

## Complex collateral consequences: Understanding women's experiences of partner imprisonment for violent crime in the UK

T. Dolen & S. Barratt

**To cite this article:** T. Dolen & S. Barratt (09 Mar 2026): Complex collateral consequences: Understanding women's experiences of partner imprisonment for violent crime in the UK, Justice, Opportunities, and Rehabilitation, DOI: [10.1080/2997965X.2026.2633147](https://doi.org/10.1080/2997965X.2026.2633147)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/2997965X.2026.2633147>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 09 Mar 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 49





View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Complex collateral consequences: Understanding women's experiences of partner imprisonment for violent crime in the UK

T. Dolen  and S. Barratt 

School of Health and Social Care, University of Essex, Colchester, United Kingdom

## ABSTRACT

Partner imprisonment impacts women socially, emotionally, and physically. This paper explores six women's experiences of partner imprisonment for violent crime in the UK using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Four main themes were identified: The Prisoners Partner, Prison as Savior, Behind Bars on The Outside and Post Experience Growth. From these findings we suggest recommendations about how services and policy can support women experiencing partner imprisonment to violent crime in the UK.

## KEYWORDS



interpretive phenomenological analysis; IPA; partner imprisonment; violent crime; grief; criminal justice

## Introduction

Criminal justice research and policy formation has historically overlooked the impact on families, partners and children. Families have a significant role in reducing reoffending (Cid & Martí, 2012), women specifically are recognized for their substantial contribution to the rehabilitation of their partners (Souza et al., 2015). The Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties Policy Framework published by the Ministry of Justice & HM Prison & Probation service (2020) states:

This policy supports the maintenance and development of prisoners' relationships with family, significant others, and friends... 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 focus on reducing reoffending from a position of unpaid and unsupported labor potentially provides a complex set of circumstances for families in this position (Condry, 2013). Though there has been a ten-fold increase in research from 1990 to 2015 (Lanskey et al., 2019), research exploring women's experiences of partner imprisonment, especially qualitatively, is still limited.

**CONTACT** T. Dolen  [tdolen@essex.ac.uk](mailto:tdolen@essex.ac.uk)  School of Health and Social Care, University of Essex, Colchester, United Kingdom.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

### ***The impact of partner imprisonment on women***

Although not related specifically to prisoners, recent research on unpaid carers who provide in-house support for those with disabilities and ill-health in the UK found that 66% of carers who were providing care for 10 or more hours week were female. This was compared to 34% who were male (Brimblecombe & Cartagena Farias, 2022). Data related to prisoners' families highlight that women provide significant support and care for prisoners, this includes partners, wives, mothers, and other relatives (Condry, 2013). These findings point to the burden women may experience as a result of partner imprisonment.

Depression and anxiety are common in women who have partners imprisoned (Comfort, 2019; Turanovic et al., 2012; Wildeman et al., 2012). Factors contributing to this may be related to extra responsibilities as a result of the imprisonment, such as additional financial strain in the form of providing items for the person imprisoned, maintaining contact (Hairston, 2007), visiting the prison and reduced income (Geller et al., 2011). Additionally, the "resocialisation" process that can follow partner imprisonment, a process involving changes to roles, responsibilities, relationships and positions in society can induce strain (McDonnell et al., 2023).

Family member imprisonment also has a disproportionate negative impact on women's physical health. They are more likely to suffer from obesity, have a heart attack or stroke and be in general poor health (Lee et al., 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 et al., 2014).

### ***Shame and stigma***

Shame is a complex emotion that can silence the shamed and increase isolation, it functions to avoid ostracization and maintain social acceptance (Goffman, 2009). Shame features heavily in findings across studies exploring families and women's experiences of family member imprisonment (Condry, 2013). Increased shame is reported in neighborhoods where imprisonment is less common (Fishman, 1990; Schneller, 1976). The experience of shame in this context may lead to elevated levels of stress, loneliness, and isolation, as well as depression (Russell, 2020). Association with a prisoner can activate feelings of secondary blame and judgment, referred to as courtesy stigma (Condry, 2013)

Families may be inclined to keep their experience private as a way to mitigate judgment and stigma however this can counterintuitively lead to increased feelings of shame and depression through isolation (Hannem, 2009).

