

# Caring for the Children of Imprisoned Mothers: Exploring the Role of Fathers

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Women are the most rapidly growing group of prisoners in Western jurisdictions, with the majority of them mothers. Research conducted over the past 40 years has concentrated on describing, but not evaluating, the circumstances, including the care arrangements, of their dependent children. Whilst fathers have played a small but significant role in this care, they are largely absent from discourse. This paper discusses research findings about the role of fathers in providing care to children while their mothers are in prison. This is part of a wider study which examined the impact of maternal incarceration on 20 young people in Victoria, Australia. In the current study, findings indicate that although fathers were the largest group providing care for these young people, participants were mostly unsatisfied with these arrangements. The current study considers children's and mothers' perceptions of the quality of that care and implications for mother-child relationships. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

**'Part of a wider study which examined the impact of maternal incarceration'**

## KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- Increasing numbers of children and young people are experiencing the imprisonment of their mothers.
- Children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to experience the loss of their primary carer and subsequent instability.
- Fathers are providing care to a sizeable group of children while their mothers are in prison.
- We currently know little about the care provided by fathers: how it is arranged, its quality or the needs of carers and children.

KEY WORDS: maternal imprisonment; children's care; fathers as carers

## Imprisoning Women: Experiences and Needs of their Children

In countries such as Australia, the US and the UK, the women's prison population has increased significantly over the past decade, far outstripping the rate of growth in male imprisonment (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2009; Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). Women remain a minority group however within the prison system, comprising around only seven per cent of the total prison population in Western nations (ABS, 2007a; Correctional Services Commissioner, 2006; Harrison and Beck, 2006; Home Office, 2003). This minority status means less attention is paid to their distinct and distinctive needs (Bloom, 2005), particularly their role as primary carers of

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**‘This heightened likelihood of instability and dislocation poses real challenges to meeting their most basic needs’**

dependent children. Research (e.g. Goulding, 2004; Mumola, 2000) has consistently shown this to be the case, with mothers comprising around two-thirds of imprisoned women, many of whom are sole carers (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008).

Despite this growing trend, there are limited official data gathered on either the parenting status of women entering prison or the status of any of their children. This has resulted in what McGowan and Blumenthal (1978, p. 54) described as an abundance of ‘stereotypes, conjectures, and theories’. Unfortunately, more than 30 years later there remains a lack of ‘transparent, shared, robust data’ (Burns *et al.*, 2007, p. 11). The need to gather formal data on the children of prisoners has been recommended e.g. Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1997. Raikes (2009) notes that this commitment was made in the UK in 2004, but was not followed through. There have been some ‘localised’ responses. For example, both the Victorian and New South Wales prison systems in Australia have recently begun gathering data on the parenting status of prisoners at reception; however, such data gathering is not widespread, nor is this information widely available or well utilised.

Given the lack of formal data, in an effort to better understand this problem, researchers have attempted to provide estimates of the overall numbers of children affected by maternal incarceration. Based on a 2007 census, Glaze and Maruschak (2008) estimated this to be around 147 400 children in the US. In the UK, recent data indicate that more than 17 700 children each year have a mother in prison (Prison Reform Trust, 2010). In Australia, based on a public health survey, Quilty (2005) estimated that around 38 000 children are affected by the imprisonment of one of their parents each year. Unfortunately, there is no breakdown of Australian data concerning those children whose mothers are in prison. It is clear, however, from these figures, that this problem affects significant numbers of children. Given the previously noted trends in women’s imprisonment, it could be reasonably assumed that this group of children continues to grow. Whilst the number of children affected by maternal imprisonment is much smaller than that of children whose fathers are in prison, research has indicated that the experiences of these children are qualitatively different and more severe.

Children whose mothers are imprisoned are likely to experience the loss of their primary carer (Caddle and Crisp, 1997), be displaced from their home (Murray and Murray, 2010), be cared for by members of their extended family (Dressel and Barnhill, 1994; Farrell, 1998; Gursansky *et al.*, 1998; Healy *et al.*, 2000; Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002; Kingi, 1999; Mumola, 2000) and have subsequently unstable care arrangements (e.g. Healy *et al.*, 2000; Johnston, 1995a). This compares to those whose fathers are imprisoned: these children typically remain in the family home, cared for by their other parent (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008; Johnston, 1995b). Because this heightened likelihood of instability and dislocation poses real challenges to meeting their most basic needs, the care of children whose mothers are imprisoned requires special consideration.

