



The Long Stretch 2

The emotional impact of long-term imprisonment on loved ones

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In partnership with the Building Futures Programme

About the Prison Reform Trust

PRT is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. It was founded in 1981 to inform and influence public debate on prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners, amidst concerns about a projected prison population of 48,000 by 1984. With the prison population in England and Wales approaching 88,000 and projected to rise to at least 95,700 by 2029¹, PRT remains as important to civic society today as it was over 40 years ago.

We are one of the few organisations willing and equipped to hold the state to account for its treatment of vulnerable people in prison. Our reputation, built over four decades of knowledgeable, reliable analysis and presentation of the facts, gives us influence behind the scenes that few organisations can match. PRT's main objectives are:

- Reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime.
- Improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families.
- Promoting equality and human rights in the justice system.

We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system, informing prisoners, staff and the wider public, and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. Whilst often working alongside the prison service and maintaining close links with government departments including the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), His Majesty's Treasury (HMT), and the Home Office, to retain its independence, PRT does not seek or accept government funding. The structure and rigour of our programmes are agreed with the trusts and foundations that fund our work.

<https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/building-futures>

Acknowledgements

This report is based on consultations with family members/loved ones of people serving a long prison sentence. We are grateful to them for giving their time and for sharing their experiences and insights. This includes "Jen" who kindly agreed to share her experiences. We would also like to thank the organisations that helped us to contact participants, the practitioners who took part, and Diane Curry, David Maguire and Rachel O'Brien and Claudia Vince for their input into this report.

¹ Ministry of Justice. (2024). *Prison Population Projections 2024-2029*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029>.

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Executive summary

This report forms part of PRT’s Building Futures programme that gives a voice to people serving long prison sentences. It is based on in-depth consultation with 27 people (24 with loved ones serving long prison sentences, and three practitioners). It follows on from *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences*, which was published by PRT in 2024 and is based on consultation with 133 long-term prisoners.²

Recent decades have seen an increase in evidence about the link between supportive relationships and prisoners’ wellbeing, desistance from crime and post-custody resettlement.³ This has helped shape the prison ‘family agenda’⁴ and policy change.⁵ There is also mounting evidence about how imprisonment impacts loved ones’ finances and wellbeing.⁶ Our consultation adds to this body of work, in particular understanding the *emotional impacts* of having a loved one imprisoned for a long time (for most, the prison sentence was between 20 and 30 years). These impacts matter in themselves: the loved ones of those who go to prison should not be treated as if they are guilty by association. But as Lord Farmer’s reviews around family support for prisoners show, any strategy serious about supporting the protective factors that external relationships bring, needs not only to consider the wellbeing of prisoners but also the toll that long term imprisonment has on those outside.

Emotional impacts

Participants highlighted the severity, complexity and relentlessness of emotional impacts they bore in relation to their loved ones’ long prison sentences. For most, this combined shock associated with the conviction, with profound and prolonged feelings of grief and anxiety. Many talked of feelings akin to the “living bereavement” described by one participant. These impacts were compounded by:

- Anger about what has happened and the length of sentence, while feeling worn down by trying to navigate the prison system, support their loved one and continue their day-to-day lives.
- Anxiety about whether prison staff were able to help their loved one progress and, for those whose loved one had been inside for over a decade, whether more time would undermine any progress made.
- The vulnerability of loved ones, particularly when they were young. Some mothers described having neurodiverse sons, whom they had anticipated would continue living at home throughout adulthood.
- Fear of repercussions where their case had been covered by media or where their address has been made public.
- Whether they felt heard during the legal process, and whether they perceived the outcome had been just and proportionate. Some raised specific issues about unfairness around joint enterprise charges and the uncertainty of IPP sentences.

Most participants raised problems about specific prisons. Many felt stuck ‘between a rock and a hard place’, where they felt compelled to raise issues but feared this could backfire on their loved one. Participants adopted a range of ways to help deal with the situation. For some, this included campaigning for sentence reform, while many tried to protect loved ones by hiding how incarceration impacted on them.

2 Hutton, M, and O’Brien, R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences*.

3 Richie FJ, Bonner J, Wittenborn A, Weinstock LM, Zlotnick C, Johnson JE. (2019). *Social Support and Suicidal Ideation Among Prisoners with Major Depressive Disorder*. Arch Suicide Res. 2021 Jan-Mar;25(1):107-114. doi: 10.1080/13811118.2019.1649773. Epub 2019 Sep 13. PMID: 31369343; PMCID: PMC7067664.

4 Lord Farmer. (2017). *The Importance of Strengthening Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*, and (2019). *The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders’ Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*. Ministry of Justice.

5 Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service. (last updated 4 September 2019). *Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strengthening-prisoners-family-ties-policy-framework>.

