

# A double-edged sword: Children's experiences of visiting a parent in prison in Scotland

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## Abstract

Prison visits are recognised as an important feature of a humane prison system, providing important benefits for prisoners and their family in maintaining ties (McCarthy and Adams, 2017). Scotland has a history of penal welfarism and a right-based agenda in relation to visits (McCarthy and Adams, 2017); however, there is a lack of research that focuses on visits in the context of Scottish prisons. Equally, there is limited research that considers the perspective of children visiting a parent in custody. This paper explores the experiences of children visiting a parent in prison in Scotland, highlighting lessons for policy and practice.

## Keywords

children of prisoners, families of prisoners, visits, child-centred, Scotland

## Introduction

Scotland's prison population has grown in recent years, with around 8,000 people in custody at any time (Scottish Prison Service, 2020). Consequently, the number of

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families affected by a relative's imprisonment has also increased. Each year in Scotland around 20–27,000 children experience the imprisonment of a parent (Scottish Government, 2017a). Contact during custody is critical to the maintenance of family ties, facilitating prisoner well-being, reducing prison infractions, encouraging adjustment to prison life, and supporting successful resettlement (Raikes and Lockwood, 2019; McCarthy and Adams, 2017; Woodall and Kinsella, 2017).

Despite this, the needs of families of prisoners have historically been overlooked by policy makers in the UK (Booth, 2020; Perry, 2016; Woodall and Kinsella, 2017). More recently the *Farmer Review* (2017) explored the role of prisoners' families as a 'resettlement agency' and a pathway to reducing re-offending. Consistent with academic research, the review noted the importance of visits for maintaining and/or developing family ties (Farmer, 2017). However, the experience of children visiting a parent in prison is explored less in academic research. What is known about the visiting experience has also tended to emerge from interviews with children's parents and/or caregivers. Few studies have incorporated views of children themselves, though there are exceptions (Flynn, 2014; Jones et al., 2013; Lockwood and Raikes, 2011, 2019; McGinley and Jones, 2018). Research in the UK has also largely focused on England and Wales, with the Scottish context less well explored. With high levels of social inequality disproportionately distributed within its prison population (McCarthy and Adams, 2017), specific recognition of the needs and experiences of children with a parent in prison in Scotland is merited as these families are more likely to have multiple disadvantages and complex needs (Phillips and Erkanli, 2008). Equally, visitation remains challenging for many families in Scotland owing to distance of the prison from their homes (Loucks, 2012). Drawing on a wider study exploring the experiences of children with a parent involved in the criminal justice system in Glasgow, this paper addresses gaps in knowledge to explore the experiences of children visiting a parent in prison in Scotland.

### *Parents in prison and their children*

Scotland has one of the highest rates of imprisonment in Europe (Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR, 2019) and almost two-thirds of Scottish prisoners are parents (Howard League Scotland, 2015). Specific recognition of the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment in Scotland is merited, as these are often among the most complex cases encountered by child protection services (Phillips and Erkanli, 2008).

Children of prisoners have been referred to as 'invisible' victims of punishment, as the challenges they experience are often not immediately recognised (Perry, 2016; SCCJR, 2019). They may experience a range of difficulties including behavioural problems, anxiety, anger, confusion and depression (Flynn, 2014; Jones et al., 2013; SCCJR, 2019); and are disproportionately represented amongst children accessing mental health services (Phillips et al., 2002). They are known to have higher emotional needs than their peers (Woodall and Kinsella, 2017); and can experience symptoms indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder (Sharratt, 2014).

Having a parent in prison also exerts a significant impact on children's education; including poorer attainment and attendance and more behavioural issues compared to their counterparts (Sharratt, 2014). Parental imprisonment can also bring about stigma, bullying, victimisation and social isolation (Murray et al., 2012). Children of prisoners are more likely to engage in anti-social or offending behaviour than other children (SCCJR, 2019). However, rather than an intergenerational transmission of convictions, there may be other familial, socio-economic and individual risk factors that increase the likelihood of offending behaviour for these children (Farrington et al., 2009). Whilst children are far more likely to experience paternal than maternal imprisonment, the imprisonment of a mother can be far more disruptive than that of a father (Jones et al., 2013); with increased likelihood of unstable care arrangements and changes in school (Poehlmann, 2005).

The Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland raised concerns about the profound impact of having a parent in prison. He acknowledged the lack of progress in improving outcomes for this group of children, despite focused attention from the United Nations and the Council of Europe; and called for the prioritisation of the human rights of children of prisoners to maintain contact with their family and to be treated with dignity (Long et al., 2019).

### *Prison visits*

The benefits of visitation for prisoners and their family are widely recognised as an important feature of a humane prison system (Booth, 2020; Flynn, 2014; McCarthy and Adams, 2017; Raikes and Lockwood, 2019; Sharratt, 2014). Reducing social isolation during imprisonment, family contact can promote prisoner mental well-being and has also been linked to reduced depression during resettlement (Kinsella and Woodall, 2017). The *Farmer Review* (2017, 2019) argued that strengthening family ties during custody was the 'golden thread' to reducing re-offending. However, Hutton (2016) argues that viewing prisoners' families primarily as a means to reduce re-offending, fails to take into account their own rights under the European Convention on Human Rights 1950 (ECHR) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UNCRC). Similarly, Booth (2020: 33) has noted significant 'disparities between *policy rhetoric*' that promotes family contact and the reality of 'managing family relationships owing to restrictions and limitations' that continue to impede regular or quality contact.

The distance to the prison and associated costs of travel have been identified as barriers to visitation for families both in the UK and other international contexts (Flynn, 2014; Sharratt, 2014). Scotland has remote geographical areas with poor public transport links impeding access to prison visits (Loucks, 2012). Higgenbotham (2007) found that 40% of families spent 5–12 hours journeying to the prison. The Prison Reform Trust (2010) revealed that Scottish prisoners reported visitors experiencing problems owing to the distance of the prison from their home (61%) and associated cost (57%).

Visiting conditions are a further barrier to contact, with restrictive environments leading to more negative visit experiences (Poehlmann et al., 2010). Noisy visits

halls with constant supervision, limited physical contact and lack of privacy can lead to a false family experience (Raikes and Lockwood, 2011). For parents in custody, visits are often valued as a means of preserving relationships with their children yet can equally reinforce feelings of guilt and shame and their inability to interact with their children. Unable to reconcile imprisonment with good parenting, some parents adopt a protective mechanism of not allowing their children to visit (Lockwood, 2018; Woodall and Kinsella, 2018). However, for some families, prison visits can provide 'rare moments of sobriety and reflection' and 'an idealised version of interpersonal interaction' (Moran and Disney, 2019: 275).

Strained relationships between caregivers and parents in prison are cited as further barriers to visitation (Flynn, 2014; Raikes and Lockwood, 2011; Sharratt, 2014). The quality of the relationship between the imprisoned parent and those caring for their children is therefore critical to the parents' ability to maintain contact with their children. This can be particularly challenging when the relationship is fractured, with some carers refusing or being reluctant to facilitate contact (Lockwood, 2018; Poehlmann, 2005); this may be motivated by a desire to protect the child from having to experience the prison environment (Brookes, 2020) or to further punish the parent in prison (Flynn, 2014). However, contact may also be prohibited by statutory agencies, such as Social Services or Probation, owing to safeguarding concerns (Ansbro, 2014). This is usually when the parent in prison has been the perpetrator of severe abuse in the family home or is identified as posing a risk to children (Brookes, 2018).

The growing body of research exploring children's experiences of when they do visit a parent in custody highlights complex and nuanced responses (McGinley and Jones, 2018). Children often value visits with the opportunity for physical contact and interaction and to demonstrate ongoing support for their parent in prison (Sharratt, 2014). Visits can also reassure children of their parents' well-being and alleviate concerns about their living conditions (Jones et al., 2013). Maintaining regular contact can also facilitate more satisfying relationships both during and after prison (Poehlmann, 2005); and is associated with better emotional adjustment and more effective coping skills for children (Murray, 2005). However, the prison environment can equally be unpleasant and intimidating for children; Sharratt (2014: 763) concludes that prison 'environments are harmful to children's emotional wellbeing and are not conducive to quality parent-child interaction'.

