‘Doing’ Time – Young people’s experiences of the imprisonment of a family member

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There are no official figures for how many children experience the imprisonment of a parent each year but estimates put the number at around 27,000 for Scotland (Scottish Government, 2012) and 200,000 for England and Wales (Williams et al, 2012). This number only includes children affected by parental imprisonment and not those with siblings or other relatives in prison, some of whom may have played an equally large role in a child’s life and whose loss may be felt just as keenly.

Research background

The research on which this article is based was carried out as part of my PhD (which I am currently still conducting). The data comes from a 22 month period spent as part of an arts collective known as KIN, a project facilitated by Vox Liminis in partnership with Families Outside. During this time KIN was made up of eight young people aged 16-25 who have, or have had, a parent or sibling in prison, two members of staff from Vox Liminis, one from Families Outside, a range of freelance artists and me. The group met approximately once a month for a day or weekend residential session. It produced a film, ‘First Words’, a set of immersive audio experiences, ‘The Golden Thread’, and a print copy magazine of texts and images, ‘The Thing’. Each of these artforms has been used to explore their collective experiences

and to share them with others (http://www.voxliminis.co.uk/kin/). I carried out participant observation at these sessions, had a literature themed discussion with the group (which forms a separate data source) and have carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven of the young people which have yielded rich data due to the relationships formed during the time spent with KIN.

Research with partners of prisoners has shown that they often feel that they are *doing time* or serving the sentence along with their partner in prison (Comfort, 2008; Kotova, 2017). They also talk about the experience of time passing differently, usually more slowly, for those in prison compared to how it

passes on the *outside*. Those who have written about prisoners' experiences of time also speak of it not being a fixed or constant unit of measurement passing in a linear fashion but that there can be a dual sense of it both *passing and standing still* (Wahidin, 2006).

While there is an increasing body of literature on children's experiences of parental imprisonment, it rarely focuses solely on the experiences of teenagers and young adults (exceptions Brown et al, 2001; McCulloch and Morrison, 2002).

This article aims to explore the potential impact of the differing experience of time by a young person and their family member in prison, what this may mean for the young person's experience of their family member's imprisonment and potential impacts on the maintenance of family relationships while a member is in prison. It will also consider this concept of time in the digital world we now live in where everything is instant and fast moving and how might this impact on young people's experiences of their family member's imprisonment.

'Doing' time

One of the young people I spoke to, Kev,[1] spoke a lot about his experiences of time passing during his dad's sentence. He went away when Kev was about 11 or 12 and was released when he was around 15 or 16. When talking about this he said:

> *…when they are released and they come back it's like, think of, like, two timelines, but all of a sudden, like, his one's been halted, so when he gets released you're kinda further on…*

He also expanded on the experience by saying:

> *…it's like they are, they're frozen in time and then they come oot and you're that much older because you've grew up quicker, so, it's like, then he's talking, you know, like, we need to go to the funfair and the cinema. We went to the cinema a couple of times and I'm like, 'Going to the pictures with,' I'm going with my pals, do you know what I mean….*

Kev had kept in contact with his dad during his sentence through writing letters, regular phone calls and visits but there were still these difficulties in re-building the relationship on his dad's release. His dad had watched him grow up during visits over this period of time

[1] Kev is a real identity. Kev actively wants and is happy for his identity to be in the public domain because he feels he is taking ownership of the issues and its impact.

yet still he appeared to expect the child he had left behind not the teenager that he had become on his release. This can be difficult for the young person who not only may be older and have changed during the period of imprisonment naturally, but may also have experienced an element of what is termed *parentification* where there is a role reversal in the parent/child relationship (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, 1973) and in some ways has been forced to grow up more quickly while their parent is in prison while then being forced back into the role of a child on their release.

Teenage Experiences

Differences between teenagers and younger children also means that the latter are more likely to be within the family home to receive phone calls and have fewer things impinging on their spare time allowing them to visit more freely while their family member is in prison. Also, on a family member's release, younger children are more likely to be available and have time to spend with their family member rebuilding their relationship. Teenagers are less likely to be spending all their time within the family home, instead going out with friends, gaining a level of independence and forming their own identity. This can introduce a level of guilt, both during and after the sentence, where they may feel they are not spending enough time with their family member, which is likely to be experienced less by younger children who have less demands on their free time.

Prison can therefore place restrictions on a young person's time and movement while their family member is serving their sentence as they have to wait in for phone calls or spend a Saturday going in to visit as that's the only time they can go when they're at school. Even when their family member is released, however, there can be restrictions placed on the young person's life as they still put their own life on hold to spend time with their family member or where they find themselves playing the role of the younger child the person left rather than the teenager that they have become.

