

# A catalogue of losses:

## Implications for the care and reintegration of young men in custody

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### Introduction

**Although loss and grief are universal human experiences, vulnerable young people, such as those involved in offending or those who have been in care, are more likely to have experienced higher rates of loss than the general population, and to have suffered especially traumatic losses. This paper summarises the research literature in relation to loss among vulnerable young people in prison and draws on the narratives of 23 young men in a Young Offenders Institution about their experiences. Loss was identified as a significant theme across these narratives. Applying the learning gained from these stories to the literature, the paper organises these losses into an overarching typology, incorporating: loss of future (due to lost opportunities or the barriers posed by criminal convictions); loss of relationships (including the pain caused by separation); loss of status (in particular the loss of power and agency that can arise from the need to assimilate in to prison culture) and loss of stability (often due to a disrupted and troubled childhood). Classifying losses in this way is useful as it can provide practitioners with a framework to ensure that loss is considered, along with other psychosocial factors, as an issue that can affect how young people cope with incarceration. Through identifying and understanding loss it will be possible to enhance the care provided to young people in prison and to better support their**

**transition back into the community, as without this depth of understanding young people will not have their needs fully met.**

### Loss in young people

In its simplest sense, loss has been defined as 'the affectual state that an individual experiences when something significant is withdrawn' and grief as 'the process through which one passes in order to deal with loss'.<sup>1</sup> While the concept of loss is frequently applied to bereaved individuals, John Bowlby, in his work on attachment and separation, acknowledged that the majority of losses in society do not arise as a result of death.<sup>2</sup> Certainly loss in young people can take many forms and be triggered by many circumstances, including: divorce;<sup>3</sup> separation through migration;<sup>4</sup> death of a pet; moving house or school;<sup>5</sup> parental imprisonment;<sup>6</sup> being taken in to care;<sup>7</sup> separation that might not necessarily be 'physical', such as that caused by parental addiction, mental ill-health,<sup>8</sup> disability or serious illness,<sup>9</sup> as well as bereavement.

Loss through bereavement is, by virtue of its permanence, the ultimate loss and the range of painful emotions experienced following the death of a loved one is well documented.<sup>10</sup> However, while death is final, it is a universal experience and is therefore acknowledged in all cultures and frequently accompanied by rituals and social support for the bereaved to help them in their time of grief.<sup>11</sup> While studies do show that bereaved young people feel that their bereavement marks them out as 'different' from

1. Courtney, A. (2000). Loss and grief in adoption: the impact of contact. *Adoption & Fostering*, 24(2), 33-44: p.33.
2. Bowlby, J. (1980) *Attachment and Loss (Vol. III): Loss, Sadness and Depression*. London: Hogarth Press.
3. Mooney, A., Oliver, C. and Smith, M. (2009). *Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-Being*. London: University of London.
4. Suárez-Orozco, C., Todorova, I.L.G. and Louie, J. (2002). Making up for lost time: The experience of separation and reunification among immigrant families. *Family Process*, 41(4), 625-643.
5. Graham, A. (2012). Life is like the seasons. *Childhood Education*, 80(6), 317-321.
6. Bockneck, E.L., Sanderson, J. and Britner, P.A. (2009). Ambiguous loss and posttraumatic stress in school-age children of prisoners. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 18, 323-333.
7. Brodzinsky, D. (2009) *The experience of sibling loss in the adjustment of foster and adopted children*. In Silverstein, D.N. and Livingston Smith, S. (Eds.) *Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care*, 43-56, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers.
8. Darbyshire, P., Oster, C. and Carrig, H. (2001). The experience of pervasive loss; children and young people living in a family where parental gambling is a problem. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 17(1), 23-45.
9. Graham, 2012.
10. Worden, J.W. (1996). *Children and Grief*. New York: Guilford Press.
11. Viboch, M. (2005). *Childhood loss and behavioural problems: loosening the links*. New York: Vera Institute.

their peers,<sup>12</sup> this universality can also mean that bereavements are less stigmatising than other losses such as parental imprisonment.<sup>13</sup>

For example, divorce, another common but not universal experience, has often been likened to bereavement as both can be experienced as traumatic and often result in the process of mourning.<sup>14</sup> However, it is also reported that children in families affected by divorce experience poorer outcomes than those whose families have been disrupted through bereavement.<sup>3</sup> Graham<sup>5</sup> suggests that as the loss is not irreversible the grieving process can be obstructed, for example by fantasies of reunion as well as conflicts of loyalty between the separating parents. The effects of parental imprisonment are similar to the death of a parent, and it is clear that temporary separation can be as equally traumatic as a permanent loss, especially when the loss is characterised by uncertainty and misinformation.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, loss through being taken into care can be confusing when the duration of, or reasons for, the separation from family are unknown, and may be complicated by conflicting emotions about the loss if the family relationship had been ambivalent or even abusive.<sup>15</sup> These factors have led Courtney<sup>16</sup> to conclude that the task of adjusting to adoption can be more challenging than that of adjusting to bereavement. For young people with numerous placement moves these losses are multiplied and are endured repeatedly and indefinitely.<sup>17</sup>

In developing the concept of 'ambiguous loss', Boss<sup>18</sup> acknowledges that it is precisely these

uncertainties that can complicate the response to loss, as without knowing if the loss is permanent or temporary it can be difficult to resolve and move on. Ambiguity disrupts effective coping strategies.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, losses that are less well recognised may not result in the same levels of understanding or support from society as a bereavement<sup>18,11</sup>. Ambiguous losses are therefore rarely '...openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported' and can result in what has been termed *disenfranchised grief*.<sup>19</sup> The

very nature of disenfranchised grief means that young people often have to face their losses alone, a concern when even ostensibly small losses can be experienced as traumatic and can have an accumulative effect on young people, but may be missed or underestimated by the adults around them.<sup>20</sup>

### The complexity of loss in prison

Typical responses to loss and trauma include *physical* symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, palpitations, loss of appetite or sleep problems, and emotional reactions such as anxiety, grief, self-blame, anger, rumination or numbness. In a non-problematic scenario, where young people are supported through their losses and have

sufficient resilience, these symptoms are short-term and tend to subside over a few months.<sup>21</sup> However, when ambiguous losses and disenfranchised grief mean that young people do not receive the intervention they need, these emotions and stress responses can manifest as challenging behaviours. Loss and trauma in childhood can therefore be linked to a range of risk-taking behaviours in adolescence and adulthood, with

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12. Schultz, L. E. (2006). The influence of maternal loss on young women's experience of identity development in emerging adulthood. *Death Studies*, 31(1), 17-43.
13. Loureiro, T. (2010). *Perspectives of children and young people with a parent in prison*. Edinburgh: Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People.
14. Bagnoli, A. (2003). Imagining the lost other: The experience of loss and the process of identity construction in young people. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 6(2), 203-217.
15. NACAC. (2009). *Ambiguous loss haunts foster and adopted children*. <http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/ambigloss.html>
16. Courtney, 2000.
17. Samuels, G.M. (2009). Ambiguous loss of home: The experience of familial (im)permanence among young adults with foster care backgrounds. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31, 1229-1239.
18. Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, trauma and resilience: therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc.
19. Doka, K.J. (2009). Disenfranchised grief. *Bereavement Care*, 18(3), 37-39, p37.
20. Dutton, P. (2007). *Trauma in children and young people*. Counselling Children and Young People. [http://www.cyp.co.uk/journal\\_pdf/ccyp\\_autumn07a.pdf](http://www.cyp.co.uk/journal_pdf/ccyp_autumn07a.pdf)
21. Bonnano, G.A. (2004). Loss, trauma and human resilience. *American Psychologist*, 59(1), 20-28.

the risks increasing with greater exposure to adverse life events.<sup>22</sup> Behavioural responses to loss and trauma such as substance misuse,<sup>23</sup> risky sexual-behaviour, suicide<sup>22</sup> and reduced awareness of danger are common.<sup>24</sup>

Given this association between loss, trauma and behaviour it is therefore unsurprising that it has been observed that around 90 per cent of young people resident in a YOI (aged 16-20) had experienced at least one bereavement.<sup>23</sup> They are also more likely to have suffered traumatic and multiple bereavements than the general population,<sup>25,23</sup> and have often grown up in chaotic, transitory and difficult circumstances, situations that are likely to lead to an environment ripe for loss. Family breakdown, abuse and neglect, and periods in placements away from home are more common among young people involved in offending,<sup>26</sup> and each of these can be experienced as a devastating loss. Furthermore, reception in to prison itself can be seen as triggering a process that results in loss,<sup>27</sup> severing existing ties and social supports. Many young people in prison therefore carry with them the burden of multiple losses throughout their journey to prison and experience these even more acutely whilst inside prison.

