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'Unsung Heroines': Celebrating the care provided by grandmothers for children with parents in prison

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prb.sagepub.com**Ben Raikes**

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Abstract

This article focusses on the issues that arise when grandmothers are put in the position of caring for their grandchildren while their parents are in prison. It will present the lived experience of three grandmothers who are in this position and 16 imprisoned mothers, whose mothers were caring for their children, who participated in two focus groups at two different female prisons. It is now well established that parental imprisonment generally has a negative impact upon children. Children with imprisoned mothers often face the most disruption to their lives. Many children with mothers in prison are cared for by their grandparents, with grandmothers generally doing the majority of the care. Pressures faced by grandparent carers of children with incarcerated parents occur as a result of stigma, loss, isolation, poor health and a lack of practical, emotional and financial support. If grandparents were not willing to provide this care, many more children with parents in prison would face being placed in foster care, or in children's homes. The complexities encountered by both grandparents and imprisoned mothers as a result of the changes in roles that arise from these circumstances will be explored.

Keywords

children with mothers in prison, grandmother carers, imprisoned mothers, stigma, isolation, lack of support

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Introduction

The UK children's charity Barnardo's is currently spearheading positive initiatives to assist families affected by imprisonment, for example by providing the iHOP website, which it has developed in conjunction with Partners of Prisoners Support Service (POPS). This website 'is a one-stop information and advice service to support all professionals in working with children and families of offenders, bringing together useful information in one place' (<http://www.i-hop.org.uk>). Barnardo's and other authors (O'Keeffe, 2013; Smith et al., 2007) refer to children affected by parental incarceration as 'invisible children' since, historically, their needs have not been recognised by statutory organisations. Given that these children can all too frequently fall beneath the radars of agencies which could assist them, the same can be said of the grandmothers who care for them. Approximately 4000 grandchildren are cared for by their grandparents in the UK each year as a result of the imprisonment of their mother (Vallely and Cassidy, 2012). Although grandfathers are involved, the 'vast majority of grandparents raising grandchildren are women' (Minkler, 1999: 202), with grandfathers generally playing a background supportive role. Therefore, in recognition of this I shall refer to these carers as grandmothers. The purpose of this article is to raise awareness of the needs of grandmothers in this situation, to promote better practice and to add to the calls for them to receive more support.

Background

Disruption faced by children with mothers in prison

There is currently no systematic recording in relation to the number of prisoners who have children (PRT, 2015). It is estimated that approximately 1% of the child population of the UK experience the imprisonment of a parent in any given year (Murray, 2007), which equates to around 200,000 children (MoJ, 2012), with about 17,200 having a mother in prison (Wilks-Wiffen, 2011). Only 9% of children with mothers in prison are cared for by their fathers (Corston, 2007), with 25% believed to be cared for by a grandparent (Corston, 2007) and a further 15% looked after by another female relative (PACT, 2011). The low numbers of fathers who care for their children while their mother is in prison may be explained partly by the fact that up to a third of these fathers might be in prison themselves (Vallely and Cassidy, 2012). As a result of this, just 5% of children with mothers in prison remain in the home they were in prior to their mother being given a custodial sentence (PRT, 2010), meaning they are often removed from the stability provided by friends and school just at the time when they need it the most. Therefore, children with mothers in prison generally face far more disruption than children with fathers in prison, of whom 90% are cared for by their mothers in the family home following their father's imprisonment (Caddle and Crisp, 1997). Grandmother carers of children with incarcerated mothers are faced with the prospect of coping with the fallout from this disruption. A large-scale European study entitled Children of Prisoners Mitigations and Interventions to Strengthen Mental Health (COPING) concluded that children

with parents in prison in the UK were 25% more likely to experience mental health problems compared to children who are not experiencing parental imprisonment (Jones et al., 2013).

Grandmother carers also have to decide what they are going to disclose to their grandchildren about the reason for their parent's imprisonment. There is a consensus amongst agencies working with families affected by imprisonment that age-appropriate honesty is the best approach (Families Outside, 2012). However, without guidance and support this can be a very daunting task for those caring for children with parents in prison (Lockwood and Raikes, 2016). If children are not provided with proper information then they can find out from classmates who might have discovered the truth via the media or by doing a web search (Lanskey et al., 2015). The shock of finding out this way can be devastating for children and it erodes their trust in the adults around them.

