to infer that the assumption of the protector role may represent an effort to regain some sense of control over the environment during an otherwise tumultuous and confusing time. As the above quote from Sylvia demonstrates, a young person who exhibits strength to the outside world may be struggling emotionally in private. It is also likely that this vulnerability is hidden from close family members, to shield them from their upset. Whilst the protector role may allow young people to view their parent’s imprisonment as a source of strength that allowed them to mature quickly, the role is accompanied by the rejection of emotional and social support. Young people are often highly alert to the emotional states of adults and carers and will usually be aware of their feelings of guilt in the aftermath of imprisonment. This increases the likelihood of children hiding their upset, as they want to avoid adding to their carers’ existing feelings of guilt.

While the carers in this study described their children as using a protector role as a primary coping strategy, this was by no means the only strategy used. Participants described the use of humour as a defensive strategy, recreating family traditions as an emotional soother, and acting out against authority figures as key coping strategies. From a professional perspective, there also seemed to be a significant gendered element to the way in which young people responded to the revelation of their parent’s offence.

“For all the families I have supported, adolescence has been a really traumatic time, particularly for boys really acting out in adolescence... girls have tended to be much more inward in how they’ve coped” – *Director, CHAS*

It is not possible to fully understand the way in which these young people experience shame, nor the broader implications for selfhood, without considering these experiences in the context of community responses to the offence. The next section of the chapter will explore the volatile media and public responses in the aftermath of sexual offences and how they exacerbate the trauma of children by reaffirming stigmatising narratives and isolating young people from necessary support.

Community responses and the inadequacy of state support

Community responses

“I still loved [my dad], and people found that very hard to understand... I think people underestimate the power of family love, even if they do the worst thing you can imagine”
– *Sylvia, adult child*

Condry's (2007) exploration of the status of sexual offender as a 'master status' that prohibits the recognition of moral ambiguity and nuance was supported by participant groups with lived experience. Carers believed that those whose partners had committed what is regarded as a more 'respectable' offence, such as fraud, were able to walk into community events without fear of abuse and shaming. Below, Claire explains how the potency of social exclusion differs in the aftermath of parental imprisonment for sexual offences.

“My sister's ex was jailed for fraud about three or four years ago. There was media reporting, but my sister held her head up and walked into the playground... so I've got a direct comparison, I know she didn't have to move, they didn't have to go anywhere.” –
Claire, mother

When children were able to maintain relationships with peers and existing support networks, many were unable or unwilling to disclose the full nature of their parent's offence. Both project workers interviewed believed that young people who are aware of the nature of the offence are often also aware of the increased stigmatisation accompanied by the committing of sexual crimes. This can be seen in the way that many young people rely on secret-keeping and falsehoods to protect themselves from rejection and exclusion from their peer relationships. The passage below demonstrates how this hierarchical understanding plays out in the context of sexual offences, with the potential to further isolate young people from their peer groups and potential sources of support.

“We've had children that have made up stories of other offences so that they're not known” – *Family and Project Operational Manager, CHAS*

“I also noticed that we used to go for walks as a family, and we were walking through a field, and he was walking ahead of us, so it didn't look like we were all together. But he insisted on bringing an umbrella out and it wasn't raining. But [when he saw his friends] he put it up... and he said he didn't want them to see him. And he became really jumpy, quite anxious.” – *Claire, mother*

Having to lie or hide details of a parent's offence limits a young person's capacity to process the reality of their trauma effectively and limits their likelihood of accessing necessary support. When support is offered to children with this experience by Children Heard and Seen, it is evident that children with a parent in prison for sexual offences are often less likely to access group activities where available, preferring one-to-one counselling. This was driven largely by a fear of stigmatisation and exclusion, even among the presence of other children of prisoners. This marks a key defining experience of children with a parent in prison for sexual offences. Condry's work highlights that prisoners often do not wish to mix with particular categories of offenders (2007). The findings of this study show that young people may often anticipate similar rejection within the population of prisoner's relatives more generally. This acts as an additional barrier to accessing support and prevents young people from building connections with other children with similar experiences. These difficulties were explained by a Group B participant below:

“They find it harder to engage with our more group activities, they worry that someone will find out and they will have to talk about it... and if they do [join a group session], they’re very guarded, and when you are guarded, it makes the other young people more inquisitive, which adds more pressure on the children” – *Family and Project Operational Manager, CHAS*

