Assessing the deployment of informal support networks for mothers of incarcerated young men

Daniel McCarthy and Maria Adams
University of Surrey, UK

Abstract
The stigma and disruption caused by a close relative’s offending and imprisonment can impact heavily on the informal support networks that caregivers commonly utilise to cope with the aftermath of such events. In the study of family–prisoner relationships, scarce research has examined how caregivers draw on informal support networks and the extent to which these networks can facilitate various modes of support. This article focuses exclusively on mothers (n = 37) related to adolescent/young adult men in prison. We analyse who caregivers turn to after the offence, and the extent to which these networks operate as a means of delivering emotional (and sometimes material) support. Our conclusions raise questions about the informal support offered by family and friends, and offer suggestions on service responses to these issues.

Keywords
Family, incarceration, social support, youth offending

Introduction
Successive studies have argued that the support networks offered by family are key to helping offenders desist from crime, as well as reducing the risks of prisoner recidivism on release (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017; Cid and Marti, 2012; Laub et al., 1998). Notwithstanding these positive roles delivered by family in desistance and re-entry pathways, questions remain about how family members themselves can feasibly cope with the trauma of offending and incarceration, and the extent to which support can be deployed not just to offenders but also within families as well. The extent to which family members themselves have opportunities to gain support for those close to them can have important impacts on their own personal lives, as well as on their capacities to cope during these challenging times.

Corresponding author:
Daniel McCarthy, Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, GU2 7XH, UK.
Email: d.mccarthy@surrey.ac.uk
Several scholars have raised questions as to whether caregivers have sufficient social resources and support networks to allow them to cope with secondary incarceration, as well as, commonly in the case of youth offending, a chain of offending and other adversities as well (Braman, 2004; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2011). Some caregivers can receive positive emotional and material support during these periods of adversity, as well as having greater social resources to cope (Black and Lobo, 2008; Patterson, 2002). For others, additional factors can complicate the provision of support offered. Because primary mothers are so often framed as responsible for the outcome of their children’s behaviour, stigmatic reactions in the case of youth offending and imprisonment can be severe, especially towards mothers (Condry, 2007; Halsey and Deegan, 2015). These situations can result in caregivers avoiding confiding in others for fear of betrayal, leading to a reliance on a small circle of close associates (see, for example, Braman, 2004). Because prisoners’ families are often poor and experience other hardships besides having a relative in prison (Arditti, 2012; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2014), informal support networks may be either small in size or weak in resources as a result of these prior hardships (see, for example, Desmond, 2012; Mazelis, 2016).

Accordingly, this article examines informal support in close familial and friendship networks following youth offending and incarceration. We focus the analysis principally on mothers (n = 37) whose sons were incarcerated at the time of interview. Through often challenging relationships with these young men, we can, at times, witness a cumulative set of hardships stemming from these parenting roles, in the years both preceding and succeeding incarceration (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2011; McCarthy and Adams, 2018). Subsequently, the investment in, and commitment to, supporting these young men up to and beyond the prison sentence can induce a personal cost in terms of ties with family and friends. In this article, we address the following questions: Following offending and incarceration of the young men, to what extent can networks of support from family and friends provide opportunities for mothers to cope with these events? What factors are associated with those mothers receiving/not receiving varying types of support? And can the disruption to the lives of mothers be explained by incarceration or by prior processes associated with offending and other adversities?

The social effects and implications of family support

The role of support networks comprising family and friends has been widely attributed to be a factor helping individuals overcome adversity, including coping with the emotional upheaval caused by these events. Social support can act as a ‘stress buffer’ (Cohen and McKay 1984; Koeske and Koeske, 1990; Walsh, 2002), helping people overcome their struggles through either direct support or indirect recognition that there are others they can turn to. Significant negative events can also act as a ‘test’ of social support networks – where either reaching out to (that is, from the person/s harmed to friends and family) or reaching in (that is, friends and family respond to the person/s), or a combination thereof (see Helgeson and Lopez, 2010). However, in the case of caregivers dealing with the consequences of youth offending and incarceration, there are both considerable complexities in the availability of support networks to turn to and doubts about the positive qualities of support emerging from these ties.
One of the key outcomes of supporting a convicted relative is the pressure placed on personal lives, in tandem with the stress and anxiety of who to confide in. Several studies have identified general discord and hardship in families affected by a relative’s imprisonment (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2008; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2014). In part these effects can be pre-existing, with the consequences of poverty and disadvantage limiting the strength of unity and provision of resources available within families. Yet offending and incarceration can place even further strain on possible support networks. Ambert (1999) found that her sample of mothers experienced deep social isolation owing to the impact of their son’s crimes, which had a wider effect on many aspects of their life and psychological well-being. Thus, reliance on wider family and friends for support can be challenging, especially in situations where mothers feel judged or blamed by those close to them (Braman, 2004; Condry, 2007). In Braman’s (2004) study, distrust of family and friends resulted in a greater tendency for mothers to conceal information, restricting options for gaining emotional support. Situations where family had sympathy for the offender, supporting them through and beyond prison, can however reduce some of the negative consequences felt. In Condry’s analysis (2007), female caregivers engaged in twin strategies of act adjustment (downplaying the severity of the crime or the status of the victim) and actor adjustment (downplaying the moral blameworthiness of the person by humanising their personhood). These emotional responses demonstrate that caregivers can alter case details during disclosure as a means of gaining sympathy and understanding from others, as well as deflecting blame away from their family.