6 Dickie, D. (2013). *The Financial Impact of Imprisonment on Families*; see also Booth, N. (2020). *Maternal Imprisonment and Family Life: From the Caregiver’s Perspective*. Policy Press; Jardine, C. (2020). *Families, Imprisonment and Legitimacy: The Cost of Custodial Penalties*. Routledge; Kotova, A. (2018). ‘Time ... lost time’: Exploring how partners of long-term prisoners experience the temporal pains of imprisonment. *Time & Society*, 28(2), 478-498

Conclusions and recommendations

Research by Building Futures⁷ and others, including the Farmer reviews,⁸ have identified key factors that would better recognise these impacts and support those with a loved one inside, and we outline these below. However, amongst participants, a key desire that goes much broader than specific recommendations, was for greater public awareness of the emotional pain of having a loved one in prison. Participants said this would help them feel less alone and more supported.

For most participants, the arrest of their loved one was their first contact with the justice system, and many said they had held very different views about prisoners' families prior to this. Some felt if the public were aware that 'this could be them', this could create the required pressure to persuade policymakers to reduce sentences to a level that maintains hope and supports rehabilitation.

In terms of specific recommendations, we have tried to reflect issues raised by participants in this consultation, but have also drawn on Building Futures' earlier work, including that on long term prisoners' relationships. Previous research has shown the importance of developing prison cultures where loved ones feel supported and engaged. For example, research has shown the importance of providing comfortable and safe spaces for visits, and opportunities for loved ones to ask questions and feel supported. These factors can increase trust and enable loved ones to engage in sentence plans, support and planning for release.⁹ Taking this into consideration, Building Futures believes that there is a need for a 'Farmer refresh' informed by the increase in numbers of long-term prisoners, including those who are older. This central recommendation is set out in more detail below.

- With nearly 10 years having passed since it first commissioned Lord Farmer's review on the role of relationships in the adult male estate, *the MOJ should commission a 'Farmer refresh'* to explore progress and consider the impact of changes brought by the pandemic (such as increased use of technology). The review should cover the whole adult estate and pay specific attention to the experiences and needs of long-term prisoners and those people who have no external visits or contact. Such a review should draw on existing consultations with prisoners and families, and invite prisoners and their loved ones to suggest practical ideas in line with the Strengthening Prisoners Families Ties Policy Framework¹⁰ and its emphasis on innovation.

Considering this and previous consultations, such an approach should include:

- ***HMPs adopting a 'partners in progress' approach.*** This should build on the progress around the Farmer agenda but take a broader approach to identifying and enhancing potential sources of support. This should include the range of roles played by loved ones, peer workers, those with lived experience and volunteers, as well as the specific needs of long-term prisoners who are older and/or who have no visits or external contact.

Such an approach should be supported by HMPPS best practice guidance and aim to further embed lived experience (including that of loved ones) and peer approaches supported by skills training and qualifications where needed. In addition, all prisons should be supported to review their use of informal and formal peer workers including mentors and those supporting social care, prison visitors, pen pals and befriending schemes. As well as aiming to enhance and raise awareness of existing provision within the estate, the strategy should engage more members of the public to be partners in progress via pen pal arrangements, visiting schemes and so on.

- ***The government should increase investment in external agencies that provide emotional and practical support for prisoners' families.*** This should include increased access to early, clear information and support that helps people to navigate the legal process and, when a loved one enters custody, helps them to understand the prison system.

Participants in this consultation were acutely aware of the vital role they play in supporting loved ones, and their experiences highlight the stress and tensions involved in this, while navigating their own feelings. There are services that provide emotional support for families, and some evidence about the impact of therapeutic support during and after incarceration.¹¹ Consideration should be given

7 Hutton M, and O'Brien R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.*

8 Lord Farmer. (2017). *The Importance of Strengthening Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*, and (2019). *The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*. Ministry of Justice.

9 *ibid.*

10 Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. (last updated 4 September 2019). *Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strengthening-prisoners-family-ties-policy-framework>

11 Negash S., Chung K., and Oh S. (2022). Families Post Release: barriers and pathways to family therapy. *Family Process*, Vol 61, Issue 2, June 2022, pages 609-624.

to supporting external agencies to provide the loved ones of long-term prisoners with therapeutic support/counselling from qualified professionals who understand the psychological issues that the imprisonment of a loved one brings over a long sentence.

- HMPPS should increase provision of targeted practical and financial support to ease the burden on families of people who are serving long sentences. Our first Long Stretch consultation showed how prohibitive costs of contact – including travel – could be for the loved ones of long-term prisoners. Related to this, greater priority should be given to keeping prisoners close to home. Recent capacity pressures appear to have overridden this principle, to the detriment of family ties and rehabilitation.
- HMPPS should involve prisoners’ families and other supporters outside prison in sentence planning wherever possible, routinely and throughout the sentence. They should be involved in relation to setting sentence plan objectives and planning for resettlement.

Much has changed since the Farmer reviews were published. Revisiting its core principles and reviewing its impact would provide the opportunity to gain feedback from frontline staff and prison leaders on what has been most impactful and where the barriers lie. The review should include looking at whether HMPPS staff training is consistent with the Farmer agenda and be supported by HMPPS continuing to publish regular updates on progress against the recommendations of the Lord Farmer Review. Full implementation should be treated as a matter of priority.

