‘It’s like someone dying but they’re still alive’: Exploring Women’s Experiences of Having a Partner Imprisoned for a Violent Crime in the UK

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"Women's freedom is the sign of social freedom." Rosa Luxemburg

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ABSTRACT

Aims: To explore women's experiences of having a partner imprisoned for a violent crime in the UK

Background: Having a partner imprisoned can impact women socially, emotionally, and physically. Research exploring this experience is scarce, especially in the UK. Given the impact it can have on women's lives, and the limited academic knowledge in the area, there is a need for more research to explore women's experiences of partner imprisonment.

Methodology: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore six women's experiences of having a partner imprisoned for a violent crime in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and NVivo was used to conduct the analysis.

Results: The analysis identified four master themes of: Adjusting to a New Identity – The Prisoners Wife; HMParent: Prison as Saviour; Collateral Damage: Behind Bars on The Outside; Post Experience Growth and Moving On.

Conclusion: The results derived from this project have highlighted the ways in which women experiencing partner imprisonment make sense of the experience, how they cope with it, and the implications of the imprisonment on them directly. Though the women described struggles and difficulties, they also described positives such as increased empowerment and improved relationships. Further research is required in this area to enrich our understanding of women's experiences and provide appropriate support services for women who require it.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Chapter Overview

In this introductory chapter I will provide background for this research project. Firstly, I will discuss the political context of crime and justice in the UK followed by public perceptions of women partners of prisoners. I will then present literature on the topic of partner imprisonment and separation and consider the impact on women socially, psychologically, and physically. This will lead into the meta-synthesis conducted on current UK and USA qualitative research exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment. Finally, I will present the rationale and aims for the current project.

Background: Politics and Policy

Despite declining crime statistics in recent decades (ONS, 2019), England and Wales hold the highest levels of imprisonment in Western Europe, with 174 prisoners per 100,000 (House of Commons, 2019) compared to 123 per 100,000 in Europe (World Prison Brief, 2019).

Crime, punishment, and imprisonment has always been a political issue and one that can sway voters. During so-called neoliberal Thatcherism (1979-1990) a tougher, more authoritarian, approach to crime was introduced with harsher sentences and increased police powers, especially to stop and search (Bell, 2010). This inevitably increased the rate of reported crimes and thus imprisonment rates (Ismail, 2020). As the consequences of this became more visible in the form of social exclusion, unemployment, poverty, and inequality, 'governing through crime' (Simon, 2007) became a useful strategy in politics. Governing through crime redefined social problems, which arose as a result of tough policies and austerity, such as unemployment, educational failure, and single parenthood, as causes of

crime rather than a result of politics and policing (Bell, 2010). Under the New Labour government (1997-2010), there was also an expansion of the criminal justice system in the form of longer prison sentences and an increase of imprisonable offences, despite the annual cost of a prison place in England and Wales costing £38,042 (Ismail, 2020). One example of this is the Penalty Notices for Disorder introduced in 2001 which gives police the authority to fine anyone over the age of 15 for behaviour deemed to be antisocial (Bell, 2010).

In the UK the current prison population stands at approximately 87,550 and trends show it is steadily increasing (Sturge, 2021). With such a large number of prisoners in the UK, one can wonder how many family members, friends, partners, and children are touched by someone they know being imprisoned. Statistics on how many women are impacted by partner imprisonment is unclear, however, estimations show that in 2015 around 370,000 prisoners in Europe and 50,000 prisoners in the UK had a partner on the outside (Eurostat, 2017).

The ‘tough-on-crime’ approach is still with us today. Priti Patel said the following at the 2021 Conservative Party Conference: “Our approach to crime will always be based on seeking justice for victims and survivors, ensuring perpetrators feel the full force of the law” (Patel, 2021). The hardy approach to crime is an alluring promise of safety and justice but one which may produce unintended victims of the system, such as families and partners.

Numerous studies have highlighted the role which families play in supporting desistance (e.g., Cid & Marti, 2012. Women partners in particular have been recognised to make a significant contribution to the rehabilitation of their partners (Souza et al., 2015). In January 2019, the Strengthening Prisoners’ Family Ties Policy Framework was published by

the Ministry of Justice and HM Prison & Probation service (reissued in 2020: Ministry of Justice & HM Prison and Probation Service, 2020). One of the main purposes of this report was to support prisoners' relationships to reduce reoffending:

> "This policy supports the maintenance and development of prisoners' relationships with family, significant others, and friends, by using a range of methods and interventions. Supporting prisoners' relationships outside of prison is considered to help prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime" (Ministry of Justice & HM Prison and Probation Service, 2020, p. 5).

The subtle, yet impactful, presence of 'rehabilitation to reduce reoffending' highlights the focus of the criminal justice system: the offenders. This focus neglects the impact on families and therefore, prisoners' families and partners remain out of sight with no agency holding statutory responsibilities for them. This was highlighted thirty years ago by Matthew (1991) and still appears to remain the same. Whilst reductions in reoffending would reduce pressure placed on families, prioritising family ties solely for the agenda of the criminal justice system does not seem to prioritise the needs of families and partners.

Prisoners' Wives Public Perception

Public perceptions of women who have partners in prison are shaped and impacted by politics and media. The 'tough-on-crime' approach influenced public perceptions of crime as well as families of those who have committed crimes (Bell, 2010). In this section, I present and discuss some of these perceptions and discourses found in popular TV and media in the UK.

Missing Voices in Popular TV and Media

Ted Bundy, a serial killer trialled and jailed for the rape and murder of over 30 women in 1979 had a Netflix series (aired in the UK) made about him in 2019. It followed the trial and portrayed the following of admiring women, called 'groupies', who sat through his court case and sent marriage proposals via post. Eventually, in 1980, while still on trial, Bundy married one of these women. The case of Ted Bundy is not alone, Jeffrey Dahmer, Richard Ramirez and Anders Breivik, to name a few, all received interest, love letters and marriage proposals from women (Common, 2020). Cases like these evoke fascination and interest from the public towards these women and in some sense, sensationalise their experiences in the media. However, the voice of these women, expressed by them, seems to be missing in the spaces they are ridiculed, fascinated over and criticised.

Drama and TV shows following the experiences of those convicted of and arrested for crimes have been portrayed on our TV screens for decades. A few examples include: 24 Hours in Custody, a British Channel 4 series running since 2014, which follows real police forces as they investigate crimes and arrest suspected criminals; Time, a 2021 BBC drama which followed the experience of a man imprisoned in the UK and his experiences whilst in prison; Gordon Behind Bars, a 2012 Channel 4 series; and so on. Conversely, families' and women's experiences of the imprisonment of loved ones has not been illuminated in the same way.

In 2012, Prisoners Wives, a six-part fictional BBC drama following women supporting their partners and husbands in prison, was aired. This series appears to be the first, and only, UK series switching the narrative to focus on the experience of partners, instead of the prisoners themselves. The series captured the experiences of the women and

compassionately conveyed their stories. It covered a range of their experiences including the challenges, shame experienced, and their resilience to stay with their partners through what appeared to be an experience that impacted every part of their lives. It attracted positive reviews for its acting as well as its highlighting of the women's experiences (Raeside, 2012). Unfortunately, popular TV like this is rare and though received well, does not seem to be a common occurrence.

Public Contempt and a Push for Tougher Punishment

In the UK prisoners have a legal right to get married in their place of detention in line with the Marriage Act 1983, Same Sex Couples Marriage Act 2013 and the Civil Partnerships Act 2004. However, in 2021, one woman made the headlines after marrying her partner who was in prison for drug offences. A news article by the Express titled: Drug dealer is allowed out of prison so he can get married (Campbell & Jolly, 2021) highlighted the crime committed, previous crimes and the use of taxpayer's money to fund the day release. This article attracted comments such as: 'punishment in this country is a joke' and 'as soon as he's out he'll dump her'. The overarching theme of public response was that of contempt and anger which demonstrates the power of the press to influence public opinions. After public backlash, rules on marrying outside of the prisoner's place of detention were tightened with now only prisoners in open prisons permitted to attend outside ceremonies (National Offender Management Service, 2021).

Similarly, public opinions on prisoners exercising their human right to become parents was received with public criticism when in 2013, a prisoner's request to become a father with his partner through artificial insemination was approved (Doyle, 2011). This case attracted a conservative MP to comment: 'The public are sick to the back teeth of the human

rights of criminals being put before the rights of decent law-abiding people, victims and taxpayers" (Doyle, 2011). Comments like this suggest those in prison should have their human rights revoked and in turn, perhaps more indirectly, limiting the rights of partners too.

Negative perceptions of prisoner's partners are implicit, and their missing voices in the public arena could indeed impact what support is offered to women, how services are funded and provided, and how public policy is shaped.

Impact of Partner Imprisonment on Women

Early Research

For most of the twentieth century, there has been minimal research interest in prisoners' families and though there has been a ten-fold increase in research from 1990-2015 (Lanskey et al., 2019), research exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment is still limited. This could perhaps be linked to the political and media climate explored above.

One of the earliest studies exploring partner imprisonment found financial difficulty to be the greatest source of distress and difficulty, especially as imprisonment mainly impacted the primary breadwinner in families (Bloodgood, 1928). This was supported by Sacks (1938) who highlighted similar difficulties and found there was a lack of communication between services and families which left families feeling alone and unsupported.

In 1965 one of the largest studies to date in this area was conducted by Morris in the UK. Morris (1965) interviewed 825 men in prison and 469 of their wives and found financial hardship, feeling alone, and having limited child-care were the most dominant difficulties.

Women at the Wall: A Study of prisoners' Wives Doing Time on the Outside was published in 1990 by Fishman. It was another large study which found that financial strain, psychological stress, family adjustment, stigma and lack of resources were the main issues when dealing with the separation of a partner to imprisonment. This narrative slightly shifted in the early 2000's through Comfort's work (2007) which found that difficulties of separation were often dependent on pre-imprisonment relationship dynamics. Some women experienced a sense of relief, especially if the partner was unemployed, had a drug dependency, or mental health difficulties prior to imprisonment.

Who Is Impacted by Partner Imprisonment?

Intersectionality, first coined by Crenshaw in 1989 is a term used to describe how different elements of social identity can overlap and compound disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989), this includes gender, race, class, disability, religion and so on. Many of the women impacted by partner imprisonment remain hidden within more marginalised groups (Loucks, 2004), potentially increasing their social disadvantage. Prisoners and their families represent some of the most socially deprived sections of society (Smith et al., 2007). A quarter of all prisoners in the UK are of ethnic minority backgrounds (Berman & Dar, 2013) and research shows imprisonment disproportionately impacts racialised members of society (Arditti, 2012). Many of these prisoners will have families of ethnic minority backgrounds too and considering research has identified institutional racism in the UK justice system (Phillips et al., 2017), it can be argued that many families of prisoners could have their difficulties compounded with experiences of racism.

Additionally, if we consider the aim of governing through crime to shift social problems to be causes of crime, imprisonment has a disproportionate impact of those with

less economic power and privilege which can also be exacerbated by imprisonment for the families in the form of increased outgoings, providing for visits and phone calls to maintain contact alongside loss of income (Condry, 2007; Comfort, 2008).

If imprisonment disproportionately impacts racialised and less economically advantaged members of society, and if women are more likely to support men during their imprisonment, this already provides us with three levels of disadvantage - gender, class, and race. This may, to some extent, explain the lack of policy support, research and support services in this area.

The Cost of Providing Care

Research shows that women most often provide significant support and care for prisoners, this includes partners, wives, mothers, and other female-relatives (Condry, 2007). This support is often unrecognised and therefore, unsupported (Condry, 2007). Women are traditionally assigned caring roles in our society (Aungles, 1993) which can bring with it additional responsibilities and sometimes penalties as a result of involvement through association. An example of this is of women losing their social housing if their partners or sons behave in an antisocial manner, even if the women themselves had no involvement in the antisocial behaviour (Hunter & Nixon, 2001).

In terms of the negative mental health impact, depression, and anxiety in particular have been identified as common in women who have partners imprisoned (Wilderman et al., 2012; Comfort, 2008; Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2007; Turanovic, 2012). Some of this may be reflective of the extra responsibilities that may arise for partners as a result of the imprisonment. Studies have highlighted some of the additional pressures such as financial

strain in the form of providing items for the person imprisoned and maintaining contact (Hairston, 2007), visiting the prison (Hutton, 2016) and reduced income (Geller et al., 2011). Families can experience financial difficulties in several different ways, for some the loss of the main bread winner provides most strain, for others it's the increase in outgoings to account for things such as legal fees and contact costs which can lead to debt (Codd, 2008).

These extra pressures can be amplified further for women with children, potentially increasing childcare responsibilities and stresses, regardless of if they are still with the imprisoned parent of the child (Park & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Research suggest that the imprisonment of a parent can result in increased externalised behaviours such as defiance and disobedience, increased internalising behaviours such as anxiety and depression and difficulties at school (Park & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). This could add increased stress upon the woman to cope in the absence of partner support. Furthermore, financial burdens of paying for visits, telephone calls and legal fees can also take a toll (Christian, 2005). On the other hand, women who have experienced domestic violence can experience relief and improvement in their wellbeing (Turanovic et al., 2012). Some partners have been reported to express relief when the father of their child has been imprisoned and others have found the experience to be a turning point of a newfound independence and purpose (Comfort, 2008).

The physical health impact on women must also be recognised, family member imprisonment has a disproportionate negative impact on women's physical health in a number of domains, leaving them more likely to suffer from obesity, have a heart attack or stroke and be in general poor health (Lee & Wilderman, 2014). In contrast, some studies have explored the impact on men when a family member in the household is imprisoned and found no significant impact on their psychological distress after adjusting for other stressors (Brown

et al., 2016) or increased risk factors for cardiovascular disease, obesity, and general poor health (Lee & Wilderman, 2014).

One way in which this can be understood is through the lens of structural discrimination within health sectors that lead to disproportionate health inequality towards women (Homan, 2019). Most recently, health inequalities have been demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic where those of ethnic minority backgrounds and lower socioeconomic status have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 complications and death (Keys et al., 2021). Research within the realm of health inequalities and gender highlight that women are less likely to receive effective and timely assessments and diagnoses for a number of different health conditions, this has been considered in the context of gender bias in medical education and research (Homan, 2019). In terms of women who have partners imprisoned, their gender may contribute to higher levels of physical health risk and could explain the discrepancy in the impact observed for men with an imprisoned family member.

Once the prison sentence ends and the partner returns home, difficulties do not necessarily end. Women often hold mixed emotions about the return of their partner and worry about whether they will remain free and how their partner will readjust back into family life (Kotova, 2019). Expectations for what life will look like upon return do not always match reality, especially in the context of experiences of loss and trauma whilst separated (Weaver & Nolan, 2015)

Shame and Stigma

In most research studying the impact of imprisonment on families, shame and stigma is included as a large feature of the experience (e.g., Braman, 2007; Hannem, 2003). The stigma and judgment experienced by families and partners of those imprisoned is impacted by the way society views prisoners themselves (Condry, 2007).

Research highlights that families of prisoners can be viewed as tainted by their association with a prisoner (Condry, 2007). Thus, families often experience secondary blame and can be assumed to be guilty through association, for this reason, many families choose to keep the experience a secret from those around them; possibly to mitigate judgement and shame (Hannem, 2003). Though keeping the experience private could limit judgement, it can also further isolate women from their support networks and contribute to an increased sense of shame (Heubner, 2005). The experience of shame in this context can lead to elevated levels of stress, loneliness, and isolation, as well as depression (Russell, 2020).

Interestingly, there is some research that suggests the experience of shame depends on what kind of neighbourhood the woman resides in with increased shame reported in neighbourhoods where imprisonment of family members is less common (Fishman, 1990; Schneller, 1978).

Separation and Grief

When a partner is imprisoned, an involuntary separation takes place. Therefore, discussing the impact of separation, loss, and grief could provide further insight into the experience. Studies have explored the impact of partner separation on wellbeing in the case of divorce (Amato, 2014), military deployment (Allen et al., 2011) and bereavement

(Bisconti et al., 2004). Findings show separation can decrease life satisfaction and wellbeing, especially if the separation is involuntary, such as in the case of divorce initiated by the other (Wang & Amato, 2000) or death (Luhmann et al, 2012).

The imprisonment of a partner results in a separation that could be described as a loss and may lead to a grief response. Traditional grief research has focused on death loss, but two types of non-death loss have been identified: social death (Sudnow, 1967) and psychosocial death (Doka, 1989). Social death occurs when a person is removed from society and psychosocial death occurs when the person is not physically removed but is emotionally altered and the way in which they are viewed by those around them is lost. Examples of psychosocial loss include dementia patients and those convicted of sex offences (Bailey 2017).

Available literature within the field of grief and loss to imprisonment has found social stigma can lead to the disenfranchisement of grief in circumstances of family member or partner imprisonment (Arditti, 2005; Travis & Waul, 2003; Turanovic et al., 2012) and death row imprisonment (Jones & Beck, 2006). The term disenfranchised grief is defined as "…. the grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (Doka, 1989, p. 4).

Research in this area has found the disenfranchised element of partner imprisonment can prevent families from seeking social support. In some cases, family members have found that support and empathy are withheld because those around them are aware of the criminal

activity and therefore judge the emotional consequences of their loss are ‘deserved’ (Arditti, 2005).

Impact of COVID-19

Face to face visits in UK prisons have been on hold since around 13th March 2020 which is now a full 24 months ago. Though some prisons facilitated a reduced number of visits over the summer months since March 2020, most have remained locked down (Minson, 2021). At the time of the first lockdown there were no facilities for remote visits till Purple Visits, an online video calling software, was introduced in January 2021 (Minson, 2021). The true effect of this is yet unclear though there have been some published studies exploring the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on children of those imprisoned in the UK (Minson, 2021) and Australia (Flynn et al., 2021). Both report on the hardship’s experiences by children during the time of not being able to see, touch and connect with their imprisoned parent and the difficulties and challenges of using the video software (Minson, 2021).

Thus far, there have been no studies exploring the impact of this on partners. Informal online discussions on Twitter amongst women experiencing partner imprisonment make clear the pain this period has caused them. However, the long-term impact on current relationships as well as reunification and adjustment back into family life remains unknown.

Literature Review - Meta-Synthesis

Considering the fragmented body of evidence in this area indicating the large impact of partner imprisonment on women, it was a surprise to find a real lack of research exploring

this, especially in the UK. My initial intention was to conduct a meta-synthesis synthesising information from studies exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment in the UK, but I soon found this was too limited for the purposes of a meta-synthesis and expanded the search to the USA. To my knowledge, this is the first meta-synthesis exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment qualitatively in the UK and USA.

Research Aim

The aim of this meta synthesis is to integrate findings from research exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment. Methodological issues that arise and limitations of the evidence base will also be discussed.

Methodology

Search Strategy

The trial registry site, PROSPERO, was searched to avoid replication of an already conducted meta synthesis with the same research aim.

Three databases which were relevant to the topic were searched between January 2022 and February 2022 for published and peer reviewed articles between 1970 to the present day. The databases searched were MEDLINE (n=1,519), PsychINFO (n=1,547) and CINAHL (n=808).

The following search terms were used on each database: [Women* OR Female OR Woman OR Females OR Wives OR Wife OR Girlfriend* OR Partner*] AND [Partner OR Spouse OR Husband OR Boyfriend OR Significant Other] AND [Prison* OR Jail OR Incarceration OR Imprisonment OR Imprisoned Or Correction* Facilities].

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Identified studies were published papers written in the English language which explored, qualitatively, women's experiences of having a partner imprisoned. Initial exclusion criteria included any study conducted outside of the UK to maintain similarities in culture across studies. However, the search revealed only two relevant UK based studies, the exclusion criteria was then adjusted to include the UK and USA. This was to maintain some similarity in cultural experience whilst not expanding to a world-wide search.

Procedure and Study Selection

Extraction guidance provided by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) was used (Moher et al., 2009). The PRISMA flow chart for this meta-synthesis is below (fig. 1). The initial electronic and manual search identified 3,876 results, once duplicates were removed, this left 2,812 papers to screen. Once these were screened, 2,777 were removed based on their title and abstract. This left 35 potentially eligible studies to be reviewed according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see fig. 1 for reasons for exclusion at full-text review) which eventually led to six relevant studies to be included in this meta-synthesis.