## **Grief and loss**

When a partner is imprisoned, an involuntary separation takes place. Studies have explored the impact of partner separation on wellbeing in the case of divorce (Amato, 2014), military deployment (Allen, 2011) and bereavement (Bisconti et al., 2004). Findings show that separation can decrease life satisfaction and wellbeing, especially in the case of involuntary separation, such as 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.

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). 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 that the emotional consequences of their loss are “deserved” (Arditti, 2005).

## **Research aim**

There is limited research on the impact of imprisonment on partners in the UK generally and there is currently no research which explores the experiences of women who have a partner imprisoned specifically for a violent crime in the UK. Violent crime may be associated with higher levels of stigmatization toward the imprisoned, as well as those associated with them.

The main aim of this study was to deepen understanding of women’s experiences of partner imprisonment to violent crime in the UK. A secondary aim was to provide practical and holistic recommendations for services and agencies in how they support this group of women most effectively.

## **Methods**

This study has taken a qualitative approach adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009, 2021).

IPA is a method that emphasizes and highlights the construction of meaning by individuals within their social and personal world. It is an approach that “gives voice” to those whose voices may be missing or less powerful in society. IPA aims to identify convergence and divergence in experiences through rigorous, idiographic, analysis of interviews with small sample sizes (Smith et al., 2009, 2021).

The authors note that the terminology used in IPA has been updated recently (Smith & Nizza, 2022) but this was completed using the older terminology.

### **Recruitment process and participants**

Recruitment took place primarily through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now known as “X”). The study poster was shared to identify potential participants. It listed the key inclusion criteria, asking whether, at the time of seeing the poster, they lived in the UK, were aged 18 or over, identified as a woman and had a partner in prison for a violent crime. Violent crime, as defined by the Crown prosecution Service (n.d.) includes, murder, manslaughter, throwing a corrosive substance, assault, gun/knife crime and robbery. Partner was defined as married or unmarried couples. The couple must have been together at the point of sentencing and remain in a relationship at the point of taking part in the study.

In the information provided to potential participants they were told that the purpose of the study was to explore women’s experiences of having a partner in prison for a violent crime in the UK, with the aim of understanding how they had made sense of their experience.

Seventeen women reached out to take part. Ten were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria – four had met their partner during the prison sentence, five were from the USA and one woman’s partner was imprisoned for a nonviolent offense. One woman agreed to take part then did not attend the interview, she did not provide a reason for changing her mind.

One participant, of their own accord, shared the study information with other women on their Twitter profile. This made possible an online form of snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), though it is not possible to be conclusive about whether it led to the recruitment of further participants as they were not explicitly asked how they found out about the study.

Of the six women who took part in the interview, all were of White British background and between the ages of 20 and 43. They had been in relationships with their partners for varied lengths of time at the point of imprisonment and all were still in a relationship at time of interview. The sentences varied from four years to nineteen years. See [Table 1](#) below for full demographic information.

**Table 1.** Participant demographic characteristics.

Participant pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Relationship with partner	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	1 Year	1 Year	Armed Robbery	4 Years
Julie	43	White British	Engaged	15 Years	7 Years	Murder	19 Years
Claire	36	White British	Unmarried	10 Months	1 Year	Grievous Bodily Harm with Intent	6 Years
Megan	20	White British	Unmarried	2 Years 8 Months	3 Months	Grievous Bodily Harm	6.5 Years
Chloe	40	White British	Married	22 Years	2 Years	Grievous Bodily Harm with Intent	13 Years
Liz	42	White British	Married	10 years	5 Years	Grievous Bodily Harm with Intent	12 Years

### **Data collection**

All interviews were conducted by the first author. The interviews began with introductions and a reminder of what was included in the participant information sheet and participant consent form which was forwarded to them before the interview date. All participants were reminded that they could withdraw consent at any time. An interview schedule containing open-ended experientially focused questions such as “can you describe to me your experience of X being imprisoned?,” “how do you feel day to day?” and “in what ways has this experience impacted your life?” was utilized. This schedule was designed by the research team and drew inspiration from their clinical and professional experiences. The schedule was used as a guide with efforts made to ensure the interviews were mainly led by the interviewee in line with IPA guidelines.

