“What upsets me is that I can’t be Grandma”:

The Experiences of Grandparent Carers of Children with a Parent in Prison

Joint artwork created by a grandparent and granddaughter impacted by parental imprisonment

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2023

Children Heard+Seen

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A drawing by Elaine, being cared for by her grandparent, depicting herself and her Children Heard and Seen caseworker

Banner created by grandparents and grandchildren together

Acknowledgements

The content of this report was initially written as part of a fellowship with the Griffin Society, awarded in 2016. I would like to thank the grandparents who participated in the research upon which this article is based, and all those who supported the development of this work. I would also like to thank the Griffin Society, and in particular my supervisor Professor Rachel Condry, for her continued support, encouragement and enormous expertise throughout this research.

About Children Heard and Seen

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

1 Introduction

Current estimates suggest that as many as 312,000 children in the UK are separated from a parent by a prison sentence each year (Kincaid, Roberts and Kane, 2019). Whilst this number is significant, the lack of any nationalised database means that the exact size of this group remains unknown. This lack of identification translates into a lack of systemic support for this group of young people, leaving them "invisible within systems that should protect them" (Beresford, 2018: 6). Prisoners are not routinely asked on reception into prison whether or not they have children, and mothers in particular may wish to conceal the fact they have children in order to avoid potential negative consequences in terms of social service interventions (Beresford, 2018; Baldwin and Epstein, 2017).

In the UK, it is estimated that one in thirty grandmothers provides full-time care to a grandchild or grandchildren (Glaser, Di Gessa and Tinker, 2014). Meanwhile, Vallely and Cassidy (2012) report that approximately 4000 children move in with their grandparents each year in England and Wales following the imprisonment of their mother. Existing studies have found that the most common reasons for children to move in with their grandparents include parental substance misuse, parental imprisonment, mental health problems, divorce, maltreatment, and economic reasons (Hayslip and Kaminski, 2005). For example, Adfam (2011) found that nearly half of grandparents they support became carers because of parental drug/alcohol use.

This exploratory report highlights the findings of a small-scale impact study on women and men whose adult children have been sentenced for a minimum of six months and who are the carers for their grandchildren. Extended family care (kinship care) is a relatively difficult-to-research phenomenon, with the high frequency of informal arrangements making potential research participants harder to identify (Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006). In the UK, whilst much academic attention has been paid to the impact of imprisonment on children and romantic partners of prisoners (Jardine, 2017; Codd, 2008; Murray and Farrington, 2008; Condry and Scharff Smith, 2018), very few studies have focused specifically on the experiences of grandparents who find themselves in the role of primary caregiver to a child whose parent is imprisoned. The overall aim of this paper is to expand on this literature and develop a nuanced and dedicated understanding of the experiences of grandparents who are thrust into the role of primary caregiver to their

grandchildren in the aftermath of parental imprisonment. In order to do so, bordering themes must also be considered in order to appropriately contextualise the experiences of these grandparents. Such themes include the broader implications of imprisonment on the family unit and the potency of shame and stigma that affects prisoner's families.

2 Literature Review

Understanding the impact of parental imprisonment on children

Children who have a parent in prison are more likely to experience poverty, poor housing, social exclusion, poor physical health, aggressive behaviour, depression, anxiety, and sleeping and eating problems (Lewis, Bates and Murray, 2008; Glover, 2009; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2016). The stigma of parental imprisonment can also lead to social exclusion and isolation from peer groups, in turn contributing to negative school experiences such as persistent truanting, bullying, and failure to achieve in education (Oldrup and Frederiksen, 2018). Children of prisoners are disproportionately represented among young offenders, the care population, children in poverty, and children with mental health needs (Glover, 2009; Murray and Farrington, 2008).

Boys who have a parent in prison are, by the age of 48, three times more likely to have had a history of poor accommodation, broken relationships, unemployment, heavy alcohol use, drug abuse, anxiety or depression, and offending (Lewis, Bates and Murray, 2008; Murray and Farrington, 2008). Parental imprisonment is recognised as one of ten possible Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), causing potentially life-long impacts on the brain, body, and behaviour (Hardcastle and Bellis, 2018). ACEs include exposure to physical and emotional abuse and/or neglect, and home environments affected by domestic violence, substance misuse, mental illness, and parental imprisonment. Individuals who have been exposed to ACEs are at greater risk of poor physical and mental health in adolescence and into adulthood, both through the direct effects of adversity and stress on the body and through the mediating effects that ACEs can have on the increased adoption of health-harming behaviours such as alcohol and drug use (Hardcastle and Bellis, 2018).

The social stigma attached to familial imprisonment plays a key role in shaping these negative outcomes. Greenberg (2006:169) perceptively identifies Five 'S's' which come to form key pillars of the experiences of children with a parent in prison: "stigma, shame, separation, secrecy and silence.". Those who face stigmatisation are met with labelling, group stereotyping, removal of community status, and discrimination (Link and Phelan, 2001). For young people, this contributes to a derailment of identity and selfhood that can leave their whole world in a state of disarray.