### **Caring for Children Whose Mothers are Imprisoned**

Snell (1994), in a now dated but still significant survey of women in prison in the US, estimated that almost three-quarters of the children were cared for

informally, within their extended family, with grandparents providing care to just over one half of these children. This trend of informal care is supported by Glaze and Maruschak's (2008) more recent analysis of national US data, and by findings from Australia and New Zealand (Farrell, 1998; Gursansky *et al.*, 1998; Kingi, 1999). Snell (1994) further highlighted cultural variations in caregiver trends, indicating that grandparent care was more common in Black and Hispanic families than in Caucasian families. Enos (2001) also noted that almost one half of the children of the 25 women in her New York based study were cared for by their grandparents, with similar cultural variations in the patterns of care; Caucasian women typically relied more on their husbands to care for the children. This latter trend was also evident in Henriques' (1982) findings. In her study of 30 mothers, mostly minority ethnic women, none of the children were cared for by their fathers.

Most research that investigates the children of prisoners, however, has not sought to examine culture or ethnicity and caring arrangements; aggregated results have more typically shown grandparent care to be experienced by around one in three children (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Koban, 1983; Stanton, 1980). Research has similarly paid little attention to the age of the children when examining their care arrangements or the impact of maternal incarceration more broadly. Most studies in this field have focused on children aged from birth to 18 years as a generic group. Cunningham and Baker (2003) remind us that 'children' are not an homogenous group, and have differing needs and experiences; they highlighted particularly the extra caring pressures sometimes placed upon adolescent children. Whilst some studies have considered the impact of a child's age on visiting (e.g. McCulloch and Morrison, 2002), no research has explicitly investigated the impact of children's age on their care arrangements. The findings of some research, however, suggest that this may play a role. For example, Farrell's (1998) investigation of imprisoned mothers with children aged from birth to eight years showed a higher than expected rate of grandparent care. Across the three Australian states of Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales, between 50 and 76 per cent of children experienced such care. This is likely to be a result of the study's focus on young children, and the resulting possibility of having a young, sole-parent mother who may rely more on her mother to provide care for the children.

### Fathers as Carers

A considerable challenge characterises any attempt to investigate and examine care by fathers: that of defining who is a 'father'. The ability to compare the findings of studies is hampered by the varied definitions utilised by researchers. Fathers have been variably defined as birth fathers (Gibbs, 1971; Kingi, 1999), both birth fathers and long-term stepfathers (as in the current study), the mother's male companion (Stanton, 1980) or husbands (Snell, 1994). The impact of defining as 'fathers' disparate groups of men who may have very different relationships with the women in prison, as well as differing relationships with the children, is yet to be discussed or accounted for in the research literature.

As is evident from the above discussion however, the general research discourse about caregivers has been dominated by discussion of the role of grandparents; limited attention has been paid to the role of fathers in caring for the children of incarcerated mothers. Indeed, Woodrow (1992) stated that fathers and co-habitants do not appear to take responsibility for children when mothers are imprisoned. Yet, in

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examining research data more closely, the persistent, if less frequent, involvement of fathers in providing care to their children is evident.

One of the earliest studies in this field by Gibbs (1971) showed that 38 per cent of children who had been living with their mother prior to her imprisonment had their immediate care needs met by their father. While these findings undoubtedly reflect the differing social and historical context in relation to marriage and family expectations, international research from the 1980s onward has shown a reasonably consistent trend of at least one-quarter of these children being cared for by their fathers (Arditti and Few, 2006; Cunningham and Baker, 2003; Kingi, 1999; Koban, 1983; Mumola, 2000; Stanton, 1980). Any exceptions to this trend may be explained, at least in part, methodologically. The sample groups of mothers in both Henriques’ (1982) and Farrell’s (1998) studies are discussed above. Similarly, Caddle and Crisp’s (1997) national study of mothers in the 12 UK women’s prisons reported a low rate of father-provided care, just nine per cent of children. These authors stated that these ‘proportions support the findings of other studies’ (p. 3), however, these studies were not specified. It is important to note that Caddle and Crisp’s (1997) data about care by fathers related only to the care of children who lived with their mothers prior to prison, discounting any children who lived elsewhere during this period. These findings only reported on care provided solely by fathers, and did not include the further five per cent of children who were cared for jointly by fathers and grandparents. Also, data on 21 per cent of the children were missing. Subsequently, any broader application of this finding in relation to the extent of father-provided care should be made with caution.