Jones et al. (2013) highlighted that despite good relationships with their parent in prison, some children found visits distressing, consequently visiting less frequently or not at all. However, in contrast, Flynn (2014) noted that despite the largely negative visiting experience for adolescents with a mother in custody in Australia, most still wanted to visit more often. Consistent with different international contexts (America: Casey-Avecedo and Bakken, 2002; Australia: Flynn, 2014), research estimates that over half of parents in custody in the UK receive no visits from their children throughout their sentence; disproportionately impacting women who tend to be held further away from their homes than their male counterparts.

Parkes and Donson (2018) have argued that prison authorities need to be proactive in responding to their legal responsibility to respect children's rights and

protect their wellbeing, in order to prevent long term damage. The partnership between prisons and the voluntary sector has improved the quality of visits (Alston-Smith, 2017); yet, there can be significant discrepancies in practice across the estate (Alston-Smith, 2017); with Hutton (2016: 348) noting that 'some visiting experiences are more survivable than others'.

### *Scottish context*

As with many Scandinavian countries' context of welfarism (James, 2014), Scotland has a strong emphasis on social work underpinning much of its penal policy. Formal recognition for children's right to visit their parents is seen in the Scottish Prison Service Family Strategy (2017) and Article 9 of the UNCRC. Prisoners are therefore allowed access to visits independent of any incentives or privileges scheme; this is significantly different to the system in England and Wales, and the United States whereby visits are framed as a 'privilege' rather than 'right'. In such countries, visits are an incentive to maintain good behaviour and can be removed if prisoners violate rules or fail to engage with education and training (McCarthy and Adams, 2017).

As in England and Wales, the Scottish system facilitates different categories of visits: open, closed and children's visits. Open visits range from remand prisoners having daily half-hour visits (up to six per week) to convicted prisoners having weekly one-hour visits. However, unlike the rest of the UK and other international contexts, Scotland does not offer overnight contact. Overnight contact is a relatively new concept in England and Wales with limited availability (Raikes and Lockwood, 2011, 2019), yet is well established in Scandinavia, France, Ireland, Canada, Australia and several states in America (Eurochips, 2006; Flynn, 2014). Such facilities vary in length of stay and availability yet provide a more child-oriented environment (Flynn, 2014; Raikes and Lockwood, 2011). In England and Wales overnight contact is primarily accessible to mothers in prison and their children and only in a very limited number of establishments (Raikes and Lockwood, 2011, 2019). Although the potential of overnight contact was prioritised for development in the National Offender Management Service 2015–2016 Business Plan, progress has been limited.

### **Methodology**

This paper draws from a wider study, commissioned by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, to explore the impact on children of having a parent involved in four stages of the criminal justice system in and around Glasgow: arrest, community penalty, imprisonment and resettlement. The child-centred study was based on family cases with the child or young person as the index with their parents and/or carers and the professionals involved with the family (See Table 1). Organisations supporting families of prisoners were approached to identify potential participants, and to seek their agreement to be put in contact with the researchers. Formal approval was secured from the university research ethics committee (HSR1617-22).

Participants were interviewed in their location of preference. Interviews focused on the children and young people's experience at the stated point of involvement

**Table 1.** Participant details.

Case	Pseudonym	Description
Case 1	Olly	Male, father in custody.
	Mandy	Olly's mother.
Case 2	Bethany	Female, aged 18, mother previously served custodial sentence.
	Karen	Professional supporting Bethany.
Case 3	Zoe	Female, mother previously served custodial sentence.
	Brenda	Zoe's mother, previously served custodial sentence.
Case 4	Kerry	Female, aged 18, mother in custody.
	Sue	Professional supporting Kerry.
Case 5	George	Male, father in custody.
Case 6	Mia	Female, father in custody.
	Elsa	Mia's mother
Case 7	Clare	Female, father in custody.
Case 8	Poppy	Female, father in custody.
Case 9	Ava	Female, father in custody.
	David	Ava's father previously served custodial sentence.
Case 10	Patrick	Male, 18, father in custody.

with the criminal justice system and their reactions, understanding and experiences of support. Focused interviews with parents and professionals addressed the impact on the child, themselves, and the family unit. In total, fourteen cases from 10 families were recruited with parents participating in twelve and four professionals from three cases also interviewed. Interviewing different stakeholders enabled a wider perspective to be obtained.