Originally, Goffman (1963) argued that stigma can be divided into three types: (1) abominations of the body; (2) blemishes of the individual; and (3) tribal stigma. Those who are imprisoned were categorized as ‘blemishes of the individual’ (Goffman, 1963: 14), meaning that there is a known record of someone’s deviant status. Goffman goes on to argue that stigma can be further split into categories of the discredited – those whose stigma is visible or known about – compared with the ‘discreditable’ – those whose stigma is less visible or unknown by others. The families of offenders can also be affected by both types of stigma: those whose family member may be widely publicised in the media or local community, compared with instances where the stigma can be concealed or redefined (for example, the person is ‘working away’). In the latter, discreditable stigma can impair caregivers’ abilities to seek out support from others. Arditti uses the term ‘disenfranchised grief’, ‘occurring when persons experience a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported’ (2003: 253). A reluctance to confide in others can be due to perceived social condemnation or to the actual avoidance of friends and family who may choose to disassociate themselves from somebody who has a relationship with a prisoner.

Instances where the effects of offending and incarceration form part of a multitude of other forms of social disadvantage (for example, poverty, unemployment, housing insecurity, financial debt) mean that the precise origins of stigma and shame are difficult to distinguish beyond the effects of secondary criminal justice contact. In these situations, multiple forms of disadvantage can create episodes of ‘stress overload’ – where these stressors become too much to handle – or ‘stress resilience’ – where people learn to survive and cope with life pressures (Black and Lobo, 2008; Patterson, 2002). Further factors such as the role of stigma either causing or compounding psychological and physical
illness are also important to address (Chaudoir et al., 2013). Some family members may also have higher levels of social capital to help cope with the ordeals of secondary criminal justice contact. For example, Comfort (2008) found that female partners of male prisoners who had higher incomes and stronger social ties through friendships, leisure options and familial support coped with secondary incarceration more easily than those without such outlets.

There are also doubts that informal support networks will offer family members sufficient emotional help to better overcome the aftermath of offending and the prison sentence. Seeking support from friends and family can place strain on these relationships, especially if the delivery of support occurs in a judgemental form (for example, blaming parents for the outcomes of their children’s delinquency) (Condry, 2007; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2011). Some caregivers find that the periods of offending before prison were as intense (or even more, at times) than when the young men were in prison (see McCarthy and Adams, 2018). As Mazelis (2016) has argued, poor families can commonly experience fragile ties within their social networks, which can result in a reluctance to seek support. In poor communities, support via friends and family can be limited by possessing either a small network size (Dominguez and Watkins, 2003; Tigges et al., 1998) or weak and distrustful ties with these individuals (Desmond, 2012; Edin and Kefalas, 2005). Caregivers’ chosen means of dealing with a close relative involved in crime and sent to prison may therefore be to further isolate themselves as a way of limiting the risks of further damage caused by confiding.

**Methods**

This article draws from a larger study focused on the impact of youth offending and incarceration from the perspective of primary caregivers. Initially a questionnaire was given out in the visiting centres of two large young offender prisons in England. Prison A held young men aged 18–21, with average terms of four years up to life; the second prison catered for young men aged 15–21 serving shorter sentences (average of two years), including prisoners on remand. The majority of the young men had been convicted of serious crimes, typically violent crimes, drug offences and robbery. This corresponds with national figures indicating a high proportion of young male prisoners sentenced for serious crimes (Ministry of Justice, 2018). In each of the two prison establishments, the visiting centres gave opportunities for researchers to speak with family members visiting the young male prisoners prior to the visits taking place. Of the 214 questionnaire respondents, 161 people declared an interest in taking part in the interview strand of the research and left further contact details with the researcher. Participants were sent further ethical details before proceeding with the study. We focus our attention in this article on the interview data.