### **Care by Fathers: Existing Knowledge**

The data presented in research conducted to date have been typically quantitative and descriptive, focused on counting and describing care arrangements. This has resulted in limited understanding about the care fathers provide. The little discussion which has been presented, however, has highlighted difficulties. For example, Martin (1997) in a five-year longitudinal study of imprisoned women’s parenting roles observed that relationships between non-custodial mothers and custodial fathers were typically hostile. Male ex-partners were seen to demonstrate ‘punishing attitudes towards the mothers’ (Martin, 1997, p. 16), which resulted in the children experiencing restricted phone calls and visits, and consequently struggling to maintain contact with their mother. Arditti and Few (2006) similarly noted that acrimonious relationships were present in cases where fathers provided care. These poor relationships between adults negatively affected the ongoing nature of the relationship between mothers and children. This is a trend reflected in broader research into the impact on children of the relationships between imprisoned parents and carers (e.g. Gursansky *et al.*, 1998; King, 2002; Kingi, 1999; Tomaino *et al.*, 2005; Tudball, 2000). Relationships with ex-partners are singled out as particularly problematic (Tomaino *et al.*, 2005; Tudball, 2000). This could be considered unsurprising, given the well-documented difficulties in separated or separating families, along with the added stressor of imprisonment.

Of further interest is the finding by Enos (2001), who reported that where children were cared for by women’s partners, these were often arrangements not desired by mothers. She further noted that ‘most husbands assumed care by default’ (Enos, 2001, p. 58), suggesting limited planning took place.

### Children's Care: Understanding Quality

Some early studies (Koban, 1983; Zalba, 1964) sought quantitative measures of mothers' satisfaction with their child's placement. While 62 per cent of mothers in Koban's (1983) study claimed responsibility for children's placement decisions, 38 per cent stated that they were unhappy with the arrangement. These observations echoed Zalba's (1964) participants' lack of satisfaction with their children's care. The reasons for this were not explored further in either of these studies. It is possible that mothers' unhappiness reflected the hasty planning processes described by a number of authors (Enos, 2001; Hounslow *et al.*, 1982; Zalba, 1964). Interestingly, however, almost three-quarters of mothers in Koban's (1983) study stated that they believed their children were happy. The dissatisfaction expressed by those mothers may more accurately reflect the quality of their relationship with the carer than the quality of the placement and care for the child(ren). The reliance on basic quantitative measures of mothers' satisfaction has created some difficulties in the development of knowledge in this area, simplifying a complex situation as well as failing to capture children's views. What is evident is that the relationship between mothers and carers and how care and visiting are negotiated requires further exploration from multiple perspectives.

### Children's Care: Children's Views

Stanton (1980) is one of very few researchers who have examined children's views. She explored the specific impact of imprisonment by comparing the circumstances of 54 mothers in prison in California and their children, with those of 21 mothers on community-based supervision orders and their families. Her findings indicated that 43 per cent of the children whose mothers were imprisoned were consulted about where they would live during that time. While 32 per cent of the sample group stated that they approved of the care arrangements, one half of them reported they were not involved in any decision making about their care; their satisfaction with the subsequent placement was not explored.

In summary, existing research has shown that fathers are care providers to a consistent, if small, group of children whose mothers are imprisoned. However, they have been largely absent from any discussion or debate about caring, with what little attention there is focusing on grandparent care. The findings from studies which pay some attention to fathers are suggestive of problems, but these have not been further investigated. Data are needed on how such care is planned and negotiated, and how decisions in the best interests of children can be made.

### Method

This study examined the impact of maternal incarceration, including subsequent care arrangements, on 20 young people in Victoria (Australia) who were aged between ten and 18 years at the time of their mothers' imprisonment. The study was approved by the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethical Research with Humans, ensuring attention to issues of protection from harm, confidentiality and informed consent. Knowledge about this group of children is limited, particularly from their own perspective, with existing research

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tending to focus on either children as a generic group or very young children. This has detracted attention from and perhaps diluted the experiences of older children. Young people are often overlooked because it is assumed that they are capable, because of their age, of caring for themselves. This paper presents the views and experiences of young people and their mothers. Throughout the findings reported in this study, young people are referred to by pseudonyms and their age when their mother was imprisoned.