Without a proper explanation of where their imprisoned parent is, children experience what has been termed 'ambiguous loss', whereby they start to experience insecurity about whether other significant adults in their life are going to be taken away from them (Bocknek et al., 2009). The situation in which children are cut off from their parent as a result of them being imprisoned has been likened to a bereavement (Robertson, 2007). However, it is a bereavement that due to the stigma associated with imprisonment is hard to talk about, and there is no guarantee it will attract any sympathy, in contrast to when a parent dies. This can be regarded as a 'disenfranchised' form of grief in which 'social support for the mourner may be less than sufficient' (Worden, 2009: 63). Therefore, children with parents in prison experience complex emotions, and often have few outlets for releasing or talking through their feelings. Sometimes they are explicitly told not to talk about their parent being in prison to anyone, not even their best friend. Therefore, it is not surprising that the anguish and frustration caused can sometimes manifest itself as challenging behaviour (Murray et al., 2012), which, in turn, grandmother carers are required to manage.

Issues faced by grandmothers caring for children with parents in prison

In the UK it is estimated that one in 30 grandmothers provide full-time care to a grandchild or grandchildren (Grandparents Plus, 2014). Parental incarceration has been recognised as one of the reasons why grandmothers might need to take on the care of their grandchildren (Williams, 2011), creating an 'incongruence between life stage and role enactment' (Landry-Meyer and Newman, 2004: 1015). This arrangement is often referred to as 'kinship care' taking place within 'skipped generation households' (Landry-Meyer and Newman, 2004: 200). The stress experienced by grandmother carers is frequently increased by having to assume the role of primary carer at very short notice with little chance to prepare, or any idea of how long they will be required to provide the care. Grandparents in this situation are vulnerable to negative outcomes such as 'decreased peer network interaction, social isolation, depression and lowered life satisfaction' (Williams, 2001: 6). In addition to this, their quality of life can be eroded by a lack of money due to not

being able to engage in paid employment as a result of prioritising caring for their grandchildren.

Lack of support for grandmother carers

Grandmother carers are further penalised by the fact that children placed with relatives generally receive less financial assistance from the state than those placed with non-relatives (Edwards, 2003). Only 4% of grandmother carers in the UK are paid as foster carers, in which role they can potentially receive an allowance of up to £40,000 per year. The rest of grandmother carers rely on social services to decide whether they are entitled to any funding. A recent study concluded that 72% of grandmother carers regarded the support they received from social services as either 'poor' or 'very poor' (Roberts, 2012). Sarah Salmon, from the charity Action for Prisoners Families has described this as a 'postcode lottery' where in some areas 'social workers will work tirelessly to get people support while in others they do not see the need for it' (Vallely and Cassidy, 2012). Since families affected by incarceration 'frequently experience poverty and negative environmental circumstances' (Hanlon et al., 2005: 68) it follows that a significant number of grandmothers providing care for their grandchildren while their parents are imprisoned will also be subject to these disadvantages. The situation for grandmothers from ethnic minority communities can be particularly acute, as they potentially face 'triple jeopardy' as a result of their vulnerability to discrimination arising from their ethnicity, gender and their age (Kropf and Kolomer, 2004). Kelley et al. (2001) conducted a study of behaviour problems in grandchildren looked after by grandmothers for various reasons, including incarceration. They concluded that psychological stress experienced by grandmothers was the most common predictor of child behaviour problems, which in turn reinforces the need to provide support for these carers, who have been recognised as the 'safety net between their grandchildren and the formal foster care system' (Kropf and Burnette, 2003: 8). Mitchell (2007) emphasises the absence of support groups tailored to meet their needs.

Double loss faced by grandparent carers

Grandmothers in the role of primary carer for their grandchildren commonly experience feelings of loss as their special relationship with their grandchild or grandchildren fades as they engage in a 'repeat performance' of parenting (Lever and Wilson, 2005: 167). In effect, they face a double loss as they have not only lost their grandparent role, they also have to deal with grief and anxiety associated with the absence of their own son or daughter while they are imprisoned. In addition to this, they may be coping with challenging behaviour from their grandchildren as they struggle to come to terms with the absence of their parent (Backhouse and Graham, 2013).

It is also very important to balance the above with the positives associated with being a primary carer for a grandchild. For example, bringing 'joy and meaning'

into grandparents' lives, as well as providing companionship and a 'purposeful social role' (Kropf and Burnette, 2003: 5).

The research

Data has been drawn from interviews with three grandmothers caring for their grandchildren while their own children are in prison and two focus groups with imprisoned mothers, unrelated to the grandmothers, whose own mothers were caring for their children while they were serving their prison sentences. The grandmothers were all white British and their ages ranged from early to late 50s. The focus groups were held in two different women's prisons, and eight women participated in each focus group. All three grandmothers who we interviewed were battling with serious health conditions. For one, in addition to caring for her grandchildren, she was also the only carer for her own mother who was over 90 years old. The research was approved by the university research ethics panel. The data was analysed thematically.

