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“It Never Gets Easier”: Understanding the Adaptation and Shattered Realities of First-Time Prison Entrants and Their Loved Ones

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Incarceration is a life-changing event, not just for those who are imprisoned but also for their families and loved ones (Gwebu, 2022). They are suddenly thrust into a harsh and unfamiliar environment, while their families are left to navigate a complex mix of emotions, societal stigma, and the practical challenges of staying connected (Chiu, 2016; Boppre et al, 2022; King & Delgado, 2020). For individuals entering prison for the first time, the experience can be particularly daunting (Liebling, 1999), and the process of adapting to this new environment has not been extensively studied, especially in relation to one's thoughts, behaviours and emotions (Souza & Dhimi, 2010).

This dissertation explores the experience of adapting to imprisonment for a first-time prison entrant as well as their loved ones on the outside who are often forgotten about. In this study, which employs a qualitative and quasi-autoethnographic approach, I included a personal vignette drawn from my own experience of maintaining a relationship with an incarcerated individual to complement the existing literature and offer a more relatable perspective on the challenges faced by first-time prison entrants and their loved ones. The vignette will bridge the academic findings with real-life experiences, providing a clearer understanding of the emotional and practical challenges faced by first-time entrants and their loved ones. By doing so, the academic discussion is contextualised in a way that resonates on a deeper, more human level, especially given the emotionally charged nature of the topic. The title 'It Never Gets Easier' captures the ongoing struggle of adapting to this lifestyle. When I was new to the experience of visiting a

loved one in prison, I heard this phrase frequently, and now I naturally find myself saying it to others who are visiting their loved ones for the first time. It reflects how quickly I adapted to this world and how I now take on the role of guiding newcomers through the visiting process, just as I once wished someone had done for me. To study the adaptation of individuals encountering the prison system for the first time, it is essential to first understand prison adaptation in general. Given the limited literature on this specific topic, I had to explore related studies regarding adaptation and imprisonment to provide a comprehensive background for my research.

Background: The Impact of Incarceration

Emotional Impact

Entering prison for the first time can be emotionally and mentally exhausting (Haney, 2003). The sudden loss of freedom, the fear of the unknown, and the need to adapt to a strict and often harsh environment can lead to anxiety, depression, and a sense of hopelessness (Cummins, 2020).

Unfortunately, mental health services in prisons are often limited and overburdened (Forrester et al, 2018), leaving many individuals without the support they need during this difficult transition.

The emotional impact of incarceration also deeply affects families. Loved ones left behind often struggle with feelings of grief, anger, guilt, and helplessness (King & Delgado, 2020; Condry, 2007). The sudden absence of a family member, combined with the stigma of having someone in prison, can cause significant emotional distress. Families of incarcerated individuals are more at risk for developing a mental illness (Wildeman et al, 2019). Without proper mental health support, both prisoners and their families may find it hard to cope with the challenges of incarceration. This emotional strain is made worse by a society that focuses more on punishment

than on helping people recover and improve the system that causes their suffering (Apel & Diller, 2017). First time prisoners and their loved ones are emotionally coping with these changes for the first time which is overwhelming and life altering, especially when they are also struggling to navigate the practicalities that accompany imprisonment.

Practical Elements of Incarceration

Beyond the emotional strain, first-time prison entrants and their families must also deal with the practical aspects of imprisonment, which can be confusing and overwhelming. Prisons operate under a set of rules and routines that are often unfamiliar to newcomers. Understanding these rules and adapting to prison life is essential for survival, yet this information is not always easy to find. Booking visits, staying in touch, and managing the costs associated with imprisonment can be incredibly stressful (Boppre et al, 2022). The process of arranging visits is often complicated and maintaining regular communication can be costly and difficult (Christian, 2005; Boppre et al, 2022). These challenges, combined with the financial burden of supporting an incarcerated loved one, can put significant strain on families. This strain highlights a bigger problem, society doesn't provide enough support for those impacted by the criminal justice system, which adds extra stress to individuals and families already dealing with the emotional and practical challenges of imprisonment. Moreover, the lack of clear and accessible information leaves many families feeling lost and unsupported (Ferraro et al, 1983). They often do not know where to turn for help (Sharratt et al, 2014) or how to navigate the prison system, which only adds to their stress. Providing better information and support can make a significant difference in helping families cope with the practicalities of imprisonment (Loucks, 2004). The need for support reveals the limitations of a system that relies heavily on incarceration while ignoring the

broader impact on families and communities (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). This strain underscores a larger issue, society's tendency to disregard individuals once they are in prison, expecting them to improve without support, and then neglecting them upon release.

Human Connection

One of the greatest challenges for individuals entering prison and their families is the difficulty of maintaining relationships (Haney, 2003). First-time entrants must navigate the overwhelming task of preserving these relationships, alongside the numerous other unfamiliar aspects of this new lifestyle. The physical separation, combined with the emotional and practical challenges, can put a serious strain on relationships (Turney, 2015). For those in prison, staying connected with loved ones is crucial for emotional well-being and successful reintegration after release (Hairston, 2003; Declaire et al., 2020). However, the prison environment often makes it difficult to keep these connections strong. Communication is key to maintaining relationships, but prison policies often make this difficult. Limited phone access and restricted visiting hours can prevent meaningful contact. These barriers can lead to feelings of isolation for both the person in prison and their loved ones on the outside (McDaniel, 2022). Loved ones also face challenges in staying connected to an incarcerated individual. The emotional stress of having a family member in prison, combined with the practical difficulties of communication and visits, can strain relationships. Additionally, the stigma associated with incarceration can further isolate families from their communities (Hadait et al, 2024; Fishman, 1990) making it even harder to maintain those connections. Keeping family ties strong during incarceration is vital. Research shows that individuals who maintain close relationships with their loved ones while in prison are more likely to successfully reintegrate into society and less likely to reoffend (Declaire et al, 2020)

Therefore, it is essential to provide support that helps families and prisoners maintain their relationships during this difficult time. This support is crucial not only for the well-being of those directly affected but also for challenging the broader societal reliance on imprisonment and the neglect of individuals once they are out of sight.

Stigma & Judgement

The stigma associated with incarceration is another major challenge for first-time prison entrants and their families. Society often views people who have been in prison as dangerous or morally corrupt leading to discrimination and social exclusion (Lebel, 2012). This stigma makes it harder for individuals to reintegrate into society and can also affect their families (Hannem, 2019).

Families of incarcerated individuals also suffer from stigma. They may be judged or shunned by their communities, leading to feelings of shame and isolation (Hadait et al, 2024). This can make it difficult for them to find support, which only adds to the stress of having a loved one in prison. Addressing the stigma of incarceration is crucial for helping both individuals and their families. By reducing stigma, we can help individuals and families affected by incarceration feel more accepted and supported. This approach is essential not only for the well-being of those affected but also for challenging the broader societal reliance on imprisonment as a primary response to crime.

The Overview and Objectives of this Study

To emphasise these recurring themes, I completed a thematic analysis of my personal journal entries from the time of my first prison visit, as well as my ongoing experience of maintaining a relationship with an incarcerated individual. Through this analysis, I identified four key themes: emotional coping and mental health, navigating the practicalities of imprisonment, maintaining relationships, and addressing the stigma surrounding incarceration. These themes were present throughout the existing literature on prison adaptation for both cohorts of people. The findings chapter contains a personal vignette detailing my experience of visiting a loved one in prison for the first time. This vignette aims to clearly illustrate how the four identified themes are experienced in real-life situations. These themes not only reflect the struggles faced by those new to the prison system but also point to a significant gap in the literature concerning the adaptation process for this group. By bringing attention to these issues, I hope to encourage further research that can fill this gap and ultimately lead to more comprehensive support for first-time entrants and their families.

This dissertation seeks to explore the complex dynamics surrounding first-time incarceration through the lens of three primary research questions: How do first-time prison entrants and their loved ones navigate and experience the process of adaptation to incarceration? What emotional and practical challenges do first-time prisoners, and their families face in adapting to this experience, and how does first-time incarceration affect their psychological well-being? To what extent are first-time prisoners and their families vulnerable to stigmatisation, and how does this stigma affect their relationships?

The Significance of This Study

This dissertation explores a critically important yet under-researched area: the adaptation process of first-time prison entrants and their loved ones. Incarceration profoundly affects not only those entering prison but also their families, who face emotional distress, societal stigma, and practical challenges. Despite this, little research focuses on how these individuals cope with the emotional, mental, and practical aspects of imprisonment (Souza & Dhimi, 2010). Understanding this process is essential, as both prisoners and their families often experience long-term mental health impacts and strained relationships. The emotional burden is worsened by the social isolation and stigma they face. Moreover, navigating the prison system, maintaining communication, and managing financial stress further exacerbate their challenges. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of these struggles and highlights the lack of support for first-time prisoners and their families. By addressing these gaps, this research advocates for more empathy and systemic support, aiming to inform policies that promote rehabilitation, emotional well-being, and stronger community reintegration.

By investigating these research questions, this study aims to illuminate the profound emotional and practical challenges encountered during this life-altering transition by both prisoners and their families. It will also consider the psychological impact of incarceration on individuals and their loved ones, along with the societal stigma that can further complicate their adaptation process. Ultimately, this study aspires to provide valuable insights into the broader implications of incarceration and to open up discussions around empathy in how we treat individuals who have committed crimes and their families.

This work also aims to highlight a deeper societal issue: our inclination to incarcerate individuals without addressing the broader impact of incarceration. With an "out of sight, out of mind"

mentality, we fail to offer the necessary support for those imprisoned and their families (Kirwin, 2022), leaving them to navigate the difficult realities of incarceration on their own. Once released, we then expect them to reintegrate into society while burdening them with the stigma that restricts their opportunities, perpetuating the cycle of neglect and isolation. Through this dissertation, I aim to bring more light to the struggles of first-time entrants and their loved ones, advocating for a more compassionate and informed approach to addressing their needs.

Conclusion

The experience of incarceration is difficult for both first-time prison entrants and their families. The emotional, practical, and relational challenges they face are significant, and the current prison system often fails to provide the necessary support. By adopting a more empathetic approach and improving support systems, we can better address these challenges and promote the well-being of those affected by incarceration. This approach not only benefits individuals and families directly impacted by imprisonment but also contributes to a more just and compassionate society. The following chapters of this dissertation will explore these themes in greater detail, calling for more empathy toward those affected by incarceration and highlighting the harsh reality faced by individuals and families forgotten about by society. When prisoners are out of sight, they are often forgotten, and the struggles of their loved ones are overlooked. Using a personal vignette to bring real experience into the discussion, this work aims to give a voice to those who are often forgotten. It seeks to bring these hidden difficulties to light and challenge the indifference that allows these issues to persist. To all those affected by the issues raised in this study, the empathy you find in the visitation waiting room should not be the only time you feel

seen and understood; your struggles deserve to be recognised and addressed. This is my attempt to do just that.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The incarceration of first-time entrants into the prison system can be accompanied with profound challenges not only for the individuals themselves but also for their loved ones. The adaptation of prisoners is a frequently discussed and written about topic but there is little literature on the adaptation specifically for first-time prison entrants (Souza & Dharmi, 2010). It is also important to look beyond the singular person and consider the wider circle of people who may be affected by this. Prisoners and their families are a vulnerable section of society that can encounter debt, unemployment, familial distress, substance abuse as well as mental health issues (Sharratt et al, 2014). Both cohorts of people experience extreme distress and have to make significant changes to survive and adapt to a new lifestyle. This chapter will discuss how this change affects both groups and will highlight the difficulties faced by prisoners and their families in the adaptation to prison life and the prison system. Firstly, it will discuss coping and adapting to prison life generally, the emotional impact and mental health, navigating the practicalities, the stigmatisation and maintaining relationships while incarcerated.

Coping with First Time Incarceration

Adapting to Prison Life

Inmates may struggle to accept that they have been incarcerated (Haney, 2012). It can be difficult for an individual to accept the title of criminal, especially for first time entrants. Diaz (2018) writes that in some cases, once this label is accepted, it can be hard to move away from. Crewe (2009) writes that there is no single pattern for how an individual chooses to adapt to prison life. Research has shown that the length of a prisoner's sentence has a significant impact on how they choose to adapt to prison life (Clemmer, 1940). Condry (2007) found that prisoners families problems are made worse when serving long sentences. Families may remain in a state of chronic bereavement if their family members sentence is long (Merriman, 1979). Adapting to spending time in prison involves understanding its unwritten code on how to conduct yourself. These informal rules are created around prisoner interests as well as resisting an institution (McKendy and Ricciardelli, 2021). These rules or codes affect how a prisoner chooses to behave whilst incarcerated.

Prisoners will often take up what is known as a prison role in order to cope with incarceration and the loss of their original identity (Goffman, 1961). Participating in prison culture and adhering to prisoner made norms is part of prison adaptation and coping with imprisonment. Elements of inmate code are traditional, but it changes as time goes on to fit prisoner's current values (Ahlin et al, 2017). This code is deeply rooted in the institution that is prison. An example of the rules of inmate code are as follows according to (Crewe, 2016: p.79; Sykes and Messinger, 1960: p 8); "do not interfere", "never rat on a con", "don't lose your calm", "play it cool and do your own time" or "don't exploit or steal from other prisoners; don't be weak, or 'be tough, be a

man' and don't ever side with or show respect for the institution and its staff'. First time entrants may feel obliged to fight or resist prison as an institution if they befriend a group with those particular values. Inmates who engage in this kind of alienating behaviour rather than co-operative behaviour (Crewe, 2016) may put a strain on their relationships with staff but can also affect their attitude towards the outside world and their family. For first time entrants, prisoner code may aid them in their integration into the prison environment and culture. New prison inmates must be aware of and fall into the social hierarchy that is prison (Bourdieu, 1984). Hegemonic masculinity is particularly prominent in prisons as this type of masculinity is legitimised through social processes and institutions (Connell, 1987; 2005).