Data were collected between July 2021 and September 2021. Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, the online video calling platform. Interviews lasted between 53 minutes and 1 hour 37 minutes. Each participant was offered a chance to debrief following the interview and all were provided with information for relevant support charities.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and included simple speech dynamics such as pauses and the use of fillers. Dictaphone recordings were used to assist with this when checking Zoom transcripts for any errors. Zoom provided transcripts for all recordings, once this transcript was retrieved, the recording was deleted. In line with the idiographic focus of IPA (Smith, 2010), each transcript was individually analyzed before moving onto the next. NVivo, a qualitative data package, was used to assist with the organization and management of data.

### **Analysis**

Analysis was conducted using guidance from Smith et al. (2009). Once transcriptions were complete, each interview was read and annotated three times: 1) To comment descriptively on content. 2) To highlight linguistic aspects like pauses, repetition of particular words and/or choice of words. 3) To comment on conceptual elements. Comments that addressed the same topics were grouped and appropriate codes were identified for each transcript individually. These codes were then reviewed across all transcripts to ensure consistency of meaning. For example, when the women referred to waiting for contact with their partner e.g. waiting for calls, frequently checking their phone and avoiding making plans in order to not miss contact, this was given the code “waiting.” Once each transcript had been through this process, the codes were organized together into subthemes and later, master themes. Quotes were selected to illustrate each theme and bring to life the women’s experiences.

## **Reflexivity**

Standpoint epistemology was selected for this research which considers knowledge as located within social and political contexts (e.g., Collins, 1990; Harding, 2004). For the purposes of transparency in social positioning, the first author is a woman of Turkish-British background practicing as a qualified clinical psychologist and a trainee clinical psychologist at the time of data collection and analysis. The second author is a White-British woman and the primary project supervisor. Neither author has experience of partner or family member imprisonment; however, the first author has professional experience of working in the visiting center of a British prison where they have spoken to, and witnessed, women with partners in prison.

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Essex (ETH1920-1559). All names used are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of participants.

## **Results**

Analysis yielded four master themes as detailed in [Table 2](#).

### **Master Theme 1: the prisoners partner**

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, stigma and judgment. 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

**Table 2.** Master themes and sub themes.

Master Theme 1: the prisoner's partner	Making Sense of the Crime Judgment from Others Amplified Emotions
Master Theme 2: prison as savior	The Parentified Role Sharing Custody of Care: HMP as Carer Improved Relationship A Safe Place
Master Theme 3: behind bars on the outside	The Waiting Game Finding Acceptance Secondhand Punishment A Shameful Grief Guilty Innocence
Master Theme 4: post experience growth	Personal Growth Creating a New Kind of Relationship Fearing The Future

their partner. Appearing strong to those around them was an important part of the women's new identity.

### ***Making sense of the crime***

Julie and Megan spoke in depth about how they started to make sense of what had happened. In the process of making sense of the crime and what their partner had been convicted of, the women expressed that their partner was more than just the crime they had committed. They shared that the crime was out of character for their partner and the shock they, and others, felt toward 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]

Claire spoke about the comfort it brought her that others were shocked at her partner's imprisonment. This supported her view that his crime was out of character and comforted her that others viewed her partner in the same light:

...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]

The women also spoke about the disbelief and sense of denial during the sentencing period. Denial appeared to act as a protective factor in what was 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 [Chloe]

### ***Judgment from others***

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

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 [Claire]

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

The only person I wanted 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]

### ***Amplified emotions***

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

Claire spoke about her partner appreciating her role in his life and the importance of this for her:

He does always say how much he appreciates me. 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]

However, she also 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]

### ***Master Theme 2: prison as savior***

All of the women described themselves as being in a caring role within their relationships yet, in the midst of challenges associated with their partner's imprisonment, there also appeared to be a sense of relief from stress and responsibility that was present pre-imprisonment. The woman experienced a sense of comfort in knowing their partners were in a safer place than they may have been had they not been in prison. Prison was presented as being somewhat of a savior; a savior of the relationship and a safe place whilst the partner was accommodated there.