Recorded interview data was transcribed verbatim and analysed initially by case (index child, parents, carers and involved professionals). Data was then subjected to framework analysis (Smith and Firth, 2011), with the initial frame set at a meeting of the researchers to represent recurring issues that emerged during initial analysis. This paper focuses specifically on data relating to visiting a parent in prison, drawing on 18 of the interviews: children and young people ( $n = 11$ ), parent carer ( $n = 3$ ), parent with experience of custody ( $n = 2$ ) and involved professional ( $n = 2$ ) (Table 1).

The children and young people were aged 8–24 years. In eight cases the parent was currently serving a custodial sentence, and three had recently been released from custody. In three cases the imprisoned parent was a mother, and in eight the father. Contrasting existing research, visiting was comparatively high across the sample, especially for younger children with a father in prison.

## Findings

### *Complex needs and multiple disadvantage: Impact on visits*

The accounts of many participants in this research explicitly and repeatedly spoke of the multiple and complex needs and disadvantages within which they and their families experienced imprisonment. Participants lives were often characterised by

substance misuse, bereavement, poor mental and physical health and disabilities, and histories of domestic, sexual and emotional abuse. Research recognises prisoners and their families as having complex needs (Woodall and Kinsella, 2017); however, evident in this study was the way in which such issues interact with prisoners' and families' abilities to maintain or rebuild familial relationships through contact.

In particular, many families were dealing with the complex mental ill health of either the imprisoned parent, children and/or the children's carers. Research emphasises that family ties are protective factors for prisoners' mental wellbeing (de Motte et al., 2012) and explores the role of families in providing social capital in order to promote successful rehabilitation and resettlement (Booth, 2020). However, this study highlighted the way in which mental ill-health can have significant implications for managing and maintaining contact during custody.

Mandy (Olly's Mother, Case 1), mother to three children with a father in prison, told of her children's father's long-term mental ill-health; *'Before he went to prison, he couldn't cope with life... , the mental health'*. Mandy stressed that she felt the prison was *'not dealing with his mental health'*, leading to challenges in maintaining contact. She explained that *'he [father] does not want visits... , he cannot cope with the volume [in the visits hall]'* and went on to explain that *'if [he] finds out about the visits, he'll cancel them'*. The family had developed a strategy to reduce the anxiety and stress of visits, avoiding *'the ones [visits] at night'* owing to the high volume of visitors and consequent noise. Olly (Case 1) also explained that owing to his dad's anxiety about visits, they *'don't tell him... , until ten minutes before a visit'*. Mandy concluded that, as a family, *'it feels as if we've not got a relationship anymore'*; explaining that this was stressful for the children and that *'there needs to be work done on his end [at the prison]... , so that it doesn't affect the kids'*.

Brenda (Case 3 – mother who had previously served a prison sentence) also gave an account of prison visits that highlighted how existing mental health issues impacted the experience of visits, but equally, the cyclical nature of this, in which the negative impact of visits then exacerbated her mental health. Brenda explained that she had post-traumatic stress disorder and how the noise of visits and the presence of uniformed officers could be a trigger, causing further anxiety and distress: *'I've got post-traumatic stress through my brother dying... , and from them as well [prison officers] and every time I see them I'm like, "It's the Police!"... , every wee noise'*.

Bethany (Case 2 – a young woman whose mother had previously served a prison sentence), told of her mother's mental health problems; *'She's got a lot of mental health... , personality disorder, anxiety, depression'*. This was reiterated by Karen (professional supporting Bethany), who explained that Bethany's mother *'has long and enduring mental health issues'*. Bethany told of a challenging and fragmented relationship with her mother and how she struggled with her mothers' behaviour during visits:

The way my mum acted, it was as if she didn't care, she was not sorry she was in there. It was like it was one big joke to her. (Bethany, Case 2)

Bethany told of limited support in managing the visits and her relationship with her mother during custody and consequently stopped visiting. Karen recognised the potential risk of visits and questioned Bethany's mother's motivation, expressing concern that Bethany had been manipulated into visits to gain favour at court and that '*nobody protected [Bethany] from that*'.

