Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor David Rudd and Doctor David Kitchener for their ongoing support and inspiration during the last few years.

I feel privileged to have been able to get to know the families who took part in this study. Without them, the research would have never happened. I am grateful to all the staff at POPS, particularly the family link workers, who introduced me to the families and gave me constructive advice throughout my fieldwork.

I would also like to thank those I met along the way who told me to simply ‘keep going’.

Additional thanks to Amanda Davis for helping me see this through and for her keen eye for detail.

Finally, thanks to Stanley ‘Baxter’ Dobson for reminding me to keep smiling.
Abstract

Research, media interest, and political involvement around prisons and families have grown significantly in recent years, although there is scant evidence within the growing body of related literature of original work that documents the perceptions and experiences of families affected by a member’s imprisonment. This research attempts to redress this, taking a social constructionist perspective which uses unstructured interviews to gain a critical insight into why family members’, and in particular, children’s voices are often absent in this field. The research focuses predominantly on children’s experiences, expressed through their own words, or through the words of an adult.

The findings complement and add value to the emerging literature in this relatively neglected area, suggesting that stigma, shame, guilt and frustration are commonplace for prisoners’ families. The findings also reveal that what is significant, but remains largely hidden in research to date, are the reasons why children often do not know what is happening when a parent is in prison.

This thesis presents the results from interviews held with a sample of twenty-four families, including parents, children, prisoners, and practitioners. The interviews took place over a nineteen-month period, and involved, in many instances, a series of interviews with the same respondents.

The phenomenon of ‘story telling’ where children are offered fictitious accounts to explain the absence of an imprisoned family member, thereby avoiding the necessity of mentioning ‘prison’ forms an important element of the thesis. Whilst these fictitious accounts were motivated by a desire to protect the children from the social harm and stigma commonly associated with prison, the children themselves often understood more than their parents realised or were prepared to realise. The research exposes parental anxieties and fears, evidenced in their narratives, and played out in their respectable, sometimes implausible, fictitious accounts they concocted for their children. What is uncovered is that, contrary to parental expectations, children can often deal with the imprisonment of a family member when they are presented with the facts, showing resilience, fortitude, and competence.
Additionally, the thesis shows how families struggle to navigate and make sense of the criminal justice system, frequently encountering hostility, incompetence, and a lack of empathy and understanding. Events such as the arrest of a family member or visiting a family member in prison can exacerbate the difficulties family members already face. By focusing the research around the experiences of children within these families, the thesis offers an original perspective and a valuable contribution to knowledge.

The thesis demonstrates that it is prisoners' families, and in particular the children in these families who are the real victims of prison.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Incarceration reaches more deeply into the substance of family and community life than standard accounts of criminal sanctions suggest. Forcefully transforming the material and social lives of families, incarceration creates a set of concurrent problems, which, in combination, strain relationships and break apart fragile families. The accounts of families attempting to cope with incarceration, typically missing from criminal justice and child development literatures, illustrate a broad array of consequences for families as a whole and for children in particular. (Braman and Wood, 2003: 159)

In this research, I want to draw attention to a largely neglected population, but one that is deserving of attention; namely prisoners’ families, and specifically the children in those families. The intention is to shift the focus of much work in this area away from prisons and prisoners; a world that has been subject to copious and detailed research to date (Newman, 1958; Giallombardo, 1966; Chadwick, 1996; Liebling, 1999; King, 2000; Sim, 2009) towards families, and especially, the children of prisoners. As Braman and Wood’s quotation suggests, there is a need to establish more of a deliberate and sustained focus on prisoners’ families, so that, ultimately, their accounts feature more prominently in the literature. Although my research has a focus on children, the whole family of a prisoner is caught up in the problems which imprisonment brings, so consequently, my research also encapsulates the experiences of other family members affected.

To help establish some sense of perspective, it is useful to consider how and why prisoners’ families have begun to emerge as a priority for some researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in the last few decades. The nature, extent and subject matter of research and inquiry into prisoners’ families can be used as a barometer to test and measure shifting political, public and academic priorities and sympathies, ultimately offering a sense of how prisoners’ families have gradually emerged as deserving more attention. My research builds on this welcome, albeit partial momentum, and suggests,
at its conclusion, how such interest and activity might be prioritised and sustained.

This chapter sets out the detail of my thesis, and presents the rationale, merit and broader context for undertaking the research. It also offers a framework and an explanation for its central arguments, aims and objectives.

**Research into prisoners' families**

Early studies of prisoners' families have helped to provide a context for contemporary research, such as my own. It is helpful to appreciate how the research focus around prisons has changed and developed over time, moving towards a wider remit, taking into account the lives of families as well as prisoners.

Before Pauline Morris's seminal work (1965) on prisoners' families, there had been some notable sociological studies which focused on life within the prison and on prisoners’ experiences (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958; Irwin and Cressey, 1962). Such studies were more concerned with the experience of the prisoners and the process of ‘prisonization’, a term popularized by Clemmer (1940) to encompass the socializing influence of the prison. These studies helped to provide a clearer understanding of life within prison walls and its subculture and phenomenology. Morris, in understanding there was scope in looking further afield, went beyond the confines of the institution, and shone a light on a subject which was relatively unknown at the time she was writing.

Morris (1965) is widely acknowledged as being a pioneer of research into prisoners’ families. She was arguably the first published researcher to uncover and attach importance to the difficulties routinely faced by prisoners’ families. Morris was writing at a time when the research focus around prisons was beginning to take into account prisoners’ wives and their families (Zalba, 1964; Goodman and Price, 1967; Gibbs, 1971). Her work was undertaken at a time of wider societal changes, chief amongst them being the changing position of women and the rise of feminism. In turn, this led to a growing sociological interest in children and families. Her work was instrumental in shifting the
immediate research focus away from the prison environment and the lives of the prisoners towards the wives, partners and children of the predominantly male inmates.

Since Morris, a growing number of studies have looked at the secondary consequences of prison, particularly in terms of the consequences for wives, children, and parents. Many of these studies have tended to focus on a particular model of a prisoner’s family, in which the young, offending male serves a prison sentence whilst his female partner struggles to cope with the demands of raising, often very young, children (Fishman, 1990; Hagan and Dinivitzer, 1999; Arditti et al., 2003; Hairston, 2004). Whilst I accept this is a stereotype, and a family model that has been widely adopted throughout the research and associated literature, it is also a family type that reflects the majority of those in the prison population (Travis and Waul, 2003; Murray, 2005).

Although there has been a considerable amount of published research since the 1960s on prisons and prisoners both globally and from a UK perspective, within and across the disciplines of sociology and criminology, there has been relatively little written about prisoners’ families over this period. Although the early work of researchers such as Morris (1965) began to highlight the everyday circumstances of prisoners’ families, it is only in the last decade that this population has received particular attention, largely through the efforts of academics (Liebling and Maruna, 2005; Codd, 2007, 2008; Murray, 2007) and voluntary sector organisations, such as Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group (POPS), Action for Prisoners' Families (APF) and the Ormiston Trust. Despite this valuable and steadily growing tranche of literature, and the attention given to prisoners’ families (see chapter two), there is a distinct gap in relation to research which explores the lived experiences of children within such families. My research, because it includes in-depth, personal accounts of the experiences and stories respondents offer, provides a valuable insight into how such families deal with the challenges that imprisonment of a family member brings.
This research should make a difference to how prisoners’ families are perceived, or indeed, considered at all, when thinking about imprisonment. It should question and challenge their preconceptions about prison and punishment; not only about prison’s unintentional impact, but also its whole value and purpose. Such questions have been raised in recent publications which highlight the damage done to children and families, and explore the need to reform prison (Corston, 2007). In some cases (Pryce, 2013) there are arguments based upon the economic as well as the humane considerations which fuel the debate about prison reform and eradication. Such work is informed by studying the prison population and through researching prisons themselves. It is important to recognise the important evidence such reports lend to changing policy agendas and public opinion, but also to consider other ways of changing perceptions, largely by focussing on studies which take into account the views of prisoners’ families. To achieve this shift in focus, my research looks more broadly at life outside the prison, focussing on the individuals who are directly affected through familial association with the individual who is serving a sentence. What happens to these families in their everyday lives is what interests me.

In terms of the wider political agenda, it is helpful to briefly consider recent trends in relation to penal policy and any likely future developments which might impact upon prisoners’ families. Some of this agenda, as the following section alludes, is influenced by political philosophy, but more recently, by economic and financial considerations.

**National debates about the use and effectiveness of prison**

The economic cost of prison has attracted renewed interest in its overall impact and effectiveness. Often, as the literature demonstrates, political, economic and populist agendas conflict, creating a climate of uncertainty in terms of future directions. A recent pro-imprisonment report written by the Policy Exchange (Lockyer, 2013) suggests that prisons are no longer fit for purpose and that radical changes are needed if the prison regime is going to survive. The Labour government’s plans in the late 1990s to build ‘Titan’ prisons fell into disarray due to mounting financial pressures and political
uneasiness around the increased use of incarceration. Ongoing resistance from groups such as the Howard League for Penal Reform is influential in arguing against the expansion of the prison estate. An example of this can be seen in relation to the current Coalition Government plans to build a ‘Titan’ sized prison in Wrexham (Crook, 2013). In contrast, recent reports from America suggest that alternatives to custody are beginning to have an impact in relation to cutting overall crime levels, particularly in cities such as New York (Austin and Jacobson, 2013). Against such a climate of political and economic uncertainty, future directions are difficult to predict.

Research commissioned by the New Economic Foundation on women prisoners found that ‘for every pound in support-focussed alternatives to prison, £14 worth of social value is generated to women and their children, victims and society generally over ten years’ (2008: 4). The same report goes on to suggest that there should be more sustained investment in support focussed on community initiatives, which have a much greater emphasis on family link and, consequently, less of a harmful impact upon children. The report’s recommendations are less concerned with the human cost and the wider impact on children and other family members than with the long-term economic savings that can be made by moving away from prison as a form of punishment. The fact that community alternatives to custody mean that children are often able to maintain direct contact with parents and siblings is attractive as it means that these children are less likely to embark upon criminal careers. The report also makes reference to the longer term consequences for children of prisoners, suggesting that there is an increased likelihood of them becoming ‘NEET’ (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Discussions on the future of punishment and alternatives to prison are likely to be influenced by the cost of keeping offenders in prison, for which estimates vary between £26,000 and £108,000 per annum per prisoner (Lockyer, 2013: 5). Preventative, non-custodial schemes, which are community based, are often substantially cheaper, and also mean that family contact can be maintained throughout the duration of a sentence. Such debates fuel the uncertainties in relation to the future of the prison estate and its possible expansion or depletion.
An awareness of policies around criminal justice, welfare, and policies specifically targeted at children and families helps to contextualise and appreciate the positioning of prisoners’ families within contemporary society. Children of prisoners are sometimes referred to as ‘the forgotten victims of crime’ in the sense that they tend to be invisible in terms of public policy, health and welfare considerations. Given the political and widespread public unpopularity of prisoners and offenders, it is challenging for government administrations to produce policies which are directly aimed at benefitting prisoners’ children, whilst at the same time maintaining electoral appeal (Mumola, 2000; Murray: 2007; Sheehan, 2010).

Barnardo’s recently called on the government to produce a national action plan for prisoners’ families which would involve the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education holding responsibility for the estimated 200,000 children currently affected in England and Wales (Puffett, 2014). However, despite such lobbying on behalf of children affected by imprisonment, there is little sign of sympathetic reform at a national level.

Because prisoners’ children are often likely to live in families with histories of low educational attainment, experiences of joblessness, addictions to alcohol and other drugs, mental health and other factors that might adversely affect them (Smith et al., 2007), it makes sense to consider the breadth of the policy environment of which they form a part. There is a temptation to focus on policies that are directly linked to prisons and punishment, but it is important to recognise that criminal justice policies alone are only part of the policy landscape for this steadily growing population. Conservative and Labour administrations have both recognised that the underlying issues, which cause individuals to commit criminal offences (sometimes resulting in a prison sentence), need to be tackled, but there is disagreement in terms of how this might be achieved.

Policies that are about education, early years, welfare, housing and employment all have an impact upon prisoners’ children, often in ways not considered by those who make policies designed to fit a broader remit and to
meet the needs of a much bigger population. Sadiq Khan, the Labour Party’s shadow justice secretary, alludes to the varied agendas that ultimately influence outcomes for children, and have links with policies on crime and justice:

As policy makers, it is critical that we do all we can to stop crime happening in the first place. Preventing crime stops the needless creation of victims, spares communities the blight of crime, and saves the taxpayer money. So, doing all we can to root out deprivation and inequality, improving housing, education, health, employment, investment in Sure Start, Educational Maintenance Allowance, family intervention projects, welfare to work – all of which can have an impact on an individual’s life and potentially prevent them going down the path of a life of crime (2013).

Policy agendas can sometimes clash and result in mixed messages and uncertain outcomes for children. An example of such a philosophical clash is evident when the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act is considered alongside the 2004 Children Act, both products of the previous Labour administration. On the one side, emphasis is placed upon favourable outcomes for all children in the Children Act, with specific attention given to vulnerable families. In contrast, the sentiments of the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act seem to be based on punishment and justice, as can be seen for example, with the introduction of Anti- Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), many of which were taken out on children. Reforms outlined in the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 outline measures to introduce Injunctions to Prevent Nuisance and Annoyance (IPNAs). These new measures will effectively lower the threshold for intervention so that police and other agencies can become involved with children as young as ten for relatively minor indiscretions.

Penal welfarism, of which ASBOs form a part, is sometimes seen as a shift in focus around welfare priorities, specifically away from supporting vulnerable populations, for example those who live in relative poverty, and towards an emphasis on coercion, punishment and accountability. This shift in focus was particularly noticeable under New Labour, with its emphasis on respect, responsibility and getting tough on the causes of crime:
On crime, we believe in personal responsibility and in punishing crime, but also tackling its underlying causes – so, tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime, different from the Labour approach of the past and the Tory policy of today. (1997 Labour Manifesto)

Criminal justice policy, under the current coalition government, continues to sustain a prison population of over 83,000. Overcrowding is still a significant concern for the prison service (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2013).

At a point where there is a huge emphasis placed upon community-led projects, social capital and investment, and the notion of ‘the Big Society’, it appears ironic that prison still plays such a leading role in criminal justice policy:

As the material costs of imprisonment accumulate, family members pull back from the relationships and norms that usually bind them together. Discussions of social capital usually describe it as promoting material well being, but public policy can invert the effect. (Braman, 2004: 162)

These ever-changing political and economic arguments form part of the broader landscape within which my research is situated. Consequently, ideas and arguments about crime, punishment, prison, inequality, disadvantage, and oppression feature extensively.

It will be contended that simply adopting a narrow policy focus that is predominantly concerned with the offenders themselves and their subsequent punishment can be harmful. Extensive social harm to the families involved is all too often a consequence of such measures. Such harm, as the research will show, manifests itself in a number of ways, as, for example, in relationship breakdowns, poverty, poor health and educational underachievement. Recent initiatives and policy decisions are starting to confirm this, but the system still appears to be primarily concerned with the offender and his or her reoffending rates, rather than the general welfare of the family (May, Sharma, and Stewart, 2008). In relation to children and families, notions of innocence, stigma,
vulnerability, protection and guilt lend the thesis a distinctly personal and intimate dimension, moving the lens away from the macro level, whilst at the same time acknowledging the connections between economic and political decisions and their potential impact on individuals.

Because of my interest in how children, parents and other family members interpret the social world, my research has sought to capture their accounts, additionally seeking to explain, understand and learn from them. It is the sheer breadth and variety of these experiences that make this research richer, more diverse and consequently, more informative.

The research cuts across the boundaries of several academic disciplines, namely sociology, criminology, and childhood studies. As such, it does not inhabit a clearly defined academic space. I do not see this as problematic, though; instead I see the freedom this confers as an advantage. Given that my research is concerned with a complex, multi-layered phenomenon, it is appropriate that a broad perspective is adopted to support my thesis.

**Theoretical context**
The theoretical framework within which my thesis sits is social constructionist. My methodological and philosophical position is outlined in more detail in the methodology chapter, but it is useful for the reader to know a little more about my personal motivations for undertaking the research and my choice of subject. It is helpful to outline some of the key theoretical concepts which emerge in the research; for example, how the notion of power and the importance of children’s rights form an integral part of the thesis.

My research falls broadly into the tradition of critical social theory and, as just mentioned, social constructionism. It has been undertaken using an interpretivist research framework, although my research recognises the value of existing research which has been carried out and influenced by alternative paradigms. Furthermore, rather than rejecting positivist models that have sought to explain the social world in a more ‘objective’ way, my research recognises that positivist findings are hugely important; as, for example, in
understanding more about recidivism or prison populations, which can be garnered from government sponsored research into such statistics (Ministry of Justice, 2012). I believe these two research traditions - the interpretivist and the positivist - can work well together in generating new forms of knowledge and in helping to further research agendas into uncharted territory.

When dealing with dominant and elusive concepts such as power, an interpretivist model can be particularly helpful. Power, in many of its guises appeared to be of central significance to my research, appearing at different points and in different guises. Many participants talked about feeling powerless and frustrated when having to deal with the bureaucratic machinery of the criminal justice system. Family dynamics, as evidenced through my fieldwork, often dictated that children were marginalised when it came to issues that directly impacted upon them, lacking agency and influence over adults and older siblings. Ideas of power and children’s rights are interlinked, often in subtle and complex ways. It helps to map out the connections between the two in a little more detail to show how they are relevant to my research.

Power manifests itself on a number of levels, ranging from the macro level, which includes policy and legislation, all the way down to the intimate, but crucially important interactions that happen within families. Often power, as my research demonstrates, is not deliberately or maliciously wielded with the intent to cause harm, but instead (as Foucault (1991) contends) is part of a sophisticated network of interactions and relationships that have evolved and become distributed in the social realms and structures that surround us.

Children, of course, form part of this landscape, and so it seems appropriate to try to connect the concept of power to them. By considering children’s rights, it is possible to gain an appreciation of their positioning and influence in my research, particularly when set against a backdrop of institutions and policies which ultimately impact upon their lives. Significantly, at least from my own point of view, are the connections between power and children’s rights when viewed within the intimacy of the family unit. In order to appreciate and
understand these connections, it is useful to consider children’s positioning and their rights, both as set out in policies, and as they manifest themselves in reality.

A key consideration for successive governments in recent history is the extent to which children are considered in relation to a basic set of rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is often referred to as an agreed set of universal principles on which much contemporary legislation concerning children is built. Boswell (2002) argues that despite efforts to incorporate these basic rights in policies that impact upon children’s welfare, there is a clear gap between the benevolent intent behind such legislation and the less than ideal reality that many children are likely to experience (as evidenced in my research). The principles contained within the Children Act 1989 refer to children who should be protected from any form of discrimination or punishment on the basis of their parents’ status or activities (Article 2). It places emphasis on children’s own views about their best interests (Articles 3 and 12), their right to maintain contact with a parent from whom they are separated (Article 9), and their rights to protection from abuse and neglect (Article 19). Thus, unless a child is known, in some way, already to have been damaged by a parent, childcare policy in England and Wales assumes that the establishment and continuation of contact with both parents is beneficial to stable child development (Boswell, 2002:14).

Boswell goes on to argue that there is no reason why these principles should not be applied to children and their imprisoned parents, despite the reality which often means that criminal proceedings do not take into account issues of child welfare or shared parental responsibility. Although rights are often enshrined and referred to in various government acts, Alderson (2008:18) points out that all rights are limited and that, as legal concepts,

…they concern freedoms, entitlements and obligations, which can be deliberately honoured – or withheld. Rights are not absolute but conditional, affected by the ‘evolving capacities of the child’, the ‘responsibilities, rights and duties of parents’, and the national law.
Clearly, given such constraints, children’s rights for those with an imprisoned parent are often a secondary or minor consideration. The primary focus of criminal justice legislation is often around dealing with the offender often at the expense of other family members, particularly children, who are not routinely considered in the process of dispensing justice. Children’s rights therefore present an elusive concept as they cannot be conveniently called upon to challenge judicial decisions made in the realm of criminal justice, and as a means of securing contact with close family members. This research accentuates children’s lack of agency, not only on a national and on a policy level, but more crucially, within the family contexts that this research explores in detail. As such, the lack of children’s rights, autonomy, and their relative lack of power, form a central aspect of the research.

The researcher’s perspective, standpoint and rationale

Partially in recognition of my interpretivist approach, this section is necessarily more personal, addressing my beliefs and philosophy in relation to my research. It should offer an insight into my reasons for undertaking this research and give a rationale for my epistemological and ontological positioning.

As a researcher, I am intrigued by the individual accounts that people create which relate to their lives, and specifically, which help them to make sense of their experiences. Such accounts are, by their very nature, deeply personal, unique, and often revealing. They are also open to interpretation, can change shape, and sometimes become distorted through the effects of time, emotion and circumstance. As I have relied on these personal accounts of others to nourish and add meaning to my research, it only seems fair and appropriate that I offer something of myself. By doing so, the reader might gain a keener appreciation of my standpoint as a social researcher and the importance I have attached to respondent’s personal accounts.
Let me begin, then, by recalling my early confusion about the nature of stories. The house I grew up in did not have many books. I remember a copy of the *Reader's Digest Guide to You and Your Rights*, which is hardly the catalyst to get one hooked on literature from an early age. Despite these literary deprivations, my mother would dutifully spend time each day helping me wade through the adventures of ‘Janet and John’ before I went to bed. Somehow, this felt more like a laboured chore, a joyless and predictable routine that never really captured my full attention or imagination. Later, when I was in bed, it was my father’s stories that held my attention and captured my imagination. My father did not read books; at least, I never saw him read a book, unless one counts the sorry contents of the aforementioned bookcase. Instead, he simply made up stories: tales filled with magic, amazing characters, and strange, exotic adventures. Each time a story finished, I would be ready to beg my father to produce another, peopled by the same characters, and reassuringly, following on from the one I had just listened to. My father would often relent, as I think he enjoyed this shared experience as much as I did.

Some years later, I recall overhearing my father weaving my little sister a story that sounded strangely familiar, apart from the fact that it seemed to contain different characters, with new roles, offering the once familiar tale an unfamiliar and, for me, an unsettling perspective. How could this be? I was confused. For me, as a child, stories had a purpose, a structure, and sometimes a moral. Importantly, they were fixed to some reference point: sometimes a character, sometimes an imaginary place. Just because the story was not found in a book, it did not, in my view, permit it the licence to mutate so dramatically.

Stories change, my father later explained, for a number of reasons. Storytellers pass them on in different forms, adding bits here and taking bits there. He told me that, as a youngster, his father told him stories in the same way, the only difference being that my grandfather did so through necessity, as he could not read. My father, like me, once the same rapt and enthusiastic listener, had subsequently added his own narrative twists, plot-lines and new characters to amuse and entertain his audience. The art of storytelling should be fluid, flexible and always changing shape - that seemed to be the message.
As an adult, I began to realise that stories are crucially important to everybody. Stories and narratives help us make sense of the world around us. As adults and as children, we need anchors and reference points to guide us through life. As a researcher and as a teacher, I believe there are multiple truths, conflicting explanations and a patchwork of narratives that can sometimes beguile, confuse, but, crucially, help map the world around us. Our knowledge and understanding rest upon these narratives, and without them, we are quite lost. Stories offer and account for a variety of interpretations and explanations of social phenomena. A willingness and an appetite to explore the rich diversity of experiences through narratives help us to value and understand differences, rather than see them as potentially problematic.

So, how are my early experiences relevant and important to this research? My thesis takes into account many interweaving, sometimes unconnected, and often, I imagine, exaggerated representations of people’s experiences. Some of the accounts may be blurred and influenced by the passage of time, or the sense of a new perspective, whilst others, although having the virtue of being factually accurate, might lack the insight and sensitivity that other accounts bring. From my point of view, it is not the truth that I seek, but rather the stories that are owned by, and important to the participants. An interactionist approach accepts that individuals interpret the world in different ways, but at the same time acknowledges that they are conscious of their own actions, personas, and care about how they are perceived by others. This micro-level approach helps to tease out subjective, personal information which tells us a great deal and is hugely valuable in helping us understand more about the unseen consequences of prison. An ability and freedom to explore cases in depth also has its limitations. Critics of such interactionist approaches might suggest that the data is meaningless, flawed, and incomparable to other, more reliable, ‘quantitative’ research. I am confident, though, after carrying out this research, and after coding the findings into meaningful themes, that I can offer a useful contribution to the body of existing work. Sometimes individuals contradict themselves; appear forgetful, or deliberately evasive. None of this matters as
much as getting a sense of what the respondents have lived through and how they have interpreted these experiences.

As social researchers, an acceptance of such limitations is part of the territory we inhabit. Although it is important to establish such limitations from the outset, it is equally right to argue that any such imperfections do not detract from the research’s core purpose.

A further episode from my childhood might help the reader understand a little more about my incentive to explore the social world from a family perspective and from one that values the subjective accounts of individuals. This piece of my history also resonates with the interview findings (discussed in chapter four), which explore themes of stigma, deceit, agency, innocence, protection, and parental anxiety in detail. The episode represents some of my motivation for adopting research that has a social justice agenda and, therefore, has merit. It begins with overhearing an argument in my family home from many years ago, when my brother and I were children. I must have been four or five years old; I cannot recall my age exactly, but I have never forgotten the incident. The argument was between my mother and my older brother, Matthew. The incident was memorable, if only for its ferocity. I remember not comprehending the exact nature of the altercation as it took place, but what I do recall is that it was something to do with Matthew’s best friend, Derek. Matthew and Derek had formed a close relationship since they both started attending the local infant school a couple of years earlier.

I understood, from listening to the argument, that Derek had done something wrong, something wicked, so unspeakably bad, in fact, that Matthew’s friendship with him appeared to be in jeopardy. The atmosphere was unusually hostile and tense, even by the standards of the domestic rows that would occasionally punctuate an otherwise predictable and uneventful family life. My mother was insistent that Matthew should no longer see Derek. She had clearly decided on Matthew’s behalf that this was in his best interest. I remember having a sense of the argument having been won almost before my brother began to plead his case. Clearly, Derek was dangerous in some way;
so dangerous that any contact with him would, from this point in time, be strictly forbidden. Matthew was distraught, and for a while inconsolable at his sudden loss. There was a discernible tension in the house in the days following the row.

Several years later, an explanation for the argument emerged. Presented with a new perspective, and finding out more about what my mother failed to disclose, helped me take a different view. Derek’s father, around the time of the altercation between Matthew and my mother, was convicted and sentenced for the violent murder of a local jeweller, which had taken place during an armed robbery. This crime was reported in the local press, and by all accounts provided a generous supply of fuel for local gossip, much of it centred in and around the school playground.

As an adult, I was interested, partly from a research and sociological perspective (thinking about social constructions of criminal families, symbolic interactionist interpretations and power dynamics) but primarily through familial curiosity, to see how my brother and my mother remembered the incident. My mother’s recollection suggested that, in her view, she had acted entirely appropriately, as any sensible parent would; there are simple choices to be made in this world, which often, guided by common sense, help to secure the right outcomes, especially for one’s children. In her view, she was simply protecting her child. When I asked why she had not given Matthew the full story at the time of the argument, she responded dismissively that he was simply too young to understand. She elaborated, explaining that she was worried that, as a family, we might have been seen as too close to Derek’s family (this chimes with the ideas about stigma I explore in chapter four). We lived in a small town, she explained, and some friendships were not always desirable.

My mother’s account connected with some of the accounts and explanations offered by the parents in my own research, specifically where parents and carers had sought to mislead children and conceal the truth. This provided me with a personal reference point and more of an appreciation of why this
happened. Clearly, such parents thought they were acting in good faith, seeking to protect their children. The extent to which these decisions were influenced by shame, embarrassment and stigma is open to question. But, for me, there seemed to be connections between my mother’s avoidance of the truth and the episodes described by the mothers in the research.

A consequence of being shielded or protected from an unsavoury truth can be a resentment, anger and frustration engendered within the ignorant party. Hence my brother’s response was scathing and unforgiving. His anger and sense of unjustness had clearly hardened since childhood. He remembered his feeling of powerlessness, being completely impotent, frustrated and confused. Our mother, Matthew maintains, had made the wrong decision. He had, he said, lost a close friend because of fear and ignorance, an ill-conceived belief that our family would become tarnished through association, however indirect, with a known criminal. This incident provides an insight into the world I have been researching and links most specifically to the subject matter of chapter four, which explores how families explain and present versions of events to children - versions that are often fictionalised and distorted.

This personal incident certainly coloured my interest in this area, and especially in how children are given particular stories to satisfy them, but I also have a professional interest in researching children, families, and imprisonment. This developed after working as a researcher in the criminal justice field for a local authority’s crime and disorder team. My subsequent work as a manager within children’s services, and as a lecturer in childhood studies, has given me an insight into how marginalised families are often overlooked (from a policy context) and, consequently, further disadvantaged. This professional background, combined with a strong sense of social justice, convinced me that there was merit and purpose in exploring the experiences of prisoners’ families.

Since I embarked on the research, I have also become a trustee for a voluntary sector organisation, Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group (POPS). POPS has since allowed me access to respondents in a research
field that has proven to be historically difficult for social researchers to reach. The team at POPS have helped me develop my research ideas, consider ethical problems, and given me an invaluable insight into the world of prisoners’ families.

The particular objectives of my research are to:

- Develop a detailed understanding of how the imprisonment of a family member affects families.
- Explain why children’s voices are often missing in this field.
- Explore and contextualise the narratives of adults and children who have experienced the imprisonment of a family member.
- Complement existing research that has focussed on prisoners’ families.
- Demonstrate how families cope in a time of adversity, often showing resilience, autonomy, and maturity.

The contribution to existing knowledge

Having explored the existing literature and research on prisons and families, there seems to be a lack of detailed research into how children are affected when they experience the imprisonment of a close family member. As Murray (2005: 442) notes:

Prisoners’ families have been little studied in their own right. The effects of imprisonment on families and children of prisoners are almost entirely neglected in academic research, prison statistics, public policy and media coverage. Limited research to date suggests that imprisonment can have devastating consequences for partners and children.

Garland (2001: 6) also points out that the emphasis given to researching and studying prisoners and offenders may detract from the importance of finding out more about the wider consequences:

We have libraries of criminological research about the impact of imprisonment upon the individual offender, but scarcely anything on its social impact on communities and neighbourhoods.
This thesis intends to help reduce this deficit, offering a fresh and, indeed, unique perspective by taking the stories and narratives of children into account. Children’s and parents’ stories help to shed light on what has been a neglected aspect of research into prisons. Not only does this mean that there are holes in the current research landscape, but, more sadly, it means that the families involved become victims of this lack of awareness.

My research should constitute a significant and useful contribution to knowledge in this increasingly important area. It is timely because it fits with the growing trend (particularly across Western Europe) in recognising the rights and claims to citizenship that children deserve and a willingness to question (politically, economically, and morally) whether prison actually works.

What makes my research valuable and unique is its deliberate and sustained focus on children as victims, demonstrating their lack of voice and empowerment, and the relative marginalisation they face within the families who participated. Tracking their attempts at coping and making sense of the confusing and stressful world created by the incarceration of a family member offers a distinct insight into the difficulties families face. By using children’s experiences as a lens for examining the social world of prisoners’ families, my research opens a new window for other, similar research, exploring the lives of children.

Codd (2008: 5) argues, the way we describe and talk about prisoners, children, and partners is important, especially in relation to repositioning and prioritising the family members:

The term ‘prisoner’s family’ itself places the prisoner in the possessive position. In my view, however, defining the prisoner as the subject and defining the family in relation to the prisoner does not give sufficient attention to family members in their own right and there is (arguably) a need to reconceptualise the debate even down to the terminology.
Media representations of issues around prison arguably influence populist views. Television depictions, with very few exceptions, in the form of fictional dramas or documentaries, for example, *Prisoners’ Wives* (2012) and *Everyday* (2012) have tended to present life from the perspective of the prisoner or from within the confines of the prison. Clement and Le Frenais’s *Porridge*, arguably the most popular fictionalised prison drama to date, throughout its three year run (1974 – 1977), hardly included family members, showing only shreds of any interaction with prisoners’ children, or partners. It is as if a collective myopia has helped obscure prisoners’ families until comparatively recently. My research attempts to counter such lack of attention by providing a testament to the fortitude of families affected by imprisonment. This research explores life within the immediate confines of the family, but also takes into account children’s relationships and interactions outside the family context.

The structure of my thesis, stemming from the rationale offered in this chapter is as follows:

Chapter two provides a detailed overview of the literature pertinent to families. The literature included offers a global, as well as a UK perspective on how prison impacts on families.

Chapter three justifies my methodological choices in detail. It is worth, however, briefly mentioning some of the practical considerations raised in conducting this research. The primary research included three prisons; HMP Orient (a category D prison ), HMP Marston (a Young Offender Institution ), and HMP Grange (a category C prison). All three prisons are male prisons and are located in the north west of England. Each prison had a contractual agreement with POPS at the time the research took place. I visited HMP Orient in March 2012, HMP Marston in May 2012 and HMP Grange in July 2012. The interviews conducted with families following these visits lasted for a period of eighteen months. The pilot phase of the research, was conducted at POPS Head Office between 2009 and 2010.

Chapter four explores a series of themes relevant to the families’ experiences. Some of the themes follow a chronological order, for example, arrest, visiting,
and release, whilst others are more all-encompassing, as, for example, in the discussion of stigma. A section on arrest discusses the trauma, upset, fear, and sense of violation that often accompanies the arrest of a family member. For many individuals, this marks the beginning of what often turns out to be a long and difficult journey. Initial dealings with the criminal justice agencies at the point of arrest often herald the onset of a difficult and tense relationship between the family members and the professionals they encounter.

The experience of prison visits, with a particular focus on how children deal with what can be a hostile, threatening, and confusing environment is discussed. The research findings should give readers an understanding of the difficulties associated with prison visiting, such as the cost of transport, the ‘hassle’, and the lengthy journeys, often culminating in an unfriendly welcome. Release of prisoners, although a relief for many families, also brings its challenges. New, modified, and shifting family dynamics and power structures need to be accommodated. Family members returning to the family home after serving a prison sentence may find their previous roles have been taken over by their children. Finding a harmonious balance for all at such an unsettling time forms the subject matter of this section.

Because parents and carers, in many of the families I encountered, chose to conceal the imprisonment of family member from children, notions of honesty, secrecy and lies are explored in the section entitled ‘Don’t mention the P word’. Stemming from the secrecy that children encountered is a discussion of stigma. Stigma is an important element in understanding the victimisation of prisoners’ families. Family members often felt as though they were pariahs or nonentities, as these voices (from my research) attest:

‘It was like we had the plague or something…like we didn’t belong in other people’s lives. Mum said something once, something like...it’ll hold you back, stop you getting on in life.’ (Jo, aged seventeen)

In recognising how such processes and experiences create victims out of family members, the research attempts to explain this by exploring a number of ideas. Consequently, the thesis explores the damaging impact of stigma,
highlighting the way dominant cultural beliefs can marginalise prisoners’ families, creating a situation of ‘us and them’, and further perpetuating the difficulties these families face. Reference is made to Goffman’s work on social stigma (1963) and is used to show how associations with certain groups or populations (in this instance, prisoners) create ‘spoiled identities’ (ibid) and can lead to low self-esteem, withdrawal from social networks and educational underachievement. Potential ‘stigmatisers’ (in this case, the prisons and other criminal justice agencies) are able to exercise control, authority, and obedience. Consequently, discussions about power, surveillance and control permeate the research and show how families quickly feel they are losing control, are undervalued and feel threatened. Whilst these processes were undoubtedly traumatic and damaging for the respondents in my research, many quickly adapted their routines, behaviours, and relationships to fit with their changed circumstances, again showing resilience and fortitude in the midst of adversity.

Additional sections explore the nature of the support available to prisoners’ families and their children, taking into account provision and resources offered by the voluntary sector, the statutory sector and others. It is obvious from these accounts, that such support is patchy and elusive, but once found, often invaluable. These accounts demonstrate that professional cultures and boundaries influence and guide the interactions different professionals have with children and families.

Stemming from the support offered to individuals and families, resilience and coping emerged as key themes. The research, whilst adopting a critical approach, drawing attention to issues of injustice and oppressive social relationships, contains an important element of optimism and hope. Whilst exploring the many types of harm experienced by prisoners’ families, it was apparent that life, for many of the children and parents involved in the research, contained a refreshing amount of happiness, love and hope. Resilience and strength appeared to be important for the respondents in my research. Aspirations and ambitions frequently crop up in the research. It was
important to emphasise the resilience which children and family members displayed in the midst of dealing with the difficulties caused by prison.

The ‘system’ appeared in many of the interviews as an important theme and seemed important enough to warrant further discussion. Many respondents talked about the frustrations of dealing with ‘the system’, without necessarily articulating what ‘the system’ was. Issues of power and bureaucracy surface in this discussion, along with social injustice and marginalisation. The thesis argues that the harm, which prisoners’ families and their children experience, is compounded by the criminal justice system and the way it operates.

I omitted some data which, although it might be interesting to those researching prisoners’ families, is not directly relevant to my thesis; for example where adults might talk about aspects of their lives which don’t necessarily show the harm that families experience following the imprisonment of a family member (please see examples: appendix 3). I have attempted, wherever possible, to only include data which fits with my thesis, particularly where it helps to show how children are affected by imprisonment.

Chapter five brings together the various threads from the research, and serves to remind and emphasise to the reader that the real victims of the prison system are the partners and the children of those serving a sentence. This chapter also highlights the fact that it is largely women who take on the responsibility for children when a partner is imprisoned (less than 5% of the prison population is female; House of Commons Library, 2013). The accounts of the participants detailed within this thesis suggest that those on the outside (predominantly women carers and their children) who are not serving the sentence are the real victims:

the majority of families are not direct victims. They are, however, all indirect victims of the processes of the criminal justice system which can make maintaining a relationship and just getting on with your life extremely difficult. (Inside Time, 2012)
After reading this research, one might argue that prison, as an institution, does not work, and consequently, alternatives to custodial sentencing need to be actively pursued. Viewpoints might be partly influenced by political or economic sensitivities, where empirical evidence and hard data appear more important than sentiment or empathy. Cost benefit analysis studies have shown that prison is by no means effective in terms of either costs and outcomes (Marsh, Fox, and Sarmah, 2011; Pryce, 2013). Additional studies have looked at how alternatives to prison, using additional resources to educate, rather than imprison offenders, can provide better value than traditional custodial models (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2009).