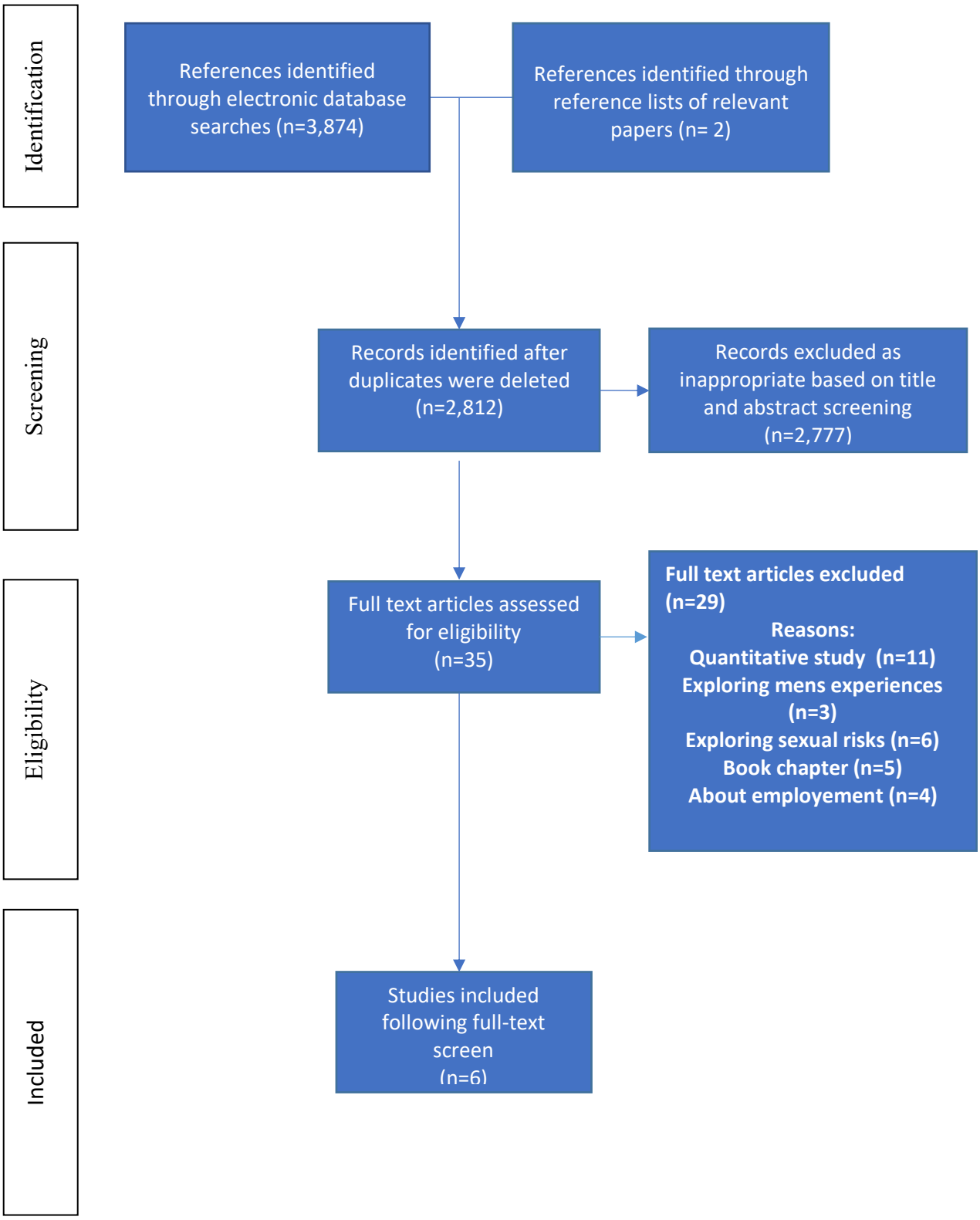

Fig. 1. PRISMA flow chart presenting search process.

Data Extraction

Information regarding sample size, participant demographics, study method, country, and length of time since partner was imprisoned was extracted from each study.

Data Analysis

NVIVO was used to analyse the six papers using the foundations of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each study was read in full at least twice to familiarise myself with the data then codes were assigned to parts of the data which were prominent. Codes were only conducted on study findings rather than on participants quotes and data to avoid re-analysis of raw data (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). Findings were then defined as researcher interpretations, discoveries, or judgements (Sandelowsku & Barroso, 2006). These initial codes were then arranged into themes and subthemes, utilising the support of supervisors.

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

The six included studies had a combined sample size of 115 women. Ethnicity was all White in one study (Fishman, 1988) but did include some diversity in the others, DeShay (2021) had a primarily Latin American demographic. All of the studies were conducted in either the UK (Kotova, 2019 & De Claire, 2020) or the USA (Fishman, 1988; Girshick, 1992; Alston, 2019; DeShay, 2021). Two of the studies, Girshick (1992) and Alston (2019) were dissertations but were included due to limited research in this area and their valuable insights. Intention was to only include UK based studies for uniformity with the research project but

only two could be identified which was insufficient for a meta-synthesis. The search was expanded to the USA to maintain similarities in language spoken and some cultural variables, but it is recognised that the USA and UK prison systems are still vastly different. Table 1 provides a summary of basic data extracted from the papers.

Author(s), Date and Country	Sample Size	Sample Age	Socio-Economic Status	Ethnicity	Partners Sentences and Crime	Data Collection and Analysis
Fishman, 1988 (USA)	30	Not Stated	25 Working Class, 5 Middle Class	All White	2-4 years Crimes against property, violent offences, fraud, and drug offences	Interviews. Grounded Theory
Girshick, 1992 (USA)	25	19-53	Not stated but education levels were high.	17 White, 5 African American, 1 Peuto Rican, 1 Filipino Mexican and 1 Mexican American	1 year - life sentence Violent offences (including rape), drug offences, property-related offences, parole violations	Interviews
Alston, 2019 (USA)	11	32-55	Not Stated	Black African American	Not Stated	Interviews. Phenomenological Analysis
Kotova, 2019 (UK)	33	20-70	Not Stated	31 White British, 1 Black British, 1 Mixed-Race	10 years - life sentence Offences not stated	Interviews. Thematic analysis

De Claire, 2020 (UK)	4	19-25	Not Stated	Not Stated	9 months-4years Theft, drug offences and violent offences	Interviews with both partners. IPA
Deshay, 2021 (USA)	12	26-43	Not stated but education levels were at least high school degree or equivalent and all but two were employed.	10 Latin American, 1 African American and 1 White	Not stated	Interviews

Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies

Quality Appraisals

Each of the six studies were independently screened using the CASP Checklist (2018). This process enabled me to assess each study for its methodological and analytical rigour, its ethical considerations, recruitment strategy, data collection and reflexivity of the researcher. As a whole, the studies were of a high standard, the two which were published dissertations (Girshick, 1992 & Alston, 2019) demonstrated most reflexivity. Those which were published, and peer reviewed articles failed to demonstrate reflexivity which could have been as a result of limited word counts in publications. Table 2 shows the CASP checklist findings in further detail.

	Clear statement of aims?	Qualitative methodology appropriate?	Research design appropriate?	Data collection appropriate?	Researcher-participant relationship considered?	Ethical issues considered?	Data analysis rigorous?	Clear statement of finding?	Value of research?
Fishman, 1988	Y	Y	Y	Y	Not Stated	Y	Y	Y	Present
Girshick, 1992	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Present
Alston, 2019	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Present
Kotova, 2019	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Present
De Claire, 2020	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Present
DeShay, 2021	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Present

Table 2. CASP Checklist

Findings

Thematic analysis of the six papers revealed three main themes and six subthemes (see table 3 for a full breakdown of themes and subthemes). The main themes covered a sense of having a special and unbreakable bond, the experience of being collateral damage of the prison system and the hopes and fears of the future.

Main Themes	**Subthemes**
A Special and Unbreakable Bond	Amplifying Positives Demonstrating Commitment
Experiencing Life as Collateral Damage of The Prison System	Second-Hand Punishment Managing Stigma and Shame
Waiting With Uncertainty: Fears for The Future	Keep Calm and Keep Going Preparing for An Unplanned Future

Table 3. Main Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: A Special and Unbreakable Bond

This theme encapsulates the strong sense of a unique and special bond between the women and their partners, which at times, appeared unbreakable and at other times, felt delicate and fragile, requiring defence and explanation from the women.

Amplifying Positives

Across three of the studies there was a pattern of the women highlighting and amplifying the strength and the specialness of their bond with their partners. There was also a strong sense of security that this brought them and a drive to care for and protect one another.

Often the women described an instantaneous connection that then grew into something special and unique.

> *"Each participant emphasized a connection, describing how it manifested in a positive view of themselves and their partner. In the accounts, the strong connection was associated with stability and a positive identity for the relationship, which they extended to themselves, and this provided hope for the future"* [De Claire, 2020]

The quote above highlights the impact of the positive connection on how the women also viewed themselves and their own identity, not just the relationship itself. Another way in which the women amplified the positives of their experience was by listing the positives and viewing the relationship with their partner as more meaningful than the connections they had with friends and family on the outside, DeShay (2021) explored this and found that communication was often an area reported as being advantageous to the relationship, understandably with limitations to physical closeness:

> *"Another way they embraced their decisions was by emphasizing the advantages of being in relationships with men who were incarcerated. The women we interviewed reported numerous benefits of these relationships. At times they viewed these relationships as more meaningful than those they had on the outside. One of the benefits noted by participants was the quality of verbal and written communication they had with their partners. This benefit was likely due to the nature of incarceration and correctional policies that place limitations on face-to-face communication. For some participants, letters and phone calls made interactions more thoughtful and meaningful"* [Deshay, 2021]

Perhaps more nuanced, there was a drive to present the partners are more than just the crimes they have committed and been punished for (Girshick, 1992; De Claire, 2020; Fishman, 1988). Within this, there was also an avoidance of thinking about the consequences of the crimes on the victims, choosing instead to think of their partners actions as out of character and unexpected:

> *"While this may be difficult for those of us not associated with a prisoner to understand, families of prisoners tend to rationalize the crimes by saying their loved one had "made a mistake, and everyone makes a mistake at some time in their life. People should be forgiven for mistakes and given another chance." Reframing the experience to focus on their spouse rather than the victim is a coping mechanism"* [Girshick 1992]

Demonstrating Commitment

Possibly unsurprisingly, there was a theme of the women managing stigma directed towards them by becoming more outwardly sure and committed to their partner. This was displayed to others by expressing their firmness in their decision to stay committed and through their actions of staying loyal and supportive of their partner:

> *"The most common way these women managed the courtesy stigma of being in a romantic relationship with a man who was incarcerated was to fully embrace their decision by emphasizing the benefits of such relationships. This included defending their relationship to those who disapproved"* [DeShay, 2021]

The demonstration of commitment to their partner and to the world also translated to changes in usual willingness to do things such as an increase in reassuring their partner:

> *"... the commitment she made and the way in which she changes her behaviour to "reassure" her partner of her commitment to him while he is in prison by ensuring that he knows everything about her life. Later comments from [redacted name] make it clear that she will only alter her behaviour while he is in prison suggesting some temporary willingness to do things that she would otherwise view as unreasonable"* [De Claire, 2020]

Theme 2: Experiencing Life as Collateral Damage of The Prison System

This theme captures a sense of indirect punishment felt by the women through the implications placed on them as a result of their partner being imprisoned. Some of the repercussions are ones enforced directly by the prison system such as the removal of their loved one physically, lost time together, and the removal of autonomy to make life decisions and have children. The others are consequences suffered through experiencing stigma and shame by those around, sometimes family, sometimes friends and sometimes complete strangers. A final subtheme touches on the fight to maintain the relationship which includes feelings of guilt for carrying on with life on the outside, the difficulties of missing everyday activities together and having to do things alone.

Second-Hand Punishment

Much of the second-hand punishment felt by the women was as a direct result of the sanctions placed on their partner through their prison sentence. One of the most emotional examples of this was touched upon in one of the studies where the barriers to parenthood were described:

> *"Prisoners are of course deprived of much of their autonomy in relation to both mundane issues such as choices of food but also of life choices like parenthood. The partners, however, also experienced what is, in effect, a deprivation of temporal autonomy. [Redacted name] did not say that she been actively planning to become a mother again, for example, but suddenly finding herself deprived of that option caused her considerable anguish….In the context of imprisonment, this was not simply nature interrupting the women's imagined life courses – rather, separating them from their partners was the intended consequence of long-term imprisonment and this deliberate nature of the deprivation made it all the more painful"* [Kotova, 2019]

For those that already have children, the consequences were far-reaching, and impact was reported on children's quality of life:

> *"It is not only the husband and wife who experience a change in their relationship. The children also feel the loss of the father at home, have to visit their father at the prison, and feel the impact of a changed relationship with their mother as she tries to cope and keep the family together. Wives of*

prisoners and of military men feel a great responsibility to be both mother and father to their children" [Girshick, 1992]

Another, more day-to-day, consequences inflicted upon the women was a sense of disrupted family time and shared experiences. Women reported their partners being absent during happy family occasions but also more challenging ones such as when someone close dies (Kotova, 2019). This highlighted the isolation and loneliness that was sometimes experienced by the women in their day-to-day life. The limited contact women do share with their partners are also monitored which Kotova (2019) found made it difficult for women to share personal details and impacted closeness. Below is a quote from one of the studies describing the longing for more mundane, everyday tasks:

"Firstly, the women described being deprived specifically of couple time. Of course, this included couple events such as anniversaries – events which were painful annual reminders of the fact of separation for many. However, they were also deprived of mundane but meaningful everyday togetherness that comes out of sharing a household and being a couple, and not necessarily deliberately intended to be 'couple time', like a date or an anniversary celebration. For the partners who shared a household, imprisonment resulted in a deprivation of the prisoner's everyday presence, including spontaneous expressions of affection, such as hugging each other. One woman, who met her partner while working in a prison, said she missed washing the dishes with him, for example. For her, this mundane activity had created a sense of closeness and she missed these moments many years after she stopped working in the prison. Another spoke of her

> *husband not being able to spontaneously give her a bouquet of flowers, but having to painstakingly arrange such gifts via intermediaries, such as their children"* [Kotova, 2019]

A more practical indirect consequence appeared to be an increase in financial responsibility for some of the women:

> *"They have taken on this task that caused many of them to have to "step-up" financial as well as in every other area of their lives in order to conduct and uphold a family on a daily basis"* [Alston, 2019]

Unsurprisingly, all the studies reported some impact on the women's mental health and wellbeing, and some touched on a sense of guilt for carrying on with life whilst their partners were unable to live a free existence (Kotova, 2019; Girshick, 1992; Alston, 2019; De Claire, 2020)

On a more positive note, De Claire (2020) found some of the women in their study could find the inner strength to put the offending in the past and go forth with an improvement to their relationship. The drive to move on appeared to help the women cope whilst also improving their communication. Similarly, Girshick (1992) found some women reported the experience to be a good opportunity for their partners to reform and change their life direction.

Managing Stigma and Shame

All of the included papers touched on the experience of shame and stigma for the women they interviewed. Fishman (1988) discussed the experience of shame sometimes in the absence of other reactions but specifically in the case of wives of sexual offenders. Alongside a deep sense of shame and embarrassment there was also the presence of fearing judgement (Girshick, 1992; Alston, 2019). One study reported the distress experienced from public shaming in the form of media reports and the guilt that followed:

> *"Within this context many wives reported that they especially felt ashamed and embarrassed when their husbands' criminal behaviour and conviction was reported in the local newspapers and on the local TV news programs. These women recounted how they developed a feeling that they too were somehow guilty. They assumed some guilt for their husbands' offense, despite being completely innocent"* [Fishman, 1988]

Sometimes the stigma was experienced as a judgement on the woman's own character as those around them judged them as bad people simply for dating someone incarcerated (DeShay, 2021).

The stigma and othering experienced led the women to carefully select who they shared their experiences with to avoid judgement:

> *"Most prisoners' wives know someone who has lost a job, or have themselves lost jobs, because of their intimate association with a prisoner. The need for an income then outweighs the desire to be honest about their*

lives. Usually the wives need to tell a co-worker or their boss in order to get time off for family visits, but otherwise, the risk may not be worth it… The truth is selective— different family members, friends, and co-workers know different aspects of their lives, ranging from all of the truth to none of the truth." [Girshick, 1992]

Sometimes the women found themselves having to cut ties with close family and friends who were most judgemental about their situations:

"Another way these women managed the stigma of their relationships with their partners was to sever ties with friends and family" [DeShay, 2021]

In the face of judgment, stigma, and shame, some of the women demonstrated a stronger commitment to their partners, perhaps to help them cope with the stigma:

"Despite the disapproval of family and friends and the stigma associated with dating or being married to a man in prison, these women chose to remain in their relationships. In doing so, they exerted their independence as women who could make their own decisions about what was best for them. They also found ways to deal with the stigma, which appeared to limit the actual or expected negative reactions from friends and family" [DeShay, 2021]

Some of the women spoke about only opening honestly to others in the ‘same boat’ (Alston, 2019) and in some instances, being open and vulnerable led to more support for the women:

> *“Here are some family members who do support her, who come around gradually, or members of her husband's family who give her encouragement, material assistance, rides to the prison, and so forth. In these cases, taking the risk of openness about the marriage has paid off. These family members help to balance the instances where other members have rejected the marriage or cannot be told about the marriage”* [Girshick 1992]

Theme 3: Waiting with Uncertainty: Fears for The Future

This theme combines a sense of having to ‘get on with it’ and the feelings that evoked in the women, such as guilt, and worries for the future of the relationship once the prison sentence itself is over.

Keep Calm and Keep Going

In the face of extended periods of separation, the women often spoke about the dilemma of waiting or living (DeShay, 2021; Fishman, 1988; Kotova, 2019). Some spoke of the guilt of continuing with life by going on holidays and celebrating Christmases (De Claire, 2020) and others spoke of not being consumed by waiting for the release date, rather focusing on shorter term dates to get them through:

> **“***...this is not to say that the women were not waiting for their partner’s release. Rather, their lives were not consumed by waiting. With the release date either far in the future or altogether uncertain, most of the women focused on short term goals, such as the date the prisoner would be moved to a lower category prison”* [Kotova, 2019]

Amongst the waiting and separation, the women showed a desire and hope for change in their partners. In one study (De Claire, 2020), this drive for change seemed to be fuelled by the want for this experience to have been worth it in some way. If positive change comes from it, then perhaps it was an experience that ultimately worked out for the best?

> *“For [redacted name], it is the faith that [redacted name] has changed; she could not allow herself to fear the alternatives. For [redacted names] hope rests on this being their first experience of a prison sentence, their realization that it has been difficult for their partners and the belief that they now know what they have to lose”* [De Claire, 2020]

Some of the women found their lives gradually looking very different to their partners and this becoming a source of disconnectedness and worry as time went on:

> *“As a result of this lack of temporal interconnectedness, dedicated prison family time – such as visits – became challenging and at times awkward, even when communication patterns were regular and reasonably frequent, such as daily phone-calls. Communication became disjointed, as prisoners had ‘less and less to say in letters’...Yet even if the partner outside was*

determined to share the minutia of her life, it could be difficult for the prisoner to relate to what was happening to her because he was unable to live through these occurrences with her. Although dedicated family time still took place, including visits and phone-calls, this family time was of perceived as being of relatively poor quality" [Kotova, 2019]

However, DeShay (2021) reported some women felt more connected to their partner in the absence of worries about infidelity:

"Another benefit the women spoke of was knowing where their partner was at all times. To some extent, this seemed to reduce the stress and worry about the possibility of him being unfaithful" [DeShay 2021]

Preparing For an Unplanned Future

Often, for the women involved in all of the studies included in this synthesis, the imprisonment of their partner disrupted a future life they have envisioned for their selves and for their relationships. This meant the future became uncertain and plans changed. For the women in Kotova's (2019) study, the uncertainty that came with long sentences meant some of the women did not have the weddings they dreamt of and the families they yearned for:

"The women in this study certainly felt that the long sentence disrupted the imagined trajectories of their lives. Some descried having had concrete plans for weddings and parenthood prior to their partners' arrests, and imprisonment meant that these plans had to be cancelled or postponed

> *indefinitely. For those who were older, motherhood would no longer be possibility if they were to wait until their partners' release. It was especially painful for the women who did not already have children, such as [name redacted], but also deeply upsetting for those who had children with previous partners but also wanted children with their imprisoned partners specifically"* [Kotova, 2019]

This change in life trajectory also brought with it worries regarding retirement and an absence of being able to provide care for one another in older age:

> *"Those who were older also spoke of their plans for retirement being dramatically altered; a further way in which their imagined lives at an older age were changed by a long sentence. Many had been expecting to spend their later years with their partners, looking after and caring for one another. Being older, some feared they or their partners would die or that their health would deteriorate and they would not be able to look after one another"* [Kotova, 2019]

Though the women waited for the return of their partner with eagerness, this was at times tinged with anxiety and worry which placed them in a stuck position of needing more certainty but being unable to gain it:

> *"Dreams of the future can be either exciting or depressing to the wife and husband, depending on the sentence length, the problems incarceration is posing, and the level of adaptation to the situation. Most wives want to have*

> *a certain level of security for the family before the prisoner comes home. They don't want him to be faced with a lot of pressures and demands immediately, for fear that he might break under the pressure and revert back to the old"* [Girshick, 1992]

However, this did not appear the same for all of the women, some held onto the faith change had occurred and could not allow themselves to worry about what could go wrong – an alternative to positive change was not an option:

> *"For [name redacted], it is the faith that [partners name redacted] has changed; she could not allow herself to fear the alternatives"* [De Claire, 2020]

Discussion

Summary

This meta-synthesis reviewed limited research currently available exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment in the UK and USA. It included six studies, two from the UK and four from the USA. The combined sample size of all the included studies was 115 with a range of ages between 19 and 70. In terms of ethnicity, the studies included a mix of backgrounds; White, African American, Latin American, Mixed Race, Mexican and Filipino. In terms of offences, not all the studies included this information but there was a real variety in the studies that did (Fisherman, 1988; Girshick, 1992; De Claire, 2020) of drug offences, violent offences, fraud, and property offences. This all provides us with a rich sample of experiences. All the studies were qualitative in approach and used interviews to

collect their data. Two used an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (De Clare, 2020; Alston, 2019).

Three main themes were identified: a special and unbreakable bond; experiencing life as collateral damage of the prison system; and waiting with uncertainty: fears for the future.