Traumatic and multiple losses, particularly those with an element of ambiguity can complicate the grieving process,<sup>28</sup> increase the likelihood of unresolved grief<sup>29</sup> and result in poorer emotional and mental health outcomes.<sup>30</sup> The high rate of these types of losses in the YOI population has important implications for behaviour management in the prison, and for successful reintegration back into the community. Understanding the losses that accompany and shape these young men is therefore crucial for rehabilitation, yet most studies of loss tend to focus predominantly on loss through death<sup>31</sup> rather than these more ambiguous losses. Moreover, males are less likely to seek help for issues that cause them distress<sup>32</sup> and therefore not only

leave themselves open to prolonged suffering, but as a result also tend to be underrepresented in the research literature that does exist.<sup>33</sup> This paper will begin to contribute to our understanding of this issue among males by documenting the range and nature of losses that young men in custody have experienced and to provide a foundation from which practice and interventions can develop.

## Method

### **Ethical Considerations**

This paper stems from a wider study exploring the pathways of young men both in and out of a young offenders institution.<sup>34,35</sup> The research was given approval by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee which endeavours to protect the integrity, security and well-being of participants and researchers in sensitive research settings such as prisons.

### **Participants**

Participants were 23 young men in a YOI, aged between 16 and 20, who typically were serving a short sentence (on average less than two years).

### **Procedure**

Interviews were conducted by the research team within the YOI with young men who had consented to be involved in the research. Each participant was interviewed using a topic guide designed to help each young man provide a narrative about their journey to prison; their experience in the YOI and their plans for reintegration back in to the community. Specific prompts relating to the original study questions were used to elicit further information about supports received; educational experiences; and understanding of the justice process.

It is useful to state at this point that bereavement, loss and grief were not directly addressed in the

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22. Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., Koss, M.P. and Marks, J.H. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.
  23. Vaswani, N. (2014). The ripples of death: exploring the bereavement experiences and mental health of young men in custody. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 53(4), 341-359.
  24. Wright, S. and Liddle, M. (2014). *Young offenders and trauma: experience and impact*. www.beyondyouthcustody.net
  25. Finlay, I.G. and Jones, N.K. Unresolved grief in young offenders in prison. *British Journal of General Practice*, 50(456), 569-570.
  26. NACRO. (2002). *Persistent young offenders. Research on individual backgrounds and life experiences*. Research Briefing 1. www.nacro.org.uk/data/files/nacro-2004120103-409.pdf
  27. Jewkes, Y. (2005). *Loss, liminality and the life sentence: managing identity through a disrupted lifecourse*. In (Eds.) A. Liebling and S. Maruna. The effects of imprisonment. Devon: Willan Publishing.
  28. Dowdney, L. (2000) Annotation: Childhood bereavement following parental death. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 41, 819-830.
  29. Shear, K. and Shair, H. (2005). Attachment, loss and complicated grief. *Developmental Psychobiology*, 47, 253-267.
  30. Harrison, L. and Harrington, R. (2001). Adolescents' bereavement experiences. Prevalence, association with depressive symptoms, and use of services. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24, 159-169.
  31. Ribbens McCarthy, J. (2006). *Young people's experiences of loss and bereavement*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
  32. Möller-Leimkühler, A.M. (2002). Barriers to help-seeking by men: A review of sociocultural and clinical literature with particular reference to depression. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 71, 1-9.
  33. Mitchell, A.M., Kim, Y., Prigerson, H.G. and Mortimer-Stephens, M. (2004). Complicated grief in survivors of suicide. *Crisis*, 25, 12-18.
  34. Smith, S., Dyer, F. and Connelly, G. (2014a). *Supporting Fife and Forth Valley: A report on the pathways into prison and the supports available to young people from Fife and Forth Valley*. Glasgow: Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice
  35. Smith, S., Connelly, G. and Dyer, F. (2014b). *Young men in custody*. Glasgow: Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice.

interview topic guide, which presents both benefits and limitations to this paper. Firstly, research that explores bereavement and loss as part of a general study is often undertaken outside of any preconceived theoretical framework.<sup>31</sup> Certainly the expressions of loss by these young men were spontaneous and not sought or directed in any way. In addition, qualitative research about loss and bereavement with young people is often reliant on a self-selecting sample who are willing and able to talk about their thoughts and experiences with a relatively unknown researcher. When the subject is as challenging and potentially as distressing as loss and grief it can be assumed that many young people, especially males, choose not to participate. Instead, viewing the young people's stories through the lens of loss, and drawing learning from more general discussions is a more inclusive approach that allows the young person some control about the nature and extent of their losses they choose to share. However, taking such an approach has obvious limitations, not least that the true scale and nature of losses may be underestimated. Furthermore, without the opportunity to reflect and elaborate on their losses young people were not able to tell their whole story, and a level of richness and detail about their losses is clearly lacking.

**Analysis**

With the consent of participants, each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVivo Version 10. Each individual interview underwent two cycles of coding to first identify expressions of loss, and then a cross-case analysis was undertaken to identify and categorise shared themes throughout the sample. Themes were then reviewed and refined into four overarching classifications: loss of future and opportunities; loss of relationships and

connections; loss of status and power; and loss of stability and security.

**Findings**

Across all 23 young men, a total of eight different losses were identified in the sample. Through the analysis these were organised into an overarching typology comprised of four broad classifications, as outlined in **Table 1** below.

*Loss of future*

All of the young men, in one way or another, spoke of the loss of their future opportunities and prospects, either directly or indirectly as a result of their behaviour or their imprisonment. The pervasiveness of this loss throughout every story poses both practical and perceptual obstacles to successful reintegration and the attainment of positive outcomes later in life. The initial catalyst for this loss was a disrupted education, often commencing during the primary school years due to transitory families, behavioural problems and exclusions.

*Well from a young age I wasn't really in school, I used to get kicked out a lot, I used to cause trouble for the teachers and stuff like that. The only place I've really done is nursery. (YP15)*

*I said to them I was sorry, it was a moment of madness, I want to come back and they said 'no' and I got kicked out. (YP21)*

Importantly, the young men in this study entered custody during late adolescence (between the ages of 16 and 20), a crucial time when all young people are

**Table 1: Classification of losses (n=23)**

Loss Classification	No. in sample reporting loss	% of sample reporting loss
<b>1. Loss of future</b> a. Loss of prospects b. Loss of education	23 23 15	100%
<b>2. Loss of relationships</b> a. Loss of relationships (as a result of prison) b. Loss of relationships (prior to prison)	18 14 12	78%
<b>3. Loss of status</b> a. Loss of freedom b. Loss of power	16 15 6	70%
<b>4. Loss of stability</b> a. Loss of stability b. Loss of childhood	12 12 3	52%

undertaking the key developmental task of cultivating and understanding their own identity and self-concept.<sup>14,12</sup> Self-concept is significantly influenced by the family environment<sup>36</sup> and many of the participants spoke of parents, siblings, cousins, friends who were in prison and alluded to communities where experiences of crime and custody were commonplace. It was clear that, for some of the young men, their experiences meant that a sense of being predestined for prison was embedded in their self-concept from a young age, signalling a chronic loss of hope and ambition for the future.

