

Focus on state as 'problem parent' rather than care-experienced mothers, says new research

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Mothers, with a criminal record and who have also been through the care system, could well face negative judgements and excessive scrutiny by

virtue of already 'being known' to the authorities.

This is the conclusion of new research led by Lancaster University working with Manchester Metropolitan University, Liverpool John Moores University, and the University of Bristol.

"Confronting Intergenerational Harm: Care Experience, Motherhood and Criminal Justice Involvement" is published in the *British Journal of Criminology*.

The study focuses on mothers with "dual system contact," that is imprisoned women who have been in care (such as [foster care](#) or children's homes), care-experienced girls and [young women](#) in the community, and the professionals who work with them

Key findings include: a desire to break cycles of stigma and social care involvement across the generations; [lack of support](#) and a fear of asking for help, and the care-less approach to pregnancy and motherhood that may be faced in prison and beyond.

As one interviewee, 26-year-old Hannah, said, "But it is also used against you that you were in care, and there isn't a great support network around me because I've been in care."

The study bridges insights from across criminology and [social work](#) to explore messages from research and argues for more productive dialog across disciplinary and practice boundaries.

It highlights the long-lasting consequences of being under surveillance and any subsequent child removal/separation which may include intense feelings of guilt, shame, anger, loss and distress, while at a system-level the immediate focus moves to protecting the unborn baby or infant.

"While few would argue against the importance of protecting children, the problem with this relatively short-term preoccupation is that the needs of care-experienced mothers, sometimes still children themselves, may become lost as damaging cycles of social care (and criminal justice) involvement are reproduced across generations," says the research.

"Moving forwards in this context is not easy but we can start by challenging the stigma and negative labeling associated with mothers who have been in care and in conflict with the law."

This involves recognizing the structures of power they must navigate as they encounter, and seek to resist and survive, various aspects of social harm.

Confronting the stigma created by dual-system contact highlights the need to consider cumulative disadvantage—and reveals the need to move beyond understanding discrimination and categorizing struggles as singular issues.

For some, negative gendered and racialized judgements may create overlapping layers of disadvantage for those who do not fit neatly with social expectations of the 'maternal woman' and combine with moral judgements of 'young' motherhood.

Practitioners who were able to support girls and women in pregnancy and motherhood to resist and survive such judgements were undoubtedly valued, says the research. Yet all need to be given the time to develop such relationships, with girls and women offered multiple opportunities to return for support and access to flexible services given their understandable fear of asking for help.

"From social workers to prison and probation officers to [health care workers](#), it is vital that professionals do not simply dismiss individuals as

'failing to engage' but recognize how care and justice system-contact may have perpetuated past trauma and intensified a mistrust of the authorities," adds the study.

"Within this context, the focus moves from blaming individuals to putting the onus on professionals and systems to create spaces where individuals may feel safe enough to trust and connect with workers."

Yet creating safe spaces and developing trust takes time, particularly for those who may have every reason not to trust.

One 19-year-old mum, Kelsey, said, "I felt like I couldn't say anything, I'd hide everything from everyone...because I don't want to do anything to lose him...Because that's all they said to me every time I done something wrong, this will jeopardize you from having [son]."

Meanwhile, for pregnant women in prison, the challenges are immense in institutions ultimately designed to punish and control—and where restraint can have fatal consequences.

"Against the backdrop of dramatically reducing the number of all women in prison, there must be a far greater commitment to preventing [pregnant women](#) from being imprisoned wherever possible," warns the study.

Confronting the intergenerational harms that imprisonment creates could enable much greater recognition of the profound impact of imprisonment across the generations, particularly on care-experienced mothers.

As one probation officer interviewed said, "Going into custody...and your children going into care and then having to fight to get them back when you've got no resources whatsoever...is almost impossible."

For those already locked up, the role of [social workers](#) in prison may be vital in ensuring that imprisoned mothers are far better supported and can benefit from family contact days where relevant.

Planning for the transition from prison to the community must occur at the earliest possible stage, supported by non-judgmental practitioners willing to look beyond the stigma that care and justice system contact may create.

Lead author Dr. Claire Fitzpatrick, of Lancaster University, says, "A system that calls itself a [care system](#), but fails to recognize the harm it can cause, may become a care-less and potentially negligent system for some. Ultimately, we need to shift our view of care-experienced girls and women as problem parents and focus our lens instead on the state as problem parent. This can provide a very different perspective."

More information: Claire Fitzpatrick et al, Confronting Intergenerational Harm: Care Experience, Motherhood and Criminal Justice Involvement, *British Journal of Criminology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azad028](#)

Provided by Lancaster University

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