Implications for family life

The UK prison population has a high frequency of characteristics that constitute either inherent or socially imposed vulnerabilities (Halliday, 2019). Prisoners are more likely than the general population to have adolescent experience of family breakdown, poor nurturing, trauma, and childhood abuse (Kincaid, Roberts and Kane, 2019). It can therefore be inferred that the families of prisoners are also a highly vulnerable and diverse group (Murray, 2005). Due to the complex and varied nature of familial relationships, it would be an oversimplification to assert that the maintenance of familial contact with an imprisoned parent should always be promoted. Research has shown that in cases where domestic violence has taken place within the family unit, the impacts that flow from parental imprisonment are "more complex" than in cases where such violence has not occurred (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2016: 154). Despite this, in cases where a

child's relationship with the imprisoned parent is strong prior to their removal from the household, the impacts of this imprisonment are often resoundingly negative (Murray, 2005).

The disruption of the imprisoned parent's position within the family unit represents one of the key markers of the familial experience of imprisonment. The removal of the parent from the family unit has been said to create a sense of "ambiguous loss" for family members left behind (Boss, 1999). This form of loss is often likened to bereavement by families experiencing imprisonment, though it is noted that this loss brings with it community shaming rather than sympathy and support. The trauma experienced in the aftermath of separation is exceptionally damaging in that it represents a long-term condition that immobilises and traumatises children as they shift between "hope and hopelessness" that a return to normality is possible (Boss, 1999: 24).

The negative effects of imprisonment on family health and relationships are often compounded by pre-existing financial difficulties resulting directly from imprisonment. A 2007 report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showed how families dealing with imprisonment suffered drops in income, housing insecurity, and increased childcare costs (Smith et al., 2007). Providing financial support to the prisoner and travelling to visit the prison are an additional economic burden and families are often forced to look for financial support from extended family and charities – or turn to loans, which can in turn lead to spiralling debts (Smith et al., 2007). The reduction in income translates into a decline in the material provisions available to children, as less money is available for children's food, clothing, shoes, and leisure activities (Smith et al., 2007). Grandparents who assume the role of caregiver often have limited resources and multiple needs themselves, including high rates of depression and multiple chronic health problems (Burton, 1992; Minkler and Roe, 1993; Poehlmann, 2003). These needs reduce their capacity to meet the complex needs of the children they care for. Financial difficulties may be further compounded for grandparent carers who have been forced to give up work to take care of their grandchildren or are already in retirement, pushing many into poverty and further financial disadvantage (Baldwin, 2021).

Existing research suggests that when the harms discussed above are identified and appropriately responded to, many of their deleterious effects can be mitigated (Condry, 2018). Children impacted by parental imprisonment are more likely to reach their potential when they receive appropriate support (Beresford, 2018). Interventions with families incur a lower financial cost than the potential damage caused should the far-reaching harms of parental imprisonment be left to escalate (Baldwin and Epstein 2017). Intervention within this group offers a real opportunity to make lasting improvements in their lives: forestalling many persistent social problems and ending their intergenerational transmission.

Impact on grandparents

Phillips and Gates (2010) identify a series of burdens that caregivers (in this study, grandparents) of children with a parent in prison face. These include the stigma and shame associated with having a family member in prison, the increased financial strain and lack of external resources, and the physical and emotional stress. Indifferent, hostile, or disapproving social attitudes can intensify this emotional pain in particular, with such stigmatisation often felt even more strongly by a prisoner's family than by the inmate themselves, as relatives are forced to share the physical space of the community that shames them (Turanovic, Rodriguez and Pratt, 2012; Condry, 2007).

Baldwin (2021) identifies the multifaceted impacts felt by grandparents who are carers due to imprisonment, as they are also dealing with their own complex feelings in relation to their adult children and can lack support, particularly from peers. In studies of the wider group of

grandparents who care for their grandchildren, Baldwin (2017) makes note of the tension that may arise between imprisoned mothers and grandparent carers, and how this not only impacts their relationships with the children but also the quantity and quality of prison visits. Furthermore, she asserts that such "strained relationships" can manifest as an "emotional tug of war," that continues well beyond the point of parental release (Baldwin, 2021).

Highlighted too are the challenges faced by grandparents in managing the complex emotional reactions of their grandchildren that flow from parental imprisonment. Often, the trauma of separation compounded by the social exclusion discussed above can result in significant changes in behaviour (Turanovic, Rodriguez and Pratt, 2012: 918-919). Children Heard and Seen's unpublished research, carried out via referral feedback forms from 273 referrals, indicates that 75% of families report a negative impact on their child's behaviour at home and at school in the aftermath of a parent going to prison. This included increases in anger, aggression, and threatening behaviour; poor school attendance; sadness (missing the parent); and self-harm. This difficulty is compounded by a lack of support in how to communicate with children who are experiencing parental imprisonment, as grandparents are often left with the daunting task of informing the children that their parent has been imprisoned (Baldwin, 2021; Raikes, 2016). Turanovic, Rodriguez and Pratt (2012) describe the grandparents' role in helping children come to terms with a perplexing and traumatic event which, due to a lack of family-based support, is rarely explained to them in an accessible and age-appropriate manner (Baldwin, 2021; Murray and Farrington, 2008).