When details of the offence were made known in the wider community, all participants believed that the sexual nature of the parent’s offending dramatically increased the voracity and intensity of community backlash. This was often exacerbated by media reporting and the prevalence of dedicated vigilante groups. Participants believed that this increased stigma was centred on the idea that sexual crimes are considered the most morally reprehensible within the public conscience. The intensity and breadth of community backlash is highlighted by the following explanation provided below:

“Our experience so far has been families having faeces through the door, witnessing their mother being assaulted, being told in WhatsApp chats to kill themselves. With comments like, if my father had done this sort of thing, I would kill myself, with ideas about how you can do that” – *Director, CHAS*

The intensity of stigmatisation and social exclusion, culminating in threats of violence, leaves these children at an increased risk of suicidal ideation, unable to escape the stigma flowing from the ‘master status’ of their relationship with an imprisoned sex offender. This has the potential to become all-encompassing, diffusing into all elements of the child’s ability to form relationships, and transforming the way they view themselves as they internalise shaming narratives from their peers, local and national media, and even extended family members. A number of participants in the study noted that, due to the nature of the offence, the offending parent’s extended family reduced contact with their children, further compounding feelings of loss and isolation. These complex losses are explained by Claire below:

“His own family have disowned him, so the impacts on my children have been on their relationships with their extended family... it’s created a really complex situation for the children with multiple losses, and that’s because of the nature of the offence” – *Claire, mother*

These cascading losses leave the children at an increased risk of social exclusion and exacerbate the loss of the parental figure by isolating them from extended family members.

Media reporting

“I guess it’s what’s perceived as being sensational... so it’s what they judge as being the news that will get the most interest.” – *Director, CHAS*

Local and national media propagate narratives which played a key role in shaping the experiences of many of the families involved in this study. Media reporting and the publication of an offender’s full name and street address is not wholly uncommon in the aftermath of imprisonment for any offence. However, on account of the highly emotional and volatile community responses to sexual crimes, there is not only an increased risk that details of the offence and the offender will be published, but also that such details will add fuel to the fire of public backlash, inviting comments and deliberately implementing language designed to shock

and create moral panic. Participants recognised that, given the prevalence of online news reporting, these stories became easily accessible well after the time of the offence, rather than being archived as paper reports of the past. This exacerbated the likelihood that details of the offence would be picked up by vigilante groups and re-reported elsewhere, whilst also making it harder to protect young people from viewing this kind of content online.

“The words that are used in tabloid reporting: “monster, predator” if you’re a young person reading that about your dad... it’s not even a person anymore” – *Family and Project Operational Manager, CHAS*

The archetypal ‘monster’ as offender is far easier for the public to comprehend than being forced to acknowledge the prevalence of intra-familial sexual offending (Leon 2011). By reducing all sexual offenders to a simplified status of monstrosity, media reporting encourages all sexual offenders to be dealt with in the same way (Klein, 2017). This erodes the nuance and complexity of individual circumstances in a way that promotes emotive and often violent public responses to offenders and their relatives. The dehumanising aspect of media reports about sexual offenders builds on the idea that their offending behaviour takes on a master status that overrides all other elements of their identity. This proved to be particularly difficult for young people who sought out details about their parent online. Reading descriptors of a parent that reduce a loved one to a ‘monster’ or a ‘predator’ can be particularly damaging for young people, particularly as they are aware that this information is readily available for others to view. This creates an added sense of vulnerability that can have a multitude of negative impacts. By viewing details of the offence in written form, children are forced to deal with the reality of what their parent has been accused of, this can be particularly disorienting if the child was previously unaware of the full details of the offence.

“It was the news sites with the comments sections that were the worst. And I of course read them, and I read them several times” – *Sylvia, adult child*

The articles are deliberately vitriolic, with the reduction of all sex offenders to the status of irredeemable sexual predators giving rise to moral panic that incites highly emotive public backlash (Quinn et al, 2004). Articles capitalise on these reactions and invite comments as a means to boost engagement and public interest. The comment sections were a major source of worry for participants with lived experience, as they frequently involved threats of violence, and even accusations of further historic offences committed by the offending parent. The worry that more victims would come forward marked a key concern for one participant, who feared being plunged back into the trauma of parental imprisonment long after her father’s release. For many participants, the aggression and shaming in online article comments sections were more damaging to emotional wellbeing than the article itself, representing a clearer illustration of public opinion. Participants believed that such articles were also more likely to attract threats of violence and promotion of suicide ideation against relatives of a sex offender than articles describing other offences. The fact that online articles and their comments section remain readily available for years after initial publication increased the temptation for young people to revisit the pages to reread comments, with the potential of repeated re-traumatisation.