The analysis identified a strong sense of there being a special bond between the partners and this being a driving force for the women to keep going at times when the implications of their partners imprisonment felt most challenging. Within this, there was a desire to amplify positives of the relationship and demonstrate a strong commitment to their partner and the relationship. This could be viewed as a way of coping in the face of uncertainty and direct, or perceived, judgement by those around them

Furthermore, the analysis suggested the cumulative effect of remaining in a long-distance relationship, experiencing judgement, the increased responsibilities and the shifts to identity may contribute to the experience of second-hand imprisonment and punishment. This has been identified before (Comfort, 2003 & Condry, 2013) in research and represents an overspill of the criminal justice system, in terms of who feels punished, which disproportionately effects those closest to prisoners. The consequences of this were different for women who had children and they had to contend with the impact the experience had on their children's quality of life. Arguably, imprisoning parents partially breaks children's human rights in ways in which they have no control over. For example, their right to be given parental guidance is compromised when contact is limited and their right to privacy is often compromised through media reports (Human Rights Act, 1998).

The women's experience of shame and stigma following their partners imprisonment featured in all of the studies included in this synthesis. Shame is a powerful emotion which usually functions to keep us part of our communities and avoid isolation (Kaufman, 2004). In the case of partner imprisonment, it appears shame functions as a longer-term emotion which prevents women from connecting with and receiving support from those around them.

In the face of stigma and shame, the women found themselves carefully selecting who to share their experience with and who to hide it from, potentially internalising the experience as somehow their fault or their wrongdoing. The experiences of shame were reported in the earlier studies (Fishman, 1988; Girshick, 1992) as well as the more recent studies (Alston, 2019; Kotova, 2019; De Claire, 2020; Deshay, 2021) suggesting perhaps limited shifts societal acceptance of the experience.

Furthermore, the synthesis identified a drive within the women to keep living whilst also waiting for their partners. This posed a dilemma at times as it induced feelings of guilt for carrying on with life whilst their partners could not (De Clare, 2020). Sometimes the women felt this created a sense of distance and disconnectedness in their relationship as their life continued (Kotova, 2019). Whilst waiting for the return of their partners, the women planned for an uncertain and unexpected future, often having to change their wants and desires for their life in the process. Kotova (2019) described women not having the weddings they dreamt of or the families they wanted with their partner, this was especially the case for women who would be at an age where fertility would be compromised or halted when their partner left prison.

When looking to the future, it appeared the women were filled with eagerness and anticipation to be reunited with their partners, but this was also tinged with anxiety and worry as to what their relationship would look like after so long apart, whether the relationship would survive and what their future lives would look like with a prior conviction hanging over their partner and their lives.

Implications

Findings from this synthesis highlight the enormous emotional burden of partner imprisonment and the treatment of women who are legally free and innocent. The criminal justice system aims to punish and rehabilitate those that break the law through the removal of freedom and liberty however, what this synthesis highlights is the experience of the unintended victims of the criminal justice system.

Policy within criminal justice focuses on offences and the offender, often forgetting the impact on families and partners. To echo Codd (2007), support for families of those imprisoned needs to focus on their individual rights, needs and experiences of families and view their experiences in their own right, not as vessels of change or rehabilitation for their imprisoned family members or partners. This synthesis, and the present study, focuses on women's experiences of this which adds an additional layer of consideration in terms of entrenched systematic failures of women.

Limitations

This meta-synthesis review was limited in several ways; firstly, the studies were across two continents, the USA and UK which though similar in some sense, are vastly different in terms of their prison systems and culture. This means the studies contained substantial heterogeneity in experience which in some sense is a positive as even with

different backgrounds, the women reported very similar experiences but, in another sense, could mean some experiences, unique to the UK, could be missing from this synthesis.

Another limitation is related to the dated research present in the field. In this synthesis I included two studies from pre-2000 due to the limited availability of literature. One study was from 1988 (Fisherman, 1988) and another from 1992 (Girshick, 1992), with such changes to social norms in this time, this calls for a real need for more up to date research in this area. Moreover, two of the included studies were dissertations (Girshick, 1992 & Alston, 2019), which are often not included in reviews but again, due to a lack of research they were included. However, it's worth noting that these were studies of very high quality as identified during the quality appraisal process. This too highlights what an under researched area of experience this is, there is clearly an urgent need for more peer reviewed research.

In terms of methodological concerns, the studies included were of a high standard and as they were all qualitative, none aimed for generalisability which means the small samples do not act as a limitation. However, a lack of reflexivity included in the studies could point to a need for research which considers the impact of the researcher on findings and recognises the double-hermeneutic aspect of qualitative research. The only two studies which included a reflexivity statement were the published dissertations (Girshick, 1992 & Alston, 2019) which could suggest limited word counts associated with publications could be preventing qualitative researchers from including a vital part of the research process in their publications.

Conclusions

This meta synthesis was the first to review qualitative studies exploring women's experiences of having a partner imprisoned in the USA and UK. Studies based in the UK are currently very limited which is what led to the inclusion of USA studies. Nevertheless, the synthesis highlights the challenges of being a partner to someone imprisoned in terms of the impact on self, the second-hand punishment and the psychological impact of loss, shame, and uncertainty.

Present Study and Research Aim

What we know about this group of women in society is that their physical health, mental health, and social support can be comprised as a result of having a partner imprisoned. We also know that this experience involves a separation and potentially a loss that may lead to the experience of grief (e.g., Wilderman et al., 2012; Green at al., 2006; Doka, 1989).

Much of the research discussed so far was not focused on specific offences and there is a lack of research on whether the impact of partner imprisonment varies by specific crimes committed by the partner. The results of the meta-synthesis found that none of the studies focused on any crime in particular but there was a theme of increased shame for some crimes such as sexual offences (Fishman, 1988). Furthermore, research conducted by Condry & Heidensohn (2006) explored the experiences of relatives of those who have committed violent offences and found that relatives often described feelings of grief which they compared to being bereaved. This was attributed to stigma and judgement families received around familial blame, as though they too had some part to play in the crime (Condry & Heidensohn, 2006).

There is a lack of research on the impact for partners of prisoners in the UK generally and as revealed by the findings of this meta-synthesis, there is currently no research which explores the experiences of women who have a partner imprisoned specifically for a violent crime in the UK. This indicates a clear need for more qualitative research in this area to recognise the needs and experiences of women and provide them with appropriate support and address the injustices.

This study will explore women's experiences of having a partner imprisoned for a violent crime in the UK using the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) method. IPA is particularly appropriate in this exploration as it is a method that emphasises and highlights the construction of meaning by individuals within their social and personal world. Additionally, it is an approach that 'gives voice' to those whose voice may be missing or less powerful in society. Arguably, the voice of women partners of those imprisoned is missing from many areas of society (TV, media, policy, research). Using IPA will contribute an in-depth understanding of the phenomenological experiences of women with a partner imprisoned for a violent crime to existing knowledge. It is hoped that by deepening understanding of their experience, women experiencing this separation can be supported more effectively and their physical and psychological health be protected and improved. This knowledge can also inform debates about criminal justice in the UK and enrich our understanding of how the criminal justice system impacts those not directly in contact with it, like families and partners.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

'Our nature or being as humans is not just something we find (as in deterministic theories), nor is it something we make (as in existentialist and constructionist views); instead, it is what we make of what we find' - (Richardson, Fowers & Guignon's, 1999, p 212)

As eloquently portrayed in the above quote, this study will aim to explore women's experiences of having a partner imprisoned for a violent crime using the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA). IPA is an approach which aims to 'give voice' to marginalised voices and highlight experiences through interpreting participants interpretations. More of this will be explored in this chapter.

Chapter Overview

This chapter will outline the methods undertaken for this study. I will begin by discussing my own philosophical positioning in terms of epistemology and ontology followed by a rationale for the use of the IPA method. The latter parts of the chapter will detail the research design, data collection and analysis. Ending with discussion of ethical considerations, quality assurance and dissemination.

Positioning and Orientation

Philosophical and Social Positioning

Within qualitative and quantitative research, it is essential for researchers to provide the reader with understanding of their philosophical stance. The way we understand and

interpret the world, and everything within it, impacts all aspects of the research process. Wise and Stanley (1983) argue the research process occurs through the core experiences of the researcher and encourages them to clearly express their positions to their reader. In line with this and in order to provide the reader with greater clarity and understanding of the positioning of this study, I will discuss my own ontological and epistemological stance in the following sections.

Ontology refers to the philosophical study of existence and reality as well as how people define what reality is and what exists (Raddon, 2010). An individual that believes there is one reality that exists in the absence of human perception and construction may identify as a realist. On the other hand, an individual that believes what we perceive as reality is constructed of individual perception and experience may identify as a relativist (Field, 1982).

Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge and how what we know, can and is, conveyed (Raddon, 2010). Similar to ontology, epistemology exists on a spectrum, from positivism to constructionism. An individual with a leaning towards realism may be more likely to identify with positivism as an epistemological stance. Positivism views knowledge as something that can be objectively and scientifically measured by researchers that are separate from what is being studied. On the other end, relativism and constructionism view knowledge and reality as co-constructed through the lens of the individual experiencing it (Cupchik, 2001).

As we know, research approaches can be qualitative or quantitative, qualitative being the analysis of non-numerical data such as interview transcripts and quantitative being the

analysis of numerical data. Given this, quantitative research may lend itself more towards a positivist and realist stance as it aims to obtain evidence and 'truths'. On the other hand, qualitative research may be more likely to lend itself towards a constructivist and relativist stance – aiming to explore and understand individual experiences of meaning making (Scotland, 2012), rather than aiming for generalisability.

In terms of my personal philosophical positioning, I adopt a 'standpoint epistemology' and lean more towards relativism and constructionism. Standpoint epistemology considers knowledge as located within social and political contexts (e.g., Collins, 1990 & Harding, 2004) therefore, it is important for me to disclose my social positioning too. I am a 28-year-old woman of Turkish British background currently training in clinical psychology. I am able-bodied, cis gendered and heterosexual. I do not have experience of partner or family member imprisonment; however, I do have experience of working in the visiting centre of a British prison where I have spoken to, and witnessed, women in this position. This occupational experience may have some impact on how I approach, engage with, and analyse the data in this project, it will therefore be considered throughout the planning, conducting and analysis stages of the project.

Feminist Theory

The following is a discussion of relevant feminist theory which has shaped my leanings towards standpoint epistemology and led to the selected research method for this study.

Feminism firmly argues that most research, including social sciences are sexist, biased, and driven by patriarchal values (Wise and Stanley, 1983). It fights for research to

encapsulate feminist principles and to produce knowledge that understands and challenges inequalities within society (Kelly & Gurr, 2019). Roberts (1978) urges researchers to adopt 'non-sexist' methodologies which she suggests is about intent and practice rather than the selection of particular methodologies. This means, feminist research does not encourage the use of one methodology over the other, instead it encourages researchers to be thoughtful about research they design and produce to take into account systemic inequalities and lead to social change.

Second wave feminism from the 1960's questioned what we know and how we know what we know by highlighting that knowledge we consume as fact is actually 'male knowledge' situated in social and political context (Kelly & Gur, 2019). This being androcentric biased knowledge that is derived from male academics, researchers, and scientists. Feminist scholars have critiqued this and positivist epistemologies, arguing that all knowledge is influenced by the researcher and their social location so therefore only produces partial and subjective knowledge (Kelly & Gurr, 2019). For this reason, many feminist researchers take on standpoint epistemology which considers knowledge as located in social and political interests (e.g., Collins, 1990 & Harding, 2004). Feminist standpoint epistemology comes from intersectional feminism – a contemporary feminist movement that highlights various forms of inequality that combined, exacerbate each other (Crenshaw, 1989). Generally, inequalities such as gender, class and race are discussed as distinct experiences, intersectional feminism brings together the interaction between these inequalities that can compound experiences of discrimination and increase powerlessness (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989, 1990; Harding 2004). This stance feels particularly relevant in exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment due to the multiple social and

economic factors that may impact how women make meaning of, and cope, with the experience of partner imprisonment.

In addition to, or perhaps in line with my feminist beliefs, my role as a trainee clinical psychologist has also contributed to my selected research methodology. A large part of my role is to collaboratively make sense of client's difficulties which can inform helpful, tailored, and unique treatment plans. This collaborative process of meaning making leads me to reflect on the benefits of holding a constructionist and relativist position within my practice and research and draws me towards more exploratory research principles.

Considering the nature of this exploration, I believe a qualitative approach led by relativist and constructionist philosophy will aid in exploring the participants experiences and meaning making of having a partner imprisoned for a violent crime. It therefore feels appropriate to adopt an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to this explorative study.

Theoretical Orientation of Interpretive Phenomenological Approach

IPA is a qualitative approach first introduced in the UK in the 1990's to enable exploration of experiences and meaning making. It has been used widely within health, clinical and counselling psychology (Smith, 2004). IPA draws heavily on philosophical principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Phenomenology is the study of experience, first coined in the early 20th century by Edmund Husserl (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenological researchers are concerned with identifying the meanings individuals make of their experiences through

accessing their interpretations. Thus, research influenced by phenomenology seeks to highlight how individuals talk about and perceive their experiences, as opposed to describing experiences and phenomena according to fixed ideas and beliefs (Smith et al, 2009)

Husserl's ideas were later developed by Martin Heidegger and the idea of hermeneutics emerged (Heidegger, 1962). Hermeneutics refers to the need to understand and relate to the way-of-thinking of an individual in order to make sense of how they speak of their experience. Though it is impossible for a researcher to completely understand the experience of their subject, attempts are vital to provide rich and detailed interpretations. In the case of this study, it felt important that the primary supervisor identified as being a woman – research for women, by women is encouraged as traditionally, most research either focused on men or topics that would benefit men, by men (Wise & Stanley, 1983). This dynamic and double role of the researcher is often referred to as 'double hermeneutics' within IPA – referring to the interpretations made by the researcher on top of the interpretations made by the participant. In some sense, final interpretations are an amalgamation of meaning making provided by the participant and meaning making of the participants account provided by the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Finally, the principle of idiography refers to the focus on individuals rather than seeking generalisability which is most common in traditional evidence driven research. IPA takes an idiographic approach to analysis and focuses on the individual rather than the universal (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) which is uncommon, even in qualitative approaches.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a vital part of conducting research compliant with IPA ideals (Smith et al, 2009). Reflexivity involves embodying a critical self-awareness of your impact as a researcher on the topic which is being studied and the research process (Finlay, 2009). The aim of this is to ensure previous understandings and investments in particular outcomes do not impact what is retrieved from the data collected and interpreted. In order to remain reflexive throughout the process of planning, conducting, and analysing this exploration I engaged in numerous reflective tasks. Namely, keeping a reflective diary, exploring my own personal experiences and beliefs associated with the themes that emerge, and participating in regular supervision.

Design

The IPA approach was adopted to explore how the participants in this study have made sense of their experiences within their unique personal contexts. The IPA approach is 'participant-orientated' and allows participants to express themselves and their experiences without judgement, distortion, or prosecution. This is appropriate and fits with the sensitive topic of a partner being imprisoned (Smith, 1996).

Participants and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was utilised as recommended by Smith (2015) and recruitment was primarily through social media platforms. I posted public recruitment posts on relevant Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram profiles and groups. Close links were established with Ormiston Families, a charity that works with families of those imprisoned, to aid in recruitment. Numerous operations managers within the charity attended a presentation about

the research which led to teams across the country advertising the study to potential participants. Unfortunately, this did not lead to the recruitment of any participants but did help me in gaining views and ideas about the project from professionals that work with women in this position. Though advertisement was across a number of different social media platforms, the six women recruited to the study were all recruited from Twitter. Twitter appeared to have a large community of women with partners imprisoned who were open to engaging with researchers and professionals. I approached some women myself via direct messaging if I could see from their profile, they may be suitable for the study. Some of the women contacted me directly through private message and some were directed to me through previous participants public posts about taking part. This could be considered a form of snowball sampling in the online realm. As part of the recruitment strategy, I also posted a video of myself explaining the study and asking women to make contact if they wanted to hear more information. This video was posted to Twitter and Facebook but most engagement was again from Twitter. I also used a recruitment poster (see appendix B) which invited potential participants to contact me by email. This poster was posted on online social media platforms and used by Ormiston Families in their recruitment efforts.

Considering the importance of homogeneity in IPA sampling (Alase, 2017), the following inclusion criteria was used to guide recruitment:

1. Women aged 18 and over
2. Has a partner* currently imprisoned for a violent crime as defined by the Crown Prosecution Service (2020) which includes: murder, manslaughter, throwing a corrosive substance, assault, gun and knife crime and robbery.
3. Minimum sentence length of 12 months.

*Definition of partner for the purposes of the study: married or unmarried couple in a relationship. The couple *must* have been together at the point of sentencing and currently remain in a relationship with each other.

Once women made contact with me, or agreed to hear more about the project, they were provided with a participant information sheet (see appendix C) via email. Participants were invited to ask questions if anything felt unclear at this stage. Once participants said they would like to take part in the study and had their questions sufficiently answered, they were emailed a copy of the consent form for them to sign and return via email. Each woman was also offered a phone conversation to ask any questions prior to completing the consent form, four out of the six women opted-in for a phone call during which basic questions about the study were answered. One woman went through this process but did not turn up to the interview on the day. I made attempts to rearrange or to find out what had prevented her from taking part but she did not return my emails, so a reason was not established for her non-engagement.

The IPA approach is not one that encourages large sample sizes due to its idiographic and phenomenological nature. IPA researchers are urged to think about how many participants are appropriate for the phenomena under exploration and are discouraged from recruiting large numbers of people simply because they have access to appropriate participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Numerous factors can impact how many people are recruited such as: accessibility to suitable participants, the nature of the phenomena under exploration (i.e., how commonly it is experienced) and time limitations. Most commonly, sample sizes of between two and twenty-five have been reported (Alase, 2017). For British

clinical psychology doctoral programmes, it is recommended between six and eight participants are appropriate (Turpin et al., 2017). This study aimed to recruit up to ten participants during the planning stage. A total of six women were recruited between the ages of 20 and 43. Recruiting women from this population proved difficult and gaining access to platforms where I could make contact with them was challenging. Therefore, a total of six participants is reflective of the hard-to reach element of this study population,

The Schedule

An interview schedule of open-ended questions was drafted (see Appendix E. for interview guide) with the support of both supervisors and through informal conversations with other IPA researchers. An IPA research group message board was also used to gather ideas and guidance around interview schedules, and I also attended a three-day IPA masterclass to help with constructing the interview guide. The final schedule aimed to provide a guide during the interviews but was not used too rigidly in order to keep the interviews semi-structured and open. Efforts were made to ensure the interview was led by the interviewee in line with IPA guidelines (Smith, 2015). This was by explaining the nature of IPA research to the participants and opening the interview to be a space where they can discuss what they feel would be most important to share.

The Interviews

Data included six interviews with six participants. Prior to the interview commencing, participants were asked simple demographic questions to complete the study demographic information questionnaire (see appendix H). All interviews were conducted by me with participants unknown personally or professionally. The interviews were arranged via email or telephone, and all took place virtually via an online video conferencing software (Zoom) due

to current COVID-19 restrictions. During the early stages of planning this project, it was intended interviews would be conducted in person. Within IPA, allowing participants to choose the time, place and date of interviews is an important aspect (Alase, 2017). Though participants could choose the time and date of their interviews, they were unable to choose location due to COVID-19 restrictions. Up to date recommendations from the university and academic research suggested that most research is conducted remotely for the safety of participants and researchers (Haleem & Javaid, 2020). Remote interviews have been found to have benefits such as participants feeling more comfortable, and participation feeling more convenient (Dodds & Hess, 2020). However, there are some downsides such as technological literacy limitations, privacy concerns and access issues (Dodds & Hess, 2020). In the case of this project, participants reported finding it more convenient to participate via video conferencing software, but some potential participants were unable to participate, naming difficulty with finding childcare during COVID-19 and feeling uncomfortable in discussing their experiences in their home with children present.

All interviews started with introductions, a reminder of what was included in the participant information sheet and consent form, and the completion of demographic information. Recording was completed using the Zoom record function as well as a dictaphone. In line with IPA guidance regarding interviews lasting in the region of about an hour (Smith, 2015), the interviews lasted in the range of 53 minutes to 1 hour and 37 minutes. Each participant was offered the chance to debrief following the interview and everyone was provided with contact information for support charities (see Appendix I.). Zoom recordings provided a transcript of the interview, these were checked for any inaccuracies and altered accordingly. Once transcripts were finalised, Zoom recordings were deleted. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant in order to protect their anonymity.

Data Analysis

Each interview was fully transcribed verbatim and included simple speech dynamics such as pauses and the use of fillers. This is advised by IPA guidelines to ensure all important information is considered (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Dictaphone recordings were used to assist with this when checking Zoom transcripts for any errors. In line with the idiographic focus of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2015), each transcript was individually finalised before moving onto the next. NVivo, a qualitative data package, was used to assist with the organisation and management of data. The following four-step guide for conducting IPA by Smith & Shinebourne (2012) was followed for the data analysis:

1. Looking for themes in the first transcript
2. Connecting the themes
3. Continuing the analysis with the other transcripts
4. Write up

Step One – Looking for Themes in The First Interview Transcript

The first individual transcript was read four times to ensure familiarity with the content. The audio recording was also listened to twice to help in immersing myself in the original atmosphere of the interview. This is recommended within the IPA method and can lead to novel insights each time transcripts are re-read, and audio recordings are re-listened to (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

At this point of the analysis, I made attempts to ensure my own reflections were suspended so as not to bias what is extracted from the original interview recordings. The task of reflecting on any personal experiences and thoughts about the topic is vital within this approach and is referred to as 'bracketing' (Alase, 2017). The first step was making annotations of the transcripts on three levels of analysis: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. The use of language, the interviewees personality, similarities, amplifications, and contradictions were all retrieved through this step of note taking. Some parts of the transcripts provided more information and therefore led to more note taking than others, but this is accepted as standard in IPA (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

Once I had worked through the entirety of the first transcript, I returned to the top and began the process again, this time using the annotations to identify themes. Themes are phrases which attempt to capture the essence of what was being spoken about.