Of course, for every study which seeks to discredit prison and its limited effectiveness, there are numerous others which support and advocate greater use of custody. Michael Howard, as a typically pro-imprisonment Home Secretary in the 1990s, was influenced in part by research conducted by Burnett (1992), entitled the ‘Dynamics of Recidivism’. Kenneth Clarke, who, as Justice Secretary in 2010, alluded to the failure of prison as a reforming mechanism and referred to a ‘bang ‘em up culture’ (Travis and Sparrow, 2010), experienced hostile political, tabloid and populist reactions for expressing this view.

It is clear that prisons will remain part of our criminal justice apparatus for some time to come, and arguments will continue to rage as to their impact on reoffending, their cost, and overall effectiveness. Although these are interesting arguments, this research does not have the capacity or the scope to engage with these political and public debates in detail. It does, however, present some recommendations in chapter five. These recommendations, whilst not directed at macro-level policy, necessitate some consideration in bringing about some modest changes, for example in how professionals work with prisoners’ families and cater for the needs of prisoners’ children.

This research is not intended to muster sympathy or elicit emotional responses. Neither does it claim the potential to radically transform how
prisons function. Its intention is more modest, and I believe, realistic. It is designed to promote a clearer understanding of the experiences that befall prisoners’ families by taking stock of their stories. In essence, the thesis is not a manifesto, but a body of evidence, supported by a reasoned argument. In seeking to create a space for children’s and other family members’ voices to be heard, it is hoped that a more rounded picture of their experiences can emerge, which should inform relevant practice and policy.

The research should have relevance to policy-makers, professionals who work within and across the criminal justice system and children’s services, the voluntary and charitable sector, the prison authorities, researchers, and ultimately, anyone with an interest in social justice. In opening a window into a largely hidden and neglected world, my research has the capacity to empower and educate. In the words of Ragin (1994: 43):

Sometimes the goal of exploring diversity is taken one step further, and the researcher studies a group not simply to learn more about it, but also to contribute to its having an expressed voice in society. In research of this type, the objective is not only to increase the stock of knowledge about different types, forms, and processes of social life, but to tell the story of a specific group, usually in a way that enhances its visibility in society.

By raising the visibility of this group, and in particular, by opening a window showing the experiences of prisoners’ children, it is hoped that the imbalance of power between them and the adults and institutions which surround them can be partly redressed.

To summarise, this thesis argues that prisoners’ families are the real victims of imprisonment. This view, as will become evident, has been articulated and corroborated by those I have spoken to. The accounts of prisoners themselves add further testimony to the belief that prison harms those on the outside more so than the prisoners themselves. The professionals who work with children and families also attest that the 'system' is not built to take into account family members. Children, in particular, it appears, whilst already marginalised and often lacking agency, become even more disempowered following the
imprisonment of a family member. Whilst this cannot be presented as a universal truth, the evidence offered within this research is compelling, original and persuasive.
Chapter Two

How imprisonment harms children and families

This chapter explores the negative consequences, as outlined in the literature, which the imprisonment of a family member brings for children and families. It is divided into a series of key themes that expose and explore the direct and indirect impact imprisonment can have on children and other family members; for example, in how a deterioration in family finances can lead to children’s lives becoming impaired, how children can become alienated and stigmatised as a result of a family member being sent to prison, or how children are sometimes offered fabricated stories and ‘shielded’ from the ‘truth’. Many of these themes are reinforced through the interview findings, which are documented in detail in chapter four.

This literature review shows that many of the problems encountered by prisoners’ children are global in nature, despite differences in criminal justice systems and penal policies within and across nation states (Robertson, 2007). Although each family and each child considered in any research will experience something qualitatively different, there are some themes that emerge which are common to many of the individuals affected by imprisonment; for example, the poverty that can arise following the imprisonment of a family member who is often the main wage-earner for the family. I have included themes that I see as being worthy of exploration and that allow me to pull together strands from different studies in order to show that there is commonality in the lived experiences of the children of prisoners’ families. Again, these common experiences are revisited in chapter four, where explicit connections are made with my research findings.

What makes such a study challenging, albeit worthwhile, is the sheer scale and variation associated with family and individual circumstances. Some parents who are imprisoned may not have featured much in their children’s lives before being sent to prison. Other parents may have been the sole carer before being sentenced, and consequently find the ensuing separation more
difficult to deal with. The reader should therefore be mindful that the following sections represent more of a generalised view of the experiences of children.

The positioning of prisoners’ families – where they sit in relation to notions of crime and punishment and their place within populist and political debates - is important in relation to where my research fits. Social constructions of prisoners’ families are important in establishing some context for my research and so this would seem to be a logical starting point. I consider and discuss the nature and scale of global imprisonment. Recent international trends have shown an increased reliance on custodial sentencing over recent decades. This has led to a corresponding rise in the number of children affected by imprisonment (Martynowicz, 2011) and so warrants attention, in order to appreciate the extent, magnitude and the innumerable consequences of this increasingly complex and testing issue.

In this chapter I look at some of the direct and indirect negative effects upon children and families which imprisonment creates. Social isolation, stigma, bullying, and financial insecurity are discussed, showing how, according to existing research imprisonment of a family member can quickly reach crisis point, with problems spiralling out of control, leaving many families in positions where they struggle to cope, are unsure of where to get help, and generally feeling isolated. It is obvious from interrogating the literature that many of the problems encountered by families combine, accumulate, and manifest themselves in complicated and sometimes unpredictable ways.

One important aspect of my research concerns the immediate impact of imprisonment on family relationships; for example, how it unexpectedly disrupts parenting roles and alters the dynamics between family members. Following such initial upheavals, uncertainty and confusion are multiplied by a host of other factors, exacerbating the fragility and vulnerability of the family unit. The behavioural and psychological impact upon children and other family members following the imprisonment of a family member is important in understanding how families adapt and cope. The likelihood of prisoners’ children becoming involved in criminal behaviour themselves appears to be
higher than for other children. A discussion of how and why prisoners' children may commit criminal acts is important in recognising an additional layer of vulnerability and risk imposed upon them.

Many of the respondents in my research talked about the difficulties and stresses associated with visiting family members in prison. Children often find this a particularly difficult experience, and again the literature highlights some of the issues it can produce for families. Families also talked about release as being problematic. Again, the literature helps the reader to understand more about the necessary, but difficult, fragile manoeuvrings and modified roles which children and other family members take on following the release of a prisoner.

The conclusion of the chapter suggests that there is a need for more qualitative studies, which focus on the experiences of children, and which add to this emerging, and increasingly revealing body of knowledge.

Having set out the main elements of this chapter, some initial consideration is desirable in terms of where prisoners' families and their children reside in terms of the wider sociological context. Notions of deviance, crime and punishment help to position such families and offer some sense of overall perspective. A great deal of literature on prisons and prisoners has focussed on the individual, and consequently neglected some of the wider familial and sociological considerations, which might better inform a study which looks at the wider impact of imprisonment.

It is worth considering how notions of crime and punishment are constructed in order to help us appreciate the landscape in which prisoners' families exist and the views they might sometimes hold. This also helps us to understand wider public perceptions around prison and punishment, and perhaps consider why, from a generalist point of view, prisoners' families are seldom considered, apart from welcome attention from the voluntary and charitable sector and the academic world.
Garland (1990: 3) offers a useful lens through which concepts of punishment are created and notes how seldom these ideas are challenged or questioned by society:

Our taken for granted ways of punishing have relieved us of the need for thinking deeply about punishment and what little thinking we are left to do is guided along certain narrowly formulated channels. Thus we are led to discuss penal policy in ways which assume the current institutional framework, rather than question it – as when we consider how best to run prisons, organize probation, or enforce fines, rather than question why these measures are used in the first place. The institutions of punishment conveniently provide us with ready-made answers for the questions which crime in society would otherwise evoke.

The establishment, in effect, makes the decisions and takes away the necessity for society to consider what is appropriate and fair. Garland’s implication is that it is easier to allow somebody else to make difficult decisions. Perhaps this is why the wider or unintended consequences of sending somebody to prison are seldom prioritised in terms of wider public debates or in terms of government policy. The criminal justice machinery becomes the means of processing criminal activity in relation to the offender, but importantly (albeit unintentionally) this also has far-reaching consequences for the families affected. These families do not feature in debates around prison policy or punishment and so are conveniently ignored or simply not noticed by the wider public.

One school of thought argues that, as societies have developed and populations have grown, there has been a move away from informal sanctions and social control mechanisms towards a more formalised system of state control (Foucault, 1975). Consequently crimes are committed against the state rather than against individuals. This has significance in terms of how crime and punishment are socially constructed in as much as ‘the criminal law tends to represent an expression of the culture of a society, the “collective conscience”, widespread public sentiment, and objective harm’ (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009: 119).
Another argument focuses on the dominant institutions that are largely responsible for setting the rules rather than the general population establishing a more democratic consensus (Conrad and Schneider, 1992 cited in Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009: 142). Despite a number of conflicting explanations and theories which attempt to explain the nature of punishment in modern society, there remains the indisputable fact that the criminal justice apparatus is a powerful, largely autonomous set of institutions and organisations which bring many adverse consequences for the families whose lives it touches.

In the rare instances where prisoners’ families might warrant consideration in debates around crime, justice and punishment, it is worth thinking about the perceptions held about them. There are a number of discourses which attempt to explain how certain families become labelled as failing or dysfunctional. Deficit models are an example of how society can label particular groups by concentrating on their failings and underachievements in comparison with the rest of the population. Labels such as ‘culturally deprived and deficient’, ‘at risk’, ‘dysfunctional’, ‘disadvantaged’ have surfaced at different points in recent decades (Swadener, 2000). Cultural and information deficit models are cultivated largely through ignorance and lack of exposure to alternative explanations and voices, which are often silenced. Political rhetoric, which is often amplified through the media, also contributes to the construction of, and the belief in, an undeserving underclass that is denied access to what respectable members of society take for granted. Notable contributions have been made by sociologists, politicians and academics, which offer various and often competing explanations (Field, 1996, Murray, 1990) as to the nature and make-up of these harmful divisions. These social divisions and the beliefs built around them, for example, between the unemployed and the employed, become entrenched and unchallenged over time, culminating in the marginalisation and sense of powerlessness for those groups who fall outside of what is seen to be acceptable modes of behaviour. Prisoners’ families form one such group, and consequently, are viewed variously as ‘needy’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘dangerous’ or ‘non-productive’ (Condry, 2006; Mills and Codd, 2007). In undertaking this research, there is therefore an ethical agenda which
seeks to frame such perceptions in a more positive light; for example, by exploring the resilience, support, and determination such families show.

On a global scale, imprisonment affects millions of families. These families are often drawn from the most disadvantaged and socially marginalised sections of society (Robertson, 2007). Although there are no exact figures for the global prison population and the number of children affected, there has been a marked trend worldwide towards the increased use of custodial sentences over the last few decades. Figures contained within the *World Prison Population List* (Walmsley, 2008) estimated there were 9.8 million people held in penal institutions throughout the world.

The United States has the highest prison population rate in the world (756 per 100,000 of the national population, or one in every one hundred and thirty), which represents a startling increase (fivefold) since the 1970s, and the sheer scale of this expansion has had an impact on the children who are affected:

Current estimates place this figure at 1.5 million, but the racial dynamics of imprisonment produce a figure of seven percent, or one in fourteen, for black children. Since these figures represent a one-day count, the proportion of black children who experience parental incarceration *at some point* in their childhood is considerably greater (Mauer, 2005: 607).

This compares to the incarceration rate in the UK, which is 153 per 100,000 of the population, or one in six hundred and fifty, although this is the highest rate in Western Europe according to Action for Prisoners' Families (APF) (2003: 1):

7% of the school population in England and Wales will experience the imprisonment of their parent during the time in school. Yet data on the number of children affected is not collected and no specific services exist for these children and young people.

Recent prison population projections imply further growth as a ‘medium’ predicted scenario based on current sentencing trends, with the Ministry of Justice estimating a prison population in six years’ time of between 83,100 and 94,800. (Ministry of Justice, 2011)
According to official government statistics, the prison population in England and Wales was 86,294 at 30th May 2014 (Ministry of Justice, 2014). This population had reached an all-time high of over 88,000 in December 2011, largely as a consequence of custodial sentences given out following the summer 2011 riots (Berman and Dar, 2013). Reasons offered for such expansions in the prison population, specifically from a UK perspective, include the following: a public appetite for more punitive measures in dealing with crime (the sentencing decisions following the 2011 riots signified direct evidence of this appetite), the emphasis placed on high crime rates and their alleged seriousness by the media (Younge, 2001; Cohen, 1987), a general lack of confidence in non-custodial sentences, and, finally, political rhetoric (Mills and Roberts, 2012). One of the most striking examples of such rhetoric and political opportunism was Michael Howard’s (the then Home Secretary) speech at the Conservative party conference in 1993:

Prison works. It ensures that we are protected from murderers, muggers and rapists - and it makes many who are tempted to commit crime think twice ... This may mean that more people will go to prison. I do not flinch from that. We shall no longer judge the success of our system of justice by a fall in our prison population.

The sheer numbers of children in England and Wales affected become even more significant when comparisons are made with other groups of children; for example, children with a parent in prison account for two and a half-times the number of children in care (61,000) and over six times the number of children on the child protection register (26,000) (Ministry of Justice, 2006). In 2006, according to APF, more children were affected by the imprisonment of a parent than by divorce in the family (Prison Reform Trust, 2007). Although these comparisons cannot be relied on to be wholly accurate, the numbers are worrying.

Other criminal justice models do not always conform to this expansionist agenda; for example, Scandinavian models appear to be moving in a different direction. Whilst Finland had a harsh prison regime in the early 1970s, with a
strong emphasis on incarceration, this has changed markedly over the last three decades. The importance of linking criminal justice policies to education and social welfare policies, together with a lack of political and media interference seems to have changed the political and public climate in relation to prison in Finland. Younge (2001) describes the Finnish system as being ‘without any political comment or interference’ and, consequently, it has not been used as a means to gather public support for political gain. This contrasts strongly with the UK, where politicians have a long history of using crime and punishment as vehicles to gain popularity with the electorate; for example, witness John Major’s desire to see society ‘condemn a little more and understand a little less’ (1993), which came in response to the equally determined Labour Party intent to get ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’ (1993).

Consequently, Finnish and other Scandinavian countries have much lower rates of imprisonment than countries such as Britain and the USA. They also, according to James (2013) have some of the lowest reoffending rates in Western Europe; for example, the reoffending rate for prisoners in Norway is less than 30% compared with England’s figure of 47%. Of course, a further consequence of the Scandinavian model is that there will be fewer children who experience having a parent or sibling incarcerated.

Having talked about the impossibility of discovering the actual world population, when it comes to children, figures are even harder to locate and attach any accuracy to. Children of prisoners do not feature in official reports or national statistics so it is difficult to ascertain the true size of this population. There is, according to Rossi et al (2004: 34), an imperative to ‘acquire systematic information regarding the scope and nature of a problem’, especially in instances where social problems are ‘invisible’.

According to the Children of Offenders Review (Ministry of Justice, 2007: 11)
There is no transparent, shared, robust data on this group. We do not know who is a child of a prisoner, where they live or which services they are currently accessing. Local authorities have no picture of the current demand for support, prisons do not know which prisoners have children, and we do not know how many children are in care as a result of their primary carer. Where information is collected, it is patchy and not systematically shared.

_The Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction Study_ (2010) maintains that over 54% of prisoners interviewed had children under the age of 18 at the time they entered prison. Over 40% of these reported being single (Ministry of Justice, 2010). Currently, there are no official plans to capture data in a more reliable form across England and Wales. This has implications for the statutory, private and the voluntary sector, which is tasked with managing the welfare associated with this steadily growing population.

**Social Exclusion, Isolation and Powerlessness: the Wider Social Harm inflicted by Imprisonment**

Micklewright (2002, cited in Murray, 2007: 60) describes exclusion as offering

A useful label for the fate that awaits some children who suffer from various disadvantages in childhood which threaten their capability to achieve in the future.

Prisoners’ families come from some of the most disadvantaged sections of society. National Prison surveys and research which has looked at the prison population show how prisoners are from families where unemployment, low social class, marital breakdown, and episodes of mental health are commonplace. The children of such families are not therefore a representative cross-section of the societies they live in. Research suggests that, compared to the general population, they are more likely to come from families that have experienced unemployment, multiple mental health problems, marital difficulties, abuse, neglect and the problems associated with low social class (Murray cited in Robertson, 2007).
Social exclusion is not just about poverty. It also extends to many other aspects of everyday living, such as the consumption of goods, political engagement and social interaction (Burchardt et al., 2002). Traditionally studies and government policies have focused on the links between poverty, social class and neighbourhoods in relation to social exclusion. It has become increasingly evident that such inequalities create frictions and tensions within society; the links between social exclusion and becoming involved in crime are stark when the statistics are taken into account. The work of the Social Exclusion Unit, set up by the last Labour administration, identified a series of factors that influenced the likelihood of somebody ending up in prison. The factors are education, employment, drugs and alcohol misuse, mental and physical health, attitudes and self-control, institutional and life-skills, housing, financial support and debt, and family networks (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002: 8):

Many prisoners have experienced a lifetime of social exclusion. Compared with the general population, prisoners are thirteen times as likely to have been in care as a child, thirteen times as likely to be unemployed, ten times as likely to have been a regular truant, two and a half times as likely to have had a family member convicted of a criminal offence, six times as likely to have been a young father, and fifteen times as likely to be HIV positive [emphasis in original].

Children are reliant on and directly influenced by the family environment in which they exist. So, despite the best efforts of families, the combined harmful factors (as outlined in the quotation above) are exacerbated by imprisonment. It appears that shielding children from such disadvantages is often impossible.

Other studies document what is sometimes referred to as linguistic exclusion. This involves an ability to process and understand information, such as that required in order to comprehend a court trial and the subsequent process of imprisonment.

Without understanding simple facts about their parent’s imprisonment, children may experience reduced capacity to
process psychologically their traumatic loss, or voice preferences about contact. (Murray, 2007: 59)

Linguistic exclusion also appears to affect adults who are touched by imprisonment, impacting in terms of increased isolation, lack of confidence and reduced self-esteem (Clarke and Dugdale, 2008). A consequence of social exclusion and its isolating capacity is the stigma that individuals and families sometimes encounter. This social stigma is compounded by having a family member imprisoned, and because of its secretive nature, can easily be missed in research with prisoners’ families. Morris’s (1965) early studies into prisoners’ wives suggest that problems of isolation were more noticeable than issues of stigma or shame. Stigma seemed to be more of an issue when husbands were imprisoned for the first time, or were within the initial stages of the sentence. Beyond that, it appeared to be a lack of any systematic network of support that became the most significant problem. Other research has found that moving house (Noble, 1995), divorce and relationship problems (McEvoy et al., 1999), and medical and health problems (Noble, 1995) are all likely consequences following the imprisonment of a family member. For children who might be categorised as socially excluded, these consequences combine and compound their exposure to further difficulties. It appears that it is a chain of events, with each experience carrying some damaging consequence for the children and families concerned, rather than any specific event, which exacerbates the level of isolation, exclusion, and stigma encountered. Perhaps one way of looking at the problems facing prisoners’ children in relation to social exclusion is usefully summarised by Murray (2007: 60), who states that ‘children of prisoners appear to be socially excluded by past, present and future processes’. Again, there is no fixed reference point that can be singled out as the sole cause of a child’s social isolation, but instead, it is likely that a combination of factors conspire in relation to how children experience the imprisonment of a family member.

What is clear is that vulnerable children who already experience a range of difficulties are doubly disadvantaged after a parent, carer or sibling is sent to prison.
Bullying, stigma, and teasing are also likely to exacerbate difficulties. Labelling might be a consequence of the families’ disclosure, further fuelling the stigma associated with imprisonment. Murray (2005) believes that more research is needed into the indirect effects of imprisonment, as they are just as important as the direct effects. Stigma might depend on the environment and peer groups – for if imprisonment is relatively commonplace, there may be less fear and more openness. Again, this makes a compelling case for further research into the socio-economic status of families in order to move from assumptions and anecdotes towards more robust evidence.

The media arguably contribute to the stigma that many families experience as a consequence of imprisonment and, in extreme cases, the family may be physically and verbally attacked, and, in the case of children, bullied at school. Jewkes (2005: 26) argues that the press play a huge role in helping to form popular opinion, consequently damaging any sense of objectivity the general public might have about those families affected by imprisonment. Prisoners, she believes, are portrayed with a lazy contempt by newspaper journalists who assume – probably correctly – that large segments of their readership regard prisoners as society’s detritus.

These ideas, if unchecked, become what Foucault referred to as a ‘regime of truth’ (1980: 207); based on assumptions and beliefs that calcify through the decades. Such views, Foucault argued, become normalized and consequently unchallenged. It is perhaps unsurprising, if Foucault’s ideas are accepted, that prisoners’ families feel a tangible and pervasive sense of stigma and shame. Some studies (Gabel and Johnston, 1995; Brown et al., 2002) suggest that the fear of alienation and social stigma is greater than the reality, but there is no doubt that the media exert a strong influence in contributing towards wider public perceptions and views. The media depiction (Mason, 2006), public perception (Roberts and Hough, 2005), and political posturing (Reid, 2006) around criminal justice and prisons, prisoners and their families are often
misjudged and misleading, and arguably combine to create a negative image of anyone associated with a crime that has led to a custodial sentence. A consequence of this populist agenda tends to be a lessening of public sympathy for such families. In such a hostile climate, public provision, in the form of state welfare and statutory support available, is likely to be severely limited and difficult to justify politically. Thus, the fate of prisoners’ families and their children is self-fulfilling with no sign of any change in the future. Guilt by association often means that innocent lives are blighted. Goffman (1963, cited in Murray, 2007: 58), suggests that

blemishes of individual character are inferred from records such as imprisonment, and that stigma can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family.

This is certainly true of sex offenders and individuals who have been convicted of offences committed against children (Leverson and Tewksbury, 2009).

Research into children’s attitudes and beliefs (Brown and Bigler, 2005) has shown that children as young as eight-years-old have an awareness of discrimination and stereotypical attitudes. Children, clearly, can be victimised and discriminated against if their peers or other family members become aware that they have been ‘tainted’ by the shadow of imprisonment. Stigma is also relevant in relation to strategic and political agendas. Smith et al. (2007: ix) identify how this can impact on funding:

The available funding sources for services carry tensions and uncertainties, which are not conducive to provision or development of services. Voluntary organisations are constrained by inadequate benefit levels. The stigma attached to imprisonment extends to charitable organisations’ willingness to fund work with this group and the resulting lack of funding impacts on service capacity and professionalism.

Although stigma and social isolation are issues that could affect many groups and individuals for a variety of reasons, it seems that the stigma associated with prison is markedly different. Arditti (2003: 196) suggests that, ‘Unlike other
contexts of loss such as death or illness, loss of a family member because of incarceration seldom elicits sympathy and support from others’.

According to the literature, stigma experienced by children and other family members appears to vary with and be partially related to the nature and severity of the crime committed; as Robertson (2007: 12) asserts, ‘Crimes viewed as particularly abhorrent by the community appear to attract greater stigma (such as sexual offences against children)’.

Cultural factors also appear to influence a society’s attitude and response towards prisoners’ families; for example in China, communities in some rural areas are especially hostile towards prisoners and their families, whilst in other areas, with high rates of imprisonment, people are more accepting (Ibid: 12). According to labelling theorists (Lemert, 1951; Becker, 1963; Paternoster and Iovanni, 1989), punishments such as imprisonment can actually lead to an increase in criminal behaviour within families, particularly in relation to the younger siblings and children of those who are convicted.

The imprisonment of a parent usually leads to a significant worsening in the circumstances of a family. In particular, sources of financial stability and income are lost, often leading to changing housing needs and associated benefits. Being sent to prison often means that all previous rights and entitlements are lost; for example, if somebody who is the named recipient of benefits is sent to prison, the subsequent amount of income support given to the family can drop disproportionately or, in some instances, be taken away altogether (APF, 2003: 2). Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Smith et al., 2007: viii) has helped to illuminate some of the issues prisoners’ families face in terms of the financial impact and the increased likelihood of these families living in conditions of relative poverty:

Families were vulnerable to financial instability, poverty and debt: household incomes fell as the prisoner’s income was lost; those who cared for prisoners’ children left paid work; and damaging financial transitions caused further disruption. Reliance on state benefits was at the root of the poverty found within prisoners’
families. Older people with caring responsibilities and those with disabilities were particularly likely to suffer from entrenched poverty. Ethnicity and nationality also influence the likelihood of remaining poor.

What makes the situation more acute and difficult to bear for many families is the fact that they are already often living in poverty and are socially marginalised. The most impoverished families appear to be the ones who are most vulnerable to the financial hardships that prison brings. This seems to be a phenomenon that cuts across national boundaries. Braman (2002: 122) describes the financial hardships faced by families in America as a result of imprisonment:

...costs of imprisonment bear down disproportionately on families that are least able to absorb them. The effects of incarceration are particularly devastating to these families because they have the highest marginal costs – that is, their above subsistence resources are already severely taxed, so any additional burdens are more keenly felt.

According to APF (2003), prison sentences have a devastating impact upon family relationships, with an estimated 45% of offenders losing contact with their families whilst serving a sentence, and a further 22% of married prisoners separating, a finding often attributed to practical hardships such as the distance between prison and home and other associated costs. Consequently, according to APF, children who are exposed to such hardships will experience feelings of acute loss and separation in most instances. Most research studies have tended to concentrate on what happens to family relationships whilst the offender is in prison. What is significant from the point of view of children affected by imprisonment is that the risk of family breakdown does not disappear once a sentence has been completed. Families tend to get used to coping without the person who is imprisoned, whilst, at the same time, the offender becomes ‘institutionalized’ and used to being without an immediate family (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Longitudinal studies such as Murray and Farrington’s (2007) suggest that the imprisonment of a parent is not something that simply takes effect for the duration of the sentence, but that the longer-
term consequences are perhaps more damaging for children of prisoners. Although there is some recognition on the part of government (Harper and Chitty, 2005) that maintaining family links for prisoners and their families is likely to lessen the likelihood of reoffending, there appears to be little in the way of statutory provision that supports or makes it easier for families and prisoners to maintain close ties. Any such encouragement seems to be motivated through a desire to help the offender, rather than the families and children of the offender. It appears that the family, despite being acknowledged as pivotal to the prisoner's readjustment to life beyond the sentence, is simply a means to an end, and part of the apparatus to reduce the likelihood of recidivism. The Home Office document, Protecting the Public and Reducing Re-offending (2005), includes family ties as a central tenet of potential success, yet fails to explicitly address the needs of families or offer any specific support to those families who find the process of support stressful and difficult.

Because family relationships and their potentially stabilising influence are not factored into sentencing decisions which are made within the criminal justice system, there is less chance that the children affected by such decisions will cope as well as they might in situations where family ties were taken into account at the point of sentencing.

Prisoners’ families are diverse and consequently their coping strategies are likely to reflect social class, offence types, and support systems - along with a range of other socio-demographics; for example, Light (1995) found that black prisoners’ families generally had a harder time than other families in terms of harassment. There is a need to explore the socio-economic and family variations that exist and see how these exacerbate or reduce the potential harm done to families as a consequence of imprisonment. Family structures are so diverse and fragmented today that in any discussion about the family, it is important to understand that notions such as the traditional nuclear family are unhelpful.

Women are more likely to be the sole or primary caregivers in most families. A potential consequence of this is that prison disadvantages children with an
inincarcerated mother more so than those who have an imprisoned father. Although the global prison population is dominated by males, the female prison population is worthy of consideration in relation to how children with mothers serving prison sentences may be different from those with fathers serving sentences. Townhead (2006) has estimated that in the United States, 80% of the female prison population are mothers. In the United Kingdom, 66% of female prisoners are mothers. A study of imprisoned mothers in South Africa (Luyt, 2008) looked at the experiences of children during their mothers’ incarceration. In relation to patterns of care following the imprisonment of mothers, those who took responsibility for looking after the children included the father, grandparents, other relatives, friends and foster carers. Participants in Luyt’s study indicated that 24% of young children ended up in foster care or with adoptive parents, and 10% ended up in children’s homes. Many of these children ended up being looked after by others outside the immediate family in cases where there was no father present. A significant number of the children in this study (7.5%) were looked after by an older sibling in households where there was no resident adult.

Estimates in the UK suggest that between a quarter and a half of all young men in prison identify themselves as being fathers (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 1997). Boswell (2002) suggests that research into parental imprisonment for fathers and the impact upon children has been relatively sparse when compared to the body of work on imprisoned mothers. Her study, which involved interviewing the children affected, found that there were no easy or convenient findings. The responses did not really say much about any differences between having a father, as opposed to a mother, in prison. Although the findings revealed that most, if not all of the children expressed concern and appeared to be disadvantaged in some way, the gender of the parent inside did not seem to be relevant. The usual concerns about visiting, loss, and financial burdens were the issues that seemed to be most important. Even though there is a lack of comprehensive research which looks at father-child relationships and imprisonment (Shaw, 1987), there is even less material which has explored the social and psychological impact of having a sibling imprisoned. Meek (2008) points out that sibling research to date has covered
children in care, those with disabilities and chronic illness, but not siblings in prison. Meek (2008: 266) regards the influence of older siblings as crucial in assessing the impact on younger brothers and sisters in relation to a number of areas:

in terms of social influence, older siblings have been shown to be particularly influential in terms of drug use, alcoholism, smoking, sexual socialisation, aggression, and health risk behaviours. Whilst a clear causal (rather than a correlational) relationship is not evident in many of these studies, the research literature has revealed some conflicting evidence relating to the nature of sibling influence.

The evidence, conflicting as it is, seems to suggest that the closer in age siblings are, and especially where they are the same gender, the higher the degree of influence appears to be. This has clear implications for older siblings who are sentenced to young offender institutions. There are approximately 10,000 young people in prison, many of whom will have younger siblings (Ministry of Justice, 2010). What is not clear is the degree of risk this presents in relation to future offending or in terms of the emotional and psychological impact it carries for younger brothers and sisters.

Meek (2008) points to the need for further research into the field of sibling separation through imprisonment and maintains that although the number of children who took part in his study could not be deemed statistically significant, and consequently allow wider inferences to be made, the research did manage to highlight the detrimental impact that separation can have for siblings in these situations.

Much depends upon the histories and experiences of individual families and there are undoubtedly cultural differences that have an impact in terms of how children react and cope after a family member is imprisoned. The degree of impact appears to be partly dependent upon the coping mechanisms families put in place. Often, it appears, where children are excluded from such mechanisms, problems can occur:
When adults are sent to prison, the lives of their partners or the people who take on the responsibilities are profoundly affected. In a situation where children are involved, further pressures may be involved in dealing with their experiences and responses at a time when the carer may be least able to cope themselves. (Save the Children, 1998: 45)

Evidence from the research supports the view that if the adult on the outside struggles to cope with the imprisonment of a partner, the worse the consequences will be for any children within the immediate family. Morris explored families in which the wives of prisoners exhibited a marked physical and mental deterioration. Children often experienced a lack of structure or routine in these instances and the mother would often become dependent on the children, placing further strain on them (Morris, 1965: 427). Without any support mechanisms, mothers in this situation would only have the children to talk to and, as such, would often place unnecessary demands on them; for example, by attempting to share worries and concerns they might have shared with the missing partner. Often grandparents take on the role of carers, especially when a mother has been sent to prison. Often decisions for grandparents about whether to take on a caring role are influenced by the stark reality that children may end up being taken into care if they are not looked after by the family:

‘I’ve got some beans and spaghetti. And some flour, so I’ll make some dumplings…….But I will be begging. Kids ain’t got no breakfast….but now I’ve got me nice big £3 in me pocket, it’ll buy me a loaf of bread and some potatoes and some flour. I can’t live like this for ever. It’s tempting to put them in care you know. To think, oh fuck it why should I live like it? I ain’t their mother. But I can’t do that because it’s a horrible thing to do. They might think I don’t love ‘em. I do love them, but …..sometimes I’m bitter’. (Interview with grandparent taken from Smith et al., 2007: 25)

Gender appears to play an important role in who cares for children with a parent in prison. This applies both to grandparents and parents, particularly in cases where there is a real risk that children might be taken into care:

It is predominantly women, alone, who take responsibility for prisoners’ children to prevent their being taken into care and who
weigh employment decisions carefully against the children’s needs, prioritising the latter. (Ibid: 26)

Children of prisoners can suffer a range of problems during a parent’s imprisonment: depression, hyperactivity, aggression, withdrawal, regression, sleeping and eating disorders, truancy and poor educational performance. In terms of how individuals cope, their circumstances are bound to vary. What is clear is that the symptoms do not necessarily follow a set pattern. Some estimates (DCSF, 2007) suggest that mental health problems are more prevalent in children of prisoners - 30% as opposed to 10% of the general population – although there doesn’t seem to be any documented evidence to support this claim. In order to build up a reliable evidence base, research is needed which contains representative, substantial samples and control data. Although there are countless other factors that can impact on a child’s behaviour and emotional well-being - for example, sibling involvement in anti-social behaviour, peer group pressure, family bereavement and so on - there are also certain direct effects that can only be attributed to the imprisonment of a parent. Separation and loss are obvious contenders. The work of Bowlby (1973) in this area and the importance of parent-child bonds are powerful in terms of considering the impact on children. Desertion and abandonment fears can also be causes of distress. Children may suffer fear and anxiety about their parents’ welfare whilst in prison. Prison visits can add to this uncertainty due to their restrictive nature and the enforced parting, which ends each visit (Brown et al., 2002; McDermott and King, 1992; Murray et al., 2012).

Studies which have explored how children cope with the stress of having a family member imprisoned have shown that the families often avoid talking to others about their feelings (Bocknek et al., 2008). Other children appear to develop sophisticated methods of avoidance; for example, in developing the ability to compartmentalise emotions. Many children talked about spending time alone (ibid).

Denial, too, appears to play a part in how children deal with the loss of a parent through imprisonment:
Often people who experience ambiguous loss resist clarifying information for fear of the consequences of knowing. This concept may be particularly true for children of prisoners as accepting complete information often means identifying one’s parent as *criminal* and therefore *bad* (emphasis in original) (Ibid: 329).

Income, care arrangements, home and school moves, a carer’s ability to cope – these are all factors likely to affect children emotionally and psychologically. Parenting will change dramatically in most instances (largely influenced by emotional distress and practical arrangements). Moreover, some studies suggest that these parenting strategies are more influential than the separation itself:

> Carers for prisoners’ children have to cope, not only with their own feelings, but also with the emotional responses to imprisonment of the children in their care. Maternal depression may affect child and adolescent development, and mental health through its effect on parenting behaviour (Smith et al.: 2007: 34).

How the parents cope and deal with the situation appears to have a huge bearing on how children adjust to change. Often parents decide, for various reasons, not to divulge the truth about imprisonment, especially when the children are very young. An important element of my research and one of its main contributions to existing knowledge is how families, often without intending to, harm children by avoiding the truth. Parents often, according to the existing literature, fabricated stories or simply avoided telling the truth when a family member went to prison. Such approaches, although seemingly widespread amongst prisoners’ families, especially those with very young children, contravene and clash with ideas supporting children’s rights. A discussion about agency, empowerment and resilience, in relation to children’s ability to deal with difficulties such as the imprisonment of a parent, is important in showing how children can be further marginalised and excluded by not being involved in family discussions and decisions. Information and explanations given to children are likely to have an impact; for example, some studies suggest that as many as one-third of children are lied to about the
imprisonment of a parent, and only one-third are told the whole truth (Shaw, 1987). Confusion and deceit are likely to compound issues of separation and ultimately mean that children will become resentful and angry when they eventually discover they have been lied to.

Wilmer’s research (1966) explored the way in which parents would concoct stories to deliberately mislead children about the whereabouts of incarcerated parents. Half of the respondents in Wilmer’s study had not told children the truth. This concurs with Morris (1965), who also found that approximately half of the children knew nothing about what had really happened to their parent. Wilmer explores the parents’ ‘need to deceive’ (Ibid: 117), which is essentially a means to ensure that children still see their missing parent as ‘good’ and ‘worthy’. Often prisoners, according to Wilmer, felt that they had been wronged in some way, and as such were able to maintain a positive self-image, helping them cope with the prison sentence. Collusion and deceit were further justified by the belief that children were ‘protected’ from the truth. Another reason for denial is the dependent nature of the relationship between the parent who is incarcerated and the parent left to bring up the children. If the truth is never spoken, the parent on the outside can continue to present a healthy image of the parent who has been convicted. Although all the available evidence seems to suggest that children fare much better and can adjust to the reality of a parent in prison if they are told the truth, Wilmer’s research showed how parents often chose the option of lying as a means of protection.

In a survey of a typical men’s prison (HMP Bedford, 2003), almost three-quarters of children did not know about their father’s imprisonment (according to the fathers), and over half of children’s caregivers did not know about it either. This survey also showed that the likelihood of children knowing about their father’s imprisonment depended upon their age. Children aged ten years and over were more likely to know than those under ten. Not surprisingly, children who had been living with their fathers at the time of conviction were also more likely to know the truth.
The growing awareness and importance of children’s rights has some bearing on how children experience and deal with the imprisonment of a family member. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that no child should be discriminated against because of the situation or status of their parents (Article 2). Yet, as this literature review shows, children of prisoners can be disadvantaged in many ways because their parent is in prison, and consequently, they become ‘the invisible victims of crime and the penal system’ (Marshall, 2008: 8). All member states of the European Union and the Council of Europe are signatories of the UNCRC and are therefore required to uphold the rights included in the Convention. Of particular relevance to the situation of children whose parents are in prison are the following rights:

- The right to be free from discrimination (article 2)
- Protection of the best interest of the child (article 3)
- The right to have direct and frequent contact with parents from whom the child is separated (article 9), including the right to be provided with information about the whereabouts of the absent member(s) of the family unless the provision of the information would be detrimental to the well-being of the child (article 9.4)
- The right of the child to express his or her views and to be heard in matters affecting their situation (article 12)
- The child’s right to protection of their family life and their privacy (article 16)
- The right of the child to protection from any physical or psychological harm or violence (article 19)

(Danish Institute of Human Rights, 2012: 6-7).