*[From] 14 or 15 I thought that [I would be in prison] because my two brothers were already in. (YP2)*

*I knew I would end up back in here...I've always thought that since I was a wee guy because of my family background and stuff. (YP19)*

In addition, for other young men, the very nature of imprisonment had a direct and catastrophic impact on the plans that they had held for the future.

*I'm hoping but the only thing is my criminal record getting in the way. (YP7)*

*I've not got a plan in my head because I know what I wanted to be, I wanted to be a mechanic, but sometimes it works out different. (YP3)*

Furthermore, the demands of remaining on the straight and narrow despite returning to the same difficult family and community environments, often while needing to remain compliant with strict licence conditions, meant that the young men were fearful that any opportunities that still remained would be soon be withdrawn from them.

*The only thing is if I breach that licence because I know for a fact I'll breach it within the first week of being out. (YP14)*

*My only worry is that if I go back to stay with my Mum, my friends could be trouble and that, and I get back in with that. (YP4)*

The concept of 'possible selves' as '...the ideal selves that we would very much like to become'<sup>37</sup> has a resonance here. The very real loss of opportunities created

by a prison sentence can result in the loss of a future 'possible self' and, in studies of adult males serving lengthy or life sentences, this can be '...experienced as a kind of bereavement for oneself; the loss involving lost worlds, lost futures and lost identities'.<sup>38</sup> While the majority of young men in this study were serving short sentences (less than two years), the revolving door of prison means that for many of these young men a substantial proportion of their young lives has been spent in prison or other institutions. Furthermore, the young age of these participants means that they have had little chance to learn a trade, gain skills or to develop a work identity. Gaining employment upon release is a key factor in successful reintegration,<sup>39</sup> and considering that what Žukov et al.<sup>40</sup> term 'prisonisation' can

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cause a loss of knowledge, skills and habits that have already been firmly established in adult prisoners, it is clear that this loss of a possible self has very real implications among young people who have not yet had the chance to develop a positive work identity and have lost hope for their future.

#### *Loss of relationships*

The most obvious loss, that of loss through bereavement, was rarely mentioned, with only one young man mentioning this type of loss. However, our understanding of this population suggests that an absence of bereavement in their stories may not necessarily indicate an absence of bereavement in these

36. Henderson, C.E., Dakof, G.A., Schwartz, S.J., & Liddle, H.A. (2006). Family functioning, self-concept, and severity of adolescent externalizing problems. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 15(6), 719-729.

37. Markus, H. and Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41(9), 954-969: p.954.

38. Jewkes, 2005: p.370.

39. Ministry of Justice. (2013). *Analysis of the impact of employment on re-offending following release from custody, using Propensity Score Matching*. London: Ministry of Justice.

40. Žukov, I., Fischer, S., Ptáček, R., Raboch, J. (2009). Imprisonment and its influence on psychobiological needs. *Prague Medical Report*, 110(3), 201-213.

young men's lives. As outlined earlier this may simply be an artefact of the methodology, in that the young men were not asked specifically about the losses that they had experienced, and may also reflect a personal or cultural reluctance to discuss potentially sensitive and taboo subjects, especially without explicit 'permission' to do so.

Despite this, the stories that the young men shared portrayed a past characterised by disrupted relationships and broken bonds, a pattern that commenced in childhood, but continued apace following entry in to custody, often as a result of their incarceration. Losses prior to custody included dysfunctional and disrupted families, and frequently the system's response to these issues (such as taking the young person into care). Even when the parent is *physically* present, studies of young people in foster care have indicated that factors such as substance misuse or emotional unavailability can mean that this distance is experienced as a loss<sup>41</sup> and this was also reflected in these young men's experiences.

*Obviously my father's been in prison for nearly five years and I've got nobody to follow by, no role model so I had nobody...I've got a Mum but I don't class her as a mum because I don't feel like I've had a mum. (YP4)*

*The first four or five months [in residential school] were difficult, I was only young, 11, 12 and I was away from my family, 100-odd miles. (YP21)*

The breakup of families through fostering, adoption and residential care extends much more widely than the loss of the immediate caregivers,<sup>7,17</sup> and some of the young men reported broken relationships with siblings as well as extended family as a result of their placements. These types of losses can be more difficult to resolve because of their ambiguity, with unanswered questions about the length of separation or the nature of the loss complicating the grieving process<sup>6,7</sup>. Furthermore, multiple moves, and separation that is interpreted as voluntary abandonment, are often especially traumatic,<sup>14,11</sup> and these were key features of the young men's lives.

*I know my family...it's like all they've done is give birth to me then forgot about me, that's all they've done. (YP15)*

These losses were exacerbated in prison, as the loss of outside relationships has been suggested to be one of the most painful aspects of incarceration.<sup>42</sup>

*When you're locked up at night you actually realise 'I miss my family, that's where I want to be'. That's where it just hits you. (YP16)*

The sense of loss and hopelessness experienced by the families of those in prison<sup>42</sup> was also acknowledged by the young men, and they expressed concern that the loss they felt was no easier for those that they had left

on the outside. In addition to the pain caused by the physical distance of their imprisonment, the barriers of shame and stigma on both sides of the relationship also proved challenging, and could disrupt even previously solid relationships, let alone already fragile ones. Some young men did not want their families to see them in prison, others were rejected by their families because of their behaviour.

*I did have a girlfriend but I think she was just finding it too hard me being in here. (YP15)*

*My Mum doesn't talk to me. My Dad talks to me but my Mum, Gran and sister don't talk to me. (YP23)*

The young men's stories hint at the anger and frustration they felt at the failure of their caregivers to provide the love and support that they needed. As a result, these young men clearly had complicated attachments and difficult family relationships, yet these were the very relationships that were so often expected to facilitate their transition to the community. This loss of a support network, that many other young people their own age can rely on, often made the young men anxious about their future, especially when accompanied by simultaneous transitions in their professional support networks.

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41. Samuels, G.M. and Pryce, J.M. (2008). 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger': Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 1198-1210.

42. Murray, J. (2005). *The effects of imprisonment on families and children of prisoners*. In (Eds.) A. Liebling and S. Maruna. The effects of imprisonment. Devon: Willan Publishing: 442-473.

*I can't stay with my mum or anything... There's nowhere else really to go. I don't talk to my other family. (YP19)*

*I've had the same social worker for three years now, but he finishes working with me when I'm 18 I think. He's been the only person that I can actually speak to and actually understands me. (YP15)*

These disruptions and disconnections in their relationships, support networks and emotional investments have clear implications for the transition to adulthood<sup>41</sup> and for successful reintegration back in to the community, as positive social ties are associated with reduced offending and engagement with employment upon release.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Loss of status*

Another common loss was that of loss of status, which occurs when an individual loses position or power in society, such as through the stigma of being in care,<sup>7</sup> or unemployment.<sup>44</sup> Imprisonment most clearly results in a loss of freedom, which was experienced with difficulty by many of the young men. This loss of freedom also results in a loss of agency to exert power and control over one's own destiny, with this lack of capacity becoming more entrenched the longer that is spent in prison,<sup>45</sup> even among adults whose status in society is more firmly established.<sup>27</sup> For young people who are already disempowered and afforded lower status in society due to their age, it becomes difficult to see how the decision-making and problem-solving skills required for successful transition to the community will be easily mastered.

*I've been locked up for most of my life so I'm used to being locked up. Jail doesn't bother me, I'm in that routine now... (YP14)*

*It's going to feel weird when I get out because I'll have been in for maybe two-and-a-bit to three years... To be able to go places myself at any time I want. It'll be weird because I'm used to working with their times, not my times. (YP1)*

Loss of autonomy is identified by Sykes<sup>46</sup> as one of the key pains of imprisonment, and this was reflected in this study as the concept of personal agency was seen as an important human right and one that young people felt frustrated about having to give up. The young men felt that the loss of freedom should be sufficient, and that the loss of other rights was unnecessary and unfair.