Step Two – Connecting the Themes

The emergent themes were listed on a separate sheet of paper and connections were sought between them. Effort was made to make sense of the connections and involved more analytical and theoretical ordering rather than sequential, as in the first step. As each cluster of themes emerged, the original transcript was checked again to confirm they still reflected the actual words and intentions of the interviewee to ensure the essence of the interview was not lost in my interpretations.

Once this was complete, a table of themes was produced with the emerging themes coherently ordered; this then produced clusters of themes. Each cluster was given a name, and these became the main themes.

Step Three – Continuing the Analysis with The Other Transcripts

Once the above steps were completed with the first transcript, the process was repeated for the remaining transcripts, one-by-one. Smith & Shinebourne (2012) recommend researchers aim to respect convergences and divergences between the transcripts, thus, any new issues or themes that emerged whilst working through the transcripts were checked for in the previous transcripts. Differences between the women's accounts were honoured just as much as similarities to ensure key experiences were not lost in my interpretations. Once all the transcripts were analysed in this way, a final table of main themes was produced.

Step Four – Write-Up

At this point, the themes were explained in detail and translated into a written account with verbatim extracts. Care was taken to ensure the reader can differentiate between what participants said and what my interpretations were as the researcher. In order to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study, I regularly engaged in meetings with both supervisors across all four steps of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethnical approval was obtained from the University of Essex Sub Committee 2 (see appendix D.). Outlined below are the major ethical considerations for this research study.

Informed Consent

All participants were made aware of their right to withdraw which was clearly stated on the participant information sheet and consent form, they were also verbally reminded at the start of each interview. All participants were informed they can withdraw consent at any point before analysis of the interview– at this point any data collected could be discarded and not included in the study. Once data analysis commenced, data could not be withdrawn.

Confidentiality

All participants were informed, via the participant information sheet (see appendix C), consent form (see appendix. A) and verbally that their data will be fully anonymised and confidential. Audio recordings were collected on an encrypted device and were only ever kept in my sole possession. Transcriptions were anonymised, and all audio files were deleted as soon as they were transcribed. Zoom provided transcripts for all recordings, once this transcript was retrieved, the recording was deleted. Participants were assigned unique identification numbers (and later pseudonyms for the purposes of the write-up); this was stored separate to the data. Data was kept in secure electronic files in accordance with the University of Essex data protection guidelines.

Disclosures

Participants were informed, via the participant information sheet and verbally, about the limits of confidentiality. It was clearly explained to each participant that it may be necessary to disclose information if I became worried about the safety of them and or others. It was agreed with all participants that if the sharing of information became necessary, they will be informed of this, and the first step would involve sharing it with the research team. Once shared with the team, if it was deemed necessary, emergency services and other

authorities could too be informed. No safeguarding issues were raised during the interviews which required the initiation of this process.

Triggering or Upsetting Material

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic being explored, there was a possibility that research participants may become emotional, upset, or distressed during the interview. Participants were reminded that they do not have to answer any questions if they do not wish to do so. All participants were offered a debrief at the end of the interview and information on support services were provided (Partners of Prisoners, Ormiston and Families of Prisoners). My clinical skills as a trainee clinical psychologist were beneficial in assessing for signs of distress or discomfort during the interview. Participants were monitored throughout the interviews to ensure they felt comfortable enough to continue.

Quality Assurance

Though assessing the quality of research is important in both quantitative and qualitative research, frameworks to do so differ between methods. There is some research to suggest that frameworks used to assess quality in many qualitative approaches are inappropriate to research that has an interpretive basis (Finlay, 2009). Additionally, the quality assurance frameworks traditionally used in quantitative research assess for objectivity, which is not usually the aim of qualitative research, especially IPA.

IPA primarily aims to uncover ‘lived experience’ so it is important for findings to be assessed for quality appropriately. Smith, Flower and Larkin (2009) initially presented Yardley’s criteria of: sensitivity to context, commitment to rigour, transparency and

coherence, impact and importance. Later, Smith (2011b) rethought the usefulness of this framework due to its tick box nature and provided us with seven principles of good IPA research. I will use the next section to discuss these principles and how I have applied the principles to this study.

1. Clear Focus

   It is advised studies provide in depth detail of a particular aspect rather than remain broad within a topic. Within this study, exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment to violent crime in the UK provided a clear focus for analysis.

2. Strong Data

   This principle refers to conduction 'good' interviews in order to collect quality data. I used my clinical skills learnt on the clinical psychology doctorate training to ensure good engagement and rapport with participants.

3. Rigour

   Smith (2011a) originally highlighted the importance of rigour within IPA research and suggested this is fulfilled by providing sufficient quotations for each theme presented. 'sufficient' quotations referred to quantifiable numbers of how many quotations were needed for each theme in order to fulfil the principle of rigour (Smith, 2011a). This was later critiqued by Chamberlain (2011) due to its reductionist nature and was altered to remove the expectation of a specific number of quotes for each theme (Smith, 2011b). In order to abide by the principle of rigour I attempted to strike a balance between having overly saturated themes and having too little themes.

4. Sufficient Space to Elaborate Themes

   It is advised to give room for the elaboration of themes by ensuring each theme is explored in depth, in some cases, presenting subsets of the emerging themes too. Within this study, the presentation of themes was carefully thought through with both supervisors to ensure sufficient space was given to the elaboration of each theme that emerged.

5. Interpretive Analysis

   This principle refers to the importance of providing an interpretive, rather than just descriptive commentary of the themes. In order to achieve this, I engaged in the double hermeneutic process and made attempts to make sense of each participant making sense of their experience throughout the analysis.

6. Convergence and Divergence

   This theme encourages the nuanced capturing of similarities and differences within participants. Within this study, I made efforts to demonstrate the uniqueness of each participant as well as the similarities within them. Smith (2011b) advises this as vital within IPA research

7. Carefully Written

   Smith (2011b) highlights that good writing of qualitative work can help the reader remain engaged in the narrative accounts of the participants. This principle was upheld within this study in order fulfil this principle and to reach the standards required for the doctorate qualification, dissemination, and potential publication.

Dissemination

This study was conducted as part of the qualification for University of Essex's Clinical Psychology Doctorate. Findings from the project will be submitted for publication in relevant peer-reviewed journals. Findings will also be disseminated to various charities that support families of those imprisoned such as Families Outside and Ormiston Families. All participants were given the option to be notified of when the study is completed in order to read a summary of key findings. For those that did opt-in, a final summary was provided to them via email.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an outline of my philosophical, professional, and personal views which have led to the methods selected for this explorative study. A rationale has been provided for the use of IPA followed by detailed discussion regarding study design, data collection and data analysis as well as ethical considerations and plans for dissemination. To conclude, this study has used IPA and has been influenced by philosophical leaning towards relativist and constructionist views.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

Chapter Overview

This chapter will present the results from the interpretive phenomenological analysis of six women's experiences of having a partner imprisoned for a violent crime in the UK. I will first present a table of demographic characteristics of the participants followed by the main themes and subthemes identified. Finally, I will present the themes in written form with verbatim extracts from the interviews.

Study Sample

In total, seventeen women approached me to take part in this study. Ten were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria - four met their partner during the prison sentence, five were from the USA and one woman's partner was imprisoned for a non-violent crime. One woman agreed to take part but them did not turn up to the interview, she did not provide a reason for not wanting to take part.

Demographic details of the six women who took part are presented in the table below. All were White British with an age range of 20-43. Two were married, two unmarried and two engaged. The length of relationships varied from two-years to twenty-four years. Years of imprisonment at the time of interview also ranged from one-year to five-years. There were a range of violent offences including armed robbery, murder, grievous bodily harm (GBH) and GBH with intent. Sentences ranged from four-years to nineteen-years. See table 1 below for more information.

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Relationship With Partner	Employment	Length of Relationship at Time of Imprisonment	Duration of Imprisonment at Time of Interview	Partners Convicted Crime	Length of Sentence
Kim	34	White British	Engaged	Hairdresser	1 Year	1 Year	Armed Robbery	4 Years
Julie	43	White British	Engaged	Unknown	15 Years	7 Years	Murder	19 Years
Claire	36	White British	Unmarried	Drug and Alcohol Worker	10 Months	1 Year	GBH With Intent	6 Years
Megan	20	White British	Unmarried	Student	2 Years 8 Months	3 Months	GBH	6.5 Years
Chloe	40	White British	Married	Business Manager	22 Years	2 Years	GBH with Intent	13 Years
Liz	42	White British	Married	Cleaning Supervisor	10 years	5 Years	GBH with Intent	12 Years

Table 1. Participant demographic characteristics.

Participant Profiles

In order to bring the above demographic table to life, below is a short introduction to each participant. Their names have been changed and any identifiable information has been either altered or redacted to protect the privacy of participants.

Kim

Kim is a 34-year-old hairdresser who lives at home with her dogs. Kim and her partner, who used to be in the army, met at a local pub and felt 'inseparable' by their third date. Kim explained her partner had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from being in the army, was under the care of the local crisis team, and struggled with alcohol misuse as a result of his mental health difficulties. Both her and her partner have no children. She had been with her partner for a year when he was sentenced to four-years for an armed robbery. At the time of the interview, her partner had been imprisoned for a year.

Julie

Julie is a 43-year-old woman who lives alone. I'm unsure of her occupation as it was not covered in our interview, and I was unable to gain it post-interview. Julie met her partner when she was 16 through friends and experienced numerous stressors together throughout their relationship, such as baby-losses and the processing of childhood-traumas. At the time of the offence, Julie and her partner had broken-up and her partner had entered into a relationship with another women who went on to have his child. Julie and her partner got back together before the sentencing took place. Though Julie has no children, she is wanting to gain custody of her partners child who is now in care. Julie and her partner were together (on-and-off) for fifteen years before he was sentenced to 19-years in prison for murder. At the time of the interview, her partner had been in prison for seven-years.

Claire

Claire is a 36-year-old drug and alcohol worker who lives alone. She has three children from a previous relationship who she sees regularly. Claire met her partner at a local pub, at the time, she was in a relationship with the father of her children, so her and her current partner initially struck up a platonic friendship. When this progressed, Claire left her ex-partner. At the time of meeting, her partner had already committed the offence and was on remand. Claire and her partner were together for 10-months before her partner was sentenced to six-years for grievous bodily harm (GBH) with intent. At the time of the interview, her partner had been imprisoned for a year.

Megan

Megan is a 20-year-old student who lives at her family home. Megan and her partner met through friends when she was 17-years. At the time of meeting, Megan's partner had already committed the crime, GBH, which he was later sentenced to 6.5-years in prison for. She was aware of it but due to a slow investigation process, was unsure whether it would result in a custodial sentence. Both Megan and her partner have no children. At the time of the interview, Megan's partner had been imprisoned for three-months.

Chloe

Chloe is a 40-year-old business manager who lives at home with her children. Chloe and her husband met whilst at school, have been together for 24-years, and have three children together. Chloe and her husband had been together for 22-years at the point where he was sentenced to 13-years in prison for GBH with intent. Chloe and her husband have

been appealing the sentence and believe he is innocent. At the time of the interview, her husband had been imprisoned for two-years.

Liz

Liz is a 42-year-old cleaning supervisor who lives at home with her two children from a previous relationship and one child from her relationship with her current husband. Liz and her partner met in a pub 15-years ago and have been married for 11-years. At the time of the offence, Liz and her partner had been briefly separated due to his alcohol use, they had reunified before the sentencing too place. Liz and her partner had been together for 10-years when he was sentenced to 12-years in prison for GBH With Intent. At the time of the interview, they had been together for five-years.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

From the six interviews, four master themes and nineteen subthemes were identified (table 2 below presents these themes in more detail), these will be expanded into a written account in this chapter. Within the verbatim quotes, repeated words and utterances have been removed for clarity of reading unless they were relevant to the interpretation. Any identifiable information has also been removed as well as identifiable locations and prison names.

1. Adjusting to a New Identity – The Prisoners Wife	Making Sense of The Crime
	Sense of Injustice
	Judgement From Others
	Amplified Emotions
2. HMParent: Prison as Saviour	The Parentified Role: "I felt like his mum, not his wife"
	Sharing Custody of Care: HMP As Carer
	Relief From Relationship Strains Pre-Prison
	Improved Relationship
	A Safe Place
3. Collateral Damage: Behind Bars on The Outside	Entering an Unknown World
	The Waiting Game
	Finding Acceptance
	Second-Hand Punishment
	Grief and Loss: "It's almost like a shameful grief, it's as if I shouldn't be grieving because he's still alive"
	Being Innocent, Feeling Guilty
4. Post Experience Growth and Moving On	Personal Growth
	Creating a New Kind of Relationship
	A Joint Fight for Freedom
	Fearing The Future

Table 2. Master themes and subthemes.

Master Theme 1: Adjusting to a New Identity – The Prisoners Wife

All of the women spoke about the experience of their partner being imprisoned and having to adjust to their new reality whilst making attempts to make sense of what has happened. They shared their experiences of adjustment, their feelings of injustice and their experiences of stigma and judgement. Within this experience there was a drive to feel grateful that they were 'better off' than others in more challenging situations and a feeling of being appreciated for their role in supporting their partner. Appearing strong to those around them also felt like an important part of the women's new identity. Four subthemes are

contained within this main theme: Making Sense of The Crime; Sense of Injustice; Judgement from Others; and Amplified Emotions.

Making Sense of The Crime

Julie and Megan spoke in depth about the way in which they started to make sense of what had happened to them and their relationship. In the process of making sense of the crime and what their partner had been convicted of, it felt important for the women to let me know that their partner is *more* than just the crime they have committed. I felt this sense in their repetitive explanation of the crime being out of character for their partner and the shock they, and others, felt towards the crime. The quote below, by Julie, demonstrates this:

> *"I know yeah, the title is a murderer but that doesn't define him as a person that's the charge his been accused of and that his been committed of and that's what his gone to jail for that's what has been punished for but that's not the person he is inside"* [Julie]

Megan spoke of the significance of those around her recognising this was out of character for her partner:

> *"When everyone found out and we told everyone that you know [partners name redacted] facing this charge, everyone's reaction was, what? Are you being serious? Surely not …I know it would have been a bit of a shock because they didn't expect it, no one expected it because they know what type of person [partners name redacted] is and he isn't a violent person, he just happened to be caught in that situation"* [Megan]

Claire spoke about the comfort it brought her that others were shocked at her partners imprisonment. I felt this functioned as a way to validate her strong view that his crime was out of character and comforted her that others viewed her partner in the same light:

> *"So, so yeah everyone was everyone, everyone was just I can't believe it, you know. can't believe he got that long, and he doesn't deserve it, that was what everyone was saying to me so that, and that was lovely…"* [Claire]

For Megan in particular, it felt key for me, and others, to know that her partner is a good person:

> *"I always said to him, its fine, whatever happens, happens and the good hearted always win. I know obviously his crimes violent and whatever but he's a good person and he would never ever do anything like that again… especially because you look at obviously what his charges were and you're like omg that's a lot, but then you look at the type of person that he is and I was just like that's not you, you didn't do that, surely not? Yeah, it was, it was a shock but I, cos I knew, I know we had only been together a couple of months, but I knew the kind of person that he was, and he'd never been in any way horrible to me, he'd always been as good as gold like really amazing…"* [Megan]

Julie shared parts of her shared trauma with her partner prior to his conviction. I felt she shared this for me to not only understand the strong bond between her and her partner, but also as an insight into the way she makes sense of her partners life and the difficulties he has faced, in the context of his conviction. I wondered if Julie made sense of her partners crime through the context of his life experiences too:

"So, when I lost the baby, both of us, I think, after watching the baby grow on the scan, I was just over 12 weeks so, I had been bleeding from 6 weeks, so we had gone in nearly every single 3 days for a scan, so we watched the baby grow on the scan all the way up so. We did, we thought everything was going to be okay then when we went in and were told it wasn't, like the baby was gone, he did, he like totally lost it. Then not long after that he found out that his real dad who he thought was his dad wasn't his dad. His mum lied to him and then he found out a lot about his childhood that he shouldn't have you know what I mean at that time. He should have been all told to him, he found out a lot of things…" [Julie]

The women also spoke about the disbelief and sense of denial during the sentencing period. Denial appeared to act as a protective factor in such an uncertain and anxiety provoking circumstance.

Chloe described the moment of denial during the trial, just before sentencing:

"In my head, I was like he's coming home, so I don't need to worry about this, and he kept saying to me you need to be prepared, but I wasn't willing to accept it….I was just pacing the house, I tidied the bedroom, I was, oh he'll be coming home, he'll be annoyed I've got clothes everywhere and stuff like this and, and then I got a phone call…." [Chloe]

Megan described a similar experience of denial just before sentencing:

"…and I, I genuinely thought, I genuinely thought he would come home, I don't know why, I don't know why because it seems silly now... but I was just like standing there like, please like he's a good person, let him come home" [Megan]

Sense of Injustice

There was a palpable sense of injustice during some of the interviews, Chloe in particular spoke about feeling failed by the justice system regarding crimes against her family preceding the crime in which her husband was convicted of:

> *"I think that that's where it's, it's really difficult for us because, when we look at like the justice system that these people stood up in court and admitted to doing all of this. That they admitted to entrapment, they admitted to false imprisonment and kidnapping, and nothing happened to them so they walked away sort of like slate clean kind of thing"* [Chloe]

Chloe was the only participant who said her partner did not commit the crime he was convicted of, which puts into context her strong sense of injustice. She shared the difficulties associated with appealing for her husband's innocence which included heavy financial implications:

> *"No he didn't [commit the crime] and that's where we're really, really struggling at the moment because I think I've spent £10,000 on solicitors so far and it's so obviously financially draining and I think I've really found out that you've got to do your research about who you choose as the solicitor as well, and some of them are literally there for the pay check…"* [Chloe]

Liz spoke about the injustice associated with media coverage of the trial and the trial itself:

> *"Shock, massive shock, because obviously everything that's read out in court, it isn't always what happened…bits are missing, and so, even though I knew he was involved, it still was a shock to be found guilty when everyone else was not guilty"* [Liz]

Claire expressed a sense of injustice about having additional responsibilities whilst her partner is in prison:

> *"You know, how am I going to survive, financially and because obviously he got sentenced to six, but he has to serve three. So it's that, three birthdays, three Christmases, three you know, three lots of everything, it's a long, long time. So yeah but yeah, then I was a bit angry like he phoned up one day saying oh I've been to the gym today and I was just like oh that's nice for you, you know I'm out here trying to hold it all together! But that's just life isn't it. I think you….I didn't get free gym membership, but I wouldn't want to be in his situation at all. But yeah, yeah definitely… it's just like grief, I just yeah I can't, that's the only way I can explain it really, you do go through the seven motions of grief as well"* [Claire]

However, not all of the women conveyed a sense of injustice. Kim expressed gratitude towards the prison system and referred to the sentencing as their 'saving grace':

> *It was our saving grace, you know, and that is something I will always be thankful for prison for definitely because we wouldn't be where we are now unless he went to prison"* [Kim]

Kim's experience can be made sense of in the context of her relationship difficulties pre-imprisonment. She described in-depth the difficulties in accessing support for her partners alcohol misuse before he was imprisoned, so her positivity towards the sentence could be reflective of her partner receiving support he was not provided with on the outside.

Judgement From Others

All of the women spoke of experiencing judgement from others and ways in which they managed it. Perceived and direct judgement from others played a part in the process of making sense of what had happened. This was particularly the case online from strangers:

> *"You know I had to delete like Facebook and come off it because, not one person we knew commented on it but these bunch of strangers, and I would feel the same if I'd read that article, I would have thought god what a monster, you know, but it was, but all they write about is the prosecution they don't write anything about what led up to that, the defence …. And so you've got all these people judging him, calling him nasty horrible, you know, things like that"* [Claire]

In the presence of judgement, the women sought further closeness with their partners as the only other person that really understands the situation, sometimes this was in place of seeking connection with other sources of support on the outside, such as friends and family:

> *I did always have people checking up on me and again I just felt like I didn't want to speak and the only person I did want to speak to was him because he knows, we kind of have been through this together and were the only people who kind of knew the true extent of it.*
> [Megan]

Direct and perceived judgement prevented Kim from being open with those around her in fear of criticism:

> ***"****Umm you sheepishly you wait for them to ask questions. I think if you start openly talking about it, you open yourself up to be. Very criticized, and so I just think you tread with caution and wait for them to ask you"* [Kim]

Amplified Emotions

Within this subtheme there was a strong sense of feeling grateful and lucky. There was also a desire for the women to express a feeling of being appreciated by their partners and a drive to appear strong to those around them, including close friends and family.