Despite these aspirations enshrined in the UNCRC and their widespread international ratification, it is obvious, as this chapter has demonstrated, and as will become apparent in Chapter Four, that these rights are seldom realised in relation to prisoners’ children. It appears that criminal justice considerations often take precedence over family and child welfare considerations, as is
shown, for example, in this comment from a family member at the time of her parent’s arrest:

The officer said that we had to leave the room so he could check it for drugs. When we were on the way out of the room, he opened my drawers and began throwing out my underwear etc. all over the place. It was so insulting I felt as if I was a criminal. (quoted in Martynowicz, 2011: 9)

The same research (Ibid: 36) calls on signatories of the UNCRC to

Incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into European standards, national laws and practice, with regard to children of imprisoned parents, so as to ensure that children of imprisoned parents are able to maintain contact with their parents; are consulted and receive timely information regarding what had happened to their parent; are free from discrimination on the grounds of the acts of their parent and have their views taken into account wherever appropriate.

A challenge for policy makers and those working in the criminal justice field is how to address the longer term, seemingly generational and cultural patterns of offending which exist within some families and neighbourhoods. For these people, prison only has a very limited effect on reducing crime or reducing the risk of offending, doing effectively nothing to tackle the root causes, which might be more to do with particular lifestyles that are seen as attractive and risky. The riots in the summer of 2011 which happened across many major cities in England, certainly provoked a renewed debate about ‘problem’ families and the generational problems found within them. Louise Casey’s report (2012) on ‘troubled families’, which stemmed from the riots, suggests that such families, and the children who are part of them, suffer a great deal of disadvantage, and without intensive support will continue to experience a cycle of violence, poverty, poor housing, low educational achievement and crime.

On the issue of generational offending, Farrington (1996: 47) is certain ‘there is no doubt that crime, like many other features, runs in families’. Certainly, scientific studies, such as Farrington’s, add to the widely held assumption that
some families are simply ‘bad’, ‘dysfunctional’ or ‘failing’. Many early studies
into delinquency have shown that criminal offences committed by members
of the same family and kinship networks are highly correlated (Glueck and
Glueck, 1950; McCord et al., 1959; Robins et al., 1975; Farrington et al., 2009).
These studies help to present a convincing case for family-based intervention
projects that represent a departure from criminal justice approaches, which
have historically been aimed exclusively towards the offender. The Social
Exclusion Unit (2002) maintains that 16% of the general population has a
family member that has been convicted of a criminal offence, whilst the statistic
for prisoners is 43%. The wider risks in terms of future life chances and criminal
pathways are well documented for children who belong to families involved in
offending behaviour. Parental offending in itself is seen as a significant risk in
terms of a child’s likelihood to commit criminal acts and come into contact with
the criminal justice system (Ditchfield, 1994). A key risk factor within such
families is often whether or not a parent is sent to prison. Such studies
illuminate the much higher risks associated with families in these
circumstances. Although these studies rely on quantitative data to show the
likelihood of future offending and do not take into account exceptional
instances in which the children do not go on to commit future offences, they
do offer a convincing case that parental imprisonment is a reliable indicator in
predicting future patterns of offending within the same families.

What is also clear from the existing research (Prison Reform Trust, 2007;
Lewis, Bates and Murray, 2008) is that, if family ties are actively encouraged
and supported throughout the period of imprisonment, then reoffending
becomes less likely. The importance of family ties has been picked up in
research which has explored desistance. Desistance is defined as the
‘termination’ point of offending (Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Immarigeon, 2004:
17). Although these studies have been primarily concerned with reoffending
and recidivism, there is also a recognised need to ensure that children of
prisoners do not go on to commit their own offences. However, Green (2004)
takes the opposite view and maintains that it is actually more harmful to
encourage links between convicted offenders and their families, especially
children. Although there are undoubtedly difficulties in reintegrating ex-
prisoners into their family homes, especially where children are involved, there is a growing consensus (at least at policy level) that close family ties are desirable. Some estimates suggest that prisoners’ children are six times more likely than their peers to be imprisoned themselves. Farrington and Murray (2007) point towards the increased likelihood of offending when other factors are taken into account, although their research also demonstrates the difficulties in attaching any certainty in the form of clear correlations and supporting evidence.

Another recent study that looks at the statistical probabilities of experiencing parental imprisonment, based on ethnicity and social class, presents some stark messages:

Black children born in 1990 were nearly 7 times more likely to have a parent sent to prison than white children; children born in 1990 to high school dropouts were 4 times more likely to have a parent sent to prison than children of college-educated parents. In addition, race and class inequality in the risk of parental imprisonment grew, although class inequality grew only for white children. (Wildeman: 2009: 276)

Although the above study is culturally specific to the American experience of incarceration, there are important messages for the UK population which show that the UK prison population disproportionately comprises non-white groups. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010), ethnic minority populations are over-represented in the custodial system in England and Wales where one in four people in prison is from an ethnic minority background.

Research has shown that for households where the main carers come into contact with the criminal justice system and for those who are sent to prison, there are some notable trends. Firstly, and perhaps not surprisingly, substance misuse, domestic violence, and extreme poverty are often present in these households. Secondly, there is a greater prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems among children age 2 years and upwards in these same households (Phillips and Dettlaff, 2009).
Child protection is an added concern for professionals and organisations working with prisoners’ families. A multitude of potential risks following the imprisonment of a family member often means that children in such families become even more vulnerable. Sheehan’s study (2010: 176) into the impact of parental imprisonment on children identified significant risk factors that meant children in such circumstances were often subject to child protection proceedings:

Children in this study were the subject of child protection concerns either because they had been abused or were at risk of significant harm because of their parents’ offending behaviour, or their parents’ imprisonment had placed them in a precarious situation. Parental substance abuse was particularly pronounced across all ages of the children, although in children under five years of age, this was combined with problems of family violence, mental health, and transience. Child neglect was a major concern, and when coupled with family violence and transience, created instability for these children.

A picture begins to emerge which shows how having a parent or a close family member in prison can compound problems for children in families where they are already vulnerable and subject to a range of other significant threats. Although not the sole cause of difficulties and adverse outcomes, it is apparent that prison plays a huge role in shaping the outcomes and experiences of children in these families. Children, in instances where they are told what has happened, may find it difficult to comprehend the complexities and peculiarities of the legal processes and criminal proceedings their parents and siblings may be subject to. Without a basic understanding of the rationale and justification for the conviction of a family member, children will find it very difficult to make sense of and consequently deal with any such traumatic loss. Often adults struggle to come to terms with a legal process or decision that results in somebody going to prison. In communicating such events to children, extreme caution and sensitivity as well as an informed understanding of what has happened are crucial. Without a clear explanation, children are likely to blame themselves for what has happened (Hinshaw, 2005). Linguistic
exclusion forms part of this landscape and helps to explain the lack of comprehension and distance that children might encounter (Murray, 2007).

The effects that imprisonment has on the children of offenders are rarely considered in the criminal justice field. The focus tends to be on determining an appropriate sentence for those convicted of various offences. This failure to consider children as part of the process of sentencing can often lead to the rights, needs and best interests of children being overlooked and consequently result in negative outcomes for those affected. This focus on the offender means that families of offenders are in many instances ignored or not considered from the point of arrest until the release of an offender. But prisoners do not exist in isolation. They are connected to family, friends, and various social networks (Paylor and Smith, 2004). To study their experience of incarceration in isolation is to separate their experience from what lies outside the walls of the prison. As Braman says:

The isolated offender is a useful fiction...but a fiction that has come to so thoroughly dominate our analysis of what our criminal law should and can do that we are blind to its limitations. (2004: 63)

The subsequent impact of release and successful reintegration following a custodial sentence should ideally mean that account be taken of family links from the point of arrest through to eventual release. Although the need to maintain and encourage family ties has been officially recognised in government publications (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002: 9), family links, and specifically links with children and prisoners, are not always prioritised by agencies and practitioners who work within the criminal justice system. Judicial systems and legal processes are ‘centred on the principles of justice and individual responsibility’ (Larman and Aungles, 1993: 263). This again means that the focus of attention is on the offender and, as a consequence, people around them are often routinely ignored. An example of this could be in how arrests are routinely managed, or how a judge might pass sentence without due consideration for the caring responsibilities of the offender. APF (2003: 3) asked children and families about their experiences of the various points from
arrest through to trial and sentencing, and, ultimately, release of prisoners who are also family members. It was apparent from the stories respondents told that there are many immediate negative consequences. Arrests take place within domestic settings, often during the evening when children are likely to be at home. The aftermath of such arrests can be extremely traumatic and damaging to children who witness them. Presently, no consideration is given to whether or not children are resident at addresses where arrests take place, even though it has been established that children have developed post-traumatic stress after witnessing the arrest of a family member (Phillips and Zhao, 2010). Arrests generally present big challenges for families as the starting point of what can be a very frightening and distressing series of events. My primary research, documented in chapter four, will show how the various stages of the criminal justice process, from arrest through to trial and conviction and eventual release, can all trigger a series of reactions and coping strategies in children. Depending on the offence type and the prison sentence given, there are likely to be huge differences in terms of the difficulties that families will encounter. Often, as a consequence of recidivism, families will experience the whole process several times, potentially having a cumulative effect on those on the outside, left to cope. Again, little is known about the impact on such families so there are opportunities to discover much more through further research in this area.

Prison visits, according to the literature, add an additional layer of difficulty for prisoners’ families. Hostility, a lack of any suitable spaces for children, and lack of physical contact compound what is already a stressful experience for many. Hostility from prison staff appears to be an issue for families visiting inmates and this can be very traumatic for children, for whom visiting is an area alien to their experience. Often physical contact is forbidden, which children find difficult to understand, resulting in instances where the children ‘express unacceptable behaviour’ when they are prevented from touching their parents. Sometimes this results in visits being cut short and families being asked to leave. What is significant is the contrast between these experiences and the official prison staff accounts of such visits, which suggest that physical contact between children and parents is perfectly acceptable (Luyt, 2008).
Other studies have shown, as Morris’s work did, that one of the most important issues for families is loss of income, which is usually compounded by the additional costs of visiting, phone calls and sending money. Morris points to the difficulties around visiting prisoners for the wives and children of male offenders, demonstrating that travelling long distances with young children is often stressful, aside from the added strain of children not being able to ‘touch their fathers’ (Morris, 1965 and 1967). Some studies have also exposed the complexities of prisons and their operating procedures in relation to visits and shown how maintaining family links can be a direct cause of stress for families. The process of booking a visit, especially for those who are not conversant with the way visits operate, is often difficult and convoluted. Gampell (2004, cited in Codd, 2007) describes the routine difficulties that families face when attempting to book a visit, experiencing long delays in getting through because lines are constantly engaged or seemingly inaccessible. Voluntary sector organisations have been acknowledged as being hugely important, especially when prisoners are new arrivals and they are faced with the challenge of making sense of complex systems so they feel in a position to contact family members (Liebling and Maruna: 2005).

Morris (1965: 429) argued for better facilities to be made available within prisons for families with children. At the time she was writing, many prisons lacked the most basic amenities, such as play areas, toys, outdoor spaces, or changing rooms. Although, with the introduction of visitors’ centres much of this has changed and there have been undoubted improvements for those visiting prisons, there remains the necessity to travel long distances in most instances. In terms of contact between prisoners and their children outside of visiting hours, telephone communication and written correspondence offer an alternative, but often the cost of telephone calls is prohibitive for many prisoners.

It appears that the age of the children is a factor in whether or not they make prison visits, as well as more obvious reasons, such as whether they (the children) know about a family member’s imprisonment. A survey at HMP Bedford (2003) found that less than a third of children were expected to visit
their father in prison. But visiting deserves some consideration in its own right, given the attention it has received across a number of research and academic studies, so a detailed discussion of visiting appears in chapter four.

Codd’s (2007) analysis of resettlement demonstrates that this is often a difficult period, which brings its own traumas; for example, relationships with partners and children will have to be renegotiated, daily routines will have to be radically altered and contact with the outside world in relation to employment, training, education and social networks will bring huge challenges for all concerned. Codd also points out that family members carry an added responsibility during the period of resettlement and reintegration into the community, creating additional pressure at a very difficult time:

> to co-opt families into the resettlement process uses families simply for instrumental reasons, allowing the State to shrug off some responsibility for the consequences of the negative aspects of imprisonment. That is to say, if an ex-prisoner re-offended after release, it appears that their family could be deemed partly responsible. By redefining families as ‘agencies of resettlement’ the State is, in effect, handing over some responsibility for successful re-entry to under-resourced and under-supported family members. (257)

Aside from the issue of resettlement, there are also problems within the family itself caused by release from prison. For example, a father can find his role has been taken by one of his older children, displacing the parent. More broadly, feelings towards the imprisoned family member may be more negative. Lastly, in instances that involve longer sentences, children may simply become used to the family member being absent (Children of Prisoners Library, 2003). A consequence of the difficulties faced by prisoners returning home and back into the community is that positive relationships with families and children are difficult to rebuild and maintain.

The literature explored in this chapter has shown the breadth and complexity of the issues which impact upon prisoners’ children and families. Much of this impact is damaging, invasive, and long-lasting for the individuals concerned, and, as my research will demonstrate, remains largely hidden or is simply
ignored. My research aims to furnish a greater and more detailed understanding of the relationship between these issues and their impact on the participants. Having identified that there is a gap in understanding the perceptions of children who experience the imprisonment of a family member, the following chapter details how I have sought to explore it, outlining my methodological choices and research design.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter outlines and justifies my research design. The chapter articulates the reasons for a reflexive approach to social research, demonstrating the importance of responding to the needs of participants, and in balancing such concerns against the practical aspects of conducting the research. Discussions with prisoners’ families and with professionals at Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group (POPS), lessons learned from a pilot exercise and the process of reviewing other people’s research with children and families all helped me devise an approach that allowed me to conduct research which has a place and context, but which, crucially, contributes to an important and increasingly significant field of knowledge.

I have attempted to articulate and justify the decisions made in refining my research design and, in doing so, hope to demonstrate to the reader that good research is always malleable in its design, and always open to change, responding to circumstances, the environment, and the preferences of the research subjects, where appropriate. The chapter represents my research journey, and as such may appear a little like a bumpy road, which I freely admit, on occasions has been frustrating and difficult to navigate. The chapter offers a ‘warts and all’ account acknowledging the pains, dilemmas, and uncertainties I encountered, and crucially, how I responded to these challenges. I have endeavoured to point out potential weaknesses and flaws within my design, accepting that perfection cannot exist in social research. Wherever possible I have deliberately pointed out any potential limitations imposed by my own bias, and by the fact that my research is concerned with subjective material. This approach fits with a conceptual framework that recognises multiple perspectives, including the researcher’s own.

Finding out how partners of prisoners and prisoners’ children cope with their altered circumstances is fundamentally important for my research. I want to reveal and understand more about why children’s perspectives of
experiencing a family member being imprisoned are worthy of detailed exploration. A central consideration in formulating the design for my research has been the importance of listening to children’s voices in relation to research about prisons. Ultimately, by offering the children of such families a platform, the research might beneficially influence policies and provision for prisoners’ families in the future, or at the very least offer a critical insight into the lived experiences of individuals who do not routinely have an opportunity to express a view. Consequently, there is a related discussion on how children are included and empowered within the research process, but also how they can easily be excluded or forgotten.

A pilot phase of the research is outlined to show how early designs can be refined and improved, leading to stronger and more valid, reliable research. The pilot phase of the research provided an account of how the interviews evolved, allowing me to refine my approach and familiarise myself with the data that emerged. It has been useful to look towards other research involving children and families, so that considerations about power dynamics within families, age profiles, and other practical concerns can be applied to my own research. Ethical considerations are discussed in relation to my research, again building on lessons learned from other studies. A discussion of thematic analysis as a research method helps to contextualise this process and explain my evolving design. The fieldwork (in the form of interviews) which forms the main body of my research is then explored, along with the practical considerations it presented. I have occasionally interspersed the text in this chapter with direct quotations from the interviews so that the reader can see the links between the research design, my theoretical perspective, and the kinds of responses the interviews routinely generated. Whilst I appreciate such material is best kept for discussion in Chapter Four, some extracts are quoted here to show the effectiveness of the approach.

A personal standpoint
Qualitative researchers accept the fact that research is ideologically driven. There is no value-free or bias-free design. The qualitative researcher early on identifies his or her biases and articulates the ideology or conceptual frame for the study. (Janesick, 1998: 40)

As Janesick states, the researcher can never be a neutral cipher in social research as bias is endemic to human life, let alone to the interpretive tradition. This tradition, as Mason (1996: 4) argues, sees qualitative research as ‘grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly “interpretivist” in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted’. Research is enriched as a result of being undertaken through a number of social lenses and differing perspectives. In social research, the researcher will always bring a unique perspective. This is because, as noted above, researchers are already embedded in society and will, therefore, always engage with fieldwork in a way that is already theoretically informed by their being members of a particular socio-economic, gendered and ethnic group with certain previous experiences of the world. I accept, as does Janesick, that my own preconceptions, beliefs and values form part of the research dynamic; so, if I did not have a sense of social justice, it is unlikely I would have undertaken this particular branch of research. The sympathies and beliefs which motivated me to carry out the research however, do not necessarily mean that the findings from my research are in any sense ‘contaminated’. As Liebling (2001: 472) asks us, ‘does acquiring sympathy for those whose worlds we study undermine our professional integrity?’ Liebling argues that this is not the case; instead acknowledging that bias does not necessarily lead to poor research or make the researcher unsuitable to perform research. What is important is the ability of the researcher to acknowledge his/her own perspective and to be clear on how this standpoint may influence any research undertaken. The researcher should first make his or her own agenda explicit, and then take reasonable steps to accommodate subjectivity.

Good research, then, should take account of personal bias, and ultimately capitalise on the benefits it can offer. Research, whether qualitative or quantitative in nature, can and should be driven by a desire to enhance understanding and to benefit the lives of those involved. A passion and an
interest in the subject matter then, rather than being problematic, should be seen as advantageous.

Because of my belief in social justice and my sympathies for the families I worked with, it is possible that my interactions with them were less hampered by concerns about objectivity. In the words of Mary, a participant in my research:

‘It feels easier talking to you about this. I don’t normally want to talk to family and friends as they’re all involved. This is easier…I can tell you things as I see them. There’s no pressure, it feels good just to be able to talk about stuff without any agenda. It’s therapeutic doing this.’

Although I felt strangely uncomfortable with the notion of being viewed as some kind of therapist, it is important to recognise the human aspect of qualitative research and to realise how, as researchers, we can adapt. Reminding myself, that as a researcher, I am part of the research process which requires building a relationship with participants and, consequently, making a difference to what they tell me, helps to contextualise such worries. It is useful to note that researchers in such situations can be smart, adaptable and flexible, responding to situations with skill, tact and understanding (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 107).

My theoretical approach, because of its interpretivist foundations, recognises that there are no absolute truths. Thus it actively seeks alternative and conflicting accounts and narratives, preventing the researcher from becoming seduced or convinced by popular or seemingly common sense explanations of events and happenings. This of course, is distinct from the fact that the social researcher lives in the social world, therefore will also be influenced by current issues, viewpoints and experiences. Again, there is a need to acknowledge that events and facts are always constructed by particular communities and groups, and thereby will be ideologically inflected in terms of language, gender, ethnicity, age, class and other dimensions of which we, as researchers, are often unaware. Researchers are themselves part of particular
communities and cannot thereby stand outside any social formation. In
accepting these limitations, and in openly acknowledging that there are no
simple truths or explanations, the researcher can assume a mantle of cautious
scepticism. As Burr (2003: 3) elucidates:

It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the
world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view
that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased
observation of the world. It is therefore in opposition to what is
referred to as positivism and empiricism in traditional science—the
assumptions that the nature of the world can be revealed by
observation, and that what exists is what we perceive to exist.
Social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our
assumptions about how the world appears to be.

Because social constructionism seeks to offer and account for a variety of
interpretations and explanations of social phenomena, methods such as
unstructured interviews help to give respondents the space in which to explain
their experiences and perceptions about events from their own perspective.
This also allows research to explore diversity of experience and in doing so to
value differences, rather than see them as potentially problematic (Truman
and Humphries, 1994). This approach, as Truman and Humphries argue, is
crucially important in seeking to understand and appreciate the perspectives
held by groups within society that are not routinely able to express themselves,
that is, prisoners’ children and families. It helps us, if undertaken well, to
understand a situation that would otherwise be ‘enigmatic or confusing’

Taking a social constructionist approach also demands that researchers
accept their responsibilities. My research seeks to convince and persuade the
reader that the perspectives and accounts of children and other family
members contain evidence that deserves attention. Given that there is no
underlying ‘truth’ and therefore only versions of it, in order to show that my
research has credibility it will be useful to discuss it in the traditional terms of
validity and reliability. This is especially valuable as research like my own,
which explores highly subjective material through a series of personal
accounts, warrants scrutiny in terms of how it balances subjectivity and objectivity, takes account of my own bias and standpoint, and deals with notions of truth. In adopting a social constructionist approach, where reality and truth are often contested concepts, I must be clear about the research’s worth, particularly in relation to my methods and findings.

**Validity and reliability**

Unlike quantitative research, reliability and validity in qualitative social research are more concerned with the ‘thick description’ of the research and the ability of the researcher to ‘generate understanding’ (Stenbacka, 2001: 551). Their applicability to studies like my own may require some adjustment and fine-tuning. Concepts such as rigour, trustworthiness, consistency, and dependability are perhaps better suited to qualitative designs. Thus ‘dependability’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 300; Clont, 1992; Seale, 1999) and ‘trustworthiness’ (Seale, 1999), rather than reliability, offer another way of assessing the worth and credibility of my research.

To demonstrate that my research has credibility, it is necessary to describe how I have cross-referenced my findings and methods with other similar studies, taking into account variables such as sample size, the age of respondents, and the types of interview used.

In terms of the reliability of my research, specifically in relation to its accuracy and repeatability and ultimately its trustworthiness (May, 1997), my remit has always been clear. I understood that respondents might rationalise their experiences in different ways and so I maintained a healthy scepticism throughout the research process. Also, whenever the possibility arose, I examined the same events from more than one point of view. This sometimes involved different family members talking about their own interpretations of the same events.

The concept of validity, specifically in relation to qualitative studies like my own, is, according to Winter (2000: 1), ‘a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects’. The concept of validity then, has to be linked to my own research
paradigm. Because social constructionism is comfortable with the notion that there are multiple versions of reality, as evidenced by the accounts of the respondents in my study, there needs to be an acceptance that there are no fixed reference points. Each case, in the shape of individual families, and beyond that, each respondent’s account within that family, produces findings which are qualitatively distinct. In terms of validity then, my role as a researcher has been to find the common threads which exist within and across families, whilst at the same time maintaining the integrity and unique perspective each respondent has to offer. It has been important to locate such threads (or themes) with other existing research to show how they corroborate and enhance current knowledge. In terms of searching for some corroboration and locating a frame of reference, social research methods can help. Triangulation in research can take many forms, often combining mixed methods, but sometimes using the same methods in different contexts. Because my research was conducted in three separate locations (I was able to access three separate visitors’ centres, each attached to a different prison), I was able to triangulate my findings by comparing and contrasting the themes which emerged from each setting. Because the results from each of the three settings yielded similar results and also coincided with the findings from other, subject-related research studies, I was reassured that my research design was robust and dependable.

I adopted an approach which involved interviewing the same participants at different points in time. Depending on what was happening - for example, following a prison visit or a particularly stressful appearance in a courtroom - the accounts individuals offered would differ. Emotions tended to be extreme and pronounced depending on the particular theme explored; for instance, respondents would appear happy and relaxed when talking about systems of family support or notions of resilience, but anxious, angry and upset when describing prison visits. By adopting an approach that involved several interviews with families spread over a period of time, it was possible for me to account for variations in such emotional responses. My involvement with the social worlds of the respondents meant that I could observe and discuss changes and events as they were happening. This closeness and intimacy
meant that respondents were more likely to trust me, and subsequently offer accounts that reflected more overtly what they felt and believed. Because I had a sample of twenty-four families, I was able to compare findings and unpick common themes which emerged during the interviews.

I acknowledge that another interviewer might have derived a different meaning from the interviews I conducted. I also accept that the accounts offered by participants might not be accepted more generally. Although this might be seen by some as a limitation of qualitative research, it more realistically reflects the social reality of the participants. By interviewing individuals from each of the twenty-four families, sometimes on separate occasions (in order to develop measures of internal consistency), and subsequently comparing the accounts systematically to look for similarities, I have, I believe, minimised some of the potential shortcomings associated with validity and reliability.

Moving on to consider the methodological issues around working with children, I have drawn on other studies to help me formulate a research design that is credible and robust. Kay’s (2009) study is particularly valuable in offering an insight into aspects of research that are potentially sensitive. She undertook research with children whose parents were HIV positive and describes having to think about issues of permission and access very carefully. Navigation through a series of ethics committees, discussions with professionals working in the field, the wording of consent forms and how parents were to be involved, were all considerations that needed to be addressed. Each of these steps helped to ensure that the research undertaken was appropriately matched to the needs of the children. Kay (2009) found that the families most likely to become involved were those where the research team had been introduced by a contact such as a professional who was already engaged with the family in relation to the parent’s HIV illness. This made me consider my own position and the propitious fact that I was seen to be associated with POPS by the families I made contact with. This connection, which seemed to reassure participants, suggests that, as mentioned earlier, trust is an important factor in relation to reaching families and having a responsibility as a researcher in not abusing this relationship.
Kay’s research made me consider other issues that were linked to carrying out interviews for my research. She found that children often volunteered more than they needed to and that sometimes there was an issue in protecting them from disclosing too much. It could be argued that this is equally true for the responses that are sometimes given by adults, although in each case full and frank accounts are always desirable. Because of this, my initial conversations with families involved reaching an understanding about the type and extent of material likely to be divulged, alongside reassurances that all information would be handled in the strictest confidence (unless of course issues of safeguarding or child protection arose – which they did not).

The literature explored in chapter two included material that dealt with issues such as separation, loss and coping after a family member is imprisoned. Because of this I was keen to consider other research which might help me explore these themes in my own study. Research undertaken by Smart et al. (2001) looked at the experience of children in relation to divorce and separation. The research is described as being more about engaging with the social worlds of the children involved than the experience of the adults. Children are described by Smart et al. (p. 47) as ‘active and interactive practitioners of social life’ and, as such, are given centre stage. The dynamics and assumptions about adult-child relationships were thereby challenged, giving the children an opportunity to articulate and demonstrate their own experiences, rather than have them conveniently interpreted by adults. Again, this approach helped me consider how I involved children in my research, particularly in thinking about providing a context in which children could provide honest accounts which were unencumbered by parental or adult control.

Again, thinking about themes uncovered in the literature review (chapter two), I wanted to take account of and learn from other research which dealt with issues around shame, stigma, harm and other matters that impacted on the family’s functioning. Mullender et al. (2002, cited in Hallett and Prout, 2003: 140) researched domestic violence and its impact on children. Particular
consideration was given to the methodology and design of the research, given the sensitive nature of the topic. The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods and comprised two distinct phases. Consent, confidentiality and child protection issues were particularly relevant in this study. One phase of the research involved interviewing children who had lived with domestic violence. There were forty-five interviews with children which were described as being ‘in depth’. Again, this research shows how sensitive and carefully devised strategies can be employed in order to engage respondents who would otherwise be difficult to reach. The researchers showed that, by ensuring that there were appropriate safeguards in place and that ethical standards were sufficiently robust, children could illuminate areas of social life that were traditionally regarded as taboo or were completely uncharted. In the light of the above mentioned research, I met with each family involved in my study before any interviews took place, allowing them to ask questions, talk through anxieties (largely about the fear of upsetting children), and to build trust. Parents and carers, once they felt reassured about the scope and remit of the research, were more open to the idea of letting me talk to children.

The researcher might take on the role of a ‘friend’ in the hope that this will be more effective in developing a trusting relationship. Some discussions talk about child friendly methods of gathering data, implying that the research might be ‘fun’ and at the same time congruent with children’s interests and competencies. Some commentators might argue that this is a patronising approach and is inconsistent with a perception of children being able and entitled to speak for themselves. If children are competent social actors, researchers should not need special child-friendly methods to elicit useful responses. I see this latter approach as more ethically sound, as to ‘engineer’ friendships seems deceitful and manipulative.

All of the research outlined above demanded a degree of flexibility on the part of the researchers; for example in knowing when to respond to children’s preferences during interviews. In the context of home, children (particularly younger children) may be used to the presence of their parents and may take
comfort and feel supported in a joint interview situation, allowing them to express their views in a way that might not be possible in an individual interview (Harden et al., 2010: 444). Informed research should always take account of the work of others in relation to the methods used in similar studies. The above represents only a fraction of work already undertaken that has helped me address issues of reliability, validity, dependability and trust, but shows how, if carefully applied, aspects of such research can usefully inform my own endeavours.

The pilot phase
Social research does not always utilise pilot studies to inform fieldwork. Without the pilot interviews, however, my research design would have been less certain and might have needed adjusting at a time of critical importance. Pilot studies help to assess the feasibility of research and often represent mini-versions of the full research. This was certainly true of my own research, allowing me the opportunity to conduct a trial run, initially involving semi-structured interviews and, after reflection, changing these to unstructured interviews. The pilot phase of my research (outlined below) allowed me to refine my research, giving it a more distinct purpose and direction, and additionally lending it credibility and trustworthiness. The pilot phase also reassured me that I had adopted an appropriate conceptual framework for my research.

The pilot interviews were held in 2009 and 2010 and included five families, all with children aged under eighteen. The pilot interviews were arranged via a family link worker, Jane, who was based at POPS’ head office. Because of this, I was able to talk to families that POPS were already engaged with. Additionally, as I had met Jane and had explained the nature of my research to her in detail, she was able to select families with children who would be willing to take part. Pilot phases should ideally involve a group with similar characteristics to those in the population to be studied, otherwise such exercises are not likely to provide the right sort of feedback necessary to make changes to the research design (Simmons, 2008: 2003). The families involved in this pilot all had a family member who was serving a prison sentence,
meaning that the convenience sample I had chosen matched the profile I needed for my primary research. The pilot interviews were carried out in the offices of POPS’ Head Office. This decision was made because it was felt that respondents would feel more comfortable in an environment that offered some neutrality, and was also a place where they felt safe. Respondents were given information in advance in the form of a flyer, and were assured that their contribution was voluntary. Although using the flyer helped me to attract participants in the pilot phase, I decided that face-to-face introductions would be more appropriate in the actual study. I found myself explaining to each of the families what the research was about, who I was, and what I might do with the findings. Despite having included these details in my flyer, the participants seemed to want further reassurance. Clearly, trust was an important factor in carrying out my research and the suspicions harboured by the respondents were obviously going to be a factor in accessing a wider population. The suspicions participants held were largely about who I worked for, which organisation I represented, and how the information I gathered would be used. All of the pilot respondents agreed to have the interviews recorded and gave consent for the material to be used in my thesis. Reassurances about confidentiality and anonymity were given at this point.

The pilot interviews helped give me an insight into the lives of prisoners’ families in a way that the literature had failed to do. The interviews gave me the chance to listen to people talk about something that was significant, life-changing, and highly emotional to them. Although my pilot work had started out with an interview schedule, it soon became apparent that the respondents I spoke to had more to tell than I had anticipated, often leading the participants into other, potentially useful territory. An example of this was provided by Jess, aged seventeen:

‘My Dad wanted to do things for us, buy presents. When mum went to get drinks for us [at the visitors centre’s tea-bar], dad would ask me if things were OK. Me and Dad could always say what was going on. I just said we were fine. We got good at making him think we were alright. We weren’t alright. After we lost the house, Dad didn’t know until weeks after. Mum told him when it seemed easier, but by then it was too late.’
The above extract from an interview with Jess and her mother prompted me to reconsider my role as an interviewer and the questions I was asking. Despite asking specifically about visiting, Jess wanted to talk about other things, so she avoided responding directly to the question. Jess’s description of how families try to protect each other takes the research in another direction. It was family dynamics rather than visiting that Jess wanted to talk about. Accordingly, I resolved to give all participants as much freedom as possible when it came to the actual research.

The pilot interviews, because of their flexible nature, allowed me to appreciate the range of responses I was likely to encounter. I was encouraged by the willingness of the participants to disclose very personal insights. Furthermore, I was surprised by the responses given, which often revealed strong emotions and involved issues that some respondents found difficult to express without becoming angry or upset. Once the interviews were underway, there appeared to be a surprising willingness to talk about the difficulties they encountered following the incarceration of a family member. As Thomas (2008: 249) points out:

> Questioning techniques should encourage respondents to communicate underlying attitudes, beliefs and values, rather than glib or easy answers. The objective is that the discussion should be as frank as possible.

The pilot phase convinced me that giving respondents the freedom to tell their stories often yielded richer material and shed light on territory I had not considered relevant. These narratives were then contextualised against a backdrop of institutions, policies and literature in order to make sense of how the participants interpreted the situation they found themselves in. I found that, because I was able to connect their accounts to some of the wider philosophical and theoretical frameworks (Clough, 2002) I had encountered - for example in relation to concepts of power and surveillance - this gave me
the confidence to develop the research in a way that gave respondents more freedom:

‘The prison officers watch us the whole time. My skin feels prickly when we’re there [in the visitors’ centre]. After, when we’re back at home, I always feel nervous…like they’re still watching us.’ (Jess)

My pilot questions concerned the experience, from start to finish, of having a family member imprisoned. This involved me asking questions about arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration, visiting and eventual release. The respondents wanted to say a lot about their frustration, powerlessness and anger, often directed towards ‘the system’, although it was not always clear what ‘system’ this was. The parents I interviewed appeared to be deeply concerned about the impact of imprisonment upon their children and wanted to talk about strategies they had adopted to protect their children. It was clear that my initial interview schedule, which tended to focus on the process and systems of criminal justice, did not yield the same quality and depth of material that seemed to emerge from having less of a structure and allowing respondents the space to recount their own experiences. Respondents often wanted to circumvent my questions and talk about aspects of their experiences that were much more significant and meaningful to them. More freedom was needed if the research was going to evolve to empower the respondents and give them an opportunity to express views on what they considered important. Unstructured interviews appeared to be a means of achieving this end, and so, following on from the pilot phase, I resolved to make this change. May (1997: 112) makes the point that unstructured discussions ‘challenge the preconceptions of the researcher’ in that the conversations can develop in any direction, with the participants using their own frame of reference rather than that of the researcher. Conversations could therefore happen without my assumptions and values being so dominant. Whilst it can be argued that this type of research could lead to a great deal of irrelevant data, with participants potentially going ‘off track’, Bryman (1988: 47) sees this as an advantage of qualitative research, in that material can appear which offers fresh or unforeseen perspectives.
As a result of transcribing the pilot interviews, I was able to make more sense of the stories individuals told and discern the themes which emerged. Issues around stigma, alienation and anger were present in each family. Also, communication was identified as a major factor, with 'not knowing' about a loved one often featuring as the worst part of their experiences, at least in the early stages of confinement. Mistrust of the prison authorities seemed to be exacerbated as a result of having to negotiate the difficulties of prison visits.

Miles and Huberman’s (1994) work on emergent theory describes the value of allowing researchers to discover material which might fall outside their conceptual frameworks. Although I expected this research to affirm what I already knew and believed about the experiences of prisoners’ families (largely as a consequence of familiarisation with the literature and through talking to those affected), I was also willing to be informed and have my preconceptions challenged by new ideas which were thrown up as part of the process. Analysing the pilot interview findings gave me a sense of place in relation to the bigger conceptual frameworks which were part of the literature and gave me the confidence to locate my research within this constellation of ideas. Miles and Huberman’s model of data reduction helped me organise and, in the process, discard, prioritise and focus on what appeared to be the significant themes that emerged through an analysis of the interviews. The process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data gave me a useful insight into the themes that were likely to be important later on when I began the next phase of the research.

The pilot phase convinced me that there would be merit in pursuing a number of interviews with the same families over a period of time. This allowed me to make sense of people’s accounts as they unfolded, revealing something about how families felt and reacted to change. Crucially, part of these ongoing interviews allowed me to find out more about the dialogue between children and adults in these families as circumstances changed; for example, as children began to ask more questions or began to articulate their concerns and interpretations. It was obvious from talking to families in the pilot interviews that trust, as I have already alluded, was a contributing factor in terms of what respondents told me. Although the families already had established
relationships with the staff at POPS, they did not know me. I anticipated that if I could get to know families over a series of prearranged interviews, these contacts would inevitably become more relaxed and open, which would, ultimately yield more candid and useful material.

The pilot phase was valuable for many of the reasons outlined above, but most importantly, it gave me the confidence to develop a conceptual framework for my research which fitted within the constructivist paradigm. Accordingly, I adopted Altheide and Johnson’s (1994) conceptual framework, which they refer to as analytic realism, an approach that can be used in qualitative social research:

It is founded on the view that the social world is an interpreted world. . . . Analytic realism rejects the dichotomy of realism/idealism, and other conceptual dualisms, as being incompatible with the nature of lived experience, and its interpretation. (Ibid: 489)

Altheide and Johnson also attach a number of conditions to their framework, which helped me to anchor and locate my own research. In relation to context, Altheide and Johnson’s model first advocates an approach which locates findings in relation to the wider context; for example, the behaviour I observed in prisons needs to be contextualised against societal notions of crime and punishment, legal frameworks, professional cultures and other factors. In other words, what is observed cannot be viewed in isolation. The second condition relates to interaction, emphasising that a researcher’s presence makes a difference to what they observe and what they are told. My pilot research demonstrated this; that is, how participants sometimes tried to be helpful by offering far fuller, elaborate answers. This was often therapeutic for them, as noted before, but also because they felt that I was a sympathetic listener, whose research might help alleviate their situation. When it came to children’s responses, the adults would also try to aid my work by ensuring that their children’s answers were not only statements that the adults felt comfortable with, but were also made sufficiently clear to me. Altheide and Johnson’s third condition stipulates that the researcher should recognise that there are always
different perspectives on any particular issue. Prisoner's families were, therefore, less sympathetic towards the machinations of the criminal justice system than prison officers and police officers. This does nothing to discredit the research findings, but simply acknowledges that multiple perspectives exist and often clash. Fourthly, Altheide and Johnson stress the importance of offering an ‘ethical’ account to those who read the research. This involves an acknowledgement, on the part of researchers, of their standpoint and how this may influence any final report or thesis. As this is such an important matter, it will be discussed in a separate section.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations are central, as research undertaken without due consideration for the wellbeing of the participants can cause harm, and can also call into question the validity and reliability of the data obtained (Burton and Bartlett 2009). Diligence given to ethical considerations from the outset helps to ensure, although in no way guarantees, good quality research. A thorough review of ethical considerations in similar projects, along with appropriate negotiations with POPS, acting as a gatekeeper, helped me to ensure that all dimensions of the research had the necessary safeguards in place.