Grandmothers' commitment to providing care and imprisoned mothers appreciation of it

There was a consensus amongst the grandmothers that for all the hardships they endured as a result of caring full time for their grandchildren, they had no doubt that it was the best option. One grandmother commented: '*there was just no way he was gonna go anywhere else*' and another stated '*there was no question about it*'. The rewards that came from providing this care were captured by one of the grandmothers who expressed her joy at seeing her granddaughter '*flourish*' in her care. The imprisoned mothers mirrored this response in terms of their appreciation of the care provided by their own mothers, one describing her mother as an '*angel*', another recognising the high standard of care her mother provided for her baby son: '*I couldn't ask for him to be in a better place*'. Another imprisoned mother wondered if she would have been able to cope if her mother was not caring for her child, speculating that without this support she might have '*cracked up or something like that... that's what gets you through... knowing how well he is being looked after*'. They were also acutely aware that without their mothers stepping in to provide care, social services might have had to be involved: '*if it wasn't for my mum fighting tooth and nail, my daughter would have been taken into care 'cos of my drug lifestyle*'.

The impact of stigma

Many of the mothers serving their sentences recalled the stigma that their mothers had faced as a result of caring for their children, and were very much aware of the impact it had had upon them. Examples were given such as gossip amongst one grandmother's work colleagues, who had said within the grandmother's earshot: '*her daughter, bloody druggie, back in jail again*', which resulted in the

grandmother telling her daughter 'you've made a show of me'. Another described how her mother's best friend had turned away from her as a result of her offending, illustrating the theme in the literature in relation to grandmothers providing this care experiencing decreased social networks, at the very time when they need them the most. This transferred stigma was illustrated graphically by one imprisoned mother who described how her mother 'wouldn't go out of the house for a week', while another stated her mother didn't go out for 'three months', as a result of the feelings of shame experienced. Others told of how their mothers had avoided family events such as christenings and first communions, again distancing themselves from their extended families, adding to their isolation. One imprisoned mother referred to the impact on her mother after she was sentenced: 'she got proper depressed and she made herself even more ill... she wasn't eating properly, she wasn't going out, she was panicking all the time, I think she was scared of what other people thought'. The grandmothers we interviewed all discussed how stigma had impacted upon their lives. One described how 'visible' she felt as people could immediately see that something had happened in her family due to the age difference between herself and her grand-daughter. Another grandmother described the feeling of being gossiped about in her small community and she was convinced that people in the community now shunned her as a result of both her son and daughter being in prison.

Managing changes in roles

Despite their appreciation for the care provided, the imprisoned mothers agreed that it was sometimes difficult to see their mothers bringing their children up using a different parenting style, but they considered they did not have a right to complain when their over-arching emotion was gratitude for the care provided. One imprisoned mother explained how she knew she needed to keep quiet when her children were brought to see her on visits, dressed, in her opinion, looking like they were 'out of a refugee camp or car boot sale', with nothing matching. Another commented that:

I hear her going for it with one of the kids and I scream at the other end of the phone, 'don't shout at them, what you doing', and then I think, she's looking after them, she's got every right to shout at them.

Mothers described how hard it was for their own mothers to discipline their children, and how hard it was to do so themselves from prison:

If I say to them have you done your room? (they say) no, cause they think 'why is she telling me, she's not there' and then my mum says it and they're thinking 'why's she telling me, she's not my mum'.

A similar experience was articulated by an imprisoned mother who was serving a life sentence. Her son was a one-year-old baby when she came into custody, and at

the time of the focus group he was 13 years old. She recognised that it was her mother, who was caring for him, who *'went through dramas'* with him. She stated how she found it both very hurtful but also very understandable that when she tried to discipline her son over the phone from prison he always replied *'you haven't been there for 13 years'*. She also explained how visits could reinforce her lack of involvement in her son's life when her visitors discussed her son's life *'across'* her, which made her acutely aware of what she was missing. Inevitably children would try and play their grandmothers off against their mothers, for example in terms of what time they were allowed to stay out until. One mother commented *'me and my mother we talk things through, we have to!'*, recognising this was the only way to ensure consistent boundaries were agreed.

Another theme from the imprisoned mothers was the emotional pain caused by seeing their children have their grandmothers stepping into their role as the primary carer for their children. One mother described how when her young son wanted something or needed comforting he now:

Cried for nannie, he doesn't cry for mummy anymore and that was the hardest thing for me, you know, but I was just thinking, 'I can't take it away from the fact of how good my mum and dad are bringing him up'.