Jen

I’m the mother of boys who were given a very long prison sentence. Although I shall always refer to them as my boys, they were both only in their 20s when sentenced and will be in their mid-50s when eventually released.

This is my story and my experience as a mum who has had her sons physically removed from her life. I still find it difficult to utter the word ‘life’ but that’s what they were given, A Life Sentence. They were sentenced under Joint Enterprise.

I’m extremely proud of my boys, clearly not proud of what they were involved in, but certainly proud of the men they have become. Growing up mixed race in a predominantly white area had its challenges. They were raised well, taught manners and respected their elders. They adored their grandparents, and my Mum and Dad adored them too. Popular at school amongst not only their peers but teachers also. They were extremely intelligent, artistic and creative, very witty, handsome and the life and soul of the party.

However, despite their intelligence and my greatest efforts to direct them, settling down to study with exams was unfortunately not high on their agenda. Accademia was not for them, and I simply couldn’t convince them otherwise. Like many young men they were eventually attracted by the ‘Quick Buck’. Inevitably they got in with the wrong crowd and quickly found themselves way over their heads in a world they had no business being in.

About this report

The Building Futures Programme

This report forms part of PRT's Building Futures programme that gives a voice to people serving long prison sentences (10 years or more for men and eight years or more for women), shedding light on the human cost of long-term imprisonment, and aiming to improve their conditions, experiences and progression. Building Futures is funded by the National Community Lottery Fund.

A fundamental component of this work is the development of a network of prisoners, former prisoners and their loved ones who have experience of long-term imprisonment. These voices enrich our understanding, and our work provides a platform for people to inform the policies that affect their lives. It is their priorities that drive the strategic direction of Building Futures. In late 2025, at the end of the programme, Building Futures will bring together the findings of all the consultations we have undertaken, identifying common principles for reform, cross cutting themes and key strategic recommendations.

Purpose and scope

Since the late 1990s, there has been a significant increase in research about the impact of imprisonment on families.¹² This has deepened our understanding about some of the links between prisoners' wellbeing, desistance and the presence of supportive relationships, as well as the ripple effects of imprisonment on families' finances, wellbeing and social networks. For example, a pan-European study found that children with a parent in prison are at a significantly greater risk of suffering mental health difficulties than those who have not experienced parental imprisonment.¹³

- In 2024 the MoJ estimated that between 1 October 2021 and 1 October 2022 there were 192,912 children with a parent in prison in England and Wales.¹⁴
- Approximately 45% of prisoners lose contact with their families after entering prison and 22% of those who were married become divorced or separated.¹⁵

In the early stages of Building Futures, family contact was identified as a priority by those serving long prison sentences. This report builds on earlier consultations, including that which informed *A Long Stretch: the challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences* published by PRT in 2024.¹⁶

One young man cited in that report talked about how long prison sentences can put "untold strain on almost all human ties so that both sides suffer".¹⁷

This second 'Long Stretch' report explores the impacts on those outside, some of the increasing number of people whose loved one is serving a long prison sentence. In particular, it focuses on the psychological impacts of long-term imprisonment on loved ones, as well as the support people value and would like to see available. As Lord Farmers' reviews around family support showed, having someone outside to support you through any sentence – and we would argue particularly a long prison sentence – brings protective factors in relation to prisoners' wellbeing, risk of suicide and self-harm, and their likelihood of offending when they leave. As such, the families and loved ones of those in prison can be a critical source of support that ideally would be recognised and valued as partners in progress.

12 Lanskey, C., Markson, L., Souza, K., & Loesel, F. (2019). *Prisoners' Families' Research: Developments, Debates and Directions*. Palgrave Macmillan.

13 Jones A., Gallagher B., Manby M., et al. (2013). *COPING: Children of Prisoners, Interventions & Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health*. Available at: <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/the-coping-project-publication/>.

14 Ministry of Justice. (2024). *Official Statistics in Development estimates of numbers of children with a parent in prison*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/estimates-of-children-with-a-parent-in-prison/official-statistics-in-development-estimates-of-children-with-a-parent-in-prison>.

15 Select Committee of Home Affairs. (2003). Written evidence submitted by Action for Prisoners' Families. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmhaff/193/193we38.htm>.

16 Hutton M, and O'Brien R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences*.

17 Ibid: page 40.

The perspective of long-term prisoners

Based on consultation with 133 people serving long prison sentences, *A Long Stretch: the challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences* focused on how a range of factors support or hinder people's ability to maintain, rebuild and develop relationships whilst inside.¹⁸ The report was welcomed by Lord Farmer whose reviews around these issues we return to later in this report. It includes participants' descriptions of how close bonds help them to feel human, cared for and maintain hope while inside, their experiences of having no, limited or disrupted outside contact, and how they felt this impacted their progress. Here we focus on the report's recommendations that are most pertinent to the issues explored here, and which inform our conclusions. These include:

- Embed greater recognition of the range of supportive relationships that long-term prisoners rely on, including more flexible use of visits and family days.
- Consistently communicate, raise awareness and clarity around visits, including accumulated and approved visits.
- Reduce the cost of contact, including enhanced use of technology and the development of a Long Sentence Allowance in recognition of how difficult and important maintenance of supportive relations are over the long-term.
- Provide long-term prisoners with one free phone call a week to one named person.