Vigilantes and violence

“There is a large vigilante movement out there against sexual predators... there have been times where they publish the whole address of families... and obviously the offender isn't there anymore, that offender is in prison, so all it does is endanger the family.” – *Family and Project Operational Manager, CHAS*

Offender details are frequently collated and republished on dedicated vigilante websites in order to encourage a retributive and even violent public response. As the offender will no longer live at the address on account of being imprisoned, any backlash delivered is felt exclusively by remaining family members, including their children. Media outlet reporting facilitated these groups' ability to obtain identifying information. Participants in this study explained that, in their experience, vigilante databases often lifted the exact details of existing online articles and embellished details to incite violence more directly against the offender and their relatives. The fear of violence and social responses to the offence was a major concern for several participants.

“It was picked up by two vigilante groups, they both have databases for it... and then on the database they'll look out for when you change your name, and they'll publish the new name, and they'll publish a picture. It would be bad enough living with someone on the register.” – *Claire, mother*

Claire describes how this targeting had an aspect of permanence in her and her children's lives, as vigilante groups actively combat the steps taken by offenders to hide their identity. The permanence of vigilante targeting and the sense of being hunted or followed by these groups exacerbated existing fears of community responses and limited the capacity of families to protect themselves from violence by taking steps like moving homes or changing names. Even after her family moved, Claire described her fears that the details of the offence would be exposed and the trauma of moving and changing names would have to be repeated.

“It just takes one person, and that's it.” – *Claire, mother*

Targeting by vigilante groups also significantly limits the ability of children to maintain relationships with the imprisoned parent, due to the danger that, through maintaining contact with the parent, these groups will be able to identify and target the young person as a relative of the offender. Whilst some participants readily accepted this risk and fought fiercely to maintain bonds with the imprisoned parent, this balancing act between anonymity and parental bonds marks a key feature of children with a parent in prison for sexual offences.

Even where children are not completely aware of the nature of their imprisoned parent's offence, the atmosphere of fear and tension created by other family members' fears of vigilantism is significant. Below, Charlotte describes her family home environment as constantly defensive and fearful, whilst Claire notes the ability of her children to pick up on the tension and fear held by adults around them.

“I was home living in fear basically... and he became really jumpy, quite anxious, so I think he was picking up on what I was experiencing” – *Claire, mother*

“That made me really wary to the point where I put sticky stuff on my windows so people can't see in... I did even buy a baseball bat and kept them by all the doors because I was so scared” – *Charlotte, mother*

Both passages highlight the ability of targeting by vigilante groups to alter a young person's perception of home. As discussed earlier, the threat of violent public backlash is not necessarily unique to families of sexual offenders, however, participants did believe that the nature of their family member's crimes increased the likelihood and threats of violence from such groups. The atmosphere of tension and the identification of a parent in fear are likely to fuel a child's attempt to fulfil the protector role and conceal their suffering from their carer, for fear of adding to their difficulties. Further longitudinal research is required in order to fully assess the extent to which the adoption of the protector role impacts on a young person's ability to form relationships and process emotions as they grow up.

State support and the exacerbation of trauma

The involvement of social services was a common feature in participant experiences, with involvement being most frequent during the pre-sentencing period and immediately before release. Relatives considered this involvement resoundingly negative and unresponsive to the particular circumstances of the individual children. This was exacerbated by participant confusion regarding the role that social services sought to play for the children in the aftermath of their parent's arrest. Families believed that they were there to provide emotional support and even counselling to their children, whilst in practice, social service intervention centred on safeguarding concerns, and the evaluation of contact that could be maintained between the child and offending parent, both during and after imprisonment.