The origins of prison code are debated. Originally prisoner code was thought to have been due to deprivation (Sykes & Messinger, 1960) while others believe that the way in which a prisoner adapts to the prison environment is influenced by external factors as well as prison conditions which is termed 'the importation model' (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). Coping with imprisonment becomes even more intense and complex when you are a first-time entrant. Entering prison means being stripped of your identity (Crewe, 2009) and therefore autonomy. A new entrant must learn both the formal and informal rules of prison on the go. Goffman described institutions like prisons as "the forcing houses for changing persons" (Jones and Fowles, 2008: p.105). Jones and Fowles (2008) continues to discuss the admission process for inmates which involves breaking away from the past, being assigned a number and a uniform while being stripped from your personal belongings.

Adapting to prison for inmates serving long sentences can look different than other inmates. Crewe et al. (2017) describe long serving inmates as ‘swimming with the tide’ rather than against it. This study showed that prisoners serving long sentences adapted well because they came to accept their situation and knew this would be their new reality for a long time. Hulley et al. (2016) argues that life sentence prisoners develop effective coping strategies and become used to the pains of imprisonment. Problems faced by families of prisoners can be exacerbated if their loved one is serving a long sentence (Condry, 2007). Some families were able to recover from the psychological effect of incarceration initially while “others remained in a state of chronic bereavement” (Kotova, 2018: p.1) throughout the entire sentence. Crewe (2011) writes that life sentences as well as sentences without a specific release date can lead to ‘pains of indeterminacy’ for prisoners. These pains extend to the prisoner's family as they are playing a waiting game filled with ambiguity in relation to when or if their loved one will leave prison. Compared to that of prisoners generally, there is little literature on the adaptation of families of first-time entrants. This project will highlight the needs of prisoner’s families and the process of adapting to their family members imprisonment.

Emotional Coping & Mental Health

Being imprisoned is an incredibly daunting experience that has severe emotional and psychological effects on the concerned individual as well as their families. The now incarcerated individual must develop coping strategies to deal with the situation they now find themselves in. Lazarus & Folkman (1984: p.141) defined coping as the “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as

taxing or exceeding the resources of a person". According to Mohino et al. (2003) the term coping refers to strategies used by people to deal with potentially stressful or psychologically damaging situations. How an individual copes can depend on the context of the situation also. Being incarcerated is a circumstance in which coping strategies are limited. Coping is not instinctive, rather it is something that requires the individual to make a conscious effort (Mohino et al, 2003). Lazarus & Cohen (1977) write that incarceration is a particular kind of stressor, it is one that affects all aspects of an individual's life. Inmates face many stressors daily in a prison environment such as adjusting to a new daily routine or the many deprivations that come with prison life (Celinska et al, 2021). Sykes (1958) claimed that there are five main pains of imprisonment which are also referred to as deprivation. These include the loss of goods and services, security, autonomy, heterosexual relationships, and liberty. These are all aspects of prison life that require adaptation and coping. In addition to these losses, prisoners also experience a profound sense of deprivation. According to Sykes' (1958) concept of the "pains of imprisonment," these deprivations involve not just the absence of freedom but also the ongoing denial of fundamental needs and desires. Prisoners must continually adapt to the deprivation of autonomy, security, and personal identity, which can have long-lasting effects on their mental and emotional well-being (Haney, 2003). Moran (2012) described these pains of imprisonment as less visible than the physical scars of prison yet equally as painful. The change from life outside to life inside is one of great shock which is even more of a challenge for a first-time entrant. Being incarcerated means learning to emotionally regulate to handle these stressors. Inmates, especially first-time entrants may befriend particular groups for a sense of belonging and solidarity as well as to substitute for the loss of their meaningful relationships in the outside world (Vanhooran et al, 2017).

Many studies have shown that mental illness is significantly more prevalent in prisons than in the community (Armour, 2012, Brinded et al. 2001; Corrado et al. 2000; Diamond et al. 2001).

Finnerty (2021) stated that research has shown that the prevalence of mental illness in prisons is underestimated. In 2019, the Irish Prison Service (2021) documented 203 instances of self-harm involving 109 individuals. Notably, one-third of these individuals engaged in self-harm multiple times throughout the year. Furthermore, approximately one in eleven of these episodes (8.9%) exhibited a high level of suicidal intent, with mental health issues being identified as the main contributing factor in 56.2% of these cases. Some argue that mental illness is imported into the prison environment (Carrol, 1974) while others suggest mental illness can be caused by the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). Either way, mental illness is very prevalent in the prison environment. There are high rates of self-harm and suicidal ideation in prison environments (Hawton et al, 2014). Mental illness also inhibits prisoners from engaging in daily activities which may aim to assist in their rehabilitation (Cunha et al, 2023).

There are aggravating factors that exacerbate a prisoner's mental health such as being a parent. A study conducted by Yi et al. (2017) found that incarcerated fathers are highly likely to experience periods of depression and heavy drinking and drug use. This study also found the following factors have an effect on mental wellbeing, length of sentence, spending time in solitary confinement and the inmate's relationship with people in the outside world. Upon entering the prison system, the individual is greeted by the harsh reality of prison and may want to avail of services and educational programmes. A crucial yet overrun service in prisons is mental health

services. Forrester et al. (2018: p.1) wrote that “criminal justice systems are overburdened with a high prevalence of multiple psychiatric disorders”.

The families of prisoners must adapt and emotionally cope with their loved ones being incarcerated. It is often a complete upheaval to their life and may leave the family feeling angry or ashamed. They will often be in shock or disbelief (Condry, 2007). Additionally, families of inmates are often subject to stigma by the wider community (Sharratt et al, 2014). This is an aspect that will be covered in more detail. Often families describe the process as grieving even though the individual has not died (King and Delgado, 2020). This feeling of grief for a living individual highlights the enormous amount of emotional suffering that families of inmates must face. In a study conducted by Kotova (2018; p.10) on the wives of prisoners serving long sentences, one participant described having a loved one in prison as “bereavement but without the finality of death”. Kotova (2018) explains that prisoners are present psychologically but not physically. If the individual had died, a funeral would provide closure (Arditti, 2012), instead the families are left with a lack of closure. Comfort (2019) notes that in a study regarding prisoner’s families, many women claimed that in their own way they were also imprisoned as they were exposed to muted, temporary accounts of the prisoners' experience (Kotova, 2018).

Families may also be subjected to financial difficulties while providing for and supporting their incarcerated family member (Sharratt et al, 2014). This financial strain can lead to stress which can then cause negative effects for family relationships. Imprisonment can be expensive for families for many reasons. The loss of the incarcerated individual from the home may have caused a drop in income (Kotova, 2018). Therefore, families often must seek financial support

and take-out loans to afford things like travel costs for visits and postage fees as well as the money that the family may send in for the inmate (Dickie, 2013). The incarceration of a mother or father may result in the wider family having to take care of the inmate's children (Sharratt et al, 2014). This contributes to the financial strain. It must be noted that a significant percentage of prisoners and their families usually come from areas of low socio-economic status/ disadvantaged areas (Hadait et al, 2024). There are many aspects of having a family member in prison that the families of first-time entrants may be unaware of, therefore another aspect of adaptation for both cohorts is navigating the criminal justice system as well as the prison system.

Navigating the Practicalities

Before incarceration both an individual and their support system must navigate the criminal justice system (Hadait et al, 2024). For first time entrants, this may be their first time encountering the criminal justice system. There is little literature on the challenges faced by families when encountering the criminal justice system for the first time.

Visiting a loved one in prison is important for both the prisoner and their family. It is not merely a procedure but a lifeline that maintains the meaningful relationships between the incarcerated individual and their family. It has shown to produce positive behavioural outcomes among prisons (Cochran, 2012). The presence of female visitors to an all-male prison normalises the prison environment (Hairston et al, 1991). Visiting is difficult for families both in a practical and financial sense. It can also be a daunting process due to the extensive searches that may be carried out. Entering a prison environment can lead to feelings of distress (King & Delgado,

2020). Research has shown that families feel uncomfortable when visiting a loved one in prison (Boppre et al, 2022). Many families must travel great distances to reach the prisons which can be costly (Boppre et al, 2022). Families of prisoners must familiarise themselves with the visitation rules and prison regulations. Partners often reported that prison staff would make things more difficult than needed and apply certain rules to one person and not another (Kotova, 2018). The family must inform themselves on the rights of their imprisoned family member in order to know how many visits they are entitled to per week. Visitation for certain types of prisoners will differ, for example remand prisoners may receive shorter but more frequent visits (IRPT, n.d). The Irish Prison Rules 2007 Section 35 outline the provisions for visits in Ireland. It states how many visits an inmate is allowed weekly depending on their status. Families must learn what items are restricted from entering a prison as well as knowing to provide the correct documentation upon entry (IRPT, n.d). Organisations such as the Irish Penal Reform Trust (n.d.) have created online booklets to assist families in booking visits and understanding what to expect.

Families must familiarise themselves with the permitted methods of communication, for example, the ability to send a certain number of letters per week as well as the number of phone calls. All incoming and outgoing mail aside from ones regarding legal matters will be accessed by prison officers and examined (Citizens Information, n.d). Maintaining contact with an incarcerated loved one can provide a protective barrier against feelings of loss and instability (King & Delgado, 2020).

Families must also learn about the criminal justice and the legalities of the court process. For many families, this is their first time encountering the criminal justice system and may not know

how it works. This begins with the arrest, Jones et al. (2013) write that at the arrest stage, information about the arrest is often not explained properly or made available to the offenders' families. In an evaluation of a United Kingdom-based offender family's hotline by Sharratt et al. (2014), they found that the families of offenders require more access to information, for example, information regarding the explanation of criminal justice processes as well as how to contact an incarcerated individual. This study also found the following, families require emotional support, support, and advice on various stages of the criminal justice system as well as raised awareness of available supports from agencies and organisations that can offer assistance in areas relating to finance and healthcare (Sharratt et al, 2014). The study highlighted the significant volumes of calls being received at this helpline service, indicating that it is a much-needed service. 80% of families stated that there are few supports made available to them and they saw this helpline as a 'unique' service because they feel as though they have "nowhere else to turn" (Sharratt et al, 2014; p.1). Having access to information and support is an area that is lacking for the families of offenders and prisoners.

The Stigmatisation of Incarceration and Its Wider Effect

Goffman (1963) coined the term stigma and described it as being able to affect personal relationships. Stigma refers to a trait or feature of a person that may label them as damaged or in some way less worthy of respect (Austin, 2004). Dovidio et al. (2000) described it as viewing a person as flawed or compromised. The label of criminal or prisoner is one with great expectations. Part of adaptation for prisoners is deciding whether to accept this label or resist it.

A survey conducted by Mahmood & Mohammad (2014) found that 75% of their participants felt as though their family had lost respect for them since they became imprisoned. The shame of offending and imprisonment is one that expands beyond the singular individual (Hadait et al, 2024). It affects a wider circle of people including their community. Unlike the offender, the family is still out in society and can face the stigma from their community. Hadait et al. (2024) wrote that the families of the participating prisoners experienced feelings of shame, isolation depression, stigma, and embarrassment. This study was in relation to Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in prisons, although Hadait et al. (2024) writes that similar results were found when researching white prisoners and their families. Stigma is also experienced by families by prison officers (Hutton, 2018). Grief and self-stigma affect an individual's ability to cope and be resilient (King & Delgado, 2020). Austin (2004) writes that prisoners can rely on prison subcultures to cope and to combat feelings of isolation and stigma and may not feel stigma as harshly as their families because they are surrounded by fellow criminals who do not necessarily look down upon law breaking.