Research that involves human participants is arguably always intrusive to some degree. The precise degree, of course, will vary, depending upon the nature of what is being researched. Lindsay (2000) suggests that we cannot assume that people will carry on unchanged after they have taken part in research. The impact on the participant therefore needs to be considered from the outset, especially in relation to the vulnerable and relatively powerless – i.e. children, and the entire families of prisoners. It is also worth stressing that research of this nature can be positive, empowering and liberating, as alluded to earlier, in instances where participants expressed a desire to talk. As I have already mentioned, my early forays into interviewing family members surprised me in terms of how emotional respondents became. Often they would become tearful or angry. This initially prompted me to terminate the interview. I soon learned that by taking part in the research, regardless of their emotional state,
respondents gained a sense of empowerment and inclusion. They often reported a sense of hope and altruism too, through taking part in the research, perhaps best summed up in the words of Rebecca, a respondent in my pilot research:

‘This feels good because there’s no agenda. We’re not being judged or interrogated. I’m sick of being patronised and dumped on. When you initially asked about doing this [the interview] I had doubts. I thought you worked for the prisons or something official. This is the first time I’ve felt OK about telling someone stuff…personal things that I wouldn’t normally be talking about.’

The families who took part in my research were all to some extent vulnerable, but it was the children who were the most so. Research with children can be difficult, especially where there are strong emotional ties, as is the case with research into parental imprisonment. Bocknek et al. (2008: 329), for example, found that:

Children interviewed were highly likely to be reported by clinical staff as resistant to share information, ranging from protective to hostile. Few children were forthcoming from the start of the interview. Several children demonstrated a flat affect often consistent with depressive symptoms. Many children became increasingly responsive during the course of the interview, but most children exhibited extreme discomfort when speaking about their families. (Bocknek et al., 2008: 329)

Taking into account these concerns, and taking a principle-based approach which encompasses autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice (Wiles et al., 2004) respondents were able to make their own decisions at any point throughout the whole research process; for example, they could choose to end an interview (this did not happen) in which they felt uncomfortable or simply opt not to take part. Of course my research, like most social research, was undertaken with a view to maximising the beneficial outcomes for participants so that no one experiences harm through taking part. I have treated all individuals with equal respect throughout the research process and, wherever possible, I have made adjustments for respondents in order to meet their needs.
The ethical guidelines for the British Educational Research Association (2004: 6) define informed consent as ‘the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway’. Informed consent is defined by Diener and Crandall (1978) as the procedure that allows individuals to make an informed choice as to whether they wish to participate in an investigation. The assumption is that the participants have a full understanding of what the research is about and take part without feeling coerced or pressurised. For the twenty-four families who did take part, informed consent was sought from the outset, but also reaffirmed throughout the research process (given that some of the participants were interviewed on separate occasions). This also included children who participated in the research. Mukherji and Albon (2010: 38) stress the importance of gaining consent, regardless of age:

> Although it is important to gain the consent of key adults or ‘gatekeepers’ for research to be carried out and older children may be able to understand and sign to demonstrate they consent to research being carried out, it is important to be clear that we do think young children’s direct consent should be sought.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), children have a right to participate in all matters which impact upon them and, as such, researchers need to consider how they involve them and how they secure their consent. As Wiles et al. (2004: 8) point out:

> In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, children under 16 are not automatically presumed to be legally competent to give consent. However if a child can be judged to ‘understand’ what participation in research will involve (known as ‘Gillick competence’) then parental consent is not necessary. Assessing children’s competence is not straightforward; understandings of, and attitudes to, competence vary among researchers and assessments of competence are clearly dependent on the complexity and risks inherent in the research being conducted.

For my research, in all instances permission was sought from the parents, carers, and the children who participated. Everybody who was involved in the
research had effectively given me their permission orally (apart from very young children), once it was established what the research involved. Written consent was also sought and given on each occasion (see consent form – appendix 1A). An information sheet (appendix 1B) was given to all participants, which formed an additional reassurance and point of reference. Langston et al. (2004, cited in Mukherji and Albon, 2010: 38) maintain that very young children could give and withdraw their consent in a number of ways, such as ‘refusing to engage with the researcher, becoming abnormally quiet, turning away and crying or refusing to engage with any materials used in the study’. As a researcher potentially engaged in conversations with very young children, it was necessary to be mindful and vigilant in relation to their responses and reactions. Throughout the interviews I would often ask children if they were happy to carry on talking. Sometimes there were silences that seemed to last for a long time. Rather than attempt to interrupt these pauses, which often gave the participants time to reflect and consider their ideas before continuing, I simply waited. Other research suggested that gaining trust, cooperation and ultimately, informed consent was sometimes difficult. Shaw (1987: 7), in researching male prisoners and their families, found the question of permission problematic:

Research into the effects of a man’s imprisonment on his children poses many ethical and methodological problems, for example the use of personal and confidential information held by social work agencies, counselling organisations and in medical records. What rights does a man in prison have in respect of giving his agreement for a researcher to speak with his child’s teacher, doctor or health visitor? Should that decision be solely the prerogative of the child’s mother?

Wherever possible, I spoke to the imprisoned fathers at the point of introduction. Typically, Kathryn, the Family Link worker, would introduce me to families, at which point I would explain to them what the research involved and ask whether they would be willing to take part. It felt unfair to simply approach the mothers or grandparents, without consulting the father, who in most instances was the prisoner.
Hart and Bond (1995, cited in Bell, 2005: 47) make the point that researchers must ensure that participants are fully aware of the purpose of the research and understand their rights in relation to participating in it. I was fortunate in that the families I included in my research were prepared to have a conversation with me before any interviews took place. Because these conversations tended to take place in the visitors’ centres, both parents or carers were often present. This allowed them to ask questions and for me to explain the full purpose and remit of my research, exploring any potential impact on and involvement of any children within the family (this appeared to be the main concern of many parents). Although I had developed leaflets informing potential respondents about my research, families did not contact me after receiving them. The opportunity to discuss matters with families face-to-face and to reassure them, proved to be the best means of securing their involvement.

Confidentiality also needs to be considered by the researcher in designing any research where respondents, be they children or adults, might potentially be identified. Therefore, all the names of the respondents and practitioners were changed to ensure anonymity. There is a particular need here to be honest and transparent with families and children about what would happen to the responses they gave. Although there is some evidence from other research studies that children as participants prefer to have their own names used in the study (ESRC, nd), I decided to offer anyone - whether adult or child - who felt strongly about this a choice of pseudonyms. In the interviews, I addressed the children and participants using their real names, but used the pseudonyms when writing up the transcripts.

Research is sometimes described as having an ‘unspoken, moral agenda’ (Fraser et al., 2004: 45). The notion of ‘rescuing’ children who have experienced trauma or hardship often appears in the literature. There are also many examples of research with children that show how resilient and capable they are; for example, Olsen (1996) carried out research looking at the lives of young carers. He was conscious that a great deal of previous work produced around this marginalised group had tended to focus on the negative impact on
the children in terms of mental health, access to education, and support systems. Olsen’s work helped to show how children can also become empowered, confident and capable in adverse circumstances.

**Gatekeepers and access to research participants**

POPS, like most other voluntary sector organisations, is constantly adapting to the external environment, which often means chasing new funding streams, forging alliances and moving quickly from one piece of work to another (often in the form of short-term contracts). Because my research fits a model that POPS has developed and is keen to pursue (primarily about providing a more responsive service to families), there are mutual benefits to be gained. In this sense my research can be viewed as a type of unofficial contract between POPS and myself.

There are challenges for researchers in ensuring that they have the ultimate say in terms of research design and focus. Jupp et al. (2000) describe an imbalance of power between the gatekeeper and researcher, ultimately resulting in some kind of research bargain; for example, in discussions with the management team at POPS in 2009, it was clear that they wanted my research to focus on specific projects they were involved in. Gatekeepers often prefer research methods that are more likely to result in ‘hard facts’ or methods which might reflect the gatekeeper’s relative success in a certain area. My research struck a balance between allowing me to pursue a project which added to a growing body of knowledge, and also offered advantages to POPS in terms of further evidence that the work it is involved in has a positive impact on the lives of family members.

As already noted in the literature review, research needs to accept that prisoners’ children can be described as ‘hidden’ or ‘elusive’ in the sense that their precise numbers and defining characteristics are not routinely mapped. Although some unofficial estimates exist (see chapter two) that lay claim to the size of this population, relatively little has been done from a research perspective in detailing the lived experiences of families within it. Higgins
(1998: 140) describes the nature of hidden populations and the importance of engaging them in research agendas:

The inherent difficulties in researching, and indeed at times the lack of awareness of the need to do so, has resulted in many hidden populations being overlooked to date. Similar difficulties have been encountered by other disciplines and a browse through the methodological literature reveals that the study of hidden populations is not a new phenomenon. …Researchers have produced a range of methodological innovations in response to technical problems they have encountered in researching varied hidden populations and social activities.

My research design had taken into account some of these challenges, specifically in how to access this elusive population. By enlisting the support of POPS, as an agency with practitioners in it who are actively engaged in working with this population, my research was more likely to be successful, at least in terms of encountering my intended respondents.

As with the pilot research, in terms of permission to approach potential research respondents, POPS consented to my using the transcripts from interviews in my final report on the condition that any names were changed, along with other obvious identifying features, for example, addresses, workplaces, and the names of the prisons. Furthermore, all participants agreed to take part in the research on the understanding that any such details were omitted. Respondents were happy that the final report could be shared with POPS, with colleagues engaged in research, and with organisations engaged in working with prisoners’ families.

**Defining the population for my research**

Because my research is focused around the experiences of family members, and specifically children, it is helpful to provide some definition as to what we mean by the term ‘children’. Given that this research takes a social constructionist stance, it is worth acknowledging the different ways that the category ‘child’ has itself been socially constructed, making it highly open to contestation. However, I do not intend to try to essentialise children in this way;
rather, it is recognised that children are defined socially, culturally and historically, so to view them as a homogenous population is not helpful. This said, it is necessary, from a heuristic perspective, to establish some parameters by which children can be identified as potential research participants. My definition therefore avoids exclusivity, while at the same time working within the bounds of definition that carry wide support and official recognition. For the purpose of my research then, the definition of the child is taken from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines this category of person as ‘a human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier’. (United Nations General Assembly, 1989: 4)

As the research took place in England, where the legal definition of a child constitutes somebody up to their eighteenth birthday, this provided a certain symmetry. Nevertheless, the research did reveal some challenges as, for example, on occasions where parents talked about their children who had been given custodial sentences, despite the fact that they were aged eighteen or nineteen. Notions of childhood, innocence, and protection in such cases merged with ideas about adulthood and responsibility. Where these instances arose, I was careful to acknowledge the sometimes crude imposition of a legally defined status, and instead chose to recognise that individuals in such circumstances could be perceived as children (primarily in the eyes of their parents), but also as juveniles and adults (in the eyes of the prison and the criminal justice system). James and Prout (1997) also argue that it is wrong to view children as a homogenous group, in that their situations and experiences are markedly different. If research is going to be meaningful, then children, they argue, should be seen as individuals or persons in their own right. The following quotation (taken from an interview in my research) articulates some of the frustration young people encounter when they are lumped together as mere ‘children’, rather than the individuals that James and Prout refer to:

‘My Mum thought she was doing the right thing; that I’d freak out if she told me about him [mother’s boyfriend, serving a prison sentence]. To be honest I was fascinated. I wanted to go and meet this guy who my Mum felt so much about. I was just angry that she
hadn’t told me all of it earlier. ...It didn’t affect me really. Mum and Dad splitting up was the hardest thing. There was more stuff going on around that. The prison thing just made that harder... I was eight when it all started, but didn’t know much ‘til years later. That’s what annoyed me most, being treated like I was nothing, like I didn’t matter. This is really the first time I’ve been asked. Mum and me don’t talk much about those times.’ (Jay, eighteen-year-old boy)

Children have the capacity to influence the social world around them (James and Prout, 1997, James et al., 1998) and so my research was constructed with this in mind, highlighting instances in which this capacity was threatened or was given free rein. Mayall suggests that:

[children] are not only ‘actors’ – people who do things, who enact, who have perspectives on their lives. They are also to be understood as agents whose powers, or lack of powers, to influence and organise events – to engage with the structures which shape their lives – are to be studied. (2001: 3)

This idea chimes with the response of sixteen-year old Nisha who, on coming to terms with the imprisonment of her older brother, resolved to bring about change and take some form of direct action: ‘I’m going to do law at A Level, and I’ll do a law degree. I can change things if I get a job on the inside.’

These views are strengthened by a significant body of research which has emerged in recent years, that has begun to see children as important actors who hold valid opinions and possess useful ideas about the world they experience. This is a move away from the more traditional approach wherein, if anything, children were seen to be the passive recipients of welfare and protection and who were expected to comply with research that was done to them (Smart et al., 2001; Cockburn,1998; Butler et al., 2006). The concept of children as actors and agents, not just in relation to research, but in a much broader sense, has been a key theme which has developed over the last two decades. This process has been partly influenced by legislation and policies that have developed within the UK, but also globally. The 2004 Children Act formed a legislative milestone through actively involving children in the consultation phase and enshrining their rights through the establishment of a
Children’s Commissioner, with additional demands on local authorities to have directly elected councillors who would carry responsibility for children’s services. Although the 1989 Children Act held the interests of children as a central tenet, evidenced in the concept of paramountcy (the notion that the welfare of children is at all times paramount and overrides all other considerations), the 2004 Act compelled individuals and organisations on a national and local level to prioritise the wellbeing of children within public and private spheres of life. The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was also heralded as a significant step forward in a new landscape which sought to empower and recognise children as agents.

Children’s positioning has also been influenced by changing sociological perspectives and notions that this category of being is socially constructed in different ways. Some of these perspectives have been shaped by events that have left an imprint on the national psyche; for example, the murder of James Bulger in 1993 heralded a cultural shift in how children are viewed: as responsible, culpable, and (at least from a research perspective) capable beings. Attributing meaning and influence to what individual children and groups of children do has become increasingly important in relation to research relating to them. To some extent, this is a move away from a more dominant framework, in which children were seen to lack the values, conventions and requisite aptitudes that allow access to citizenship. My research shows that, even through the accounts offered by parents, children are able to understand and deal with events that they are not often given credit for:

‘It’s like he knows. He doesn’t say anything to me directly, but he’ll say to his Grandma, ‘what did Daddy do?’ , ‘why does he have to work in that place?’...little things that make me think he must know.’ (Ellie, mother of four-year-old boy, and partner of prisoner)

Although the voice of the child in this particular instance has been channelled through an adult, it appears likely, according to the mother’s account, that the boy in this example understood something of what was happening and wanted to find out more. A frustration and a weakness of my research was that, in
cases where children knew very little or were offered alternative accounts, as a researcher I was powerless to inform them otherwise.

Defining families and thinking about family dynamics in research
Family structures are ever-changing and we can no longer consider the model of the ‘nuclear family’ as being in any way typical or normal. Defining what the concept ‘family’ means can be a tricky business. Fox-Harding (1996) suggests that it tends to overlap with other concepts, such as household, kinship, marriage and parenthood. The decline in the popularity of marriage, the increase in the number of one-parent households, the increased divorce rate and the growth of reconstituted families all mean that any research undertaken with children and families must be flexible and responsive to these huge variations in family types and structures. Again, I do not want to restrict my respondents by being prescriptive about parameters and appropriate family structures. The families I have chosen for this research all have children aged below eighteen and have an immediate family member in prison (a sibling, a child, or a parent).

The distribution of power within families can pose challenges for researchers in terms of whose voices tend to dominate and whose are hard to hear. I have to consider this in terms of the specifics of my research; for example, when thinking about age, competence, knowledge, experience and autonomy within families. Dominant voices tend to be those of adults. In terms of an agreed narrative or explanation given to a significant event (in this case, the imprisonment of a family member), the voice of the child may often be muted in deference to the meanings conferred by adults. It is they who often control what happens in relation to visiting, informing schools and, in many cases (as evidenced in the literature and the interviews), in what the child knows about an absent parent. As another interview respondent put it:

‘I’m not going to tell him cos I don’t want him to know all this shit. I grew up with my mates and family in prison and it messes you up. He doesn’t need to know.’ (Lucy, mother of four-year-old child and partner of prisoner)
Harden et al. (2010: 444) point to the challenges in studying ‘multiple perspectives’ in family based research:

there was a concern that, given existing generational power relations, parents would talk for, or instead of, the child, particularly in the context of one off interviews, resulting in a silencing of the voice of the child. It is certainly the case that generational power relations structure many aspects of children’s lives.

Saskia, a mother of a four-year-old girl offered some revealing insights into power dynamics within her family:

‘We never discuss it when she’s [four-year-old daughter] up. I can tell you how she’s reacted...she’s been fine, most of the time. It’s only when he [father of four-year-old, serving a prison sentence] rings that she becomes agitated. I’ve told him what to say and what not to say. She started to cry the other night, really uncontrollably. I asked her what was the matter, and she said she was scared. When I asked her what about, she said she was scared of not seeing him [her dad] again. I managed to calm her down and get her to bed. It’s not good for her. Talking about it just gets her all wound up.’

A climate of secrecy and privacy can be an obstacle for researchers in this environment (Wyness, 2006). Parents acting as ‘gatekeepers’, who may wish to dominate any research carried out within the family, can present researchers with challenges. These power imbalances and relationships often mean that children are ‘shielded’ from the research, which itself is seen as being associated with something shameful.

Family dynamics might also have an impact upon the responses given by respondents. There is likely to be a difference in the group discussions with families, compared with the individual responses from the interviews. May (1997: 114) makes the point that ‘group and individual interviews may produce different perspectives on the same issues’. May goes on to explore how group dynamics can influence the outcome, and cautions researchers against/about attributing opinions to a whole group of people, when, in fact, dominant personalities may have influenced the discussion:
As most of our lives are spent interacting with others, it comes as no surprise that our actions and opinions are modified according to the social situation in which we find ourselves. (May 1997: 114)

Hareven (1982, cited in Chamberlayne et al., 2000: 73) reminds the researcher that ‘few individuals live alone as isolated atoms’. Families represent clusters of people whose actions, emotions, life decisions, and commitments are often interrelated. Life stories taken from different members of the same family become more valuable than simply interviewing children in isolation across several families. Family members belong to the same ‘social world’ and as such, it is possible for the researcher to distinguish how events which have happened at the same time impacted and unfolded in different ways for the adults and children concerned within a particular family unit. Useful differences are, however, bound to emerge in relation to experiences outside the family unit; for example, in interactions between children whilst at school, or in how extended family and friends are involved in the adult constructions of events.

Selecting the respondents and setting up the interviews
Following the pilot phase, I felt more focused and prepared for talking to respondents. Although I no longer had any specified questions, there were some pre-requisites I had in terms of what I needed to explore. All of the respondents who took part were clear that the research was about families and the way that the imprisonment of a family member had affected the family unit, and children in particular. Occasionally it was necessary to remind and prompt respondents if I felt they were becoming sidetracked, but for the majority of the interviews most of the issues discussed were linked in some way to the children. I always had a preliminary informal conversation with each respondent so that he or she was clear on what the research was about. Once the respondents were satisfied as to the nature and scope of the research, I encouraged them to tell their stories, in their own words, without any assistance from me, unless they became unclear, or needed some guidance. Although it felt strange, without having the comfort of an interview schedule, it
soon became apparent, as the pilot interviews had promised, that respondents gave me much more if I just gave them the space to talk freely.

Selecting respondents for my research presented a number of challenges, the main one being how to reach respondents who fitted the research profile. The pilot interview respondents had effectively been handpicked by the POPS team and consisted of families they knew well. A convenience sample made sense at this point as participants in this group fitted the profile for my research and were likely to be cooperative. As this seemed to be an effective strategy, it made sense to use POPS again as a vehicle to reach families who might be willing to take part. Three of the families involved in the pilot phase of the research agreed to be interviewed again. This allowed me to consolidate my initial findings stemming from the pilot interviews, but crucially presented the opportunity to encourage these respondents to present their stories in more detail. As these families had children who were in their teens, this also gave me the chance to talk to the latter directly concerning their experiences. Although the findings from these narratives gave me a great deal of information, I needed to extend the scope of the research by involving more families. Whilst the nature of this research is qualitative, I wanted to make sure I had sufficient information that would allow me to identify themes which chimed with the literature I had explored, but would also uncover new material that would eventually contribute to this emerging research landscape. I had to strike a balance between the quality of the data produced and the numbers of respondents involved that would allow me to construct a valuable, in-depth study. The size of the sample concerned me less than the quality of information and the results it was likely to produce. The parameters of my sample were partly defined by my reliance on POPS as a gatekeeper and by the settings I visited, both of which allowed me to meet potential respondents.

Because the research is qualitative, the sampling procedure is entirely different from that used in quantitative research. As O’Connell, Davidson and Layder (1994: 173) suggest:
Generally, qualitative research is concerned with smaller numbers of cases but with more intensive analyses. In formal terms, qualitative enquiry deals with non-random samples in which there is no way of estimating the probability of units in the total population of the group or community being included in the sample that is actually included.

The timeframe was also another important consideration in selecting appropriate respondents. I wanted to interview children and families who were currently experiencing the imprisonment of a family member, but I wanted to interview them several times to capture information that emerged over time, in this case, over a period of nineteen months between January 2012 and September 2013. I decided on this timeframe as it gave me sufficient opportunity to conduct two or more interviews with each family and gave me the room to get to know the respondents so they could trust me and begin to confide in me more. Crucially, in the case of families with young children, it meant that over time the parents would be more open to the idea of me talking to their children. Many of the families I spoke to had family members in prison who were serving relatively short sentences and so, in the course of nineteen months, it was quite possible that some of the prisoners involved would be released, which would add a dimension to my research in terms of the impact release had and the challenges it presented for families.

In addition to interviewing family members (including children, parents, grandparents, and the prisoners themselves), I also interviewed three prisoners and four professionals who work with prisoners’ families. The prisoners were already known to Kathryn the Family Link Worker, who set up introductions which enabled me to involve them in subsequent interviews. Patton (1990) reminds us that purposeful sampling is intended to deliberately seek out cases which are likely to yield rich information and will provide ample opportunity to explore the key research questions. Using a purposive sampling method meant that I was selecting only those cases I would consider useful. Kathryn guided me in this process. Following on from the pilot phase and in order to reach more respondents, I took the opportunity to meet families and approach them directly about my research. In January 2012 I visited HMP
Orient, where Kathryn introduced me to ten visiting families (all with children). Because Kathryn was already well acquainted with these families she knew which ones had children and which ones were regular visitors. Kathryn had also been involved in a large-scale research project in the twelve months leading up to my initial contact with her. This was especially helpful as it gave her an insight into what was likely to work when attempting to get people involved in the research. Kathryn introduced me to the families as they arrived for their visits. It was clear that she knew the families well and they trusted her. The building of trust between researchers and respondents had surfaced as a significant issue in other research with families and so it seemed appropriate to learn from this. Janesick (1998: 40) suggests that access, cooperation, trust and honesty are intrinsically linked and that researchers should be aware of this:

Access and entry are sensitive components in qualitative research, and the researcher must establish trust, rapport, and authentic communication patterns with participants. By establishing trust and rapport at the beginning of the study, the researcher is better able to capture the nuance and meaning of each participant’s life from the participant’s point of view. This also ensures that participants will be more willing to share everything, warts and all, with the researcher.

Following the introductions, I would sit and chat for several minutes with the families, who came in varying numbers and consisted of children, spouses, parents, siblings, grandparents and friends. As I explained the nature of my research to one couple, both became agitated and advised me quietly, but sternly, never to mention the ‘P’ word (I had used the word ‘prison’). Their child, aged approximately four years old, was playing on the floor nearby. I became acutely aware of the sensitivity around what was said in the vicinity of children who regularly visit a family member in prison. I had naively assumed that because the children saw the prison, the prison officers, watched their fathers or older siblings appear from behind a locked door, along with all the other cues, that they must already know they were in a prison. Luckily, this couple were the first people I met so I was able to adjust my approach with subsequent families throughout the day. Surprisingly, most of the parents who
had young children with them during this visiting session made it clear that the children did not know that one of their parents was in prison. Most were told that their fathers or relatives were at work. One boy was told his father was in the army. I decided, during the follow-up interviews, to find out more about why parents had chosen to fabricate stories for their children and to discover what the possible consequences might be in pursuing such an approach.

After explaining a little more about what my research entailed, I asked permission from the families to contact them at a later date in order to carry out further interviews. I texted all the family members who had agreed to talk to me (a total of eight) so that I could arrange a suitable time to interview them. These interviews, in the vast majority of cases, were held with one family member at a time. In seven cases this was the mother of the child (and partner of the prisoner) and in one case it was the mother of the prisoner (and grandparent/part-time carer for the child).

A subsequent visit to HMP Orient in March 2012, and similar visits to HMP Marston (May 2012) and HMP Grange (July 2012) yielded an additional sixteen participating families.

The interviews, which took place following my visits, gave me the opportunity to tell the participants more about the research and also gave me an opportunity to remind them that they were helping me on a purely voluntary basis. I carried out initial interviews over the telephone after asking permission to record the conversations. I made it clear that all information would be confidential and that all records and details relating to names and other identifying features would be anonymised. These interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes and gave me the necessary background information to plan further interviews, all of which were conducted face to face. Where permission was given for me to interview a child, I arranged for the interview to take place face to face at a venue selected by the family. By adopting such a flexible but necessary approach, I discovered more about their lives and experiences of family members, and, crucially, the children.
The telephone interviews involved parents, but not children. Respondents sounded willing to talk freely over the telephone and gave full and frank accounts of their experiences. I had anticipated that telephone interviews might inhibit responses, but the conversations demonstrated that this was a viable method for interviewing adults. Three of the respondents expressed the view that it was helpful to talk to somebody who was ‘not connected’ to their situation. The practical consideration of distance and travel was also overcome by using telephone interviews as a research method. Although the literature on research methods points out that there are disadvantages to telephone interviews because of the lack of non-verbal cues and the reduced likelihood of obtaining open and frank responses (University of Surrey, 1994), the fact that I had already met the respondents during my prison visit seemed to make a difference. Again, the building of trust appears to be pivotal. Without the initial meetings in the visitors’ centres and the follow up telephone interviews, it might have been more challenging to arrange a sequence of subsequent face to face interviews. Occasionally respondents would ask if what they were saying was ‘good enough’. But once they had my reassurance they began to reconnect to their stories. Respondents generally seemed to want to talk and make sense of their experience without being presented with a series of orchestrated prompts.

Although each of the three prisons was categorised differently, which meant there were differences in terms of the length of prison sentence, type of offence, and variations in visiting conditions, the themes that emerged from each setting were broadly similar. Initially I considered this a methodological weakness; however, after subsequently checking, coding, and examining the data from the interviews, I was reassured that conducting the research across three prisons strengthened and added credibility to my research.

Whilst I was waiting for the visitors’ centre to fill up on my visit to HMP Orient, I was able to talk to two of the prisoners who were working in the sandwich bar area. Although this was not planned, Kathryn suggested I use the opportunity as both of the prisoners were fathers to young children. Again, because Kathryn knew the two prisoners well, they were willing to talk to me. After
explaining what my research involved and gaining their consent to take part, we managed to use a small room adjoining the kitchen, where we could talk. In keeping with the narratives I hoped to elicit from the families on the outside, I also wanted to ensure that I captured the stories the prisoners told. In hindsight, this gave me a valuable insight into the frustrations of being a parent in prison, particularly in relation to the powerlessness and the sense of guilt experienced.

In addition to the interviews I conducted with the families, I also carried out four interviews with professionals who routinely work with prisoners’ families. The POPS team were already engaged in working with these professionals, and so introductions were managed through them. I was able to triangulate my findings, using the data these interviews generated, making connections with the data elicited from the families. These interviews, as discussed earlier in this chapter, add a layer to the research, allowing a deeper appreciation of the immediate landscape prisoners’ families inhabit. The interviews were particularly helpful in showing what kind of help and assistance children are entitled to and sometimes receive. They also offered an insight into the pressures, priorities and interactions each professional was likely to experience when dealing with prisoner’s families. The findings from these interviews are interwoven into chapter four and complement the themes which emerge in this chapter. Each of these four interviews was conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule (see appendix two), allowing me to deliberately target areas which family members had attached significance to. The professionals included a police officer, a family intervention worker, a head teacher, and a social worker.

**An ethnographic approach – immersion into the prison**

Ethnography is, according to Liebling (2001), a broad concept and can include observation, participation and interviews. Essentially it should involve some kind of meaningful interaction between ourselves (as researchers) and the social world being researched. In this sense, there is perhaps a case to make the ethnographic considerations and experiences I encountered explicit.
There are few detailed accounts that are written about the experience and practicalities of conducting research within a prison environment. There is a lack of guidance in relation to the human interactions, communication, and culture within prison settings that prepare researchers adequately. Although I spent time in three prison visitors’ centres, initially I felt uncomfortable, unprepared and anxious about how these environments operated, what I would be able to achieve as a researcher, and how others perceived me. These are not uncommon worries for researchers who study the social world of prisons, although they are rarely the main focus of attention. Qualitative and quantitative research tends to focus more on the findings and analysis rather than on the actual experience of immersion in a particular setting (Sutton, 2011). By acknowledging the process, environment and interactions that took place and that ultimately produced the findings of my research, an appreciation and deeper understanding of my role was gained. This in turn, offers the reader a further insight into my findings and the subtle dynamics through which they were uncovered. A large part of my time spent within the visitors’ centres involved waiting for opportunities to meet with and talk to families and individuals. These periods of waiting gave me the chance to observe and reflect on the interactions for the duration of the visiting time. Often I would sit amongst visitors, inconspicuous but, nonetheless, conscious of my status as an outsider. On reflection, many of the people visiting were also self-conscious, but for different reasons. Generally people did not strike up conversations with people who were sitting next to them. The waiting area seemed to me to be a tense and anxious zone, where there was a palpable sense of impatience and desperation. Conversations which did take place tended to be around common experiences; for example, if visitors arrived with young children, these visitors might talk about them. Conversations tended not to be about the prison visits, and were often simply a polite way of passing time. Because of this reticence and associated tense atmosphere, I was able to listen to the few conversations that did happen, which offered me an insight into the dialogue that routinely punctuates a typical visiting day at the prison. What seemed strange, at least on my first visit to a visitors’ centre, was the matter of fact, everyday, sheer ordinariness of the visitors’ demeanour. The location might have been a doctor's waiting room or a bus shelter. People did
not talk about prison openly to each other and individuals appeared guarded and a little cautious. Subsequent interviews that happened in the families’ homes also enhanced my understanding of the worlds of the participants, helping me in turn to appreciate their experiences and accounts.

Chapter four describes some further observations from my vantage point as a researcher. Although these are in no way detailed accounts, they offer the reader a sense of place and context where this is deemed to be helpful, as, for example in relation to the layout of a prison’s visitor’s centre, the spaces used by children and the interactions between the different actors.

**Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis can be described as:

identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic. (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79)

The themes which emerge in chapter four have been developed through a process of thematic analysis, using the broad approach identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). This is a process of sifting through transcribed interviews that enabled me to initially code, and subsequently to cross-reference and find a ‘home’ for this data. Although the process was time-consuming, the results have allowed me to establish a structure in which my thesis can be most coherently articulated. Inevitably, at times, themes overlapped and interlinked. Sometimes the process of separating ideas became problematic as, for example, when looking at the themes of stigma, secrecy and fictional accounts. Wherever such overlaps occur within my findings I have attempted to make these explicit to the reader.

Braun and Clarke identify themes as capturing ‘something important about the data in relation to the research question’ (2006: 82). An example of a theme that emerges from analysis of the data is the concept of stigma. This theme also resonates with the literature on prisoners’ families. Although respondents
did not refer directly to stigma as a distinct idea or concept, its implied importance was obvious. Ben, the son of a prisoner I interviewed spoke about the intensity and impact of stigma on his feelings and on relationships with other immediate family members:

‘We got home and Mum was crying, then started ranting about keeping a lid on everything, about not telling anyone that didn’t need to know. She was really out of control, just ranting and talking nonsense. I felt like dirt after that. As if I was bad or something. Mum made me feel bad. She was trying to hide something from people and because of that, it made me feel worse.’

Braun and Clarke identify six distinct phases of activity which fall under thematic analysis. They are familiarisation with the data, initial coding, identification of themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and finally producing a report. It must be stressed that in relation to my research, this process was repeated several times, and at each stage produced a greater level of refinement and ordering in relation to the identification of themes. Often this involved listening to a particular recording of a conversation several times in order to familiarise myself with the context and possible meanings respondents attributed to particular events or circumstances.

I felt a sense of responsibility in transcribing the personal accounts of respondents, and wherever possible attempted to capture their words as spoken. Although I have not always captured pauses and other attributes associated with the spoken word, I have tried to impress where appropriate a sense of feeling and emotion; for example, I have always made it explicit when a respondent has manifested signs of becoming upset.

**Conclusion**

The methodology I have chosen is consistent with the type of knowledge I want to capture and analyse. Individual accounts and interpretations of events are bound to be personal, complicated, emotional and sometimes confusing, but nonetheless will begin to illuminate an area of social life that has been overlooked for too long. My approach used a thematic analysis to tell me more about how and why children were involved when a family member was imprisoned. This gave me the opportunity to explore individual accounts in
detail. Because I made trust an important factor the families were more likely to allow me to explore their stories as they developed.

The research is as much about secrets (between adults and children) as it is about frankness and openness. Whilst it does not seek to judge or maintain that there is a right way to handle imprisonment and its consequences, what it does do is listen to the explanations and accounts of individuals who have experienced these issues. In doing so, I expect the reader will be able to understand more about the impact of imprisonment upon children and families.

The initial findings from the pilot interviews had already given me a deeper understanding of the criminal justice process and how families have reacted, particularly in relation to how they attempted to explain and present this information to their children. These explanations often turned out to be fabricated accounts or stories, based on the assumption that children would not be able to cope with the ‘true’ situation. The next chapter explores the findings from the research and divides them into a series of themes elicited through the thematic analysis methods outlined earlier in this chapter.
Chapter Four

Findings

This chapter explores and analyses the main themes emerging from the interviews with family members, prisoners and practitioners. The chapter is divided into a number of sub-sections, many of which correspond to ideas outlined and detailed in the literature review.

I have deliberately prioritised the voices of the participants, allowing their words to illuminate the various issues involved, which my own commentary has then sought to foreground. Some voices are more prevalent than others, though; for example, the voice of Kathryn, the family link worker, who was invaluable not only because she helped me set up the interviews, but also because she was immersed in the landscape I was exploring. Although unplanned, Kathryn acted as a guide, often anticipating themes and ideas I would encounter in my conversations with family members.

All of the material selected for inclusion in this chapter helps to evidence the harm, disadvantage, stigma and hardship prisoners’ families experience, ultimately demonstrating that children, partners of prisoners and other close family members are inadvertently, but systematically, punished in a multitude of ways as a consequence of imprisonment. Each theme is given a place and adds a layer of evidence, helping to show how and why imprisonment harms families. Notions of coping, resilience and support are included to show how, despite the disadvantages and hardships prisoners’ families encounter, some are better equipped than others to deal with them. The harm caused by the imprisonment of a family member is not uniformly distributed and tends to impact on some families disproportionately.

Although the experiences described are manifestations of the unintended consequences of imprisonment, they nevertheless deserve attention and warrant further study so that the impact of prison can be understood in its entirety, rather than solely from the context of the prisoners or their partners.
The themes discussed in this chapter are broken down into four broad sections. Firstly, the frustrations of dealing with ‘the system’ are explored, showing how aspects of bureaucracy and power imbalances are prevalent in the negative experiences of the participants. The participants’ responses included in the chapter show how, for example, the families’ initial dealings with the criminal justice system present them with a continual sense of frustration, often exacerbated through a lack of knowledge, hostility from the professionals who work within the system, and a pervasive feeling of helplessness. Secondly, the use of fictionalised accounts offered predominantly to children, helps to show how parents and carers struggle to accept the reality of their situation, and in the process try to protect their children. Avoidance of the truth and children’s relative powerlessness are discussed in relation to this. Thirdly, the seemingly ever-present notion of stigma forms another pillar of the discussion, demonstrating how shame, embarrassment and a desire to conceal their situation determined how participants acted. The impact of imprisonment on family relationships is the final strand that runs through the findings. These all-encompassing themes are discussed largely in the first half of the chapter.

The second half of the chapter is entitled ‘Events’, for this term captures more fittingly the dynamic nature of certain themes; for example, the processes of arrest, visiting, and release. Of course, there will always be significant overlap between these events and the more general themes outlined in the first part of the chapter. Wherever possible I have attempted to map and navigate the complex worlds prisoners’ families inhabit and to contextualise what appears significant to them at different points. A sense of priority, place and an appreciation of the relative impact each element produces offers the reader a sense of the harm and overall damage inflicted as a consequence of imprisonment. A final section looks at how families, and in particular children, adapt and cope following the imprisonment of a family member, often showing strength, resilience and independence. Whilst every family copes differently and, on the whole, most families struggle on many levels, the findings show that families can ultimately adapt to and survive such hardships.
By organising the chapter in this way, I have attempted to contextualise the lived experiences of family members in a way that should give the reader a sense of perspective and will eventually lead to the formulation of some recommendations for improvement (detailed in chapter five).

**Themes:**

**How prisoners’ families make sense of and deal with ‘the system’**

‘He was on solitary confinement for six months because they refused to answer letters to the solicitor. It was abysmal. That’s what we’re saying – we can’t believe how bad the system is.’ (Johanna, a prisoner’s mother)

‘The system is all set up for plea-bargaining, because it will make their figures look good. They say if you admit to this then we’ll get you a better deal.’ (Jen, prisoner’s mother)

‘It’s the system that stops them from having a reconnection. Things aren’t geared up properly. The prisons were never meant to talk to people on the outside, but now they’re finding out why they need to. The people who are part of the system don’t even talk to each other. Probation officers and prison officers don’t always communicate. Some people think they’re better than others. It’s the families and the children that get trapped in the middle.’ (Kathryn, family link worker)

The system influences and shapes the lives of children and families affected by imprisonment in sometimes subtle, but often brutal ways. It is a powerful, but elusive entity. The following extracts taken from the interviews with professionals, children, and families reveal that although the system means something qualitatively different for each individual, its regular occurrence within the accounts they offered deserves further consideration. Whatever the system signifies to individuals, whether it helps or hinders, it clearly held importance for the family members I spoke to, permeating their stories and having a presence throughout the interview process.