Kerry (Case 4), a young woman whose mother was serving a prison sentence at the time of interview, also experienced significant challenges both during and after visits with her mother in prison. Sue, a professional supporting Kerry explained, '*[She] struggles to regulate emotions at all...and uses drugs and drinking as a coping mechanism*'. At the time of interview Kerry was 18 years old and was starting to rebuild a relationship with her mother who was coming to the end of a long-term prison sentence and with whom Kerry had had limited contact throughout her childhood. Sue explained that Kerry's mother's imprisonment had '*provided the opportunity [for Kerry and her mother] to have contact*' but that this was a '*daunting experience for [Kerry]... , because she had not seen her mum for a long, long time*'. Kerry also alluded to her mother's mental health problems; '*My mum had her own issues, and then she's just never dealt with them*'. Both Kerry and Sue's accounts indicated inconsistency in the frequency, quality and success of visits. Sue explained that when visits were less successful, Kerry was often left feeling '*abandoned*' and '*rejected*'. Sue recognised the value of contact but equally that '*it had risks*'; and went on to explain that; '*at times [Kerry] has walked out the visiting room... , really distressed*'. Sue often worried that Kerry might '*self-harm*' or '*use alcohol or something else*' in order to cope with her emotions.

Both Bethany and Kerry's stories highlight the complexity of challenges facing young people visiting a parent in prison, including differing expectations about parent-child relationships and a sense of being disappointed with their parent. Professionals interviewed recognised there should be more support '*in terms of building that relationship*' between '*child[ren] and parent in prison*' (Sue; Case 4 – professional supporting Kerry); and in recognising and navigating the potential risk posed to young people of visiting a parent in prison (Karen; Case 1 – professional supporting Bethany).

### *The emotional impact of visiting a parent in prison – Visits as a double-edged sword*

For many children, visiting their parent in prison brought about competing and contrasting emotions; whilst children often told of being happy to see their parent, they also spoke of visits causing them much distress. Mia (Case 6, father currently in custody) captured her mixed feelings:

They [the prison] are destroying the whole emotion of looking forward to seeing your parent, because you are so looking forward to seeing this person, but you know what's coming when you get to the prison. (Mia, Case 6)



### *False sense of family*

Many families spoke of the challenging prison environment and highlighted that the atmosphere was not conducive to meaningful contact. For some children, the environment was particularly intimidating.

The visiting rooms are absolutely shocking . . . , and it's horrible. I've seen other people in that visiting room getting angry with each other . . . , it scared the living shit out of me. (Kerry, Case 4)

They're horrible . . . , it's like the vibes in the room are depressing. It's upsetting and not nice. (Clare, Case 7, father currently in custody)

The artificial atmosphere of the visit hall was considered to be inconducive to productive family interaction, often creating additional stress for children and their parents.

Sitting at a school table with four people staring at each other, what are you going to talk about? You are sitting there and you're thinking, 'I spoke to you on the phone last night'. (Mia, Case 6)

Just sitting across from them at a table which is so unnatural because they wouldn't do that with their parents if they were seeing them at home. (Kerry, Case 4)

Poppy (Case 8 – father currently in prison) noted the monotony of visits, explaining that there is '*nothing to do at all*' and that she and her siblings end up '*just sitting there looking at*' their father. This is consistent with research by Woodall and Kinsella (2017) who noted that children often report feeling bored and restless on visits. George (Case 5) explained how he attempted to overcome such boredom; '*I've been learning how to beatbox . . . , and I just beatbox for him [father]*'. Whilst George told of actively taking responsibility for disrupting the monotony of visits, this may indicate an unnecessary burden being placed on children to be entertaining and manage the quality of the visit experience.

Despite visits being a right rather than a privilege in Scottish legislation, there was a sense of children's acceptance of the unsatisfactory visiting conditions owing to the desire to see their parent. This was illustrated by George (Case 5) who suggested '*it's worth it. I cannot turn it down because he's my dad*' and Patrick (Case 10) who indicated '*It's a bit shit, but we have to do it*'. Many of the participants also articulated solutions to the challenges of visits. A longing for '*things to do*' to address the awkward and false family environment was expressed. Olly (Case 1) suggested '*a place outside*'; and Kerry (Case 4) called for space and activities that are '*not forced . . . , something that's natural*'.