### ***The parentified role***

All of the women in this study spoke of feeling like a caregiver to their partners, either before sentencing, during the sentence or both. The sentencing, to some extent, provided respite from this care giving role.

I felt like his mum, not his wife [Liz]

Megan indicated a strong parentified dynamic between herself and her partner and described the impact this had on her physical health:

I find myself sometimes getting headaches because I'm like why hasn't he called me yet is he okay... I worry about him because I know that...he needs someone to lift him up [Megan]

### *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 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.... I don't feel that I'm neglecting him and making him feel left out or.... making his mental health worse [Megan]

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

...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...When they remanded him I was quite relieved, because it was umm, it just wasn't all on me to try and help him [Kim]

Liz described the relief and peace that came with her partner's imprisonment:

The peace was nice, not arguing, the house was quiet for once...not worrying if he's going to come back drunk.... 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. [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:

I know he's safe, know he's warm... fed [Liz]

### *Improved relationship*

The women shared how improvements in the wellbeing of their partner whilst in prison directly impacted their relationship. Liz spoke about the impact of therapy, that her partner was receiving whilst in prison, had on him:

Before he went to prison, he was possessive, jealous, paranoid umm didn't like to talk...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]

Similarly, Kim shared the impact of prison on her partner's 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 ...but what it also gave him was you know when he was sober time to think...He had no choice but to think okay I'm either going to use this as a dosing experience or I want to change my life, and you know, luckily, for me, he wants the change [Kim]

### ***A safe place***

This theme demonstrates some of the difficulties present in the couples lives prior to sentencing and brings to life how prison can provide an element of stability and safety.

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 [Claire]

Similarly, Megan said she felt her partner was saved from committing more crime:

... 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 partner's life:

Definitely...he says it himself, it saved his life [Liz]

### ***Master Theme 3: behind bars on the outside***

All of the women spoke of a sense of punishment and restriction as a result of the imprisonment. This feeling brought further distress to the women as they felt selfish or disenfranchised in their emotion as they were not in prison themselves, yet still experienced restriction and distress.

### ***The waiting game***

Waiting emerged as an important theme. This included waiting for the end of the sentence and also waiting for contact day-to-day. 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 [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... my phone is always on loud now whereas I always used to put my phone on do not disturb like...I don't want to miss his call when he rings [Megan]

### ***Finding acceptance***

All of the women spoke about experiencing acceptance into online communities where they felt understood and less alone talking to others who

have, and are, experiencing similar circumstances. This appeared to be an important aspect of the experience as it provided the women a space where they felt understood and not judged.

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

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 on Twitter rather than in her networks offline:

...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... [Megan]

Yet 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 on Twitter, there were still moments of loneliness:

...I'm here by myself surrounded by couples. It can be quite lonely, especially because no one like understands [Megan]

### ***Secondhand punishment***

Secondhand punishment was described in several ways by the women. Some of the women spoke about the abuse they received, whether online or in person, and the complicated feelings of guilt this caused within them. They spoke about the harsh financial implications of the imprisonment and about sacrificing their own emotions and experiences in order to support their partner in the most effective way.