What is family?

The way some prisons appear to construct family could also have an impact on how parents in prison experience the passing of time in respect of their children growing up. Prison can often be thought of as infantilising prisoners who have a lack of autonomy, lack of opportunity to make decisions for themselves and a lack of control over a lot of their lives. But prison can also be infantilising for the young people with family members in prison, as they may be placed in the role of 'young child' which the prison tends to cater for when considering families. Where visit rooms or visiting centres have 'play' areas they can be focused on young children with little provision for what teenagers would like to spend their waiting time doing. This may particularly affect relationships between siblings where they are both teenagers/young adults yet do not have the opportunity to relate to each other as they typically would, have no opportunity to 'play' together in a way that is natural for older children or teenagers and are often not even considered for 'family' visits. If teenagers are unable to do things they would

normally do at visits, then the prisoner will still see a 'child' during these times and the prison will effectively hold the young person in that position during the time that they are at visiting.

The digital world

The digital world we now live in may also mean that we experience time differently generally today because of the instant way that we tend to live our lives, rarely waiting for anything. We binge watch TV series rather than waiting each week for the next episode. We download or stream music rather than having to wait to go out and buy a single or an album and even books can be downloaded straight to our phone or Kindle and read straight away as soon as we've thought that we want to read them.

Our means of communication today are also much quicker, snappier and instant than before. We send text messages or make calls to mobile phones knowing that people almost always have them with them. We send messages on apps that tell us our message has been delivered, then read and then we wait for the instant response, often getting annoyed if it is not forthcoming. We send pictures on Snapchat that instantly convey how we feel in that exact moment, and then they disappear.

This is in stark contrast to communication with a person in prison where you are required to wait until the time you are allowed to visit, wait for a phone call, (which if you miss it there is no opportunity to just call back or send a text in response), or the wait for letters which have to be written, sent, delivered, read, responded to, sent back and received again.

This is quite apart from the waiting that goes on generally for the sentence to be served and the family member to be released. Again, this additional waiting, for a child or young person, can seem to be a lifetime. As one of the young people commented when looking back the actual calendar time of three months that her brother spent in prison seemed like nothing but, at the time, when she was twelve, it felt like *forever*.

This experience of a family member's imprisonment in the digital age may have the potential to have increased the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958) felt by family members of prisoners in respect of the concept of time and its passing. It may be felt more keenly, particularly by young people, who have spent their whole lives in the digital age.

Conclusion

Exploring the experiences of young people with a family member in prison is timely given the recent release of the Farmer Review (MoJ 2017) in respect of how supporting men in prison to engage with their families can reduce re-offending. The Scottish Prison Service has also recently launched its Family Strategy for 2017-2022.

The role of families, including children and young people, has long been recognised as important in the reduction of re-offending and the process of desistance from crime. It is likely that many families wish to support their family member in this journey but they should not simply be viewed as a resource (Jardine, 2017). They require support in their own right and recognition of the impact of their family member's sentence on their own lives. As SPS note in their Family Strategy that *every family is unique* and Lord Farmer noted that when he speaks of family relationships that it *should be assumed that other significant supportive relationships are inferred*, so there must also be a recognition of family in the wider sense not only in the partner and young child model which can be seen in literature or practice.

Teenagers can have distinct experiences of familial imprisonment, when compared to younger children. This must be borne in mind when considering how to provide opportunities and support for them in relation to maintaining relationships and dealing with their family member's imprisonment. The rise in digital technology and the digital age that we live in may also be compounding the impact of a family member's imprisonment on young people today and how to ameliorate this is something which must also be explored by those working with this group of young people.

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About the Author

Kirsty is currently a full-time PhD student at the University of Glasgow, based within the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research and funded by What Works Scotland. Her research is looking at young people's experiences of having a parent or sibling in prison and is specifically exploring what family means to this group of young people, how they experience family when a member is in prison and how they deal with the imprisonment of a family member.

About Vox Liminis

Vox Liminis (est. 2013) is playing a significant role in the rehabilitation of the criminal justice system in Scotland, by creating spaces where differently situated people communicate and connect in new ways through the arts, and can imagine a more positive and human future together.

About KIN

KIN is an arts collective of young people who have experienced the imprisonment of a close family member. Working as a collective, they create original pieces of art that are rooted in their experiences. This art is then share to inspire conversation, thought and action about an issue that is all too often hidden away.