A Long Stretch also highlights the critical importance of a range of relationships that help people to fill 'dead time', maintain hope and progress over a long sentence. This informed one of the report's key recommendations; for HMPPS to develop a 'Partners in Progress' plan to build on its Families and Significant Other strategy. This should seek to expand and enhance the range of sources of support (including loved ones, peers and volunteers) and better meet the contact needs of older prisoners, foreign nationals and those who have no visits/external contact.

Who participated?

This report is based on consultation undertaken in 2024, involving 27 people: 24 (22 women and two men) who have loved ones serving long prison sentences (the majority between 20 and 30 years); and three practitioners who work with prisoners' families.

Relationship to individual serving a long sentence	Number of participants
Mother	12
Daughter	1
Stepfather	2
Female partner	5
Grandmother	1
Sister	1
Friend	2
Total	24

¹⁸ Hutton M, and O'Brien R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences*.

Methodology and limitations

Participants were recruited in one of two ways – either through organisations supporting families or via social media adverts. Information about aims, confidentiality and anonymity were shared, alongside clarity that close non-relatives could participate. This wider understanding of ‘family’ is reflected in policy and is important given the number of people in prison who have experience of care and/or have lost ties with relatives.¹⁹

To shape the scope of this report, we hosted a focus group where most attendees were mothers at various stages along the sentence. This helped to identify issues (see Appendix 1) and prompts used in semi-structured interviews conducted through remote, face-to-face and phone meetings.

Given the sample size, we have not disaggregated how people’s experiences were shaped by factors such as household income, neurodiversity, disability, ethnicity or location (although participants did raise some of these issues). It is important to note that incarceration disproportionately impacts some groups, including those who face poverty, marginalisation and discrimination.²⁰

We did not secure participation from those whose loved ones are women serving long prison sentences. This is likely to reflect the relatively small number of women serving such sentences and may speak to issues around support available. Also, no one came forward who had ceased contact with a loved one in prison. Lack of external contact seems to be a particular issue for older prisoners, those convicted of sexual crimes, and foreign nationals.²¹ Further research in this area would be useful.

Some participants were supporting loved ones serving an imprisonment for public protection (IPP) sentence or where they believed that false accusations had been made and/or felt there was lack of evidence for conviction, including where the joint enterprise doctrine was used. We highlight where these factors were raised but do not go into depth about these important issues.

Finally, it is important to note that many people supporting prisoners experience stigma and that the types of experiences that people shared with us can be difficult to talk about, particularly where a serious offence is involved.

Report structure

In the next chapter we outline some of the context in which this work is taking place, giving a brief overview of trends in relation to long prison sentences, recent policy changes and some of the work that has shaped the ‘prisoners’ families’ agenda. The third chapter sets out the key themes that emerged, and the fourth our conclusions and recommendations, drawing on this piece of work and previous consultations. Throughout, we have used direct anonymised quotes.

19 Prison Reform Trust. (2025). Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile. Available at: <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Winter-2025-factfile.pdf> See also Masson I, Booth N. (2018). Examining Prisoners’ Families: Definitions, Developments and Difficulties (ECAN bulletin issue 39). London: The Howard League of Penal Reform. Available at: <https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ECAN-bulletin-November-2018.pdf>.

20 Prison Reform Trust. (2025). Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile.

21 See for example, Hutton M., and O’Brien R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences* and Pryce J. (2024). *Growing Old and Dying Inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences*; see also Warr, J. (2016). The deprivation of certitude, legitimacy and hope: Foreign national prisoners and the pains of imprisonment. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 16(3), 301-318.

The year my boys were on remand was perhaps the hardest for me. It was a time when I was lulled into a false sense of hope that somehow everything wouldn't be as bad as it seemed.

Desperate to find a solicitor I could afford, I was sadly duped by a Court Clerk who posed as a solicitor, took my money and told me all the things I wanted to hear. He gave me and my family bad advice and false hope, which was very cruel. I did later manage to have him prosecuted. During that time, I was also subject to a great deal of intimidation from supporters of the prosecution. At times it was terrifying, the police supplied me with a panic alarm, even advising me to stay low and I moved in with my parents for a period.

When the day of sentencing took place, and the verdict was announced I simply remember falling to my knees and hearing an almighty scream, a howling. I was later told that the scream was in fact my own. My beautiful sons were to be taken from me and locked away.