Kim conveyed a sense of feeling grateful for her situation through comparing her situation to those who may have been together longer before their partners imprisonment:

> *"I feel like I'm fortunate, I don't personally suffer with my mental health. But yeah I think a lot of women out there, do, you know if they maybe, errr it's really hard to say, if they may be a little bit more needy of their partner. You know, or you know it'd be different, because we was only together a year if we'd have been together 10 years and then he was took away I'd probably be feeling a little bit like I needed a lot more help…. I mean I can't speak to these poor people that their partners are inside for years and years, we're very fortunate"* [Kim]

She also compared her situation of not having children to women who may and demonstrated a level of gratefulness for that too. It appeared her comparisons helped her to feel better about her own situation, but I wondered if it sometimes invalidated her experience:

> *"Yeah you know and obviously we don't have children umm I can appreciate that must be very hard for women who have children umm, but when there's kind of only me and the dogs to think about you know I have it a lot easier than a lot of other women"* [Kim]

Chloe spoke about her gratefulness for her partners access to a phone, especially for the wellbeing of their children:

> *"He's always had a phone in his cell so he's always been able to do that, so I think we're really, really lucky, because not everybody has that. Some people might go for days without speaking to their other half and I think that would have really had a massive detrimental impact on the boys if they couldn't have that constant connection"* [Chloe]

Claire in particular spoke about her partner appreciating her role in his life. I sensed the significance of appreciation in a situation where she was providing her partner with so much:

> *"I think he appreciates how lucky, because he knows there's people in there that doesn't have anyone. You know he's asked me before, can you, can you Google something and send it into me for a friend of his like an MP address and I said why can't they, and he said they haven't got anyone… he does always say how much he appreciates it. He said so you know I don't always say it but I really do appreciate everything you do, and I think he does, I know he does"* [Claire]

But perhaps the imbalance in how much she provides for her partner showed in times when she felt more anger. Claire expressed some frustrations at her partner discussing trivial activities whilst she felt the burden of pressure outside of the prison:

> *"He phoned up one day and said, I've been to the gym today and I was just like, oh that's nice for you, you know I'm out here trying to hold it all together"* [Claire]

A desire to appear strong, perhaps to avoid judgement and remain sure in their decision to stay was conveyed. Megan spoke about not wanting to burden others with her stress and anxieties, especially if things turned out okay in the end:

> *"It was just like constantly having to make up excuses because I didn't know what was going to happen, I didn't want to burden them with oh [redacted partners name] could be going to prison but if he doesn't then I've caused everyone all this stress because they think that he's going to prison… do you know what I mean?"* [Megan]

As part of appearing strong, Chloe described feeling like she has a public face and a personal, more vulnerable face which she felt she can't share with outsiders:

> *"But yeah I do feel like I'm a bit of a split personality, I've got these like professional mom, I'm going to football training kind of thing with the kids and then I've got this other side, where I'm like researching sort of rules and regulations and when you can be reviewed for your category and prison rules and I'm like this is…I shouldn't be doing this, this isn't a part of what I signed up for… and so it is, it is an odd, an odd place to be at times"* [Chloe]

Chloe also spoke about the difficulty she experienced in accepting help from anyone else but her husband, possibly as a way to remain loyal to him whilst he was imprisoned:

> *"I was kind of keeping everybody at arm's length to say I'm fine, I can cope, I can do all on my own and not really wanting to accept anybody's help. I think, for me it was, if I can't have my husband, I don't want anybody else, like in my life helping…I will struggle on, and I will do it on my own"* [Chloe]

She also spoke of her drive to appear strong for the benefit of her children:

> *"So it was almost like I had to just get over myself and if I wanted to cry, I cry in the bathroom with the taps running, so that they couldn't hear me or when they were in bed because although I wanted them to know it was okay, I didn't want them to sort of feel that they couldn't talk to me because mum might cry if you if you ask a question, or if you say that you're upset"* [Chloe]

Master Theme 2: HMParent: Prison as Saviour

The women often described themselves as being in a caring role within their relationships. All of the women described going above and beyond what might typically be a 'usual' caring role in a relationship dynamic. In addition to this, in the midst of challenges associated with their partners imprisonment, there also appeared to be a sense of relief. This relief felt reflective of being alleviated of stresses and responsibilities present pre-imprisonment and a sense of comfort in knowing their partners are in a safer place than they may have been had they not been in prison. Prison was presented as being somewhat a saviour; a saviour of the relationship and a safe place whilst the partner is housed there. This experience appeared linked to role taking within the relationships, both before and during the imprisonment. Five subthemes were identified within this master them: The Parentified Role; Sharing Custody of Care: HMP As Carer; Relief From Relationship Strains Pre-Prison; Improved Relationship' and A Safe Place.

The Parentified Role: "I felt like his mum, not his wife"

There was a sense of the women viewing themselves as the caregiver within the relationship. All of the women in this study spoke of feeling like a caregiver to their partners,

either before sentencing, during the sentence or both. None of the women referred to this as a 'parentified' dynamic, however, they did speak of feeling like they're in a parent role.

Julie spoke about the importance of learning how to take care of herself in order to be there for her partner:

> *"At the start my mental and physical health really wasn't good at all with people messaging all the time I didn't really, I only went out if I had to go out and that wasn't me. I'm a social person, I love walking, I love walking everywhere and I just love being at one with nature and things like that. That's stopped, all that stopped like, the other day was the first day, last week was actually the first day I actually took myself out on a walk, I'm like no I'm gonna start doing this because I started exercising and trying to get my mind healthy, eating healthy and things like that because if I don't eat healthy and if I don't do things like that, I'll decline quickly so I just have to eat healthy and like mentally try and prepare myself for the stress. Because at the moment he had a heart attack like I said last Friday so stressing out was making me think…Then I'm thinking if I'm stressed out about it it's not gonna help like, so I just try and take that approach with things but yeah it has been hard, it has been very hard"* [Julie]

Megan touched on an elevated sense of responsibility for her partners wellbeing:

> *"Because I remember, when he was remanded, he was remanded for about 5 days when they was doing his bail application. Ermm and, he just, he just lost so much weight, he looked awful when he came home, he didn't look like himself"* [Megan]

Liz explicitly said she has felt at times like her partners mum rather than his wife:

> *"Yeah, felt like his mom, not his wife"* [Liz]

Megan spoke in ways which indicated a strong parentified dynamic between herself and her partner:

> *"I find myself sometimes getting headaches because I'm like why he hasn't called me yet, why hasn't he called me yet is he okay. The constant concern about his health and his wellbeing is also yeah, quite hard, I think….it was 3 weeks yesterday he's been in this new prison, and when he first got there like, the first week I was like oh my god like is he going to like be okay, is he making friends? And like yeah, it definitely affects me because I know that I'm okay, but I worry about him because I know that he is a bit more, he needs someone to lift him up whereas I do have that support"* [Megan]

Julie spoke about ways in which she cares her for her partner from the outside:

> *"No, I wouldn't say he's had a lot of support because he hasn't. no, I'm trying to get him moved to another jail because he's getting nothing, when he was in [redacted prison name] there was a lot of courses and everything, he wanted to do, they were giving him a lot to do in [redacted] but now he can't do any courses, no nothing and every year he should be able to do courses… that's what we were told"* [Julie]

Sharing Custody of Care: HMP As Carer

In the context of the previous theme, the women also spoke about a relief of responsibility when their partners were imprisoned. Megan spoke about her time being freed to do things for herself without feeling neglectful:

> *"I think also a positive is independence – I've always been independent and so has he but when this situation happened, because we were spending literally 24/7 together there was kind of like, oh I don't want to go home*

because I want to be with you whereas now it's like I can, I can do what I want without feeling…neglectful, of our relationship and feeling like oh my god this could be the last minute I spend with him and stuff like that. So definitely independence….I could always do what I want anyway there was no restrictions but for me, because I wanted to be with him and make sure he was okay and make him feel like he always had someone there to talk to and you know have a good time with definitely now that we've come away from this situation, I can…I can go work out by myself and I can, if I want to go shopping, I'll go shopping by myself whereas before it was always like oh come with me, to get out the house and yeah, independence in the sense that, I don't feel that I'm neglecting him and making him feel left out or….making his mental health worse because he's by himself sort of thing" [Megan]

Kim spoke about feeling less alone in her caring responsibility when her partner was arrested:

"Sometimes when I was at work, he would ring me constantly saying I need you to come home, I want to kill myself, and so it was extremely draining and took a lot out of me, so I think. When the second time he got arrested and they remanded him I was quite relieved, because it was umm, it just wasn't all on me to try and help him" [Kim]

Kim also spoke about the practical relief she experienced when her partner received care and support in prison which they could not finance as a couple before his imprisonment:

"But I think in terms of you know, when we had tried to get help and we'd also looked at a private rehab for 28 days, which was 10,000 pounds on one wage we couldn't afford to send them to that and 28 days wasn't long enough, so I almost started to look at this experience as it was just the help he desperately needed, and it was free" [Kim]

Liz described the relief and peace that came with her partners imprisonment:

"The peace was nice, not arguing, the house was quiet for once. You know. Just nice and quiet for once, it's not worrying if he's going to come back drunk or…. that was nice… I was always worried, he was going to get hurt or what time he was going to turn up home, was he gonna have a row. Constant worry. Even having driving lessons, I couldn't concentrate on anything at all. So once he got sent to prison. It was like my mind just went blank then but in a good way because I knew he was okay, then." [Liz]

She also spoke about her sense of feeling as though her partner is safe and looked after well in prison which provided her with peace of mind:

"Yeah, you know where they are and know he's never had any trouble in prison like bullying so I know he's safe, know he's warm... fed. I mean he's been working outside over a year now, and you know touch wood there's been no trouble, seems good" [Liz]

Relief From Relationship Strains Pre-Prison

There was a real sense of relief described by most of the women, they shared difficult moments and experiences pre-sentencing which were now contained and under control whilst their partners were in prison. Claire shared the stress she experienced within her relationship and the change which has occurred since prison:

"Yeah I mean we went through hell of a lot of stress before he went inside, obviously, so I had all the stress of leaving my [ex] partner and kind of potentially being homeless really because I left the house and supported the children and his dad passed away about two months before he was sentenced, so we went through a lot together. But we just supported each other and got stronger and then just the stress of the court case and yeah lots and lots of stress and stress at work, because of what happened…when

we first met, he was in such a dark place, but he completely turned his life around yeah so yeah" [Claire]

Improved Relationship

The women shared changes in their partner whilst in prison which directly impacted and improved their relationship. Liz spoke about the impact of therapy on her partner:

"Massively. Perhaps not like in the first couple of years, but then he got sent to a really good prison, they had like a therapeutic wing, and I mean I don't know all what was said in his class, because obviously he's got to have some privacy, but yeah there's been a massive change….before he went to prison, he was possessive, jealous, paranoid umm didn't like to talk…if you had an argument, he would think that means you've got to split up, it was really dramatic, umm blamed everyone else. The list just goes on similar to that and then since he's had therapy, he's really good at listening, good at talking. Whereas once he wouldn't want me to go out, now he'll say go out and enjoy yourself... yeah massive changes" [Liz]

Julie echoed this and shared the huge changes in her partner and his drive toward self-improvement:

"I think he hasn't got support but I'll tell you what, jail itself, sitting there and taking accountability, not just for this crime but the past and things that he's done and things that I didn't even think he was thinking of, things I didn't think he would have went back to. It's mad him appreciating everything and I think it's amazing to see people in a different light like as well like that he can trust people. He didn't trust anybody to be honest so I think in both ways it helped me see him because he's changed so much to be better like he just wants to become a better person and he's changed in whatever way he can to become better even with like exercise to keep his mental health straight. He's just trying to do whatever he can just to keep

positive and to stay on that. So, I think that's helped him, I think him taking accountability for a lot…. I think that helped" [Julie]

Similarly, Kim shared the impact of prison on her partners addiction and space it provided for him to think and reflect, and to possibly to transform his life:

"I think, I mean the drink was so bad so prison put an automatic stop to the addiction, yes, he could have carried on inside because drugs and stuff are rife inside but he didn't he chose to stop he had a two week detox and…but what it also gave him was you know when he was sober time to think, so I think that's another thing because they have got so much time on their hands to kind of think. He had no choice but to think okay I'm either going to use this as a dossing experience or I want to change my life, and you know, luckily, for me, he wants the change" [Kim]

A Safe Place

To my surprise, a theme of prison being a safe space was identified within the interviews. This was unexpected to me as through my lack of personal experience of this circumstance, my biases led me to view prison as a dangerous place. Speaking to the women, I found that they sometimes considered the prison as a place of safety for their partners, particularly when life had become chaotic pre-imprisonment. I think this theme demonstrates some of the difficulties present in the women's and the partner's lives prior to sentencing and brings to life an element of stability that prison can provide when everything else feels hectic and unclear.

Claire spoke about the difficult life her partner was leading prior to imprisonment and the safety that came after sentencing:

> *"I think I've said this… it sounds horrendous, I think because of how chaotic his life was, when I met him. I think three to six months probably would have done him good obviously, when we got together, he stopped, everyone said it was a massive turnaround"* [Claire]

Similarly, Megan spoke of a sense of her partner being saved from committing a worse crime:

> *"Yeah and I just said to him, I was like, this is a good thing because if this didn't happen he could have got into something even more violent or more detrimental to him so it was scary"* [Megan]

This powerful quote by Liz conveys the significance of imprisonment on her partners life:

> *"Definitely…he says it himself, it saved his life"* [Liz]

However, prison did not always feel like the saviour to the women, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when rules were tightened, and contact was limited:

> *"Like when Boris does the roadmap, prisons have not been mentioned at all. There's literally no information of when any visits are going to restart, there's no information whatsoever. And the visits they did do, you had to be from the same address. wear a mask. You can't touch. I couldn't do that, I couldn't take our daughter and not hug"* [Liz}

Master Theme 3: Collateral Damage: Behind Bars on The Outside

All of the women, in different ways, described the experience of navigating a new, unknown, and unfamiliar reality they had found themselves in. I felt a strong sense of life changing considerably for the women such as changes in their routine, changes in what their relationship looks like, and a change in their social networks. Within the experience of navigating a new reality, six subthemes were identified: Entering and Unknown World; The Waiting Game; Finding Acceptance; Second-Hand Punishment; Grief and Loss; and Being Innocent, Feeling Guilty.

Entering an Unknown World

This subtheme touches on the women's experiences of finding themselves in a new and unknown situation. The women described feelings of confusion, upset and anxious uncertainty, especially within the context of a lack of support to navigate the new systems. It appeared the sense of entering an unknown world started at the point of sentencing for the women when they found themselves lost and confused about the next steps, how to get in touch with their partner, how to send items into the prison, how to arrange visits and so forth. The sense continued in a less practical sense too with trying to find a way to fit into the new reality in terms of how they engaged with others in the same situation and how they presented themselves to others close to them, like friends and family.

Chloe described the confusion she felt at the day of sentencing and difficulties she went through to find out how to navigate the next few days. She found a lack of support provided to her from the professionals around her, so she sought information from other women in similar situations online:

"So the day he was found guilty I was obviously in shock, I'm crying, I'm like what do I do from here, and all the solicitor did was ripped a scrap bit of paper wrote the prison telephone number down and said just ring that on Monday morning. That was the level of support that I got and I was thinking what do I do now and I didn't realize it was a Friday. I was ringing the prison on a Saturday, and it just rang and rang and rang. There was no answer machine to say we don't answer the phone today, so I spent all Saturday and all Sunday just trying to hope that they pick up the phone to me. And then they answered on the Monday and they were really good, but it was like, as I was asking things like how do I send in like a care package and they almost laughed at me… I'm like he's not got anything with him like shower gel or toothpaste or anything like that, and so, for me that, from that very, very point, it would have been helpful to have practical support and guidance to say this is what's going to happen to them, and this is what you can do to help. I just frantically searched Facebook groups and joined a load of Facebook groups and said to these women, I don't know what I'm doing can someone help" [Chloe]

As described in her quote above, Chloe felt really out of control of what was going on around her. She described feelings of powerlessness over her own life due to lack of information and support through an experience that was completely unfamiliar to her. She coped with this by trying to regain control in other areas of her life:

"I think it was about properly handing over control, whereas everything was at that point so out of control and I thought, if I just manage, like micro manage, every part of our life. Then I was keeping control of our situation that there'd be no outside influences, it was almost like I was creating my own little protective bubble for me and the boys kind of kept my circle very small and I didn't venture out very far kind of just kept it as safe as it could be" [Chloe]

Similarly, Kim described a feeling of utter discombobulation, an experience she described as leaving her in limbo, without basic information to help her to manage, especially in the early days:

> *"…and then the fact that the police just tell you nothing you're just left in limbo you're like dude does he get a phone call what happens he's going to prison…Nobody tells you anything about prison or what how they are in there, how it works, you are left to find everything out on your own"* [Kim]

Megan reported a slightly different experience at the point of sentencing, she had some knowledge of legal processes through her education so felt she understood more than others at that point. She felt this knowledge helped her to feel more in control:

> *"When I first attended court for the bail hearings for the plea, they was talking about oh section 18, section this, section that and nobody else knew what was going on and what they was about, talking in like, really like legal terms and if I didn't know I would have been like what's going on like obviously he [partner] wouldn't have known so all the judges and the Barristers all knew what they were talking about. So I think the fact that I knew and had that background, for me it helped because I was able to go back to his mum and the other girlfriends and say this is what they've been charged with, you know this is when the trials going to be, this is when they need to have all their defences in by bla bla bla so for me personally it helped"* [Megan]

The Waiting Game

There was a theme of waiting. This included waiting for the end of the sentence and also waiting day-to-day for contact. Liz spoke about the decision to wait for her partner to return because of the love she felt for him:

"It's really weird when he first got sent to prison I had to decide whether to wait for him, and I mean I waited because I love him, but I knew that if I would have broke up, then he would have come out of prison and we probably would have ended up back together, so I didn't want that to be this big break and then we reunited anyway" [Liz]

Similarly, Julie spoke about the decision to wait for her partner because of the love she feels for him:

"We sat down and we spoke about it and I did say to him before the sentencing if you get more than 20 years we'll have to talk about it we'll have to revisit this conversation because I don't know, I love you like and I don't think I'll ever be with anybody else so I don't see the point [in not waiting]" [Julie]

Liz also touched on the conscious decision to stay together at the start of the sentence:

"Yeah I mean at the beginning, we did umm, when he first got sentenced and was sent to prison, obviously we had the conversation…what are we going to do because we had only just got back together when all this happened, so we had to decide whether you're going to carry on together and we decided we would" [Liz]

Megan described a daily waiting game and feeling on edge. It seemed this impacted almost every area of her life as she felt she always had to have her phone nearby and on loud, even when asleep:

"I definitely feel more anxious, I mean I get quite… my phone is always on loud now whereas I always used to put my phone on do not disturb like, my phone didn't vibrate when it rings, but now I always leave my phone on loud like I find myself like, I don't want to miss his call when he rings" [Megan]

Finding Acceptance

There was a theme of acceptance into a community that understands, this was mainly online communities of women who have, and are, experiencing similar circumstances. This appeared to be an important aspect of the experience as it provided the woman a space where they felt understood and not judged.

Kim spoke about Twitter being a place where she felt accepted and safe from judgement:

> *"That's why I'm so open on Twitter it's my only way to get things out, and you know you're not really going to be judged"* [Kim]

Megan echoed this and felt she found women that truly understood her situation online rather than in her networks off-line:

> *"I think to be honest what has helped me and what actually made me make a twitter account is there's so many other, there's so many other people in this situation who really, truly understand what you're going through, but it just helped to know that you're not the only one to have bad days and you're not the only one to who gets annoyed when something isn't getting sorted and stuff like that"* [Megan]

Chloe spoke about receiving more practical support from women on Facebook, especially at a time where she felt lost and alone:

> *"I joined a load of Facebook groups and said to these women, I don't know what I'm doing can someone help. And you kind of get this sort of open armed hug from women who are all in the same situation as you… who are like, calm down this is what you need to do"* [Chloe]

Claire shared her anxiety reduced and she felt more comfortable in her existing community when she felt their support through explicit messages of support:

> *"...and like I said that first, the first couple of weeks after he got sent down, I would feel a bit anxious going to supermarkets and going out and stuff just because I didn't know how people were going to react - were they going to be like ahh what you going out with a woman beater for because a lot of people knew what was going on before he go into court, but then there's some that don't and then they just see this story by never experienced any of that you know, and then, when I started to get the messages and see people and feel the love it was fine there's no reason to feel that anxiety"* [Claire]

Acceptance was not always experienced though, Megan spoke of the isolated nature of feeling like no one else understands, highlighting that though she at times felt understood by others in similar situations, there were still moments of loneliness:

> *"...like my boyfriend is actually in prison, he doesn't have any freedom, I'm here by myself surrounded by couples. It can be quite lonely, especially because no one like understands almost...that like you're with someone but, you can't always be there to communicate with them, you can't always be there to give them a hug. Sometimes I do just want to pick up the phone and say do you know about this, I need to tell you about this or I'm getting my hair cut... whereas I can't do that"* [Megan]

Julie shared she had been turned away from a prisoner support charity, which made her feel isolated and rejected. She felt this was due to the nature of her partners crime:

> *"No, they told me they weren't for, she told me they weren't for the support I needed. The thing I got from them was they weren't there to support*

people with violent crimes. She didn't tell them words, but I got the impression" [Julie]

Though none of the women in this project were involved in the crimes their partners had been sentenced for, all of them spoke of a sense of punishment and restraint as a result of the imprisonment. I sensed the women feeling as though they were imprisoned outside of the four walls of a prison building. This feeling brought further distress to the women as they felt selfish or disenfranchised in their emotion as they weren't in prison themselves after all.