### *The challenge of 'goodbye'*

Nearly all of the families who participated in this research spoke of the challenges of visit ends. Clare (Case 7) explained that she found it '*horrible to see [her father] turning the corner, that final "bye"*'. Whilst existing literature has identified that visits can be an effective means of alleviating some of the worries children have

about the conditions in which their parents are held (Sharratt, 2014), this study highlighted how, for some children, such worries were exacerbated as they watched their parent return to the main prison building. Poppy (Case 8) explained:

I hate to leave him, I don't like it, because I just see him go through this dark door away from me and it's just not nice because it's a dark door with dark holes in it and it doesn't look that warm or anything. (Poppy, Case 8)

Similarly, Mia (Case 6) suggested;

I feel like my dad's cold all the time, because when they open the door to let them back out there's just a cold draught. (Mia, Case 6)

She went on to explain how interactions between prison staff and her father at the end of the visit would also increase her anxieties.

I've seen them . . . , they say like, "Come on boys" . . . , it's kind of not nice the way they say it, it's the tone they use with them . . . , it's like saying, "I'll beat you up" or something. (Mia, Case 6)

George (Case 5) told us that he found it 'hard to leave' his Dad after visits. For George the visit ending brought about a recurring sense of injustice reminding him that '*[his father] doesn't deserve to be in there*'. The emotional upset of visit endings left some children not wanting to visit again. Brenda (Case 3) explained that her daughter did not want to visit her in prison, and when asked about it, her daughter responded, '*I don't like leaving you*'. Similarly, Poppy (Case 8) suggested that she doesn't '*really like [visits]*', owing to the goodbyes and went on to say, '*I just don't want to let go of my dad*'. She told us that after a visit: '*All of it is running through my mind . . . , I just put my head down and don't talk to anybody*'. For George (Case 5), the end of one visit initiated the anticipation for the next: '*It's really bad because I think "when's the next visit, when's the next visit, when's the next visit?"*'.

### *The impact of prison processes and surveillance strategies; 'it could all be a lot more relaxed'*

Consistent with existing research (Sharratt, 2014), children's experiences of visiting their parent in prison were consistently reported to be negative. A common and consistent theme through all participant accounts was the way in which the prisons facilitated visits, with a perceived sense of unnecessary bureaucracy and security restrictions.

#### *Hostility of prison staff*

Children and young people frequently spoke of their perceived sense of being met with hostility by prison staff. This is consistent with the work of Dixey and Woodall (2012) who noted that visitors were often left feeling unwelcome by the prison staff. Mia (Case 6) suggested: '*You walk in and you are made aware that these people*

*[prison staff] are not your pals'*. Bethany also spoke of her sense of being treated with hostility:

I didn't even have an in-date passport... , getting into the prison, I was questioned. And they were so judgemental, the people that worked there... , they were just quite arsey. (Bethany, Case 2)

Bethany was 18 at the time of interview and navigating the prison system independently as an adult found the process intimidating. As noted by Long et al. (2019), children visiting a parent in prison often experience reduced support as they transition to adulthood and argued for a more proactive approach to ensure they were able to continue to visit their parent in custody without sudden obstacles.

Patrick (Case 10) spoke of feeling stigmatised by the prison during visits and expressed a sense that he was being judged for his father's actions:

We are treated more like a prisoner than the actual prisoners are. Walking in... , your name gets shouted and you are told to queue, all orderly. And I'm like, "I didn't even do the fricking crime, mate. Why am I getting shouted at?" (Patrick, Case 10)

Light and Campbell (2006) describe the concept of 'guilt by association' which causes families of prisoners to feel less worthy owing to the actions of their family member in prison. Importantly, this can lead to families being less likely to access required support.

### *Lack of privacy and intimacy*

The imposition of rules and regulations during contact led to further anxieties and frustrations. Ava (Case 9) told of enjoying the '*soft play*' area when she visited her father. However, her father, David, spoke of the restriction on movement during visits:

I cannot move with her [daughter], so it was a bit awkward... , she wants to run about and go and play with stuff and she's asking me to go with her. (David, Case 9)

The restriction on physical contact was also highlighted as a challenge of visits. Brenda (Case 3) suggested: '*You weren't allowed to hug them [daughters]*'. Similarly, Kerry (Case 4) indicated:

You're not allowed to touch... , there've got to be twenty screws to a room... , staring... , making sure you're not touching. (Kerry, Case 4)

Kerry also expressed how the lack of privacy permitted with consequent sense of surveillance impacted the quality of the visiting experience:

It annoys me... , screws [prison officers]... , they're just wandering past, I was always put on edge because there was one right behind us where we were sitting and one right here, and then one across there. (Kerry, Case 4)

Similarly, Mia (Case 6) suggested she felt that prison staff are constantly 'looking at you and actually looking at what you do'. Olly (Case 1) expressed his frustration at the intrusion of prison officers during visits who he referred to as 'creepy people' who were 'staring at them all the time' and detailed his response:

The officers that listen, you know, they can just go and shove themselves. I'm very smart about that. I keep them occupied. I'm always asking for juice or paper or something, even though I don't use it. Just to get them out of the way. (Olly, Case 1)

Zoe (Case 3) told of the detrimental impact on visits being in such close proximity to other visitors: 'I didn't like it [visits], because it was as if everybody was listening to you'. For Clare (Case 7), the close proximity to others was particularly challenging when she needed to speak to her father about something personal:

The visits are just horrible, because they're so cramped and you don't want to talk about things. When I went through that miscarriage, my dad was distraught . . . , and on that visit, I felt as if they were extra close. (Clare, Case 7)

Recognising that her father was 'going to get bad news', Clare highlighted the need for 'space . . . , a wee private room'. As noted by Alston-Smith (2017), delivering bad news can be difficult during a visit; with good news equally challenging to share knowing family members are unable to be part of it. The visiting experience is therefore often tense, with communication awkward, artificial and stilted.

## Discussion and conclusion

Previous research has highlighted the importance of prison visits; yet, as noted by Hutton (2016) such research has tended to focus on visits in relation to their capacity to influence successful resettlement and reduce reoffending. Although there are exceptions (Flynn, 2014; Jones et al. 2013; Sharratt, 2014), the lived experience of prison visits, particularly, those of children visiting a parent in prison, is limited. Given the significance of prison visits for those residing in the prison and those visiting, and the dearth of literature in relation to the Scottish context, this research has served to address gaps in existing knowledge.

Consistent with existing research, the wider study from which this paper draws identified the complex needs and multiple disadvantages experienced by children with a parent in custody and their families (Long et al., 2019). In particular, this paper has highlighted the way in which mental health issues and the additional needs of both the parent in prison and visiting children can have significant implications for managing and maintaining contact during custody. The visiting environment with increased and often sudden noise was identified as problematic. Allely (2015) has noted that for those with sensory sensitivities, the prison environment can be particularly challenging. The prevalence of sensory sensitivities, such as autism and PTSD, within the prison population is unknown; however, research indicates that figures are higher than the general population (Facer-Irwin

et al., 2019; Fazio et al., 2012; King and Murphy, 2014). Such prisoners are more likely to have unique and complex needs (Allely, 2015). In relation to the Scottish context, Slokan (2019) identified gaps in prison staff's understanding of sensory sensitivities and ability to translate any existing knowledge into daily practices. The necessity for prison officer training in Scotland has been identified in existing literature (Robinson et al., 2012); policy recommendations (NHSGCC, 2014); and prioritised by Government (Scottish Government, 2018). Although this body of work highlights the challenges of those with sensory sensitivities in relation to rehabilitation, a more proactive approach to protecting the rights and well-being of children with and/or visiting a parent with complex needs is required and therefore, further research exploring this specific issue is required to develop understanding, awareness and appropriate policy and practice.

Equally, specific challenges were highlighted for adolescents and young adults visiting a parent in custody. Flynn (2014) notes there is limited research that focuses on the distinctive needs or experiences of adolescents; yet they can feel the burden of parental imprisonment more greatly, often having to fend for themselves or care for younger siblings. As children progress towards adulthood, they may have more autonomy over visits, able to express opinions and not have contact regulated by their carers (Poehlmann et al., 2010). However, identified in this research, young people often had more negative visiting experiences; this was frequently owing to prison environmental factors, such as staff attitudes, leaving some young people feeling stigmatised; and surveillance strategies, limiting intimacy and privacy, especially where sensitive issues related to the transition to adulthood, needed to be discussed. Although representing a small part of our sample, several of the young people in this study had no or irregular visits with their parent in prison. As noted by Flynn (2014) adolescents are less likely to visit their parent in prison; therefore, further research is needed to explore the specific needs of this group.