I became a grieving mother, my boys were gone, no birthday celebrations, no Christmas family gatherings, no Sunday dinners together, unable to attend weddings, christenings, and most significantly the funerals of both their Grandad and Grandma. There was also the likelihood of no grandchildren. I describe it as a Living Bereavement. However, unlike parents who suffer the terrible dreadful loss of a child, sympathy and understanding are often unavailable to the parents of lifers. We are avoided, stigmatised and seen as unworthy of any sympathy.

For years I witnessed the neighbourhood gossiping, the nods and the finger pointing. People would cross the street rather than talk to me. All but the very closest of friends even found it difficult to engage in conversation. Despite this, throughout the years I have maintained some incredibly close friends who have always been there to support me. Likewise, my boys have fantastic loyal friends who after 16 years still keep in touch with them and visit whenever possible. And, naturally, bonds of friendship are formed over the years on the inside; these become as strong as family and just as necessary and yet are discouraged.

Some details have been changed in order to protect people's identity.

The changing context

Long-term trends

The number and length of custodial sentences in England and Wales have increased significantly over the last 20 years.

- The prison population in England and Wales has grown by over 40,000 people since 1993.²²
- In 2023, almost three times as many people received sentences of 10 years or more compared to 2010.²³

These increases are not matched by overall rises in crime but have in large part been driven by political decisions by the UK's main parties. Estimates from the Crime Survey for England and Wales show an overall decline in incidents of headline crime since 2017.²⁴ A House of Commons Justice Committee survey found that beliefs about sentencing do not always reflect reality. While the average prison sentence length rose from 14.5 months in 2012²⁵ to 20.3 months in 2022,²⁶ 30% of respondents thought they had become shorter and 23% that they had stayed the same.²⁷

The public are not as punitive as policy suggests. When given details of more typical cases, people tend to think sentences are too high.²⁸ A PRT-commissioned citizen's panel found a strong desire for "a system which is fair to everyone in society and prioritises keeping people safe whilst achieving better outcomes from reform and rehabilitation."²⁹ It identified key problems with the sentencing system:

- Low public awareness leading to misunderstandings that can unduly influence policy decisions.
- Systemic unfairness that disproportionately affects minoritised ethnic groups, women, and working-class individuals.
- Ineffective rehabilitation programmes that fail to achieve desired outcomes.
- Financial inefficiency, particularly with regards to prison costs.³⁰

Recent policy

Recent months have seen policy changes in relation to prisons in England and Wales. This includes implementation of the government's early release scheme aimed at alleviating prison capacity pressures³¹ and the creation of the Women's Justice Board aimed at reducing the number of women in custody.

In 2024, the government also announced the Independent Review of Sentencing, chaired by the former justice secretary David Gauke.³² The review is considering whether those who persistently offend should receive longer sentences and considering evidence from the UK and beyond, including the use of technology in alternatives to custody and measures that "boost rehabilitation" inside and in the community.

The justice minister highlighted a credit scheme operating in Texas where some prisoners can earn credits allowing them to reach their parole eligibility date sooner. The process excludes a range of offences

22 Ministry of Justice. (2016). 1993 – 2016 *Story of the Prison Population England and Wales*.

23 Prison Reform Trust. (2021). 'Long-Term Prisoners: The Facts', Building Futures. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Long-term-prisoners_the-facts_2021.pdf

24 Office for National Statistics. (2024). *Crime in England and Wales: year ending June 2024*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingjune2024>

25 Ministry of Justice. (2021). Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2021 – Overview tables. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62850135d3bf7f1f3ef483b9/cjs-bulletin-december-2021.pdf> (Accessed 13 October 2025).

26 Ministry of Justice. (2023). Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2021 – Overview tables. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/criminal-justice-system-statistics-quarterly-december-2023> (Accessed 13 October 2025)

27 House of Commons Justice Committee. (2023). Public Opinion and Understanding of Sentences, Tenth report of Session 2022-23.

28 Independent Sentencing Review. (2025). *Independent Sentencing Review: historic trends and sentencing*.

29 Hopkins Van Mil and PRT. (2025). *Citizens' Panel on Sentencing: findings report*.

30 Ibid.

31 Ministry of Justice. (9 September 2024). Guidance, New change to some offenders' automatic release dates. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-change-to-some-offenders-automatic-release-dates> (Accessed 13 October 2025).

32 Independent Sentencing Review 2024 to 2025 - Terms of Reference Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/independent-sentencing-review-2024-to-2025>

(including those more common amongst the long-term prison population). Alongside wider measures such as increased funding for prison education, this scheme is credited with helping the state of Texas to reduce its prison population, saving over \$2 billion and closing some prisons.³³

The review did not cover remand, IPP or youth sentencing, wholesale reform of the murder sentencing framework, or out of court settlements. In early 2025, its first report stated: “Rather than approach sentencing policy based on the evidence of what is likely to be most effective in reducing crime and reducing reoffending, too often the knee-jerk response has been to increase sentence lengths as a demonstration of government action. This has left England and Wales with a very high prison population by historic and international standards, which has diverted resources from other parts of the criminal justice system that could contribute.”³⁴

At the time of writing the government had laid before parliament the Sentencing Bill, the legislation intended to implement the findings of the independent sentencing review. The Bill introduces a presumption that prison sentences of a year or less will be replaced with sentences in the community, for those people convicted of an offence. While welcome, the measures included in the Bill are unlikely to have a significant impact on the cohort of people that Building Futures works with and more legislative changes are needed if the harms of long-term imprisonment are to be fully recognised.