Very little research has specifically examined the experience of grandparents caring for children as a result of parental imprisonment in the UK. Notable exceptions include Raikes' (2016) work, drawing upon interviews with three grandmothers and two focus groups of women in prison whose mothers cared for their children to provide valuable insight into the challenges faced by this group of grandparents. Meanwhile, Turanovic, Rodriguez and Pratt (2012: 915) examine the "collateral consequences" for families in the aftermath of imprisonment, as grandparents assume fundamental roles during a parent's incarceration that can have a significant impact on children's experiences.

3 Research Aims

The aim of this paper is to expand on the academic and social understandings of the experiences of grandparents who adopt the role of primary caregiver to their grandchildren as a result of parental imprisonment. In pursuit of this aim, the research has four specific objectives:

1. Identify the distinct experiences faced by grandparents who adopt the role of caregiver to their grandchildren in the aftermath of parental imprisonment
2. Critically evaluate the appropriateness of state and community responses to these harms, and efforts to support and identify these families.
3. Explore the views of those with lived experience through thematic review pertaining to loss of agency, starting over, shrinking futures, challenging behaviours, and mortality.
4. Formulate recommendations for future research and for development of more responsive policies.

4 Methodology

Research Design

This paper seeks to explore the impacts of grandparents being thrust into the role of primary caregivers to their grandchildren through the imprisonment of their child. The primary vehicle used to achieve this understanding was a series of one-off, semi-structured interviews with participants with lived experience. In order to maximise the insight that could be obtained from each participant, a qualitative model utilising face-to-face, semi-structured interviews was adopted. The interviews with the caregiving grandparents were designed to be open ended and conversational in style to put participants at ease and offer them the narrative freedom to carve out their own stories (Kvale, 1996). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed before thematic review. These methods were deemed most appropriate for the study, as they allow participants to share their experiences in their own words and from their own perspectives (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2008).

Sampling

Of the 11 families interviewed, eight were couples and three were grandmothers who were sole carers. One couple opted to be interviewed separately, meaning that a total of twelve interviews took place. A total of 22 children were being cared for across the 11 families. Grandparents' ages ranged between 57 and 74; all identified as White British and heterosexual. All of the families interviewed had looked after the children to prevent them from going into or remaining in care and felt there was no alternative. The families with two grandparents were taking care of two or more children, two single grandparents were caring for one child, and one single grandparent was caring for three children.

Although this sample may appear to be small in size, raising questions as to the generalisability of findings, families of prisoners remain a hard to reach group with access to participants forming a major barrier to researchers hoping to gather data in this field. The sample sizes involved in the study are therefore inevitably small, relying on convenience sampling to conduct interviews with available participants. This was only possible as a result of my pre-existing relationships with the families involved.

Ethical considerations

My role within Children Heard and Seen, combined with the inherent power imbalance between researcher and participant, created a situation where participants were at an increased risk of disclosing information that they would otherwise be uncomfortable with (Minson, 2020). For instance, participants may have felt the need to alter their stories in a way they believe makes them more palatable or disclose more than they normally would in pursuit of validation and positive affirmation from the researcher. It was therefore important for me to continually monitor my own body language and tone throughout each interview to reduce the likelihood of subconsciously exploiting this dynamic. At the beginning of each interview, oral consent was obtained in addition to the documents already signed. This was also an opportunity to make sure the participants understood my role as a researcher as being distinct from my role within the charity, and that non-participation would have no implications for the support they received or may in future receive from the charity. All candidates appeared to understand this distinction and agreed to proceed with the interview.

A risk that participants would be retraumatised by recounting their experiences was also identified, and that, through telling their stories, research participants place themselves in a position of inherent vulnerability (Stanley, 2018). In order to respond to this risk and minimise the potential negative outcomes for participants, every effort was made to ensure participants' comfort. It was recognised that this effort must go beyond pre-determined procedures and shape every aspect of my interaction with the individuals interviewed (Minson, 2020). I monitored not only the information provided to participants, but also the way in which it was conveyed and was mindful of the relationship I formed with them. Despite these efforts, it is acknowledged that the inherent power imbalance between researcher and participant will always remain, no matter how much effort is made to be "fair and respectful" (Condry, 2007: 195).