Compared with the larger survey sample, our interviewees differed across certain key demographics. The survey covered a broader range of respondents beyond the study’s core focus on primary caregivers. In order to ensure like-for-like comparisons with our caregiver focus, we exclude 37 cases of other groups involving friends and other family members, including partners and cousins. Comparing the adjusted survey sample \((n = 177)\) with our interview sample, we find several key differences.
First, our interview sample was composed of a higher proportion of mothers than the survey sample (38 percent, \( n = 58 \), of survey sample; 58 percent, \( n = 37 \), of total interview sample). Secondly, when assessing ethnicity, we recruited a smaller proportion of Black, Asian and Minority ethnic (BAME) interviewees compared with the survey sample (51 percent of survey sample; 38 percent of total interview sample). Because mothers’ made up the largest group of caregivers, we focus this article on the mothers’ experiences only.

The majority of our survey and interview samples had close relationships with the young men, although physical and emotional conflicts were not uncommon. Caregivers had experienced multiple forms of hardship—having low incomes and mental health issues, and several were residents of high-crime neighbourhoods. The imprisoned young men were all aged between 15 and 21, with most between 17 and 18 when first entering prison. Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participant. All names included are pseudonyms, with some identifying information such as specific details of the case omitted to prevent identification of the caregiver and the young person. The study was assessed by an ethical review board and given a favourable verdict.

**Qualitative interviewing procedure**

We carried out the interviews in a neutral venue such as a community office or café, or otherwise by telephone. Telephone interviews were used in approximately half of the interviews. Aside from geographical boundaries, participants who opted to take part in a telephone interview usually did so due to busy work or personal schedules, or on a few occasions because they felt more emotionally comfortable with this means of communication. Regardless of the interview type, we had already met the caregivers in the prison visiting centre on one or multiple occasions and had time to build some familiarity and rapport with them prior to undertaking the interview. Interview questions concerned the effects of offending and imprisonment on the welfare of the caregiver, the caregivers’ emotional challenges, impacts on social networks and interactions with family and friends, prison visitation experiences, conflicts and family trauma, as well as general insights into the quality of the relationship with the young men over time.

**Coding and analysis**

Our approach to coding and analysis drew from the principles outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). First, all data were thematically coded in two stages: the first included general coding of key themes using Nvivo, which was conducted independently by two members of the research team, with good consistency between each analyst (that is, agreement on broad themes to group data, with minor differences in allocation of some specific sub-themes). Then we developed focused coding of themes with more detail and nuance developed within themes. Secondly, we also numerically coded some aspects of the qualitative data in order to help identify patterns and associations in our data.

Our conceptualisation of ‘informal support networks’ is based on responses given during the interviews. These included: whether mothers had spoken to other people about the circumstances of the crime, such as friends, family and work colleagues, and what kinds
of support had been garnered through these networks (that is, emotional-based support and/or material support, such as assistance with travel, childcare or finances).

**Findings**

The majority of the sample indicated generally positive support networks to draw on \((n = 15)\), in contrast to situations where support networks were either ambiguous \((n = 12)\) or strained \((n = 10)\). We coded these from overall responses given during the interview to give context to the support networks within families. Positive networks encompassed situations where conflict in families was either minimal or absent, with a portrayal of family and friendships remaining strong since the offence or, at times, even stronger. Ambiguous relationships concerned more of a mixed picture of support networks, which had both positive and negative aspects. Among these cases were greater restrictions on telling family and friends about the offence, with the secrecy due to stigma of the offence resulting in restrictions on utilisation of support networks. Yet stigma was neither universal nor the only factor operating to impede family relationships. Strained support occurred where mothers had experienced arguments with family and friends since the offence occurred, or had generally tenuous ties to begin. Each of these themes was based on mothers’ perceived support networks in the aftermath of the offence/incarceration.

Given that mothers are more likely to be the ones involved in the bulk of parenting work, and often juggling multiple family responsibilities, our qualitative data seeks to highlight further aspects of their experience, in terms of struggles derived from offending and/or incarceration, stigma and other adversities. This focus is contextualised within mothers’ support networks, and, where possible, we seek to assess whether these ties were impacted differently as a result of offending compared with incarceration. Across the entire sample, caregivers mostly dealt with the young men’s offending with limited support from formal services, with sources of emotional support more likely to come from family and friends.

**Positive networks of support**

Most families citing positive relationships generally concerned parents in stable employment and family environments, and with fewer social problems compared with the other two categories (ambiguous and strained). These mothers were also more likely to experience consequences from imprisonment, as opposed to the offence/s leading up. A key reason for this was that the offenders were (a) less likely to have lengthy histories of offending, (b) more likely to have committed crimes that, despite being serious on some occasions, were often framed as a ‘shock’ or ‘out of character’ from the mother’s point of view.