Respondents talked about the system throughout the interviews, and though it proved difficult for participants to define, certain characteristics seemed to be held in common. Sometimes the system exhibited malevolence and cruel indifference (‘nobody listens’, ‘they’re all out to get us’), whilst at other
junctures, albeit less often, it was characterised by its helpfulness and responsiveness. Often ‘the system’ was invisible, intangible and seemed to possess many facets. Occasionally participants would talk about its more manifest functionaries and contexts; for example, probation officers, prison officers and the police, courtrooms and prison visitors’ centres. It is worth examining these characteristics and manifestations of the system in more detail in order to understand and make sense of them, and specifically so in order to consider how they impact on the lives of family members. Again, the concept of power (and the lack of) appeared to be central in relation to many of the participants’ accounts.

One prominent characteristic, cropping up in many of the interviews, was an overriding sense of helplessness and of being lost and confused in relation to dealings with the system. It seemed distant and inaccessible to some participants, such as Billy, the father of a prisoner:

‘You can’t get sense out of anyone. Trying to find out about Jack is impossible…they don’t tell you anything. Finding someone who can help is like finding a needle in a haystack. I spent nearly a week trying to get hold of somebody who could help us. We ended up giving up…nobody could tell us what was going on with him. From the day he was sent down, he disappeared from normal life…the rules don’t apply…we’re on our own. Trying to make sense of it [the system] is just impossible.’

Billy’s view captures the frustration and powerlessness experienced by many family members. The sense of isolation and of enforced separation for those outside the prison, rather than in relation to the imprisoned family member, presents an ironic twist on the concept of prison and its original intent: incapacitation, deterrence, retribution and reformation (Morris and Rothman, 1998). It is as though the family members are the ones who are trapped and powerless, effectively incapacitated and disconnected from their loved ones who are in prison; it would seem that they are being unfairly and systematically punished.
Often, the system represented something that was damaging and caused anguish for individuals. Kathryn described the system as something that hindered and prevented families from helping those who were imprisoned. This idea was commonplace in my interviews. Connections between prisoners and family members, although seen as desirable by many, especially at policy-making level (Ministry of Justice, 2013), became difficult to maintain for many of the families I spoke to: ‘You’re not getting any younger and you’re fighting the system all the time. Nobody wants to listen to you’ (Janet, mother of prisoner).

Kathryn’s description of the system highlighted failures in communication between the professionals and agencies who work within it. According to Kathryn, the legal and procedural aspects of the system seemed as convoluted and complex to the practitioners working with the criminal justice system as they did to the families struggling to make sense of it.

I asked Kathryn, in her role as a family link worker, if she herself felt part of the system. Her answer was revealing, and again, seemed to be concerned with the human element and how important trust was:

‘It depends what you mean. I’m here to help those families that struggle against it. I help them cut through the red tape and the rules and regulations. The whole thing confuses them. It does me, sometimes. People trust me and when they see I work for POPS, they tend to talk and trust us more, whereas the police, the probation and the courts frighten them.’

Kathryn acknowledges the bureaucratic barriers that families have to ‘cut through’. She also alluded to the professional experts, who might be cold, impersonal and detached from the specific needs of the families attempting to navigate through the system. Such detachment and lack of empathy might, if it is perceived to be the norm, inevitably alienate those who interact with it, ultimately resulting in poor communication, animosity and mistrust. This was certainly true of many participants in my research.
Weber (in Watson, 1980), writing almost one hundred years ago, described bureaucracies as machine-like and unfeeling. He suggested that professionals who work in such bureaucratic organisations are removed and distanced from emotional concerns, and consequently exempt from feeling 'love, hatred, and every purely personal, especially irrational and incalculable feeling...' (Weber, cited in Bendix, 1977: 427). This analysis, despite its age and original context, fits with descriptions offered by the respondents, suggesting that many of the institutions, organisations, and ultimately the professionals that families encounter, are removed to the extent that they cannot connect to individuals who fall outside their immediate domain. Dean, a prison officer, in his succinct observation about his changing role, offers a glimpse of this 'distance' and the corresponding reluctance to narrow it:

'We have to deal with the families direct now. It used to be different, we used to just sign them in and that was it. Now it's all more complicated. We're being asked to do a lot more. This isn't what the job is about.'

It is this 'depersonalisation' that appears to characterise the system for the families I spoke to. Dean's seeming reluctance to move away from such a depersonalised model reveals the professional cultures which have become entrenched over time.

Kathryn suggested that such bureaucratic climates were not always so unfeeling. Her description of prison officers suggests that compassion and feeling are not unknown. Changes within the prison (alluded to by Dean), some of which are being introduced as part of a change in management ethos, seemed to yield visible and encouraging results:

'Job roles are changing in the prison service. Where they [prison officers] were sat at a computer or booking in, now they're being told that they have to talk to people, talk to families. Some of them will actually talk to the little boys and girls, but it tends to be those who've got children of their own.' (Kathryn)
It is clear from listening to family members and those who work in the criminal justice system that changing work cultures demand that professionals have more interaction with prisoners’ families. Such moves are, it seems, slow to gain momentum, and consequently recognition and appreciation from the individual family members and from the professionals who work within the system.

Perceptions of roles and responsibilities and, in particular, participants’ views about where an individual or organisation fitted within the overall system, seemed to be significant: ‘Most of the people we’ve come up against have been unhelpful, apart from POPS that is’ (Janet, mother of prisoner). It is revealing that Kathryn saw herself as an advocate of the families, aligning herself with them against other, potentially less helpful agencies. Certainly, from what I experienced, it was obvious that the families who knew Kathryn trusted her. The ease with which I was able to meet family members and arrange interviews was testament to the strong relationships that Kathryn had fostered with them. This was in contrast to the impression I gained when observing interactions between prison officers and families, where levels of suspicion and hostility were palpable.

Professionals I spoke to appeared to understand, and work around these cultural and professional limitations. Gary, a police officer, viewed these boundaries as a routine aspect of his working life:

‘We get cases involving families with all sorts of problems...like the families you’re talking about. They’ve got social workers, psychologists, health workers all milling around them. I’m not paid to feel sorry for people who run into trouble...it’s just the way life is. Social workers and teachers think we’re a bit hard sometimes...you have to be to do the job. It’s just the way it [‘the system’] works.’

Although Gary’s priorities were fundamentally linked to the immediate business of policing and crime detection, his version of the system demonstrates the difficulties in navigating professional cultures for those who work within them. Given these professional differences, it hardly seems surprising that families admit that building trust, accessing information and
securing help are often challenging. Whilst cultural competence models have
developed in the fields of health, education and social work (Nazroo, 1997; Modood, 1994, 1997; Acheson, 1998), there has been no corresponding
development across criminal justice agencies, apart from isolated models
such as youth offending teams, set up under the auspices of the 1998 Crime
and Disorder Act. Because of this deficiency, prisoners’ families are likely to
experience poor communication, limited access to help and advice, isolation,
stress and ultimately a sense that their needs are not recognised.

Whilst the system’s shortcomings are undoubtedly frustrating for the
professionals who are part of it, they seem relatively insignificant when
compared to the anguish experienced by a close relative of somebody serving,
or about to serve, a prison sentence.

Some individuals and organisations appeared to fare worse than other in the
eyes of the participants. John, a prisoner, has two children, aged twelve and
eight. The following extracts from an interview with John’s parents, Billy and
Mary, capture some of their frustration in relation to the system, and those
who, they believe, represent it. Their frustrations and anxieties were
compounded by the additional responsibilities carried as grandparents. Again,
a sense of powerlessness, confusion and hopelessness permeated the
accounts of such respondents who attempted to articulate their involvement
with the system.

John’s offences had been committed partly, according to his parents, as a
consequence of his drinking. His parents were concerned that the probation
officer was willing to make a recommendation that involved John effectively
receiving no support. Billy and Mary were extremely critical of the system and
its seeming inability to secure a positive outcome for John:

‘The probation service were really lax – they didn’t produce the
reports they were supposed to, even though they were requested
by the magistrates’ courts. We had no idea what was going on or
what was needed. If we had, then at least we could have tried to
put pressure on. John told us his probation officer was a waste of
space and that he didn’t like John. What kind of a system does that?'
It’s like a lottery…bang!...here you go…this idiot will be your probation officer. When we next went to court on 30th November, probation recommended a non-custodial sentence. John was not eligible for drinks counselling and that was his main problem.’

As well as viewing the system as distant and confusing, it also appeared in their view, to be inept and unresponsive: ‘Nobody seemed to talk to each other. We came out of court wondering how on earth people get help. Our son needed help and the system failed him’ (Mary).

The system was clearly connected to power and status, according to the respondents I spoke to. Billy talked about their experience of encountering the system for the first time, starting with the process of the courtroom:

‘We’d never been to court before so it all felt alien. We were appointed a barrister. First of all, it was the Magistrates’ court – they wanted to go for a six month maximum sentence. John was offered unconditional bail, at the request of the barrister. It all seemed to be so mixed up; we didn’t understand what anyone was on about. The barrister, although she was nice, treated us like children. She understood the way things worked and we didn’t. I don’t think she thought we were very bright.’

The language and terminology employed by the professionals in the criminal justice system creates a barrier for families who are unfamiliar with its peculiarities and idiosyncrasies. For families who are struggling to decipher this language and interpret the workings of an unfamiliar landscape it was incredibly difficult to explain what was going on to their grandchildren, given their limited understanding:

‘The initial hearing was in October, and the next hearing was scheduled for 9th November. John was clearly suffering from mental health problems – this affected Mary badly. She was looking after the kids [John’s children] pretty much non-stop at that time. Trying to explain it all to them was a nightmare. We didn’t understand what was going on ourselves. I’m not convinced the probation staff knew what was going on sometimes … everyone appeared to sit around nodding. We didn’t have a clue. The kids were not themselves. We’d take them out and visit places but they knew something was badly wrong.’
The challenge of explaining the complexities of the criminal justice process, in terms their grandchildren could understand, presented an ongoing challenge for Billy and Mary.

The children, according to Billy and Mary reacted badly to the news about their father. Added to this frustration for Billy and Mary was the feeling that nobody seemed to recognise them or their rights:

'We just felt like we were in the dock, like we were being judged. There was no-one who really helped us; it [the system] felt like a brick wall. It's not like we didn't try and ask to find out. They [individuals employed by the courts] just told us they couldn't tell us anything and they could only speak to John or John should speak to his solicitor. To be honest, it was scary. Nothing prepares you for this.'

Foucault’s ideas (1991) about how language and power are linked can help in making sense of Billy and Mary’s dealings with the criminal justice system. Billy and Mary seemed to quickly realise that the dominant institutions and organisations appeared to speak in and use a different language. Their lack of involvement, comprehension and inclusion affected their relationship and interactions with the prison and the court. In many respects, they could be considered as outsiders, having no stake or any influence over procedures and interactions that would ultimately alter their lives and the lives of their grandchildren. Foucault (cited in Gaventa, 2003: 1) argued that power is not necessarily manifested in obvious ways, but instead tends to be dispersed. As Gaventa, summarising Foucault’s ideas, (2003: 1) puts it ‘power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them.’

Perhaps it was these intangible aspects and pervasive manifestations of power, sometimes in the guise of legal jargon, perceived indifference or the lack of any definitive guidance that Billy and Mary experienced, which led to their frustration and anger towards the system. Their attitude, although
influenced by a number of perceived failings in the system, appeared to have been particularly influenced by the professionals they encountered:

‘Ever since John was arrested, most of the people we’ve had to deal with have treated us badly. We have hidden most of that from the children, but it leaves a bad taste.’ (Mary)

A sense of ‘otherness’, of being disconnected from ‘the system’ was noticeable in the accounts of other participants: ‘they [the criminal justice agencies] knew all the moves, spoke to each other in their code and didn’t consider us’ (Joel, aged seventeen, younger sibling of prisoner).

Another frustrated parent of a prisoner talked about the uncaring attitude of the probation worker who, it seemed, was oblivious to the needs of the family, and only seemed concerned with the immediate matter of managing his client. Again, the bureaucratic and procedural concerns of the probation officer appear to outweigh the needs of the individuals affected:

‘The probation officer pops round now and again, but only because he has to. He’s got no interest in Paul as a person or how he gets on. So long as he can say Paul’s out of it [offending] and he’s kept his nose clean, that’s it. He just disappears, ticks the box, job done. He never asks us about what we’ve been doing to support Paul, how I have bloody awful rows, screaming fits begging him not to go out. He doesn’t see Paula [Paul’s teenage sister] stressing out, tears all night. Funny that, but he never asks about us...It’s as if we don’t matter, like we’re not here.’ (Yvonne, Paul’s mother, following Paul’s release from prison)

Ultimately, the unpreparedness of family members seemed to be one of the most telling factors in relation to their dealings with the system. In a legal system where it is hard to guarantee outcomes with any degree of certainty, specifically in relation to sentencing decisions, families struggle to come to terms with sentences that are handed out. Billy and Mary were no exception. They described ‘feeling lost’ once they heard the verdict:
‘We spent the whole day in court and Jack was given a four-month sentence. No one prepared us for this eventuality – it was impossible to plan for. As soon as they disappear, you lose all contact; all of your rights go out of the window. We didn’t know where he went, what the procedure was, we didn’t get any advice at all. When we tried to ask, we were fobbed off with some stuff about confidentiality. That’s what I mean, it’s [‘the system’] like a brick wall you can’t get around or see through. We didn’t understand the language they used, it was all jargon. I’m sure they do it on purpose to confuse you. We had no rights, no redress, nothing.’

The time spent in and around the courts seemed to be the most confusing and stressful. The legal system’s procedural complexities seemed bewildering and frightening in equal measure. Billy and Mary were worried about their grandchildren, Johanna and Jack, aged six and eight. Their lack of confidence in the system and frustration about not knowing what was likely to happen exacerbated their concerns about the children:

‘What made the whole episode even more stressful was how it affected the kids. With all the confusion we’d lived through, we then had to try and let Sue [John’s wife] and the kids know what was happening. How do you explain to an eight-year old that their Dad is in the middle of some complex legal negotiations that might also mean he spends more time in prison or not. What we needed, I suppose more than anything else was some kind of certainty. For their sake more than anything. They missed their Dad a lot.’

Billy and Mary’s case exposes the marginalisation of children from the legal process. Not only are they routinely excluded from the formalities of court proceedings, dealings with legal professionals and sentencing decisions, but, for many children like Johanna and Jack, they are removed to a greater extent by the efforts of parents, grandparents and carers to protect them from such dealings. Whilst such distancing is well intentioned, from what Billy and Mary told me about their grandchildren, they (the children) appeared to be very unhappy.

Sue (John’s wife) had chosen not to attend court, and gave her consent for John’s parents to deal with any decisions made by the criminal justice system. Sue admitted to Billy and Mary that she was not coping and the additional
strain likely to be caused by attending court, visiting prison and dealing with criminal justice agencies would be too much. Cases like this show how damaging and far-reaching contact and transactions with the criminal justice system can be, even in the early stages before formal sentencing decisions are reached.

Although Billy and Mary felt frustrated and powerless throughout much of this period, there were moments when the system could be surprisingly and unexpectedly helpful. These instances offer a sharp but refreshing contrast to the negative aspects they had encountered up to this point:

‘After we got back [from a prison visit], we had to wait until Monday before we could see him again. We had to sort postal orders and get telephone numbers checked out. There were no short cuts, or so we thought. Mary found POPS on the internet – they were incredibly helpful.’

‘Once we got in touch with POPS and the Drugs and Alcohol Team, things started moving – we were able to get in touch and we found out which wing John was on. The system can be fantastic.’ (Billy)

Despite such encounters, which offered some comfort to Billy and Mary, the majority of their dealings with the system were negative.

Although the system appeared to possess many limitations, what families experienced did not appear to be calculated or deliberate on the part of the agencies and individuals who worked within it. Instead of being seen as an instrument of malevolence, it is perhaps more helpful to see the system as a confused and uncoordinated entity which has evolved without having any sense of clear purpose, plan or rational aims. Whilst I came across some individuals who worked within the system like Dean, the prison officer, who appeared reluctant to engage with family members and to move away from his traditional role (predominantly inside the prison, dealing with prisoners), there was no evidence to suggest a collective, deliberate desire within and across the system to cause families harm. The harm experienced by participants was more the result of the unintended manifestations of bureaucratic, rules-based, and legalistic structures. However, regardless of intent, many respondents
were convinced that the harm they experienced was deliberate and fully intended.

Gaynor, the mother of a prisoner (Barry), talked about the failure of the system to find appropriate support for her son. Barry had a history of mental health problems before going to prison. Gaynor believed that the criminal justice system should have been more responsive to Barry’s needs: ‘You need support and the system is totally failing. It isn’t ready for people like Barry’. After attempting to appeal the sentencing decisions which led to Barry’s imprisonment, Gaynor talked about being ‘fed a pack of lies’ by those she described as ‘parasites’: ‘they feed off people like us, that’s how they make their living’.

Nisha, aged sixteen, talked at length about her mistrust of authority following her older brother’s prison sentence. Although Nisha acknowledges that her opinions were influenced by her encounters with various professionals within the criminal justice system, she presents an articulate and rational case:

‘The legal people were confusing. Liam told us to just let them do the talking as that’s what we were hoping they’d do...talk Liam out of trouble. We still can't believe what happened and just feel cheated by the system. They convinced Liam that plea bargaining would be best, just to admit guilt and get it over with. At first he wouldn't budge and said it was about the principle. We believed him, but his lawyer said to plead guilty otherwise he’d spend a long time in prison. We were all scared. We'd never been through anything like this before. Liam ended up pleading guilty, but still ended up inside, with a bigger sentence than we were told. That was just the start. Once he was inside, they moved him, put him in solitary, wouldn't let us see him. It was like a nightmare. They wouldn't let him study, took away his privileges and we were just outside, completely out of it.’

Nisha believed that the system extended beyond the criminal courts and that the individuals who worked in this wide network deliberately sought to ‘confuse’ and ‘fob off’ attempts to find out what was happening. Her account seems to imply a deliberate and determined effort to exclude and isolate family members:
‘Everyone we came across, apart from POPS, was just part of it [the system]. It was like learning to speak another language. Everyone seemed to speak in code and whenever Mum tried to find stuff out, they’d just try and confuse us or fob us off. The prison was the worst though. They just treated us so badly.’

Like Billy and Mary’s experience, Nisha felt as though the professionals she encountered spoke another language, deliberately aiming to confuse her and her mother.

Dave’s account of his role as a parent, whilst serving his prison sentence and following his release, gave him, too, a sense of perspective about the system. He believed that the system had far-reaching and damaging consequences for prisoners and their families:

‘That’s what ‘the system’ does to you. It affects your entire family. It never leaves you. Jane [Dave’s wife] sometimes gets worried about being watched…she thinks someone is out there, just watching. I tell her that’s all gone now. It makes me sick that they’ve all been dragged into it and there’s nothing I can do.’

Given that the system, according to the respondents, is all pervasive, long-lasting in its effects, and generally frustrating for those who encounter it, there is some merit in attempting to define it.

In trying to make sense of the various responses above I have taken the system to mean the criminal justice system and its related bureaucracy, procedures, agents and machinery: this includes a number of organisations and professionals including the police, prisons, the probation service, and the judiciary. I acknowledge that this is a wide definition, but would maintain that such a broad categorisation is necessary to show the extent and depth of ‘the system’s’ reach and its pervasive and persistent impact upon the lives of family members. By setting these parameters of the system, some perspective and positioning of prisoners’ families is possible, to see how they fit into this wider, over-arching framework.
Secrecy and lies within prisoners’ families: Don’t mention the ‘P’ word

‘I have a nice house, a good car. We have money. This is a nice neighbourhood. Apart from my Mum, nobody knows. His school don’t know. He will never need to know.’ (Abby, partner of prisoner and mother of a four-year-old boy)

‘I don’t tell anyone. Well, apart from a few mates and my family. I don’t want people to know because they’ll judge us and I don’t want Carrie to know because I want to keep her out of all this. Once he’s out we can put it all behind us...move on.’ (Trish, wife of prisoner and mother of Carrie, aged four)

This section addresses the phenomenon of ‘storytelling’, where children are offered fictitious accounts to explain the absence of an imprisoned family member, thereby avoiding the necessity of mentioning ‘prison’. Whilst these fictitious accounts are predominantly motivated by a desire to protect the children from the social harm and stigma commonly associated with prison, the children themselves often understood more than their parents realised or were prepared to realise. The findings demonstrate that children are capable of forming their own constructions of reality, which often conflict with and contradict the versions offered in the stories they are told. The research exposes parental anxieties and fears evidenced in their narratives, and played out in the respectable, sometimes implausible, fictitious accounts that they invented for their children. Notions of childhood innocence, purity, shame and stigma are explored alongside coping, resilience, and adaptability, helping to demonstrate the different realities that children and adults construct in order to make sense of and navigate their way through the world they encounter.

Family dynamics and the unequal distribution of power within them play a part in children’s involvement and participation. Children’s lack of agency in decision-making, the use of fictional or missing accounts to obscure the truth, and children’s resilience are all important in determining their experiences of having a family member imprisoned. Although the voices of children in this section are rarely heard, usually being silenced by adult family members, it is apparent that despite this lack of voice, their actions and efforts to make sense
of and come to terms with the information offered to them are worthy of consideration and show them to be capable of dealing with multiple truths.

Collusion and deceit, according to the literature on prisoners’ families, are commonplace ploys to avoid telling the truth (Morris, 1965; Wilmer, 1966; Shaw, 1987). What was notable about the findings from my research was that the use of fictional accounts was more widespread than the literature suggested. There are two possible explanations for this. Firstly, most of the families I interviewed tended to have children who were very young and, according to their parents and carers, this meant they were simply not ready to be told. In addition, the size of the sample in the research was relatively small (twenty-four families). Consequently, the findings have no statistical significance in terms of inferences that might be made about the wider population. It could simply be that the sample of families selected for my research is unrepresentative. Because there have been no large-scale studies in the UK which have looked at the theme of deceit in relation to prisoners’ children, it is difficult to position my own findings against other research. Despite such shortcomings, however, I believe that my findings open a door for future research in this largely uncharted area.

When a parent has been imprisoned, some families make a decision early on to tell their children about what has happened. This was true for Dave, whose children were aged nine and six. Dave maintained that he was lucky. He talked about a supportive network of family and friends who were willing to help with the children:

‘My Dad has helped me out loads with the kids. He was the one who told them. He said, ‘your Dad’s not coming back home for a few weeks.’ I would have struggled telling them. I’m lucky. I have very supportive parents and a really supportive family outside.’

Despite his family living over fifty miles away from prison, Dave was able to maintain regular contact with his family through regular visits to the prison and via the telephone.
The decision to tell the children was partly influenced by the fact that Dave’s family were supportive and understanding, but there were other, more pressing reasons, which seemed to prompt Dave and his family into making a decision about what to tell the children:

‘Where I come from, it’s only a small town where everybody knows everybody. There was an article in the local paper about my case. I was really concerned about the impact this might have on the children. One of the kids in my son’s class had a go at him, accusing him of having a dad in prison. My son confronted him and the boy backed off. He’s OK. I know he can handle it now. We did think about telling the kids I was working away – being a plumber means I’ve done all sorts of jobs – they would have believed that. I can see they’re ok now – we don’t need to tell porkies.....this is the best way.’

The fear of being judged and the stigma associated with prison convinced him that telling the truth to his children would enable them to understand, defend and take some control of their situation. Often stigma has the opposite effect on families, as this chapter goes on to show. Dave recognised why some parents chose to present their children with fabricated stories, and yet seemed fully aware of the dangers in doing so:

‘I see kids in here all the time...some of them are old enough to know, but they [the parents] pretend. They put on this act, that they’re at Daddy’s work. You can see them checking the uniforms out, the doors, everything. I don’t see how you can hide it from them...for god’s sake, there’s a huge great sign outside that says ‘HMP Orient’. I don’t think kids are that soft – in some ways they deal with it better than grown-ups. I’ve been surprised at how my two have just got on with it, not questioning the whole thing.’

Dave seemed to think that he had made the right choice in letting his children know about his sentence. He talked about the resilience and maturity of his son, Chris, in dealing with his father’s imprisonment. Although, as Dave pointed out, there are many frustrations that are part of prison life; for him at least, the dilemma of what to tell the children was not one of them.

A subsequent meeting with Dave and Chris, at the family home following Dave’s release from prison, gave me the chance to talk to Chris about how he
found the experience of having his father imprisoned. Chris’s account tended to corroborate what Dave had said in relation to the resilience of his children:

‘I was in a fight with a boy from another class who knew about Dad. He said something stupid about it. I got into trouble about that and Mum was cross with me. I wasn’t scared of him….it made me angry. After that, nobody said much. My friends knew about Dad. They are still my friends.’

‘Dad seemed OK. We were allowed to see him at weekends. He was happy to see us. I looked after Josie [Chris’s younger sister] at school. She sometimes got upset about Dad being away, but I told her it would be OK. Mum was angry with us a lot and Dad was sometimes on the phone telling Mum what to do.’

Chris’s description of what happened seems to suggest that despite the initial difficulties he encountered (for example, at school), knowing the truth helped him to adjust. Chris’s fears about his friendships appear to have been unfounded.

Jane, Dave’s wife, told me about the initial experience of having to cope on her own. Jane’s anxieties at this time seem to be mixed up with not knowing what to tell her children:

‘It wasn’t even the money so much; although I’d be lying if I said that wasn’t a problem…..it was the kids that worried me most. When the school phoned and said Chris had been in a fight, it was, right, OK, here we go, this is how it’s going to be. Chris never got into fights and two weeks into his Dad being gone, this all starts.’

‘The head teacher was very good. Once I told her about everything, she was really understanding. We meant to tell the school much earlier, but I never knew how to say Dave was in prison. It’s stupid I know, but it just felt like that was someone else’s life, not mine. It turned out that the other boy had provoked Chris and she [the Head teacher] said the other boy was often the one who ended up in trouble. When I was there, she [the Head teacher] got Chris in with us. In a way it was the first proper time I got to listen to Chris. I didn’t know how angry he’d been. He was angry about a lot of stuff, not just his Dad, but me too. He said I never talked to him about the whole thing, and when I did, he said it was just ‘pretend’ talk.’

‘Once it was out in the open and the school knew about what had happened…it wasn’t embarrassing anymore. Because the school were good at dealing with it, it made me feel a bit more relaxed. You never know how people are going to react and what they might say.'
When I heard about the fight I just assumed the worst. Things seemed calmer at home afterwards. I think Chris was just so full of anger...anger at the whole situation and about me not taking the time to properly talk to him.'

Jane's account of her meeting with the head teacher resonates with the perspective offered by a different head teacher, Julie, who was also a participant in this research. Julie works at a large infant school, and her philosophy of supporting families appears similar to that shared by the head teacher at Chris's school. Julie appeared to recognise and be sympathetic towards the difficulties parents often felt about disclosure:

'It isn't just children who need that reassurance. Adults have so many hang-ups about all sorts, but if that interferes with a child's welfare then I, we as a school, have a responsibility. I take it as a compliment that a parent can come in here and disclose to me about going to prison.'

Julie’s experience suggested that it was better for parents to talk to children about prison, although she recognised that this was not always easy:

‘The children seem to adjust when things are out in the open. They see all the significant adults are working together and getting on. Ultimately, it's down to parents to decide what's best. I'm not going to pretend we have all the answers here, but at least we know what to do when parents need help.’

Clearly, there seem to be a number of factors which are instrumental in how parents and carers decide what to tell children in relation to the imprisonment of a family member. It appears that if there is a good support network, including friends, wider family and schools, parents and carers feel more comfortable telling the truth. Where these factors are absent, or where there is a perceived lack of support, there is an increased likelihood, as will become clear, that children are offered alternative accounts.

Jane talked about her difficulty in explaining to her children what had happened. Her account suggests that making up a story about John’s absence
might have actually been more complicated than if they had been open with their children from the outset:

‘I felt stupid. It was as if I had lost the words. Before Dave went away, we both sat down with them and explained why Dave wouldn’t be around. We made this stupid story up about his work. Dave’s work means he’s done the odd bit of work away, but this was at least six months. Anyway, we neither of us felt comfortable with the whole thing. We were daft ever thinking we could get away with it. The place we live, well, you can see yourself….it’s hardly the sort of place you can hide stuff. Everyone knows everyone’s business. The local press ran the story weeks later, and we were both thinking the same. The fight at school made a big difference too. It’s out there, there’s nowhere else to hide from this, so we just told them after Dave had been gone for a few days. To be honest, it was Dave’s dad who talked to Chris and Josie about their Dad and prison…he’s always been better at explaining things than John or me. Sometimes it feels like he knows just what to say. But, once that was done, it made a big difference to all of us…we got on better, things got more relaxed. Telling the children helped a lot.’

‘After the fight at school…that just changed everything. I thought…no more secrets’, let’s just be straight. Since then, it’s been easier….I think because I don’t always think I’ve got to hide something. Chris has been great….most of the time [laughs]. He’s really been a great big brother for Josie. He even helps me with stuff around the house. I never ask him to, he just does it.’

‘Josie and Chris argue like all kids. I don’t think it’s because of when Dave was away, that’s just what kids do. Who knows? But we did what we did and in a way it worked out. We just want to get on with our lives… not make a big deal of everything.’

Although Dave’s family felt better about letting their two children know what had happened, for other families I spoke to, things were not quite so straightforward. Parents and carers chose to fabricate stories, often believing that this was the right thing to do. Often, parents and family members would disagree about what to tell the children. Kathryn felt that many prisoners felt pressure from spouses not to tell the children about prison, and that if it were their choice (the prisoners’), the children would know:

‘A lot of the prisoners would love the children to know in truth, but with pressure from the carer, about being told not to [tell the children], the carer holds all the cards which means that for the
offender, they have no control. The number of lads [prisoners] in here that will come and tell me about being nagged... not having any say. They'll [the prisoners] always give in to their partners because they are the ones who have to carry the can. They have to carry on, do the school run, make the tea, sort bedtimes. The prisoners have it easy so they end up feeling guilty, just giving in. I can understand why it happens. It’s the easy thing to do in the short-term.’

Again, Kathryn’s account implies that some of the prisoners felt relatively powerless in terms of their parenting capacity. Because life outside prison is more difficult for the partner or the carer - that is, the one who has to ‘carry the can’ - many prisoners, according to Kathryn, simply pretend and choose the ‘easy route’.

Kathryn could understand why parents and carers often chose not to tell children the truth, especially when trying to come to terms with the sudden incarceration of a family member. It is this suddenness, she maintains, which prompts the invention of a convenient tale, but it is the convenient repetition of these stories which becomes difficult to explain away subsequently. As Kathryn put it, ‘Once the lie has been told, it’s hard to go back. It becomes easier to just stick to the same story, even when it sounds ridiculous’. Shaw (1987: 15) recognised this was a particular difficulty for many mothers:

The suddenness of the incarceration and the hope (however futile) that it will be of short duration, leads many mothers to deny the truth to their children. It then becomes increasingly difficult, with the passage of time, to be honest with them.

Danny, another prisoner, has five children, three of whom are grown up. His two youngest children are living with their mother, Ruth. Danny’s older children have a different mother and they are all independent. Danny and Ruth decided not to tell their two children for a number of reasons:

‘I don’t want to mess up like I did with Jake [Danny’s eldest son]. He’s inside again for the second time. He shouldn’t be inside. What he’s done...it’s obvious to anyone he’s got mental health problems....all along through school. For the girls [Danny and
Ruth’s children, aged three and five] it’s different. For one, they’re too young to know. I could be out of here in a couple of months…there’s no point is there?”

‘Jake wanted to be like his Dad, always wanting to make his mark. He struggled with school, got expelled, even then he never got the help he needed. He’s on all sorts of tablets, medication. Anyway, he basically got in with the wrong crowd, he’s easily led, and here we go…’

Danny’s reasons for not telling his two young daughters were not simply to do with their age, but were also influenced by the experience of his oldest son, Jake. Danny talked a lot about how Jake had been failed by school, how the system had let him down. Despite Danny’s wish for Jake to lead a life that was free of crime, Jake had embarked on a criminal career since his early teens. A series of petty offences, including vandalism, car crime and shoplifting began Jake’s career, which eventually resulted in Jake spending time in a young offenders’ institution. Jake, now twenty years old, had recently been sentenced for a violent street robbery offence and was serving time in a category A prison. Danny blamed himself for Jake’s conviction:

‘Like any son, Jake looks up to his Dad. He saw that I’d got involved in stuff, stupid stuff, saw me in prison, and you know what, he wanted some of that. He saw the money, the cars and thought……….I can do that. School was just a let-down, they couldn’t wait to get rid of him. After that, what’s the point? Who’s going to give him a job? It’s my worst nightmare…not knowing if he’s OK. It’s hard enough when you’re on the outside, but in here I’ve got no way of keeping in touch. There’s no way it’ll happen for Jess and Hannah. They’ll not know this’… [looks away, clearly upset].

The research literature suggests that criminal careers often run in families and that children will sometimes emulate their parents (Murray and Farrington, 2007). Danny explained that he wanted a different life for his two daughters and he believed that not telling them was the best way to secure positive outcomes for them. Danny believed that his son, Jake, had embarked on a criminal career because he wanted to be like his father. The decision to conceal his imprisonment from his daughters was made for benevolent
reasons, to protect them from future dangers: ‘The girls think I’m away….working. I write them letters all the time. It’s easier this way. I’ll do my time. When I’m out, I’ve got a good reason to stay out’.

Terri, aged thirty, remains adamant that her daughter, Amy, aged four, will never know that her father, Pete, spent time in prison:

‘I’ve told her that Pete has gone to work so that she can have nice things. I’m embarrassed. I don’t want anyone to know, I don’t want Amy to know. Only my parents know. She will be proud of her Dad, that’s the way it should be. I don’t want her to even hear that word. I hope they will not remember. She thinks she’s going to see him in work – I just want to protect her. What’s the point in bringing all this into her life? She misses him like mad; that’s enough suffering.’

Terri felt sure that if her daughter discovered the truth, she would lose all respect for her father and stop loving him. She maintained this was the best way of dealing with a difficult situation that could soon be forgotten. She also alluded to the children being the victims when a parent is imprisoned, especially if they are told the truth:

‘Amy is happy. Why should I take that away? He’ll be out soon. We can get on with our lives, put it all behind us. Pete isn’t a bad person. He’s not a murderer. Some of the people in there deserve it. If we tell Amy, she’ll be the one that suffers. Her life is pretty good; I don’t want it tainted.’

Terri’s sense of injustice made her more determined to shield her daughter from the truth. She believed that not revealing the truth would, in the long run, mean her daughter would continue to lead an ‘untainted’ life.

Jenny is a grandmother to Laura, aged five. Jenny chose to concoct an alternative account, but seemed unsure it was the right choice:

‘Jack [Laura’s dad] used to work away a lot. That was the easy part. Laura thinks he’s just at work. It’s when we visit that it gets a bit tricky. She sees all the other families, the guards, the uniforms. She’s not stupid. I want to tell her. I would if she asked me, but then
her Mum....Her Mum lives in a nice house with her new partner, they've got good jobs, fancy cars, everything. She [Laura's Mum] doesn't want to spoil this for Laura. I still think we should tell her [Laura]. Jack just goes along with what Gemma [Laura's Mum] wants, but I know what he thinks is right. I just don’t know. I don’t know where I stand in all this. I just want to make sure Laura is OK.’

Jenny was not the only participant who suggested that her grandchild, despite her young age, might know more than she acknowledged.

Home visits, although a welcome escape from the stressful business of prison visits, also appeared to contain challenges for many families. Maintaining fabricated stories during home visits became such a challenge. Terri talked about such visits:

‘Pete is coming out in May. He started home leave last Sunday. When it gets dark Daddy goes back to work. This is always tricky as Pete never went to work at night before. Amy is starting to ask more questions. I'm not always sure what to say. Sometimes I end up just snapping...it’s so hard sometimes. It’s hard trying to keep to the story.’

Children’s behaviour seemed to present problems for parents. Despite the possibility that this behaviour might have been influenced by the frustration of being lied to, or simply being confused, parents continued to stick to their stories. Michaela, mother of Joe (aged five), talked about how she had dealt with her partner, Rick, being sent to prison. It is not clear from Michaela’s account how much Joe’s behaviour was a consequence of loss or of not being told the truth. It is possible that a number of factors triggered Joe’s anger:

‘I tried to explain to Joe that Dad was away for a while. We live in ***** so when Rick was about, he and Joe were out all the time in the countryside, always playing. They were incredibly close to each other. I think they were too attached. Joe would cry all the time when Rick went away – he had really bad tantrums; he would collapse in a heap. We’ve got Adam too, the new baby.’

‘Joe settled really well at nursery school, then started having major tantrums when he started proper school. The teacher would ring up and ask me to come and collect him. His eyes would turn black, he’d go into a rage. Sometimes he would smash up his bedroom.
He would say ‘I want my Dad, I miss my Dad.’ He blames me really. The arguments made him think it was my fault. It makes me so angry - I want to tell the government. We are the real victims in all of this, not Rick. He’s got it easier than us. I want to say, ‘look what you’ve done to my family’. The system has failed us. It makes me so angry.’

‘When I told the teacher what was happening, the school suggested we think about telling Joe about where Rick really is – they said it might help him understand, settle more. As far as we’re concerned, Rick’s in the army.’

Despite Rick and Michaela’s efforts to ‘protect’ Joe from the truth, it was possible that Joe knew more than his parents realised, as this comment suggests:

‘Joe, when he sees a police car, will say, ‘Who’s been a naughty boy. He might go to prison’. He’s not supposed to know about where Rick is, but sometimes he lets on. He’s not stupid. I worry he’ll work it all out one day.’

Protecting children from the truth often proved more challenging than expected then, as Michaela suggests. Whilst it was often possible to concoct, contain and manage a fictional account within the close confines of the family setting, once outside that environment, parents began to lose control and their stories became less credible:

‘One night at parents’ evening, the teacher said, ‘can we talk about Dad?’ I was really shocked and I felt like I’d been put on the spot.’

‘Tyler had told the teacher about the tabards. They all have to wear the same tabards at the prison. It was like the teacher had worked it out for herself, but she started questioning Tyler about what happens when he visits his Dad. I was really angry. They [the teachers] said Tyler had told them that Richie was in prison. They were lying, because Tyler thinks his Dad is at work.’