5 Findings

Introduction

> *"we've got a longer sentence than him as he's out soon and he still can't look after the children."* (Grandfather K)

Existing research (Baldwin, 2021; Raikes, 2016) has explored the challenges for grandparents, children, and parents released from prison when there is an intention for families to be reunited. However, in this study, all nineteen grandparents interviewed planned to continue acting as the primary carers for their grandchildren following the point of release. These plans had formed for a variety of reasons. In many families, there was no intention for the children to be returned to parental care because of severe and persistent drug and alcohol addictions. This imbued a sense of permanence in the grandparents' new role and shaped many of the distinct themes explored below. Most notably, this sense of permanence amplified many of the grandparents' heightened awareness of their own mortality, exacerbated by the feeling that they were the only people who could provide care for their grandchildren. The self-identification of participants as the only thing standing between their grandchildren and placement in foster care resulted in increased feelings of anxiety and emotional distress, distinct from families where children are expected to be returned to the parent. This is highlighted by the passage below:

> *"You know, it is sad because we look at them when they're asleep, don't we? Look at them. God, if we didn't have them, they'd be put away. It is sad."* (Grandmother E)

For many of the grandparents interviewed, fulfilling a significant kinship role to their grandchildren was not a new development formed exclusively after the point of imprisonment. Before looking after their grandchildren, the participants had provided extensive support to their own children. All had needed to support their grandchildren with the effects of one or both parents being in prison: six out of the eleven families had had both parents in prison at some stage during their care of the children. However, only two families had grandchildren placed with them at the point that their child was sent to prison, with one having to take the grandchildren immediately as their daughter was murdered by the children's father. Out of the eleven families interviewed, the grandchildren in nine initially came to live with their grandparents because of their mother's drug and alcohol abuse (the mother being the main carer for the children).

Despite all participants facing a common struggle with the difficult transition into the role of the primary caregiver, these experiences were complex and nuanced in the way they played out on an individual level. Often, there was a clear tension between the sense of duty and responsibility felt by participants towards their grandchildren and the sense of joy and focus their new role gave them. These often-conflicting emotions marked a key feature of participant experiences as

they cherished the time spent with children they would otherwise have spent far less time with, whilst also struggling with the emotional, physical, and financial difficulties that had been forced upon them in their new role.

Loss of agency

When asked about their feelings surrounding their adoption of the role of caregiver to their grandchildren, all grandparents reported a feeling of having no choice. For many, this was compounded by a belief that they were the only people able to prevent their grandchildren from entering the care system. Many of the families interviewed had not expected their children to receive a custodial sentence, meaning that the decision as to who the grandchildren had to live with came about suddenly, transforming their lives overnight.

> *"It was just a case of having to cos there was no-one else to take them. It was either that or let them go into care."* (Grandfather D)

> *"But we didn't have no choice'; 'well it was either that or they went into care. I mean, you're not going to let that happen, are you?"* (Grandfather and Grandmother K)

> *"They were brought to us by social services when their mother turned up drunk at school to pick them up. Initially we thought it was going to be for a couple of days, but social services made it clear it was either us or care. So, we said well okay, it's us."* (Grandfather H)

What came through in all the interviews was a sense of immediacy in the decisions that needed to be taken, shock and unpreparedness for what needed to be done, and a lack of support at that crucial time. Grandparents are faced with the difficult decision of adopting caregiving roles that many feel completely unprepared for or unable to fulfil, or losing their grandchildren to a care system and so causing irreversible damage to the child's sense of security and familial attachment. Participants reported a lack of support in making this difficult transition, as little to no information was provided about what to expect in relation to the imprisonment of their family member. Participants also noted fears of the personal sense of guilt that they would have felt had they not taken on this new caregiving role:

> *"And I literally had a phone call saying, "they're going to be taken into care mum, will you look after them?" and then I had to phone up [X] and we hadn't even talked about it, hadn't had a discussion or nothing... I would have been guilt ridden."* (Grandmother B)

Existing research has shown that the parents of prisoners often feel a sense of responsibility for their children's offending behaviour, creating a troubled "parental identity" as they come to view the imprisonment of their child as a personal failure. These self-blaming narratives are compounded by the internalisation of external stigma, as society attaches a perceived guilt by association onto the parents of prisoners (Condry, 2007). The findings of this study suggest that this feeling of personal responsibility for their child's criminality amplified the responsibility felt by the grandparents to step into the role of carer for their grandchildren, limiting their sense of agency over a monumental life decision. This feeling of a lack of control was particularly difficult for many of the participants interviewed in this study.

Starting over again/second time round

> *"I mean, it's hard work to start all over again."* (Grandfather D)

All participants spoke about having to start over and how they resumed the role of being a parent with all of its related tasks and duties (school runs, homework, and parents' evenings, in addition to day-to-day care).