Commonly mothers cited experiencing a strong form of unity in the wake of the offence, with a commitment towards helping the young men during their sentence and beyond. For Jane, the reliance on support from family had been a stable part of her experience right the way back during the point of her son’s involvement in offending and school drop-out. Yet the prison sentence for her was a major event, and not an outcome she ever expected:
Well, we were quite lucky as a family that we were able to support each other. My brothers have been brilliant, they weren’t judgemental or . . . you know, they were really supportive of us all, even of my son. You’ve got to think that crime is quite horrific and they always ask how he is, how he’s getting on, and you know, there’s no, been no nastiness. (Jane, Mother)

For Jane, having non-judgemental family backing was a crucial attribute in her positive reflections on the importance of these networks to help overcome the trauma of her son going to prison. The circumstances of her son’s involvement in serious crime was a major shock to the whole family, and for Jane imposed impactful personal harms to her physical health. Although the offence would have been difficult to conceal because of it being news in the local community, Jane took it upon herself to confide in family from the outset, telling most people she was close to.

Galvanising family support was also established through the perceived injustice experienced by some of the young men sentenced, or otherwise through struggles navigating the prison environment from afar. Pooling money for legal advice/appeals, working together as families to investigate matters of legal procedure, or finding ways to set up work and other options for the young men after their sentence were all referred to. These were consequences more commonly triggered by incarceration, as opposed to prior offending:

I’m very close to my best friend and she was there for a lot of it with me, all my family have been, we’ve all just stuck together and supported him through everything. He’s got all my family backing him, and obviously just his solicitor was the one that spoke to him more, to be honest. (Claudette, Mother)

Yes, friends, family, my brothers and sisters in my congregation, really brilliant support. Obviously, when you’re going into this world of the prison services, it’s not a world that you are familiar with on any level and it’s not a world that you can really infiltrate easily either. (Oprah, Mother)

Both Claudette and Oprah’s accounts refer to families coming together in the wake of the offence. In Claudette’s case, family support was provided to her son in prison, who at the time of interview was going through a legal appeal arising from his conviction. In Oprah’s account, the absence of formal institutional support gave few alternatives but for family to rely on each other to cope with the consequences of the young man going to prison. Oprah described her initial experience navigating prison visits and contact with her son as a ‘lonely time for me because I didn’t really understand it [the prison system]’. In tandem with having people to turn to, a moral belief in the inherent goodness of the young men in prison (‘not bad people’ but those who had made ‘bad choices’) was one frame through which family support could be organised. And even in cases where offending and related social problems had weighed heavily on mothers’ resolve, they regarded the proximity of close ties as important to how they felt accepted by others, and possibly in this process resulted in one of the reasons mothers did not always perceive stigma regarding their own parenting roles.

Through having other people close to them, mothers were also less likely to blame themselves for the young men going to prison. Being able to speak openly to those in
their social network can be an important stage for mothers garnering support and reducing social isolation in the wake of the offence. In some cases, mothers cited supportive gestures offered by family as crucial to them overcoming the challenges imposed by having a child in prison. In Natalie’s case, her son’s incarceration was a shock, with no prior offending or severe behavioural problems impacting on her role as caregiver. Telling close friends and family after the case outcome, she referred to receiving overwhelming support towards her and her son. One expression of family support she described was framed through the logistical challenges of visiting the prison:

No, ‘cause come hell or high water I’ll go [to visit]. And I’ve got people that can supply me a car if I need to and I would hire a car if I needed to. I won’t miss that visiting. We’ve always sort of said to him in the winter and that, if the weather’s bad and we can’t get there then we can’t, and if it’s out of our control. But I mean like my family day in my car was . . . I had two people . . . well, my Dad actually took me, there’s my credit card details, you can hire a car, someone else said, take my car for the day. So, again, and that’s our support network outside of there as well. (Natalie, Mother)

As described by Natalie, the commitment towards visiting her son in prison was a primary feature that allowed her family and close friends to bond together even more strongly. Incarceration, in such instances, acted as a facilitator of emotional, as well as, on occasions, material support. For Natalie and others describing more positive support networks, there were fewer reported instances of tension and conflict in families occurring after the sentence.

Ambiguous networks of support

Ambiguous support described situations where relations with close family and friends were still largely intact, but with some tensions and conflicts in the aftermath of the case. It was more commonplace to see mothers carefully selecting who to tell about the offence, fearing that this information could be used to further taint the reputation of the young man and direct family members. Furthermore, even in cases where mothers had spoken to close family and friends about the offence, there were limits to the emotional support received. Common were challenges imposed by friends and family having their own personal problems to manage, or where the level of emotional support offered could become drained through fatigue and over-use of these support networks. Although stigma (as in discredited, that is, known about by others, or discreditable, that is, hidden from others) formed one part of these challenges faced, this was more evident compared with the previous theme.