Julie described her experience of receiving abuse from strangers online, especially on news 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...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]

Claire shared the financial implications on her as a result of her partner's imprisonment:

I had to take out a loan to pay off his court fees and things like that... [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]

### ***A shameful grief***

Almost all of the women spoke about a sense of grief and loss at the separation with their partners. Some felt the grief was recognized 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. Others grieved for missed moments yet to come in the future:

In this extract, Chloe describes her experience of “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... 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... The loss of things that you will have...it's kind of the grief of missed moments.... But 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 [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... [Julie]

Claire touched 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]*

### ***Guilty innocence***

Within the complicated emotions of feeling punished, grief, and judgment, the women also expressed emotions of guilt, often without directly naming it. Perhaps this was because the emotion felt too shameful or possibly as they had not yet recognized the emotion within themselves.

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... 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 feel bad and he was like don't be stupid, you go, you know, and he said that to me from before...please live your life, you know and don't be afraid to go out and stuff like that... [Claire]

Liz articulated the guilt that drives her to mask some of her experiences in the context of being free whilst her partner is imprisoned:

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... [Liz]

#### ***Master Theme 4: post experience growth***

This theme captures some of the positive elements of the women's experiences following the initial stress they experienced. It also captures the unease the women reported for their future and a worry that the positive changes may not stand the test of time.

#### ***Personal growth***

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

Kim spoke about focusing on gaining qualifications and starting a new degree as a way of coping, as well as a way of improving and developing herself:

I threw myself into education ... I wanted to understand him, but I also wanted to better myself .... it's given me time to work on me too [Kim]

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

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]

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... I'm responsible for everything in this house and I can do it, ...so I've taken a lot of positives from it actually. [Claire]

#### ***Creating a new kind of relationship***

The women spoke about their relationships changing and evolving in the context of the imprisonment. Certain things had to change; the couples could not physically be together, but they all spoke of the importance of communication. In the absence of any other kind of intimacy, the sharing of words became vital.

Here an extract from Megan's interview summarizes the significance of increased communication and the positives that have come from it:

I think it's just that you're just so forced to speak, all the time... the fact you are forced to only communicate has been a positive because I was suppressing 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 [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:

We used text each other all the time... we were very dependent on each other, we were each other's support [Claire]

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

... 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 wasn't dressed up or anything like that, but so excited, so anxious about going to a prison [Claire]

### *Fearing the future*

All the women spoke about various concerns for post-prison life and the potential impact on their relationship. Some expressed worry about whether the 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 partner's life and some had anxieties surrounding whether the relationship would simply survive in the outside world.

Liz described worrying about whether the changes she has observed in her partner would remain after release:

It's just hoping the change is genuine ...It's easy to trust them when they're locked up, suppose just that really... worried, 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]

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'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'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? We both reassure each other as much as we can that that's not going to happen... [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]

## Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the multifaceted impact of partner imprisonment to violent crime, building on previous research in the area. The experiences shared highlight the complex, and at times perceived contradictory, aspects of the experience.

The women in this study experienced separation from their partners, for various lengths of time, with limited opportunities for contact. Their experiences were complicated by stigma and shame, yet all of them described a sense of personal growth that followed their initial responses to the events.

Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) refers to the positive psychological changes that can develop following a traumatic experience. It can include a greater sense of self confidence, improved wellbeing and an increased appreciation and acceptance of life generally (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The experience of PTG has been identified and explored in the prison population (Hearn et al., 2021; Okanlawon et al., 2024), but not so clearly highlighted or documented for families of those imprisoned.

This section will discuss the themes that emerged through the lens of PTG. It will consider specifically the internal (thoughts, feelings and psychological features) and external processes (social and systemic factors) that supported the experience followed by proactive recommendations clinically, system-wide and for future research.

### *Internal processes*

The women shared feelings of shame, guilt, grief and confusion in the early stage of their experience. They also shared increased strength, confidence and self-assurance. These internal thoughts and ways of appraising the experience appeared to have a direct impact on their emotions and experience of the circumstances.