> *"But it just, basically, it all came to a... ...it just took us right back to the start again. I mean now I have to try not to dwell on it or you just get so utterly depressed."* (Grandmother G)

> *"I just feel it should be my time do you know what I mean, and I had to turn the clock back 25, 30 years and I feel my time has been taken away from me."* (Grandmother I)

Participants expressed frustration at their inability to perform their former role of grandparent and instead having to act as a parent, with all ~~of~~ the additional responsibilities and burdens that entails. Many identified how being a grandparent is a distinctly separate role to that of parent, and how they were missing out on the unique relationship that they had looked forward to between them and their grandchildren. This distinction was explained by several grandmothers below:

> *"So that's what upsets me is that I can't be Grandma... ...I feel they are missing out on grandparents because suddenly we're mum and dad."* (Grandmother I)

> *"I have to put boundaries in place that half the fun of being a grandparent is that you don't have to put those boundaries in place. You know, I could, I could wind them up and send them back do you know what I mean? I can't do that anymore."* (Grandmother J)

> *"I should be enjoying my grandchildren; do you know what I mean? They shouldn't be my children."* (Grandmother I)

Backhouse and Graham (2011) highlight in their research on Australian kinship carers how no longer being able to have the grandparent role and relationship was a significant loss to the grandparents. Further, some found their roles as parent and grandparent incompatible with one another because their other adult children were resentful of the new relationship to their grandchildren. This was an additional source of strain for the families, a situation that has previously been referred to as 'role conflict' (Climo et al., 2002).

Being at a different stage in life was also an issue that was spoken about, particularly in terms of the 'generation gap' (age and experience):

> *"I mean for a grandparent, it is hard work because you're not young enough to go out and play footie with them or whatever it is you do. You're not really into Xbox games and all that rubbish... ...like when my kids were small, and I was younger...we had the same interests in music and everything else. And you could connect with them. But as you're older, you just can't connect on the same wavelength as kids are."* (Grandfather D)

The interviews also revealed a gendered dynamic in the way that caregiving responsibilities were distributed among the participants who were in partnered relationships. Of the eight couples, seven spoke about the differences between the experiences of the women and the men. Both sexes perceived that the role was more difficult for women on a daily basis as they assumed responsibility for the day-to-day domestic tasks, whereas the men focused on the more enjoyable tasks such as taking the children out and doing activities with them:

> *"It's harder for [my wife] than it is me...Because she's the one that does the washing. She's the one who sorts all the bills out and sorts everything. For me, I just take them to the park*

or take them for walks. Take them out places and do things with them. But I suppose it's more harder (sic) on [her]." (Grandfather E)

"I don't think it's affected [him] as much because. Without being funny, but a man gets on with his daily life, do you know what I mean? It's me doing the extra cooking and cleaning and everything else..." (Grandmother I)

The three single grandmothers were able to identify positives about caring for their grandchildren:

"I mean he's my life... It's somebody for me to care for and look after." (Grandmother C)

"That she keeps you grounded, you've got a routine you know, so her and the dogs are first in my life so looking after them means that we've always got something to do." (Grandmother J)

To varying degrees, all participants felt that it had not been their expectation that they would be taking the role of primary carer at this stage in their lives. The grandparents responded to their situation with varying levels of stress, enjoyment, and frustration; however, all found their newfound caregiver role incongruent with what they had expected for this particular time in their lives. These often-conflicting ideas of what they expected their life to be marked a key feature of participant experiences, as they cherished the time spent with their grandchildren whilst also struggling with the emotional, physical, and financial difficulties that had been unexpectedly thrust upon them.

Strain on Romantic Relationships

"It's just we don't get time together. Only like during the day when the kids are at school now." (Grandfather F)

The single grandmothers interviewed did not identify a lack of time for romantic relationships but identified their grandchildren as their priority. All the participants in long-term relationships talked about the loss of time for their relationships and the impact that the caring role has had on this element of their lives. Some described the strain that circumstances had put on their relationships with their spouses:

"It's had a massive impact, I think. To be perfectly honest we don't make any secret of it. We um, we just muddle along as friends really. I think if things were different financially, we would probably part, um to be honest, don't you? Things have become very difficult. I think it's them, ironically, that holds us together now." (Grandmother G)

"All the other times are it's when they're at school, ain't it. We try to go out for lunch somewhere in a little country pub, just me and him, when they're at school, for our lunch. Er, yeah, so it's our time. Because, you've gotta think, we brought up our kids. Yeah. A lot of grandparents have got free time all the time ain't they. Well, we haven't."

Some of the conflict expressed was about differing parenting styles. This was the case for the three couples for whom this was a second relationship. Although they had each been together for significant periods before their grandchildren came to live with them, they had not brought up children together. This meant they were 'co-parenting' for the first time:

"[We] argue more... About different ways of bringing kids up." (Grandparents I)

> *"We never argued the whole time we were married when we were on our own…. Since we have had the kids we do argue and lots to do with my way of parenting and his way of parenting."* (Grandmother D)

Shrinking present, shrinking future

For those couples where the female took the lead on domestic duties, all demonstrated a similarly high level of distress, all crying during interview, about being in the situation of caring for their grandchildren with the theme of loss threaded through all their interviews. Williams (2011) identifies that grandparents in this situation are vulnerable to negative outcomes including social isolation, depression, lowered life satisfaction, and a decrease in peer interaction. In all but one of the participant families, the grandparents' own children were older and had left home, so they had experienced a period of freedom from day-to-day childcare (post-caregiver parenthood).