Complex emotional responses to visits were expressed by children visiting their parent in prison. Although longed for, visits also caused much distress. Children and young people could be left feeling abandoned, rejected or confused when contact was inconsistent or less successful. This was particularly pertinent for those who had fragmented relationships with their parent in prison and equally those transitioning to adulthood that may have limited support in the community. Visit endings were particularly difficult, and in contrast to existing research indicating that visits reassure children of their parents' well-being (Sharratt, 2014), concerns about their parent in prison were heightened as children watched their parent return to the main body of the prison. The need for more structured support for children visiting a parent in prison is highlighted throughout the paper, both to prepare for visits and to manage and process emotions afterwards. In 2017, the Scottish Government dedicated £1.8 million towards the develop of new and existing prison visitor centres (Scottish Government, 2017b). Consequently, visitor centres are now available in most prisons in Scotland (Families Outside, 2017). Such facilities are key to creating a more welcoming and supportive environment (Woodall and Kinsella, 2018); and are a critical resource for reaching some of Scotland's most vulnerable families. However, the emotional response to visits often remain long

after exiting the prison boundaries, with some children isolating themselves or struggling to reintegrate back into their normal routines. Funding for community-based interventions providing ongoing emotional support is essential. Equally, as discussed by Long et al. (2019), children can derive much support from their peers, especially those with similar experiences, yet for children of prisoners, this remains an untapped resource. As an academic and practitioner working with children with a parent in prison, Brookes (2020) highlights that peer support facilitates an 'intrinsic understanding' and has the potential to build resilience in children. Further exploration of this support as a resource is therefore merited.

Children, young people and their families also expressed a longing for activities during visits, including increased play opportunities to disrupt the monotony and provide more meaningful interaction with their parent. The challenges of facilitating such opportunities within a prison environment focused on risk are recognised. However, existing research indicates that play is important for children, serving to address many of their physical, mental and emotional needs (Woodall and Kinsella, 2017). For children visiting a parent in prison, the closer engagement and interaction facilitated through play can help to replicate the family dynamic of the home environment; and the physical contact enables the maintenance of emotional bonds (Woodall and Kinsella, 2017). Equally, play can enable a sense of agency, which is often denied in a prison environment where structure is imposed rather than negotiated (Wragg, 2016). More child-friendly visiting environments can be effective at protecting children's emotional well-being, maintaining existing positive parent-child relationships and rebuilding fractured ones (Sharratt, 2014). Although child visits, with a more relaxed nature and play-orientated were mentioned and appreciated by participants, these are often limited in frequency and availability; therefore, ways of incorporating aspects of these interventions with a focus on play and meaningful interaction into standard visits are warranted.

Prison regimes featured heavily as a challenge to positive visiting experiences, including frustration with search procedures, hostility of prison staff and what was perceived to be unnecessary and disproportionate levels of surveillance. The Farmer Review (2017, 2019) has brought increased attention to the importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties through contact during custody; however, the demands of prison security often lead to stricter visiting conditions. Consequently, discordance exists between prison service rhetoric and the reality of the visiting experience.

The global Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 has had a further detrimental impact on contact between prisoners and their families, with visits temporarily cancelled. However, innovative practices have been implemented in some prisons in the UK (and globally) to facilitate contact, including video visits and prisoner mobile phones (Scotland). An opportunity for meaningful reform has therefore emerged. A critical and reflective approach is required to review the facilitation of visits to ensure contact does not continue to cause further harm and are conducive to, rather than impeding, quality parent-child contact. In line with UK and international counterparts the development of overnight visiting facilities in Scotland would serve to address some of the difficulties highlighted within this paper. Such facilities

mitigate some of the challenges and limitations of the resources involved for families in facilitating shorter visits; and can provide smaller and quieter visiting spaces in more natural settings, with increased opportunity for meaningful interaction with minimal intrusion from prison staff.

Owing to the small sample of the present study and the small geographical area covered, some limitations are identified. Contrary to existing data, visiting was relatively high across the sample with shorter travel times than identified in the literature review. This is likely owing to the study focus being within and around the Glasgow area. A wider piece of research is therefore needed to explore and compare the potential variability of visiting experiences across the Scottish prison estate. Equally, further research is essential to understand the needs and experiences of children not visiting their parent in prison.

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