Our data identify difficulties in the immediate ability to speak with close friends or family. Living long distances away from immediate family and friends meant that the immediate provision of face-to-face emotional support was not available to some mothers. Shirley, for example, spoke of keeping in contact with her family, but she struggled to handle the immediate aftermath of the offence, namely intimidation from local neighbours following her son’s conviction for a serious violent crime. As Shirley’s account details, reliance on the help of a youth offending worker was a key means of receiving immediate support:
You know I just, if I had any, if I was worried or if anything happened, I’d just ring Leigh [youth offending worker] and she’d ring me straight back; she came around to the house and would sort of talk me through things if I didn’t understand legal terms, she’d talk me through that. She was just really supportive, she didn’t have to do it, she was just really supportive. (Shirley, Mother)

Shirley’s testimony demonstrated that formal support was received openly during her son’s offending, and then thereafter in the incarceration stage. It was rare for mothers to refer to formal support given by community agencies. Shirley’s experiences also reflected the combined effects of offending and incarceration. Shirley’s son did not immediately go to prison, and support from the youth offending worker occurred before the sentence, which left her with few outlets of support once her son was in prison.

The build-up of hostility and tension in the home further presented mothers with considerable pressures. Tensions arose from having few services to turn to, combined with conflicts within families that were fractured even further following disputes arising from the young men’s behaviour. Marnie, for example, described ongoing battles with her son, which had resulted in him being taken into temporary care because of violence and other disturbances in the home. As Marnie described during the interview, part of the context underpinning her marital breakdown was the pressures induced by her then partner’s parenting, which she described as having negatively impacted her son’s behaviour:

I was told [by the social worker] that it’s probably because he’d never been given any boundaries, which is the opposite actually, because his Dad, and that’s why the family broke down as well, his Dad was so regimental and there wasn’t any give or take, it was one rule after the next. (Marnie, Mother)

Marnie’s account described a catalogue of traumatic circumstances induced by her son’s behaviour, which added to the pressure on family life. Repeated difficulties accessing services at earlier time points, as well as an array of negative experiences when eventually receiving support, were regarded by Marnie as similarly impacting on her isolation and frustration. At the time of interview, Marnie recognised a recent improvement in her life circumstances following her son coping well in prison (see McCarthy and Adams, 2018), and she spoke of some friends, but not others, continuing to offer support to her.

With young men involved in challenging behaviour, the impact on the home life of mothers was often very difficult. Adriana, for example, spoke of the difficulties looking after her other children while her son was in prison. As a single mother, and dealing with psychological distress alongside the many other pressures, Adriana spoke of feeling isolated and with limited emotional support. She reflected on her informal support networks during the offending and incarceration period. As she remarked:

I’ve got my brother, he lives here. He’s got his own family as well, I’m close yeah to him as well, but it’s nothing like he could help me, he got a lot from his family to do and not like I’m close to him. (Adriana, Mother)

Adriana’s brother was physically present, but her connection to him was distant. Her experience explains the difficulties of family offering help when they themselves have
their own pressures to deal with. One reason for this was the constant fatigue about updating people about the young man’s condition in prison, with sadness and personal blame felt by the caregiver on these occasions:

No, I mean, family, yes, obviously initially you speak to the closest family member who, you know, you’re really close to and know that they’re not going to judge you, because you do, you feel absolutely, you feel, no, you know, I could have done more, I should have done this, and maybe if I’d . . . you know, you judge yourself. To this day I still judge myself. You know, yes, family, you know, were okay, I don’t, to this day, if they ask me, I say, yes, he’s fine, he’s doing this, and stuff, but if nobody asks I don’t volunteer the information. (Kimberley, Mother)

Informal networks are not always effective in terms of their deployment of emotional resources. In Kimberley’s case, blaming herself for the outcome of her son in prison meant that she avoided speaking to her family, despite reporting no negative judgement from her close family towards her. These effects occurred many months after the sentence, during which she struggled to adjust to life without her son. Perceived failings and self-blame can be defined as stigma insofar as the caregiver internalises these emotions, yet the secondary reaction from others towards the stigma plays a considerable part in the weight of these experiences. In Kimberley’s case, by way of example, choosing not to share further details was her way of protecting herself from the repeated emotional ordeal of having to explain her son’s situation.

In the theme of ambiguous support, stigma was, at times, less distinct and difficult to disconnect from other factors, namely the proximity of networks of support and other forms of disadvantage. Although some mothers such as Kimberley referred to the effects of stigma on her capacities to speak with others and offload, others spoke of psychological harms and mental illness, family breakdown, and a host of other outcomes that meant that attributing these solely to either offending or incarceration was challenging. In the final theme of strained ties however, when occurring in tandem with already difficult or fragile ties with family, the impacts of stigma were more obvious.