All of the eight grandmothers who had been at work prior to caring for their grandchildren had to change jobs or give up working once they assumed the caregiving role. Two of the women who weren't working were unable to drive, so their husbands had to give up work because the children needed transporting. Participants spoke about how they had to abandon their plans for their future (i.e., when they retired), and how they'd had to change things they could do or wanted to do together, particularly in relation to their social life and leisure time:

> *"It's just normal things like being able to go out down to the pub, or just pop out. Not having to worry about babysitters that we require today."* (Grandfather B)

> *"And I used to say when the children are settled, you know, it's my time... That's all gone. The money's gone. Peace of mind has gone, you know, it's going to make me cry in a minute, make me cry. It's just not fair."* (Grandmother A)

> *"It shrunk my world to nothing."* (Grandmother G)

Isolation and Lack of Peer Support

All participants lacked peer and social support. Two of the families had pre-existing relationships with one another at the time of interviews, but none of the other participants knew others who were coping with similar challenges. A lack of emotional support for caregiving grandparents from friends and colleagues is linked to the shrinking of opportunities for them to continue with their social lives. Wellard (2011) refers to the fact that grandparent carers are of a different generation to their grandchildren's friends' parents, and how this can form a barrier to connecting with other caregivers. This was corroborated in the interviews as participants noted struggling to form social bonds with other parents at school; many believed that this was compounded by the shame and stigma attached to their children's imprisonment. For many of the participants, the responsibilities of childcare also isolated them from their existing networks of peer support and friendships:

> *"They struggle to understand why I'm constantly saying I can't come out for a meal with you, I can't come away for a weekend. In the end people drift off. And I've become very, very isolated. Very isolated, actually."* (Grandmother G)

Often, the anticipation of "rejection or devaluation" that follows the exposure of a familial imprisonment is equally, if not more, detrimental to an individual's emotional wellbeing than direct shaming (Saunders, 2018: 22). This fear prevented many participants from disclosing the fact of imprisonment to their peers and friends. Whilst this protected them from overt shaming and rejection, it limited their capacity to seek out help and access support. For those that were open

about the fact of imprisonment, or had had this status exposed against their will, they faced stigmatisation that cut them off from friendships and relationships that had existed for years prior. This had a particularly destabilising impact on participants, who had relied on these relationships to inform their own sense of identity and personhood. Smith and Henry (1996) suggest that our social groups and relationships form an integral element of our self-identity. Being separated from peer groups during a time of familial upheaval throws a person's sense of self into further disarray.

> *"We have lost lots of friends absolutely loads of friends… (crying) people were nasty, really nasty. Used to say horrible things and they were supposed to be our friends and that was the worst part because at the end of the day I had to protect the kids and I had a choice. I had to protect the kids or kept all my friends." (Grandmother D)*

Being isolated from peer groups at a time when the new identity of 'parent' is being thrust upon caregivers means that this new role takes on a master status, making this new parenthood all-encompassing. This can be particularly disorientating for grandparents, given that the role has been assumed without free choice, contributing to a sense of being trapped or losing control. Not only did participants have to manage and respond to negative societal reactions aimed at themselves, they also had to cope with the reactions aimed at their grandchildren.

> *"Oh, your Dad lives in a prison, your mum don't want you and all things like that and he was getting quite upset about it."* (Grandmother C)

Thus, all the grandparent carers felt their world had shrunk, along with their social circles, their support networks, and their opportunities for a productive and free 'old age.' The grandparents felt that their peers had little understanding for their position, rendering them even more isolated, separate, and stigmatised. Baldwin (2021) discusses similar findings in her research with grandparent caregivers, reiterating that in addition to managing their own and their grandchildren's emotions and experiences, they are often managing those of their imprisoned adult child as well.

Challenging behaviours

> *"I said, I naively thought, cos they were so young, that, it would be just like bringing up your own children."* (Grandmother B)

All participants reported having to deal with difficult and challenging behaviour from their grandchildren that had not been as significant before the point of imprisonment. Although participants were aware that the children's circumstances meant they had to cope with traumatic events, particularly during their early lives, they felt they were at a loss in knowing how to manage some of the difficult behaviour and support the children in developing greater resilience. All the children had experienced serious problems including domestic abuse and drug misuse, family breakdown, neglect, separation, and loss. A range of behavioural responses was reported, and the children were clearly struggling with self-management of behaviour, self-regulation of emotions, engaging in learning, and accepting authority. These behaviours profoundly negatively impacted their lives at school, at home, and across their relationships.