Families may feel ashamed of their loved one and must cope with a common assumption that people in prison are dangerous or untrustworthy (Lebel, 2012). Arditti (2003) discussed how inmates families feel disrespected and criminalise themselves when visiting their family member in prison. King & Delgado (2020) write that these findings are consistent with theories of stigma, which suggest people close to an individual who already has a stigmatised identity can be directly affected and can become what Saunders (2018: p.22) deems as 'contaminated'. This can then lead to the alienation of prisoner's families from their community (King & Delgado, 2020). Research has shown the stigma attached to parental incarceration can affect children more than

other types of parental loss (Cramer et al, 2017). Children of incarcerated parents can be faced with stigma that suggests that the child will grow up to commit crimes also (Hannem, 2019). This creates a negative perception of the children of offenders. Partners of prisoners have reported losing their employment due to the stigmatisation of their partner's imprisonment (Kotova, 2018). This shows that stigma affects more than a person's feelings or self-esteem. The consequences of stigma are immense for both prisoners and their families. Sharratt et al. (2014: p.2) write that incarceration can cause issues or disruption with relationships, income, caregiving and "unwelcome adjustments to roles and responsibilities within the family". The authors also stated that family members often experience severe forms of stigma as well as bullying and social isolation. To cope with this, families often develop a lifestyle of secrecy in which they protect themselves from any negative assumptions or judgements from their community. Families may respond to stigma with silence, this silence is detrimental for many reasons according to Austin (2004) because firstly it makes the family unaware of other families in their position which makes them feel even more isolated and secondly society then continues to be unaware of the consequences of imprisonment. Staying silent or developing a lifestyle of secrecy has consequences for the family's mental health because families may not feel as though they can ask for support from their social circles (Sharratt et al, 2014). Partners and children of incarcerated individuals can experience worse mental health issues (Wildeman et al, 2008). First time entrants and their families may experience more stigma than those who are familiar with the criminal justice system. In the family helpline study by Sharratt et al. (2014), they found that families are hyper-aware of the stigma associated with being involved with the criminal justice system and therefore feel as though they cannot confide in anyone outside of their immediate circle. Another key feature identified in this study is the perceived level of judgement

experienced by the families of prisoners. Many participants confided in family and friends about their situation but were met with strong judgemental opinions. Hannem (2019) argues that family members can be viewed as risky, simply because they are associated with someone serving time in prison. Parents of incarcerated individuals are often thought to have been bad parents for this situation to occur (Austin, 2004). The stigma families of incarcerated individuals face hinders any efforts to instigate change or put pressure on governments or prison services to meet the needs of families (Hannem, 2019). It is also argued that many people may view families of prisoners as less worthy of sympathy because of their criminal association (Hannem, 2019). Austin (2004) writes that shame surrounding incarceration is contagious and stigma can stem beyond the immediate family, neighbours and friends of the family may experience stigma for supporting a family affected by incarceration. Hannem (2019) discussed instances where a member of the public would suggest that the family member cut contact with their imprisoned loved one instead of navigating the challenges that come with imprisonment. Goffman (1963) wrote about stigma leading to the collapse or termination of relationships. Maintaining relationships as well as the loss of meaningful relationships is an aspect of prison life and adaptation for both prisoners and their families.

Maintaining Relationships while Incarcerated

Having meaningful relationships is one of the most important aspects of human life. Having meaningful relationships has proven to lower health risks and increase rates of life satisfaction (Reis & Collins, 2004). Incarceration can lead to the loss of many meaningful relationships which can have a detrimental effect on an inmate's wellbeing and ability to cope while in prison.

Stigma affects personal relationships (Goffman, 1963). Family members may choose to cut contact due to stigmatisation from their community or contact may become a tedious task due to the rules and regulations of prisons. The emotional strain can often become too much for family members (Sharratt et al, 2014) so they may view cutting contact as the best solution. Research has estimated that up to 43% of prisoners lose contact with family members once incarcerated (National Offender Management Service, 2005). As discussed in the 'Navigating the Practicalities' section, there are many challenges to maintaining contact, such as the distance to prisons and travel costs (Sharratt et al, 2014). Due to technological advances in recent decades, prison visits are mostly booked online and there are now video call options (Irish Council for Civil Liberties, 2017). These aspects of maintaining contact can be a challenge for people who struggle with the use and technology, for example, elderly relatives.

Sharratt (2008) writes that maintaining contact with a prisoner is beneficial for many reasons, including sustaining many different types of relationships such as romantic relationships and parent-child relationships, reducing reoffending as well as maintaining the mental wellbeing of family members. If a meaningful relationship diminishes while an individual is incarcerated, it can cause serious issues upon their release, in regard to reintegration and communication (Naser and Visher, 2006; Mowen and Visher, 2016).

Kotova (2018) conducted a study on wives of incarcerated men serving long sentences. The women in this study reported that imprisonment was overwhelming because they could not fathom spending that much time separated from their partners. Participants in this study reported

that they were unsure about whether to maintain contact and their relationship with the prisoner for two reasons. Firstly, because of the ambiguity of their partner's sentence and not fully knowing when he would be released and secondly, the possibility that he would come out of prison a different man than before. Kotova (2018) wrote that the difference between maintaining contact as a wife versus family members is that wives are not biologically related and therefore have more of a choice on whether to maintain the relationship or not. The idea of not knowing when a partner will be released can be a reason for meaningful relationships falling apart.

Participants in this study also described times where they became dependent on their partner's prison routine, for example, if they did not receive a phone call at the usual time, it would lead to extreme worry. Maintaining contact with an inmate hugely affects the life of the individual on the outside, with some feeling as though their partner's routine (e.g., daily phone calls) has become theirs and they now feel institutionalised in a way (Kotova, 2018), therefore some may deem it easier to step away. There are high divorce rates among those serving time in prison (Hairston et al, 1991). The loss of a meaningful relationship can be detrimental for the incarcerated individual as the maintenance of meaningful relationships has a positive effect on their wellbeing and reduces the likelihood that they will reoffend (Claire et al, 2020).

Hairston et al. (1991) wrote that family ties while incarcerated serve three main functions, maintaining the family unit, enhancing the wellbeing of the family members and for the successful facilitation of a prisoner's release and success after release. The authors claim that incarceration can often lead to the breakdown of marriages and relationships. There are many challenges to maintaining a meaningful relationship while in prison such as the lack of time spent together, the costs of maintaining contact as well as the psychological/emotional effect on

both the inmate and their partner (Turney, 2015). Although some research suggests that imprisonment allows a relationship to succeed in ways it might not have in the outside world (Comfort, 2019). The stigmatisation of imprisonment as discussed previously is another reason for the breakdown of relationships (Turney, 2015). Turney (2015) discusses the changes to an individual once incarcerated and how this can contribute to relationship breakdown, for example, incarceration causing a decline in an individual's mental health (Schnittker et al, 2012) or engagement in violent behaviours (Nurse. 2002). Some couples will maintain their relationships because of the anticipation and hope surrounding the partners release from prison but often these relationships do not succeed (Turney, 2015).

Claire et al. (2020, p.303) found in their study that inmates initially felt connected to their partners both emotionally and physically and that intimacy within the relationship grows based on their 'exclusive' knowledge of each other. The authors described this as developing into "an experience of shared identity" and identity is something we know inmates strive for once incarcerated (Crewe, 2009). The study by Claire et al. (2020) also found that maintaining relationships over time takes skill and this act of maintenance can provide hope for male inmates that their behaviour can change. This study also discussed the importance of 'disclosure' for many couples. A lot of the relationships relied on confiding in one another as well as reassurance.

Other relationships suffer just as much, for example, parental relationships. Many incarcerated mothers limit contact with their children because of the embarrassment accompanied by

imprisonment as well as knowing that maintaining contact through letters, phone calls and visits can be stressful and costly although research suggests that children will benefit more if they maintain contact with their mothers (Michalsen et al, 2010). In fact, maintaining a relationship through letters, phone calls and visits can be crucial in supporting their children to grow and develop (Michalsen et al, 2010).

Conclusion

This literature review has explored the difficulties faced by prisoners and their families when adjusting and adapting to the realities of imprisonment. This review focused on four main aspects, coping with imprisonment in terms of adjustment as well as emotional coping and mental health, navigating the criminal justice system and prison system, stigmatisation and finally maintaining relationships while incarcerated. It is clear that both prisoners and their families encounter a wide variety of obstacles when adapting to this huge change. It is important to recognise these struggles and contribute to understanding the complexities of adaptation in this context so that supports, and interventions can be well-informed and therefore correctly targeted towards the needs of the people involved. Moreover, this research is timely and necessary, as it brings attention to the often-overlooked experiences of first-time prison entrants and their loved ones by shedding light on their unique struggles, this study aims to fill a critical gap in the existing literature. Understanding these challenges is not only crucial for academic discourse but also has significant real-world implications. It highlights the need for more targeted and compassionate interventions that can better support these individuals during such a difficult time. The insights gained here lay the groundwork for the next phase of this research, where my

personal experiences will be methodically examined alongside academic findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of these complex issues.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology used to explore the experiences of first-time prison entrants and their loved ones. Since there is little existing literature on this topic, a qualitative approach and a quasi-autoethnographically approach was chosen to deeply examine the personal and emotional aspects of first-time incarceration. This approach cannot be classed as autoethnographic but researching the methods of autoethnography provided helpful insights for the analysis of my journal. A desk-based approach was the most appropriate for this project due to time constraints and ethical considerations. The methodology focuses on thematic analysis, using a personal vignette and journal entries to gain insight into the challenges faced by first-time prisoners and their loved ones. A key part of this research involved analysing my journal notes from my first prison visit. These notes, including direct quotes and reflections, served as the primary data source, providing a first-hand account of the emotional, psychological, and practical challenges that arose during my experience of maintaining a relationship with an incarcerated individual. The personal vignette was used as a form of storytelling to put the experience of prisoners and their loved ones in a realistic context in which they could be understood on an emotional level. The analysis of both the primary data and the existing literature aimed to identify key themes that represent the lived experiences of both incarcerated individuals and their loved ones. This chapter will explore the main research questions, the research design, how the research was carried out and the methods that were used and why.

Research Questions

1. How do first-time prison entrants and their loved ones navigate and experience the process of adaptation to incarceration?
2. What emotional and practical challenges do first-time prisoners, and their families face in adapting to incarceration, and how does first-time incarceration affect their psychological well-being?
3. To what extent are first-time prisoners and their families vulnerable to stigmatisation, and how does this stigma affect their relationships?

Ethics

A desk-based approach was most appropriate for this research project for several different reasons. Firstly, this project involved reflecting and delving into distressing times in my life, which required careful consideration prior to committing to this idea. It was important to prioritise my own well-being and ensure that this research could be carried out in an ethical manner. Obtaining ethical approval from both the Maynooth University Ethics Committee as well as the Irish Prison Service to interview prisoners would be a major obstacle and even if approved, would take a significant amount of time to complete. Secondly, the emotional wellbeing of both the prisoners and their families would need to be considered as some of the topics that may arise would be distressing. Gathering my own primary data would take immense preparation as well as a significant amount of time to complete therefore analysing secondary

data was the more feasible option for this research project considering the time given to complete it.

Research Design

Desk- Based Approach

This dissertation adopts a desk-based research approach. The collection of primary data from a sample of prisoners and their loved ones would have been insightful and informative but was not a feasible option for this project due to ethical and time constraints. Desk-based research is a form of empirical research in which the data is gathered indirectly (Bassot, 2022). This research project was carried out by analysing both qualitative and quantitative secondary data and applying it to my insights via a vignette of my first prison visit. Taking a desk-based approach to this research project meant that secondary research could be examined, and new questions could arise (Heaton, 2004) and spark inspiration. Unlike primary research, secondary research involves the analysis of existing materials, which can include not only academic literature but also datasets and other sources of information. This can involve drawing on previously conducted studies or analysing raw data that was originally collected by someone else.

Using verified websites and databases, previous studies, prison reports, and other rich data sources were accessed and analysed without the need for primary data collection. This approach involved evaluating both quantitative and qualitative data, including my personal journal entries. To ensure the relevance and reliability of the data, clear criteria were established for selecting these sources. Given the focus on applying findings about prison adaptation to the understudied cohort of first-time entrants, it was crucial to ensure that the data was pertinent and applicable.

Qualitative data, gathered through methods like interviews, open-ended surveys, and observations, provides in-depth insights into attitudes and behaviours by capturing rich, context-sensitive information (Tenny et al., 2022; Guerin et al., 2018). In contrast, quantitative data, obtained through surveys and experiments, offers numerical insights to identify patterns, measure variables, and conduct statistical analysis, allowing for generalisation if the sample is representative (Kabir, 2016). The primary data in this case was the direct quotes taken from my journal at the time.

A desk-based approach allows this project to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in criminology and potentially highlight gaps in literature in relation to the supports available to first-time entrants and their families.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify and analyse patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Its flexibility makes it an effective tool for exploring qualitative data, as it allows for the categorisation and reporting of recurring themes based on the research questions. By systematically examining data, thematic analysis uncovers themes that are deemed significant by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of thematic analysis involves several key stages according to Braun and Clarke (2006) who write, the researcher must first become familiar with the data through repeated reading and immersion and then identify codes which can be sorted into themes. A report of the emerging themes is then created. In this study, thematic analysis was applied to personal journal entries, which were not originally intended for research purposes. This consisted of reading through the several journal entries,

identifying various codes and later, categorising them into four main themes. This approach revealed four key themes that align with existing literature on incarceration.

Retrieval of Secondary Data

Identification of Secondary Data Sources

To conduct a comprehensive analysis for this dissertation, I sourced secondary data from a range of legitimate academic sources such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and the Maynooth University Library. Google Scholar is a broad search engine for obtaining scholarly literature (Google Scholar, n.d). The use of Boolean operators is a helpful tool in narrowing down the search to only the articles containing the relevant criteria. Similarly, Scopus is a database in which research and reliable data is available across several different fields (Scopus, n.d). Scopus has advanced search functionalities. These functionalities allow the reader to refine their search. This is helpful when researching a broad topic. The Maynooth University Library is a university database that students can access to obtain several different types of academic research. This source is valuable as it may permit access to otherwise restricted articles.

I identified key words relevant to my research question to enter into these databases to find the appropriate literature. I created an excel spreadsheet to account for the research and readings I had viewed and organised them by key word for efficiency. This level of organisation is essential. Any secondary data I obtained was screened for relevancy and any irrelevant or outdated findings were excluded from the spreadsheet.

Key Words

The table below contains an example of the key words I entered into the academic databases.