Another mother created a vivid picture of her son proudly demonstrating how he was learning to use a potty on a visit. She had found the whole experience unbearably painful as she had thought to herself *'I should be doing that... it's just so hard... I don't know how I get through it to be honest with you'*.

One mother summed the change in roles up very well in terms of who was now experiencing the stress of childcare: *'At one point I would have been like a raving lunatic, screaming ... now it's my mum running round screaming her head off'*.

Another imprisoned mother in one of the focus groups recalled how on home leave she felt *'like a visitor in mi own house'*. She described how her mother, who was living in her house during her sentence, proudly showed her the children's rooms which she had repainted. She explained how she had said *'oh yeah, thanks, you've done a nice job'* when in fact she was thinking to herself *'that's my job, I should have done it'*. One mother described how she had handed over all decision making in relation to her children to her mother who was looking after them, including which schools they should go to, as she felt now she was in prison she did not have *'the right'* to make those decisions. This echoes the theme found elsewhere in the literature regarding mothers losing their confidence in their ability to mother as their sentence progresses (Raikes and Lockwood, 2011). This was also illustrated by a mother who was due to be released from prison two weeks after the focus group was held, who poignantly stated that she was worried about whether her children would want to come and live with her when she got out: *'I'm scared about going home cos my mum and dad have done such a good job... I'm scared that I'm not gonna be as good a mum as they have been'*.

The impact on grandmothers' well-being from providing care

The imprisoned mothers worried about their mothers in terms of the toll that caring full time for their grandchildren would take upon them: *'I worry about my mum's health definitely, many a time when she comes up to visit me she looks absolutely worn out'*.

There was also an understanding of the fact that the grandmothers have stress arising from both worrying about their daughters in prison, as well as assisting their grandchildren to feel stable and secure:

It's emotionally draining for them, cos they don't want to leave you in here and then they are going home to questions like 'when's mummy coming home?'

They're worrying about us at the same time they are worrying about their grandkids.

Lack of support for grandmothers

The imprisoned mothers recognised that their own mothers would benefit greatly from some support. One commented:

My mum has said to me sometimes she just wishes she has someone she could turn to who's going through what she's going through but there isn't so it's hard, there's nothing really out there for them.

Other mothers thought that a system of support similar to Victim Support would be useful. They suggested that a worker could ring their mothers after they were imprisoned and offer advice and support. There was agreement that their mothers generally lacked awareness of what support was available. The grandmothers also considered there was an absence of both support and *'recognition'* for the care they were providing. Their views about social services were congruent with the negativity expressed in the literature, which was illustrated by one grandmother stating that any support provided should be done by an agency that was independent of social services. She described how she had phoned social services but *'they don't return the call'*.

Another grandparent described how one prison that her daughter had been allocated to had been very supportive, both in terms of putting on family events that promoted bonding between her daughter and her son, and also due to the attitude of the staff in the visitor centre. She likened the warm welcome provided by the visitor centre staff as feeling as if someone was *'putting their arms around you and giving you a hug'*. However, she went on to describe the negative impact upon her and her grandson as a result of her daughter being suddenly transferred to another prison where there were no family events and where the visitor centre staff were not so welcoming. She explained how hard it was to have services put in place and then to experience them being taken away. Another grandmother reflected that *'no one's catching us, there is no safety net for us'*. In the absence of any available support one of the grandmothers had set up her own support group with assistance from a

charity supporting families affected by imprisonment. She had made links with other grandmothers in the same position through Facebook too.

Examples of good practice

During the focus groups we did hear about examples of good practice. The Women's Turnaround Project, run by the organisation Person Shaped Support (PSS) in Liverpool, was identified as an example of excellent support by one of the mothers. She explained how one of their workers visited her mother every month and provided some childcare to allow her some free time. In addition to that, she stated that the project assisted with practical tasks such as finding nursery places and arranged for a photo of her child to be sent into the prison every month. One of the grandmothers also praised the Grandparents Association for the support they provided, both practically and via their website that has information specifically tailored for grandparents caring for a grandchild whilst their parent is imprisoned. It would be very beneficial if support of this nature could be rolled out across the country so grandparents could rely on it.

Conclusion

It is clear from the literature and from our research that grandmothers caring for children of prisoners do so at considerable cost to their own quality of life and with very limited support. The care they provide is invaluable in terms of the number of children who, as a result, do not need to go into foster care or children's homes. However, there is an urgent need for agencies such as local social services departments to proactively support grandmothers in this situation, both in terms of financial and practical support, which in turn will promote a better quality of life for the grandmother, grandchild and the mother in prison. It would also be very beneficial if more non-statutory organisations could support grandmothers to set up their own support groups to capitalise on the strengths, wisdom and resilience they possess.

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