**Strained networks of support**

Previous findings have argued that concealing news of the relative’s incarceration within the immediate family is a key method by which to protect the integrity of the offender, while preserving unity within the family (Braman, 2004; Condry, 2007). We find that offence concealment was a more common aspect of those mothers citing strained relationships. Often previous conflict in relationships, or otherwise not having close and sustained ties with friends and family, led to a reluctance to tell others about the offence and thus receiving emotional support. In these situations, the role of informal support networks was either commonly strained owing to tensions arising from the circumstances of the young man’s offending and sentence, or otherwise weak owing to other factors (for example, long-standing family conflicts).

Within these accounts, we found some differences by faith and ethnicity, both of which were bound closely with social status and respectability. One such example is Amira, who blamed her social isolation and lack of support within her community on her faith. As her account demonstrates, her status as a single mother living in a large Muslim
community with a child in prison contributed to her perception of the community not caring about her:

I don’t think my religion has helped me at all. Muslim people don’t like it. They won’t talk about this sort of stuff. I feel like in my community I’ve got no one to talk to at all. Because their kids are all proper, do you know what I mean? They’re not banged up. They’re going to university. They want to be doctors. Mine has got a bit out of hand. There’s no one to talk to there. (Amira, Mother)

Amira was living in challenging conditions of hardship, looking after her younger children while trying to maintain relations with her eldest son in prison. She regarded her adversities as more the consequence of having broken ties with her family over a previously failed marriage, which led to considerable arguments. In her own community, she felt both excluded and stigmatised by others, and, in turn, excluded herself from interactions with neighbours and other community members because of the damage to her public reputation. These issues were regarded as prominent factors in her restricted social support, although in tandem with the issues described above (namely her son’s failure to meet the standards of her community’s view of normative development, and visibly marked by his prison sentence, which was known to many in the local area).

As well as being affected by social status and exclusion, networks of friends and family were also damaged through fatigue, that is, too much dependence on these sources of emotional support. Shanice, for example, believed that she had pushed her friends away because she depended so heavily on them for emotional offloading during the worst periods of her teenage son’s offending:

It made relationships with other people difficult. Getting involved with anyone wouldn’t have been a topic. I did have friendships at the time. At the moment, I am still trying to get myself together. With friendships, what I do is, because I would talk about my son all the time, I would push people away. Friends are there to listen, but if you are talking about the same thing every day... I would be waiting for a phone call to see if anyone was going to call me about my son. I couldn’t be relaxed and have a normal conversation. (Shanice, Mother)

The end result of strained sources of support is that coping with the aftermath of the offence falls even more heavily on mothers and a tight network of close people around them, usually consisting of immediate family members only. Shanice’s account illustrates that depending heavily on friends and family, who themselves were close to the situation for a long period of time, may not always elicit positive outcomes in terms of harnessing emotional support. Her struggles with parenting her son during his escalation in offending were extensive, leaving her powerless and frustrated in her efforts to help him and to gain support from those close to her. Other mothers shared similar experiences to Shanice, where information about the offence was kept strictly within close family, but the overall reliance again fell on the shoulders of the mother. As Bianca explains:

I: Who do you confide in, who do you get your support from, is it your parents mostly and your partner?
Bianca described severe emotional strain during the interview, in terms of both relations with her family and relations with her son in prison. Her narrative emphasised more the effects of the prison sentence than of prior offending, namely on the extent to which her family had sought to distance themselves from the offender because of the severity of the violent offence. Being forced to tell close friends and family because the offence was made public, Bianca was one of the few to stand by her son in prison, but doing so without the backing of those around her.

A further negative outcome of having strained family relations following the offences committed by the young men was the effect of social isolation on mothers’ mental health. Crucially, the maintenance of ties that mothers sought from relationships with the young men in prison corresponded with greater levels of social isolation and, with it, implications for their mental health and well-being. Mental health issues arising out of the caregiving relationship were the result of a complex array of circumstances, induced by possessing a prior history of mental illness that deteriorated when the young men went to prison, or mental health symptoms that had begun from the events leading up to prosecution and eventual incarceration.

Yes, depression. Suffering with depression through it, you know, crying all the time, you know, sitting here thinking could I have been a mum to him, which I was a good mum, you know, what I mean, but could I have been a better mum, where did I go wrong, why did I let him go out that night? (Beryl, Mother)

Beryl’s experience of her son’s sentence had a major impact on her emotional resilience. Preferring to keep herself to herself, rather than tell other people about her son in prison, Beryl’s mental and physical health had been deeply affected by her son’s imprisonment and the shame she felt. Coping with setbacks and personal challenges had resulted in major difficulties for Beryl to manage in her everyday life. Among cases comprising the strained theme was evidence of multiple adversities, such as instances of stigma and feelings of parental failure. As Beryl’s case describes, factors such as mental health and generally weak ties with family and friends impacted even more heavily on the challenges caregivers faced.