- Effects/Impact/Unintended consequences of incarceration/imprisonment*
- Prison (Inmate/Prisoner) Experience (Life)*
- Prison identity/ Building a prison identity/ Identity as an inmate *
- Prison/Inmate/Prisoner Adaptation/Adaptation styles*
- Inmate/Prisoner Relationships*
- Aims of Imprisonment/Incarceration
- Failure of the Prison System
- Prison Visits/The Significance of Prison Visits/Visitation/Importance/Effects of
- Incarcerated/Imprisoned Fathers/ Mothers in Prison
- Families of Prisoners/Inmates*
- Costs of Incarceration/Imprisonment *
- Problems for the Families of Prisoners/Inmates *
- Rehabilitation in Prison/For Prisoners/Inmates*
- Mental Health Services in Prison
- Receiving Visits in Prison*
- Inmate Relationships with Family Members/Family*
- Inmate Relationships with Outside World*
- Loss of Meaningful Relationships while in Prison/While Incarcerated/Imprisoned *
- Maintaining Relationships while Incarcerated/Imprisoned/in Prison *
- Practicalities of Imprisonment/Incarceration for Prisoners/Prisoners Families

- Emotional Processes of Imprisonment/Incarceration for Prisoner/Families of Prisoners *
- Stigmatisation of Imprisonment/Incarceration on Prisoners/Inmates/Families of Prisoners/Inmates *
- Video Calls in Prison/ The Introduction of Video Calls in Prison/While Incarcerated/Imprisoned
- Effects of Prison Visits on Children
- Lack of Supports/Resources for Prisoners/Families of Prisoners/Inmates

**Any term with an Asterix was searched along with the term- First Time Prison Entry/Entrant*

It is important when searching key terms that a researcher searches the database using a range of inclusion/exclusion criteria to narrow down the search to find relevant articles, especially when researching a broad topic. Databases like Google Scholar use Boolean operators which allow a more focused and productive range of results. When entering key terms into the search bar, I used quotation marks to ensure that the research found was relevant, for example “Prison Experience.” It is important when searching multiple keywords to use either AND/OR to broaden the results. For example, ‘Stigmatisation of Imprisonment OR Incarceration’ or ‘Prison Staff Culture AND Prison Experience.’ To broaden the search, I took the different spelling of words into account (e.g., organisation and organization) as well as synonyms (e.g. looking terms up using both terms- incarceration and imprisonment), therefore no articles were missed. I also used the various advanced search functionalities to exclude older research that may not be as relevant. Conducting desk-based research also requires the researcher to take ethical

considerations into account. All sources obtained from the databases mentioned above were correctly cited/ referenced to maintain academic integrity.

Incorporating My Insights Through a Personal Vignette

Vignettes are narrative tools drawn from previous research to study human behaviour, such as attitudes, decision-making, or moral values (Gourlay et al., 2014; Hughes, 1998). Typically involving hypothetical characters in specific circumstances (Finch, 1987), vignettes are often used in qualitative research to elicit responses during interviews (Hill, 1997). While there is limited literature on their use in qualitative research (Barter & Reynolds, 1999), vignettes serve three main purposes: interpreting actions within a context, exploring individual judgments, and discussing sensitive topics without directly asking about personal experiences (Neale, 1999).

In this study, I incorporated a personal vignette from my own experience to complement the existing literature and provide a more relatable perspective on the challenges faced by first time prison entrants and their loved ones. The vignette, drawn from a journal entry during my first prison visit, was initially a personal reflection rather than a research tool. However, it was used here to connect the academic findings with real-life experiences, offering a clearer understanding of the emotional and practical difficulties that first time entrants and their loved ones encounter as well as allowing the academic discussion to be contextualised in a way that resonates on a deeper, more human level, particularly given the emotional nature of the topic. To avoid any confusion between the insights recorded at the time and those formed after further reflection, I have used direct quotes from the journal itself, which are presented in italics and enclosed in

quotation marks. By weaving this personal story into the analysis, I aimed to highlight the human side of the issues discussed in the literature. This approach helps to bring the theoretical points to life, making the impact of incarceration on prisoners and their families more tangible and easier to grasp for readers.

The use of vignettes appealed to my strengths as it allowed the project to include a more creative element that could appeal to the emotions of readers and therefore contribute to the readers understanding of the lives of prisoners and their loved ones.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The use of a personal vignette introduces subjectivity, which can bias the findings. Since the vignette was drawn from personal journaling not originally intended for academic purposes, it may not fully capture the range of experiences of first-time prison entrants and their families. Relying on just one personal story means the results might not fully represent the diverse experiences of all first-time prison entrants and their families.

Additionally, academic writing often overlooks incorporating personal insights, which may limit the study's engagement with the emotional realities of the subject as well as affect the perceived legitimacy of my findings. There is also a lack of existing literature specifically on the adaptation of first-time entrants and the impact of their first incarceration on their loved ones, which limits the depth of analysis. Ethical concerns around using personal narratives and time constraints also affected the study. With more time, conducting interviews with first-time entrants and their families, along with obtaining necessary ethical approvals, would have provided deeper insights and a fuller understanding of their experiences.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the experiences of first-time prison entrants and their loved ones by blending personal stories with existing research. The personal vignette adds a crucial human element, showcasing the real emotional and practical challenges people face during this significant life transition. While there are some limitations, such as relying on a personal journal and gaps in the existing literature on the adaptation experiences of first-time entrants, these aspects also underscore the study's unique value. By combining personal experiences with academic research, we gain a fuller, more relatable understanding of the impact of incarceration. After all, we are not robots—our experiences and emotions matter deeply. This approach sets a strong foundation for future research, emphasising the need to include personal and emotional perspectives alongside academic insights. Further studies could build on these findings by conducting direct interviews with first time entrants and their loved ones and gathering more data to enrich and confirm the insights gained. Overall, this study demonstrates the importance of understanding the human side of incarceration. It offers a meaningful starting point for deeper exploration into the adjustment process for first-time entrants and their families, paving the way for more comprehensive and empathetic research.

In light of these insights, it becomes crucial to explore the tangible realities faced by individuals and their loved ones as they navigate the complexities of incarceration. The following chapter delves into the reality of maintaining a relationship with an incarcerated individual and the many challenges and changes that accompany this difficult journey. By presenting both empirical data

and personal narrative, the aim is to paint a comprehensive picture of this significant life transition.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

Entering prison for the first time is both a psychological and emotional upheaval, an experience that shatters one's sense of normality and tests human resilience (Kirwin, 2022). Within the prison walls, inmates are thrust into a new reality where adaptation becomes essential for survival (Haney, 2003). Beyond these walls, families and friends are confronted with their own harsh new reality, where maintaining relationships becomes crucial for emotional survival. Coping with incarceration involves not just adapting to this altered reality but also managing the psychological and emotional distress that accompanies it. Prisoners and their families are subjected to a multitude of challenges, including financial strain, stigma, unemployment, family distress, substance abuse, and mental health issues (Sharratt et al., 2014). The advice to "keep your head down" and "get on with it" (Schinkel, 2015, p. 3) fails to acknowledge the profound impact of this life change. Visiting a loved one in prison for the first time underscores these harsh realities, revealing the stigma associated with incarceration and the complex dynamics of maintaining relationships in such unnatural circumstances. First-time inmates and their families, often overlooked and forgotten, represent a particularly vulnerable cohort facing these multifaceted difficulties.

Drawing from my own experience of maintaining a meaningful relationship with someone in prison, I encountered personal struggles that reflect the broader challenges highlighted in

academic research. This personal journey has not only mirrored the difficulties documented in literature but also exposed gaps in our understanding. While existing research provides valuable insights into the prison experience, there remains a significant gap in acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by first-time prison entrants and their families. Reading about these experiences from an outsider's point of view is informative, yet it cannot fully capture the visceral reality of living through it.

To analyse this topic, I reviewed entries from my personal journal written during the time of my first visit. Quotes taken directly from the journal are presented in quotation marks and italics. Other reflections included are insights I have drawn based on the knowledge I have now and the time I've had to reflect on this experience. This analysis aims to weave my personal experience with academic insights in order to highlight the difficulties experienced by the families and friends of first-time entrants in relation to navigating the practicalities of prison. Through studying the various literature on prison adaptation generally as well as my personal experience, I found that there are four main aspects of prison adaptation for both prisoners and their loved ones, emotional coping/mental health, navigating the practicalities of prison, in particular prison visitation and communication, the stigma associated with incarceration as well as maintaining relationships.

This chapter delves into the reality of adaptation for first-time prison entrants and their loved ones, using my personal experience to illustrate the difficulties faced. By sharing this vignette, I aim to shed light on the challenges of adjusting to this new normal, a challenge that is shared by many others. At the time, I journaled a reflection that captured the depth of my experience:

“Finding yourself in a completely unexpected situation such as allocating six minutes of your day to a dreary broken up phone call as well as your weekend to a heartbreakingly out of touch

from reality prison visit is not something that I ever expected.” This quote highlights the deep sense of disconnection and emotional strain I felt while dealing with these challenging new circumstances.

To begin, I will discuss my first ever prison visit, through the format of a personal vignette in which the four themes will become apparent. The title of my personal reflection "Inside and Out: A Journey Through My First Prison Visit" reflects the dual exploration of both the physical experience of entering the prison and the emotional impact on the visitor. It aims to provide an introspective look at the complexities of the visit, examining how it affects both the person behind bars and the one supporting them from the outside. By addressing both external realities and internal reflections, the title encapsulates the multifaceted nature of the experience, encouraging a deeper understanding of the challenges involved. The chapter will then examine the four identified themes in depth referring to both the personal vignette as well as the literature surrounding this topic.

Inside and Out: A Journey Through My First Prison Visit

I will never forget my first visit. I could not sleep the night before as nerves washed over me. The morning of, I gathered myself while triple checking I had everything I needed, my personal identification being the most important thing. Being secretive about where I was going was necessary but uncomfortable. I did not want my family knowing that I was in contact with someone in prison as that would be met with immense worry and stigmatisation. The stigma surrounding incarceration can often lead to social isolation and the breakdown of support networks. Reflecting on this, I felt an overwhelming sense of injustice and frustration. The

emotional impact of stigma was captured in my journal entry, where I described: that *“It shocked me to witness the judgements I faced from many of my family and friends for merely supporting a vulnerable friend”*.

The journey to the prison was filled with a mix of emotions, from anxiety to sadness. I knew I would be happy to see him, but a feeling of dread washed over me. I was particularly nervous about the practicalities of the visit, this being my first time and having no idea of what I had to do or where to go. Booking and arranging the visit itself was an already complex and unnecessarily difficult process so it was only natural that I would be apprehensive about the real thing.

I arrived at the prison car park. Nothing was clear as there were no informative signposts, therefore ending up with me parked in the wrong car park. My initial experience at the prison was marked by a sense of disorientation, as I reflected in my journal: *“I was so lost and confused. I didn’t know who to ask for help”*. I entered the main building to enquire about the location of the visitor car park and was very surprised to hear that it was free of charge. Upon my arrival to the actual prison, the sight of a dreary, stark environment, the high walls, barbed wire and stern-faced guards were intimidating to say the least. It was almost like entering a whole different world where normal social rules did not apply, instead you had to learn the new rules as you go.

I vividly remember entering the waiting area. Walking into the sight of several lockers with endless ‘out of order’ signs, queues of people and the screeching noise of crying babies. The overwhelming scene in the waiting area is etched in my memory, *“My heart broke for the babies, calling out for their dada”*. The facilities were not in the best condition with the bathroom barely closing, let alone locking as well as the toilet not flushing. The smell of tea and

toast filled the area, making it *almost* homely and the waiting area employees providing the little bit of comfort that they could. One of the main things I noticed was that “*the tea ladies were so kind and helpful*”, a stark difference from my later interactions with the prison officers. I was met with looks of confusion and curiosity by many people when I entered the queue. I was a new face, and most people were chatting and knew each other. This was their weekly routine, and I was raising curiosity. I continued to queue for my docket, pretending to ignore the persistent stares. One of the kind waiting area employees approached me and asked if I was new and gave me some instructions. She then turned to the woman behind me and said, ‘we have a newbie’. The woman and I then bonded over how confusing this all is for a first timer, she shared memories of her first visit, and we bonded over our frustrations about the system and how the prison staff and the prison generally are reluctant to explain or inform visitors about what is now routine for her. This kind woman told me to stick with her and she would show me the ropes. Amidst my initial disorientation, the journal entry recounts a pivotal moment when “*I felt such a sense of relief*”. Her kind acknowledgement of my cluelessness meant a lot to me. I made sure that if I ever spot ‘a newbie’, I always take them under my wing like she did for me.

I’m now standing at the heavy steel door outside, it opens only for me to realise in my nervous state I’ve left my phone in my pocket. I panic and run back over to the lockers. This meant I no longer was accompanied by my new friend. Queueing for the search, met by more guards and their stern faces making me feel more uneasy than I already do. I noted my frustration: “*It kills me that they won’t just smile, we are all human for god’s sake and kindness goes a long way. Especially in these situations*”. Little things threw me like knowing to take off your shoes and who you need to show your docket to. These are elements of the procedures that you are expected to know. The judgement from some of the guards was palpable. At the time, I observed

“It’s like the guards get annoyed when you don’t know the drill or take a little bit longer because you are not aware of the protocol. It’s not like they have a sign with instructions before it’s your turn or even simply what you can or cannot bring through. Simple things like this would be helpful for everyone including guards. Maybe then they’d smile”. I ended up speaking to a few regulars in the line. I had the same repeated conversation with each one. It usually entails comments like “I’ve never seen you here before, are you new to this?”, “how long is yours in here for?”. My response usually met with sympathy and empathy as well as the sharing of their own story. Usually, the conversation ends with something along the lines of “well look, it never gets any easier” or “unfortunately this is just something you get used to”. The sheer amount of solidarity I encountered during this process was moving, reinforcing my belief in the power of community and collective support even in the most challenging times.