‘The school have been good since though. They let him have time off for visits. They said they can support us now that they know.’ (Tyler’s mum, Tamara)
Despite this discussion taking place between Tyler and his teacher, Tamara asked the school not to discuss the visits with Tyler. Although Tyler seemed to understand a great deal more than Tamara had originally assumed, Tamara preferred to maintain as much privacy as possible. It was not always clear if this was for her own sake or for Tyler’s:

‘I know they are trying to be helpful, but they don’t understand. How can they? Until you’ve lived through this, you don’t see the looks, the comments we overhear, the whole thing. Richie’s going to start home visits soon. Friends know, family know, that’s it. I want to protect my son; I don’t want him to get the wrong idea, think what his Dad did was OK. I want him to do well, not end up in a place like that.’

Clearly, parental aspirations for their children played a part in shielding the children from the realities of prison and its far-reaching impact. There seemed to be a belief amongst some of the parents I interviewed that if they admitted the truth to their children, the consequences would be dire. Pretending, even in instances where both adults and children knew what was going on, seemed to be a common strategy for some. Although this ‘collective’ approach to dealing with the reality seemed to work in the short-term, eventually tensions would emerge, suggesting that children preferred to deal with the imprisonment of a family member in more of a direct fashion:

‘Once they [Ian’s parents] came clean I could cope with it. Making out it was something to do with some job he’d [Ian’s father] landed made it feel dirty, worse than the being in prison. I found that worse than the other stuff.’(Ian, aged eighteen)

Although in short supply, there are a limited number of advisory leaflets and packs available from voluntary sector organisations about how to let children know when a family member is imprisoned. APF’s *Telling the Children: the Outsiders* is a resource which is available online. This publication recognises the difficulties that many parents face:
When we asked prisoners’ relatives to identify the most important issues they had to face, they said, ‘the children and what to tell them’. As parents, we may often hide the truth from our children. When they are small we may encourage them to believe in fairies and in Father Christmas – it’s only later they learn where the presents come from. When relatives pass away we may reassure our children that they are safe in heaven. Some adoptive parents find it hard to tell their children that they were adopted, instead of born, into the family. In other words, we can often tell our children what we think will protect them and make them happy (APF, nd: 3).

APF are clear in their advice in terms of what parents should do, but at the same time they acknowledge the difficulties that parents might face in dealing with something this stressful:

It is of course any parent’s right to decide how and when to tell the children, but remember that there is no guaranteed way to protect children from finding out about what has happened in some other way. The key question perhaps to ask yourself is not, ‘Shall I tell the children?’ but ‘When and what shall I tell the children?’ (APF, nd: 4).

The guidance warns against creating fictional accounts; for example, pretending the prison is a factory where father works. The chances of children finding out through other sources present more of a risk for those parents who choose not to tell their children. Despite such guidance, my research shows that working away from home is a popular story, but also, unfortunately for the parents, one that holds little credibility for many children.

Various case studies are presented in these guidance documents, which help to show how avoiding the truth can lead to problems. A woman prisoner is described in one of the case studies. The woman is so embarrassed and ashamed about being in prison that she makes up a story for her five-year-old daughter:

At first I tried to pretend this was college I was at. But one day my daughter said she wanted the TV on during the visit and I said we weren’t allowed. So she said, “Can’t you ask the officers?” I’d always called them teachers and she looked really ashamed of letting it out and I realised she knew this was a prison. I was amazed how she’d picked it up. She’s only five (APF, nd: 13).
I talked to Kathryn in more detail about how she felt she could help families who might be deliberating about what to tell their children. She emphasised that her role was largely about supporting families. This sometimes meant helping them make decisions, but often it was a case of simply offering practical support in relation to visits and signposting other organisations:

‘Yes, I think it is always better to tell the children. Like anything that affects them, divorce, bereavement, you shouldn’t hide this stuff. It’s obvious some of the kids know what’s going on, but the parents just pretend. They’d rather not face up to it and admit what’s happened. I think it’s to do with the shame. The fear of being judged by your kids is too much. I just help them make the choices they feel comfortable with. If they ask me, I’ll advise them to tell the truth.’

Kathryn talked about why, in her view, families with young children often chose to fabricate accounts:

‘They live a lie with the children as well. They don’t tell the children. A high proportion of young families who have young children do not tell the children where dads are. It can be that they’re working away, that they’re away with work for two years, or this is their workplace or they’re just visiting here from their workplace. The children do know, a lot of them do know who they are coming to see and why. You can’t get away from it. There’s officers about, there’s signage up. You always think your child can’t read and then they get back to the schoolyard and say they’ve been to prison.’

Clearly, children are capable learners, and do not necessarily have to be able to read in order to understand where they are. Visual clues, modes of behaviour, interactions between prison staff and families, searches, locks and heavy doors, tabards, and an atmosphere of tension all contribute to their growing awareness. As Kathryn said:

‘Stigma and embarrassment mean that it’s hidden from the neighbours. Maybe some relatives might know, but a lot of schools are not told about it. Schools really need to know. There should be
more of an impact through education. Schools need to understand about behaviour and why that child’s not acting normal. This is true for troubled families. A lot is hidden. If they [the carers] don’t have to tell them, they won’t tell them. By telling people it helps, I think it helps. You can’t tell anybody what to do, but I always believe that honesty is the best policy. You can tell a child in a nice way. We have agencies like APF who have booklets for different age groups, so we have the small children, three to five, and then we have the eight plus, who can take stuff away with them. There’s help and advice there, but it isn’t always welcome.’

Kathryn was acutely aware of the challenges for parents and carers who chose not to tell their children about prison. These challenges became especially apparent at certain times, as, for example, during and after prison visits:

‘Children who come on visits, we know what they go through. This child, who comes on a visit, does not like that, he’s very unhappy, he’ll go home and have tantrums. Carers won’t understand why this child is behaving like this, then when I speak to them, I have to try and explain it’s because they’re not telling them, they’re not telling them why. Think about it, he’s [the child] going to a horrible place: he doesn’t like the dog, he’s being searched, he doesn’t like the way he’s spoke to or his Mummy’s spoke to.’

Although many parents and carers were hesitant to steer away from their fabricated accounts, and many justified their stance because of the young age of their children, Kathryn was able to convince some that telling the truth did not have to be as difficult as some imagined. Kathryn’s experience in working with such families, gained over many years, meant that she could help families find ways to tell very young children:

‘In a nice way, a gentle way... By drawings, you can do it by using drawings with very young children. You give a child two pieces of paper and ask, ‘do you know where Daddy is?’... [imitates child] ‘Mummy’s told me that Daddy’s at work, but I know he’s in prison’. ‘So, why is he in prison?’ [imitates child] ‘Cos he did something wrong’. Children talk about this on the school yard, and they’ll tell each other about how long their Daddy is away for, like it’s a competition. So anyway, a child draws a picture of how they think Daddy lives in the prison and the first picture you get, and I’ve done quite a lot of these, is black and brown and grey, with bars, and then I’ll tell them that I work in the prison and look after the fathers, and I’ll tell them how Daddy’s room is. The picture transforms onto brightly coloured curtains, coloured bedding. I can tell the child about where Daddy can go in the prison, the gym, the library...that
child then gets a better understanding about what goes on in the prison by having the truth told to him. It's much better that way, otherwise it destroys them; it destroys them. If they're not told the truth, it will catch up with them. As that child's getting older, it will come back.'

Kathryn was a strong advocate of allowing the children to use art as a means of expressing their emotions. Dealing with traumatic events could, Kathryn suggested, help children and parents deal with the incarceration of a family member, and ultimately help families come to terms with this, brokering the way for honest and open dialogue.

Kathryn welcomed the introduction in some prisons of areas where children could play. When children were playing, they were, in her opinion, more relaxed and would find it easier to talk to the play workers who staffed these areas:

‘With the play interaction in prisons, that's when you can really help the children. By letting them [children] interact with you, you can earn that child’s trust and you then become a friend to them. The thing is, this is a way in with the parents. Once the parents see you interacting with the children and they see the children like you, they'll begin to tell you stuff and confide in you. This is when it makes it easier to talk about telling tales and telling the truth. Trust is such a big thing in here. Most of these families have forgotten what it is to trust somebody. They’re scared that if they tell you things, it'll go against them. To be honest, you can’t blame them...all you can do is get to know them, and by playing and talking to the children, that's the way in.’

Play was not, for the family link worker and the play workers, simply about making the visits more child-friendly. Importantly, it also offered a conduit through which to build trust and foster dialogue between families and the staff who worked in the prison. Once this trust had been established, only then could Kathryn and her co-workers begin to offer advice, assist and, ultimately, make a difference to families who were experiencing difficulties. Sometimes this involved offering parents and carers advice on how they might deal with letting their children know the truth. Kathryn described the children as crucial in this process, alluding to their ability to work things out for themselves:
'They [the children] are sometimes just waiting to hear what they already know. We have to let the parents know that they are playing a game...The kids are way ahead of them.'

'They always wear tabards in prison and his children started to pick up on this. When they saw something on TV about prison they'd say, 'he must work at the same place as my Dad - they're all wearing the same.' (Marie, younger sister of prisoner)

Kathryn, over the years, had witnessed many parents change tack, often deciding that telling the truth was the best option. Sometimes, such decisions were forced upon them, rather than being the result of thoughtful deliberations:

‘You and I know you can go on Google, and put in any name, and you know or suspect anybody that is suspected of a crime, high profile or low profile, and you can pull up what they’ve done. With the internet now, and technology, with children that’s the way forward now. It’s not textbooks anymore, its computers. I try and tell them [the parents], and they may not think about this at the moment, but in three or four years, I’ve seen children turn round and say, 'Why didn’t you tell me, why didn’t you tell me the truth from the beginning? I would have understood all about it, Mum.'

Some parents seemed a little uncertain about whether their children knew what had happened when a family member was imprisoned. When Beth talked about her daughter Mika, it was obvious that her own anxieties about her partner Greg, returning home from prison, made knowing what to tell Mika more difficult:

‘I don’t think she really understood. And I’m pretty glad that I hadn’t given birth to her and she hadn’t had that...that time with him [Greg, Mika’s father]. All she’s ever known is time with just me. I actually got a few things wrong. We thought last year he’d be out in the community, back with us, and I kept saying to my daughter, ‘Daddy’s coming home soon’. And then I realised over a period of time that it wasn’t working how my head thought it would work....there’s actually a lot more needs to be done.’

‘In the end, I learned to stop saying it to her actually...cos she will have been four and old enough to understand what it means when I say ‘your Dad’s coming home’. She’d be asking questions like, ‘When’s Daddy coming home?’ So then I stopped saying it after that when I realised that that wasn’t the case [Greg was not being released].’
‘Up to the age of three she [Mika] didn’t have a clue where her Dad was. She’d come on the visits, but she wasn’t grasping, you know, what’s happened. I had a conversation in front of her... this must be about a year and a half ago, and she just said, ‘Oh, Daddy’s in gaol isn’t he?’ It was after I’d spoken to someone when we’d spoke openly, and I think she’d cottoned on from there. I would have loved to have had her believe that he was away working.’

Beth’s account is contradictory; it is as though she is in denial about Mika’s capacity to understand where her father is, despite Mika’s declaration that he was in prison. Beth understands that Mika already knew, but surprisingly continues to maintain the story that Greg is ‘working away’. It is clear that suspicion and mistrust played a part in Beth’s decision not to tell her colleagues at work, or anyone outside her immediate circle and support network. This caution extended to her decision not to tell Mika about Greg, although, despite her intentions, Mika had discovered the truth. Beth was concerned about Greg’s criminal lifestyle, and this fear also seemed to contribute to her decision not to tell Mika the truth:

‘I always wanted to tell Mika he was at work. Does this make sense to you? Because of Greg’s, how should I say, criminal activities, cos I know what he was about. When he was 17, he was quite wild then. There’s an element of me that’s not scared of him...he’s not shouty or violent, he’s never hit me or anything like that. I’m scared of what type of person he used to be and how he’s gonna be. That terrifies me, the not knowing. Mika hasn’t ever seen that side of him.’

Again, as with other families I interviewed, the notion of purity and innocence also had an influence on Beth’s decision to mask the truth. This effort to protect Mika from any threats to that innocence was connected to aspirations and ambitions for her daughter. Beth’s description of Mika’s child-minder is revealing in that it opens a window on another world; one in which people have manners, are educated, and ‘speak correctly’:

‘I’ve kept her [Mika] as pure as possible, if that makes sense. I wasn’t even happy that she was having to visit her Dad in those establishments [prisons]. I just want her to be everything I wasn’t.'
She has a child-minder who is quite an educated lady and who talks really well, and that really buzzes my head to know that my daughter is in an environment that is like that. I don’t want to be posh, I don’t want to be better than anyone else. I want her education to be spot on, so we can do the normal stuff like reading together, picking out words. I’m dead over the top, so that words like ‘poo’ don’t get used, and I’ll say that’s swearing. I just want a normal life for her, and education, speaking correctly, conducting herself in a proper manner and not being subjected to....it’s not even that horrendous. I see it when I go in for a visit and it becomes normal, but out here, it’s different, a different set of rules and I don’t want Mika to be judged by that.’

Secrets seemed to run in Beth’s family. Keeping secrets and concocting stories, like the regular visits she made to different prisons, became routine and part of the fabric she associated with family life. Her brother’s imprisonment, and the implications it held for his child, mirror her own frustrations about Mika’s future. Although Beth made it clear her brother’s crimes were more serious than Greg’s, there were parallels in how both families felt about telling the children:

‘My brother’s situation is quite different. His crimes are quite horrendous. He’s in prison at the moment and he’s on protection. You can’t believe the type of people he’s in and amongst. He’s got a daughter who’s just turned two and I know that he and his girlfriend both pray she will never find out.’

For Beth, prison visiting had become so routine, and she often used it as an opportunity to test her own parenting decisions against those of other mothers and family members. This is perhaps a manifestation of her uncertainty, and of wanting to ‘do the right thing’ for Mika. A culture of ‘not telling’ amongst other mothers who had partners in prison seemed to offer Beth a sense of security and helped to convince her about shielding her daughter from the truth:

‘It’s what I’ve grown up around. It’s very, very common for children not to know what’s going on. When I speak to other mums in the queue when I’m visiting, cos you go to these places regularly and start recognising faces, and you can’t help but talk. I see them with their children and I always like to hear what’s going on with them. I
always ask the same questions and I always seem to get my thinking back, which is, yeah, don’t tell them. Work is very common. ‘Daddy’s away working’ is what you hear a lot.’

‘She [Mika] probably does know a lot more than what I think. It’s just not a conversation that we have. When she said to me, ‘He’s in gaol’ and I said, ‘No, he’s not’, and she said, ‘You said it’. She definitely knows now, but I don’t think they [children] fully understand what it is that is going on or what gaol means.’

Even though Beth acknowledged Mika was capable enough to work out the truth, she remained steadfast in her belief that discussions about prison were best avoided. Despite the advice offered by voluntary sector organisations on how to tell children and why this is appropriate, many parents seemed to prefer to control and block access to the facts where their children were concerned.

Like other parents, despite acknowledging that their children knew about their fathers’ whereabouts, Beth maintained her story and flatly denied to Mika that her father was in prison. My research clearly shows that stigma and fear of stigma play a large part in the decisions that adults make in relation to what to tell their children when family circumstances become significantly altered or challenging. Stigma appears as a pertinent theme in other studies concerned with children and families (Deacon and Stephney, 2007; Green, 2003; Gray and Robinson, 2009). Stigma has been researched in fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, human geography and criminology. There are common features that can be discerned from such studies, namely; social isolation, withdrawal, and low self-esteem. An additional factor appears to be stigma through association, often referred to as courtesy stigma.

Goffman (1963) viewed stigma in this way, as resulting from an association with a person who is himself marked by stigma. Research into mental health demonstrates that parents, siblings and spouses often experience stigma. Such research shows that children, specifically, are often worried about being contaminated through association (in a social rather than biological sense) with a parent's or sibling's illness (Corrigan and Miller, 2004). Stigma was felt by participants such as Billy, who experienced it first-hand after letting members of his family know about his son’s imprisonment:
‘We were reluctant to tell other family members, but a family engagement meant we had to. Certain family members were silent after we told them. The silence told us what we needed to know. It was telling that people we thought we knew...well, suddenly all that changed. It turned out we could count our friends on one hand.’

Rose had reservations about letting her daughter, aged eight, know the truth about John, who was serving a prison sentence. Her experience demonstrates that reactions can vary depending on who knows. Clearly for children, such information can be harmful and lead to incidents of bullying, as was the case for Jasmine, Rose’s daughter:

‘I asked people what to do about the children. My mum knew all about it and said it was best out in the open. I thought she [Rose’s mother] was right at the time so I told Jasmine a couple of years ago, soon after John went to prison. It affected her really badly. She told her friends at school, before I had chance to intervene, and before you knew it, her friends had disowned her. They called her names, but it gradually got better. She’s angry with me - she blames me for everything. She remembers her Dad being at home and she remembers us having rows – mainly about money.’

‘The teacher was really good. It turns out that Jasmine isn’t the only one at school with a father in prison. When you think of people sent to prison you immediately think of bad people, the type of people you don’t know. I used to label people like that. Not anymore.’

Joe (aged 17) expressed his frustration about his mother’s reticence in relation to talking about prison. Although Joe’s story does not flow chronologically, his earlier memories become evident. Fear and stigma clearly play an important role in Joe’s case, along with blaming himself after finding out that his father has gone to prison:

‘It was like we had the plague or something...like we didn’t belong in other people’s lives. Mum said something once, something like...‘It'll hold you back, stop you getting on in life’. She wanted to keep me clean, innocent, but all it did was wind me up. It was like she was in denial. She just wouldn’t talk about it even to me. For the first few months Dad was in prison, I didn’t even know about it.'
She said he had gone away. I thought he’d left, completely disappeared. I had mates whose parents had split, where their Dads had just walked out. I was convinced that it was because of me, that Dad had left. I knew we were different or something, that other people, even some family and mates wouldn't be the same around us...’

Joe’s comments, specifically in relation to contamination, connect to research into mental health and stigma, in which aspects of guilt and association feature, as in the following extract from Ben-Dor (2001:330)...

My then 13-year-old daughter summed it up this way: 'If David's body were hurting, people would send gifts, but because it is his mind that is hurting, they throw bricks. And so we were thrust into the stigma/blame loop. [People would say] ‘She's the one with the crazy son. Maybe he's crazy because she is?’ (Ben-Dor, 2001:330).

Issues of contamination and potential exposure to the harmful aspects of prison feature in the accounts of respondents who talked about stigma. The desire to deny or concoct alternative accounts rather than address the situation often directly resulted in individuals feeling even more marginalised. Often parents and other family members would exacerbate the stress and worry children were feeling about how to deal with the absence of a family member, as Joe’s story attests:

‘I was eight when Dad went to prison. I found out through my Gran. She told me everything one night. After that my Gran and my Mum didn’t speak for a long time. I think Gran was drunk, but I just kept asking where’s Dad, where’s Dad?’

‘I remember being so angry. I got into trouble at school. I lashed out at this boy...he was winding me up. I can't remember if that was when I knew about Dad or not. Anyway, he said something and I hit him. One of the teachers tried to calm me down and I wouldn’t. I just lashed out and kicked her. It wasn’t like the way I was. I was always good, well-behaved. It all started to get worse though. The school called Mum and she had to come in from work. The headmaster took my Mum into his office while I waited outside. When they called me through, I couldn’t believe it. My Mum had made up this story, that Dad had left us. I just sat there, thinking why. Why would she say this?’
‘We got home and Mum was crying, then started ranting about keeping a lid on everything, about not telling anyone that didn’t need to know. She was really out of control, just ranting and talking nonsense. I felt like dirt after that. As if I was bad or something. Mum made me feel bad. She was trying to hide something from people and because of that, it made me feel worse.’

Marion talked about life after the arrest, trial and imprisonment of Wayne, her eighteen-year-old son. Because Wayne’s crime was so serious, the case featured in national and local newspapers, creating and reinforcing the stigma his family experienced. Marion’s attempts to challenge other people proved counter-productive, and resulted in her subsequent decision to ‘keep it bottled up’:

‘When the story hit the papers it was like we lived in a bubble. I still feel like everyone watches us, secretly judging us, but without having the courage to talk to us. There are people I used to talk to…it was just nothing, but just to say ‘Hi, how’s it going?’ After Wayne was convicted of manslaughter, and of course, all of this was reported in the newspapers, these people just looked away, almost as if they might catch something contagious. I once got so angry that I ended up confronting this woman. It wasn’t even that we were especially close or friendly before, but what she did just made me so angry. I was under a lot of pressure, taking tablets for depression, not really with it I suppose. I asked her straight out why she couldn’t look me in the eye anymore. She had nothing to say. She just looked back at me as if I’d asked her something completely alien. After that I just kept it all bottled inside.’

‘It feels useful talking about Wayne like this. It doesn’t feel like I’m being judged, like some people might. It’s not as if I’m trying to hide anything. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve got nothing to feel ashamed about.’

Some consideration should be given to the notion that children are in control of what they choose to believe and acknowledge. It is quite possible that children may deny the idea that their parent or close relative is ‘bad’ or ‘dangerous’. It is disingenuous to assume that parents hold all of the power:

Often people who experience ambiguous loss resist clarifying information for fear of the consequences of knowing. This concept may be particularly true for children of prisoners as accepting
complete information often means identifying one's parent as *criminal* and therefore *bad* (Bocknek et al, 2008: 330).

It appears that parents have a number of reasons for inventing accounts or simply omitting the truth when a partner or family member is sent to prison. Stigma, shame, fear, guilt, frustrated aspirations, and a desire to maintain innocence and purity for the benefit of children, all appeared significant for the respondents in my research.

Voluntary sector organisations such as APF, Barnardo's, and POPS advise that telling the truth to children about imprisonment is the best option. Unfortunately, such advice is not always guaranteed to yield positive outcomes for families. Josie, a mother with a partner in prison, wanted to make an informed choice so that she could help her children deal with the absence of their father:

‘I asked people what to do about the children. I called up an advice line and talked to people who I thought could help. My Mum knew all about it and said it was best out in the open. I thought she was right at the time so I told Jasmine a couple of years ago, soon after John went to prison. It affected her really badly. She told her friends at school, before I had chance to intervene, and before you knew it, her friends had disowned her. They called her names, but it gradually got better. She’s angry with me - she blames me for everything. She remembers her Dad being at home and she remembers us having rows – mainly about money.’

Other research helps to clarify how children are able to deal with potentially difficult events. Butler et al. (2002) explored how children cope when they experience the divorce of their parents. This work illuminates the importance of providing honest explanations for children:

Being told what was happening remained a vital consideration for most children trying to restore some kind of balance in their lives...Being left out of the explanations could feel very much like being left out altogether (92).
Parents attempted to justify their decision not to tell their children about what was happening. They expressed a wish to protect their children from the potential trauma and upset of divorce. The research revealed that the children wanted to know what was happening; not being told was often a cause of confusion, frustration, and powerlessness.

Butler et al.’s (2002) research also revealed that children sometimes had an unexpected capacity to help parents in such difficult times, ultimately helping in the longer-term resolutions and new ways of living that divorce necessitated:

Recognising children as competent (as well as relevant) witnesses to the process of family dissolution may further assist the process whereby their accounts are attended to and valued (99).

Research exploring the experience of younger siblings who have an older sibling in prison (Meek, 2008: 271) reveals a reluctance on the part of the younger siblings to share information with anyone outside their immediate family. These children worried about being judged by teachers and the potential stigma that disclosure might bring about. Julie, a head teacher at an infant school, was realistic and honest about how some teachers might view such disclosures:

‘I am sure all my staff would always support children in such difficult circumstances. I don't know if that’s true for all teachers; unfortunately people make judgements about families and tend to discriminate...I can completely understand why some families would be reluctant to come clean.’

It may be that children’s voices are generally absent from research on prisons and its associated literature because of their powerlessness and their ‘protected’ status as supposed innocents. For the families I spoke to for this strand of my research, very young children were often fed misleading accounts, which ultimately led to confusion, anger, and frustration. For older children, their stories seemed to suggest that knowing what had happened to a family member was crucially important.
Although the concerns that parents expressed about their children’s welfare seemed understandable, there was little evidence that shielding them from the truth held any benefits or helped the children in any way. In fact, the use of fictional accounts, designed to protect children from harm, often seemed to be counterproductive, for example in causing additional levels of distress, animosity and anger for children when they eventually discovered the truth. Despite these setbacks, children appeared to be more resilient in dealing with adversity than their parents realised. It was interesting that once outside the immediate sphere of family influence, children would offer accounts of their experiences to other people, such as teachers, which suggested that they were sometimes acutely aware of what had happened to their imprisoned parents or carers. These conversations, which often happened away from parents, did not indicate that the children concerned were in any way traumatised but, on the contrary, suggested that they were capable of dealing with challenges and constructing their own narratives in order to make sense of them.

More research would help to establish the extent of children’s experiences of having a family member incarcerated, especially for those children in their early years. It is this group in particular, who, at least in their parents’ view, is not capable of emotionally dealing with, or would simply find incomprehensible, the situation in which the family finds itself. For research to involve such children, there is a need to navigate around family dynamics, and for parents and carers to place more trust in the coping abilities of their children.

The impact of imprisonment upon family dynamics

From the point at which individuals are arrested, through to their trial, incarceration and eventual release, family relationships are altered, stressed, and tested. This section explores how family dynamics and power relationships change and adjust to the new circumstances imposed as a result of the imprisonment of a family member. It may be useful to begin by considering the perspective of the prisoner to show how, from his point of view,
the role and position in the family he once held has effectively disappeared or been passed on to another family member. My research discovered that it is often children who take on extra responsibilities and roles, seeking to fill the gap left by the imprisoned family member.

For example, Dave felt frustrated and angry. He expressed his anxiety about not being able to ‘help out’ at home or to do what other fathers routinely do. He was concerned that his wife had too much to do:

‘I know my wife has found it difficult, especially with the kids. My boy has been more bolshie since I’ve been gone. We have different parenting styles. She gets pretty mad with them and finds it hard when they don’t do what she asks. I feel so out of it, like I can’t help. In the future I might get tagged so at least I can help out more at home then.’

Dave’s sense of frustration was exacerbated by the uncertainty of not knowing where he would carry out the remainder of his prison sentence. Although unlikely, Dave alluded to the possibility of being moved to another prison and the detrimental consequences this might have for his family:

‘You’ve really got to watch it because you can get shifted to another prison without any notice. I’ve seen it done to people who’ve said the wrong thing to the wrong person. That can really screw you up, especially when you’ve got kids. It’s pretty hard for the ones who’ve got really young kids or babies. There’s no way you can spend any quality time with them. I’m missing out, but it’s got to be harder for some of the other lads. There’s quite a few who’ve split with their partners since being inside. That’s shit when you’ve got children – imagine how hard it is anyway, but when you’re in here everything is twice as difficult.’

Beth’s case mirrored the findings of existing research, which suggests that relationships become extremely difficult to maintain when a partner is in prison. Although Beth was prepared to tell me about her fears, it was obvious that she had not and was not prepared to discuss them with Greg, her partner, who was serving a prison sentence. It became clear from what she said that the strains imposed upon relationships are often created by the sense of freedom sometimes experienced by partners on the outside:
‘Although I love him and I want to be with him, there’s a small part of me that’s thinking, ‘I’m not ready for this yet, I’m not sure I can wait another year. I’ve never said this to him - it’s dead hard to say - but...I was dead silly when I got together with him. I just thought we’d get married, have loads of kids...then things changed. Since he’s been away I decided to get myself into college. Before then it was always that I’d be saying, ‘I’m gonna have his children, we’re gonna be alright’. It was like I was kidding myself, like it was a comfort blanket...like pretending it was all going to be OK. And now, today, I don’t want any more children just yet, definitely not. I want to go through school. If he ever does anything that concerns me, he’d have to leave. I’d give him one chance, and that would be it.’

One of the mothers I spoke to expressed relief that her partner had been sent to prison. Bev, Russell’s mum, talked about her ex-partner, Neil, who had been sentenced two years earlier for a drugs related offence:

‘To be honest, it’s a good thing. When Neil was around I used to be scared....for myself, and for Russell. Some of the people he hung around with, they were dodgy, I mean really dodgy, violent. I saw some bad stuff. I’ve told him [Neil] that it’s over. I’ve only been to see him three times in all the time he’s been away. It’s not like he’s Wayne’s real dad. He [Russell] doesn’t mention him [Neil] anymore. At first he did, but then he’s moved on. He’s six now, loves his school. We’re both OK. We have a supportive family and a good set of friends...that’s enough.’

For Bev, it was simply convenient to forget about Neil. She did not want to maintain contact with him on release. It appeared, for this family at least, that a set routine had been established. Certainty seemed to make a difference for Bev. It gave her the strength and confidence to establish a new life without any reliance on her ex-partner.

Children, it appeared from my research, were capable of dealing with difficult situations and adjusting to new circumstances, where they might take on new roles and be offered fresh responsibilities. They were also capable of showing that they understood the seriousness of their situation and reacted accordingly. Adults, by comparison, seemed to struggle with the changed circumstances prison brought. My research has helped to show how these
different ways of coping happen within families. Jane, a prisoner’s wife, had mentioned conversations with her son, Chris, which contained what he referred to as ‘pretend talk’. I was interested in what Jane meant by this:

‘He said I was pretending it was all alright [his father, Dave, being in prison]. He said he hated the visits and the long journey. I would put this act on, try and keep things cheerful, but Chris just saw right through this. I think he just knew that things were serious, but I didn’t help by being all cheerful. To be honest, I think I was thinking of myself too much, not really considering the impact on Chris and Josie. Chris really surprised me…it was as if he was being the adult, telling me to face up to it.’

Jane appears to have been struggling in her role as an adult and a parent. By attempting to ‘put on a brave face’, the situation was made worse and Chris seemed to react negatively to his mother’s perceived inability to deal with the situation. Jane’s struggle appears to have involved a number of conflicting emotions, in which her loyalties as a parent and as a wife were tested:

‘I was so angry with Dave, for being so stupid and thoughtless. He was fine. Every time we went to see him he would tell us about his jobs [Dave worked in the kitchen, and the shop at the prison] and his mates. It all sounded so easy. What really got me was telling him about what I was doing. I wanted to tell him what a bloody nightmare the whole thing was, but I couldn’t because Chris and Josie were always there. I can’t begin to describe the frustration of the whole thing. Being treated like I was the one who’d committed a crime made things even worse.’ (Jane)

Family dynamics, it seems, were constantly tested for the respondents I spoke to. Jane and Dave’s story demonstrates how roles become distorted or permanently altered following the imprisonment of a family member, often leading to tensions, arguments and in some cases, separation. What is notable is the ongoing impact of imprisonment following release, suggesting that difficulties continue for a long time after a sentence is finished.

The following section contains material and ideas which are more to do with processes and the sequence of events family members are likely to
experience; for example, how arrest, prison visits, and release from prison impact upon individuals.
Section Two: Events

**Arrest: how individuals cope when a family member is arrested**

This section details the experiences of participants who talked about the impact of having a family member arrested, which in some instances happened in their presence. The trauma of living through the arrest appears to be intensified and made worse by the subsequent experience of a criminal trial, ultimately resulting in a prison sentence. Many of the participants talked about these stages, which for some was their first encounter with the criminal justice system. Others, although they had experienced having a family member arrested and sent to trial on previous occasions, seemed less affected by these ordeals.

Although Jack (aged fourteen) seemed suspicious at our first meeting (initially he suspected I worked for the police or the prison authorities and seemed reluctant to get involved in the research), he gradually began to open up and talk freely about his experiences:

‘The worst thing was when the arrest happened. We were asleep...it was really late; 2 o’clock or something. They broke the door; they didn’t wait for my Dad to answer the door. I heard lots of shouting, and banging. There were dogs. It was really scary. I didn’t know what it was. It was mad. I didn’t think police could just do that.’

Jack’s recollection of feeling confused and afraid is similar to the accounts offered in the literature, especially at the point where the police arrive at the house. Codd (2008: 65) suggests that:

The initial process of arrest, especially if followed by refusal of bail and remand in custody, can be a time of extreme shock, stress, fear, confusion and instability for children, especially if the arrest is witnessed at home.

Children, such as Jack, struggled to come to terms with such an extreme event and often felt violated and confused: ‘I remember not sleeping much after that.'
I was always awake and listening for the door. Mum would stay up late, just sitting in her chair.

Marion’s account of her son Wayne’s arrest and the ensuing search of her family home offers an additional perspective into how the behaviour of the police can make the trauma of arrest much worse:

‘What hit me like a brick was the attitude of the officers. They definitely were not sympathetic. All they would say was that Wayne had been arrested and was being held for questioning....no indication of why or what had gone on. My emotions were all over the place...I just felt utter relief, then shock, but also...anger. They [the police] started searching the house. My husband was away at the time so I felt utterly hopeless. I just let them plough through the house like it didn’t belong to me.’

Jack’s account also shows how helpless families are when the police are involved in the arrest of a suspect. The helplessness experienced appears to be exacerbated by the lack of any information or communication offered by the police:

‘I knew Dad was into stuff that was dodgy but I never thought this would happen, not like it did. The police were everywhere. They just didn’t care. They made us wait downstairs and the really annoying thing was they didn’t tell us anything. Every time my Mum tried to ask they just ignored her. It was like we weren’t there in our own house. They were searching for stuff all over the house. We could hear them upstairs moving furniture, banging around. Mum kept holding on to me...she kept pulling me back down on the settee so I couldn’t see what was happening.’

The circumstances of the arrest meant that Jack was unable to talk to his father. Jack appeared to interpret his father’s silence at the time of the arrest as a reluctance to acknowledge what was happening:

‘They took Dad away in a van. He didn’t say anything to us, just left. I remember wanting to look at him but he had his head down, like he didn’t want to see us.’

‘I got really angry after all that happened. I hate the police for what they did to us, not just my Dad but all of us. I’d done nothing. I
always turned up for school, worked hard, never got into trouble and it was as if I was some kind of crim [criminal].’

Jack’s story demonstrates how an arrest can have long-lasting consequences for family members, particularly children. After his father’s arrest, Jack indicated that his lifestyle altered, and consequently he ended up getting into trouble with the police [for vandalism and criminal damage]. A sense of injustice and anger appeared to compel him into behaviour, which, although uncharacteristic, allowed him some form of expression:

‘We [Jack and his father] used to do things all the time, go fishing, go on big walks. It just got worse and worse since he went away. I never do any of that stuff now. Mostly I hang around with mates.’
‘I don’t know if Dad being away had anything to do with what happened. It just happened. It was stupid. I needed to do something, even if it was wrong.’

Marion talked about her experience of the police searching her family home following the arrest of her son, Wayne. Her account reveals the mixed emotions of disbelief, incredulity, shock and relief:

‘Wayne had gone out with his mates the night before it all happened. He normally came back before eleven o’clock, but that night he never appeared. We ended up ringing the hospitals, phoning his friends, but no one seemed to know where he was. We’d tried his mobile over and over, but for whatever reason it was turned off.’
‘The worst part of the whole experience was what happened the morning after he’d been out. Two police cars appeared whilst I was getting breakfast ready for Paul. I was just in a complete daze, not really with it at all. I’d not had any sleep and I was frantic with worry and stress.’
‘Paul [Wayne’s brother] seemed oblivious. He was about to go to school when they knocked on the door. I really thought they’d come to tell me he was dead. I was convinced. What else could it be when two squad cars suddenly appear at your house and your son has disappeared?’
After the initial relief of discovering that Wayne was safe, albeit in police custody, Marion’s feelings quickly changed as she became angry, protective and frightened:

‘What really got to me was how they treated Paul. Paul was fourteen at the time. They told us we had to stay in the house until they told us otherwise. We kept asking what had happened, but they just ignored us...like we weren’t there. I’ve never ever in my life felt so powerless and so intimidated.’

Beth, aged 30, mother of Mika (aged five), talked about her experience of her partner Greg’s arrest:

‘Although I was pregnant, I had a job and people around me, so I was in a good place. When Greg was arrested it was awful, I’m not saying it wasn’t, but financially it wasn’t, like, that bad. I was in a routine, working early and late shifts...that was my life. My family were going to look after Mika, so all that was sorted. In some ways I wasn’t relying on Greg. Looking back I think that made a difference to how I reacted. I was in floods of tears, really angry, but I knew I wasn’t on my own.’

Beth appeared to have been ready to deal with Greg’s arrest and intimated that her life at the time was organised so that she could operate as a single parent if she needed to. Unlike the accounts offered by other respondents, Beth’s story offers a strong sense of resilience and determination:

‘I only found out through his Mum. I got this phone-call. She said Greg’s been arrested and he’s not coming out. It all feels like only yesterday. I knew it was going to happen one day...I knew what Greg was like. I was expecting the call and when it happened I wasn’t surprised.’

‘I don’t think I fully digested it all at that time...it’s only about a year ago that the goalposts have moved nearer...after he was first arrested, there was a lot of meetings with solicitors and that...they were talking about a big sentence....we kept getting warned about that possibility. Anyway, he was on remand for some time. We kept thinking we was going to flip, not knowing for a long time what was going to happen. Once we got through the trial and Greg was sentenced we could get back on with our lives. It was as if everything went into slow motion at that point.’
Nisha, whose older brother Liam was arrested in the family home, sums up her recollection of an arrest being made on her older brother:

‘I never saw that before...police being so aggressive to us, to me and mum. We were in shock for hours afterwards. I'll never trust another police officer...they were animals. We'd done nothing...we were just at home.’

Arrest often plays a significant part in how individuals feel in relation to the imprisonment of another family member. The experience is particularly harrowing for children, who often do not understand what is going on. For the respondents in my research these experiences tended to become part of their wider perception of prison and its impact. Although, arrest, in many cases, heralded the beginning of a difficult journey, the experience formed a lasting, negative memory for them.

The difficulties families encountered associated with prison visits

‘You get searched, have to wait forever and then they look at you as if you’re scum. The officers all look the same – look at you as though you’re rubbish’. (Jack, aged 14, son of prisoner)

This section explores the theme of visiting, which appears to be central in relation to experiencing the incarceration of a family member. Extracts are taken from interviews, in which respondents have talked about their experiences and feelings of the prison visit. Adults’ and children's accounts are included, often demonstrating the different priorities each group faces, and how they routinely cope. I have also included extracts from interviews with Kathryn the family link worker, and Angela a play worker, who also works in the visitor’s centre.