Second-Hand Punishment

Second-hand punishment came in a number of different forms for the women. Some of the women spoke about the abuse they received from those around them, whether online or in person, and the complicated feelings of guilt this caused within them. Some of the women spoke about the harsh financial implications put upon them as a result of the imprisonment and some spoke about sacrificing their own emotions and experiences in order to support their partner in the most effective way. There were also feelings of guilt experienced for struggling with the experience whilst knowing their partner has had their freedom taken away.

Julie described her experience of receiving abuse from strangers online, especially on new outlet posts on social media:

"Because I even said to him, I don't think I can do it. It wasn't for the fact that I don't think I can wait, it was all this abuse, this horrible like do you know what I mean, and I wouldn't mind if it was from people we knew, or he knew or knew us, it wasn't, it was from strangers and I'm not like you

don't even know like, you don't know me so for crying out loud like get to know me or ask me things about it and then judge" [Julie]

She spoke of how this made her feel like she was involved in the crime. I wondered if this experience also made her feel unfounded guilt for her partners actions:

"Yeah, it was horrible, because I wasn't, how can I describe it, I wasn't a part of it, but I felt like everybody was looking at me like I was, like I was the one" [Julie]

Claire shared the financial implications upon her as a result of her partners imprisonment, I got the sense this felt like a punishment towards her:

"I mean there's been lots of things that I've had to do out here, you know, like moved into the house…I had to take out a loan to pay off his court fees and things like that, and I mean he never asked me for money or anything like that, but you know…" [Claire]

Megan spoke about sacrificing her emotions and needs to ensure the happiness of her partner:

"I sacrificed a lot of my feelings to make him happy because I knew that he was going through a tough time" [Megan]

Liz articulated how impossible and unacceptable it feels to feel punished when she has her freedom, and her partner does not:

"Well yeah but if I complain obviously and say I feel like I'm in prison… he'll say, well, you don't know what prisons like, and in a way, he is understanding, but you feel like you can't complain, because they're a

prisoner so what have you got to complain about you're free. Umm you're never really free" [Liz]

Grief and Loss: "It's almost like a shameful grief, it's as if I shouldn't be grieving because he's still alive"

Almost all of the women spoke about a sense of grief and loss at the separation with their partners, some felt the grief was recognised by their close network, others felt shameful about grieving someone that is still alive. Some grieved for the loss they felt at sentencing and currently, and others grieved for missed moments yet to come in the future:

In this emotional extract, Chloe describes eloquently the experience of what she described as 'shameful grief':

"*It's almost like a shameful grief because it's as if I shouldn't be grieving because he's still alive… I'm lucky, I'm lucky… there are people out there that are grieving because they're not going to get to see their loved one again. But it is… it is a grief, it's a grief for a loss of a life that you were leading. So it's kind of like, everything's going hunky dory, you're having a really lovely life, you've got plans for the future and then all of a sudden, that stops. And it's a grief. The loss of things that you will have. So my youngest will go through the whole of secondary school without my husband being there, so it's kind of the grief of missed moments… of opportunities, so holidays or milestones, prom, my middle child learning to drive, those kind of things, so it is, it's a lot. But it is, it is, it does feel quite shameful. It feels like you shouldn't be allowed to voice that you feel like that because somebody is always going to say, well don't do the crime, don't do the time kind of thing, like you've got nothing to moan about and yeah… so it's kind of a private grief…"* [Chloe]

Julie spoke about the loss of children she could have had if her partner not been imprisoned:

> *"Yeah, I do to be honest with you. Yeah. Because I know, I know if he didn't get locked up, I know, we probably would have had 2 or 3 kids by now like. So yeah. It is a loss, when I see kids, especially my friend now"* [Julie]

Claire touches on the complexity of non-death loss and grief in the short quote below:

> *"It's just like grief really, it's like someone dying, but they're still alive"* [Claire]

She then goes on to describe the complicated emotions associated with grief, she shares her anger towards her partner which is often a stage of grief:

> *"He got sentenced to six, but he has to serve three. So it's that, three birthdays, three Christmases, three you know, three lots of everything, it's a long, long time. So yeah but yeah, then I was a bit angry like he phoned up one day and said, I've been to the gym today and I was just like, oh that's nice for you, you know I'm out here trying to hold it all together but that's just life isn't it. I think you… I didn't get free gym membership, but I wouldn't want to be in his situation at all. But yeah, yeah definitely… it's just like grief, I just yeah I can't, that's the only way I can explain it really, you do go through the seven motions of grief"* [Claire]

Similarly, Liz summarises the confusion surrounding non-death loss:

> *"It's like someone's died but they're still there"* [Liz]

Being Innocent, Feeling Guilty

Within the complicated emotions of feeling punished, grief and judgement, the women also expressed emotions of guilt, some were able to name this, others described guilty feelings without naming it, perhaps because the emotion felt too shameful or possibly as they had not yet recognised the emotion within their selves yet.

Liz described the guilt of moving on, and living, as a family whilst her partner is unable to join them:

> *"Because obviously you still have to carry on and celebrate Christmas, birthdays, I still take the kids on holiday, so you have the guilt of carrying on"* [Liz]

Chloe described similar feelings of guilt during day-to-day activities, like getting a coffee:

> ***"****In the start, it was it was really difficult because everything that I did I felt guilty, I felt guilty if I went and got a coffee or because it's that kind of like, why should I be enjoying myself, why should I be laughing when he's there and he's in pain, because of what he's, what he's missing out on"* [Chloe]

Claire shared her emotions with her partner who was able to support her in managing her guilt through giving her permission to carry on with life in his absence, this seemed to ease some of her sense of guilt:

> *"I've booked to go to a festival, I said to him about it the other day and I said you know I don't really want to go, I feel bad and he was like don't be stupid, you go, you know, and he said that to me from before…the week before he went in, please live your life, you know and don't be afraid to go*

out and stuff like that, and you know I think he quite likes it actually, he's hearing all the gossip and stuff like that" [Claire]

Master Theme 4: Post Experience Growth and Moving On

Though the women described many difficulties that had arisen as a result of their partner being imprisoned, there was also a sense of growth present. The women shared stories of feeling more independent, empowered, and strong, even in times of great distress. Many of them spoke about a newfound sense of assurance that they would be okay if they ever had to be alone. This in addition to the conscious choice to stand by their partners added a further level of resilience and empowerment to the experiences they described. Four themes were identified within this main theme: Personal Growth; Creating a New Kind of Relationship; A Joint Fight for Freedom; and Fearing the Future.

Personal Growth

The interviews revealed a sense of personal growth. Most of the women spoke about going on to further study, feeling, and being, more independent, a sense of increased strength and self-belief.

Kim spoke about focusing on doing courses and starting a new degree as a way of coping as well as a way of improving and developing herself:

"Umm mentally I've got my own ways of coping you know? I threw myself into education and done two courses at a level four and substance misuse counselling, criminology and criminal justice and now putting myself through a degree, so I chose to kind of understand, I wanted to understand him, but I also wanted to better myself and I think when you're not…. it's given me time to work on me too" [Kim]

Liz speaks below about her increased independence due to circumstance and the increase in her confidence that she can cope alone:

> *"Yeah…. because I, because I've done so much since he's been gone, you know I've been to college started work you know just silly things like decorating, taking the kids on holiday. I have to do everything myself, pay for everything myself… yeah. I used to think that I probably can't cope on my own, now I know I can"* [Liz]

Chloe spoke of a sense of having to show strength and resilience in order to survive. I got the sense she experienced an increased sense of responsibility for her family, allowing her to prove to herself her strength:

> *"Mentally I always thought I was quite a weak person and I'm surprised at how resilient you can be…I think if I could take positives out of it, I would say…I realize I'm a, I'm a stronger person than I thought I ever was, and I think I'm at the position where you could chuck anything at me and I'll, I'll tackle it, I won't run away from it"* [Chloe]

Claire spoke about a new form of independence and increased confidence that she can be self-sufficient:

> *"I've learned to be independent and I'm comfortable in my own company…. in the evenings I do feel sad, but I know I can do it, I've never lived on my own before really, I have to be, I'm responsible for everything in this house and I can do it, I work a very emotionally draining stressful job I'm single a mum every other week to three children, three boys and so I've taken a lot of positives from it actually that if I need to live alone, then I can"* [Claire]

Within the feelings of personal growth was a shift in how the women viewed crime and punishment. Chloe spoke of this change in her beliefs about those who have been to prison and those that have family in prison:

> *"I think I, I think I was very judgmental before this, so I think I was….I'm quite embarrassed to say… if before all of this experience, if I'd seen somebody like on a newsreel someone had gone to prison I'd be like It doesn't affect me, doesn't bother me and it's the same when I joined the Facebook groups, because I kind of have that judgment where I'm thinking I don't really belong here. And then you soon realize none of these women belong here… we're all sort of dealing with the same situation, regardless of our background or working life or where we live or where we socialize, we're all different, but we're all dealing with the same thing, so I think it's taught me to be less judgmental that it could happen to anybody and it doesn't mean that you're a bad person either"* [Chloe]

Similarly, Liz spoke of a shift in her views of imprisonment after her personal experience:

> *I don't know because I've read articles before John was in prison and I probably had some of the same thoughts and believed every single thing that I read but I know better now, so I was one of them people that judged"* [Liz]

Creating A New Kind of Relationship

What emerged through our interviews was the development and evolution of a new kind of relationship in the context of the imprisonment. Certain things had to change; the couples couldn't physically be together but what they all spoke of the importance of was

communication. In the absence of any other kind of intimacy, the sharing of words in particular, became vital.

Here an extract from Megan's interview summarises the sense of having nothing else but communication to remain connected:

> *"I think it's just that you're just so forced to speak, all the time…So, I think again, the element of communication and the fact you are forced to only communicate has been a positive because of where personally I was supressing my emotions before and maybe not telling him how I feel, the fact that now all we have is communication, that is, that's definitely a positive. And I think, again I think, if this situation didn't happen"* [Megan]

Though there was theme of improved communication, there was still the reality of this being controlled and limited. Claire speaks below of missing the supportive aspects of her relationship:

> *"You know it's not about sex or anything like that, but it is about texting, you know we used text each other all the time and if I wanted, or if something happened, I could just pick up the phone and speak to him and talk it through with him. That's what I would do we were very dependent on each other…we were each other's support"* [Claire]

Chloe described recreating some of what was present before the imprisonment through remote phone calls. Below she shares a new routine her and her partner have created within the limits of their separation:

> *"Umm we've now got sort of a new routine. So he, he probably calls about seven or eight times a day, so he'll call about 07:20 in the morning, and that is to make sure that I haven't slept through my alarm because I do that*

*a lot *laughs*. I, I now rely on him as my backup to make sure that I'm not sleeping so he'll ring about 07:20 and say, are you out of bed? I'm like yes, I'm out of bed, and then he'll give me about 10 minutes or so to kind of get my coffee…then he'll ring back just for a 5-minute chat and then he'll ring back a little bit later when the boys are out of bed, so they speak to him before they go to school. So on a work day he'll ring me about lunchtime, just for a quick chat, so 5-minutes at lunchtime see how my day is going and, and then he'll ring the boys when they get home from school and then he will ring me when I get home from work. We kind of have all these times and then he'll ring in the evening so before they go to bed, and then before I go to bed, so we have a new routine of sort of constant sort of talking throughout the day so it's nice"* [Chloe]

Similarly, Claire spoke about replicating normality where possible. In the quote below she talks about preparing for a visit as though it's a date:

"Yes he's about an hour and a half drive away now and the drive up it was like getting ready for a date you know, I tried to make sure everything, I wasn't dressed up or anything like that, but so excited, so anxious about going to a prison. That scared me, didn't know what to expect" [Claire]

A Joint Fight for Freedom

Within the process of making sense of their experience and attempting to move on, the women described joining their partners on a joint fight for freedom, even at times when it felt their partners freedom was hanging in the balance. Sometimes it appeared this joint fight helped the couple feel more connected at a time they couldn't connect physically and at other times it felt like a way to survive the long stretch of time ahead and keep hope.

An extract from Chloe's interview below details the appeals process she and her partner are undertaking as well as alternative scenarios of the appeal is rejected, possibly demonstrating the constant string of hope running through the sentence:

> *"So we kind of think in our, in our heads we've got the appeal here but worst case scenario next June he'll been an open prison, so it means he could come home, it means he could work so we're kind of looking at them objectively of what we want to achieve ideally we'd like the appeal to quash the conviction but we're doing it, so you can do it against the conviction and the sentence so ideal would be they quash the conviction secondary, it would be that would reduce the sentence and then thirdly, if nothing happens, we know we've got another target of next June to kind of reintegrate into the family"* [Chloe]

Fearing The Future

In all the interviews there was a palpable level of anxiety and worry for the future. All the women spoke about various concerns for post-prison life and the potential impact on their relationship. A range of anxieties appeared to be on the minds of the women. Some of them felt worried about whether their observed positive changes in their partner would remain post-release, others worried about what day-to-day life would be like with a conviction restricting their partners life and some had anxieties surrounding whether the relationship would simply survive in the outside world. Having given up so much to support their partners, it made sense to me that they would worry about whether it would all be worth it. I found myself wondering what, in their post-prison life, would make the experience 'worth it'. What was striking for me was the women's conviction to remain supportive, even in the toughest and most challenging of times.

Liz described worrying about whether the changes she has observed in her partner would last after release and a fear of whether the experience of staying with him would have been worth it:

> *"It's just hoping the change is genuine it's, not just in the prison walls…. he'll say I've changed you've got to trust me now, we've come this far, so we don't want it to mess up at the end, yeah, that's me... got to learn to trust. It's easy to trust them when they're locked up, it's just the temptation when they're out…But I am a worrier in general, I overthink absolutely everything in a sense, he's out the walls, because he is out every day working and, but I think home is going to be a different temptation. There so …. suppose just that really... worried that ...whether it was all worth it"* [Liz]

Claire spoke about the anxieties surrounding life post-prison with her partner having a conviction:

> "And we have got concerns obviously when he comes out, you know he's got that conviction overhanging him now, it's going to cause us a lot of grief but we know that he'll be supported" [Claire]

She also expressed worries that arose from unanswered questions about what life might look like when her partner is back home:

> *"It's a lot, you know he's not been released till 2023, there's a lot of things we want to know you know, is he going to be allowed to move back here? Because the victim live two minutes down the road. You know, even though he said well, in his mind he's like well, I was alright before living in the same town, I was like yeah but you're convicted now, might be different. You know there's no risk to me, you know I've got no qualms, you know the offence never happened here, but you know, are they going to make it*

difficult for us? … That not knowing you know, are they going to make him go to a hostel ? He's got the choice of two houses, because he could live with his mum you know or live here and it's just…it to me just seems ridiculous if they do I mean hopefully they wouldn't but yeah I don't know, it's just, because he's wound up so he moans to me and I get wound up so we both feel a bit stressed at the minute, it's just too many unanswered questions" [Claire]

There also seemed to be a fear of whether the relationship would survive in the long term. Chloe spoke about this in terms of the reintegration back into family life:

"*I think I worry long term about how that reintegration will work where I've been on my own for so long, he's been there for so long, will we just get back together like, like we did before? Or is that going to be another challenge that we've got to face together umm yeah that's probably the one that worries me the most"* [Chloe]

Similarly, Claire shared worries about the future of the relationship and whether her partner would stay with her post release:

"It's that kind of like I've thought to myself before, is he using me? And he's you know, or will he dump me as soon as leaves? But then he says he feels the same as well you know that he might phone me up one day and I'll say I can't do this anymore you know but we both you know reassure each other as much as we can that that's not going to happen, so and that … and that's all we can do really" [Claire]

Julie shared her worries about the restrictions that would be placed on her partners life, and in turn hers, upon release:

"*Yeah, it means when he gets out, he will be on restrictions, he will have restrictions for the rest of his life. Like if we want to go abroad, even to*

Ireland were going to have to get the parole board signed off and everything like… So, it's like being in an open prison still" [Julie]

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

Chapter Overview

This chapter will summarise the results of this project and discuss the findings in relation to existing theory and research. The project strengths and limitations will be explored and the implications of this study on policy, clinical practice, and research contexts will be considered. Recommendations and a reflexive account will be provided.

Mains Findings

Research Aim

The main aim of this project was to qualitatively explore women's experiences of having a partner imprisoned for a violent crime in the UK. Women were recruited from social media platforms to take part in an interview discussing their experience. IPA was used to analyse the data.

Summary of Findings

The interviews conducted with six women revealed four master themes and nineteen subthemes. The four master themes are detailed below:

1. Adjusting to a New Identity – The Prisoners Wife
2. HMParent: Prison as Saviour
3. Collateral Damage: Behind Bars on The Outside
4. Post Experience Growth and Moving on.

The first theme touched on the women's experiences of adjusting to a new identity and making sense of their partners crime whilst managing others responses to them and their partner. There was a huge sense of drive to appear grateful that their situation is not any worse than it is. There was also a determination to appear strong in the midst of challenges, which sometimes meant not sharing their experiences and emotional states fully with those around them.

Though the identity shift brought with it difficulties, the second master theme detailed prison being beneficial. For most of the women there was a relief of responsibility that came from their partner being imprisoned. For the women who had been supporting their partners through addiction or experiencing relationship difficulty, prison acted as a surrogate parent in some sense and provided the men with a safe place to be. This also provided the women with more time to focus on their self and makes positive changes in their life. Within this there was also a subtheme touching on the couples' relationship improving as a result of the imprisonment, the main form of improvement was attributed to increased communication, especially in the absence of connection in any other way. Though COVID-19 prevented visits taking place for about a year when this study was conducted, the women found telephone connection helped to replace some level of intimacy lost as a result of halted face-to-face visits.

Whilst there were some reported benefits of the prison system, the third theme covered the pains of experiencing second-hand punishment as a result of their partners imprisonment. There was the sense of counting down the days, looking for acceptance among other women who understand the experience, feelings of guilt for being on the outside and a sense of grief that felt somehow dismissed by those around them.

Through all of these complicated and layered experiences and emotions, the final theme covered the women's capability and resilience to grow personally. Some of the women spoke about gaining a newfound sense of independence, some went onto further study and most spoke of their confidence increasing in their ability to survive not only this experience, but alone if their partnership did not work out in the end. Worries and fears for the future featured here too, as the women experienced personal growth, they not only worried about how their partners would fit back into their lives, but they also worried about what life would look like for them as a couple with a conviction hanging over their lives.

Findings in Relation to Previous Literature

Though there is limited qualitative research exploring women's experience of partner imprisonment to violent crime in the UK, there is a body of literature reporting on families, children and partners experiences of family and partner imprisonment more generally. Much of this research has been conducted in the USA though there is now a growing research base in the UK too. Some of the findings of this project echo previous findings, some build upon the evidence base that already exists and some of the findings provide a new perspective and contribute significant new understandings to the literature base. The first section will consider links between the findings of this study, and previous literature.

Second-Hand Punishment

There are direct links from the findings of this project to the findings of the meta-synthesis conducted in the introduction chapter which touched on the experience of feeling punished by the prison system. Previous literature has highlighted the repercussions felt by partners such as the removal of their loved one physically, lost time together and the removal

of autonomy to make life decisions and have children (Kotova, 2019; Girshick, 1992; Alston, 2019; De Claire, 2020).

Previous research has also identified that some of these second-hand challenges may be amplified for women with children (Park & Clark-Stewart, 2002). Three women in this study had children and they spoke of difficulties specific to this. For example, Chloe spoke about the dilemma of having to explain the situation to her children, the upset of watching them grow up without having their father at home, as well as some of the difficulties of parenting alone. She described how she has adjusted to some of this through building different ways of including her partner in her and her children's life, one of the ways she adapted was by continuing to include her partner in parenting via regular telephone calls with the children.

Other forms of more indirect punishments were felt through experiencing stigma and shame by those around them (Girshick, 1992; Alston, 2019; Fishman, 1988). The women in this study similarly spoke about a sense of experiencing second-hand punishment as a result of their partners imprisonment. However, what was not identified as strongly in this project was a sense of a special and unbreakable bond, which appeared as a main theme in the meta-synthesis. This is interesting as although this theme was not specifically identified in the current project, what was identified was a sense of developing a new identity, within which the women spoke of their drive to appear committed, grateful, strong, and detailed how they made sense of the crime. The presence of identify development may delve deeper into how the women have made sense of their connection to their partner, rather than just describing their bond and relationship. The sense-making was mainly identified through the women's motivation to understand why and how their partner committed the crime they were

imprisoned for, which may have helped them in their decision to stay with them through the experience.

This finding around developing a new sense of identity might have been a result of the interpretive nature of the analysis which aimed to gain understanding of the way in which the women made sense of their experience. In IPA research, this is achieved through conducting three levels of analysis on transcripts before identifying themes and subthemes. As a reminder, these levels are, descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual (see methods chapter for further information). The descriptive level of analysis describes what a participant is reporting, linguistic examines the words used, and conceptual adds a thicker level of analysis which is grounded in additional theory and interpretation. So though there was no theme of a 'special' or 'unbreakable bond' in this study on a theme level, the women did speak about feeling 'instantaneous' and 'special' connections with their partners. This descriptive level analysis fed into a more conceptual level theme of adjusting to a new identity which went beyond simply describing the relationship. It also provided insights into how the women made sense of their relationship in the context of making sense of the imprisonment. This could further add to our understanding of the experience of having a partner imprisoned and the way in which women may adjust to a new identity.