Cognitive engagement (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2015), identifies the act of asking the self intentionally “why did this happen” and “what impact do these events have on my life” as a key element positively associated with PTG. Cognitive engagement differs from intrusive rumination, which was not an experience described by the women in this study, and can have the opposite effect, leading to more trauma symptoms (Stockton et al., 2011). The themes which emerged in this study mirror this cognitive process – the subtheme “Making Sense of the Crime” touches on the “why did this happen” whilst master theme three “Behind Bars on The Outside” touches on the “what impact do these events have on my life.”

An element of cognitive engagement that really stood out in the women’s accounts was regarding their sense of relief that their partners were safe in prison. This is an interesting finding as violence and death in prisons have increased in recent years (Jolliffe & Haque, 2017). Yet the women shared that rather than believing that their partners were at greater risk in prison, they focused on the protective aspects of imprisonment, such as being away from alcohol, substances and other harmful circumstances that they would have access to, and be at risk of, in the community. The intentional cognitive draw toward identifying the positive elements of the experience may have contributed to the PTG experience.

### **External processes**

The women shared experiences of feeling different, disconnected, and othered by their close communities and sometimes by wider communities through social media. Sometimes the stigma was perceived, or preempted, which led the women to distance themselves socially to avoid anticipated shame. When the women found others who they felt understood by, either through social media or through opening up to friends, they reported lessened distress and shame. This demonstrates the impact of external factors influencing internal processes, and vice versa.

Courtesy stigma (Condry, 2013), shame felt through association, featured heavily in this study. Feelings of stigma and shame were lower for the women who had others around them with personal experience of family imprisonment and increased for the women who did not, supporting earlier findings that shame is increased in neighborhoods and communities where imprisonment is less common (Fishman, 1990; Schneller, 1976). Selective sharing, or not sharing at all, was a strategy employed to mitigate preempted stigma and shame (Hannem, 2009), but which may have inadvertently provided missed opportunities for support and connection.

Shame and stigma generally are associated with lower levels of PTG, whereas considered disclosure of experiences in safe spaces where one is understood and accepted, is associated with higher levels of PTG (Kamen

et al., 2016). 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 new circumstances. The women spoke about online spaces feeling “safe” and connecting with other women in similar situations helping to reduce some of the isolation and shame that they experienced, supporting the idea that social acceptance and connectedness can encourage PTG.

### **Summary**

As highlighted above, internal and external processes appear to be mutually influential of each other. The internal and external influenced one another and either functioned to maintain distress or to challenge distress and contribute to positive experiences. These observations, from a small-scale phenomenological exploration, begin the building blocks of understanding this experience further and provide valuable recommendations based on these findings.

### **Recommendations**

#### ***Clinical***

Although 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 judgment from others and worries about the future. This reflects other studies in this population highlighting the impact of partner imprisonment on mental health (Condry, 2013). Psychological support with a focus on anxiety, shame, guilt and grief could therefore be beneficial in supporting women experiencing partner imprisonment.

Women may be less likely to reach out for help if they are experiencing feelings of shame and guilt. Those from marginalized backgrounds may find access difficult due to language barriers or fears of judgment 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 centers, and involving women in the shaping of services through service-user involvement initiatives.

#### ***Policy and systems***

The role that partners play in the life of prisoners during imprisonment and after release is an important reason for considering how legal and

social policy includes and supports partners of imprisoned people. Supportive systems can play a large part of ensuring women are protected against trauma responses, and can influence factors that contribute to PTG.

Existing policy regarding Prisoners' Family Ties (Ministry of Justice & HM Prison and Probation Service, 2020) acknowledges the role families and partners play in reducing reoffending but fails to acknowledge their experiences and needs as individuals. A revised, or additional, policy acknowledging this and calling for statutory support services could change the landscape of support for families and partners.

Considering the important role of social and community acceptance in encouraging PTG, peer-support forums organized by charities and prisons could provide safe and effective space for women to connect with others experiencing similar circumstances. Though the women in this study were able to find peer-support on social media, without the facilitation of these spaces, there is a risk of being exposed to more trauma vicariously without professional systems in place to ensure these groups remain helpful and safe. Nevertheless, it is important to ensure that peer-support spaces are collaborative in nature and remain empowering for the women that they serve.