Another common loss was that of loss of status, which occurs when an individual loses position or power in society, such as through the stigma of being in care, or unemployment.

*We're in here to do our time, we're in here to get punished by taking away our freedom, and we're not in here to get punished by the staff members. (YP1)*

Furthermore, the power imbalance between the young men and some of their peers or YOI staff, as well as the stigma or community consequences caused by their offences caused the young men to feel that they had lost 'respect' in society.

*They've got the upper hand. They think because they've got more power over us they're better... (YP3)*

*I don't even want to put my face into the community, I was ashamed of myself. I still am to this day. (YP16)*

This loss of power and agency is not only deskilling, but can affect the development or utilisation of effective coping strategies for dealing with loss and grief, such as going for a walk or listening to music.<sup>23</sup> Even maladaptive strategies such as self-medication provide relief, at least in the short-term, but are not accessible to young men in prison. Furthermore, the

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43. Berg, M.T. and Huebner, B.M. (2010). Reentry and the ties that bind: An examination of social ties, employment and recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, 28(2), 382-410.
44. Atkinson, T., Liem, R., and Liem, J.H. (1986). The social costs of unemployment: Implications for social support. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 27(4), 317-331.
45. Irwin, J. and Owen, B. (2005). *Harm and the contemporary prison*. In (Eds.) A. Liebling and S. Maruna. The effects of imprisonment. Devon: Willan Publishing.
46. Sykes, G.M. (2007). *The society of captives*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Princeton University Press.

reality of prison routines means that there is either a lack of space for privacy and reflection,<sup>45</sup> or alternatively that there is *too much* space for unstructured reflection, and not enough freedom to employ distraction techniques.<sup>23</sup> Of relevance is Stroebe and Schut's Dual Process Model of bereavement,<sup>47</sup> which depicts the process of coping with loss and grief as an oscillation between loss-oriented activities (akin to the more traditional 'grief work' tasks of earlier bereavement theories) and restoration-oriented activities such as distracting oneself from grieving (engrossing oneself in a movie, for example). Stroebe and Schut<sup>48</sup> assert that '...oscillation is necessary for optimal adjustment over time' with the individual choosing to take time out from grief or to actively focus on processing aspects of the loss. Spending too much time in one activity or the other is viewed as detrimental to both mental and physical well-being.<sup>47</sup> This is clearly problematic for young men coping with loss and grief in prison as, due to the restrictions, monotony and power imbalances inherent in the prison regime, they have little opportunity to take control of their grief.

#### *Loss of stability*

The final classification of loss relates to what has been termed here the 'loss of stability'. Young men described disruptions and loss of stability in their backgrounds, often resulting from their disconnected relationships or inconsistent school histories. This is a key characteristic of disadvantaged young people, especially those with long care histories<sup>7</sup>, and can leave young people to suffer from enduring insecurities that make the transition to adulthood more difficult.<sup>41</sup> In addition, a lack of a stable base, such as family and home instability, has been associated with an increase in problematic behaviours and poorer academic outcomes.<sup>49</sup> Of concern is that if this instability remains a feature of the young person's life upon release from custody then the likelihood of successful reintegration is reduced, as a stable accommodation base is linked to more positive outcomes such as training or employment.<sup>50</sup>

## Young men described disruptions and loss of stability in their backgrounds, often resulting from their disconnected relationships or inconsistent school histories.

*So I got kicked out and ended up sofa surfing and just robbed all sorts of stuff. I've never had the chance to have a stable place to stay, get the tag and show them that I can work.*  
(YP21)

Another emerging loss in this classification could be best described as 'loss of childhood'. Of course, the transition through adolescence to adulthood can be viewed as a universal process of leaving the innocence of childhood behind.<sup>31</sup> However, the additional challenges or sheer trauma that these young men have had to face makes this loss of childhood, frequently at a very young age, quite often a defining moment for them. Young people experiencing bereavements and

loss of relationships often have to take on new roles and responsibilities<sup>14</sup> and this was also true of the more ambiguous losses among the young men in this study. As a result, family roles and relationships were often reversed, confused or inappropriate and young people frequently described having nowhere to turn.

*My Dad's outside but he's got back into drugs and that. He doesn't support me at all...I phone him and talk to him but he treats me like a pal.* (YP12)

*I've had a really bad upbringing, I've not had the support that normal children should have from the minute they're born to the minute they leave the house.* (YP15)

#### *Discussion and Implications*

It is clear that young men in custody have experienced a catalogue of losses since childhood, and that these losses are compounded by entry to prison, including disruption to relationships and social support networks. In addition, there are unique aspects of loss associated with incarceration, such as loss of status and agency. Sykes,<sup>46</sup> in his classic 1958 text, *The Society of Captives*, outlined five key pains of imprisonment including deprivation of relationships, deprivation of

47. Stroebe, M. and Schut, H. (1999). The Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement: Rationale and description. *Death Studies*, 23(3), 197-224.

48. Stroebe and Schut, 1999:p.216.

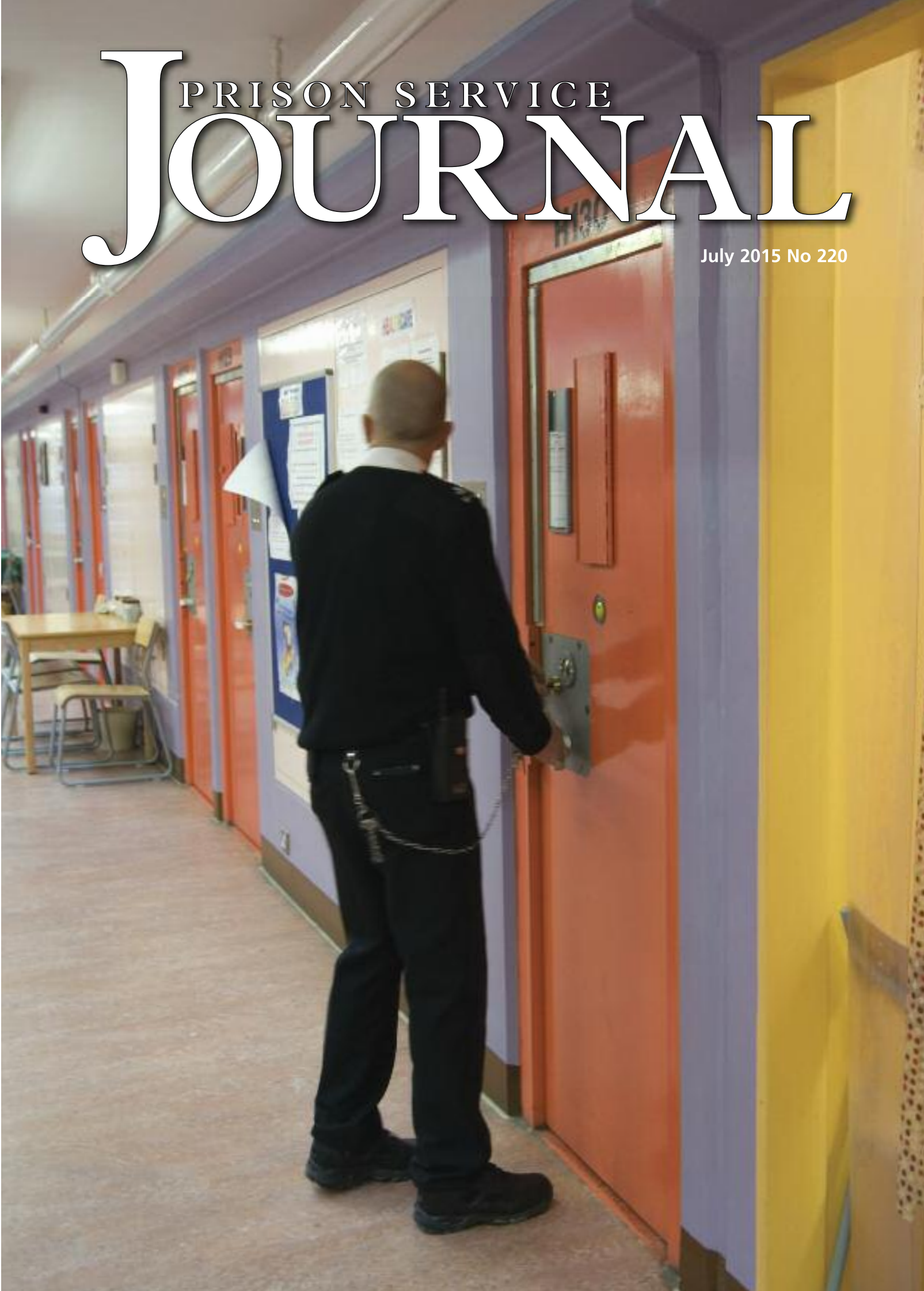
49. Sandstrom, H. and Huerta, S. (2013). *The negative effects of instability on child development: A research synthesis*. Washington: Urban Institute.