I finish getting searched and am now expected to know where to go next with no direction from any officers until I explicitly ask and once again am met with annoyance and stern, dull faces. I noted that *"this whole process is extremely frustrating"*. At the next stop of the long journey to visitation, I arrive to the next steel door. I see that there is a doorbell, but I am not sure whether to press it or not. I did not want to annoy an already miserable officer. The discomfort of the environment is clearly reflected in my journal, where I noted: *“I hate that I was apprehensive to press a button. The level of uneasiness is palpable in this environment, and I can tell it’s not just because I’m new”*. To my surprise, the door is opened by a bubbly female guard with a big smile. She greeted me enthusiastically which made all the difference to my day. She lets me in and once again I am clueless about where to go next. I ask her and she kindly explains the next step. The comforting effect of the guard’s cheerful interaction is reflected in my journal entry, where I noted: *“Interacting with a nice guard really put me at ease”*.

Through stained yellow blurry screens, I see him. It felt strange being so close yet so far. The inability to hug or touch made the interaction cold, impersonal and formal. We exchange the usual 'how are you' to which he replies that everything is good. I pry more, only to realise nothing is good. He tells me about staffing issues inhibiting his routine, the struggle of the long waiting list for counselling, adapting to the constant noise, his back feeling broken from sleeping on the thinnest mattress known to man, his only outlet, the gym and the school being closed because of staffing issues, an extra two men in his cell sleeping on the floor. The list goes on. Hearing all the difficulties associated with prison life and prison adaptation made me feel so helpless. I remember feeling like the time went so fast. You would hear the jangle of keys walking around behind you waiting for an officer to approach, hand you the docket and say 5 minutes left, hoping you are not the next one. The sense of disorientation and the impact on meaningful conversation is captured in my journal where I wrote: *"I hated not knowing the time or how far into the visit you are. It's extremely disorientating and makes it difficult to know what to talk about, I'm not going to bring up a deep conversation topic if he is going to be escorted away in sixty seconds"*. While you converse, you try to ignore your surroundings so it just feels like a normal conversation but *"there is only so much you can block out"*. The abrupt goodbye once the guards decide time is up one of the most heart wrenching experiences, the hand goes up to the glass and your goodbyes are mouthed and as they are escorted away. Now all you are left with is the sad walk out. I noticed that *"everyone is on a different vibe"*, some leave buzzing, some in a bad state. The emotional aftermath of the visit cannot be underestimated. This experience empathises the emotional coping that is required when adapting to knowing someone in prison. Coping with this change requires resilience and a strong support system which can be undermined with the persistent stigma faced by those affected by incarceration.

The silent drive home left me overwhelmed by the strange new experience I just had. I arrive home, greeted with ‘how was your day? did you get up to much? To which I have to simply smile and say, ‘no not really’. Nobody truly understands it until they are the ones experiencing it. I used to often question if telling anyone was worth it.

Theme 1: Emotional Coping & Mental Health

Initial Entry & The Label of Criminal

Incarceration is widely recognised as a profoundly stressful experience characterised by the five primary "pains of imprisonment" or deprivations, the loss of goods and services, security, autonomy, heterosexual relationships, and liberty (Sykes, 1958). Moran. (2012) highlighted that these pains, although less visible than physical scars, are equally distressing. These deprivations require adaptation and coping efforts. After visiting my loved one, I noted that *“he is a shell of the man he used to be, I can tell the need to rely on guards to complete the simplest of tasks is really getting to him, he’s been completely stripped of his identity and his independence”*. The general public often overlooks the profound suffering caused by imprisonment, adopting an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude that fails to acknowledge the severe and lasting impacts on those affected. Society *“hides them behind walls in the hope that if the problems are out of sight and out of mind, they’ll simply vanish”* (Kirwan, 2022; p.11).

Incarceration has a huge effect on the mental and emotional wellbeing of first-time prison entrants and their families (Cunha et al, 2023). The prison environment is known to affect an

individual's mental and physical health, increase stress levels and overall decrease an inmate's life satisfaction (Wildeman et al, 2014, Wildeman and Wang, 2017). Research on the initial period of incarceration highlights the intense distress experienced by first-time inmates, which tends to diminish over time (Reitzel & Harju, 2000; Edwards & Potter, 2004). Jones and Fowles (2008) describe the inmate admission process as a significant break from an individual's past. Inmates are assigned an identification number, given a uniform, and required to surrender their personal belongings (Kirwin, 2022). For first-time entrants, this sudden and drastic change can greatly hinder their ability to adapt, leading to feelings of dehumanisation and disorientation as they struggle to adjust to their new environment. It is crucial to understand the emotional and mental health impacts of imprisonment in order to develop appropriate support mechanisms that are effective and tailored to the needs of this cohort (Cunha et al, 2014). This section explores the adaptation of first-time entrants and their loved ones in relation to how they emotionally cope with this change and the challenges to their mental wellbeing.

The sudden transition from living a life of freedom to one of confinement is world altering and can lead to severe psychological challenges. Successful adaptation to prison life is typically marked by compliance with institutional rules and stable psychological functioning (Kovacs et al, 2019). Kovacs et al. (2019) write that addressing guilt is a significant psychological challenge for first-time prison entrants during their initial incarceration period. The emotions and thoughts related to their offence can heavily influence their behaviour. Managing these feelings and reflections about their crime is crucial for their psychological adaptation to prison life. A study by Ireland et al. (2005) found that incarcerated individuals with no prior involvement in criminal activity experienced heightened feelings of guilt and shame when reflecting on their crimes.

These findings suggest that first-time entrants to the criminal justice system, particularly those from non-criminal backgrounds, may experience intensified feelings of guilt and shame when confronting their crimes compared to individuals with prior criminal histories. This heightened emotional response could potentially exacerbate their adjustment and coping processes within the prison environment. Souza & Dhami (2010) found that first time entrants experience worse emotional turmoil than other inmates. Jones & Schmid (2000) had similar findings which showed that first time entrants experience heightened fear.

Individuals who are incarcerated must develop strategies to cope with their new environment. Coping, as defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984: p. 141), involves the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person". Mohino et al. (2003) describe coping as the strategies people use to manage potentially stressful or psychologically damaging situations. The context of the situation significantly influences how an individual copes. Incarceration presents unique challenges where coping strategies are often restricted. It requires a conscious effort, rather than being an instinctive reaction (Mohino et al., 2003). Lazarus and Cohen (1977) note that imprisonment is a distinctive stressor impacting all aspects of an individual's life. In a prison environment, inmates encounter numerous daily stressors, such as adapting to new routines and coping with the various deprivations of prison life (Celinska et al., 2021).

The initial entry to the prison environment is accompanied with feelings of shock, fear and anxiety. Reality then sets in that the individual has now lost their right to freedom and autonomy (Van Der Kaap Deeder et al, 2017; Sykes, 1958). Research indicates that inmates experience elevated levels of stress, depression and anxiety during the initial phase of incarceration (Haney,

2003). First time entrants can struggle to come to terms and accept that they have been incarcerated. This denial can lead to possible antisocial or destructive behaviours (Liebling & Maruna, 2013). This is an aspect that concerned me in regard to the incarcerated individual that I support. I noted that *“I don’t want him to press the self-destruct button and just commit to a life of crime because all he will now be seen as is his crime”*. Diaz (2019) found that once an individual is labelled as a criminal, it can be hard for them to see themselves as anything more. Labelling theory suggests that those who are labelled internalise their label and engage in associated behaviours (Asencio et al, 2011). Therefore, we can infer that initially accepting the label of criminal may impact a first-time entrant's adaptation to prison as well as the likelihood of these prisoners engaging in rehabilitative efforts if they can't view themselves as anything more than a criminal. The stigmatisation of imprisonment and criminality generally, contributes to this. First time entrants have not yet built their prison identity or experienced the solidarity commonly found among seasoned inmates (Crewe, 2012). The lack of immersion into prison culture means that first timers may be less likely to internalise the label of criminal and its associated stigma. Consequently, if the first-time entrants avoid falling into the traps of prison such as the culture of solidarity and being exposed to criminogenic risk factors and initially resist adopting a permanent criminal identity, they may be more likely to engage in positive self-improving behaviours and rehabilitative work (Cullen et al, 2011) in an effort to separate themselves from their new peers.

Mental Illness

Incarceration affects the mental health and wellbeing of both the inmate themselves and their loved ones. It is estimated that a significant portion of incarcerated individuals suffer from

mental illness (Maruschak et al, 2021). Numerous studies have demonstrated that mental illness is more prevalent among prison populations than in the general community (Armour, 2012; Brinded et al., 2001; Corrado et al., 2000; Diamond et al., 2001). According to Finnerty and Gilheaney. (2021), the true prevalence of mental illness within Irish prisons is often underestimated. Speaking about prison, Kirwan. (2022; p.15) described it as “a melting pot of every physical and mental health diagnosis under the sun”. For first-time entrants, the shock of incarceration can exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions or trigger new ones due to the sudden and severe change in environment. On my first prison visit, I observed the toll that the first few months of prison had taken on him “*I’ve never seen him in a worse state*”. Kovacs et al. (2019) highlights that the initial experience of incarceration can induce mental health issues among individuals who did not have any prior to their imprisonment. This is supported by Kirwin. (2022; p.14), who observes that, “Inmates who hadn’t been diagnosed with mental health problems quickly developed them”. This underscores the profound impact that the prison environment can have on an individual's mental well-being.

There are differing views on the origins of this mental illness in prisons. Some argue it is brought into the prison environment by inmates (Carroll, 1974), while others believe that the conditions of imprisonment itself can induce mental health issues (Sykes, 1958). Regardless of its origins, mental illness is notably common in prisons and is associated with higher rates of violence, self-harm, and suicide among inmates. Mental health issues also impede prisoners from participating in activities that could aid their rehabilitation (Cunha et al., 2023).

The initial experience of prison life can be profoundly distressing, leading to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, isolation, and suicidal ideation (Cummins, 2020). High rates of self-harm and suicidal thoughts have been documented in prison settings (Hawton et al., 2014). In 2019,

the Irish Prison Service (2021) recorded 203 self-harm episodes involving 109 individuals, with one-third engaging in self-harm more than once during the year. Additionally, around one in eleven episodes (8.9%) had a high degree of suicidal intent, and mental health issues were the primary contributory factor in 56.2% of self-harm incidents. Data from the same study indicated that younger prisoners tended to have the highest rate of self-harm.

First-time entrants may be particularly vulnerable, as they are tasked with adapting to a whole new environment with its own rules while coping with the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). An issue with first-time entrants emotionally coping with their incarceration is their access to mental health services. Mental health services in prisons are often overburdened, according to Forrester et al. (2018; p.102). They also note that "criminal justice systems are overwhelmed by the high prevalence of multiple psychiatric disorders." A report from the Irish Prison Service (2022) found that the average ratio of psychologists to prisoners in 2022 was 1:226. This ratio indicates a severe shortfall in mental health resources within the Irish prison system, leading to inadequate support for the complex psychological needs of prisoners.

Many incarcerated individuals suffer from mental health conditions (Irish Prison Service, 2021), and the shortage of psychologists means that many may not receive timely or effective care. This increases the risk of mental health deterioration, worsens outcomes, and places enormous pressure on the system. Overwhelmed psychologists may struggle to provide and carry out individualised care plans, reducing the overall quality of mental health services in prisons. Without sufficient mental health intervention, first-time entrants may be more vulnerable to suffering from anxiety, depression, or other psychological distress. Early psychological support is crucial for helping them adjust and rehabilitate, but the high ratio can make it difficult for them to receive the attention they need. For first-time entrants, the lack of adequate mental health

support can be particularly detrimental as they navigate the new and stressful prison environment. Mental illness is a significant factor that can affect an individual's ability to adapt. Previous research has demonstrated that individuals with mental health issues often face increased challenges in maintaining and rebuilding family connections both during and after incarceration (Mowen and Vishner, 2016). Experts suggest that first-time offenders without any familial history of crime should receive psychiatric monitoring (Kovacs et al., 2019). This group tends to experience heightened levels of shame and guilt, which can contribute to elevated stress-related conditions and psychopathological symptoms (Kovacs et al., 2019).

The Psychological Toll on Loved Ones of Prisoners

It is equally important to consider the mental health and wellbeing of the prisoner's family and friends. Incarceration of a loved one can upend and disrupt lives (Chiu, 2016) and cause feelings of anger, shame, shock, or disbelief (Condry, 2007). The mental health of partners and children of incarcerated individuals can deteriorate significantly, putting them at greater risk of developing mental health issues (Wildeman et al., 2019). Research conducted by Braman (2004) found that the wives of incarcerated men experience higher levels of anxiety, depression and general social isolation compared to their imprisoned partners. These issues can often lead to separation or divorce once the incarcerated partner is released. Carlson and Cervera. (1992) discovered that women whose husbands are in prison face significant strain, including feelings of guilt and stress due to the responsibilities of fulfilling the roles typically carried out by their incarcerated spouses. This like many other aspects of incarceration would likely affect first-time entrants more profoundly than those who are recurrently in and out of prison and whose partners are familiar with their husbands being absent for some time.