Many of the women spoke of entering further training and education, to support themselves financially but also as a response to their lived experience. Providing free and accessible financial advice and education and training opportunities could enable the women to tap into their resilience and shape their experience toward PTG. In turn, reducing distress and protecting against more trauma responses.

### **Future research**

All participants recruited in this study were White British and aged between 20 and 43 years old. This limits how widely the results can be generalized. Further research should prioritize recruiting women of minoritised backgrounds to be reflective of the disproportionate impact of imprisonment on racialized members of society (Arditti, 2012). The current study recruited from Twitter which may not be accessible to women who, for example, do not speak English, do not have access to devices, or women from more marginalized groups. Again, this limits generalizability and highlights the need for more research in this area. 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.

The recruitment stage of this project showed a 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 toward the women.

And finally, further research exploring what helps and hinders PTG in this population could contribute additional recommendations to support women experiencing partner imprisonment to violent crime.

### Acknowledgements

The authors express their appreciation to the women that took part in this project. They shared their stories of loss, sadness, hope, and above all, love. Thank you also to Dr Andy Sluckin for his guidance, reflections and support.

### Author contributions

CRedit: **T. Dolen:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft; **S. Barratt:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### ORCID

T. Dolen  <http://orcid.org/0009-0009-7262-3294>

S. Barratt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5679-4223>

### References

- Allen, M. A. (2011). *Military basing abroad: Bargaining, expectations, and deployment*. State University of New York at Binghamton.
- Amato, P. R. (2014). The consequences of divorce for adults and children: An update. *Društvena istraživanja-Časopis za Opća Društvena Pitanja*, 23(01), 5–24.
- Arditti, J. A. (2005). Families and incarceration: An ecological approach. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 86(2), 251–260. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2460>
- Arditti, J. A. (2012). Parental incarceration and the family: Psychological and social effects of imprisonment on children, parents, and caregivers. In *Parental incarceration and the family*. New York University Press.
- Bisconti, T. L., Bergeman, C. S., & Boker, S. M. (2004). Emotional well-being in recently bereaved widows: A dynamical systems approach. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 59(4), P158–P167. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/59.4.p158>
- Brimblecombe, N., & Cartagena Farias, J. (2022). Inequalities in unpaid carer's health, employment status and social isolation. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 30(6), e6564–e6576. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.14104>
- Brown, T. N., Bell, M. L., & Patterson, E. J. (2016). Imprisoned by empathy: Familial incarceration and psychological distress among African American men in the National Survey of American Life. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 57(2), 240–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146516645924>