50. Batemen, T., Hazel, N. and Wright, S. (2013). *Resettlement of young people leaving custody*. London: Beyond Youth Custody.



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# A catalogue of losses:

## Implications for the care and reintegration of young men in custody

*Nina Vaswani is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, University of Strathclyde.*

### Introduction

**Although loss and grief are universal human experiences, vulnerable young people, such as those involved in offending or those who have been in care, are more likely to have experienced higher rates of loss than the general population, and to have suffered especially traumatic losses. This paper summarises the research literature in relation to loss among vulnerable young people in prison and draws on the narratives of 23 young men in a Young Offenders Institution about their experiences. Loss was identified as a significant theme across these narratives. Applying the learning gained from these stories to the literature, the paper organises these losses into an overarching typology, incorporating: loss of future (due to lost opportunities or the barriers posed by criminal convictions); loss of relationships (including the pain caused by separation); loss of status (in particular the loss of power and agency that can arise from the need to assimilate in to prison culture) and loss of stability (often due to a disrupted and troubled childhood). Classifying losses in this way is useful as it can provide practitioners with a framework to ensure that loss is considered, along with other psychosocial factors, as an issue that can affect how young people cope with incarceration. Through identifying and understanding loss it will be possible to enhance the care provided to young people in prison and to better support their**

**transition back into the community, as without this depth of understanding young people will not have their needs fully met.**

### Loss in young people

In its simplest sense, loss has been defined as 'the affectual state that an individual experiences when something significant is withdrawn' and grief as 'the process through which one passes in order to deal with loss'.<sup>1</sup> While the concept of loss is frequently applied to bereaved individuals, John Bowlby, in his work on attachment and separation, acknowledged that the majority of losses in society do not arise as a result of death.<sup>2</sup> Certainly loss in young people can take many forms and be triggered by many circumstances, including: divorce;<sup>3</sup> separation through migration;<sup>4</sup> death of a pet; moving house or school;<sup>5</sup> parental imprisonment;<sup>6</sup> being taken in to care;<sup>7</sup> separation that might not necessarily be 'physical', such as that caused by parental addiction, mental ill-health,<sup>8</sup> disability or serious illness,<sup>9</sup> as well as bereavement.

Loss through bereavement is, by virtue of its permanence, the ultimate loss and the range of painful emotions experienced following the death of a loved one is well documented.<sup>10</sup> However, while death is final, it is a universal experience and is therefore acknowledged in all cultures and frequently accompanied by rituals and social support for the bereaved to help them in their time of grief.<sup>11</sup> While studies do show that bereaved young people feel that their bereavement marks them out as 'different' from

1. Courtney, A. (2000). Loss and grief in adoption: the impact of contact. *Adoption & Fostering*, 24(2), 33-44: p.33.
2. Bowlby, J. (1980) *Attachment and Loss (Vol. III): Loss, Sadness and Depression*. London: Hogarth Press.
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10. Worden, J.W. (1996). *Children and Grief*. New York: Guilford Press.
11. Viboch, M. (2005). *Childhood loss and behavioural problems: loosening the links*. New York: Vera Institute.

their peers,<sup>12</sup> this universality can also mean that bereavements are less stigmatising than other losses such as parental imprisonment.<sup>13</sup>

For example, divorce, another common but not universal experience, has often been likened to bereavement as both can be experienced as traumatic and often result in the process of mourning.<sup>14</sup> However, it is also reported that children in families affected by divorce experience poorer outcomes than those whose families have been disrupted through bereavement.<sup>3</sup> Graham<sup>5</sup> suggests that as the loss is not irreversible the grieving process can be obstructed, for example by fantasies of reunion as well as conflicts of loyalty between the separating parents. The effects of parental imprisonment are similar to the death of a parent, and it is clear that temporary separation can be as equally traumatic as a permanent loss, especially when the loss is characterised by uncertainty and misinformation.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, loss through being taken into care can be confusing when the duration of, or reasons for, the separation from family are unknown, and may be complicated by conflicting emotions about the loss if the family relationship had been ambivalent or even abusive.<sup>15</sup> These factors have led Courtney<sup>16</sup> to conclude that the task of adjusting to adoption can be more challenging than that of adjusting to bereavement. For young people with numerous placement moves these losses are multiplied and are endured repeatedly and indefinitely.<sup>17</sup>

In developing the concept of 'ambiguous loss', Boss<sup>18</sup> acknowledges that it is precisely these

uncertainties that can complicate the response to loss, as without knowing if the loss is permanent or temporary it can be difficult to resolve and move on. Ambiguity disrupts effective coping strategies.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, losses that are less well recognised may not result in the same levels of understanding or support from society as a bereavement<sup>18,11</sup>. Ambiguous losses are therefore rarely '...openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported' and can result in what has been termed *disenfranchised grief*.<sup>19</sup> The

very nature of disenfranchised grief means that young people often have to face their losses alone, a concern when even ostensibly small losses can be experienced as traumatic and can have an accumulative effect on young people, but may be missed or underestimated by the adults around them.<sup>20</sup>

### The complexity of loss in prison

Typical responses to loss and trauma include *physical* symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, palpitations, loss of appetite or sleep problems, and emotional reactions such as anxiety, grief, self-blame, anger, rumination or numbness. In a non-problematic scenario, where young people are supported through their losses and have

sufficient resilience, these symptoms are short-term and tend to subside over a few months.<sup>21</sup> However, when ambiguous losses and disenfranchised grief mean that young people do not receive the intervention they need, these emotions and stress responses can manifest as challenging behaviours. Loss and trauma in childhood can therefore be linked to a range of risk-taking behaviours in adolescence and adulthood, with

Typical responses to loss and trauma include *physical* symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, palpitations, loss of appetite or sleep problems, and emotional reactions such as anxiety, grief, self-blame, anger, rumination or numbness.

12. Schultz, L. E. (2006). The influence of maternal loss on young women's experience of identity development in emerging adulthood. *Death Studies*, 31(1), 17-43.
13. Loureiro, T. (2010). *Perspectives of children and young people with a parent in prison*. Edinburgh: Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People.
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21. Bonnano, G.A. (2004). Loss, trauma and human resilience. *American Psychologist*, 59(1), 20-28.

the risks increasing with greater exposure to adverse life events.<sup>22</sup> Behavioural responses to loss and trauma such as substance misuse,<sup>23</sup> risky sexual-behaviour, suicide<sup>22</sup> and reduced awareness of danger are common.<sup>24</sup>

Given this association between loss, trauma and behaviour it is therefore unsurprising that it has been observed that around 90 per cent of young people resident in a YOI (aged 16-20) had experienced at least one bereavement.<sup>23</sup> They are also more likely to have suffered traumatic and multiple bereavements than the general population,<sup>25,23</sup> and have often grown up in chaotic, transitory and difficult circumstances, situations that are likely to lead to an environment ripe for loss. Family breakdown, abuse and neglect, and periods in placements away from home are more common among young people involved in offending,<sup>26</sup> and each of these can be experienced as a devastating loss. Furthermore, reception in to prison itself can be seen as triggering a process that results in loss,<sup>27</sup> severing existing ties and social supports. Many young people in prison therefore carry with them the burden of multiple losses throughout their journey to prison and experience these even more acutely whilst inside prison.