Like Beryl, Asher had managed the consequences of her son’s serious criminality with limited support from others. In Asher’s case, the consequences of her son’s offending had placed enormous strain on her marital relationship. She admitted to having few people to turn to for support, having had limited communication with her family for many years. The circumstances of her son’s offending were a major source of disruption to her life, and Asher had witnessed her quality of life deteriorate over time. In addition, her efforts to seek support from friends around her were limited because of their constant judgement about Asher’s parenting performance. As Asher argued: ‘Sometimes also with friends they can start advising you and sometimes that advice is not helpful. . . “do this”, “do that”, “if it was my son I’d do this”. Asher perceived this interference from friends as striking at the core of her own abilities as a parent, contributing to her isolation and depression:
There are some things you don’t want to tell other people. For me it’s changed me as a person. I was really ‘happy go lucky’. With all the depression you just isolate yourself. You hide from people. (Asher, Mother)

Stigma can be worsened by what appear to be acts of betrayal from close friends and family whose judgements strike at the heart of their identity as a mother. Furthermore, perceiving others as not caring, and moreover castigatory in their responses, can lead to mothers facing even greater difficulties in coping – mental health as one manifestation, alongside acute loneliness. Although the causal direction of these outcomes is difficult to fully establish (whether existing before the stigmatic reactions or following these reactions), it is clear that a clustering of social and psychological adversities renders mothers’ lives even more disrupted.

Discussion

Implied in studies of prison visitation and family contact is the idea that families can pull together, offering valuable resources to support prisoners during and beyond their sentence (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017; Mears et al., 2012). However, potentially limiting this deployment of support are the capacities of mothers to seek support from those close to them, notably wider friends and family who can be potentially important in helping come to terms with a relative’s sentence. To date, research remains limited in understanding the support networks within families, including the extent to which these networks are always available, supportive or indeed helpful for caregivers. In the circumstances of youth offending and incarceration, these situations are complex, at times imposing an accumulation of hardships. Given that incarceration disproportionately affects families already struggling with a range of social disadvantages (Arditti, 2012; Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2008), the role played by support networks in the extent to which mothers are able to cope with these challenges has important policy implications.

For the majority, networks of support were important for dealing with the trauma of the offence and subsequent imprisonment. Reference to families pulling together in the aftermath of the prison sentence is consistent with other studies that demonstrate how broader social adversities can encourage much resilience in families (Saltzman et al., 2013; Walsh, 2006). As Walsh (2006: 58) argues, through ‘normalizing and contextualizing distress, family members can enlarge their perspective to see their reactions and difficulties as understandable in light of their particular situation’. Reflecting on imprisonment therefore served as an important foundation to pull together in light of the support needed to overcome the challenges imposed on both caregivers and the young men in prison. This process of pulling together in families was arguably made easier when the young men’s offending had been relatively recent, and where the offence had been more readily accepted and understood by family members. However, these positive benefits of support were not universal. In the case of mothers citing more restrictive or negative support networks, perhaps unsurprisingly we find evidence of a clustering of other adversities beyond the role of support networks.

Although incarceration has been widely regarded as a key event sparking distinct harms for mothers, we are circumspect in this assessment that incarceration operates
distinctively to inflict unique harms. Although not discounting the emotional weight that, for example, a long prison sentence may inflict on mothers, a history of prior offending also plays a key role in the hardships faced, especially given the effects of youth offending on parenting strain and familial relations (Ambert, 1999; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2011). For primary caregivers, these consequences are likely to be unique compared with other caregiver groups, and mothers the more likely to bear the brunt of these struggles. It is our contention that offending and incarceration, certainly in the case of youth offending, do impose particular consequences for mothers, often in combination with one another.

Since the original theoretical path developed by Goffman’s (1963) work on stigma, research has since moved beyond the description of stigma and its varying components to ask what stigma does to people in terms of emotional and material consequences (for example, Major and O’Brien, 2005). Our insights challenge the notion that stigma, whether in discredited or in discreditable form (Goffman, 1963), is the only aspect that affects how mothers seek support from others. The existence of stigma is not universal in the emotional harms it inflicts on mothers. Our data also demonstrate circumspection in the capacities of mothers to either have the infrastructure of support in the first place, or otherwise fear drawing on these actual or potential resources. We argue that a strong culture of mutual support and reciprocity within family and friendship networks was made difficult owing to either others in these networks experiencing the same struggles and having few outlets to escape the situation, or relations becoming fractured because of the offence or associated adversities, including stigma (Braman, 2004; Desmond, 2012). The very fact that many of the mothers were experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage, in conjunction with a child in prison, plays an additional role in reducing the possible outlets for emotional support.