- Cid, J., & Martí, J. (2012). Turning points and returning points: Understanding the role of family ties in the process of desistance. *European Journal of Criminology*, 9(6), 603–620. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370812453102>
- Collins, P. H. (1990). Black feminist thought in the matrix of domination. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 138(1990), 221–238.
- Comfort, M. (2019). *Doing time together: Love and family in the shadow of the prison*. University of Chicago Press.
- Condry, R. (2013). *Families shamed: The consequences of crime for relatives of serious offenders*. Willan.
- Crown Prosecution Service. (n.d). *Violent crime*. Crown Prosecution Service. Retrieved March 22, 2025, from <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-types/violent-crime>
- Doka, K. (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington Books.
- Fishman, L. T. (1990). *Women at the wall: A study of prisoners' wives doing time on the outside*. State University of New York Press.
- Geller, A., Garfinkel, I., & Western, B. (2011). Paternal incarceration and support for children in fragile families. *Demography*, 48(1), 25–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-010-0009-9>
- Goffman, E. (2009). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Simon and Schuster.
- Hairston, C. F. (2007). Focus on children with incarcerated parents: An overview of the research literature.
- Hannem, S. N. (2009). *Marked by association: Stigma, marginalisation, gender and the families of male prisoners in Canada* [Doctoral dissertation]. Carleton University.
- Harding, S. G. (Ed.) (2004). *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies*. Psychology Press.
- Hearn, N., Joseph, S., & Fitzpatrick, S. (2021). Post-traumatic growth in prisoners and its association with the quality of staff–prisoner relationships. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health: CBMH*, 31(1), 49–59. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cbm.2173>
- Jolliffe, D., & Haque, Z. (2017). Have prisons become a dangerous place? Disproportionality, safety and mental health in British Prisons.
- Kamen, C., Vorasarun, C., Canning, T., Kienitz, E., Weiss, C., Flores, S., Etter, D., Lee, S., & Gore-Felton, C. (2016). The impact of stigma and social support on development of post-traumatic growth among persons living with HIV. *Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings*, 23(2), 126–134. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10880-015-9447-2>
- Lanskey, C., Markson, L., Souza, K., & Lösel, F. (2019). Prisoners' families' research: Developments, debates and directions. *The Palgrave handbook of prison and the family*, 15–40.
- Lee, H., Wildeman, C., Wang, E. A., Matusko, N., & Jackson, J. S. (2014). A heavy burden: The cardiovascular health consequences of having a family member incarcerated. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104(3), 421–427. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301504>
- Liamputtong, P. (2010). *Performing qualitative cross-cultural research*. Cambridge University Press.
- Luhmann, M., Hofmann, W., Eid, M., & Lucas, R. E. (2012). Subjective well-being and adaptation to life events: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(3), 592–615. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025948>
- McDonnell, D., Lambert, S., & Farrell, A. (2023). The experience of having a partner in prison—A systematic review and meta-ethnography. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 33(5), 1151–1170. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2697>
- Ministry of Justice & HM Prison & Probation Service. (2020). *Strengthening prisoners' family ties policy framework*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/863606/strengthening-family-ties-pf.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/863606/strengthening-family-ties-pf.pdf)

- Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 327–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701401305>
- Okanlawon, A., Lamade, R. V., & Guarini, B. (2024). Post-traumatic growth among male perpetrators. In *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence* (pp. 1–14). Springer International Publishing.
- Russell, K. N. (2020). *Courtesy stigma: Examining the collateral consequences of sexual offenses and subsequent policy on partners of sexual offenders* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Nevada.
- Schneller, D. P. (1976). *The prisoner's family: A study of the effects of imprisonment*.
- Stockton, H., Hunt, N., & Joseph, S. (2011). Cognitive processing, rumination, and posttraumatic growth. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 24(1), 85–92. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20606>
- Smith, J. A., & Nizza, I. E. (2022). *Essentials of interpretative phenomenological analysis*. American Psychological Association.
- Smith, J. A. (2010). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis*, 21(2), 9–108.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. SAGE Publications.
- Smith, J. A., Larkin, M., & Flowers, P. (2021). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*.
- Souza, K. A., Lösel, F., Markson, L., & Lanskey, C. (2015). Pre-release expectations and post-release experiences of prisoners and their (ex-) partners. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 20(2), 306–323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12033>
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9(3), 455–471. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.2490090305>
- Tedeschi, R. G., Calhoun, L. G., & Groleau, J. M. (2015). Clinical applications of post-traumatic growth. *Positive psychology in practice: Promoting human flourishing in work, health, education, and everyday life*, 503–518.
- Turanovic, J. J., Rodriguez, N., & Pratt, T. C. (2012). The collateral consequences of incarceration revisited: A qualitative analysis of the effects on caregivers of children of incarcerated parents. *Criminology*, 50(4), 913–959. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2012.00283.x>
- Wang, H., & Amato, P. R. (2000). Predictors of divorce adjustment: Stressors, resources, and definitions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(3), 655–668. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.00655.x>
- Wildeman, C., & Muller, C. (2012). Mass imprisonment and inequality in health and family life. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 8(1), 11–30. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-102510-105459>
- Wildeman, C., Schnittker, J., & Turney, K. (2012). Despair by association? The mental health of mothers with children by recently incarcerated fathers. *American Sociological Review*, 77(2), 216–243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122411436234>