The views of Kathryn and Angela help to add another perspective to the fraught process of visiting.
Kathryn’s extensive and varied experiences offer a useful starting point in understanding the interactions of a prison visitors’ centre:

‘I try to help wherever I can, but sometimes I need to be firm with some of the families that come in. Last week I had to suggest that a family left. It was a first time visit and mum became very aggressive. Because she hadn’t been through the checks, searches and all the rest she took it personally. I could see the situation was getting a bit tricky so I had a word with a couple of the officers and said I’d sort it. Anyway, I had to put her straight and explain they were only doing their job, like anyone else. Sometimes they can’t appreciate the other side. These guys [prison officers] have families too, and feelings, believe it or not. My role is a bit like a go-between or sometimes a peace-maker. There’s never a dull moment.’

Kathryn’s role is an unusual one, requiring her to balance the needs and expectations of visiting families with the formal, rule-based operations of a prison. Whilst she is clearly an advocate for the children and families she works with, she has a legal duty to work within the clear boundaries and operational demands imposed by the prison management. Explaining this to visiting families can be problematic for Kathryn, especially in instances where individuals are feeling stressed or upset.

The prison’s influence is powerful and its institutional effects appear to have an impact on the practitioners who work there, the prisoners, and the civilian staff including individuals like Kathryn and Angela; as Shaw puts it:

Prisons are ‘total institutions’; their nature exerts institutionalising effects on all those within their boundaries – staff and inmates alike. Not only does the pressure to conform to the system affect uniformed staff and the governor grades, it also has the propensity to neutralise the civilian staff who bring professional expertise into the prison (Shaw, 1987: 16).

Shaw’s observation, which develops Goffman’s work on total institutions (1961), suggests that the ‘institutionalising effects’ of the prison are far-reaching, potentially compromising the value of the work carried out by professionals such as Kathryn and Angela. Building allegiances and trust
across, within and outside the prison walls are important for Kathryn and, in her view, help her to carry out her role effectively. Kathryn believed that this involved representing the interests and welfare of those on the outside, and to do so she was conscious that she needed to resist some of the 'institutionalising effects' that the prison exerted:

'Sometimes I have to remind the officers that I'm here to look after the children and the mums. They forget and just see things as right or wrong, good and bad. I sometimes make things complicated for them. I understand why they need rules, that's how this place works, but they [the prison officers] need to realise that families and young children especially, don't understand why they have to follow all these rules.'

The prison regime clearly extends its remit to encompass visiting families who often feel aggrieved, unprepared and resentful, even in instances where they have prior experiences of visiting relatives in prison. Kathryn's account corroborates the narratives of the families who visit relatives, in that visiting appears to be a particularly difficult and stressful time for all concerned. Before the visit takes place there are numerous checks which can, according to a family member, cause visiting families to feel uneasy:

'You're made to feel like a criminal...like you've committed a crime. I think you're treated differently if you've got children...then it's slightly better. They check everything. You get three, four, or five checks in high security. There's metal detectors and sniffer dogs, just like the airport.'

'I've seen someone stopped and pinned down. Kids were all crying and it was pretty tense. Things are really emotional after a visit. I think in a prison everything feels more intense and emotional. We visited lots of prisons on the twelve years he was inside.' (Marie, younger sister of prisoner)

The level of security and the thoroughness of the searches that families encounter depend largely on the category of prison. What determines the prison category is the element of risk posed by the type of inmate, and the subsequent risk of harm they pose to others along with the possibility of
escape. For families, these considerations seem far removed from the actual experience of visiting a loved one.

Prisons exhibit a wide variation in terms of the visiting procedures they offer. Visiting conditions depend not just on the category of the prison, but also on the priority afforded by individual establishments to visiting families and facilities for receiving them:

Some establishments have good facilities which enable families to come together in a reasonably civilised manner. In other prisons the environment is totally unsatisfactory and depressing, a situation brought about by lack of space, insufficient staff and the low priority afforded family contact by comparison with security, court productions and the smooth running of the establishment (Shaw, 1987: 14).

Although Shaw’s work is over twenty-five- years’ old it still applies to the prison regime that exists today, in which some prisons, according to Kathryn, are more ‘progressive’ than ‘repressive’, although they represent the minority in her opinion.

Even in category D prisons (open prisons where conditions are more relaxed), the effect of a visit can be powerful and disturbing for some:

‘You are constantly being watched. They look at you like you’ve done something terrible. I always feel guilty and dirty after a visit. I always have a shower when I get home’. (Jen, partner of prisoner).

Clearly the process of visiting, by its very intrusive nature, and with its attention to surveillance, security, and safety, is a negative one for the families and their children. Jen’s description above suggests that the visit is more than a violation of privacy: it amounts to something more sinister and intimate. The psychological aspects of visiting appear to stay with individuals long after the visits have finished.

Guidance issues by Action for Prisoners’ Families (2007: 6), about being searched, might help prepare some families for what is in store, but does not
capture the trauma that individuals experience and the feelings they harbour as a consequence:

Security is a major concern at all prisons, particularly regarding drugs. Different prisons will have different procedures, but all visitors have to be searched before they can come in. This will probably include children and babies. They are rather like the searches that people have to go through at airports.

This rather neutral description does nothing to help family members prepare for what, for many I spoke to, was a humiliating, cold, and in all cases, a negative experience. Although such guidance is designed to be informative and helpful to uninitiated and inexperienced family members, there is clearly a gulf between the written version offered by such guidance when compared to the lived experiences recounted by the visitors themselves.

From the time I spent with Kathryn in the visitors’ centres it was obvious that she had a good working relationship with the prison staff. Spending time in the Visitors Centre and observing interactions between the staff and the visitors was revealing. There appeared to be a spirit of camaraderie and a level of trust between Kathryn and the prison officers. They appeared to communicate well, share jokes and enjoy working together. Although this was only my perception, Kathryn mentioned her relationship with the two Prison Officers on duty:

‘These guys are OK. I’ve only worked with Pete and Chris for a couple of months, but we’ve quickly got used to each other. They don’t give me a hard time, like officers in some of the other prisons. [Calls over to Pete, who has just entered the office] ‘You’re alright aren’t you Pete? – you’re one of the good guys. [Pete smiles, ‘What you after, Kath?’]’

‘Sometimes I see mums and partners looking at me, trying to work out if I’m OK. I’m always upfront with them. I’ve got nothing to hide and they prefer it if I’m direct. If I see anything dodgy, I have to act on it.’

Again, Kathryn’s words offer a reminder of the regime imposed by the institution, and the importance of having to ‘act on it’. Her loyalties are finely
balanced both as a family advocate and as an agent of the prison, aligning herself to the formal rules and regulations of the workplace.

Kathryn believed that families often viewed prison officers as part of the ‘system’. Although some prison officers seemed to be friendlier with younger children, teenagers such as Jack felt uncomfortable. Hostility between visiting families and prison officers appeared to be commonplace:

‘Prison officers play it by the rules. They don’t want a massive claim coming in. They don’t want to be accused of saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing. It’s all them and us sometimes and we have to try and change that.’

‘Job roles are changing in the prison service. Where they [prison officers] were sat at a computer or booking in, now they’re being told that they have to talk to people, talk to families. Some of them will actually talk to the little boys and girls, but it tends to be those who’ve got children of their own’. (Kathryn)

Kathryn was able to see the prison officers as people rather than as officials or bureaucrats. The visiting families were unable to relate to the officers in the same way, seeing them instead as representatives of ‘the system’, and as representing ‘the other side’:

‘On the other side, families are frightened that if they talk to the prison officers that this might affect the prisoner so they’re fighting each other. I don’t think that’s going to change for a while although I know big changes are coming. It feels like people just want the visits to go as quickly as possible sometimes. The prison staff don't like it because they don't know how to be with some of the families that come in. I think they try not to get too friendly and so they're careful about crossing the line’. (Kathryn)

Over the course of a prison sentence, the respondents in my research, because of the perceived hostility they encountered, began to draw distinct boundaries. These boundaries often denoted who could be trusted, who to talk to, and how to act. Once inside the prison, these boundaries became more obvious, and to an observer such as myself, were an obvious manifestation of
the distance between prisoners’ families and the prisons and those who worked in them.

The impact of visits upon children

You expect things to be warm and fuzzy when you visit your Brother. Well think again. Anyone who has visited a prison knows the cold, the smell, the unwelcoming seats. They all stick in your mind. At first the place seems perfectly average, like a metal dome, or a tin Trafford Centre. But when you enter a cold blanket envelops you and the shiny white painted walls make you feel crazy…..everyone suited and booted exactly the same.’ Proof of identification!’ the same toneless drone pours out of each and every Officer’s mouth. Fingerprints are taken – shoes off, belt off, jewellery off, pockets emptied. The floor so cold it feels wet. The cold rises up through the bottom of your feet, creeps up past your ankles and makes you shudder. You walk through the metal detector holding your breath….even when you know you’ve nothing to worry about. Then frisked, mouth checked…you’re made to feel like a criminal yourself.

_A Place I Do Not Like_ (A Poem by a child relative, aged fifteen, 2009)

In considering the repercussions that stem from a prison visit and the impact on children in particular, there appear to be a number of factors at play. Kathryn talked about how visiting often upset a fragile equilibrium that followed the incarceration of a family member, and how a prison visit could unsettle family relationships:

‘The problems for children on the outside are about how they’re looked after and provided for. Making sure that they can still keep up their way of life is a big thing for many of the Mums who come here. When the prisoner was at home, or should I say, when Daddy was at home, or Granddad was at home, they want it to be the same. Coming here is a reminder of what they’ve lost.’

Although families can find some stability and a way of coping outside the prison, Kathryn’s suggestion is that visits can damage and jeopardise such
How children react to prison visits depends on a multitude of complex, sometimes interrelated factors. The immediate environment and atmosphere the prison presents to a child, their understanding of where and why they are going, their age, along with the way they are treated, are all likely to be significant. Furthermore, much depends upon the existing relationships children have with parents and other family members. If these relationships are fragile, there is a much greater chance that visits will be more traumatic for all concerned (Scharff-Smith and Gampell, 2011). Chris, aged ten, helped to shed light on what it might be like for a child visiting someone in prison for the first time, as he had done when he first went to visit his father:

‘People were watching us all the time. My Mum said to ignore it but the guards always looked, even when we sat with Dad. I hated it. Nobody looked happy and everyone seemed sad. Some children next to us started to cry.’

Kathryn went on to talk about the alien environment that children encounter when visiting a family member, contrasting sharply with life outside the prison:

‘Children come and visit, they see the name tag around their Daddy’s neck. You see them looking around...you’ve just got to put yourself in their shoes. In this place, they wear name tags...you go to a different prison and they wear bibs. It’s not a normal life. It’s not like this on the outside. Even the youngest children pick up on the uniforms. They like to draw and paint when they are here. They’ll paint their Dads and the guards. They’re always processing what’s going on even if they can’t say the words.’

It is important to consider how older children make sense of prison visits. Unlike the very young children in this research, who were struggling to comprehend what was happening, often in the face of conflicting and misleading accounts, teenage children fully understood what prison was about. Jack (aged fourteen) talked about visiting his father in prison and expressed some of the frustration that such visits bring:
‘I go and see Dad every other week. It’s a big journey. It takes nearly two hours, then they search you, you have to wait for ages. Visiting…it’s really boring. You get searched, have to wait forever and then they look at you as if you’re scum. The officers all look at you the same—as though you’re rubbish. There’s one officer, he’s OK…it’s like, they’re not allowed to talk to you, but he sort of lets on. I’ve only seen him a couple of times. Bet he’s been sacked for being nice…”

Jack had clearly come to expect visits to be difficult and to involve a level of hostility and tedium. In mentioning a prison officer who appeared unusual simply because he acknowledged Jack, it is clear that his expectations were low. Jack was acutely aware of the surveillance and level of security at the prison, describing situations in which he and his father had been singled out:

‘Once we’re in, it’s like a great big hall, people watching everything. We can’t really be ourselves in there. I once tried to give Dad a high five, just messing about, the sort of thing we used to do outside…they told us no messing about. What is that all about? Even my Mum has to stay sat down all the time. The worst part is when Mum gets upset on the way back. I feel pretty bad cos I don’t know what to do, what to say. It gets me really wound up. Why should she be the one suffering? It sounds really stupid, but Dad caused this, it’s his fault. Sometimes I don’t think I want to see him. It’d be easier just forgetting. Anyway, that’s the worst part.’

Jack believed it was his mother, rather than his father, who was being punished. His relationship with his father had clearly become more difficult because of the prison sentence. Visits, according to Jack, did not allow him to bridge the distance (practically and emotionally) that had grown between him and his father:

‘I look forward to the visits but I end up dreading them. That doesn’t make sense does it? I can’t explain…it’s like I want to see my Dad but I don’t, not in there. It’s not the best place to meet anybody. We never have a decent talk or a proper laugh. He’s not like he used to be.’
For Jack, the visits involved stress, confusion, anger, and sometimes happiness. Codd’s research supports Jack’s harrowing account (2008: 152), describing prison visits as

the lynchpin of contact between prisoners and their families, [they] provoke joy and unhappiness in almost equal measure. They provoke joy at being briefly reunited with a parent, partner, child or friend and also anxiety, stress and sometimes unhappiness prompted by, for visitors, difficult travel arrangements, complex prison policies, or simply an unhappy or difficult meeting with the prisoner.

Kathryn, despite the difficulties that prison visiting caused, especially for children, believed that visits allowed families to support the prisoner, offering, in many instances a safe haven on eventual release. Sam, aged sixteen, talked about visiting his father in prison:

‘When we all go and see Dad it feels like some sort of other day, not like a weekend or a weekday, but like one of them weird days when you lose track of time, like when you're on your holidays, 'cept its not much of a holiday in that place [prison]. Ade gets pretty wound up with the waiting and booking in, and we always try and take stuff for Kayley. The play area in there is crap, just a few cuddly toys and a manky old doll's house. Most of the little 'uns stay with their Mums so we take a book and a toy, just something to do, fills the time.’

Sometimes, according to Kathryn, children will manipulate family dynamics, accessing the limited, but nonetheless, significant power and influence they have. This is especially true of family visits to prison, where according to Kathryn, parents can feel especially guilty about their children being there:

‘It is blackmail by the child, it is blackmail, but not in a bad way. They're not being told what's going on. [Imitates child] ‘I know when I ask Daddy if I can do something, or go somewhere, I know he'll say yes.’ And a lot of the Daddies do go, ‘let him do it, let him do it’. There are times when the Dads say, ‘No, you will listen to what we say, and you will not do it.’ And that child will sit through the visit and be moody for two and half hours, but that’s manipulating Mummy and Daddy. They get at each other. I think the best way of doing that is by a private visit. If you’ve got a troubled family, a
private visit is absolutely brilliant for them. You bring mother in, or carer in, and they don’t have all the hassle of the visits hall [main visitors’ centre room]. Time away from the child, just the chance to let Mummy and Daddy discuss what’s going on, put things into order, setting up rules and regulations. Children need rules and regulations no matter where they are. Then you bring the child back into the equation again, and you make your rule list, show them [the children] your rule list and everybody signs it at the bottom. A child needs something like this. Without it, families are in chaos, lost and at the mercy of the child.’

Ade, Sam’s brother (aged fourteen), talked about how his younger sister, Kayley, allegedly manipulated the fragile and shifting dynamics during family visits to prison:

‘Kayley would do this face before we arrived to visit Dad. It was so put on, but it always worked. She could get anything out of them [her parents] by just acting pathetic. Dad would always pay her all the attention and we would just sit there like we weren’t there...it was so pathetic [pulls face at Kayley]. We looked at Sam more for telling us what to do. He was the one who was always there...the one we relied on.’

Ade’s description shows how children are aware of such positioning and the different reactions it is likely to elicit once a family member has been imprisoned. Children often appeared determined to get their own way in circumstances where the family dynamics had significantly altered. After Joe found out from his grandmother that his father was serving a prison sentence, he began to put pressure on his mother to allow him to visit his father.

‘At first Mum said, ‘no way’. She wouldn’t give in, but I just kept begging, giving her a hard time, whatever it took. I was only about eight at the time and Mum said I was way too young to understand what was going on. I knew I needed to see Dad. I hadn’t seen him in ages. It wasn’t as if Mum could have stopped me. When I want something, nobody will get in the way... I just had to see him.’

‘In the end, Mum gave in. The first visit was tough. I just wanted to stay with Dad. I hated seeing him in there. Mum was OK until we got home, then it all started again. She said it wasn’t good for me, being in a place like that. Anyway, I got to see Dad more often after that. I just wanted to know when I could see Dad again.’
Despite Joe only being eight years old at the time of his first prison visit, it was clear that, regardless of the hostile atmosphere he encountered, he was able to make a choice about seeing his father. His frustration appeared to emanate more from being denied such opportunities, even if they upset him at the time. Joe continued to visit his father, and with each visit, appeared to develop resilience and some understanding of the difficulties and stresses of visiting:

‘I got used to it eventually. Being searched became normal. I see why they have to do all that, but what gets me is the way they are with you. Mum says they must be bitter and twisted to do that job. I don’t make a big deal of it...what’s the point?’

The experience of family members visiting relatives in prison appeared to be partially dependent upon the regime and the philosophy of the prisons themselves. Kathryn talked about how some establishments appeared to be more family-orientated than others. Kathryn also implied that what the families and the children experience ultimately depends upon how government policy relating to prisons is interpreted and implemented:

‘They live a lie really. They constantly tell themselves that it’s not happening. So they come along, and it depends on where they visit. Some places like HMP Orient are more relaxed, so everything is forgotten. Other places throw everything up in the air...the officers are more hostile, especially in the higher security prisons. Some children look scared and it’s obvious they can’t relax. A lot of prisons are starting to provide places and things to do for children, but there are some that still live in the dark ages. You've seen a couple now so you can see how they’re all different. Some of it depends on the Governor and the management, but the powers that be, the government are the ones who really call the shots.’

Kathryn went on to talk about the way in which some children would blame themselves for everything. Often children would confide in Kathryn whilst they were on a visit. Kathryn thought these opportunities to talk were useful, but she often found it difficult in the short time available during a visit to talk to the parents and carers. Although Kathryn’s role is a difficult one, it appears that the prison visit, although often stressful, can bring some benefits for children:
‘These children come in here angry, really, really angry. They don’t want to talk or anything and it’s us that have to [pauses]... work, open them up a little bit. We don’t want to know everything. Talking about it can help, but then the children go back after the visit, and there’s tears, crying. They don’t understand why Daddy’s to be led out of that door. Daddy has to sit in the same chair. If Daddy gets cross an officer comes across to see what’s going on. It’s not normal life, so you are going to be affected by it. Mums and carers will do everything reasonable to make it enjoyable - buy the lunch, get them treats. They’ll be laughing and getting along and then the child will start. It’s tough and it doesn’t always get much easier for them.’

Such encounters show how prisons are limited and challenged in their capacity to provide supportive and reassuring environments for children. Professionals such as Kathryn are often challenged in their practice in knowing how to relate to and advise children who might be experiencing confusion, upset, anger and a host of other difficult emotions.

‘Some people don’t let their children visit at all, but what happens is that, if the children don’t visit, if I put myself in that position, after a while I probably wouldn’t want to know my father after so many years. Because I would have spent my youth not understanding why, and blaming him. I’d blame myself first, then get angry, then I wouldn’t forgive him. When that happens it creates so much bad feeling on each side. Why would you spend time on the outside, unloved, unwanted, and probably out of work.’

The cost of visiting relatives is a theme that has appeared in the literature from the early days of prison research (Morris, 1965). Although there is some means-tested financial assistance available for families, for example the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme, Kathryn suggested that prisons need to be more understanding of the financial pressures that families might face in making the journey to and from the prison:

‘The cost that it takes to come to prison is too much for some carers. To an average person it can be forty pounds for a visit. There are some pots of money that carers can access, but you can’t always get this if you are working. Although there’s a transport allowance, if you’re not claiming anything, you won’t get it.’
Kathryn also talked about how prisoners did not always appreciate the difficulties that partners and wives faced in preparing for a visit and the attendant stresses that such preparations brought:

‘Prisoners need to understand how families live at home – that they come on a visit, and they might be dressed up very nicely, but that might be the only outfit they have. And then they feel obliged that they've got to buy something when they get to the prison, and the things here are expensive. Some of the lads in here are just so made up to see their loved ones, they don't see past the visit. They know it's taken a couple of hours and a few quid to get them all here, but they won't think about the clothes, the getting ready, the time off. I don't know if it's just a typical bloke thing, but it happens a lot. They'll say 'you look nice' or say the right thing, but they don't get the hassle, the cost, the messing around that some of the mums have to get sorted just to make the visit work. They'll come to me and say, the ones who know me, 'If only he knew, if only he could understand what its cost me.' They don't make a fuss, most of them. Why upset the apple cart?’

Kathryn’s view seems to indicate that the prisoners are sometimes ignorant of the trouble, expense, and general effort that families make in what, from the prisoner’s perspective, is an opportunity to simply spend time with the family. Rather than risk upsetting what might already be a delicately balanced family dynamic, many partners of prisoners, according to Kathryn, simply don’t ‘make a fuss’. From this perspective, it is reasonable to suggest that prisoners are cushioned and protected. After all, they do not have to plan the visit, get out of bed early, arrange and pay for transport, liaise with the school about authorised absences, ensure that the children are emotionally ready, undertake the journey, wait until the allotted time to enter the visitors’ hall, and expose themselves to numerous checks. The visit, at least from the perspective of the prisoner, is comparatively straightforward:

Dave, a prisoner with a family who regularly visited him, was a little more aware and sympathetic than Kathryn’s depiction of prisoners’ general stance and attitude:
‘They used to travel down from the Lakes every week. It was costing them a fortune. My wife doesn’t drive so they used public transport. One adult and two kids, a train and a bus every week. I was just here, ready, twiddling my thumbs and feeling bad they’d be going through all that… all that way.’

Once families arrived at the prison, further expenses were incurred. Because visitors are not allowed to bring their own lunch, many would spend money at the sandwich bars and snack outlets within the visitors’ centres:

‘When families are here for a while, they have to wait around, kids get bored and hungry. Because there’s sandwiches, cakes and drinks, that’s what they ask for. For most parents, it makes life easier if you just give in and let them have what they are asking for. A mother can walk away from a day visiting with a hundred pounds less in her pocket, easy. The sandwich bars make a fortune in these places. I know it sounds stupid, but you’ve got a captive audience. Get it? I know, bad joke. One thing that you do need in here is a sense of humour.’

‘The children know this is not normal. They’re confused, they’re asking mummy, ‘Can I go swimming, can I go ice-skating’, and it’s, ‘Sorry, I haven’t got the money, sweetheart.’ So just on how money is spent can be confusing to kids. It’s not the norm so they pick up on that and that creates problems. That’s how children start being affected by it. They’ll go back to school and see the other kids doing other things, spending money on whatever and they’ll start to resent the visits.’

Kathryn talked about how prisoners coped when they did not receive regular visits. Often they would support each other and form new types of families, effectively cutting themselves off from the outside world:

‘Some of the lads in here know each other quite well. Some have been inside a few times so they get into a routine. If they don’t get visits and nobody wants to see them, then they make a life in here. Self-preservation is what they say and I suppose that’s what it boils down to, making life as good as it gets.’

Kathryn acknowledged the importance of family links and contact in terms of long-term outcomes for the prisoners (Maruna, 2001; Maruna and
Immarigeon, 2004: 17), but she was also mindful that the emphasis of responding to the needs of the prisoner often obscured or pushed aside the needs of children:

‘There’s more chance of non-re-offending by keeping that bond together. By helping offenders and families as one unit, as we try and do here, it helps the offender as a person. It can help them as a family. Most of the guys will admit that life for them is easier. They will say, ‘We’ve got it cushy’, but it can be the system that stops them from the reconnection. You see some of the families in here once in a blue moon and that's not surprising given they live in the south of England or way up north. All the big ideas you hear coming from the government about family this, family that, don't count for much. What I see is that prisoners are happy with the visits and keeping in touch, but the downside is that keeping visits up is tough for the children and the mums who keep things going.’

The reality Kathryn describes fits with the policy guidance developed to reduce reoffending rates for prisoners (Department for Children, Schools and Families / Ministry of Justice, 2007; POPS, 2006; Prison Reform Trust, 2007). Whilst it is undoubtedly beneficial for prisoners to keep some connection to their families on the outside, it is less clear how beneficial this is for the families themselves.

Yvette, Rick’s ex-partner and mother of Sammy, aged seven, described the differences between some of the prisons where Rick (Sammy’s father) had been serving time. Although what she describes is worrying, Yvette was determined that Sammy maintained contact with his father. It was, according to Yvette, Sammy’s ‘birth right’. Although Yvette and Rick had separated three years before I interviewed Yvette, coupled with the fact that distance, expense and time off from work and school were often difficult, her determination was impressive:

‘Sammy visits Rick every week. In Belton [a category A prison], there were rooms full of paedophiles. How can you expect children to come to a place like that? There was no way we could tell him where he was. He was transferred to Orient in December. That made a big difference. We don’t have to travel as far now, although it's still a pain. We still have to wait around and get searched. Some
of them [prison officers] just treat you like something they’ve wiped off their shoe; they’ll look at you like scum. It’s the worst place for kids. I hate taking him, but he loves to see his Dad.’

‘When Rick was in Belton Sammy would say, ‘Why can’t Dad stand up?’ There was a glass partition. There was no play, no interaction. At Marston, at least they move around, sit with each other. It’s not great, it’s still prison...it’s really tough on children. You get there, then they search you. Belts, coats, shoes, and then you get the ‘bad moods’. He [Sammy] was treated like a criminal.’

Again, staff hostility, the long distance travelling, the cost, being searched, all appeared to add to the trauma of taking children on prison visits.

Angela is employed as a play worker at HMP Orient. She described her role and her own experiences of observing children visiting their loved ones. Like Kathryn, Angela was immersed in the world of prison visiting. Her perspective helps to show how, through observing hundreds of visiting families, children in particular appear to cope with the visits. Because of her close interaction and communication with the very young children who came into the visitors’ centre, she understood a great deal about how these children dealt with the process of visiting:

‘I get to see a lot of children in here. I'm based in this area [a cordoned off play area, specially designed for young children in the visitors’ centre] and the children will come and play with the resources and equipment. I don't tend to leave this bit, apart from when I might take a child back to where the parents are sat. The dads in here [prisoners] can't come into this area. They have to stay sat down.’

The area Angela works in is approximately twelve feet by twenty feet and can cater for between ten and twenty children at a time. During my visits to the prison, the area always seemed to be popular with the children.

Although Angela’s role was primarily childcare related, the fact that she wore an ID badge seemed to concern visiting families enough to arouse their suspicions. According to Angela, parents seemed to visibly assess and ‘weigh up’ who Angela might be, perhaps worrying that she was part of ‘the system’: 
‘I don't know how they see me. I'm not like a prison officer, but I'm definitely one of the staff. Sometimes parents can be a little bit wary. You get some funny looks in here, people are suspicious of who you are, but I just try and do my job.’

Angela talked about the importance of children being able to express themselves. Sometimes, for younger children, this happened through producing artwork, as Kathryn had already alluded to:

‘Lots of the children like to draw and use the crayons. They'll make pictures and things for their Mums and Dads. Some of the drawings are of the prison...inside...and the guards, the uniforms. I don't know what they make of this place. I just think its good they can come in here and just do something, be active. Some don't want to. They'll just stare and wait. Sometimes they'll wail and I'll have to go and find Mum. It’s not like a typical play setting where the children know each other, will go to regular sessions. This is more one off. Not as much fun I suppose if I'm being honest. You know like the place at IKEA where you can just dump the children when you go and do your shopping. Some of the mums will literally just drop them here while they go and talk. You can see they don't want to be here. They'll give me a look and I'll think, OK, I've got an hour or so to make this work, but if they don't like being here, it's a real nightmare.’

Angela’s account raises some interesting questions about the quality of the experience offered to children within the visitors’ centre. Because the experience was ‘not as much fun’, there is an implication that the play area is almost a holding pen, a place, like IKEA, where children could be left in order to allow parents and families to converse and spend time with partners and other family members. Perhaps the children sensed that this was the case, and something about the nature of the experience suggested it lacked permanence or importance. There were no incentives to form meaningful, significant relationships or friendships in the play area. For some children, this was acceptable, but for others who ‘didn’t like being here, it was a real nightmare’.

Furthermore, Angela talked about how very young children seemed to sense something about the prison atmosphere. Whilst she had experienced other
childcare settings as being routinely noisy and exuberant environments, the prison’s play area seemed markedly different; children held back and tended to be reticent, exhibiting a general reluctance which, according to Angela, seemed quite palpable:

‘One thing that strikes me is the lack of noise. In other settings I’ve been working with ten children and they’ll just generate a buzz, they’ll get excited, start shouting and laughing and just lose themselves. In here it feels different. It’s as though they realise they are in a place where you’re not meant to have fun. I don’t know if that’s my imagination, but that’s the impression I get.’

Even though the visitors’ centre can often get full, with approximately 150 people on the day I talked to Angela, there was remarkably little noise. Families tend to huddle together and speak in hushed tones, often glancing around, as if to check who might be listening. Although there was an air of intimacy and palpable relief which emanated from the family groups and reunited couples, the atmosphere was also charged, laced with an ever-present sense of being watched and monitored. Perhaps it was this confusing and slightly menacing atmosphere that the children in Angela’s play area were aware of.

Planning activities for children was a challenge for Angela and her colleagues. The diverse and complex needs of the children who came into the area were largely unknown. The nature of the visits for some families meant that children did not always come with their family and, when they did, they found themselves in an unfamiliar environment. For Angela, meeting their needs and making sure the play area offered them an enjoyable experience had challenges:

‘Not knowing the children who come in can be tricky. I don’t know if a child is autistic or has any kind of special needs. It’s not like I get to have a proper conversation with the parents. When I worked in a Children’s Centre we’d know all about each child. We’d have a copy of all the details we needed, talk to the families, do home visits, get to know them. Here, you have to guess at what’s likely to be going
on. You have to be alert, think quickly, and try and make the visit worthwhile. It’s probably the hardest job I’ve had.’

Angela was acutely aware of the potential emotional fragility some children carried. Like Kathryn, her role is delicately poised, and much of her time interacting with children is spent attempting to decipher family relationships, needs and potential tensions, before responding directly to questions or comments from children:

‘I think the children just get very confused. If you can imagine losing a parent and then being able to meet up for a brief visit once in a while, for a three-year-old that is really tough. Most of the families try and make it special and will build up the visit into a really important day. With children that can lead to all sorts of problems. They’ll get over-excited, emotional, ratty, and it all ends in tears. It’s like the worst parts of Christmas. I don’t know who I feel more sorry for, the mums or the children.’

Angela’s caution in responding to children is understandable, given the potential confusion some are likely to be experiencing during, before and after visits. Potential hostility from parents is ever-present, especially in instances in which children have been ‘protected’ from the truth and offered fabricated accounts:

‘I try not to get into conversations with the children about why they are here. It’s obvious some of them don’t know what’s going on and they’ll start asking questions about ‘Why is Daddy here?’, or ‘Do you think my Daddy is bad?’ Children just come right out and say it so that is something I’m better at dealing with. Parents don’t like other people talking to their children about why Dad’s inside. There was one occasion when a Mum got really aggressive and abusive towards me. I can’t really remember what that was about. She accused me of filling her little boy’s head with lies. I honestly don’t remember saying much to her son. I definitely didn’t talk about the prison or his Dad being here. People just get highly charged and really stress out. You can feel the tension in this place bubbling sometimes.’
For some families who had grown accustomed to prison visits, and for the children in those families, a routine became important. Some parents, like Beth, talked about the relative ease of the whole process, and about how fortunate she felt:

‘When Pete was in HMP Heston, I was OK cos I had a car. I could go every other day when he was in there. I didn’t need to worry about three bus journeys and dragging kids with me like some mothers did. I could just ring and you could just book visits whenever you like, so they were regular.’

For Beth, visiting someone in prison became routine, and consequently the experience became normalised. Because she had grown up around family members who had spent time serving prison sentences, some of them in Category A prisons, she tended not to notice or mind some of the more routine aspects of visiting:

‘Visiting prisons has always been a big part of my life. It was boyfriends, friends and family members....there was always someone inside I was going to visit. I remember visiting Heston and Ripon [high security prisons ]when I was a teenager. For me, it’s not like, wow, shock, horror. I’ve been there, done that, and I know what it’s about. Only this time it’s different cos I actually loved him. I’ve got his child.’

By contrast, families who were new to the whole process of visiting found the process particularly harrowing, especially when trying to navigate situations they felt wholly unprepared for. Billy talked about arranging a visit to see his son, who had recently been sent to prison. Despite feeling reassured after making their appointment over the telephone, on arrival at the prison, things became strained :

‘We spoke to a really lovely lady on the phone and we managed to book a visit for between 9 and 10:30. We arrived at 8:15. We weren’t advised about what we could and couldn’t take on the visit. We had to book in clothes.’

‘On the first visit we had to have out fingerprints taken. It cost us £10 each. We went to the visitors’ centre first, then to the main
building. There were some other first timers with us too. We were told it was a ‘no show’. We tried to talk to a prison officer about what this meant, but he just shrugged it off and said, ‘He doesn’t have to see you’. We were really upset as he inferred that John didn’t want to see us.’

‘We even tried ringing the prison chaplaincy – ‘We can’t force your son to see you.’ It was like some type of mantra designed to put us off. It’s a good job we didn’t take the children as they would have been in pieces.’

Unfortunately, such negative experiences appeared to be commonplace amongst the families I interviewed. Visits form an important part of experiencing the imprisonment of a family member. The respondents I spoke to all talked about visiting prison as a challenging aspect of dealing with the incarceration of a loved one.

There is evidence to suggest that prison visits lead to positive outcomes, especially in terms of finding accommodation, gaining access to employment and a lessening of the likelihood of reoffending (Shafer; 1994; Niven and Stewart, 2005; Mills and Codd, 2007). There is, according to Codd (2008), a need to undertake more qualitative research into the experiences of families who visit, rather than looking at mere statistics indicating visiting patterns.

The children I interviewed viewed prison visits as frightening, unfriendly, and generally stressful. Although some of the children expressed a strong desire to maintain contact with family members who were serving a prison sentence, there was an overall feeling of antipathy towards visiting.

Partners of prisoners talked at length about the difficulties in arranging visits, the complex procedural difficulties, and a general lack of clear information. Ultimately, it appeared to be the lack of facilities, combined with the hostility of the prison staff families encountered which made visiting difficult. Clearly, these were barriers to children who were unable to visit a relative in prison. Perhaps none of this is surprising when the evidence shows that

Every aspect of the relationship with prisoners’ children is in some way regulated by the fact that the parent is behind bars. Prison
security and availability of staff dictates the visiting times, the
duration of the visit, whether or not prisoners can have physical
contact with their relatives, when and for how long they can speak
on the phone, how many letters they can send. Nothing about
visiting a parent in prison is ‘natural’ and the impact on the child’s
relationship with an imprisoned parent through visits to prison is
profound (Scharff-Smith and Gampell, 2011: 18).

Some prisons, as Kathryn pointed out, are making significant efforts to make
visiting easier for children and families. Family days, fun days and activity
sessions involving the whole family have been introduced in a number of
institutions in recent years. Worryingly, however, is a trend which shows that
fewer children are visiting parents in prison, despite an overall rise in prison
populations (Eurochips, 2006). Respondents cite the distance between home
and prison, inefficient booking systems, restrictive visiting times, and the
curtailing of visits as reasons for why visiting is so problematic (HIP, 2001).

The benefits of regular visits from family members for prisoners are beyond
dispute. Reduced recidivism rates, the increased likelihood of securing
somewhere to live, and potential employment prospects all contribute to the
argument that visits are generally beneficial. This argument has to be qualified
and, in doing so, it is important to recognise that the quality, ease, and
availability of visits play a crucial part:

The most striking feature of the literature about the benefits of visits
for prisoners, their families and communities, is that there is little if
any contrary argument and conflicting data to the general principle
that the better the quality of visitation throughout a prisoner’s
incarceration, the better the effects on the prisoner, his or her post-
release adjustment, the family of the prisoner and the community
(Kupers, 2002, online).

Internationally, as one would expect, there are variations in practice. Some
countries, such as Denmark, Poland and Italy, offer more flexible visiting
arrangements for prisoners who have children (Scharff-Smith and Gampell,
2011). Evidence suggests that such flexible arrangements offer a more
humane, sensitive response to families under stress.
Kathryn, in summing up her thoughts about the overall impact of prison visiting on children, presented a bleak picture of what she considered to be the current state of affairs:

‘Prisons destroy children. The whole thing needs to change. It needs to be more family orientated. The visitors’ centres and everything are great, but when you actually get into the prisons, I don’t think it’s necessary that the children have to be treated like that, searching them and everything. I know things go on, but there must be an easier way. The prison staff need to be trained on families, how they speak to people. When you see the officers in the prison who are so used to talking to the prisoners, they forget. They’ll just say ‘no’ to families, it’s awful, awful.’

How children and families cope when somebody is released from prison

Family dynamics, stable routines, and the roles and responsibilities of family members can often be unsettled following the return of a family member from prison. This section demonstrates that assumptions about life returning to normal and families simply ‘picking up the pieces’ and ‘getting on with it’ are unfounded and unrealistic. Despite having served a prison sentence, and ultimately taken their punishment, prisoners find the consequences of incarceration are long-lasting and deep-rooted. Prisoners’ families find it hard to adjust to the return of a family member. Emotional and personal relationships have to be renegotiated, financial and practical arrangements need to be rearranged, and the day-to-day business of living is fundamentally altered. In short, families find dealing with such change difficult. This section foregrounds, through the voices of the participants, some of these difficulties.

Common concerns that respondents talked about included financial worries, particularly the difficulties of finding work for the returning family member, changing roles and responsibilities within the family, and a pronounced fear of being negatively judged by others. The process of living together again as a family, despite its romantic appeal whilst the prisoner is serving the prison sentence, is often not realised. Corresponding concerns about new-found independence, differences in parenting strategies, and the ever-present worry
about the family member being sent back to prison, compound the problems in the period of time following the release of a prisoner.

Dave, as an ex-prisoner, talked openly about his renewed status as a full-time family member:

‘It’s only been a few months so it’s early days. The kids have been fine and seem to be happy to have me back again. I won’t make out it’s a bed of roses though. Debbie and I have had a couple of big humdingers since I landed….basically about money and work, the usual stuff. I’ve got a couple of small jobs lined up, but to be honest it’ll take me years to get on my feet again. That’s a worry.’