Reflecting on the early months of his incarceration, I recall feeling completely overwhelmed. The phone call notifying me of his arrest was a turning point, unleashing a whirlwind of emotions: fear, confusion, anger, and, above all, a deep sense of helplessness. I found myself grappling with disbelief, clinging to the hope that this situation was somehow a misunderstanding. This experience underscored the emotional turmoil that often accompanies incarceration, highlighting the challenges faced not only by those incarcerated but also by their loved ones. Over a year later, waiting for a six-minute phone call has become a routine part of my day, and I no longer react with surprise to the stories I hear from within the prison walls. This experience highlights how, as I reflected, *“It is surprising how quickly you can adapt to an uncomfortable situation and watch it slowly become normality”*.

I struggled with the ability to cope emotionally with the arrest and imprisonment of someone close to me, *“I’ve been overwhelmed by the simplest things ever since he was arrested”*. The smallest issues became too much, and my level of anxiety was through the roof. My mental illness worsened, and I now spend an hour every week speaking to a professional psychotherapist. Losing someone to incarceration is considered a form of grief (King and Delgado, 2020). I did not expect to be as affected as I was. This led to me minimising my experience of grief. Firstly, because my relationship to the incarcerated individual is not straightforward or linear and secondly, I did not feel as though I could name what I was going through as grief because he isn’t dead. This is reflected in my notes as I wrote *“It almost feels like he’s dead but somehow with even worse”*. Arditti (2012) writes that the loved ones of prisoners are often left with a lack of closure when experiencing this type of grief, when in actual fact if the individual had died, the funeral would have provided this closure. In a study by Kotova. (2018; p.10) focusing on the wives of men serving long sentences, one participant

described having a loved one in prison as experiencing “bereavement but without the finality of death”. Coping with this strange feeling of grief wherein your loved one is psychologically present but physically absent (Kotova, 2018) is confusing, especially when applied to young children of incarcerated fathers or mothers. Emotionally coping with a loved one’s incarceration can mean being exposed to ‘muted, temporary accounts of the prisoner’s experience’ (Kotova, 2018). This can be psychologically taxing on the supporting individual. As I expressed in my own experience, “*All I want to do is help him, but I’ve never felt more helpless*”.

Theme 2: Navigating the Practicalities of Imprisonment

Initial Adjustments

The initial adjustment as touched on previously in relation to the emotional coping with incarceration, can be overwhelming for both the inmate and their loved ones. The transition from freedom to imprisonment is abrupt (Chiu, 2016) and world altering. I’ve witnessed a new inmate their family face confusion and anxiety as they navigate the complex legal and administrative procedures. First-time prison entrants also face the daunting task of adapting to a completely new environment characterised by its own set of formal and informal norms and rules (McKendy and Ricciardelli, 2021). This adjustment requires striking a delicate balance between conforming to the prison's social order and maintaining one’s individuality. The pressure to make a positive impression on fellow inmates can be intense, as societal dynamics within prison walls can create significant stress (Celinska et al., 2021). The need to fit into the prison hierarchy, where friendships and alliances play a crucial role (Crewe, 2012), demands careful navigation. The experience is further complicated by the regimented routines imposed by the prison system,

which may be a first-time experience for many new inmates, therefore requiring substantial personal adjustment (Haney, 2001; Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Schinkel, 2015).

In prisons, the social structure is starkly different from the outside world. The informal rules, often unwritten, govern interactions and behaviours among inmates. These social norms can dictate everything from who gets to be first place in line to the handling of conflicts. First-time entrants, unfamiliar with these intricacies, must quickly learn and adapt to avoid conflicts and to find their place within this micro-society (Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1961).

The regimented routines of prison life, including fixed mealtimes, work schedules, and limited recreational activities, require inmates to adjust to a level of structure and control they may not have previously experienced. The prison regime in Irish prisons typically revolves around maintaining security, discipline, and rehabilitation efforts for prisoners. Daily life includes routines such as scheduled meals, exercise, work assignments, and access to education programs. Inmates also have access to healthcare, vocational training, and psychological services, although overcrowding and limited resources can hinder effective rehabilitation. The prison system incorporates various levels of security depending on the prison, with some offering more open regimes for lower-risk inmates, allowing them more freedom and opportunities for work and rehabilitation (Citizens Information, n.d; Irish Prison Service, n.d). This strict routine can be both a source of stability and a cause of stress, as it limits personal freedom and autonomy (Schinkel, 2015). The mental and emotional strain of adapting to such an environment can be profound, often necessitating significant psychological resilience and support (Haney, 2001). The IPS Incentivised Regimes Policy started in 2012 and is now in place across all Irish prisons. It offers different privileges to prisoners based on their behaviour and participation in activities, encouraging them to stay engaged and follow the rules. There are three levels, basic, standard,

and enhanced. All prisoners begin at the standard level and can move up to the enhanced level if they meet the criteria for two months. This motivates prisoners to take part in structured activities and improve their behaviour, with the hope that any positive changes they make will continue after they leave prison (Irish Prison Service, n.d)

Becoming institutionalised means the once abrupt restrictions to normal life become of second nature (Haney, 2001) meaning there is no longer much need for active navigation. This is particularly transformative for those encountering prison for the first time. The societal pressure within the prison environment to fit in and the subsequent stress it causes cannot be underestimated. The friendships and alliances formed in prison are unique and crucial for survival and psychological well-being (Crewe, 2012). However, these relationships can be risky and need to be managed carefully to avoid negative outcomes (Liebling and Arnold, 2013).

Prisoners' relationships with each other are usually cautious and limited. Interactions are often tense and strained, with a focus on practical needs rather than genuine connection. Prisoners tend to form alliances to protect themselves and advance their own status, avoiding those who might cause trouble (Liebling and Arnold, 2013; Crewe, 2012).

For the loved ones of first-time entrants, initial adjustments consist of emotionally processing the incarceration of someone dear to them as well as understanding how to communicate. For the families of prisoners who decide to distance themselves, the adjustment can revolve around coping with the loss of a meaningful relationship.

Communication

Prisoners have access to three main forms of communication, phone calls, letters and physical visits with some prisoners offering video calls also (Irish Council for Civil Liberties, 2017). First time entrants and their loved ones must familiarise themselves with these forms of communication especially the dos and don'ts. Traditional methods such as mail and phone calls remain vital, despite being subject to various regulations and costs. Letters provide a deeper connection, while phone calls offer immediate, albeit limited, interaction. Families face financial burdens related to incarceration, which include expenses for phone calls, commissary items, legal fees (Boppre et al, 2022; Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2007). Families, particularly those with low incomes, bear significant financial burdens from visitation (Christian, 2005). In addition to the costs of travel, there are considerable time-related challenges, such as the duration of the trip and the waiting involved to gain entry to visitation. The introduction of video calls in Irish prisons has significantly alleviated the financial burden associated with traditional in-person visitations. By providing a virtual alternative, video calls reduce the need for families to incur these expenses, making it easier and more affordable for them to maintain contact with incarcerated loved ones (Christian et al, 2006). The introduction of these calls is particularly beneficial for prisoners with young children (McLeod and Bosnu, 2018) as it not only eliminates the need for young children to enter the prison environment, which can be intimidating and distressing but allows the children to interact with their parent from the comfort of their own homes, which provides a more relaxed and familiar setting (Hilliman, 2016). This setup allows for a more natural and less stressful communication experience. Video calls can maintain a sense of connection and normalcy despite the physical separation.

Navigating Visitation

Navigating the practicalities of imprisonment presents significant challenges for first-time entrants and their families. This section explores various logistical and emotional hurdles, including initial adjustments, communication channels, visitation procedures and financial barriers.

Prison visits are one of the keyways in which inmates feel connected to those in the outside world. Prison visits as well as the introduction of video calls have allowed inmates to maintain relationships with their partners, family members and children (Murdoch and King, 2019). They are crucial for inmates to maintain family ties and for adjustment once released (Sturges, 1999). Attending a prison visit for the first time is an extremely uncomfortable and daunting experience. Entering a prison environment often induces feelings of distress and anxiety (King & Delgado, 2020). Studies indicate that families frequently experience discomfort and unease during visits to incarcerated loved ones (Boppre et al., 2022). I resonated with that as I noted: *“The whole environment was eerie almost; in my head I was thinking all this hassle and effort of essentially fighting for a visit just to feel so uncomfortable”*. The process of scheduling visits involves navigating bureaucratic hurdles, adhering to specific visiting hours, and providing necessary documentation. The rules for visitation can be stringent, including dress codes and prohibited items, which can add stress to an already emotionally charged situation. The loved ones of first-time entrants need to educate themselves on their imprisoned relative's rights to understand the number of visits allowed each week. Visitation rules vary based on the type of prisoner; for instance, remand prisoners might have shorter but more frequent visits (IPRT, n.d). The Prison Rules (2007: Section 35) in Ireland specify the weekly visitation entitlements according to the inmate's status. Additionally, incentivised regimes, which reward good behaviour with more privileges, can also influence the frequency and duration of visitations. Families must be aware

of the restricted items and ensure they have the correct documentation when visiting (IPRT, n.d). Moreover, families need to understand the approved communication methods, such as the permitted number of letters and phone calls per week as well as be aware that all non-legal mail will be inspected by prison staff (Citizens Information, n.d).

Emotionally, prison visits are a double-edged sword. They bring joy and a sense of normalcy but also drive home the reality of the painful separation. The emotional toll each visit had on me is reflected in this quote: *“I love going to see him but part of me always feels a little more damaged after each one”*. The anticipation and excitement of seeing a loved one are often accompanied by the sadness and emotional toll of parting at the end of the visit (Fishman, 1990; Carlson & Cervera, 1992; Girshick, 1996). There are many problematic aspects of visiting someone at a correctional facility (Arditti, 2003). Families are affected by not only the direct experience of talking to and seeing their imprisoned loved one but also aspects such as their interactions with staff, the conditions of the environment, other visiting families as well as the policies of the prison.

Prison visits are both psychologically and physically challenging for adults and children (Hairston, 1988). Visiting individuals often feel stigmatised and treated poorly by the prison staff and find the conditions of the prison to be unacceptable (Hairston, 1988). Despite its flaws, these visits are important to both prisoners and their loved ones. Visiting a loved one requires planning and can be costly depending on one's circumstances, such as the distance from the prison and their means of transportation. The journey to the prison can be long and expensive, as many families must travel considerable distances to reach the facility (Boppre et al., 2022). For those travelling via public transport, the journey can be much more taxing as there are often very little

public transportation options (Boppre et al, 2022). Visitation is only one aspect of imprisonment that has proven to be costly for families.

The financial burden of supporting an incarcerated loved one can be substantial (Kotova, 2018) which can come as a shock to the family of first entrants. Costs associated with travel for visits, phone calls, and transferring money to their incarcerated loved one can strain family resources (Dickie, 2013). These financial pressures can be worsened by the loss of income if the incarcerated individual was a primary earner. It is important to highlight that a notable proportion of inmates and their families typically hail from economically disadvantaged areas (Hadait et al., 2024). Losing a primary earner from a struggling household can place even more strain on families. Support networks, including community resources and non-profit organisations, can provide much-needed financial assistance and emotional support during this difficult time (Comfort, 2007).

Families must also acquaint themselves with the criminal justice system and the legalities of court procedures. Understanding the legal rights of the inmate and their family is crucial. I have first-hand witnessed the stress families must manage when attempting to navigate a complex web of legal and administrative tasks, including managing legal paperwork, keeping track of court dates, and communicating with prison officials. For many, this may be their first encounter with the system, leaving them with little knowledge of how it operates. The process begins with the arrest, and as noted by Jones et al. (2013), families often receive inadequate information about the arrest. Sharratt et al. (2014) evaluated a UK-based hotline for offenders' families and found a significant need for better access to information. Families require explanations of the criminal justice processes and guidance on contacting incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, Sharratt et al. (2014) identified a need for emotional support, advice on navigating different stages of the

criminal justice system, and awareness of available support services for financial and healthcare issues. The study highlighted the high volume of calls to the helpline, emphasizing its necessity. About 80% of families reported a lack of available support, describing the helpline as a "unique" service where they felt they had "nowhere else to turn". A study by Ferraro et al. (1983) found that the biggest issue reported by the loved ones of prisoners was the struggle to gain information about the incarcerated individual and their ongoing situation. The families reported that the ambiguity of the unknown is distressing and causes emotional issues. Access to information and support for offenders' families is a critical area in need of improvement. One of the first steps in this improvement is to actively acknowledge the harm caused by imprisonment for both inmates and their loved ones. More specifically, paying attention to the experience of first-time entrants is essential because it highlights the emotional and psychological impact of incarceration, helping to ensure their rights and dignity are upheld. This focus can lead to better support systems, reducing trauma and aiding successful reintegration into society, ultimately contributing to a more just and humane criminal justice system

From my experience, I found the lack of information the most frustrating and witnessing those around me come into contact with a system that is unkind and utterly confusing. I vividly remember the difficulty I had when attempting to book my first visit. It took several attempts to secure the visit after endless frustrating emails back and forth to the prison services booking team. Each email left me further confused. I was trying to book a visit two weeks in advance as advised but after various attempts, my visits were declined. This is when I learned about the prison week being from Sunday to Saturday. So, the date I was requesting was technically not giving two weeks' notice despite the website saying visits could be made 48 hours in advance.