"I was just under the illusion that social services were there for me and my girls. And I think realistically, their job was just to come in and interrogate us... there was nothing there for me and the girls." – *Lucy, mother*

"Families describe it as social workers swooping in... and then going again and leaving them reeling in a state of shock." – *Director, CHAS*

The involvement of social services in cases where a parent is imprisoned for sexual offences is often markedly different than in cases of general offences, focusing primarily on the safeguarding of children, and judging both the remaining carer's protective capacity, and the risk that offending parents may pose to their own children. Participants described a failure to provide appropriate tools for support, or even guidance with regards to how to explain the fact of imprisonment to a child. This mirrors Condry's findings that relatives perceived social workers as adopting "rigid" conceptions of sex offenders (2007: 150) that did not reflect children's individual circumstances and needs. The Literature Review portion of this paper established that children with a parent in prison generally are left to feel "invisible in systems designed to protect them" (Beresford, 2018: 6). In the context of sexual offences, this feeling was exacerbated by questioning regarding the non-offending parent's capacity to safeguard their children, and the potentially severe limitations that may be placed on contact with the imprisoned parent. Participants with lived experience believed that the nature of the offence heavily influenced the way in which social workers dealt with their case. Mothers interviewed also seemed to be largely aware of the lack of research-led policy surrounding supporting children with a parent in prison for sexual offences, describing their struggle to find age-appropriate resources for support.

"There doesn't seem to be enough knowledgeable people in regards of what can be offered to children." – *Mary, mother*

This confirmed the finding that a lack of research into the unique experiences and complex needs of children with a parent in prison for sexual offences, in combination with a lack of provisions for identifying and supporting children with a parent in prison, left many without essential support.

Broader Familial implications

“You can be an ex-drug addict, you can be an ex-alcoholic, you can be an ex-burglar, but you can’t be an ex-sex offender” – *Claire, mother*

One factor that caused significant worry for all participants in Group D was the long-term implications of the imprisoned parent’s capacity to return to their parenting role after the point of release. In many of the families involved in this study, the children had strong pre-existing relationships with their parent prior to arrest, shown through language used by Sylvia when speaking of her father: “I idolised him” (*Sylvia, adult child*). The Literature Review briefly considered the implications of cases where the children hope to resume contact after the point of release. Zilney’s work (2020) provided an excellent analysis of the potential restrictions placed on sexual offenders that reduce their ability to reintegrate into family life. Findings in this study suggest that this may place increased strain on the family unit, as parenting couples that do stay together after release are unable to distribute parenting tasks as necessary. Project workers believed that this additional strain has the potential to confuse and bewilder children, who may struggle to comprehend why the return of their previously missing parent has not ushered in the return of normalcy and stability that they had hoped. This was affirmed by the interviewed mothers, many of whom believed that life would never be able to return to normal for their children.

“When he gets released, he’s on a life sentence. His life is owned by the register. My children won’t have a normal life... they won’t be allowed sleepovers, he won’t be allowed to watch the school nativity play... all those little things of normality that the kids will question.” – *Charlotte, mother*

“Even when parents separate, the children go and stay with one parent over the weekend. Or they might go out to McDonald’s or the cinema, they won’t be able to do that... so that’s difficult.” – *Claire, mother*

“Now we’ve got to monitor him even more maybe, so they kind of won’t have that normal, mum and dad, family life, ever again.” – *Mary, mother*

These quotations clarify the unique challenges that these limitations raise when a child is too young to understand the full nature of the offence. Charlotte mentioned things the children will question, and all of the parents interviewed worried that their children would struggle with confusion and frustration when family life failed to return to normal post-release. When these fears are considered in the context of ambiguous loss, and the lack of certainty children feel about when or if their parent will return, we see that this confusion is exacerbated in the context of sexual offences as barriers to normality “throw more confusion onto a child” (*Family and Project Operational Manager, CHAS*). Project workers explained that children with a parent in prison often fixate on or anticipate the date of release as representing the end of their ordeal, or the point at which their normal relationship with their parent can resume. However, in the

context of sexual offences, a return to familial normality is significantly less likely to take place, something which may not be clear to children during the period of imprisonment. Not only must children navigate the confusion of supervised contact and their relationship with their parent being subject to heavy regulation and outside control, but they must also contend with the nature of the offence itself, and how it may cause a shift in their perception of their parent, who may have formerly represented a figure of strength, trust, and stability. Below a project worker explains one of the common feelings raised by young people undergoing this experience:

“I thought this was over and it’s not” – *Family and Project Operational Manager, CHAS*

“I still think that I grieve a parent that is still alive and that I grieve the version of him before. But yeah he still exists.” – *Sylvia, adult child*