#### *Participants*

This purposive sample was drawn from a population of women who had been involved in previous research: the Women's Access to Welfare after Prison (WAWAP) study (Trotter *et al.*, 2006), supplemented by snowball sampling. The WAWAP study investigated the experiences of 139 women who had exited either of the two women's prisons in the state of Victoria, examining their access to services, and their views and experiences of such services. The author was involved in the WAWAP project as a research assistant. She interviewed all women exiting the main Victorian women's prison – the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, a prison with an operational capacity of 260, including both remand and sentenced women, from all security levels. Sixteen mothers agreed to participate in this study with young people then recruited via their mothers.

The 16 mothers had a total of 47 children between them. Of these, 20 were aged ten to 18 years at the time of their mother's imprisonment. These young people were the focus of this study. Fourteen young people agreed to participate in an interview for the study; in the majority of these cases, additional data were provided by their mothers and key professionals. In the remaining six cases, information about the impact of maternal incarceration on the young person was provided solely by the mother. To ensure methodological rigour, the researcher examined all cases where data were provided by both mothers and children, comparing these to the remaining seven cases (mother or child-only data). This review indicated that there was sufficient consistency in themes identified across the 20 cases to warrant including all in the analysis.

A comparison of demographic data from the participant mothers with a range of secondary sources indicates that they are broadly typical of women in prison. The majority were Australian-born (ABS, 2004), aged in their thirties (ABS, 2007a), sentenced for mostly non-violent offences (Woodward, 2003) and likely to have been imprisoned previously (ABS, 2004), with an average current sentence length of less than 12 months (Correctional Services Commissioner, 2006). This group of mothers also show similar presenting problems to those identified in the literature: substance abuse and mental illness or behavioural disorders (e.g. Mumola, 2000; Tomaino *et al.*, 2005). There is no direct comparison group against which to measure the young people who were the subjects of this study. However, demographic data show that these young people are dissimilar in some respects to the broader population of Victorian children: being more likely to have been born in Australia (ABS, 2007b), having larger sibling groups (ABS, 2007b) and more typically living in sole-parent families (ABS, 2006).

The author must also acknowledge the study's limitations. Because of the recruitment method, participation in the study was confined to those women

who were contactable, and therefore possibly more stable, in the post-release period. As a result, the findings may underestimate the difficulties faced by the broader group of young people and their mothers. Relying on one-off data collection with young people may have similarly influenced the data provided by young people. Social desirability, the stigma usually attached to the topic and a desire to protect their mother may have acted to minimise the difficulties they reported. Also, as indicated above, not all young people who were invited participated in the study. Of the six young people who did not participate, four were living with their fathers during their mother's imprisonment; therefore views in relation to care by fathers are provided by only one-half of the young people who lived in this arrangement. Finally, this study did not incorporate a carers' perspective; rather it prioritised the views of young people and their mothers. Practical constraints also supported this decision. The researcher was aware from work on the WAWAP study that many ex-partners, with poor relationships with mothers, had cared for children while their mother was in prison. Gaining access to these individuals for interview via gate-keeping mothers seemed unlikely, as well as being a potentially time-consuming and unproductive strategy. The researcher acknowledges that this is a gap and represents an area requiring consideration in future research.

#### *Data Collection*

Data were gathered via one-off, in-depth interviews conducted after the mothers were released from prison; the period between release and the time of the interview varied from one to 18 months. Participants were typically interviewed individually, however, in some cases young people chose to be interviewed with a sibling/s or support person. Interviews were audio-recorded where possible and transcribed; comprehensive notes were also taken.

#### *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was the chosen strategy for this exploratory study, because of its capacity to describe and build foundational knowledge. This method enabled 'the researcher to focus, formulate hypotheses [and] build a model of probable causality' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 129). This method of analysis was also deemed most suitable because whilst some general 'hunches' were identified prior to analysis based on previous research, it was expected that more specific themes would emerge during analysis. Subsequently, codes were largely developed inductively from the data, using researcher-constructed coding, with some *a priori* coding applied in specific areas where previous research data had been generated.