Meanwhile, the prison population in England and Wales is projected to increase to between 95,700 and 105,200 by March 2029, with a central estimate of 100,800.³⁵ The estimated cost of prison expansion, which aims to add 20,000 new places by 2031,³⁶ is between £9.4 billion and £10.1 billion.³⁷ This includes the cost of building new prisons, expanding existing ones, and refurbishing the estate.³⁸

Building Futures, PRT and many of the participants here advocate for government action to address excessive sentence inflation and ensure that the use of prison is proportionate, cost effective and evidence based. However, these trends also highlight the vast number of people impacted by lengthy prison terms and the urgent need to explore and mitigate their consequences.

For the participants involved in our consultation, this means ensuring that individuals in custody have genuine opportunities to progress, reduce their risk, and, where possible (if they are not serving a whole life tariff), move towards a release. Progression is not only essential for rehabilitation and personal wellbeing, but also for managing prison capacity effectively, especially under current pressures, and for ensuring individuals are held in environments that match their assessed level of risk.

33 The Independent, ‘Prisoners could cut jail time by earning points in Texas-style reforms to ease overcrowding crisis’ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/prison-reform-shabana-mahmood-texas-b2619307.html> September 2024

34 Independent Sentencing Review. (2025). *Independent Sentencing Review: historic trends and sentencing*.

35 Ministry of Justice. (2024). Prison Population Projections 2024 to 2029. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029/prison-population-projections-2024-to-2029>

36 Inclusive of the 6,518 new prison places already delivered between 2020 and September 2024. <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/increasing-the-capacity-of-the-prison-estate-to-meet-demand/>

37 National Audit Office. (2024). Increasing the capacity of the prison estate to meet demand. Ministry of Justice and Probation Service. Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/increasing-the-capacity-of-the-prison-estate-to-meet-demand/> (Accessed 13 October 2025)

38 Ibid.

The role of and impact on loved ones

As the number of people serving long prison sentences has increased since the 1990s, so have those dealing with the effects of supporting loved ones in prison.

- In 2003, Action on Prisoners' Families reported that 55% of men and 35% of women prisoners lived with a partner before prison.³⁹
- The average distance to visit a woman in prison is 63 miles.⁴⁰
- In Scotland, Families Outside found that despite the increasing prison population, the number of prison visits is decreasing.⁴¹

Families Outside is working with Building Futures on a similar consultation in Scotland to the one that informs this report (which we return to later).⁴² There is also a range of evidence about the role loved ones can play in relation to people's prison experience and to desistance. Research has shown that experiences within prison can significantly shape both individuals' time in custody and their ongoing journeys beyond it. For example, one study identified several factors associated with desistance from prison violence—such as the presence of supportive relationships—and concluded that “enhancing these factors by whatever means a prison has available could help to reduce custodial violence.”⁴³

Research published in 2008 found that prisoners who received visits from a family member or partner were 39% less likely to reoffend than those who had not.⁴⁴ In addition, those who receive visits from family have been found to be more likely to have successful post-release employment and accommodation.⁴⁵ A literature review by HMI Probation found that families can:

- Provide motivation and support to cease offending.
- Help people adhere to substance treatment and supervision requirements.
- Encourage self-belief and engender hope in the possibility of change.
- Widen access to information and resources, especially work and housing.⁴⁶

In short, there is strong evidence showing that loved ones can play a significant role in reducing the pains of prison (including self-harm and suicide risks),⁴⁷ encouraging compliance⁴⁸ and improving post-custody outcomes.⁴⁹

This has fostered consensus around the vital role of prisons and partner agencies in supporting and safeguarding these relationships, in line with the state's legal obligations, including Prison Rules, and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prison's Healthy Prison Tests.⁵⁰

39 Select Committee of Home Affairs. (2003). Written evidence submitted by Action for Prisoners' Families.

40 Ministry of Justice. (2018). Table 5.1a and 5.1b, Supporting Data Tables for the Female Offender Strategy.

41 Families Outside. (2024). No Easy Journey; the Costs and Barriers of Visiting Prison for Families

42 Families Outside. (forthcoming 2025)

43 Mitchell M.M., Spooner, K., Jia, D., & Zhang, Y. (2016). The effect of prison visitation on reentry success: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Criminal Justice*. 47(C), 74-83. DOI: 10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2016.07.00

44 May C., Sharma N. and Stewart D. (2008). Factors linked to reoffending: a one-year follow-up of prisoners who took part in the Resettlement Surveys 2001, 2003 and 2004. London: Ministry of Justice.