The Parentified Role and Handing Over Responsibility

All of the women in this study spoke of taking on a caring role within their relationships. None named this as a 'parentified' dynamic, but some spoke of feeling like their partner's mum at times, instead of their partner, Liz explicitly said, "I felt like this mum, not his wife".

The level of caring responsibility described by the women appeared in excess of the 'usual' reciprocal care provided within a romantic relationship in the sense that the women described worrying about what the men were eating, their daily whereabouts, spending time with them and ultimately, putting some of their partners needs ahead of their own. This dynamic is discussed as the women taking on a 'parentified' role within the relationships. Within this role, the women took on responsibilities to look after the men and it appeared the men depended on them. Though exploration of childhood roles were beyond the scope of this thesis, there is some research to suggest children who are placed in parentified roles in childhood can take on excessive responsibility in later adult relationships (Hooper et al., 2014). Thus, the roles taken on by the women in this study could have been developed before the formation of their relationships and may have led them to choosing a specific type of relationship, namely one where they could take on their familiar parentified role.

This relationship dynamic has not been explored in previous literature within the field of partner imprisonment. However, it has been discussed more generally in terms of the caring role that women typically take on in society (Aungles, 1993) and the potential penalties that can occur as a result of this, especially when the men cared for behave antisocially or illegally (Hunter & Nixon, 2001). Potential penalties emerged in the current study in the form of second-hand punishment detailed in theme three, such as facing feelings of shame, being stigmatised, experiencing grief, putting life plans on hold, and increased financial and caring responsibilities.

Alongside the increased levels of care and responsibility, the interviews also touched upon the sense of prison somehow saving the relationship and providing respite from caring responsibilities. Previous research has also identified a sense of relief experienced by women

as a result of their partners imprisonment, especially if the relationship was difficult pre-imprisonment (Comfort, 2007). Pre-imprisonment relationship difficulties such as drug addiction, mental health difficulties and unemployment were found to be indicators of relief experienced (Comfort, 2007). This was captured in the interviews in this study, especially by Kim, whose partner was experiencing PTSD and alcohol addiction prior to imprisonment. She spoke of the prison system taking over the caring role and saving the relationship. Though she also discussed difficulties, she was mainly grateful for the contribution the prison system had made to the recovery of her partner's mental health difficulties and alcohol addiction. Especially as support seemed unavailable to him before imprisonment and private care costs were out of the couple's financial reach.

The lessening of this role as a result of their partner's imprisonment was spoken about as a relief of responsibility but the difficulty of giving up the role entirely was demonstrated in the women's determination to remain a source of support even during the sentence. Some of the adapted ways in which the women were able to continue fulfilling this role was through regular phone-calls, providing financial and emotional support, and through assisting in legal affairs and advocating for their partners rights.

Future research in this area could provide interesting insights into potential experiences in childhood which may impact the way in which the women experience their adult relationships with a partner imprisoned. These insights may aid in how support is provided for women who feel this would be helpful. Support provided could explore previous experiences in the lives of the women and how these experiences may lead them to be in a more parentified role currently. However, it is important to state here that this study did not explicitly explore relationship dynamics. Any offer of support around this would need to be

dependent on whether the woman feels this role is not serving their interests and they require the support to identify patterns, otherwise there is risk of pathologising the women for something which may not be problematic for them.

Financial Strain

Previous research has highlighted the strains of financial difficulties placed upon women alongside family adjustment and stigma (e.g., Bloodgood, 1928; Fishman, 1990; Alston, 2019). Financial difficulty has been attributed to the loss of family income (Geller, 2011), the costs associated with providing items for the person imprisoned and maintaining telephone contact (Hairston, 2007), the costs of visits (Hutton, 2016), as well as legal fees (Codd, 2008).

Interestingly, financial strain was not discussed heavily in the findings of the present study. This may have been in part to do with the way in which questions were asked regarding finances. There was no specific question about this in the interview guide but follow-up questions regarding financial context were provided if women mentioned it. Therefore, the lack of discussion around this may be due to the absence of opportunity to bring it up during the interview.

Moreover, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic which paused all visits in UK Prison for almost two years (Minson, 2021), this too could have contributed to less focus on financial difficulty within the study as there may have been reduced financial impact as a result of paused visits.

Previous research has highlighted the amplification of financial difficulties for women with children (Park & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Three out of the six women in this sample had children and it was they who spoke most of the financial implications related to the imprisonment, though they did not explicitly link this to having children. For example, Chloe who has three children, spoke about the expensive legal fees which she described as 'financially draining' and Claire, who also has three children, spoke about having to take out a loan to pay for court fees.

Physical Health Implications

Previous research has highlighted the negative physical health impact of family member and partner imprisonment on women (Lee & Wilderman, 2014). Findings suggest the experience can have a profound effect on a number of health domains such as cardiovascular health, increased levels of obesity and increased risk of general poor health for women, but not for men with imprisoned family members (Lee & Wilderman, 2014).

The physical health impact on the women in this study presented as headaches and weight-loss primarily. There was a question in the interview guide which asked whether the imprisonment of their partner has impacted their physical health which would have invited the women to further share issues in relation to this. However, the discussion around this was minimal and not one that formed a theme in the findings. Limited conversations about physical health in this study may have been due to the women not feeling like their physical health was impacted by their partner's imprisonment, they may not have linked their physical health to the imprisonment of their partner, or conversations about physical health may have felt too private a subject to discuss in-depth during the interviews.

Shame and Stigma

Unsurprisingly, the experience of shame and stigma featured heavily in this study as it has done in a number of others within the literature (e.g., Bramman, 2007; Hannem, 2003; Condry, 2007).

The women in this study spoke of the direct stigmatisation they received, especially in the form of judgement and abuse directed towards them online via news outlets. They also spoke about being selective about who they shared their experience with, in order to mitigate shame and stigma. This has been discussed before in the literature as a way to manage the experience of being shamed (Hannem, 2003). This is an important finding which gives us insight into how the women may present to those around them in order to experience the least judgement and stigma. It may have presented in this study too in terms of what the women shared, and did not share, with me. Furthermore, it could also indicate a distinction between women who took part in this study exploring the experience and women who would have chosen not to speak to a researcher about their experience.

The experience of shame has also been identified to be increased in neighbourhoods and communities where imprisonment is less common (Fishman, 1990 & Schneller, 1978). This featured in the current study too with one of the participants (Chloe) speaking of how unusual the experience was for her as she did not know anyone around her who had experienced the imprisonment of anyone. The identity shift and processing of what had happened to her partner and family appeared to be a more difficult task for her, which may have been linked to feeling more stigmatised or alone in her experience.

All of the women in this study spoke of the helpfulness of social media in connecting them to other women experiencing partner imprisonment, which helped them in their journey of adjusting to their situation. The women spoke about these online spaces feeling 'safe', I wondered whether connecting with other women in similar situations helped mitigate some of the isolation and feelings of shame that they reported. What felt most important for the women online was for the platform to feel judgement-free, accessible, and anonymous if the women chose to be unidentifiable.

Guilty and Innocent

Across a number of themes and during all of the interviews, the women reported feelings of guilt. Sometimes the guilt was for being associated with someone who has been imprisoned for a crime and sometimes the guilt was for living their lives on the outside whilst their partner had lost their freedom. Identifying emotions of guilt is not a new finding within the literature of partner imprisonment (e.g., Fishman, 1990; Hannem, 2003; Kotova, 2019, Girshick, 1992; De Claire, 2020).

Research has explored the common experience of feeling shame and guilt for the actions of others whom we share social associations with (Lickel et al., 2005; Schamader, 2006). For the women in this study, associations were pronounced as they were all in established relationships with the men during sentencing and all reported a high level of responsibility towards their partner. Previous research states that feelings of guilt can be amplified if a person feels they should have been able to predict and control the associated persons actions, and shame increases as shared identity increases (Schamader, 2006). The origins of the emotion may lie in the responsibility they felt over their partner's actions and

perhaps also in the judgement and shaming they received from the outside world. Particularly given the context of the 'parentified' role dynamic identified in the findings of this study.

The findings of this study echo, and add to, an evidence base which already highlights the experience to be one that brings with it intense levels of guilt. This finding is important as it can have clinical implications on how professionals approach this experience with women who may be feeling high levels of shame and guilt.

Impact of Violent Crime

Research in the area of partner imprisonment has found increased shame, judgement, blame, and grief for those whose partners have been imprisoned for certain crimes. Amplified experiences of grief have been attributed to increased levels of stigma, blame and judgement, for women whose partners have been imprisoned for sexual offences (Fishman, 1988), grievous bodily harm, murder, and robbery (Condry & Heidensohn, 2006). Though these insights are present, the results of the meta-synthesis identified a gap in research exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment with a focus on specific crimes.

The present study certainly identified experiences of grief and stigmatisation as reported by the six participants. However, none of the women explicitly linked this to the crime their partner was imprisoned for. This is interesting and could be thought about in terms of the possible increased stigma and shame experience when partners are imprisoned for certain crimes (Fishman, 1988). Increased shame could mean the women in this study were less willing to discuss aspects of the experience linked to the nature of the crime.

Furthermore, psychological avoidance of the nature of the crime could function as a way to cope with expected, perceived, or direct shame.

Grief and Loss

Previous literature has discussed disenfranchised grief in the context of family member and partner imprisonment. The term disenfranchised grief was first introduced by Doka (1989), to describe the experience of a particular kind of grief, one "….that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported" (Doka, 1989, p. 4). Research in this area has found partner or family member imprisonment can lead to experiencing disenfranchised grief due to the stigmatised element of the experience (e.g., Arditti, 2005; Travis & Waul, 2003; Turanovic et al., 2012).

In the present study, the experience of grief featured heavily. The women spoke of feeling a 'shameful' grief linked to the nature of their partners crime and sometimes minimised their own grief by comparing themselves to others who have it 'worse'. The non-death element of the loss appeared to impact this quite explicitly but the social death element, the emotional alteration of how the person is viewed by those around them, was less discussed in the context of the grief. This could have been as a protective factor for the women as acknowledging the social death element may have been too challenging to face or could have risked perceived judgement from me.

Moreover, research has found the disenfranchised grief element of partner imprisonment can prevent people from seeking support in fear of judgement and increased shame (Arditti, 2005). In this study the women spoke of being selective about who they shared their experience with which could be reflective of this. None of the women said their

experience of grief was recognised by others, which could also be reflective of disenfranchised grief.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

In this section I will discuss the strengths of this study in relation to its methodological approach, feminist stance, attention to power dynamics and finally, its commitment to quality assurance.

The main strength of this research is its IPA approach which gave the women who participated a voice to express their experience. Interpretive research acknowledges the concept of 'truth' to be subjective and based within the social context of those being studied, and those doing the studying (Cohen et al., 2009). This study design enabled me as the researcher to step back from the position of expert and allow the women to lead with their narratives and shape the findings of this project to be reflective of their experience. The interpretive element helped me to travel away from providing a descriptive level account of the interviews and move towards more conceptual and interpretive understandings of what the women shared.

The double hermeneutic element of IPA research methods meant what is presented is my interpretation of the women's own interpretations of their unique experiences. My position as a trainee clinical psychologist allowed my interpretations to be reflective, informed by psychological theory, and focused on each individual experience. This means

the findings of this project are firmly based within my social context as a researcher and provide insights through my lens, into the social contexts of the women that took part.

Another strength of this project is related to the attempt to make it a feminist piece of research in its planning stage, execution, analysis, and discussion. Feminist research, at its core, is driven to produce knowledge that understands, and challenges, inequalities within society (Kelly & Gurr, 2019).

The current study aimed to both understand and challenge inequalities experienced by women who have partners imprisoned by giving them a voice to share their stories of their experience. This felt especially important as women who experience partner imprisonment are more likely to be from more marginalised parts of society (Loucks, 2004). Increased marginalisation within the experience of partner imprisonment, which is arguably stigmatising and othering, could be further disadvantaging for them. What we know from research is that prisoners and their families represent some of the most socially disadvantage sections of society (Smith et al., 2007) and a quarter of all prisoners in the UK are of ethnic minority background. The experience of partner imprisonment in the context other intersectional disadvantage could compound the experience and increase difficulties experienced such as financial strain (Condry, 2007; Comfort, 2008), stigma, and racism (Arditti, 2012).

This study included an all-White sample of women who the impact of race and ethnicity on the experience was not explored. However, the women included in the project represented different socioeconomic backgrounds, some held professional jobs and were economically advantaged, others were less advantaged economically. The feminist lens used

to approach this study enabled me to acknowledge and recognise the impact of social positioning on the women's experiences.

Furthermore, I was very much aware of the imbalance in power dynamics throughout the project. During the interviews, I was mindful about my position as a researcher and the impact this could have on the women and what they share with me. I made attempts to reduce the impact of the power imbalance by providing each woman with a phone conversation before the interview and clearly explaining my role and the stance of the project. I presented each interview as a conversation which could be led by them in any direction they thought appropriate. I also informed each woman of the exploratory nature of IPA research which places importance on each participant's voice and experience. Though these steps were taken to mitigate the impact of a power imbalance, the power difference was still present and could not be eradicated, simply for the fact I was presenting as a researcher linked to an academic institution. and they were the participants of the research study planned by me. This reality may have led to the women withholding or selectively sharing certain aspects of their experience to prevent judgement by me. Nevertheless, the steps taken to remain aware of this and place some power back to the women are strength of this study.

Finally, each stage of the project was guided by the quality assurance principles for IPA presented by Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009). These principles include: a clear focus; strong data; rigour; sufficient space to elaborate themes; interpretive analysis; convergence and divergence; and finally, carefully written.

This study had a clear focus to explore women's experiences of partner imprisonment to violent crime in the UK. The specific nature of exploring women partners experiences, the

violent crime aspect and the UK based focus means the study provides in depth detail for this population instead of a broad presentation within the topic.

The data collected was of 'good' quality as each interview used a well-designed interview schedule for guidance, but the women were not limited in what they could share because of it. I also ensured I used my clinical skills to build a good rapport with the participants, which I believe led to good engagement.

I aimed to fulfil the principle of rigour, referring to providing a sufficient number of themes which are not over or under saturated, by thoughtfully arranging the quotes and experiences into four master themes and nineteen subthemes.

The themes went through a process of development and alteration to arrive at the final written presentation. This also allowed sufficient space to elaborate on themes in depth. I utilised supervision sessions at this stage too which contributed to a good structure of theme presentation.

In order to fulfil the principle of providing an interpretive analysis I engaged in an in-depth analysis process of annotating each interview transcript on three levels of analysis: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. This process supported me in ensuring the final analysis and the themes presented were interpretive in nature instead of just descriptive. The process of engaging in the three levels of analysis allowed me to build on interpretations on a conceptual level which would not have been possible without this step.

I also ensured the themes presented were nuanced and captured both similarities and differences between the women. I did this by including quotes which were representative of common views as well as quotes which stood out as a divergence from the similarities observed.

Lastly, I made efforts to ensure the quality of writing within this project was clear, concise, and engaging. Abiding by these principles have ensured this project is of high quality, which I would consider is one of its key strengths.

Limitations

In this section I will discuss the limitations of this study in relation to its sample, recruitment, generalisability and finally, its content.

The primary limitation of this study is its all-White British sample. As discussed in the introductory chapter, imprisonment and criminalisation disproportionately impact those of racialised backgrounds, as well as those of marginalised backgrounds in other ways such as class, economic resource, educational background and so forth. It is therefore a significant limitation of this project to have only presented voices of White-British women. Whilst reading this study, it is important to recognise the absence of voices as well as those included and consider what experiences may be missing from the findings, such as racism.

One reason this study contains an all-White British sample could be down to accessibility of research for those in more marginalised communities. I wonder if taking part in a research project exploring an already stigmatised experience, risked further judgement for women of racialised backgrounds and whether my recruitment strategy failed to expand

the search for a more diverse sample. Recruitment was primarily conducted online via social media platforms which may have been limiting for certain women. The inclusion criteria of the project also excluded non-English speaking populations, for ease of analysis without an interpreter, which is undoubtedly excluding of women of ethnic minority backgrounds. Furthermore, recruitment from social media could have attracted women more willing, or more comfortable, with sharing their experience to take part, potentially excluding the voices of those who may be experiencing more stigma or less likely to be vocal of their experience.

Another potential limitation is the lack of generalisability of these findings. The voices presented here are of the six-women that took part and the interpretations presented are mine. This means if this study was repeated by someone else, even with the same participants, perhaps different conclusions could be drawn. However, generalisability is not the aim of interpretive qualitative research, nor should it be. The voices of the six-women provide us with some insight into the experience of women when their partners are imprisoned and welcomes a space to think about and reflect on this experience as clinicians, academics, and policymakers.

Finally, another limitation of this project is the absence of what was not spoken about in interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the women may have avoided talking about certain aspects of the experience to avoid judgement and stigma from me, or from readers of this research.

At times I wondered if the women felt reluctant to share worries and doubts about their relationships, especially when they spoke in very determined ways about their resolve to make the relationship work. At times I also wondered about whether the women wanted to

manage how they were perceived by me; I sensed this most in their drive for others, and me, to recognise their partner is more than just the crime they are imprisoned for. Sometimes I felt like the women were defending their decision to stay with their partner through repeatedly explaining how good their relationship is. This slight defensiveness of their life choices may be reflective of judgement they feel from those around them for staying in the relationship.

Some of these strategies may have developed as a way to cope and may be unconscious to some extent. It may also be a learned way of mitigating judgement and negative input from others. It is therefore understandable that the women may not have been completely open with me during the interviews, it is not a criticism of them, rather a limitation of the nature of this research project.

Implications and Recommendations

In this section I will present recommendations for policy and support, implications for clinical practice and delivery, and finally, I will present my recommendations for future research.

Policy and Support

This study identified potential implications and recommendations for policy and support services for women who have partners imprisoned for a violent crime in the UK.

The current Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties Policy Framework (reissued in 2020: Ministry of Justice & HM Prison and Probation Service, 2020) was a report issued in 2019. The policy stated its positioning on supporting maintenance and development of

relationships in order to "…prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime" (Ministry of Justice & HM Prison and Probation Service, 2020, p. 5). This approach arguably fails to view families and partners of those imprisoned as individuals indirectly impacted by the criminal justice system, and perhaps prioritises family ties for the agenda of the criminal justice system.

This policy may explain to some extent the little official support provided to partners of those imprisoned. A change to this policy report, or perhaps the addition of a policy report that discusses the nuanced impact of imprisonment of partners of those imprisoned may lead to a shift in the way in which partners are viewed within the criminal justice. Maybe this shift could lead to partners being considered within the experience of imprisonment and provided appropriate support when, and if, needed.

Current support systems are mainly provided by charities and aimed at families or children of those imprisoned, there are no charities or services that specifically support partners of those imprisoned. There is one charity currently, Prison Advice and Care Trust, funded by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, that provides a telephone and web support service called The Prisoners Families Helpline. This helpline service aims to provide family members of those in contact with the criminal justice system with advice and support. Other charities include Ormiston Families, Families Outside and Partners of Prisoners.

Though there is a presence of support charities and systems in place for families and children of those imprisoned, all of the women in this study spoke of feeling a lack of support, especially during the sentencing and early days of imprisonment. The women spoke about getting advice and support through Facebook and Twitter by speaking to other women

in similar circumstances. Julie shared with me that she had attempted to get support from a charity but was turned away, she felt this was due to the violent nature of her partners crime. Some of the other women spoke about finding the peer support on social media platforms enough and not needing official service input.

These findings may indicate a desire for some women experiencing partner imprisonment to have peer-support. Perhaps the unofficial element of these streams of support on social media help the women to feel safe and less judged than seeking support from professionals. Research in the area of peer-support has found that online communities can reduce the experience of stigma for people and lead to self-empowerment and increased hope (Naslund et al., 2016). Although, it is also plausible that the women have found themselves seeking peer-support due to a lack of official support provided to them, as in Julie's case.

When I first began working on this project, I wondered whether more official forms of support, provided directly by the criminal justice system, could be helpful in acknowledging the indirect impact of imprisonment on partners of those imprisoned. I felt a uniform approach funded centrally by the government would mean a socio-political shift in recognising partners as hidden victims of the system. However, what I have found from speaking to the six women in this study is that peer-support felt like an important source of support for them on this journey. This does not mean it should be the only support available, however, it highlights the importance of recognising the differing and individual needs of women experiencing partner imprisonment.

Clinical

Though this study did not assess for mental health difficulties, the women spoke of feeling anxiety related to the imprisonment process; anxiety due to uncertainty, worries and feelings of low mood related to judgement from others and worries about the future. There are therefore some important clinical considerations that have emerged from this project.

When thinking about clinical recommendations as a result of this project, the first type of clinical service that comes to mind is Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services. IAPT services provide evidence based short-term, goal orientated therapies to those experiencing mild to moderate anxiety or depression (Clarke, 2011). This type of service could be at the front-line of providing clinical support for women with partners imprisoned who require mental health support. This is because women may initially present to their GP with mild to moderate anxiety, worry or low mood, as indicated by the findings of previous studies (Wilderman et al., 2012; Comfort, 2008; Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2007; Turanovic, 2012).