## **Results**

### *Young People's Care Arrangements*

Young people were cared for in a variety of arrangements (Figure 1). These care arrangements were, as would be expected from previous research, predominantly informal, with the largest group (8 of the 20 children) cared for by fathers or stepfathers (hereafter called 'fathers' for brevity). For the purposes of this study,

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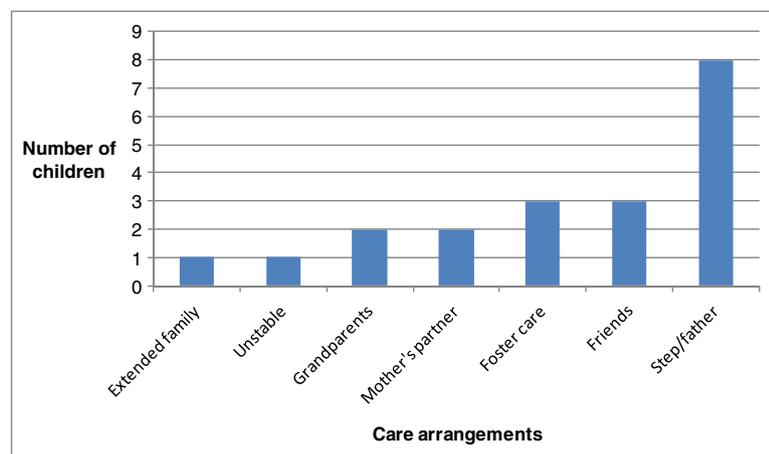
stepfathers were grouped with biological fathers, and were differentiated from the mothers’ partners by being resident in the family home, having a long-term relationship with the child’s mother and an established role in the family.

This trend in care arrangements varies from that presented in much previous research, where it has been argued that fathers provide minimal care for their children in comparison to that provided by the children’s grandparents (e.g. Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Gursansky *et al.*, 1998; Kingi, 1999; McGowan and Blumenthal, 1978; Stanton, 1980).

#### *Quality of Care: Participant Perceptions*

To investigate father-provided care specifically, some attention is required to participant views of overall care arrangements. Figure 2 compares evaluations of the respondent groups in relation to the young person’s primary care arrangements, rated on a five-point Likert scale. Although the sample size is small, and would usually preclude the use of percentages, the data are presented in this form specifically to allow for meaningful and accurate comparison between the respondent groups.

These data illustrate mothers’ perceptions compared to those of young people. Contrast is evident between the typically ambivalent opinions about their placement expressed by young people and the more general trend towards satisfaction noted by their mothers. Mothers were most happy with arrangements when children were safe and with carers with whom they had pre-existing relationships. ‘Mixed feelings’ about the placements of seven children were, however, also expressed by participant mothers, typically about care provided by fathers. Mothers explained these views as resulting from feelings of guilt about relinquishing their parenting role prior to prison and their subsequent lack of control over their children’s care, and feeling they should be caring for their own child/children. They also expressed concern about the quality of care the young person received. Young people’s dominant response of mixed feelings related to placement-related problems, mostly difficulties in relationships and personal problems, such as missing their mother or feeling worried and anxious. A small number (4) of young people reported being happy/very happy in their



**Figure 1.** Young people’s primary place of residence whilst their mothers were imprisoned.

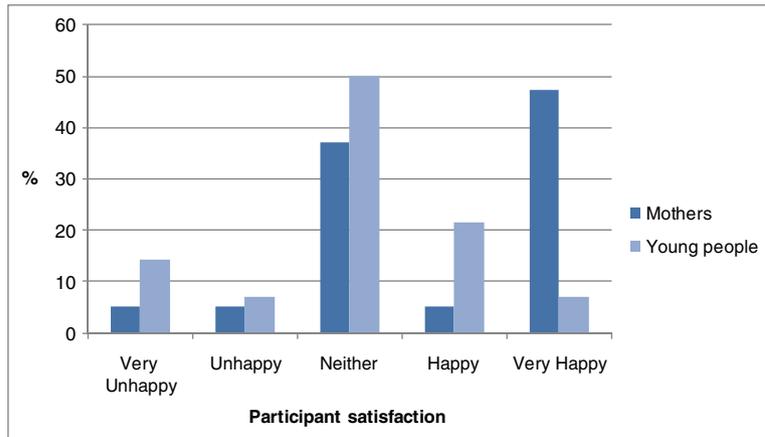


Figure 2. Mothers' and young people's satisfaction with primary care arrangements.

placement. However, when qualitative data were examined, young people's comments showed more measured enthusiasm; they do not describe happiness *per se*, but rather an absence of unhappiness. For example, Hayley (13 years) stated of her foster care placement: 'It was just like having a normal family . . . [The carer] would treat us all the same – not just [youngest sibling] as special'. Fourteen-year-old Chloe simply stated 'It wasn't too bad'.