Ex-prisoners find gaining paid employment incredibly difficult. Dave’s story demonstrates how difficult it is for ex-prisoners to find work following their release from prison:

‘Once you’ve been inside, it’s like I said last time to you, to make anything work, you’ve got to work twice as hard at everything. At least I’ve got a trade, I don’t always need to rely on big firms or anything. I can drum up business, but it’ll take time.’

‘I’ve volunteered to help out at my daughter’s school. I read somewhere there’s not enough blokes working in primary schools. They said they’d get back to me. I won’t hold my breath.’

Dave’s cynicism about his ability to find work is understandable. Statistics suggest that finding paid employment is especially difficult for ex-offenders and ex-prisoners, with 76% of male prisoners having no work to go to on release from prison (HM Government, 2005:12). Dave recognised the challenge involved in securing appropriate employment and resolved to make himself useful in the meantime:

‘I’m on my best behaviour so I’m not drinking and not smoking….all to save a few quid. I take the kids to school, get involved in the house- work, and all that, but long-term I really don’t know. I’ll turn my hand to anything if I have to, stack shelves in Tesco, do the bins, I’m not proud. After everything, I just feel lucky to be back. I’ve got a good team here.’
Perhaps Dave’s situation is more fortunate than that of other returning prisoners. Some families are less forgiving and possibly less welcoming. Beth talked about when Greg would be coming home and how she intended to deal with it if he drifted back into his previous criminal lifestyle:

‘If he ever does anything that concerns me, he’d have to leave. I’d give him one chance, and that would be it. I believe that everybody deserves a chance. I’ve got a past, a horrendous past, but I’ve managed to change. I’m not so thick as to think it’ll be easy for him [Greg] when he gets out and I know I’ll have to support him through it all. He’s in a bigger hole than I ever was...I can’t compare his lifestyle with what mine was like, it’s nothing like. You can be bad, or you can be acting to be bad, but I’ve seen that side of Greg to know he wasn’t acting. That’s what scares me. When he comes out it has to be right for us and for Mika. Unless he changes, it’s over, the whole thing is gone.’

Two-thirds of adult prisoners reoffend within two years (Learning and Skills Support Group of the National Council for Independent Monitoring Boards, 2008:5). Statistically and objectively for many families, such as Beth and Greg’s, the chance of a positive outcome is reduced. Beth’s worries about Greg reoffending seemed very real and she seemed to lack confidence and belief in their long-term future.

Beth appeared to be frightened of Greg returning home from prison. She suggested he would disapprove of her newfound independence. Beth’s fears extended to her daughter, Mika, who, according to Beth, had become used to not having her father around. Beth was clearly anxious about giving up the life she had created since Greg had gone to prison:

‘Greg would never let me go to college...he hated school and stuff so he never got any qualifications. I don’t think he even took any of his GCSEs or anything. He thinks I should just work and be happy, but I’m not... I want more.’

‘I get scared when I think of him coming out and moving in again. I’m scared for Mika too. She’s got used to life without him being at home and I know it’ll freak her out when it all changes. A lot of stuff has changed and I’ve moved on. There’s nothing much we have in
common apart from Mika. I don’t hang around with the same people we used to. They were all Greg’s mates to be honest. I don’t even see them now. I’ve got a couple of really close friends now. My child-minder is one of them.’

Action for Prisoners’ Families (2006) provide a guidance sheet, ‘the Outsiders’, for families who are preparing for the release of a family member. The guidance stresses the importance of accepting change for everyone concerned, and the difficulties that families often face in coming together again. Some of the quotations from family members have resonances with Beth’s story and the anxieties she expressed:

It’s been very hard for both of us. It’s like getting to know each other all over again. I know it was only two years, but both of us had changed so much – especially me. I’d got really independent. The youngsters had grown up another two years. There was a new child in the house as well, a new person for him to get to know. I find it difficult having to account for everything now. (The wife of a former prisoner, cited in APF, 2006: 2).

Kathryn talked about the changes that take place in family dynamics as a result of imprisonment. Once families had adjusted following the imprisonment of a family member, it became difficult to plan for their eventual release and reintegration into some kind of family routine. There was often a reluctance to relinquish newfound status and power in the case of families who suddenly had to readjust all over again. New deals had been struck within the families, often resulting in new roles, responsibilities and positioning of children within the household. This often proved to be a source of frustration for fathers who were serving sentences. Kathryn described some of the problems family members were likely to encounter following the release of a prisoner:

‘They will come out with all sorts, and tell you everything, [imitates child] ‘I’m really cross with my Daddy. When he comes out, I don’t know where he’s going to sleep.’ So the household, the format of the whole family has changed at home. Boys, especially, take control of that household, even from a very young age, so when Daddy comes home, for Dads it about ‘Where do I fit in that family household?’ ‘My daughter is sleeping with my partner. Am I going to be let in?’ And then, when they [the dads] go on home leave, I
ask them, ‘Did you have a nice time?’, and they’ll say, ‘It was strange, I didn’t feel comfortable in that house, I’ve been away so long.’ By the end of the fourth day, on a home visit, they are starting to feel comfortable, but then they go back in again for the next lock-up and things can change again. Dads will ring home every night and ask, ‘Why aren’t you doing this for Mummy, why aren’t you being good?’ Children will just clam up or say, ‘Don’t you tell me what to do, you don’t live here, this is our house.’ The child is manipulating the family, using their Dad’s guilt and turning it against them. In a way it’s not just the distance of where they live. It’s the fact they don’t have a role anymore. They end up being like some elderly relative you visit. I think respect is difficult for them, self-respect I mean.’

Jenna described the difficulties she encountered after her partner, Rob, was released from prison. Her story demonstrates that despite her efforts to reintegrate Rob back into the family home, it proved too difficult to re-establish any sense of normality. Without employment and any sense of role within the family, it appeared Rob became disillusioned and resorted to drinking:

‘People I’d got talking to when I was doing the visits warned me. Things aren’t a bed of roses just because he’s coming home. When Rob came back for weekly visits it was good for a while. He just fitted in and helped out. He was a proper dad and Kylie [Rob’s daughter] looked forward to weekends when they could be together and we were a happy family. Once he was back properly it got tricky and things turned shitty pretty fast. Rob couldn’t get a job, wouldn’t make any effort. He stole money from me and spent it on booze. Coming home with Kylie and finding him pissed on the couch was the last straw. It wasn’t just a one off either. It was becoming his way of life, but the problem was it wasn’t good for us, good for Kylie. He’s in some kind of sheltered housing scheme now. It’s pretty crappy, but at least it’s a home. The funny thing is, it was better when he was inside.’

Release from prison often meant disruption to families in terms of housing. The release of a prisoner often meant families had to be rehoused, as, for example, in situations where a housing association refused to accept ex-offenders or ex-prisoners. This made it especially difficult for ex-prisoners to re-connect to their families and establish any sort of independence:
‘On release, families need a lot of support. There’s the SAFE project in Lancashire. They help people where ex-offenders are resettled. They make sure that families and children have set routines, that children have their own beds, that everybody sits together at mealtimes, that no one is being brought into the house that shouldn’t be, that sort of thing. But the thing is, it’s all down to funding.’

‘Housing can be a problem. A lot of landlords don’t want families from offenders, nothing like that. Landlords don’t need to know but if they are on benefits, there’s that stigma as well. That family would probably be frightened. Really the family are being blamed for the partner committing the crime. Social housing is the same. It’s under great demand throughout the country. We have a family, where she’s got two children. She’s going to be having another child. When Daddy goes home, he’s not allowed to go back there, so you try and get them into social housing to get them in the same area. You speak to social housing and they say they’ll put them on the list.’ (Kathryn)

Support, coping and resilience
This section demonstrates that, despite the acute hardships prisoners’ families face, there are some positive messages from my research. In particular, children’s resilience and ability to cope under pressure seemed to feature in many of the participants’ accounts. A desire to move on and ‘work through’ the difficulties faced, whether financial or emotional, was also a prominent feature in the findings. Aspirations, particularly held by parents for their children, showed a determination and desire to break free and seek a new life for future generations. It was obvious from my research that in order to achieve these goals and to secure a better future, families needed help and assistance from families, friends, and organisations such as POPS.

Support for prisoners’ families is varied, patchy, and overall, limited in scope. The most common form of support that families receive is through their existing social networks and families. This type of support varies of course, depending on a number of factors such as the type of crime committed, the strength of the support network in the first instance, and practical issues; for example, money, distance, and work commitments. Often, the support needed was highly specialist and required the involvement of professionals working within criminal justice, children’s services or mental health sectors. This type of
support was sometimes difficult to access, as Katrina, a social worker with responsibility for children and families explains:

‘Because the cases you are talking about tend to be hidden, we only get involved once something has happened...it might be a safeguarding issue when a dad is released from prison, but sometimes it’s when families just can’t cope. The number of vulnerable families where mental health is a main factor is huge. When children are involved, they end up taking on tasks and doing jobs that aren’t age appropriate. There was a recent case I was involved in where the mum had attempted to take her own life. Her two boys were six and eight and her partner was in prison. It turns out she just lost all ability to cope. She had limited support and as far as we can tell didn’t tell anyone she was on her own with the boys. It’s these cases where we try and help, put support in, but often the support is too late.’

Katrina’s account flags up some of the difficulties organisations face when dealing with hidden groups such as prisoners’ families. Furthermore, rather than rely on professionals based in health and social care, prisoners’ families appeared to depend on their immediate support networks and people they knew and trusted. Informal friendship networks were important as a source of emotional help in times of difficulty:

‘If it wasn't for Keira my best friend I really think I'd 'av gone under. She came round most nights, listened to me cry, moan and bitch about life. She deserves a medal.’ (Jess, partner of prisoner).

Kathryn described the needs of families and the support they looked for when a family member was in prison. It was obvious that some individuals needed specialist support which went beyond the type of help friends and family were able to provide:

‘Emotional support is high on the list. Somebody to listen to, somebody to talk to. They also need the practical stuff like information on the prison they are visiting. They just want to offload – they need that sense that somebody is there for them. They want to talk about everything they’ve gone through, what their concerns are. Things like arrest can be very traumatic for families, especially children.’
The importance of joining up service provision and actively supporting families was, according to Kathryn, a challenging aspect of her role. Many of the agencies Kathryn works with, although providing support for families, appeared to be ill-equipped to deal with prisoners’ children. What was important, in Kathryn’s view, was the building of trust, and accepting that families who were struggling needed to be treated sympathetically and appropriately:

“We work with the Children’s Society, Barnardo’s, Homestart, but they’re only 0-5. If there is a really complex case, then we’ll step in, we’ll assist and go and see the house where the families are living. A lot of these agencies, they’re not clued up for the prison. And you’ve got to know the prison to understand how the family are at home. You can go to a house, and see complete and utter disruption…but I understood why. If you get a social worker in, or an outside agency in, OK, they try and tell you the family rules and how you’re supposed to do this and do that, but it makes no difference. The trust and the understanding of it is what’s needed. Sometimes we can have that.’

For many families I spoke to, their coping appeared to be more dependent upon the immediate family and friendship networks available. For some families, these networks were extensive and strong, but for some families, such networks were non-existent.

Marion talked about her family’s immediate and wider support network and how it made a big difference in how her family coped with the imprisonment of Wayne, aged eighteen:

‘We are lucky. This could easily have destroyed us. We have immediate family members who are all great. Our parents have been just fantastic. My parents have set up a fund for Wayne for when he comes out of prison. I think he’ll struggle to get a job so the plan is to make him self-sufficient. He’s never been short of confidence or get up and go. He’s not frightened of challenges. It sounds monstrous to say it, but if it were the other way round…if it was Paul [Wayne’s younger brother] in there instead of Wayne, I really don’t think he [Paul] would have coped.’

‘Money is useful in this sort of situation. I talk to some of the mums when I’m visiting and it’s obvious they don’t have any real income
to speak of. There’s one lady in particular who I’ve seen a couple of times. She tells me about how she saves the money to pay for the journey and it breaks my heart listening to her. I don’t feel guilty. You have to fight for your children and use everything at your disposal. Thankfully, in our case, we have a lot.’

‘We decided to get our close friends together one night for a meal, soon after the trial. They all knew what was going on then anyway so it was no great surprise to anyone. Paul was there too and it meant a lot to see all these people he’s known all his life come together and be there for us when it was most needed.’

Social, economic and cultural capital appear crucial in relation to prisoners’ families. Certainly, for families like Marion’s who, in her words, ‘have a lot’, money, social support networks, social class and education all seemed important. If we take Marion’s awareness about her advantages relative to other, less fortunate families, it is possible to see how social capital, in Bourdieu’s words (cited in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119) has relevance in this instance, representing

the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.

Other families were not quite so fortunate and lacked the social, economic and cultural capital that others, like Marion and her family, possessed. Gina talked about her situation, following the imprisonment of her husband:

‘When Eddy [Gina’s husband] went inside we had nothing left. He’d left money owing to some idiots and we were already behind with the rent payments. I was getting a lot of hassle. I tried to get in touch with my sister who I’d not seen in years. I heard she was doing OK….pointless, never found her. In the end we got in at the refuge for women. Not the best, but it meant I could be with my kids and we were safe.’

Accounts like Gina’s remind us that many of the families affected by imprisonment are socially and economically disadvantaged (Murray, 2007;
Robertson, 2007). Despite these drawbacks, Gina’s determination to keep her family intact, and her preparedness to do whatever it took to achieve this was impressive. Gina recognised her children aged three and five were also resilient amidst the changes their new life brought:

‘Tommy [aged five] would put his arm round Katy [aged three]. He’d just sit with her and cuddle her. They’ve been so lovely with each other. Before Eddy went inside they’d always be fighting…constant hell.’

Families I spoke to attempted to carry on as normal, despite the hardships they faced. Attaching importance to a regular routine seemed to be a manifestation of resilience. In some instances, this involved the children trying to create a climate of safe predictability and routine. Marie, the younger sister of a prisoner, talked about attempting to establish such a routine for her family when she was a teenager:

‘I wanted Mum to see that there can be good things in life too. I wanted our home to be normal. That was what I remember about being a teenager, not wanting to go out, but to spend time with Mum, make things right.’

The desire to be ‘normal’ and carry on regardless seemed to be an aspiration for many family members I spoke to. Age did not seem to be a barrier and very young children often surprised other family members with their kindness and thoughtfulness. Helen was moved when her five-year-old daughter, Grace, tried to help out with breakfast, following the imprisonment of Helen’s partner and Grace’s father, Ian:

‘It was a weekend when it first happened. I can’t remember what I was up to…hoovering or something. The next thing is Grace is standing there with a tray for me with a glass of milk and some biscuits she’d obviously saved. When I asked her why was she being so kind, she just said, ‘You need me to help now that Daddy is gone’. I remember just breaking down in tears. She made me so proud and sad at the same time.’
Nisha (aged sixteen) talked about a perceived loss of freedom, and an infringement of her quality of life following the imprisonment of her older brother, Liam. In the same way that young carers feel an obligation and duty to look after a parent, prisoners’ children appear to carry the extra responsibility imposed indirectly on them because of imprisonment. Family members appeared to become closer and more dependent upon each other as a consequence of someone being imprisoned:

‘I used to try and cheer Mum up when Liam was first inside. I’d make supper and even do the washing up. I even made the beds once, but I did it all messy so Mum banned me from that. I never went out. Me and Mum were always together.’ (Nisha)

However, Nisha was unable to sustain this new layer of responsibility and instead, began staying out with friends, missing school, and generally adding to the stress her mother was already under. Despite this setback, Nisha subsequently demonstrated determination and resilience, largely gained through the influence of Liam. Nisha talked about how her relationship with Liam combined with a realisation about the predicament he was in made her realise that she needed to change. She maintains that it was partly because of Liam being in prison that she decided to start attending school again:

‘Eventually it was Liam who persuaded me to sort stuff out. We used to visit him in prison and he would try and give me advice about not messing up. I don’t know if Mum put him up to it, but in the end he told me he didn’t want to see me until I sorted the school thing out. He said if he could hack it in a dump like Marston [prison], then I should go to school. He said something about using my anger...if I could use it for better things, change the way things were. Whatever he said worked in the end. I knew how miserable he was in there. Everything he had was taken off him.’

Conclusion
Through unpacking the accounts of participants in this chapter, it is clear that the social harm experienced by family members is often acute, long lasting, and damaging. Often, to outsiders, the difficulties prisoners’ families experience are hidden, and frequently, deliberately so. Stigma,
embarrassment and shame carried by the respondents meant that many individuals felt marginalised, and, sometimes, therefore, left out of ‘normal stuff’ other families might take for granted:

‘His mates don’t come ‘round here these days. He [Max, a six-year-old boy] doesn’t seem to care. All he talks about is his Dad, but he’s not here. When we do go and see him [Max’s Dad], Max gets upset. His life is on hold. He is waiting for his Dad to come back, but I’ve told him that’s a long way off. He just isn’t interested anymore in normal stuff—football, friends, sleepovers—it just doesn’t happen.’ (Bev, Max’s Mum).

Clearly, imprisonment has far-reaching consequences; many of them unexpected and unpredictable— the way, for example, fabricated stories are used as a means of ‘protecting’ children from the ‘truth’. The evidence, as outlined throughout the chapter, deserves attention and consideration so that prisoners’ families are less vulnerable to the harms they currently routinely experience. Despite the fortitude, resilience, and loyalty shown by the participants in my research, the families who I spoke to were let down, largely forgotten about, and left to cope without adequate support.

The following chapter offers some reflections and conclusions on the research. A number of recommendations are made so that the research might help to influence and shape the future experiences of prisoners’ families and their children.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

There is a need to appraise and evaluate the wider social implications for prisoners' families in order to understand the huge cost prison carries for society, not purely in financial terms, but on a basis that takes into consideration the health, welfare, opportunities and the aspirations of family members. Although there are some instances where children appear not to suffer any adverse consequences because of a parent being imprisoned, in most cases the picture is bleak for those on the outside. Certainly, in my own research, there were few instances of positive outcomes for the children and families involved.

This chapter summarises the findings from my research into the impact of prison upon children and families, and discusses its contribution to knowledge. The chapter also attempts to pave a way for reform and fresh thinking in relation to how such families can be supported in dealing with the incarceration of a family member. Messages from my research show that there is scope to improve the experience of prison on family members and that there is potential for specialist organisations and the professionals within them to play a part in such improvements.

As this research has shown, children can be affected on a number of levels by separation, stigma, loss of family income, reduced quality of care, being deprived of the truth, and children’s modelling of deviant adult behaviour. It is difficult to untangle how these factors are interlinked, as their influences and complex relationships cannot easily be explained. Helen, a mother of three young children talked about untangling the difficulties her family faced following the imprisonment of her husband, Micky:

‘The kids were difficult before Micky got sent to prison. He was always away most of the time anyway so there’s not much change there. They just got used to him not being around. I think it’s harder on them now ‘cos I can’t just say your Dad will be here in a couple of days. They know he’s gone and isn’t around for them at
weekends like he used to be. I don’t know what they’d have been like if he’s not gone to prison, so who knows. It just feels like I’m all alone and I can’t get the help I need’.

Helen’s point is an important one. It is unrealistic to predict with any degree of accuracy what the specific impact of losing a family member is likely to have on children and how such impacts manifest themselves, but this uncertainty can be qualified against the body of growing evidence (including my own) that prison harms families in a multitude of ways.

Models of power (Foucault, 1975), bureaucracy (Weber, 1922) and stigma (Goffman, 1963) help us to understand and contextualise many of the experiences and accounts of respondents in my research. Specifically, these models help to explain how such individuals feel like outsiders, and perceive themselves to be powerless. Although such models cannot explain every aspect of the experiences recounted in my research, they provide a useful framework to help us make sense of why, for example, many of the mothers I interviewed were suspicious of officials, made up fictional accounts for their children and were frustrated and angry about ‘the system’. Such models can also help us support an argument that recasts prisoners’ families from being viewed as dysfunctional or deviant, to being seen rather as victims of an unjust and ineffective regime. Tamara, partner of a prisoner and Tyler’s mother, summed up her feelings in relation to how she felt she had been treated by the prison authorities:

‘They don’t listen. I feel like I am invisible. Prison officers are the worst people I’ve had to deal with. They look through you, not even at you. When I tried to complain, they passed me a pile of forms, said some confusing stuff and just walked away. Sometimes I want to forget the whole thing and walk away like they do’.

**My contribution to knowledge**

My research has shown, drawing on the accounts of participants, how it feels to experience and cope with the imprisonment of a family member, and how participants often feel that they are being punished too:
‘When you’ve got somebody inside, you’re serving that sentence with them, as much as they’re inside, you’re on a sentence as well. The difference is they just keep still and you’ve got to keep moving. It’s like swimming against the tide. Everything seems harder and nobody gives a damn. My children have done nothing to deserve this’. (Janice, partner of prisoner)

‘I was punished and that’s fine…I can live with that. I made a stupid mistake and paid the price. What I can’t accept is what happened to my family. They were the ones who had to carry on and keep everything going. That’s the worst part’. (Dave, ex prisoner)

The additional impact on families of a prison sentence is, as this research has shown, unnecessarily damaging and causes many problems for the children and families affected.

It is important not to lose sight of my central thesis, which, as the above sentiments attest, is to argue that it is largely the families of prisoners who have to deal with the adverse consequences created when someone is sent to prison. The children I spoke to, most of them teenagers, talked about feeling confused, lost, disinterested and uncertain of the future following the imprisonment of a family member. Often this appeared to be because they were excluded from decision-making or given misleading accounts of what was actually happening. Parents and carers, even when they tried to involve children, seemed distant and significantly altered in the eyes of their children. Paul aged fifteen, who’s older brother Wayne was sent to prison, remembered talking about Wayne’s imprisonment with his parents soon after Wayne was convicted:

‘They wanted to make it better, but I could tell they were as scared as me. My Mum tried to be calm and not cry. I didn’t say much and neither did they. My Dad kept saying it would get sorted like he could fix it. I sometimes think this is all a dream…everyone seems different. We used to laugh a lot and do things together and now we hardly talk. I want things back to how they were. I don’t know what will happen anymore.’
Paul’s situation was different to most of the other children in my research, in that his family were open and honest with him from the point that Wayne was arrested. Many of the children in my research had no idea that a family member had been imprisoned, and this appeared to be more common the younger the children were. Such children, it appeared, are doubly disadvantaged; firstly, by losing someone close, and secondly through being misinformed about events that matter enormously to them. There appeared to be a gulf between, on the one hand, presenting the facts to children at the earliest opportunity and involving them in family decisions (as many of the professionals working with such families advised) and deliberately misinforming children, in the hope that doing so will protect them from harm. Children’s rights, specifically those about being informed, consulted and included seemed not to feature in the lives of the families I spoke to. This may have been a consequence of families trying to hide their business from the outside world, or simply that for many, they did not consider their children competent enough to deal with the reality of their situation. Embarrassment and stigma help to partly explain the actions of adults in shielding children from the truth, but there also appeared to be a widely held belief amongst the families I spoke to that children would take on the characteristics of the person serving the prison sentence or harbour aspirations to follow in their footsteps:

‘He loves his Dad. That’s why I’m keeping him [Jo] out of the way. He’s only two, but he’s a smart kid. He wants to please his Dad. He thinks he’s forgotten him and that’s just the way it is. He’s not going into that place, seeing his Dad and seeing that as acceptable…it is not acceptable.’ (Jo’s mother, Maggie)

Punishment, according to the participants in my research, was something that they felt was happening to them, often more so than the family member serving the prison sentence. Many of the participants I interviewed, such as Jen, a mother of two, described themselves as victims, or as being punished unnecessarily:

‘When are the prisons going to get it together? It’s us on the outside who are the victims, just as much as those doing the time. Who’s
being punished in that situation? The whole system is just completely rigged’. (Jen, partner of prisoner, and mother of two)

In many respects prisoner’s children, as Jen suggests, should be seen as the victims. Discussions of victimology within criminological circles over the last few decades have led to a questioning of who exactly might be considered a victim. Quinney (1972: 315) referred to the

Victims of police force, the victims of war, the victims of the correctional system, the victims of state violence, the victim of oppression of any sort.

Admittedly, this stretches the concept of victim, but such arguments have validity. If we consider that prisoners’ families are victims of ‘the correctional system’ (ibid), then such a view requires a significant reappraisal of legalistic and legislative approaches to victimology (Walklate, 2008).

To bring reforms which legally recognise the status of prisoners’ families as victims might seem a little ambitious or unrealistic, given the ever-present political and public desire to pursue the use of custodial sentencing as an ongoing means of imprisonment. Such changes undoubtedly take time, but are unlikely to happen without a body of convincing evidence. This thesis forms a contribution to such evidence which might ultimately lead to permanent changes in the penal system and through these, improvements for the families of prisoners.

Although there has been a reluctance to engage with the debate surrounding prison and its wider consequences within political circles and at national policy level, there are some notable exceptions, including the work of politicians such as Sadiq Khan, the Shadow Justice Secretary (2013: 14):

When we think about victims of crime, we have a traditional perspective – the person mugged, or the householders burgled – and that is, of course, right. But crime creates other innocent victims, such as the family and friends of those in prison.
Sadiq Khan's comments encourage the necessary reassessment of how we construct crime victims in order to treat prisoners’ families fairly. By taking a broader view, it is possible to argue that, just like victims of domestic burglary, assault, or other commonly reported crimes, the families of prisoners are likely to have similar experiences; for example, the anger caused by a sense of injustice and fear of disclosure because of how people might react. A sense of helplessness and abandonment featured in many of the respondents’ accounts, along with the feeling that their lives had been blighted and irreparably damaged in a way that gave them no control:

‘I haven’t been able to live my life to the full capacity. I don’t want to be happy. I can’t be properly happy because I haven’t got my partner and so, that makes a big difference. I can do things, but I can’t live my life.’ (Beth)

In many ways, such reactions are extremely similar to victims of serious crimes (Peterson, 2003, cited in DeValve, 2005), the main difference being that those who are classified as official victims receive a degree of support, sympathy, and solace from organisations such as the police and victim support. Victims of certain crimes, such as domestic burglary or assault might also be eligible for participating in restorative justice, which might ultimately help them find some resolution for the anguish they have experienced. For prisoners’ families, there is no such equivalent measure. Ultimately, the difficulties they face are ones that they alone must face.

The stigma attached to being an official victim of crime is qualitatively different from that experienced by prisoners’ families. The establishment of a Victims’ Minister, a Victims’ Commissioner in 2012, and the creation of a Code of Practice for victims of crime (Ministry of Justice, 2013) marked a renewed emphasis on the help given to victims of officially recorded crime. Victims are entitled, according to this guidance, to clearer help and advice in relation to navigating the complexities of the criminal justice system, are given information on the arrest, bailing, and release of offenders, and are offered a comprehensive summary of their rights. Unfortunately, prisoners’ families fall
outside this category despite their innocence, vulnerability, and ignorance, and as my research findings show, a need for such resources and support.

Jen talked at length about the financial hardship she was facing, which, she insisted had become worse since Liam, her partner, had been imprisoned. Financial hardship, in her view, contributed to her feeling like a victim:

‘When are the prisons going to get it together? It’s us on the outside who are the victims, just as much as those doing the time. It costs me a fortune, getting Liam the stuff he needs to just get by. Without the money I get through to him, he’s struggling each month. Everything in that place [prison] costs a fortune. Somebody is on a right racket [profiting at the expense of others through questionable means]. Just to buy basic food and toiletries, it’s more than the pittance he gets for working each day. Then there’s the travel. The train cuts down on the time it takes to get there, but it costs an absolute fortune. That’s just the tip of the iceberg. I need to get him clothes every few weeks. You wouldn’t think it in there would you, but it all adds up. My Mum sometimes gives me a few quid, but that makes it worse ‘cos I know she’s skint too. Who’s being punished in that situation? The whole system is just completely rigged. The prisons are on the make, same as the police with their speed cameras all over.’

An extract from a newspaper, ‘Inside Time’ (2012: 6), which is written by and on behalf of prisoners’ families, suggests that the government should extend their definition of victims to encompass the families of prisoners and offenders. Although such arguments point out that prisoners’ families are not direct victims of crime, the indirect impact deserves attention and, ultimately, some kind of action:

Whilst we welcome the Government’s focus on victims and witnesses, Action for Prisoners’ Families would like to see the definition of victims broadened to include the families of prisoners and offenders. Whilst we of course support reparation to victims - particularly through restorative justice schemes - it should be acknowledged that it is the families who are the indirect victims. Some of these families are victims of domestic or other violence, abuse, theft, etc. Violent and sexual crime often occur within the family and often affect the extended family too. But the majority of
families are not direct victims. They are, however, all indirect victims of the processes of the criminal justice system which can make maintaining a relationship and just getting on with your life extremely difficult.

Despite the overriding emphasis on the damaging aspects of imprisonment, especially in relation to viewing families as victims, my research also flagged up some positive findings. Children’s resilience, ability, and understanding emerged as powerful themes. Although most of the parents in my research felt an understandable desire to protect their children from the adverse consequences of prison, attempts to do so often met with difficulty. My research helps to demonstrate that children, when told the truth, are remarkably resilient and able to adjust to new, often testing circumstances. Parents and carers, frequently in an effort to protect, or exercise control over events, opt to mislead and invent stories for children. My research findings provide an additional layer of evidence which supports the case for more openness and honesty within families. For this to happen, however, families need to be able to trust professionals and organisations that might be able to help them.

To summarise, my research’s contribution to knowledge confirms what previous studies have found, namely that prisoners’ families suffer multiple hardships; financially, emotionally and in readjusting family dynamics and ties. Crucially, my research offers an additional dimension by showing that children are the most marginalised and disadvantaged out of all concerned. Lack of information, fabricated stories, and unanswered questions featured prominently in participants’ accounts about their children and helped to explain why young children’s voices in particular are missing from this landscape.

Additionally, it appears that stigma and the resultant alienation it brings to families compound the sense of loss, frustration and distance that many of the families encountered, ultimately resulting in the secrecy, lies, and silence encountered by many of the children affected. Although my research offers evidence to show how families displayed astounding resilience and courage in the face of adversity, it is clear that without systematic support and
understanding from professionals and more broadly, through a process of awareness raising on a national level, there is little that can be done to alleviate the current difficulties they face.

The following section considers some of the steps that can be taken to make damaging outcomes less likely and points to possible future directions in policy and practice.

**Attempts at reform**

In terms of broader political moves deemed sympathetic towards prisoners’ families, the previous labour administration, despite its commitment to prisons, began to recognise that, as well as high rates of recidivism in the prison population as a whole, there were also significant flaws in terms of prison’s wider impact on communities. A set of recommendations appeared in the vision, set out in a framework for local delivery, designed to reduce reoffending and support children of offenders (Ministry of Justice and the Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009: 9):

A coherent system to support offenders’ children and families by ensuring:

- Strong national, regional and local partnerships are in place and working together on the Every Child Matters and Reducing Re-offending agendas.
- There is greater consistency in meeting the needs of offenders’ families and there are clear routes for them to be able to access support.
- Families are supported within local communities at each stage of the criminal justice system, ensuring that the children are in receipt of relevant universal services and linking them with relevant targeted services to support them through the process.
- That all parts of the system ‘Think Family’ and local authorities offer targeted parenting and family support for children and families of offenders with additional needs.
- Children who are suffering, or are likely to suffer, harm are identified and safeguarded.
- We achieve a diverse Third Sector, working with offenders’ families and helping us to make the case for investing in these families as part of a wider agenda to tackle social exclusion.

These admirable and ambitious plans to bring about cultural reform have met with limited success. Without any legislative underpinning, such visions lack
impetus and do not carry the same incentive for local authorities as other measures which are strengthened through legal obligations.

Large-scale research projects such as the pan-European COPING project (see www.coping-project.eu), have called for government reforms across Europe to ensure that prisoners’ children are, first of all, recognised as a vulnerable group, and ultimately offered appropriate support. Such support can only be achieved through reform in the way practitioners such as judges, lawyers, police, probation staff, schools, and others likely to have an impact on the lives of prisoners’ children work together and develop an awareness of the needs of this group. The recommendations from the COPING project reinforce the need for macro reforms so that cultural and professional changes can ultimately happen at local level. To that extent, they connect with the vision set out by the Labour government on 2009 (see above).

Organisations such as Barnardo’s, in recognising the plight of prisoners’ children, have recently set up a children of prisoners campaign (2014), calling for the introduction of a lead minister to take responsibility for this group, and in addition, a requirement that such children are identified at the point of sentencing or remand so that appropriate support can be put in place quickly. Other key recommendations include the introduction of a national, cross-departmental action plan targeted at helping prisoners’ children.

Such lobbying, although unsuccessful in instigating change at the point of writing, is welcome and necessary. My own recommendations based on my research findings would support the proposals outlined by the Labour party’s vision (2009), and more recently by the COPING project and Barnardo’s, so that help is more likely to be forthcoming by those who work directly with those families affected. National policy directives which in turn influence local practice are more likely to achieve success, and in the process reduce the ignorance, stigma, and isolation that prisoners’ families currently experience.

On a local level, schools have an increasingly recognised potential to help prisoners’ children in dealing with the incarceration of a parent or close family member (Morgan et al., 2012). Often, with an increasing awareness amongst staff within schools, more can be done for what is often a largely hidden
population of children. Because of their heightened vulnerability, prisoners’ children are more likely to benefit from any additional support offered by statutory services, specifically universal providers such as schools. On a practical level, schools are able to offer a platform for peer support. In Nisha’s case, this made her feel less isolated following the imprisonment of her older brother:

‘When I started to get back into school, they offered me counselling and I went to this group. Other children had the same thing going on and we could get together and talk. I went to a few and it made me feel like it wasn’t just me. There were other girls who had worse things going on.’

Local authorities are arguably in an influential position to highlight the plight of prisoners’ families, and yet prisoners’ children do not feature in Local Authority Children’s Plans, which are meant to identify vulnerable groups who require additional support. Local children’s safeguarding boards also have a potential role to play in supporting prisoners’ children through encouraging representation of appropriate voluntary sector provision and on insisting this population is prioritised through children’s plans and in strategic decision-making.

Without a clear focus on developing interagency working within a framework that embraces cultural competence, organisations that come into contact with prisoners’ families, for example the police, probation service and schools, will continue to work in isolation. The lack of a shared culture that accepts the sensitive and elusive nature of working with prisoners’ families to secure positive outcomes for them means that the difficulties identified in this thesis will remain. As Julie, the head teacher pointed out:

‘We can do our part, but without the social work, police and involvement from others, it feels like we’re shouldering a huge amount. Parents are OK talking to me, but once we mention social care or the police, that’s when it breaks down. Without a big cultural shift, these children will be off limits and that means we can’t help.’
Because the negative social identities of the respondents in my research were shaped partly because of how they were perceived or how they thought they were perceived (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1961), it appears crucially important for professionals engaged in working with prisoners’ families to help to change these perceptions.

**Future directions**

The damage that prison causes to children and families is, as this thesis makes clear, incontrovertible. What is contentious is the type of change needed to ensure that such harm is minimised. Future reforms, if they are to help in any meaningful way, require a change in political and public thinking. Such a cultural shift depends upon responsible reporting and portrayals of issues affecting prisoners’ families through the media and through a political change of emphasis.

An emphasis on such changes at local authority level might be helped through deliberate and targeted training initiatives, aided by close partnership working with voluntary sector organisations such as POPS and APF. Such organisations are well equipped to deliver training and raise awareness, so that agencies who work with children are able to gain a basic understanding of the difficulties prisoners’ children routinely encounter. Additionally, there is a need to audit and assess the true extent of prison’s impact upon children, with an imperative to take action on a local level. This is possible through the development of local authority children’s plans so that they incorporate this population alongside other vulnerable groups such as children in care.

Unfortunately, there is little sign of such a shift, and so it is vital that research such as my own contributes in helping to demonstrate the hidden consequences of imprisonment for children and families. Until the damage caused by the imprisonment of a family member on others is formally recognised, it is likely that more children will continue to suffer the adversities outlined in this thesis.
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Appendices

Appendix 1A
Consent Form

I agree to take part in the research study about prisons, families, and children and would like to take part in (please tick one or more of the following)

☐ an individual interview

☐ a joint interview with my family

I have read and understood the information leaflet. I know what the study is about and the part I will be involved in. I know that I do not have to answer all of the questions and that I can decide not to continue at any time.

Name ___________________________________________

Signature __________________________

Age __________

Date ______________________
Appendix 1B

Research: Prisoners’ Children and Families: Information Sheet

Thank you for showing an interest in this research.

The research will help to show how a family member serving a prison sentence affects children and families. Your contribution will help people understand more about this important issue.

I am interested in talking to you about how you and your family have coped when somebody close to you has gone to prison. I am particularly interested in how children (from a very young age through to eighteen- years- old) cope after someone goes to prison. I am interested in talking to families with children who have been affected by imprisonment.

Often, families prefer to talk about their experiences together (especially when children are involved), but sometimes people prefer to be interviewed alone. This research is designed so that your preferences are taken into account.

If you agree to take part in the research, it is important to recognise that your name, and other identifying features will be omitted from the findings. You will be invited to sign a consent form, which shows that you understand what the research is about and what your involvement means.

The research findings will be confidential and will only be shared with my supervisors at the University of Bolton. The findings may eventually be available, alongside other pieces of research, as part of the British Library’s collection.

Please feel free to ask any questions or raise any concerns at any point.

Thank you.

Jim Dobson

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Appendix 2

Semi-structured Interview Schedule (Practitioners)

Q1. Can you tell me about your professional involvement with prisoners’ families?

Q2. What kind of support do you provide for prisoners’ children and families?

Q3. What difficulties do you face in offering such support?

Q4. How do you know which children/families need support?

Q5. Can you tell me something about how you work with other professionals in supporting prisoners’ families?

Q6. Is there anything else you want to add that you feel is helpful for this research?
Appendix 3

Transcripts of interviews (examples of material not used)

‘Sometimes I’ll go out with my mates and we’ll have a good time. That helps. It means I can forget all about what’s happened and just have some fun. The girls I go out with don’t want to hear about my sob story. They want to have fun. Last time we went into town it cost me a fortune, but we had a laugh. I always say you need to laugh. Whatever happens, you should always be able to laugh about something.’ (Carla, prisoner’s wife)

‘I went shopping last night and spent hours and hours just wandering around the aisles. Sometimes mindless tasks seem more bearable. I don’t read much anymore or watch tele. Most of the time I feel like I’m in a daze. There was this programme on the other night, something that I might have found interesting before everything happened. It was all about wildlife and I just stared at the screen. I must have watched for the whole programme without taking anything in. When it finished I felt like I’d been asleep, but I hadn’t. I zone out more. It feels like a way of getting through the days.’ (Mary, mother of prisoner)