For those mothers experiencing strained networks, we highlight a number of additional social effects that correspond with these outcomes. As mothers, the connection between damaged reputational status following a child involved in crime was unsurprising given that parenting (and mothering specifically) and stigma are so closely connected in popular cultural assumptions concerning aetiologies of youth crime (Gillies, 2006). However, our assessments of stigma also extended beyond these markers of motherhood and identity. Consistent with other research, we identify a close connection between stigma, social isolation and impaired caregiver well-being (Ambert, 1999; Arditti, 2003; Braman, 2004). In cases where stigma was directly referred to, these effects were bound up with other factors, such as loneliness and mental health struggles. Stigma-related avoidance behaviour has been found in samples of people suffering from mental illness (for example, Abiri et al., 2016; Corrigan et al., 2010). This avoidance behaviour may also be attributable to outcomes such as low self-esteem and self-efficacy, which may compound abilities to open up, or otherwise to exhibit circumspection in confiding in others (Corrigan et al., 2010). In the case of loneliness, a combination of existing fragile or few ties with family and friends can compound these experiences, meaning that mothers perceive having few people to turn to (or actively avoid contact in some cases) – made even more challenging by the damage to their social status as a parent of a child involved in delinquency. Avoidance-related behaviour has similarly been found among parents of children with conditions
such as autism or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, reflecting potential fears about further discrediting responses from others (Gray, 2002; Koro-Ljungberg and Bussing, 2009). Scholars should thus proceed to move beyond descriptions of stigma to instead interrogate how stigma may mix with other aspects of identity, trauma and social inequality, thus producing particular life outcomes.

**Limitations and future research directions**

This article draws from 37 interviews with mothers of young men in prison. Larger samples that which also capture different time points, as well as assessing how networks of support may change, would be welcome additions to the developing body of research on prisoners’ families. Studies that adopt longitudinal measures to assess change in support networks once a family member enters prison are important as a means of assessing the factors influencing family disclosure practices and willingness to seek emotional support. Social network data collected during different stages of the prison sentence to examine how family networks change would also help assess the quality and extent of caregivers’ support networks. We also recognise that our sample focused on the offences committed by young men, and not women – the latter a group where serious crime may elicit even more draconian public condemnation and thus strain on mothers to disclose and seek support. Finally, our sample is derived from caregivers visiting the young men in prison, thereby creating an obvious selection effect. Although conflict and adversity in both caregiver and prisoner lives were not uncommon in our visiting sample, we might expect a greater level of complexity to be found among non-visiting family members – a perspective that future studies should seek to address (for example, Pleggenkuhle et al., 2018).

**Implications**

Our findings have implications for family support service provision. We are aware of some good local-based charities and voluntary and faith-based services, but no statutory provision for supporting prisoners’ families exists in England and Wales. Mothers’ low take-up of formal support informs us that they felt little need for support in some cases, while being both unaware and reluctant to speak to others following the imprisonment of the young men. That the mothers were accessing the prison visiting centres, but not public services outside the prison, informs us that more work is needed to build trust and face-to-face support with families in situ of the prison. Those mothers with already strong and stable relations with friends and family are precisely those who gain most through support, and arguably who would have already gained benefits courtesy of having stronger networks to draw from in the first place. For those mothers with either small networks or weak relations within these networks, further interventions are needed. We identify that it is those families who are already vulnerable and without others to turn to for support who are in most need of accessing such services.

In the context of emerging policy questions about the role of families in supporting serving and released prisoners, recognition of how families themselves may cope with these situations is key to addressing the material and emotional capacity of families to
offer sufficient resources. One implication of this article is that the prison service should be attentive to the reality that families can experience a multitude of hardships in addition to a family member’s offending and incarceration. Furthermore, the pattern of more visits equalling a lower recidivism risk is beginning to be critically assessed (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017; Cochran et al., 2018), and no doubt the hardships faced by families may place restrictions on the deployment of support to prisoners. It is thus crucial that the endeavour of addressing caregiver experiences also be critically understood in terms of the capacities to support relatives during and after release from prison.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the reviewers for their helpful comments on improving the paper.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Grant number: ESRC, ES/L010240/1.

ORCID iD

Daniel McCarthy https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3680-4652

Notes

1. One case was removed owing to multiple missing variables (n = 215).
2. For this variable, we compare using the larger sample (n = 214), including one case missing (n = 213).

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