Perceptions of Father-provided Care

As noted above, fathers provided care to eight of the 20 young people who were the focus of this study. Data on father-provided care were provided by four of the eight young people directly (3 had lived with their mothers and 1 had lived with her father prior to their mother's imprisonment). Seven of the possible eight mothers also provided data. Despite fathers providing considerable care to young people in this study, this care was most often described by participants with mixed feelings or with dissatisfaction; only one mother and no young people expressed satisfaction with this arrangement. It is, however, important to examine placement satisfaction in context. Comparing participants across all care arrangements, Table 1 indicates that whilst young people were generally less satisfied overall with their placements than their mothers (as discussed above), for both groups of respondents, the level of satisfaction expressed is dependent on placement type. Placements with fathers appeared less likely to generate participant satisfaction. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the small sample size, these findings should be treated with some caution and this issue investigated in more detail.

Table 1. Median satisfaction ratings by care arrangements

Placement type	Young people: Placement satisfaction	Mothers: Placement satisfaction
Father/Stepfather	2.5	3
Foster care	3.5	5
Friends	4	5
Grandparent/s	3.5	4
Other family member	1	5
Mother's partner	3	4
No stable accommodation	3	3

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**‘Young people who had lived with their fathers also indicated that all were either ambivalent or unhappy about the arrangement’**

**‘The nature of the relationship between the parents mediated contact between mothers and children’**

**‘Mothers described problems maintaining contact with their children who were cared for by their fathers’**

Qualitative data from young people who had lived with their fathers also indicated that all were either ambivalent or unhappy about the arrangement. Perceived relationship problems with their carer/s was a key factor identified:

‘... dad, sometimes he be’s mean ...’ (10-year-old Joel)

‘I didn’t like dad’s ‘other half’. She was more strict than my dad. ... She wasn’t good at showing how nice she was... And dad was *always* working ... he was never home ... you could never talk to him; never get him to understand’ (10-year-old Dan)

As was perceived conflict between their parents:

‘... after I saw my mum I wanted to be with her ... But I wouldn’t tell my dad because he would tell me off and tell me she wasn’t coming back ... he would be cross because she broke his heart and he didn’t want us to have anything to do with her’ (11-year-old Keira)

Unsurprisingly, young people who perceived their fathers to be unsupportive did not visit their mother regularly or in a predictable way. Subsequently, of the eight young people who lived with their fathers, one-half either did not visit their mothers at all or experienced unpredictable visiting arrangements. Also, unsurprisingly, those fathers perceived by young people to be supportive of their contact with their mother were in a current relationship with the mother; while those who were deemed unsupportive or ambivalent were ex-partners. Clearly, the nature of the relationship between the parents mediated contact between mothers and children, with children from separated families most at risk of poor ongoing contact with their incarcerated mother. This trend fits with what is known from broader research on post-separation parenting; difficulties with contact are linked to a number of issues, including inter-parental conflict (Smyth, 2004).

When qualitative data from mothers about father-provided care were examined, three key themes were identified: maintaining contact, the quality of care provided and prioritising the young person’s needs. It is important to note that all women here, apart from one, were commenting on their ex-partners. Mothers described problems maintaining contact with their children who were cared for by their fathers. Mothers did not raise the possibility of difficulties with transport or distance, but this has been noted in previous research as problematic in prison visiting (e.g. Mumola, 2000; Tudball, 2000). Mothers instead understood this as the father’s choice, which for some children curtailed their contact visits with their mother:

‘[My ex-husband] said ‘no’ – wouldn’t bring them out for visits, nothing. I think if he could have stopped the mail he would’ve’ (Mother of 11-year-old Keira) ‘[I had] three visits over a 12 month period. I phoned 2–3 times a week; and sent letters – never got no replies though ...’ (Mother of 10-year-old Tegan)

For other young people, although contact continued, fathers were perceived to put barriers in place:

‘[My ex-husband] knew he had to do it [bring son to visit] – although he caused difficulties during remand ... The thought of driving from [rural area] to prison was not [ex-husband’s] idea of fun. He was very happy for [my partner] to pick [son] up and drop him off after the weekend’ (Mother of 10-year-old Dan)

Mothers also identified core concerns about the perceived quality of care being provided for the child/ren. For example, 10-year-old Joel's mother was clearly concerned about this, but also the limited options open to some families:

'I think I would have preferred that they were in a foster family,' cos I'd know they were 100 per cent looked after . . . we've got no other family who'll take 'em, and the only other option is foster care . . . I thought they'd end up in there. Every time I've gone to jail [my husband] has lost custody . . .'