After assuming I had all the logistics straight, I requested once again. I was once again declined. This time because I booked two weeks *and a day* in advance. I was told to book again the next day. One inconvenience of booking a prison visit online is the limited choice when selecting a time slot, as visitors are typically only given the option of choosing "AM" or "PM." This lack of specific scheduling flexibility forces visitors to be available for a broad range of time. Depending on the time they are assigned, this can disrupt daily routines or require visitors to adjust their plans, accordingly, making the process less convenient for those with tight schedules. If visitors have limited flexibility or need to rearrange their schedules, it could result in fewer visits or more irregular visiting times. This inconsistency might affect the prisoner emotionally, as regular visits from loved ones are key to maintaining a sense of connection, stability, and motivation while in prison (King & Delgado, 2020). When visits become less consistent, it can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can negatively impact the prisoner's mental health and efforts to rehabilitate. This was an extremely frustrating process, I tried to prepare myself for the visit by doing some research from what to expect. There was such little information or guidance. At the time of my first visit, I felt alone and hopeless. I felt like everyone was looking at me like I was a clueless newbie. Now that I am far from a newbie, I observe the interactions in the waiting area before visits and I know that I did not imagine the stares, as I witness them now but this time from the other side. 'The regulars' really do know how to spot the newbies. Instead of staring and making them feel out of place like I once did, I do as the kind woman once did for me and offer to help or simply even make conversation. Both first time entrants and their families have to learn on the go, for families because of the lack of support and guidance and for first time entrants, because of the informal and unspoken rules of prison life. In a way, these two groups of people, although experiencing different perspectives have similarities in common in relation

to adaptation. The Irish Prison Service (IPS) website provides some guidance but organisations such as The Irish Penal Reform Trust and The Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas provide great insights and advice for the loved ones of prisoners on what to expect when entering the prison and the procedures involved.

Theme 3: Maintaining Relationships while Incarcerated

Fostering and maintaining significant connections is a critical part of human existence (Spikins, 2022). Studies have shown that maintaining meaningful social bonds reduces health risks and enhances life contentment (Reis & Collins, 2004). For imprisoned individuals, the loss of contact with the outside world carries a huge burden, especially in relation to losing contact with loved ones (Adams, 1992).

Visitation is the key contributor in being able to maintain my relationship with him. The experience of visitation can be both positive and negative. On one hand I really enjoy physically being able to see him, but I found that every time, regardless of how well it went, it has huge emotional effect on me and often caused me to spiral. At the time I noted that: “I feel like spiralling after every visit. It is so frustrating that he is only on the other side of the glass, so close but feels so far. I just want to give him a hug”. The hardest part is saying goodbye, each visit ends with gut-wrenching separation, leaving the visitor feeling a sense of loss and helplessness. The emotional turmoil is compounded by the reality that the majority of their time is spent apart making it difficult to leave their loved one behind after each visit. It highlights the stark contrast between the brief moments of togetherness during the visits and the long stretch of separation, this heightens the emotional turmoil and reinforces the harsh reality of incarceration.

This reoccurring pattern of anticipation, followed by brief moments of joy and subsequent sadness can significantly impact the mental health and emotional wellbeing of the both the incarcerated individual and their visitor (Carlson & Cervera, 1992).

Prison entrants will build friendships and social ties in to cope with the pains of imprisonment. Having a common purpose provides a sense of solidarity among inmates (Crewe, 2012). In my personal experience, I noticed that things started to pick up for him once he became close with the men on his landing. There is only so much I, as an outsider can understand about his experience and struggles therefore it was comforting for me to know that he had people in there who he could talk to that could fully understand what he is going through. New inmates, especially those incarcerated for the first time, may seek out particular groups within the prison to gain a sense of belonging and solidarity, which can help compensate for the loss of meaningful relationships from the outside world (Vanhooran et al, 2017). As mentioned before, maintaining contact can be done through phone calls, letters, video calls or physical visits. The Prison Rules 2007, Section 35 state that the number of calls or visits per week depend on your status as a prisoner, e.g., remand versus sentenced prisoners. The incentivised regime in Irish prisons is a system that rewards good behaviour by offering prisoners increased privileges. These privileges, which can include longer visiting hours, more phone access, and better recreational or educational opportunities. Planning physical visits can require a significant amount of effort, especially if the family live far from the prison or depending on if they have access to a car or must take public transport. Planning these visits becomes a central part of life for incarcerated individual's loved ones (Christian, 2005). Arranging visitation can be met with both emotional and practical issues, therefore making it more difficult to maintain a relationship with an incarcerated individual.

There are barriers to maintaining meaningful relationships while incarcerated such as stigma, emotional demands financial barriers, physical distance to the prison, and mental wellbeing (Hairston, 2003). According to Cochran et al. (2016), greater distance between a prisoner's home and the facility decreases the chances of family members visiting. Traveling to visit a loved one in prison can be both challenging and expensive for families (Arditti, 2002; Christian, 2005). The long distances many must cover often require significant time, effort, and money for transportation. For those with limited financial resources, these costs can quickly add up, making regular visitation difficult or even impossible. Since most incarcerated individuals come from low-income backgrounds, providing financial support for transportation and related expenses could make it easier for families to visit more frequently. Additionally, expanding visitation hours and offering more flexible scheduling options could further boost visitation by making it easier for families to fit visits around their personal commitments and work obligations (Boppre et al, 2022). In addition to the financial burden, coordinating travel can be stressful and emotionally draining, further compounding the strain on families trying to maintain a connection with their incarcerated loved ones. Prisoners can often encourage their loved ones to not visit to avoid negatively affecting the wellbeing of their family (Christian, 2005). Limiting reminders of the outside world is a type of adaptation seen among prisoners, especially those serving long sentences (Schinkel, 2015).

Families and friends of prisoners are subject to stigmatisation which can therefore cause them to permanently sever family ties as opposed to temporarily (Sturges, 1999). This is extremely difficult for the inmate in this circumstance. The lack of meaningful and frequent contact makes

it difficult for a lasting bond between both the inmate and their loved one, especially between children and incarcerated parents (Hairston, 1998). Studies on prison entrants generally as opposed to first time entrants, have indicated that as many as 43% of inmates lose contact with their family members upon imprisonment (National Offender Management Service, 2005).

Families of first-time entrants may be completely in shock, especially given that this is their first time coming into contact with the criminal justice and/or prison system and therefore may cut contact. This coupled with the stigma associated with offending can also lead to these ties being severed. This may be detrimental for the inmate given that family contact and support is known to encourage successful reintegration back into society (Hairston, 2003).

Inmates generally experience feelings of shame, guilt, depression and embarrassment (Hadait et al, 2024) therefore the inmates themselves may choose to cut contact to separate their family and friends (Schinkel, 2015) from these feelings. It must be noted that the unfamiliarity of the prison system officially as well as socially is overwhelmingly daunting for both first time entrants and their families. From what I have observed, I would argue that first time prison entrants are at risk of feeling these emotions on a heightened and potentially dangerous level which may lead to self-destructive behaviour including cutting off family and friends. Prisoners themselves must list the individuals whom they want to contact. Therefore, if an inmate acts destructively and cuts contact, the family have few ways of reaching out to support their loved one as the contact is initiated by the incarcerated individual themselves. Families can send letters given that they have the prisoners' details or can seek contact through the prison chaplain or in some cases the governor. Many prisoners tell their families not to visit so their loved ones can avoid the stigma and hardship that accompanies incarceration (Christian, 2005).

There are many benefits to maintaining contact with family while incarcerated. Positive and frequent contact with loved ones has shown to reduce recidivism rates (Declaire et al, 2020). Although research has found that factors such as the level of involvement in family life before incarceration matter in this context (Edin et al, 2004). In my personal experience, I saw first-hand the sheer number of relationships he lost due to his incarceration as well as watching what would have been regular, mundane relationships become significantly more meaningful.

Maintaining contact is beneficial for the mental wellbeing of both the prisoner and their family (Sharratt et al, 2014) The mental wellbeing of a first-time entrant is going to be tested greatly upon their entry to prison, therefore maintaining their meaningful relationships with those outside the prison walls is crucial. The loss of a meaningful relationship while incarcerated can cause issues for the inmate once released, in terms of their prison experience and their reintegration into society (Naser and Vishner, 2006; Mowen and Vishner, 2016).

I related to the experience of participants in a study conducted by Kotova (2018) in which the wives of incarcerated men were interviewed and discussed the reasons they considered not maintaining contact. Their considerations were in regard to not knowing the sentence of the incarcerated individual as well as the fear that he may come out of a prison a different man. The time in-between sentencing is a particularly tough time for both prisoners and their loved ones. The ambiguity can be a reason for meaningful relationships to be lost. Another aspect I related to in this study as the loved one of a first-time prison entrant was the pressure of choosing whether to maintain this relationship because I had the choice due to the fact, I am not biologically related/family. My choice to stay in contact despite having no familial, moral or legal requirement left me open to more stigmatisation from those around me. This often came in the form of judgmental remarks or people distancing themselves from me. I believe this was because

society tends to expect non-family members to distance themselves in these situations, seeing it as a reflection of their own character. There's a belief that maintaining a relationship with someone in prison implies association with their crime (Hannem, 2019). It's surprising how easily people can respect and admire you, until they see you supporting someone who has done wrong, *especially* in the eyes of the law, which some hold in high regard at times, but then conveniently overlook at other moments. In those moments, their judgment can come quickly, but it's in these situations that real character shines through. Standing by someone who's made mistakes, despite what others think, shows strength and loyalty. It's not about excusing what was done but about offering compassion when it's hardest. Staying true to your values in the face of criticism speaks louder than the approval of others.

This study also discussed how simply the loved ones of an incarcerated individual become dependent on the prison routine of the inmate. Wives in the study by Kotova (2018) found that their daily routine now relied on receiving contact from their imprisoned partner, leaving them feeling institutionalised in their own way. This can be termed as 'secondary prisonisation' (Comfort, 2003). The feeling of secondary prisonisation for an innocent individual in the outside world may be reason enough to step away from the relationship. The quick adaptation to his prison routine becoming part of mine is clearly reflected here in this quote; "It's surprising how quickly six-minute calls, separated by piercing beeps becomes not only part of your daily routine but something you look forward to".

Theme 4: The Stigma of Incarceration and Its Wider Effect

Stigma pertains to a characteristic or aspect of an individual that may cause them to be perceived as impaired or less deserving of respect (Austin, 2004). According to Dovidio et al. (2000), it involves regarding someone as defective or lacking in some way. Goffman (1963) observed that stigma spreads through personal relationships which can affect close associates and acquaintances. The stigma associated with incarceration extends far beyond the prison walls (Hadait et al, 2024) and arguably affects the families of inmates more than the inmates themselves. For example, Austin (2004) writes that prisoners rely on their subcultures to cope and to tackle feelings of isolation and stigma, whereas those on the outside may experience this stigma more harshly as they are surrounded by law-abiding and morally righteous citizens, compared to those who are incarcerated who are surrounded by fellow criminals who do not necessarily look down upon rule or law breaking. It is the families and friends of the incarcerated individual who roam freely and yet can be the ones subject to the most scrutiny or judgement. Stigma may be experienced differently across socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly concerning the prison population. Individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who make up a significant portion of the incarcerated population, might experience less personal stigma related to imprisonment. This is partly because imprisonment is a more common experience within their communities, and they may have more direct connections to individuals who have been incarcerated. In Ireland, individuals who end up in prison are significantly more

likely to come from, and eventually return to, areas of severe deprivation. Specifically, prisoners are 25 times more likely to originate from and go back to these highly disadvantaged regions compared to those from the least deprived areas (O'Donnell et al., 2007). This statistic highlights the socio-economic disparities that exist within the prison population, illustrating how deprivation and incarceration are closely intertwined. In contrast, people from middle or upper socioeconomic classes may experience more intense stigma if their family members are imprisoned, due to the relative rarity of such occurrences in their social circles and the greater social emphasis on maintaining a "respectable" image (Fishman, 1990).

The families of prisoners can experience ostracism from their communities, with friends, neighbours or even extended family members distancing themselves due to the negative connotations that are associated with maintaining contact with someone in prison. I experienced this stigma first-hand; *"It shocked me to witness the judgements I faced from many of my family and friends for merely supporting a vulnerable friend"*. The families of prisoner's experience feelings of shame, isolation, depression and embarrassment (Hadait et al, 2024). This kind of social isolation not only has intense effects on the wellbeing of those involved but also can lead to community breakdown, therefore removing any extra support networks and leaving the family and friends without the crucial social support networks to manage their situation. This left me feeling isolated, to which I noted *"I feel like I can't talk to anyone about it"*. Stigma is something that wears a person down over time. The stigma faced by those involved personally with a prisoner makes it more difficult for these individuals to be resilient, therefore directly affecting one's ability to cope (King & Delgado, 2020). I experienced complete *"disruption to my life"* which required a huge amount of resilience and coping.

Stigma is particularly harmful for first time entrants and their families. Firstly, due to their lack of experience with the criminal justice system. This can cause their first experience of stigma particularly jarring. Repeat offenders have had the opportunities to develop coping mechanisms whereas first time entrants and their wider circles can be unprepared for the social isolation and judgement that they will face following incarceration. The shift from normality to having a loved one be incarcerated is emotionally overwhelming. Families and friends of a first-time prison entrant may not have anticipated the extent to which they will be subject to social isolation and judgement, this can then cause further distress and shock. As mentioned before, stigma can lead to the breakdown of families as well as the collapse of social support networks (Sturges, 1999: Sharratt et al, 2014: Hannem, 2019: Goffman, 1963). Extended family members, friends and neighbours may distance themselves from the family to avoid any negative opinions from association with a family affected by incarceration (Hannem, 2019). This social isolation will be more distressing for the family and friends of first-time entrants who had previously maintained a respectable social status or social standing within their community, especially if the family had never once before been associated with criminality (Fishman, 1990). In contrast, studies have found that middle- or upper-class families might escape some of the social stigma of having an incarcerated family member. They might also reduce the impact of 'courtesy stigma' by presenting themselves as different from the typical 'criminal family.' (Kotova, 2020). Condry (2007) found that her participants frequently emphasised that they did not fit the stereotype of a 'criminal family.'