45 Fahmy, C., Gricius, M., Chamberlain, A. W., and Wallace, D. (2022). Prison Visitation and the Likelihood of Post-Release Employment. *Crime and Delinquency*, 68(12), 2200-2224.

46 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. (2021). Probation Services - specific areas of delivery: Family Relationships. <https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/our-research/evidence-base-probation-service/specific-areas-of-delivery/family-relationships/>

47 Zhong S., Senior M., Yu R, Perry A., Hawton K., Shaw J., Fazel S. (2021). Risk factors for suicide in prisons: a systematic review and meta-analysis *Lancet Public Health*6(3) :e164-e174.

48 Burns, D., Murray, C., Ferguson, J., & Moore, L. (2024). The experiences of men in prison who do not receive visits from family or friends: A qualitative systematic review. *Criminal Behaviour & Mental Health*, 34(3), 271–295.

49 See, for example, Brunton-Smith, I. and McCarthy, D. (2017). The effects of prisoner attachment to family on re-entry outcomes: A longitudinal Assessment. *British Journal of Criminology* 57(2): 463-483.

50 Inspection framework HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-secure-training-centres-framework/joint-inspection-framework-secure-training-centres>.

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)	Prison Rules 1999
<p>Criteria reflecting requirements of Article 8 of ECHR; Respect for family life and private life.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Under section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA), a public authority is obliged to act compatibly with ECHR rights, including Article 8. The justice secretary and governors are bound by Section 6 of the HRA. Governors must ensure that their approach to family ties strategy is sufficient to ensure compliance with Article 8. 	<p>Each prison must ensure it operates in accordance with rule 4 of the Prison Rules 1999 and complies regarding outside contacts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Special attention shall be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family or significant other, as are desirable in the best interests of both, Prison Rule 4(1). A prisoner shall be encouraged and assisted to establish and maintain such relations with persons and agencies outside prison as may, in the opinion of the governor, best promote the interests of his family and his own social rehabilitation, Prison Rule 4(2).

Source: MoJ and HMPPS (27 January 2020) [Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework](#).

The Farmer Reviews

In 2016, the MoJ commissioned Lord Farmer to lead an investigation into how engagement with families in the adult men’s estate in England and Wales could reduce reoffending and address intergenerational crime. In his conclusions, Lord Farmer stated: “...a very simple principle of reform that needs to be a golden thread running through the prison system and the agencies that surround it. That principle is that relationships are fundamentally important if people are to change”.⁵¹ This notion also shaped Farmer’s subsequent review into the women’s estate.⁵²

Both reports make detailed proposals calling for a national approach to strengthening family and relational ties throughout the prison system, supported by strong leadership and sustainable funding. They emphasise the potentially traumatic impact of separation from children and make clear that the concept of ‘family’ must be inclusive – recognising diverse family structures and the broader networks of support that individuals depend on.

Since the publication of the Farmer reports, the MoJ and HMPPS have developed policy and practice, including publishing a framework document in 2020.⁵³ A progress report in relation to women published in 2023,⁵⁴ encourages governors to create “innovative approaches”⁵⁵ to engaging families and significant others.

Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework

- The need to have a Family and Significant Other Strategy in every prison.
- A senior member of staff leading on families alongside family service provision.
- Ensuring staff are aware of the importance of these relationships in reducing reoffending, preventing self-harm and suicide.
- Raising awareness about extended visits.
- The use of risk-assessed ROTL to enable people to spend time with family/significant others.

Source: [Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework](#).

51 Lord Farmer. (2017). *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners’ Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*.

52 Lord Farmer. (2019). *The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders’ Family and other Relationships Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*.

53 Ministry of Justice. (2020). Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strengthening-prisoners-family-ties-policy-framework>.

54 Ministry of Justice. (2023). The Farmer Review for Women Progress Report. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63d8d9b78fa8f51884b98716/farmer-review-women-progress-update.pdf>.

55 Ministry of Justice. (2020). Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework, page 6. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strengthening-prisoners-family-ties-policy-framework>.

In 2022 Lord Farmer revisited these issues in the wake of the pandemic, which resulted in face-to-face contact with loved ones not being possible during prison lockdowns.⁵⁶ In this work, Lord Farmer made a number of recommendations to be added to the government's implementation of the Farmer Reviews, including:

- MoJ/HMPPS to include families and relationships in all departmental documentation and communications related to reducing offending.
- Prison governors to revitalise efforts to implement their Family and Significant Other Strategies, including data collection through the new family measure and prisons' requirement and a senior operational lead driving change.
- HMI Prisons to undertake a thematic review on the difference family services made during the pandemic.
- Each prison to audit provision for first night and early days in custody, including deployment of peer support in this period and more broadly.
- HMPPS and DfE to pilot the integration of external visitors centres into family hubs networks, so families can access a full range of family support services.
- Improve prisoners' access to telephone contact and service contract terms, including the use of simple non-internet based mobile phones.
- Build on the pandemic's legacy of a hybrid system of visual contact, including improving video calls and social visits.