Grandparents reported having to cope with stealing, aggressive outbursts, what some described as temper-tantrums, and challenges to their sense of authority in the home. Many of these behaviours had only developed in their grandchildren following the point of imprisonment – and in children where such behaviours were already present, they had deteriorated further during the

period of imprisonment. Regardless of the extent to which these behaviours had existed prior to the point of imprisonment, such behaviours now became the sole responsibility of the grandparents to manage and resolve.

Often, these behaviours were present in older children who the caregivers thought would have already grown out of them. All families with children of secondary-school age had had to deal with fixed-term exclusions and there were frequent issues for all children at school. A child in one family had been permanently excluded and had been out of education for fourteen months at the time of interview. The grandparents were providing daily care and constant supervision due to challenging behaviour, while fighting to access services, support, and education.

All of the children were also dealing with ongoing trauma in various forms (e.g., separation, loss, shame, stigma, social isolation, and bullying), resulting in high levels of anxiety and stress. Additionally, their circumstances (i.e., having a parent in prison) are often not known about or understood by those outside the family who are in the best position to offer support, for instance, schools (Kincaid, Roberts and Kane, 2019). Having a parent in prison can also result in children struggling with their own sense of identity in relation to that parent, with the possibility of moving between idealising and not being able to trust the parent. This is something else grandparents must navigate, experiencing the child's repeated disappointment but feeling too helpless to do, say, or change anything:

> *"How upset and how angry are they going to feel and how worthless are they going to feel when they weren't enough to keep you off drugs, both of them? That both their parents, do you know what I mean?"* (Grandmother J)

> *"You know, obviously, you know, they're being let down by their parents. Like, you know, when they, now dad's gone back inside, and even dad promises, you know that this will be the last time that he's going to go inside. And then, you know, he phones them regularly when he's inside. And then, when he comes out, you know he's out for a matter of a few weeks."* (Grandfather B)

> *"How do you think a child views their parent in prison? Just a weight around their neck, that's how they see it now."* (Grandmother A)

Grandparents worried about their grandchildren's self-esteem and self-worth in relation to having a parent in prison, and the stigma and shame attached to that; they also had great concerns about how this might impact the children's future. Because schools and other childcare professionals did not always view the children as vulnerable, grandparents not only felt unsupported but also frequently criticised for the challenging behaviour of their grandchildren. This added to their sense of isolation. This may have been because schools weren't aware of family circumstances, or because there was little or no allowance or adaptation made to meet the children's needs.

> *"They're hurting because they've got no friends because people are nasty. Teachers can be quite, you know, nasty as well, you know, and these poor kids are struggling on a daily basis and nobody is listening to them."* (Grandmother D)

> *"You know; you look at [my granddaughter]. She's getting stick at school because of her bloody mum. It's nothing to do with her, poor little sod. She didn't ask to be brought into the world."* (Grandfather A)

Participants explained that these behaviours represented a huge challenge for them to manage:

"It's the way she is... There are mood swings. She can throw things around the house she can eff and blind. She can throw herself on the floor. Yeah, she can, yeah, she's very unpredictable cos she don't like it when things are going well. She puts a spanner in the works to maybe be attached and she's got a problem with attachment so yeah, it's always something different. (?)

I think she, she really struggled [about dad being in prison]. She don't talk about it. She don't talk about it and if anyone says anything, 'oh, your Dad's this' or 'your Dad's that' she goes absolutely ballistic. Yeah, she will go mental." (Grandmother J)

"...they've got all these issues, diagnosis, and she's been out of education fourteen months and my biggest fear with her is that there's something, it creeps in sometimes, little things she says and it might be a bit cool and I really fear for her if we don't get her into a specialist school and get her settled. I fear, I really, it's my biggest fear is that she's going to go down a similar path." (Grandmother G)

All the grandparent carers in the study described feeling anxious, worried, and stressed about their situation, about the lack of support for them and their grandchildren, and about what the future held for their grandchildren. The enormity of their situation, which most managed as previously stated with little support, weighed heavily on the minds of the grandparents. They all described having little space in their heads to think about anything other than the situation they found themselves in, made more challenging by the knowledge that, if their care arrangement broke down, many of the children would end up in local authority care. The implications for the grandparents in terms of their own stress levels and ergo their health and wellbeing cannot be overstated.

Mortality

"So, I said I hope we stay alive for another 10 years at least he will be 17 and old enough not to go into care and things... If anything happens to us, you know, poor little things would be put away. So, we worry about that." (Grandmother E)

Baldwin (2021) highlights some of the challenges families face when children of imprisoned parents are to be returned to their parents, in terms of transition periods, tension, and co-parenting. However, all the grandparents who took part in this research had the care of their grandchildren permanently, and therefore knew that they had taken on the responsibility of looking after their grandchildren for life. As such, they were acutely aware of the disadvantages of being, in effect, 'much older parents.' This was a cause of significant anxiety about the future and their capacity to look after their grandchildren as they grew older, in terms of all the aforementioned issues and the additional concern that they simply may not live long enough to provide stable care for their grandchildren into adulthood. Two of the single grandmothers said that caring for young children again kept them feeling younger and fitter. This was primarily because of their concern that they needed to be fit and healthy to fulfil their role as sole carers. One participant, when asked about the impact of caregiving on her health and wellbeing, said:

"Because I've got [child] *to care for, I'm very concerned that I stay fit and healthy for him, which is why before he came to live with me I packed up smoking. I think I need to stay fit for him because I've got to be here for him..."* (Grandmother C)

7 Recommendations

Training support.