The practical limitations on an offending parent’s contact with their child serve as a frequent reminder of the offence and imprisonment itself, extending the implications of parental imprisonment well beyond the point of release. It is useful to consider these limitations within the framework of what it means to be a family, and how familial relationships are performed. Through considering the above quotations in the context of Finch’s work (2007), we may understand the serious deleterious effects that seemingly small limitations, including being unable to attend school nativities or sleepovers, may have on the ability of a child to maintain a relationship with the offending parent. Finch posits that “doing family things” lies at the very heart of the way in which we constitute and understand our own familial relationships, and that these family practices are not only ‘done’, but also convey meanings associated with family (Finch, 2007: 66). It is clear that these “little things of normality” (*Charlotte, mother*) form a significant part of what participants believed to constitute strong parental bonds. In being unable to attend certain events and perform specific parenting tasks, the familial bond between the child and parent is undermined, which is likely to make reintegration into the family unit particularly difficult. This may have the effect of contributing to existing feelings of loss for young people, as they are not able to resume the relationship with the offending parent after release as they had hoped.

There was a worry among participants that, as a result of limited parental capacity, families may have to seek outside support. In doing so, there was a fear that the parent’s status as a sex offender would be exposed, potentially leaving children vulnerable to negative social responses and stigmatisation that families had taken significant steps to avoid.

“We couldn’t ask friends for support, because if I’d asked, they’d be like, what about his dad?” – *Claire, mother*

When the children are older and understand the nature of the offence, this regular limitation on their parent’s ability to attend events may limit their autonomy with regards to choosing when and to whom they disclose the fact and nature of imprisonment. This limitation, and its effects on the ability to access friends, social groups, community activities, and professional support, is compounded by the increased likelihood of highly volatile media reporting, as outlined above.

6 Discussion

Whilst there was significant crossover between the experiences of children with a parent in prison for sexual offences, and those whose parents were imprisoned for other crimes, this

study revealed a number of ways in which the nature of a parent's offence distinctly affects childhood experiences. These differences were not experienced monolithically among this group, but were heavily influenced by a range of factors, with the most significant being the child's age, knowledge/understanding of the parent's offence, and their previous relationship with the imprisoned parent.

The findings of this study have highlighted the disruption of personal identity and derailing of sexual maturity as two of the key defining markers of this experience on an individual level for young people. These difficulties were felt most profoundly in children entering adolescence, as the nature of the offence had the potential to make young people wary of exploring their own sexuality for fears of following the same path as their parent. The shame generated by these feelings isolated young people from their peers, forcing them to rely on secret keeping and various other coping strategies to hide the fact of imprisonment and protect themselves from anticipated rejection and ridicule. As Phillips and Gates (2011) suggest, these attempts to control the narrative surrounding the missing parent have the consequence of isolating young people from potential avenues of support. Interviews with project workers showed that this fear also translates into the anticipation of rejection within the population of prisoner's relatives more generally. Condry's work shows that prisoners often do not wish to mix with particular categories of offenders (2007). The findings of this paper have highlighted that young people with a parent in prison for sexual offences are often aware of this hierarchy. This awareness forms a key barrier to accessing group peer support. Isolation from peer groups, even those who may share adjacent or even similar experiences, further disrupts a young person's developing sense of identity, as Smith and Henry (1996) suggest that these relationships form an integral component of our own selfhood. This disruption through isolation is often compounded by relocation of the family home and the likelihood that young people will be forced to change names to avoid detection and shaming.

Previous studies have examined the often-violent community reactions towards family members associated with a perpetrator of sexual offences. This study took the additional step of investigating the way in which children are not only aware of these threats, marked by changes in their physical environment, but also take on the anxiousness of their parents and become isolated from potential sources of support. These findings indicated an increased likelihood of sensationalised media reporting in relation to sexual offences that, in turn, fuels negative social responses to sexual offenders and their families. Whilst the threat of violent community responses is a possible consequence of parental imprisonment generally, the study revealed that carers were aware of an increased likelihood and volatility of these threats in the context of sexual offences. This supports Condry's findings that families of sex offenders face increased stigmatisation when attempting to maintain a relationship with the offender (2007). This study explored how these fears translated into the experiences of their children. The atmosphere of tension and the identification of a parent in fear has the potential to fuel a child's attempt to fulfil the protector role and conceal their suffering from their carer, for fear of adding to their difficulties. This simultaneously allows young people to regain a sense of control over their situation, but limits their capacity to access support, compounding existing isolation. One carer described her son as "picking up on" feelings of anxiousness within the home (*Claire, mother*). Whether or not threats made towards families materialised into actual violence, the anticipation of rejection and danger has the potential to be just as emotionally damaging as violence itself (Saunders, 2018). By exposing young people to a sustained state of fear and defensiveness within the family home, their sense of security and normality is further fractured.