Traumatic and multiple losses, particularly those with an element of ambiguity can complicate the grieving process,<sup>28</sup> increase the likelihood of unresolved grief<sup>29</sup> and result in poorer emotional and mental health outcomes.<sup>30</sup> The high rate of these types of losses in the YOI population has important implications for behaviour management in the prison, and for successful reintegration back into the community. Understanding the losses that accompany and shape these young men is therefore crucial for rehabilitation, yet most studies of loss tend to focus predominantly on loss through death<sup>31</sup> rather than these more ambiguous losses. Moreover, males are less likely to seek help for issues that cause them distress<sup>32</sup> and therefore not only

leave themselves open to prolonged suffering, but as a result also tend to be underrepresented in the research literature that does exist.<sup>33</sup> This paper will begin to contribute to our understanding of this issue among males by documenting the range and nature of losses that young men in custody have experienced and to provide a foundation from which practice and interventions can develop.

## Method

### **Ethical Considerations**

This paper stems from a wider study exploring the pathways of young men both in and out of a young offenders institution.<sup>34,35</sup> The research was given approval by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee which endeavours to protect the integrity, security and well-being of participants and researchers in sensitive research settings such as prisons.

### **Participants**

Participants were 23 young men in a YOI, aged between 16 and 20, who typically were serving a short sentence (on average less than two years).

### **Procedure**

Interviews were conducted by the research team within the YOI with young men who had consented to be involved in the research. Each participant was interviewed using a topic guide designed to help each young man provide a narrative about their journey to prison; their experience in the YOI and their plans for reintegration back in to the community. Specific prompts relating to the original study questions were used to elicit further information about supports received; educational experiences; and understanding of the justice process.

It is useful to state at this point that bereavement, loss and grief were not directly addressed in the

22. Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., Koss, M.P. and Marks, J.H. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.
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34. Smith, S., Dyer, F. and Connelly, G. (2014a). *Supporting Fife and Forth Valley: A report on the pathways into prison and the supports available to young people from Fife and Forth Valley*. Glasgow: Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice
35. Smith, S., Connelly, G. and Dyer, F. (2014b). *Young men in custody*. Glasgow: Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice.

interview topic guide, which presents both benefits and limitations to this paper. Firstly, research that explores bereavement and loss as part of a general study is often undertaken outside of any preconceived theoretical framework.<sup>31</sup> Certainly the expressions of loss by these young men were spontaneous and not sought or directed in any way. In addition, qualitative research about loss and bereavement with young people is often reliant on a self-selecting sample who are willing and able to talk about their thoughts and experiences with a relatively unknown researcher. When the subject is as challenging and potentially as distressing as loss and grief it can be assumed that many young people, especially males, choose not to participate. Instead, viewing the young people's stories through the lens of loss, and drawing learning from more general discussions is a more inclusive approach that allows the young person some control about the nature and extent of their losses they choose to share. However, taking such an approach has obvious limitations, not least that the true scale and nature of losses may be underestimated. Furthermore, without the opportunity to reflect and elaborate on their losses young people were not able to tell their whole story, and a level of richness and detail about their losses is clearly lacking.

**Analysis**

With the consent of participants, each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVivo Version 10. Each individual interview underwent two cycles of coding to first identify expressions of loss, and then a cross-case analysis was undertaken to identify and categorise shared themes throughout the sample. Themes were then reviewed and refined into four overarching classifications: loss of future and opportunities; loss of relationships and

connections; loss of status and power; and loss of stability and security.

**Findings**

Across all 23 young men, a total of eight different losses were identified in the sample. Through the analysis these were organised into an overarching typology comprised of four broad classifications, as outlined in **Table 1** below.

*Loss of future*

All of the young men, in one way or another, spoke of the loss of their future opportunities and prospects, either directly or indirectly as a result of their behaviour or their imprisonment. The pervasiveness of this loss throughout every story poses both practical and perceptual obstacles to successful reintegration and the attainment of positive outcomes later in life. The initial catalyst for this loss was a disrupted education, often commencing during the primary school years due to transitory families, behavioural problems and exclusions.

*Well from a young age I wasn't really in school, I used to get kicked out a lot, I used to cause trouble for the teachers and stuff like that. The only place I've really done is nursery. (YP15)*

*I said to them I was sorry, it was a moment of madness, I want to come back and they said 'no' and I got kicked out. (YP21)*

Importantly, the young men in this study entered custody during late adolescence (between the ages of 16 and 20), a crucial time when all young people are

<b>Loss Classification</b>	<b>No. in sample reporting loss</b>	<b>% of sample reporting loss</b>
<b>1. Loss of future</b> a. Loss of prospects b. Loss of education	<b>23</b> 23 15	<b>100%</b>
<b>2. Loss of relationships</b> a. Loss of relationships (as a result of prison) b. Loss of relationships (prior to prison)	<b>18</b> 14 12	<b>78%</b>
<b>3. Loss of status</b> a. Loss of freedom b. Loss of power	<b>16</b> 15 6	<b>70%</b>
<b>4. Loss of stability</b> a. Loss of stability b. Loss of childhood	<b>12</b> 12 3	<b>52%</b>

undertaking the key developmental task of cultivating and understanding their own identity and self-concept.<sup>14,12</sup> Self-concept is significantly influenced by the family environment<sup>36</sup> and many of the participants spoke of parents, siblings, cousins, friends who were in prison and alluded to communities where experiences of crime and custody were commonplace. It was clear that, for some of the young men, their experiences meant that a sense of being predestined for prison was embedded in their self-concept from a young age, signalling a chronic loss of hope and ambition for the future.

*[From] 14 or 15 I thought that [I would be in prison] because my two brothers were already in. (YP2)*

*I knew I would end up back in here...I've always thought that since I was a wee guy because of my family background and stuff. (YP19)*

In addition, for other young men, the very nature of imprisonment had a direct and catastrophic impact on the plans that they had held for the future.

*I'm hoping but the only thing is my criminal record getting in the way. (YP7)*

*I've not got a plan in my head because I know what I wanted to be, I wanted to be a mechanic, but sometimes it works out different. (YP3)*

Furthermore, the demands of remaining on the straight and narrow despite returning to the same difficult family and community environments, often while needing to remain compliant with strict licence conditions, meant that the young men were fearful that any opportunities that still remained would be soon be withdrawn from them.

*The only thing is if I breach that licence because I know for a fact I'll breach it within the first week of being out. (YP14)*

*My only worry is that if I go back to stay with my Mum, my friends could be trouble and that, and I get back in with that. (YP4)*

The concept of 'possible selves' as '...the ideal selves that we would very much like to become'<sup>37</sup> has a resonance here. The very real loss of opportunities created

by a prison sentence can result in the loss of a future 'possible self' and, in studies of adult males serving lengthy or life sentences, this can be '...experienced as a kind of bereavement for oneself; the loss involving lost worlds, lost futures and lost identities'.<sup>38</sup> While the majority of young men in this study were serving short sentences (less than two years), the revolving door of prison means that for many of these young men a substantial proportion of their young lives has been spent in prison or other institutions. Furthermore, the young age of these participants means that they have had little chance to learn a trade, gain skills or to develop a work identity. Gaining employment upon release is a key factor in successful reintegration,<sup>39</sup> and considering that what Žukov et al.<sup>40</sup> term 'prisonisation' can

. . . for some of the young men, their experiences meant that a sense of being predestined for prison was embedded in their self-concept from a young age, signalling a chronic loss of hope and ambition for the future.

cause a loss of knowledge, skills and habits that have already been firmly established in adult prisoners, it is clear that this loss of a possible self has very real implications among young people who have not yet had the chance to develop a positive work identity and have lost hope for their future.