Due to the traumatic nature of the children's experiences, grandparents are ill-equipped to deal with or understand much of the challenging and complex emotional issues which the children communicate through their behaviour. Through training and sharing experiences with others, grandparents can develop skills which extend their capacity to care for the children.

Peer support.

Providing group sessions for grandparents where they are able to meet others in a similar situation can reduce feelings of isolation. Structured and facilitated groups offer a non-judgemental space where feelings and thoughts can be discussed, as well as providing practical and social support. This also helps to combat feelings of shame and stigma.

Practical support.

Grandparents who care for their grandchildren need recognition of the scale of the task they undertake through practical support. If the children were recognised as 'Children in Need' under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, they would be entitled to support from local authorities. If the grandparents in this study had not taken on the care of their grandchildren, those children would have been place into local authority care or remained in care. They would all be looked after by foster carers or placed in residential care. According to the National Audit Office figures for 2014-15, the average annual spend on a foster placement for a child was between £29,000 and £33,000, and between £131,000 and £135,000 for residential care (National Audit Office, 2014). Foster carers are provided with training, support, and respite breaks, residential workers are provided with training, support, and supervision. Grandparents should be able to access at least the same training and support as foster carers. Recognition as carers could open these sorts of possibilities to grandparent carers.

Local authorities should set aside permanent funding to assist local charities and organisations in developing support for grandparent and other kinship carers supporting children affected by imprisonment. They should also provide, where possible, premises free of charge for such organisations to base themselves and facilitate their support of families.

8 Conclusion

Given the extensive impact that parental imprisonment has on children, grandparents who take on caring for them occupy multiple roles. Not only do they assume care for their grandchildren, but they must also support them through the trauma of separation from their parent, the anxiety which they are likely to have about them being in prison, and any resulting challenging behaviour. The findings presented in this report highlight several areas of impact on grandparents who care for grandchildren who have a parent in prison. All participants felt that they had no choice but to step in and take on the care of their grandchildren; either preventing them from going into care or taking them out of care. Their commitment shone through in the interviews, but also present was an underlying sense of what they had lost or had to give up. They had to, in their words, start all over again; entailing a big shift in role from grandparent to parent. They were returning to aspects of the parenting role for the second time, repeating something that they had moved on from into a different phase in their lives.

Closely linked to the adoption of this new role were many comments about how much the lives of the grandparent caregivers had changed because of the loss of their independence. In very tangible ways their world had 'shrunk.' Because of the long-term care the children needed, the grandparents' future plans, hopes, and wishes for their later lives had diminished or disappeared. Because of their ages (they spoke of generational differences) and, for some, age-related health problems, it was clear that they had taken on an enormous task, not least because of the challenges of managing their grandchildren's high levels of emotional and behavioural reactions to their traumatic experiences. The long-term commitment caused them worry about the future; as older carers, they seemed to have a pre-occupation with their own mortality, worrying about what would happen to the children if something happened to them.

One thing made clear by the findings of this study is that the five S's identified by Greenberg (2006), stigma, shame, separation, secrecy and silence, are not limited to the children left behind when a parent goes to prison, but also play a major role in the experiences of grandparent caregivers. Many of the participants in this study chose to keep the fact of imprisonment a secret to avoid negative social reactions from their communities, which had the unintended consequence of creating a barrier to accessing support.

Grandparents are undertaking a vital role as kinship carers for children with parents in prison. They care for very vulnerable children, whose vulnerabilities frequently go unrecognised, and they have prioritised their grandchildren's future over their own. This sacrifice can result in loss and isolation, and because of the reason for the kinship care arrangements, it is also likely to attract stigma and shame.

Rather than developing a comprehensive understanding of these experiences, this paper hopes to capture the attention of researchers and policy makers to further investigate the role of kinship carers in this context and implement appropriate frameworks of support. Despite the recognised limitations of a small-scale study, this report is successful in identifying key markers of the experiences of grandparent caregivers. Policy recommendations will potentially have wide applicability and benefit. It is vital for children and families affected by parental imprisonment to have access to practical, financial, and emotional support; without this, families remain at risk of family breakdown, social disadvantage, and intergenerational criminality. To develop appropriate support services, it is important that further research is undertaken with children and families to ensure any services developed pay attention to the voices of those they are designed to support, and following the findings of this study, that grandparents and other carers of prisoners' children are included in any consideration of the wider impact of imprisonment on families.

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