It is therefore vital that these services are aware of the nature of the experience and can respond to these women appropriately with their interventions. One way to do this is raise clinician awareness of the impact of partner imprisonment through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training courses. Training courses with a key focus on the experience of shame, guilt, and grief associated with partner imprisonment could be particularly helpful. These courses could also be offered to GP's and other third-sector organisations that provide psychological therapies in the community.

The women in this study shared their experience of anxiety, shame, guilt, and grief. For women that seek help for these experiences, there are two psychological interventions which may be particularly helpful. The first intervention is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which encourages people to accept their thoughts and experiences rather than feeling guilty for having them (Harris, 2006). This may be helpful to help women deal with the sense of uncertainty and insecurity which they spoke about in relation to the sentencing process in particular. ACT may also support the women in adjusting to their partners being in prison and the worries and anxieties that can arise through that process and in thinking about the future post-imprisonment.

Another intervention which may target feelings of shame and guilt is Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT). CFT supports people in increasing compassion towards themselves which in turn can reduce levels of anxiety and discomfort experienced (Gilbert, 2009). CFT may also be helpful in targeting feelings of grief (Harris, 2021) and increasing the women's compassion towards themselves in the context of potential disenfranchised grief.

The hidden nature of the experience of having a partner imprisoned means this population may find it harder to access help if, and when, they need it. For women who require mental health support, services may not be easily accessible for a number of reasons. Women may be less likely to reach out for help if they are experiencing feelings of shame and guilt. Furthermore, those from more marginalised backgrounds may find access difficult due to language barriers or fears of judgement or discrimination. This means, clinical services must focus on ensuring their provision is accessible to these women. This may be achieved through training for professionals to raise awareness of the experience, providing

advertisement of therapy services in places the women may frequent like visiting centres, and involving women in the shaping of services through service-user involvement initiatives.

Research

More research in this area is needed as demonstrated by the lack of studies available for the meta-synthesis and the limited literature in this area. Further research should prioritise exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment qualitatively in the UK. Care should be taken to recruit women of minioritised backgrounds to be reflective of the disproportionate impact of imprisonment on racialised members of society (Arditti, 2012). This may mean recruitment strategies for research in this area may need to be more mindful of being inclusive. The current study recruited from Twitter which may not be accessible to women who, for example, do not speak English or do not have access to devices. It is also important to note that women from more minoritised backgrounds may be more cautious of contact with researchers and professionals (Liamputtong, 2010). In this case, peer-led research, or recruitment strategies, may be helpful.

Future research could also explore the impact of partner imprisonment in the context of different crimes. This study focused on violent crime due to the possible increase in stigma in this population. Future studies could explore experiences in the context of repeated imprisonment, drug related crimes, fraud, and sexual offences – all of which may change the experiences of the women. Furthermore, exploring the experience in the context of social factors such as having children together, length of relationship and quality of relationship pre-imprisonment could all be interesting avenues of exploration. Additionally, the recruitment stage of this project showed a great need for future studies to explore women's experiences of commencing a relationship with someone who is already imprisoned. This

area in research appears to be severely neglected, perhaps reflective of the stigma directed towards the women.

Finally, longitudinal studies could be helpful in tracking women's experiences from pre-trial to post-imprisonment. This could provide important insights and richness to our knowledge of the experience in terms of how it may change or develop across time, and what the remnants of the experience may be long after the imprisonment itself.

Reflections

Throughout the duration of this project, I kept a reflective diary to maintain reflexivity. Keeping a reflective diary in qualitative research is a common technique to allow the researcher to be aware of their biases and indicates a higher quality of research methods (Etherington, 2004). Through my reflexive diary, I made attempts to ensure I did not influence the findings of the study through any strongly held views, feelings, or experiences, and tried to ensure I remained mindful of any emotions and thoughts which arose as a result of conducting the research, especially the interviews.

In order to present my thought processes coherently, I will first begin with my reflections during the planning stage of this project. As a researcher who had never conducted qualitative research, my first challenge was to shift my thinking away from more quantitative research ideologies. This challenged me in many ways, the early stages of this project were less exploratory and more inductive in its approach. I began the journey of planning by being interested in the concept of disenfranchised grief and intended to put together a proposal which aimed to explore the experience of disenfranchised grief for women with partners imprisoned. This more positivist approach was entirely informed of my previous experience

of conducting quantitative research where I started with a hypothesis and sought to prove it right or wrong.

Through conversations with my supervisors, I began to notice that seeking to find a particular phenomenon in a population assumes the experience within that population, which is less exploratory. Once I started to make sense of how this could lead to the production of a project which neglects a more participant-led and open approach, I was able to slowly adjust the project towards being more exploratory, but this created anxieties within me. The unfamiliarity of working within a more open framework and in the absence of a hypothesis to test, I felt worried about how the study would take shape if I did not pre-determine what I was looking for. Some of my worries included being unsure about how I would write an introductory chapter without an idea of what experiences may come out of the interviews and how I would enter an interview space without an agenda. These worries felt disabling at times but as I worked through the stages of the project and challenged my more positivist leaning philosophical stance, I could see that this approach was one that fitted more accurately with my values as a clinician. Namely, a clinical psychologist who seeks to understands clients' ways of meaning making rather than searching for a particular type of experience within them which prior research points towards.

During the recruitment stage, four women approached me to take part in the study who had started their relationship with their partner during their partners prison sentence. I made the decision to exclude women who were not with their partner during the point of imprisonment in order to capture the experience of the separation caused by the sentencing. I found this decision rather difficult as a few of the women expressed upset at the fact they felt their experience was often dismissed, and their pain disenfranchised, as they were seen to

have had more capacity to 'choose' being with someone in prison. So, though I made efforts to use this project as an opportunity to give voice to women who may not normally have their voice heard, it still made some women feel othered and excluded. This was also the case for a woman who approached me who had a partner imprisoned for a non-violent crime. Furthermore, five women from the USA approached me via Facebook to take part, they were not included due to the projects focus on the UK. I reflected on the experience of turning away more women than the six that met the eligibility criteria of the project. It was an uncomfortable thought that I may be giving the message that some women's experiences of partner imprisonment may be more valued than others.

Given the feminist focus of this research, I had started the project well intentioned to be inclusive and representative, but the nature of academic research meant I found myself perhaps perpetuating some level of discrimination towards some women with slightly different experiences of partner imprisonment due to the inclusion criteria set out for the project. This has highlighted the complexity of women's experiences in this area for me and the ethical dilemmas that can arise as a result of researching peoples experiences. This is especially the case in terms of how much findings from research are acknowledged or used in reality and whether it is ethical to conduct research which does not lead to any real change (Jones, 2020). My intention with the findings of this project is to disseminate appropriately, and publish in relevant journals, to honour the women's participation and hope change is achieved through their participation in this research project.

The interview stage of the project brought up complicated feelings and emotions for me. Hearing the women's accounts of their partners crimes often left me feeling a complex mixture of emotions including sadness, injustice, anger, fear, and sometimes disgust. At times

I found myself fighting these uncomfortable feelings and experiencing guilt for passing judgement. Utilising my psychology training I was able to make use of some of my emotional responses to the women and their partners. I reflected on the presence of strong and sometimes negative emotions which arose for me and wondered if this could be an indication of some of the feelings and emotions those around the women might feel. I wondered how these emotional reactions might impact the way in which people responded to the women and how the women may experience other people feeling anger, sadness, fear, and disgust towards their partners crime.

Through recognising the emotional experience for me, I was able to utilise this as a point of reflection of the women's experiences and environment, which helped me during the analysis stage. I also considered whether some of the strong feelings I felt were in part the women's emotions which could not be experienced or verbalised. Linked to this, I noticed myself often feeling like I do not quite understand why the women are putting themselves through this experience. My confusion felt more pronounced in some of the interviews than others. I pondered if I felt this so strongly due to my own experiences and background which gave me the strong message of independence – at times, the experiences the women shared with me felt like the ultimate sacrifice of the women's independence. I experienced this as rather unfamiliar in the context of my life and upbringing.

During the analysis stage of the interview, I engaged in 'Bracketing' (Alase, 2017), which is the task of reflecting on personal experiences and thoughts about the topic to mitigate biasing the analysis and interpretations. I mainly engaged in this task through the use of my reflective diary and through conversations with colleagues and my supervisors. I was particularly mindful of how I analysed the themes around grief and loss as I knew my

initial academic interests were in this area. Additionally, as some of the crimes were high profile, they had been featured in news outlets, I ensured I did not read any media pieces about any of the partners crimes as this could have biased my interpretations of the women's interviews.

Overall, conducting this piece of research has been an emotional journey at times. Throughout the process I have had to remain mindful of my responses to the experience in order to ensure my interpretations are based within the women's accounts. From the six women that took part in this study, I have learnt that the experience is challenging and difficult but also one that has empowered them and brought some positivity to their lives. This was not a finding I was expecting and one which has demonstrated to me the human drive to survive, and thrive, when faced with adversity.

Conclusion

The results derived from this project have highlighted the ways in which women experiencing partner imprisonment make sense of the experience, how they cope with it, and the implications of the imprisonment on them directly. Moreover, the findings presented a complicated picture of how the prison system is experienced by the women – they sometimes spoke of it 'saving their relationship' and being the 'best thing that has happened to them [the relationship]' but other times they spoke of the challenges associated with being physically separated from their partner, implications on their life plans as a result of the imprisonment and the day-to-day difficulties of facing others in the community, dealing with childcare, experiencing a constant state of waiting, and feeling guilt.

Nevertheless, the women demonstrated strength, power, and resilience in their ability to adapt to their new reality, some spoke of starting new jobs and courses and others spoke of recognising their own inner strength. This was all in the context of worrying about the future and how the relationship will look post-imprisonment. I was struck by the women's determination, dedication, and resilience in the face of what was a challenging separation, even within the context of some positivity arising from it.

To conclude, the findings of this study provide a significant contribution to the field of knowledge around partner imprisonment in the UK. Being one of three studies qualitatively exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment in the UK, it is in the minority in terms of a research base but nevertheless, it is a promising start to creating change for women impacted by partner imprisonment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Consent Form

University of Essex

CONSENT FORM

Exploring Women's Experiences of Partner Imprisonment to Violent Crime

Research Team: **Primary Researcher:**
Tugce Dolen (Trainee Clinical Psychologist, University of Essex)
Email: tdolen@essex.ac.uk
Supervisors
Dr Caroline Barratt
Dr Andy Sluckin
School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex

Please initial box

1. **I confirm that I** have read and understand the Participation Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions ☐

2. **I understand that** my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any point up until my data is analysed, without giving any reason and without penalty. If I withdraw my consent before the point of data analysis, all of my data collected will be deleted. I understand that once my data has been analysed, I won't be able to withdraw my consent for it to be used in the final write-up of the research study. ☐

3. **I confirm that** I have been given information on support helplines and websites that I can contact after the interview if I require more support. I am also aware that, if I say something during the interview which indicates that either myself or someone else is at risk, the researcher has a duty of care to inform an appropriate authority. ☐

4. **I understand that** the data I provide will be securely and anonymously stored. It will be accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained. ☐

5. **I understand that** my fully anonymised data will be used for a doctoral thesis and potentially published in a journal article. ☐

6. **I give permission** for the anonymised transcripts generated from my interview to be deposited in a research data repository so that will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals at the University of Essex. *This is optional and you do not need to agree to this in order to participant in the study.* ☐

7. **I agree to** take part in this study. ☐

Participant Name	Date	Participant Signature
_____	_____	_____

Researcher Name	Date	Researcher Signature
_____	_____	_____

Appendix B: Poster

University of Essex

- Do you have a partner in prison?
- Were they imprisoned for a violent crime?
- Are you above the age of 18?
- Do you identify as a woman?
- Would you like to contribute to a study exploring your experience?

If you have answered yes to the above and would like to hear more about this research project, please contact Tugce Dolen on tdolen@essex.ac.uk

University of Essex

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

University of Essex

NHS

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Exploring Women's Experiences of Having a Partner in Prison for a Violent Crime – UK

Research Team:

Primary Researcher:
Tugce Dolen (Trainee Clinical Psychologist, University of Essex)
Email: tdolen@essex.ac.uk
Supervisors
Dr Caroline Barratt
Dr Andy Sluckin
School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex

Doctoral Thesis Research Project

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. The information below will provide you with information to assist your decision. Please do not hesitate to ask for more information or clarification.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to explore women's experiences of having a partner in prison for a violent crime in the UK. The study aims to understand how you have made sense of this experience.

Why have I been invited to participate?
You have been invited to participate because you are a woman who has a partner in prison for a violent crime in the UK. Violent crime includes offences such as murder, manslaughter, throwing a corrosive substance, assault, gun and knife crime and robbery. It is required that your partners sentence length is a minimum of 12 months.

Do I have to take part?
Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your consent at any point up until the analysis of your data, without giving any reason and without penalty. If you withdraw your data before the point of analysis, any information you have provided till that point will be deleted and not included in the final write up of the research report. The report may detail how many people withdrew their consent before analysis.

your consent at any point up until the analysis of your data has taken place, at any time for whatever reason and without explanation or penalty.

What will happen to me if I take part?
If you decide to take part, you will be invited to attend a Zoom interview lasting up to 90 minutes. You will be able to decide on a date and time to suit you. All interviews must be virtual due to COVID-19 restrictions.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, you may find some of the interview upsetting. We will have time to debrief at the end of the interview and you will be provided with helplines that you can contact if you feel you need further support.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Your participation will help us to further understand women's experiences of losing a partner to imprisonment for a violent crime. It could potentially shape support provided by services.

What information will be collected?
The interview will be audio recorded using a dictaphone or the Zoom record function. You will be asked to provide some basic demographic information. All of your data collected will be anonymised.

Will my information be kept confidential?
Yes, the information you provide will be kept confidential. This means, your personal information will not be shared with anyone else outside of the research team. The only exception to this is if I am worried about you or someone else's safety. As my duty of care to you, if during the course of the interview you disclose something that leads me to believe that you or somebody else is at risk of harm, I will have to inform an appropriate authority. If this is the case, I will endeavour to discuss this with you beforehand.

Pseudonyms will be used in place of your real name and any other identifiable information will be altered to protect your anonymity. All information collected will be stored safely according to the University of Essex information governance guidelines. Only those involved in the research will have access to your data.

You will be given the choice to opt-in and consent to your anonymised interview transcripts generated from the interviews to deposited in a research data repository so that will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals at the University of Essex. You are not obliged to consent to this.

What is the legal basis for using the data and who is the Data Controller?
Your data will be kept in accordance with GDPR guidelines and will only be used within this evaluation with your full, written consent. If this consent is withdrawn before analysis commences, your data will be discarded and not included in the study. The Data Controller for this evaluation is the University of Essex. Their contact details are Sara Stock, University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

What should I do if I want to take part?
If you would like to take part in this study please Email Tugce Dolen on tdolen@essex.ac.uk.

What will happen with the information I provide and the results of the research study?
All interviews will be transcribed and anonymised. The data will be coded and interpreted to identify the main themes and ideas conveyed by participants. The results will be used and written up for the researcher's doctoral thesis. The results may also be published in a peer-review journal.

Who is organising and funding the research?
The researcher is undertaking this study at the University of Essex in the School of Health and Human Sciences. This study is a requirement for the award of the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology (DClinPsych) in collaboration with the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and North Essex Partnership Foundation Trust.

Who has reviewed the study?
The University of Essex Ethics Sub-Committee 2 has reviewed and approved this study.

Concerns and Complaints
If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Tugce Dolen, using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Camille Cronin (camille.cronin@essex.ac.uk). If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager , Sarah Manning-Press (sarahm@essex.ac.uk). Please include the ERAMS reference which can be found at the foot of this page.

Contact Details:

Tugce Dolen
Clinical Psychology Doctorate Student
tdolen@essex.ac.uk

Thank you for considering taking part in the study!

Appendix D: Ethical Approval

Health and Social Care

University of Essex

Dear Tugce,

Ethics Committee Decision

I am writing to advise you that your research proposal entitled "Loss and Imprisonment: A Qualitative Exploration of Women's Experiences of Losing a Partner to Violent Crime Imprisonment in the UK." has been reviewed by the Ethics Sub Committee 2.

The Committee is content to give a favourable ethical opinion of the research. I am pleased, therefore, to tell you that your application has been granted ethical approval by the Committee.

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid 19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. We will keep you informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or have any queries.

Yours sincerely,

Beverley Pascoe

Ethics ETH1920-1559: Miss Tugce Dolen

Appendix E: Interview Guide

Interview Schedule

- Can you tell me a bit about how you came to know X?
- What do you enjoy about the relationship?
- How did X come to be in prison? Is this the first time he has been imprisoned?
- Can you describe to me your experience of X being imprisoned? What was the day like?
- How do you feel day to day? Has X being imprisoned effected your mental or physical health?
- In what ways has this experience impacted your life?
- How do you find yourself speaking to others about X being in prison? Is it ever hard to be totally honest about the experience/how you're feeling?
- When you talk about them to others, what kind of things do they say?
- Do you find the experience has impacted how others view you? (friends, family, colleagues etc.)
- What has felt most difficult about your partner being in prison?
  - has anything helped you with these difficulties?
- Can you tell me about a day/time that you found particularly difficult?
- Has anything become easier or changed for the better since your partner was imprisoned?
- Have you sought support from anywhere? Charities? Groups? Family?
- Has COVID-19 changed your experience of your partner being in prison?

Appendix F: Transcript Extract

Researcher	*In what way do you this has impacted your life?*
Participant 5	I think if I could take positives out of it, I would say…I realize I'm a, I'm a stronger person than I thought I ever was, and I think I'm at the position where you could chuck anything at me and I'll, I'll tackle it, I won't run away from it. Obviously, the negatives are that yes, that I constantly think about him. I constantly think about prison, I constantly think about the situation we're all in so there isn't any kind of respite from that. It's something that's just ingrained in as part of your, your day to day and, and everything is, everything's a count down. So it's like count… it used to be countdown to visit or count down to the next date that something has to be done by, and now we count down things like if we're watching a TV program, like a series, we watch them together and they'll be like six episodes and then that means that's six weeks down, so we kind of do all of these little countdowns together. And I think I'm worried if he's in there for the rest of his sentence, he would come out in 2025. I think I worry long term about how that reintegration will work where I've been on

	my own for so long, he's been there for so long, will we just get back together like, like we did before? Or is that going to be another challenge that we've got to face together umm yeah that's probably the one that worries me the most.

Appendix G: IPA process of annotation during analysis

Annotation	#	Fil...	In Folder	Modified on
descriptive: highlighting how close they were.	1	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
linguistic: hesitancy may suggest she finds it difficult to talk about before highlighting the events that led up to i...	2	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: strained relationship before imprisonment	3	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: Failed by services?	4	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: hopeless before prison. could prison have saved their relationship? Prison as saviour?	5	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: Sharing caring responsibility with prison service. relief from duties. prison as help	6	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
linguistic: nightmare to describe life before the imprisonment.	7	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
linguistic: didnt realise how complex ptsd is...	8	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
linguistic: reached capacity with caring responsibility.	9	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: shame? judgement? sense of being misunderstood or partner being misunderstood? people dont u...	10	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
linguistic: uncertainty, not knowing, being in the dark	11	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: change, post traumatic growth? protecting self from others judgement and views?	12	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
descriptive: seeking understanding, not finding it in those that are closest	13	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: hard to cope, difficult	14	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
descriptive: twitter is safe space	15	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: suspicious of others intention, fear of judgement. social network gets smaller	16	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: immportance of highlighting that he has changed. progress is important, redemption is possible	17	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
descriptive: comparison to brothers cancer diagnosis and death	18	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: distraction with education	19	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: the growth from the experience has been worth the pain?	20	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: navigating the unknown system alone	21	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
linguistic: education was intelectualising	22	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
descriptive: comparing own situation to those in worse circumstances	23	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
linguistic: prison as saving grace - would relationship survive without prison?	24	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: prison as one last chance for the survival of he relationship?	25	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: more knoweldge and less uncertainty reduced anxieites	26	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at
conceptual: protecting self from criticism through more silence. isolation? rejection?	27	1. Ki...	Files	23 Aug 2021 at

Appendix H. Demographic Questionnaire

Sociodemographic Questionnaire

Participant ID: _____

DOB (Month/Year): _____

How long have you and your partner been together?

When was your partner imprisoned?

What was the charge?

Ethnicity:

White
1. English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
2. Irish
3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller
4. Any other White background, please describe

Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups
5. White and Black Caribbean
6. White and Black African
7. White and Asian
8. Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, please describe

Asian/Asian British
9. Indian
10. Pakistani
11. Bangladeshi
12. Chinese
13. Any other Asian background, please describe

Black/ African/Caribbean/Black British
14. African
15. Caribbean
16. Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please describe

Other ethnic group
17. Arab
18. Any other ethnic group, please describe ____

Appendix I. Support Numbers Provided

Thank you for taking part in the study. I just wanted to drop you a quick email with some support numbers. I send these across to everyone that takes part, just in case they find them useful.

Ormiston Families
Email: enquiries@ormistonfamilies.org.uk
Telephone: 01473 724517

Prisoners' Families Helpline
Telephone: 0808 808 2003 (Freephone: including most mobiles). The Helpline is open 9am – 8pm Monday to Friday and 10am – 3pm Saturday and Sunday. Please note the Helpline is closed on Bank Holidays.
Email: info@prisonersfamilies.org.

Samaritans- Confidential support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.
Phone: 116 123 (free 24-hour helpline)
Website: www.samaritans.org.uk