Rather than operating as a system of support in the aftermath of the trauma of separation for these children, former friends, neighbours, and even extended family members may become sources of rejection and degradation. This shatters a child's perception of the world around them and who they are able to rely on for support, further cementing their isolation. Children are both "contaminated" (Condry, 2011) by their parent's offence, and told that maintaining a relationship with said parent condones and legitimises the offending behaviour. Sylvia explained that those around her could not understand why she sought to maintain a relationship with her father, and that community responses did not appreciate the "power of family love" (*Sylvia, adult child*). This, in conjunction with the adoption of the protector role, prevents children from being able to process the complex and nuanced emotions they may feel towards their missing parent. Additionally, the community links that children often rely on for support or to share feelings no longer constitute a safe place. Fears of community rejection mean that many families choose to conceal the imprisonment from those around them. When a disclosure is made, evidence suggests that a significant number of children provide altered explanations about the offending behaviour (Phillips & Gates, 2011), indicating that family members are often aware of the palatability of particular crimes over others in the hierarchical ordering of moral differences in criminality.

Perhaps the clearest delineation in experiences between children who have a parent in prison for sexual offences and those whose parents commit other crimes, takes place after the parent is released. The offender's long-term placement on government registers, and the enforcement of supervised contact with their children, formed a key thread in the interviews. When considered in the context of Finch's family displays theory, it becomes clear that being excluded from "little things of normality" (*Charlotte, mother*) significantly limits an offending parent's ability to reintegrate into the family unit and rebuild a relationship with their children. Engagement with and involvement in these seemingly mundane activities forms a fundamental thread in the construction and maintenance of family bonds (Finch, 2007). Parental exclusion exacerbates feelings of loss for young people as they are unable to resume the lost relationship as they may have hoped, causing potentially irreparable damage to the parent child bond. This damage and the failure to return to life as normal compounds feelings of ambiguous loss, perfectly embodying the tension of flitting between "hope and hopelessness" that Boss describes (1999: 24) as children look forward to the date of release to be met with confusion and disappointment. This barrier for successful familial reintegration marks a key relational component to the harms suffered by young people who experience parental imprisonment for a sexual offence. When considered in the context of Condry and Minson's (2020) symbiotic harms, we see that this relational loss has the potential to compound the affront to identity and selfhood explored above through the destabilisation of kin relationships.

Participants believed that social services' supervision of parental contact was a key negative feature of their children's experience, as the primary focus of state response rested on assessing safeguarding practices for the child, rather than offering therapeutic support. Participants described state actors as "swooping in" (Director, CHAS) and being unresponsive to the complex needs of these children, causing further damage and upset. It would certainly be reductive to characterise the role of social services as the singular and unified antithesis of family wellbeing and support in the aftermath of parental imprisonment for sexual offences. It is important to recognise the complexity and difficulty of the cases that social workers preside over, and that accounts of families are likely to be inherently one-sided (Condry, 2007). However, these findings do confirm what the Literature Review suggested, namely that there is a lack of research-driven policy and support in place to protect children with a parent in prison for sexual

offences. In this sense, the state fails to fulfil its residual obligations (Bülow, 2014) towards these children in the aftermath of parental incarceration, often causing further harm through the exacerbation of trauma.

Hierarchies of stigmatisation exist across all offences that lead to imprisonment, but there are also clear hierarchical differentiations within the boundaries of sexual offences alone, with particular sex crimes being marked out as even more worthy of stigmatisation (Rickard, 2016). Project workers explained that key signalling factors which influence the way in which society responds to these offences include whether they were contact or non-contact offences, or whether they involved the exploitation of children. A complete exploration into the breadth of these experiences and their connotations is beyond the scope of this paper, though it will be essential for future research to consider the implications of these orderings.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

As explained in the methodology chapter, one of the key limitations of this study was the inability to include child participants with lived experience. In order to make appropriate and effective recommendations for future research and development of policy, it is essential that children's own perspectives are considered. Two further limitations with regards to the universal applicability of the findings of this study lie in the smaller sample size and lack of quantitative data to contextualise the interview findings.