Those affected by the stigma of incarceration are more vulnerable to mental health issues due to the psychological and emotional burden that accompanies stigmatisation (Lopoo & Western, 2005). Again, the lack of experience in this area can result in high levels of anxiety and

depression as well as several other mental health issues. The societal perception that an offender will offend again is harmful as it is not necessarily truthful and the scrutiny and disbelief by the public towards those who have committed a crime can often drive offenders to accept this narrative and the label of criminal (Diaz, 2019) and therefore commit to a life of crime because they may feel as though they will never shake the stigma so why not indulge and commit to the title of 'criminal'. Societal bias surrounding first time entrants can be more critical as it is the individuals first time deviating from the norms and gaining the label of criminal. Once labelled as a criminal, inmates may internalise this label as well as the behaviours associated with it (Asencio et al, 2011).

Conclusion

In exploring the experiences of first-time prison entrants and their families, this research reveals a challenging and often painful journey. The combination of emotional strain, practical difficulties, and stigma paints a complex picture of adaptation and resilience.

First-time entrants face significant emotional challenges. Stepping into an unfamiliar and rigid environment, they grapple with the stress of adjusting to unwritten rules and the harsh realities of prison life. For their families, who may be new to this experience, the emotional burden is equally heavy, marked by grief and heightened risk of mental health issues. Practical difficulties compound these challenges. Families struggle with understanding communication protocols, managing visits, and navigating the complex legal and bureaucratic landscape of the prison system. The logistical hurdles, such as arranging visits and handling associated costs, add to their stress and frustration. Maintaining relationships is another major struggle. The stigma associated

with incarceration can push both inmates and their families into isolation. Visits, though valuable, are emotionally taxing and saying goodbye can be particularly hard. The stigma surrounding imprisonment can lead to the breakdown of relationships and support networks, making it even harder for families to cope. The stigma of incarceration impacts families deeply, often more so than the inmates themselves. For those unfamiliar with the criminal justice system, this stigma can be especially harsh, leading to feelings of shame and isolation. This social stigma not only affects mental well-being but also disrupts support systems, leaving families even more isolated. Reflecting on my personal experiences alongside the academic findings, it's clear that first-time prison entrants and their families face a multitude of challenges. Understanding these experiences sheds light on the need for greater support and empathy for those navigating this difficult journey. In summary, the findings highlight the need for more support and understanding for first-time entrants and their families. Addressing the emotional, practical, and social challenges they face is crucial for helping them adapt and cope with their new realities.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Discussion

As we conclude this examination of the experiences associated with first-time incarceration, one clear insight emerges: the experience of entering prison for the first time, along with the ordeal faced by a prisoner's loved ones, reveals much about the fractures in our society. It is not merely about the physical confinement of the individual behind bars; it is about the emotional and social imprisonment of everyone involved. These are the people who bear invisible sentences (Breen, 2008), whose lives are forever altered by an out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality that society imposes, often without thought or empathy (Kirwin, 2022). The impact of imprisonment is a heavy burden to bear, not only for the individual entering the prison system for the first time but also for their loved ones, who are thrust into a world filled with stigma, judgment, and systemic barriers that exacerbate the immense emotional and psychological toll.

By thematically analysing my journal entries from my initial prison visit and ongoing experiences, I have highlighted recurring themes such as emotional coping and mental health, practical navigation, relationship maintenance, and stigma. These insights emphasise the daunting and confusing nature of the prison system for newcomers, revealing a significant gap in the existing literature regarding adaptation processes. Ultimately, this dissertation reveals the heart-wrenching reality that adapting to the prison system is a relentless struggle for newcomers and their loved ones, underscoring the painful truth behind the title 'It Never Gets Easier'.

Core Findings

This research has explored the profound and multifaceted challenges faced by first-time prison entrants and their families, revealing a complex interplay of emotional, practical, and social factors that significantly impact their lives.

First, emotional challenges emerged as a predominant theme. Both first-time entrants and their families grapple with feelings of grief, shame, anxiety, and isolation. The initial experience of incarceration can be overwhelming for inmates, as they confront the rigid structure of prison life and the unwritten rules that govern their new environment (Crewe, 2012). Simultaneously, their families, often unfamiliar with the criminal justice system, experience a similar emotional burden characterised by distress and heightened risk of mental health issues (Wildeman et al 2019).

Second, practical difficulties were identified as significant barriers to maintaining relationships. Families encounter numerous logistical hurdles, such as navigating communication protocols, arranging visits, and managing the financial costs associated with maintaining contact (Christian, 2005; Boppre et al, 2022). These challenges not only exacerbate feelings of frustration and helplessness but also hinder the ability to sustain meaningful connections, which are crucial for emotional support. Third, the theme of maintaining relationships highlighted the intricate dynamics of visitation and communication. While visits provided a necessary lifeline for both inmates and their families, they also induced emotional turmoil, with the pain of separation often overshadowing the moments of connection. The stark contrast between the fleeting joy of visits and the prolonged periods of separation underscores the emotional toll that incarceration takes on both parties. Moreover, the stigma of incarceration surfaced as a significant issue affecting the families of inmates more acutely than the inmates themselves. Families often face social

ostracism and judgement from their communities, leading to feelings of shame and isolation.

This stigma can dismantle social support networks, leaving families vulnerable and without the resources necessary to cope effectively with their circumstances. For first-time entrants and their families, the experience of stigma can be particularly jarring, as they are often unprepared for the societal backlash associated with having a loved one in prison.

Wider Consequences and Future Directions

At its core, this study seeks not only to highlight the challenges faced by first-time prison entrants and their families but also to initiate a broader dialogue around these often-overlooked realities. By bringing attention to the emotional, practical, and social complexities of incarceration, I aim to foster greater awareness among policymakers, professionals, and the general public.

The emotional struggles faced by first-time entrants and their families reveal the profound impact of societal judgment. The shock of incarceration, the stress of adapting to prison life, the grief of separation, and the daily fight to maintain relationships are battles they must fight every day (Kotova, 2018). The additional burden of societal judgment such as disapproving looks during prison visits, whispers of gossip, and the assumption that association with a criminal taints one's character intensifies this suffering. These barriers are not only unnecessary but also cruel, worsening the pain of an already devastating experience.

To foster a society that demonstrates a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-time incarceration, we must shift our perspective from viewing incarceration merely as punishment to recognising it as an opportunity for rehabilitation and reintegration. This requires empathy and a

willingness to look beyond the crime to see the person behind it. It is essential that we ask ourselves what the purpose of imprisonment is if we, as a society, do not allow those who have committed wrongdoing a chance to do better. If the label of ‘criminal’ cannot be shed and if we continue to deny those who have made mistakes the opportunity to redeem themselves, then the very concept of rehabilitation—one of the main aims of imprisonment—is rendered meaningless. There is no hope for change if the world refuses to offer second chances. This question is not just relevant for the incarcerated individual but also for their families, who often suffer in silence. The loved ones of first-time prison entrants did not commit a crime, yet they are judged as though they did. They are subjected to the same harsh social stigmas, judgmental looks, and whispers. This punishment is unjust and reflects a deep-seated flaw in our societal attitudes toward crime and punishment. Fixing the issue of stigma surrounding incarceration can begin with individuals being present for friends who have loved ones in prison, without feeling the need to back away. This basic act of support is a significant step toward fostering understanding and breaking down the barriers of stigma. If someone feels discomfort or judgment when learning that a friend has a loved one in prison, it is essential to explore that feeling within themselves. This introspection can lead to greater empathy and help challenge the societal stigma that often isolates individuals and families impacted by incarceration.

It is crucial that society begins to recognise the profound impact that imprisonment has on families, as their experiences are frequently marginalised in discussions surrounding the criminal justice system. My aim is that this work serves as a catalyst for further exploration and understanding, encouraging a shift in perspective that prioritises empathy and support for those affected. By highlighting these issues, I aspire to contribute to a more informed and compassionate discourse that ultimately leads to meaningful change.

We must confront the systemic issues that exacerbate the challenges faced by first-time prison entrants and their families. Mental health services in prisons are overburdened (Forrester et al., 2018), and the support available to families is often minimal or non-existent. The practical difficulties of maintaining contact, visiting loved ones, and navigating the prison system are daunting enough without the added burden of social stigma (Boppre et al., 2022; Christian, 2005; Kotova, 2018; King & Delgado, 2020). Enhancing resources, improving access to mental health care, and fostering a more supportive environment for families can significantly aid their ability to cope with these challenges (Ferraro et al., 1983; Forrester et al., 2018; Sharratt et al., 2014).

The obstacles faced by first-time prison entrants and their loved ones highlight the urgent need for greater empathy and more effective support systems. The current prison system often fails to address the emotional, practical, and relational needs of individuals and their loved ones (Sharratt et al., 2014). Empathy is crucial for creating a more humane and supportive atmosphere. By recognising the emotional and psychological impacts of incarceration, we can develop improved mental health services and tailored support programmes for first-time entrants. Orientation initiatives, peer mentoring, and enhanced mental health care could significantly alleviate the emotional burden and foster resilience.

Furthermore, empathy is essential in tackling both practical challenges and the stigma associated with incarceration. Streamlining processes, providing clear guidelines on daily routines and informal rules, and offering comprehensive support services could greatly reduce confusion for both inmates and their families. Dedicated helplines can assist with these practical matters (Sharratt et al., 2014), while family engagement programmes within prisons and family therapy outside can help maintain and strengthen relationships during incarceration. Educational and skill-building opportunities within prisons can empower inmates to navigate societal prejudice

and stigma (Evans et al., 2018), while public awareness efforts can help diminish stigma for families. By integrating these approaches—simplifying the prison experience, offering support, and challenging negative stereotypes, we can develop empathy and establish better support systems, ultimately enhancing the experiences and future prospects for those affected by incarceration.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be noted. First, it is qualitative and quasi-ethnographical, relying on a personal vignette created from my own journaling. This means that the findings could be biased due to my subjective perspective. While the vignette helped bring the themes from the literature to life and made the experiences of first-time prison entrants and their families more relatable, it does not capture the full range of experiences that different individuals might have.

Additionally, there is a lack of existing literature that specifically focuses on the adaptation experiences of first-time entrants and the impact of incarceration on their loved ones. This gap limits how deeply I could analyse the situation and connect my findings to broader discussions in the field. Although the personal insights from the vignette add value, relying on just one story means that the study may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all first-time entrants and their loved ones.

Ethical concerns also played a role in the limitations of this study. While my perspective is important, it raises questions about how well I can represent others' experiences without their input. Future research should include direct conversations with both first-time entrants and their

families to gain a more complete understanding of their challenges. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I was unable to pursue this approach in this study. If I had more time, conducting interviews would have provided deeper insights and a better understanding of the issues at hand.

Recommendations for Future Research

To enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by first-time prison entrants, further research must focus on their adaptation processes and the overall prison experience. Currently, there is a significant gap in the literature concerning the unique emotional, psychological, and social hurdles that these individuals encounter upon their initial entry into the prison system (Souza & Dhimi, 2010). By examining the adaptation and experiences of first-time entrants, researchers can provide valuable insights into the specific needs and challenges they face, which are often overlooked in broader discussions about incarceration.

Moreover, it is equally important to explore the experiences of the loved ones of first-time entrants, who play a critical role in the emotional support system for those incarcerated, yet their perspectives and challenges are frequently marginalised in research. Engaging in interviews, focus groups, and surveys can provide first-hand accounts of their experiences, allowing researchers to capture the emotional aspects and practical challenges faced by both parties. Such research could lead to the development of tailored support systems and interventions that address the specific needs of first-time entrants and their loved ones, fostering a more empathetic and informed approach to the realities of incarceration.

Final Reflection

As I reflect on my own journey and the academic research that has informed this dissertation, it becomes clear that there is a dire need for change. The experiences of first-time prison entrants and their families are not isolated cases but are representative of a much larger societal issue.

The way we treat those who have committed crimes, and by extension their loved ones, says a great deal about our values as a society. If we continue to judge, stigmatise, and marginalise, we will only perpetuate a cycle of harm that benefits no one.

This dissertation sheds light on the often-overlooked struggles of first-time prison entrants and their loved ones. These individuals are deserving of our empathy, our understanding, and our support. They are navigating one of the most difficult experiences of their lives, and they should not have to do so alone, facing unnecessary barriers and judgment at every turn. The world has become a harsh and unforgiving place for those connected to crime, whether they are the ones who committed the act or the loved ones who stand by them.

This dissertation is written in honour of those who face this struggle daily. It is crucial to move away from approaches rooted in judgment and exclusion and instead work towards a future guided by understanding, compassion, and empathy. Consider a system where families can visit their loved ones in prison without feeling the weight of societal judgment, where the stigma of incarceration does not spill over the prison walls to affect innocent loved ones, and where those who have made mistakes are given the genuine opportunity to become more than their worst mistake. This is not merely a matter of fairness, but of basic human decency. Addressing these challenges ensures that all individuals are treated with the dignity they deserve. Once again, to those reading this who may be affected by the issues raised in this study, the empathy found in the prison visitor waiting room should be more than just a brief moment of relief; it should be a

constant presence. Your struggles and hopes deserve to be seen and understood. This work is a small step toward making that a reality.

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