#### *Loss of relationships*

The most obvious loss, that of loss through bereavement, was rarely mentioned, with only one young man mentioning this type of loss. However, our understanding of this population suggests that an absence of bereavement in their stories may not necessarily indicate an absence of bereavement in these

36. Henderson, C.E., Dakof, G.A., Schwartz, S.J., & Liddle, H.A. (2006). Family functioning, self-concept, and severity of adolescent externalizing problems. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 15(6), 719-729.

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38. Jewkes, 2005: p.370.

39. Ministry of Justice. (2013). *Analysis of the impact of employment on re-offending following release from custody, using Propensity Score Matching*. London: Ministry of Justice.

40. Žukov, I., Fischer, S., Ptáček, R., Raboch, J. (2009). Imprisonment and its influence on psychobiological needs. *Prague Medical Report*, 110(3), 201-213.



young men's lives. As outlined earlier this may simply be an artefact of the methodology, in that the young men were not asked specifically about the losses that they had experienced, and may also reflect a personal or cultural reluctance to discuss potentially sensitive and taboo subjects, especially without explicit 'permission' to do so.

Despite this, the stories that the young men shared portrayed a past characterised by disrupted relationships and broken bonds, a pattern that commenced in childhood, but continued apace following entry in to custody, often as a result of their incarceration. Losses prior to custody included dysfunctional and disrupted families, and frequently the system's response to these issues (such as taking the young person into care). Even when the parent is *physically* present, studies of young people in foster care have indicated that factors such as substance misuse or emotional unavailability can mean that this distance is experienced as a loss<sup>41</sup> and this was also reflected in these young men's experiences.

*Obviously my father's been in prison for nearly five years and I've got nobody to follow by, no role model so I had nobody...I've got a Mum but I don't class her as a mum because I don't feel like I've had a mum. (YP4)*

*The first four or five months [in residential school] were difficult, I was only young, 11, 12 and I was away from my family, 100-odd miles. (YP21)*

The breakup of families through fostering, adoption and residential care extends much more widely than the loss of the immediate caregivers,<sup>7,17</sup> and some of the young men reported broken relationships with siblings as well as extended family as a result of their placements. These types of losses can be more difficult to resolve because of their ambiguity, with unanswered questions about the length of separation or the nature of the loss complicating the grieving process<sup>6,7</sup>. Furthermore, multiple moves, and separation that is interpreted as voluntary abandonment, are often especially traumatic,<sup>14,11</sup> and these were key features of the young men's lives.

*I know my family...it's like all they've done is give birth to me then forgot about me, that's all they've done. (YP15)*

These losses were exacerbated in prison, as the loss of outside relationships has been suggested to be one of the most painful aspects of incarceration.<sup>42</sup>

*When you're locked up at night you actually realise 'I miss my family, that's where I want to be'. That's where it just hits you. (YP16)*

The sense of loss and hopelessness experienced by the families of those in prison<sup>42</sup> was also acknowledged by the young men, and they expressed concern that the loss they felt was no easier for those that they had left

on the outside. In addition to the pain caused by the physical distance of their imprisonment, the barriers of shame and stigma on both sides of the relationship also proved challenging, and could disrupt even previously solid relationships, let alone already fragile ones. Some young men did not want their families to see them in prison, others were rejected by their families because of their behaviour.

*I did have a girlfriend but I think she was just finding it too hard me being in here. (YP15)*

*My Mum doesn't talk to me. My Dad talks to me but my Mum, Gran and sister don't talk to me. (YP23)*

The young men's stories hint at the anger and frustration they felt at the failure of their caregivers to provide the love and support that they needed. As a result, these young men clearly had complicated attachments and difficult family relationships, yet these were the very relationships that were so often expected to facilitate their transition to the community. This loss of a support network, that many other young people their own age can rely on, often made the young men anxious about their future, especially when accompanied by simultaneous transitions in their professional support networks.

These losses were exacerbated in prison, as the loss of outside relationships has been suggested to be one of the most painful aspects of incarceration.

41. Samuels, G.M. and Pryce, J.M. (2008). 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger': Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 1198-1210.

42. Murray, J. (2005). *The effects of imprisonment on families and children of prisoners*. In (Eds.) A. Liebling and S. Maruna. The effects of imprisonment. Devon: Willan Publishing: 442-473.

*I can't stay with my mum or anything... There's nowhere else really to go. I don't talk to my other family. (YP19)*

*I've had the same social worker for three years now, but he finishes working with me when I'm 18 I think. He's been the only person that I can actually speak to and actually understands me. (YP15)*

These disruptions and disconnections in their relationships, support networks and emotional investments have clear implications for the transition to adulthood<sup>41</sup> and for successful reintegration back in to the community, as positive social ties are associated with reduced offending and engagement with employment upon release.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Loss of status*

Another common loss was that of loss of status, which occurs when an individual loses position or power in society, such as through the stigma of being in care,<sup>7</sup> or unemployment.<sup>44</sup> Imprisonment most clearly results in a loss of freedom, which was experienced with difficulty by many of the young men. This loss of freedom also results in a loss of agency to exert power and control over one's own destiny, with this lack of capacity becoming more entrenched the longer that is spent in prison,<sup>45</sup> even among adults whose status in society is more firmly established.<sup>27</sup> For young people who are already disempowered and afforded lower status in society due to their age, it becomes difficult to see how the decision-making and problem-solving skills required for successful transition to the community will be easily mastered.

*I've been locked up for most of my life so I'm used to being locked up. Jail doesn't bother me, I'm in that routine now... (YP14)*

*It's going to feel weird when I get out because I'll have been in for maybe two-and-a-bit to three years... To be able to go places myself at any time I want. It'll be weird because I'm used to working with their times, not my times. (YP1)*

Loss of autonomy is identified by Sykes<sup>46</sup> as one of the key pains of imprisonment, and this was reflected in this study as the concept of personal agency was seen as an important human right and one that young people felt frustrated about having to give up. The young men felt that the loss of freedom should be sufficient, and that the loss of other rights was unnecessary and unfair.

Another common loss was that of loss of status, which occurs when an individual loses position or power in society, such as through the stigma of being in care, or unemployment.

*We're in here to do our time, we're in here to get punished by taking away our freedom, and we're not in here to get punished by the staff members. (YP1)*

Furthermore, the power imbalance between the young men and some of their peers or YOI staff, as well as the stigma or community consequences caused by their offences caused the young men to feel that they had lost 'respect' in society.

*They've got the upper hand. They think because they've got more power over us they're better... (YP3)*

*I don't even want to put my face into the community, I was ashamed of myself. I still am to this day. (YP16)*

This loss of power and agency is not only deskilling, but can affect the development or utilisation of effective coping strategies for dealing with loss and grief, such as going for a walk or listening to music.<sup>23</sup> Even maladaptive strategies such as self-medication provide relief, at least in the short-term, but are not accessible to young men in prison. Furthermore, the

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43. Berg, M.T. and Huebner, B.M. (2010). Reentry and the ties that bind: An examination of social ties, employment and recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, 28(2), 382-410.
44. Atkinson, T., Liem, R., and Liem, J.H. (1986). The social costs of unemployment: Implications for social support. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 27(4), 317-331.
45. Irwin, J. and Owen, B. (2005). *Harm and the contemporary prison*. In (Eds.) A. Liebling and S. Maruna. The effects of imprisonment. Devon: Willan Publishing.
46. Sykes, G.M. (2007). *The society of captives*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Princeton University Press.

reality of prison routines means that there is either a lack of space for privacy and reflection,<sup>45</sup> or alternatively that there is *too much* space for unstructured reflection, and not enough freedom to employ distraction techniques.<sup>23</sup> Of relevance is Stroebe and Schut's Dual Process Model of bereavement,<sup>47</sup> which depicts the process of coping with loss and grief as an oscillation between loss-oriented activities (akin to the more traditional 'grief work' tasks of earlier bereavement theories) and restoration-oriented activities such as distracting oneself from grieving (engrossing oneself in a movie, for example). Stroebe and Schut<sup>48</sup> assert that '...oscillation is necessary for optimal adjustment over time' with the individual choosing to take time out from grief or to actively focus on processing aspects of the loss. Spending too much time in one activity or the other is viewed as detrimental to both mental and physical well-being.<sup>47</sup> This is clearly problematic for young men coping with loss and grief in prison as, due to the restrictions, monotony and power imbalances inherent in the prison regime, they have little opportunity to take control of their grief.