Mothers at times expressed anger about the perceived inability of their ex-husbands to prioritise the needs of their children:

'I was angry that I had to [get my mother to come and help]. My ex has been in their lives since they were babies. And yet he can't cope with the daily stuff with the kids . . . and it got to the point that he was just sitting back laughing – I thought 'How dare you take advantage of my mother?'' (Mother of 12-year-old Ben)

The above data indicate that the relationships between the children, their mothers and those involved in the care of the children are integral to the mother's expressed placement satisfaction: good relationships between young people and their carers are a major contributor to the mother's satisfaction, whilst difficulty in their own relationships with carers is the major source of dissatisfaction for mothers.

## Discussion

In contrast to the findings of much previous research, fathers were the largest group of care providers for the young people in this study whilst their mothers were in prison. Given that the sample of mothers in this study is similar across a range of factors to the broader population of women in prison, other factors potentially influence this pattern of fathers playing a noticeable role in caregiving with these young people. First, this may reflect a trend noted in previous research that social isolation and limited support networks of mothers and young people result in limited care options being available. For many mothers and young people in the current study, in common with the findings of Enos' (2001) study, placement with a father or stepfather was not perceived to be the best option, but the only option. Second, in three cases, young people were already living with their fathers prior to their mother's imprisonment. By contrast, much previous research about 'mothers in prison' includes only women who have custody and/or care of their children at the time of their arrest. The discrepancy may therefore reflect more about gaps in previous research; there may be considerable numbers of children, previously unaccounted for, who reside with their fathers prior to their mother's imprisonment. As argued by Johnson (2006, p. 4), while these children do not 'experience a change in household structure . . . to the extent that they were involved with the non-resident parents prior to the incarceration, may still experience a number of adversities'. Further research into maternal incarceration must critically examine the defining of 'mothers', to ensure that all children, and their varied experiences, are counted. Whilst the older age range of the young people in this study (10–18 years) may

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**'Fathers were the largest group of care providers for the young people in this study'**

**'Placement with a father or stepfather was not perceived to be the best option, but the only option'**

**'The findings show that across both participant groups satisfaction with these care arrangements was very low'**

**'The views and experiences of fathers caring for their children are unknown'**

have been influential in the extent of care provided by fathers, it is not possible to comment with any certainty, as previous research has tended to examine the experiences of 'children' aged from birth to 18 years as an homogenous group. Similarly, ethnicity, as suggested in some US research (e.g. Enos, 2001), may be an influential factor. These are areas requiring further research consideration.

#### *The Impact of Fathers' Care on Young People*

Fathers are noticeable in the current study not only in their role as providers of considerable care to children, but also in their absence in participants' reports of satisfaction with care arrangements. The findings show that across both participant groups satisfaction with these care arrangements was very low. The rationale for this assessment is clear: fathers were not seen to adequately fulfil their parenting role. Mothers reported that fathers often curtailed mother-child contact; and given the opportunity would 'use' the children or the circumstances against them. For children, unhappiness in these placements stemmed from direct problems with their father or others in the placement, such as a father's new partner, but often also in the relationship between their parents. This fits with what has been found in previous research about the hostile nature of relationships between imprisoned mothers and their ex-partners who are caring for the children (Arditti and Few, 2006) and the subsequent impact on children (Martin, 1997), but also contributes children's views on this. Broader research findings confirm that women feel relationships with carers have the most significant impact on how their relationships progress with their children (Gursansky *et al.*, 1998; Tomaino *et al.*, 2005). As the current study did not gather data from carers, the views and experiences of fathers caring for their children are unknown. It was also beyond the scope of this study to objectively 'measure' the quality of care provided by fathers, but this would seem a reasonable next step for researchers.

Detailed knowledge about the role of fathers in providing care to children while their mother is in prison is lacking. The extent of father-provided care, whilst evident in this study, requires further examination to understand to what degree this is more broadly typical. And whilst the current study identifies concerns about this care, this too requires examination on a much broader scale, to understand the circumstances in which fathers provide care to their children, the quality of this care, the support needs of fathers, as well as the longer-term impact. These concerns fit with those being explored more broadly in current child and family welfare practice, where both understanding and improving the involvement of fathers in children's lives are being grappled with.

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