

Title: Natalie Booth

Author: Maternal Imprisonment and Family Life

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Given the tragic loss of two babies in women's prisons over the past months (see Devlin & Taylor, 2019 and Taylor, 2020) maternal imprisonment has had a brief moment in the public eye. A small number of researchers have been focusing on mothers in prison. To this, Natalie Booth has added her sensitively researched work on the experiences of caregivers of the children of female prisoners. Booth brings family theory to criminology and offers us an engaging and at times heart-breaking account of the challenges that caregivers face when left with imprisoned women's children to care for.

Booth frames the impact of a mother's prison sentence as a 'family sentence' and she shows us how these caregivers occupy a 'disenfranchised social status'. These are powerful concepts that emphasise the lack of support for and the stigma around taking on the care of prisoners' children. While these families' experiences may sound familiar to anyone working or researching in this area, the power in this work lies in the detailed quotations, together with a thoughtful use of theory that offers the reader a nuanced and comprehensive view of the experience.

Booth's focus on the caregivers helps to deindividualise the narrative around crime and punishment so that we recognise the wider social implications of imprisoning mothers. Using Morgan's (2011) theory of family practices, we can see how a traditional focus solely on imprisoned mothers and their children obscures the impact on the caregivers, their own children and their wider family and friends. The level of disruption to caregivers' lives is extensive and, using her participants' words, Booth details the difficulties they face from the moment the mother is sentenced.

These rich findings take us through the criminal justice system from the perspective of the caregivers, and we can observe the barriers at every stage: from the court process, to prison visits and contact, and finally release from prison. Of note, and often overlooked in the maternal imprisonment literature, Booth has devised a typology of fathering practices – which is an avenue for further work. In addition, she considers the experience of prison mother and baby units from the caregivers' perspectives as well as caregivers' experiences of stigma from the wider community. Throughout her work, Booth humanises people who are going through an inhumane process. The strength of this work lies in her detailing the struggles through moving quotations (e.g. addressing the extortionate costs of phone calls), and then highlighting the gap between what families experience and the discourse in a range of key policy documents.

While based on academic research, this book is accessible to practitioners and, by taking a family perspective, should provoke reflection. There is much here to inform probation officers, whether they are writing court reports, referring to external agencies, or providing support on release. Social workers, too, will draw much from reading this work – whether they are prison-based or in community teams. The key message is the importance of gender-informed provision at every stage of the criminal justice system, while keeping the wider family network in mind. Of course, services across the country have been stripped back, and the return to 'normal' after Covid will be difficult and lengthy. However, awareness of the plight of caregivers will enable practitioners to offer better support to mothers and to the caregivers themselves.

Booth makes five key recommendations. Above all, access to financial support for caregivers would probably make the single biggest difference, although this is the least likely to be implemented. Underlying the caregivers' accounts is the grinding effect of poverty; a lack of financial resources compounds the family sentences for the caregivers and children. As Booth asserts, it is unethical to expect families to be part of helping to reduce reoffending when they do not have the means to do this.

Booth's work could be usefully extended in two ways. Firstly, the practice implications for women with histories of domestic violence need to be considered. Negotiating contact and re-entry with children and extended families should be done sensitively and in partnership with domestic violence specialists. Secondly, Booth's framework could be extended to women with multiple convictions so that we can understand the particular needs of caregivers who are caught in a cycle of repeated periods of care or the indefinite care of the children of imprisoned women.

In conclusion, this innovative and compelling research provides an original approach to an area of criminology that thus far has received little attention. Booth's concept of a 'family sentence' is a compelling one and highlights the gender-specific needs of women in the criminal justice system while providing some specific proposals for change. As the author succinctly states, 'The challenge ahead lies in responding to what we know' (p.180).

References

Devlin, H., & Taylor, D. (2019, October 04). Baby dies in UK prison after inmate 'gives birth alone in cell'. Retrieved July 13, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/oct/04/baby-dies-in-uk-prison-after-inmate-gives-birth-alone-in-cell>

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