As there is currently no statutory framework for identifying children impacted by parental imprisonment generally, a key difficulty faced by researchers seeking to understand their experiences lies in locating and accessing these families. Shame and stigma may leave many potential participants fearful of coming forward; as this research has shown, these barriers are often even more potent in the context of parental imprisonment for sexual offences (Condry, 2011). I was personally very lucky to have connections with Children Heard and Seen, a charity dedicated to supporting children and young people impacted by parental imprisonment. Through their case studies of family support, the charity has access to a large database of real families impacted by parental imprisonment. It was purely as a result of this database that I was able to secure the number of participants that I did. At present, this study represents the largest sample yet to be examined in exploring the lived experiences of children with a parent in prison specifically for a sexual offence. As replicability and generalisability did not form a key focus of this research model, the small sample size did not inhibit the paper's goals of breaking ground in this field. Rather than developing a comprehensive understanding of these complex and heterogeneous experiences, this paper hopes to capture the attention of researchers and policy makers to further investigate the experiences of these children on a larger scale.

Another limitation of the implemented methodology lies in its inability to adequately examine the differential experiences of children whose mothers are imprisoned for sexual offences, rather than their father. Substantial literature exists to bolster an argument that children experience maternal and paternal imprisonment differently (Minson, 2020). However, on account of the small sample size used in this study and the fact, in that all families involved, the father was the imprisoned parent, the exploration of the parent's gender as an influential factor on childhood experiences was not possible. It should be noted that the number of children with this particular experience is likely to be extremely small. Recent government data shows that, in 2019, only 2% of adults prosecuted for a sexual offence in England and Wales were female, with the vast majority of these offences being committed by men (MoJ 2020: 52).

Despite the recognised limitations of the implemented methodology seen in its small sample size and lack of child participants, the paper is successful in identifying key markers of the experience of this invisible group of young people. This paper has built on bordering discourses and research that focused on the stigmatisation of sex offenders, the experience of prisoners' children generally, and the perceived hierarchy in the moral culpability of offences, as recognised by prisoners and their family members. The existing literature did not include dedicated explorations of the implication of these hierarchies in this context, although it did contextualise and inform the exploratory findings of the study.

7 Conclusions

Existing research has shown that children with a parent in prison suffer a plethora of harms which pervade every aspect of a child's life in the aftermath of the imprisonment of a parent. When these harms are identified, many of their deleterious effects could be ameliorated or compensated to some degree (Condry, 2018), and existing literature recognises the capacity of these children to maximise their potential should they receive appropriate support (Beresford, 2018). The findings of this paper highlight the distinct susceptibility of children with a parent in prison for a sexual offence to harms that go beyond those experienced by children with a parent in prison generally. This paper does not purport that children with a parent in prison for sexual offences represent a newly defined, monolithic group, with any one identifiable and comprehensive 'story'. There are as many experiences of parental imprisonment as there are children affected by it.

The findings presented in this paper identify a number of distinct themes that render these experiences broadly different from cases where a parent is imprisoned for a non-sexual offence. The disruption of personal identity and derailing of sexual maturity marked two of the key defining markers of this experience on an individual level for these young people. Harms suffered were exacerbated by volatile media and community responses, that lead to cascading losses which isolated young people from former systems of support and security. By pursuing punitive policies against sex offenders that cause distinct and severe harm to their children well beyond the period of imprisonment, the state has a "residual obligation" to respond to these harms and provide appropriate support (Bülow, 2014). Currently, this obligation is not being met. The invisible harms suffered by children with a parent in prison for a sexual offence are "inconsistent with the principles of a just democratic society" (Condry, 2018: 38). It is essential that support is provided that responds to the complexity and heterogeneity of these harms.

Sex offenders currently represent one of the largest groups of sentenced prisoners, constituting 18% of the total UK prison population (MoJ, 2021). These figures indicate that the number of children with a parent in prison for sexual offences in the UK is likely to be much larger than publicly anticipated. It is essential that government agencies recognise and respond to the complexity of the experiences of these children in order to avoid the long term "economic and social cost" of leaving them unsupported (Minson, 2019: 532). Further research is required to elucidate the ideas formulated in this paper and make salient (Phillips & Gates, 2011) the distinct experiences of children with a parent in prison for sexual offences so that these differences may be appropriately responded to.



Drawing submitted by Lucas, aged 5, who provided his handprint to represent the support he had received from Children Heard and Seen..

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