#### *Loss of stability*

The final classification of loss relates to what has been termed here the 'loss of stability'. Young men described disruptions and loss of stability in their backgrounds, often resulting from their disconnected relationships or inconsistent school histories. This is a key characteristic of disadvantaged young people, especially those with long care histories<sup>7</sup>, and can leave young people to suffer from enduring insecurities that make the transition to adulthood more difficult.<sup>41</sup> In addition, a lack of a stable base, such as family and home instability, has been associated with an increase in problematic behaviours and poorer academic outcomes.<sup>49</sup> Of concern is that if this instability remains a feature of the young person's life upon release from custody then the likelihood of successful reintegration is reduced, as a stable accommodation base is linked to more positive outcomes such as training or employment.<sup>50</sup>

## Young men described disruptions and loss of stability in their backgrounds, often resulting from their disconnected relationships or inconsistent school histories.

*So I got kicked out and ended up sofa surfing and just robbed all sorts of stuff. I've never had the chance to have a stable place to stay, get the tag and show them that I can work.*  
(YP21)

Another emerging loss in this classification could be best described as 'loss of childhood'. Of course, the transition through adolescence to adulthood can be viewed as a universal process of leaving the innocence of childhood behind.<sup>31</sup> However, the additional challenges or sheer trauma that these young men have had to face makes this loss of childhood, frequently at a very young age, quite often a defining moment for them. Young people experiencing bereavements and

loss of relationships often have to take on new roles and responsibilities<sup>14</sup> and this was also true of the more ambiguous losses among the young men in this study. As a result, family roles and relationships were often reversed, confused or inappropriate and young people frequently described having nowhere to turn.

*My Dad's outside but he's got back into drugs and that. He doesn't support me at all...I phone him and talk to him but he treats me like a pal.* (YP12)

*I've had a really bad upbringing, I've not had the support that normal children should have from the minute they're born to the minute they leave the house.* (YP15)

#### *Discussion and Implications*

It is clear that young men in custody have experienced a catalogue of losses since childhood, and that these losses are compounded by entry to prison, including disruption to relationships and social support networks. In addition, there are unique aspects of loss associated with incarceration, such as loss of status and agency. Sykes,<sup>46</sup> in his classic 1958 text, *The Society of Captives*, outlined five key pains of imprisonment including deprivation of relationships, deprivation of

47. Stroebe, M. and Schut, H. (1999). The Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement: Rationale and description. *Death Studies*, 23(3), 197-224.

48. Stroebe and Schut, 1999:p.216.

49. Sandstrom, H. and Huerta, S. (2013). *The negative effects of instability on child development: A research synthesis*. Washington: Urban Institute.

50. Batemen, T., Hazel, N. and Wright, S. (2013). *Resettlement of young people leaving custody*. London: Beyond Youth Custody.

security, and deprivation of autonomy. However, it is clear from this study that these pains are not simply limited to imprisonment, but in fact occur repeatedly in the backgrounds of these vulnerable young men, and are exacerbated by incarceration. Furthermore, the very real societal stigma that is associated with a prison sentence and the identity of 'offender' simply amplifies, or even creates, many of these losses. This is particularly evident in the severing of positive social ties and relationships; in the removal of a young person's status in society and thereby lowering self-respect and self-esteem; and, perhaps most tragically, by withdrawing opportunities that result in the loss of a 'future possible self', leading to a chronic lack of ambition and hope for the future.

In response, this paper has provided an early and developing typology of these losses to better support practitioners to identify and address the range of losses that are experienced in the YOI population. It is important that practitioners, and society as a whole, understand that loss does not have to be outwardly huge, nor devastatingly permanent, to have a long-lasting effect on young people. Small-scale and temporary losses, especially as they accumulate, can be equally traumatic and manifest as externalising and challenging behaviours or complicated attachment relationships.<sup>20</sup> The anger and frustration that young men feel about these losses, from abandonment by family to the forfeiture of opportunities and prospects, can affect coping strategies and potentially lead to an ongoing cycle of challenging behaviour and imprisonment.

For prison and throughcare services, acknowledging and supporting these losses will be crucial in helping young men cope with loss and grief in their lives and disrupting this cycle, as losses that remain unresolved can cause problems for behaviour management in institutions and more importantly for successful reintegration to the community.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that many of these losses were incurred *prior* to prison also emphasises the need for social work, education and other services to address a range of losses in vulnerable child populations at a much earlier stage, long before the prison gates are reached.

. . . while entry into prison may have been the culmination of a background of losses, and represented yet another major loss for these young men, there were also gains to be had.

Yet while there may be similarities between bereavement and other forms of loss, not enough is known at this point about how young people respond to these different types of losses, and therefore what interventions and approaches may help practitioners to meet their needs. Are existing bereavement interventions effective with other types of loss? Do loss and grief education programmes, such as Seasons for Growth<sup>5</sup>, help people cope with more ambiguous losses? This study was naturally limited in its scope, as taking a general approach that was focused on pathways into and out of prison meant that it did not delve more deeply into how young men experienced and responded to these losses and therefore cannot

provide the answers to these questions. While the merits of such an approach, in opening up loss and grief research to a potentially reluctant group of young men, have already been discussed, it remains true that this approach sacrificed richer narratives for inclusiveness and is likely to represent an underestimation of the scale of the issue. Further research that explores how people respond to, and learn to cope with, these wider losses especially within restricted environments such as prison, as well as research that supports young people to voice their own experiences in greater detail, is required to refine knowledge and understanding

of this issue. Creative methodologies that empower young people to actively generate and define their own evidence, rather than simply have it passively 'gathered' from them may be of benefit here.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that while entry into prison may have been the culmination of a background of losses, and represented yet another major loss for these young men, there were also gains to be had. With loss of stability such a key feature of these young men's childhoods, entry in to custody at times provided some much needed stability and support, even despite the associated loss of freedom.

*I'm not just saying this but there is actually a lot of support in here for people. There's nothing you can't get in here, if you need support you can get it. (YP1)*

51. Young-Junior, V. (2003). Helping females inmates cope with loss and grief. *Corrections*, 65(3), 76-79.

Similarly, some of the young men described what they saw as very real opportunities of being in custody.

*It was like Maths and English, the big subjects I missed out on...I love it, I used to go everyday. I put my name down for Italian. I don't even know the slightest thing about Italy, I put my name down for that as well, to try and learn new things. (YP15)*

Neither the positive nature of these opportunities, nor the joy that some young men expressed at being able to access these experiences, should be dismissed. However, that prison can represent an exciting

opportunity for these vulnerable young men only serves to highlight the true extent of the losses that they had faced on their journey to custody. Of course it is impressive that these young men are receiving the support that they need, finding positives in adversity and demonstrating considerable resilience. However, that fact that we have prisons providing what should be a part of a normal childhood is a sad reminder of how we could be doing so much more to support some of the most vulnerable members of society at the earliest possible stage. Understanding their responses to a wide range of loss and grief will be an important part of that process.



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