The experience of families and loved ones should not be seen solely through the lens of their influence on reoffending, progression and post-custodial outcomes. Their own wellbeing, and the emotional and financial toll they endure must also be recognised. As we will explore, participants are deeply committed to providing meaningful support, even as they face often profound and devastating impacts themselves.

While the Farmer reviews were commissioned to explore difficulties faced by those in prison, there is a range of evidence about the financial and practical implications by those supporting someone in prison, including, for example, work by Families Outside in Scotland published in 2023, which found that:

- The costs in supporting someone in prison falls disproportionately to women, affecting their physical and mental health.
- Prisoners' families overwhelmingly live on low incomes, even before taking the costs of prison into account. As a result of additional costs, many experience food and fuel poverty, and cannot afford many social activities.

A 2023 survey of families and loved ones by the Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT) found that half of respondents were finding it difficult or very difficult to pay for some of the basics, including food (49%), heating (50%) and clothes (68%). Over a third (38%) reported spending at least a quarter of their household income to supporting a loved one in prison, and 71% dedicated a minimum of two days per week towards that goal.⁵⁷

Previous work has also explored the health impacts of incarceration on a range of family members. PACT's survey found that most respondents reported a decline in their mental health (83%) and physical health (71%) since their loved one had gone to prison.⁵⁸ The negative impacts of imprisonment of family members on loved ones seem to be present to a greater or lesser degree, regardless of the type of relationship and demographics. A survey in the US, published in 2021 concluded: "any family member incarceration—and not necessarily the type of family member incarceration—has repercussions for mental health, and that these associations are not contingent on demographic characteristics."⁵⁹

A literature review published in 2015 concluded: "...the impact will vary according to the nature of the offence, pre-prison variables and other underlying difficulties, relational dynamics, care arrangements (before and during the period of incarceration), and the wider support systems and socio-structural

56 Lord Farmer. (2022). Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid, an addendum to the Farmer Reviews. Available at: <https://www.lordmichaelfarmer.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Report-on-Prison-Visits-FINAL-Dec-2022.pdf>

57 PACT. (2023). Serving a Hidden Sentence: the financial and emotional impact of a loved one's imprisonment.

58 Ibid.

59 Turney K. (2021). Family member incarceration and mental health: Results from a nationally representative survey, SSM - Mental Health, Volume 1. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666560321000025>.

context.”⁶⁰ Clearly, every family is different, but what emerged were common themes.

Our consultation aimed to hear directly from those affected about the psychological and emotional impacts of supporting a loved one in prison for long periods of time. We also wanted to explore the kinds of services – and possible gaps – that participants felt were important in alleviating some of these impacts, and how these were shaped by length of sentence. The next section outlines key themes that emerged.

Key themes

Below, we divide the themes that emerged from the consultation into three sections. The first outlines participants’ *experiences of and views about the criminal justice system*; the legal process, sentencing and their experiences of the prison system, including the cost of contact.

The second focuses on *the emotional impacts* that participants shared about their loved one’s sentence and imprisonment. This includes the initial shock of conviction, and their experiences of enduring feelings of grief and loss, alongside anxiety about their loved one. The third explores the *coping strategies and support services* that participants described, and their reflections about what they felt was missing/would have helped.

Some of these experiences and emotions are likely to impact many of those whose loved one receives a custodial sentence. However, what emerges clearly from participants is how a long sentence (likely to be an indicator of the seriousness of the offence involved) brings an intensity and relentlessness to these impacts.

The criminal justice system

i. The legal process

For those supporting a loved one accused of a crime, the process can be overwhelming and complex, particularly when a serious offence is involved and where the defendant is vulnerable.⁶¹ The processes and experiences can be made harder when people are not updated or given information that would help them to understand the sequence of events and what is involved.

While the CPS and legal representatives may provide some information, there may be legal and practical considerations about disclosing certain details to protect the integrity of the process. These restrictions may apply to cases discussed by participants and each case will be different. This said, some participants felt that, despite what was at stake, post-arrest and during the trial, they were not given adequate responses when they asked for clarification from legal representatives. This includes wanting specific information to be heard in court, such as factors they felt were mitigating circumstances.

The solicitor said to him you don’t even need to speak in court ...he didn’t even have a chance to give his own case.

Partner

Some participants shared examples where they had carried out work where they felt their loved ones’ legal representatives were not interested. This included protracted efforts to try and prove their loved one’s innocence.

I challenged the barrister.... I kept saying why aren’t we raising this, why aren’t we saying this in court, and he said ‘well it’s not relevant’...that’s because he had not read it.

Mother

I wrote a 40-page document...the barrister actually congratulated the solicitor on such a thorough piece of writing.

Partner

Every day his dad has got those files out and he’s gone through them with a fine toothcomb and then he’ll think of something else and then he’ll go through them all again... and for five years, he’s been doing that nearly every day.

Mother

60 Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, (2015). Weaver B. and Nolan D., Families of Prisoners: a review of the evidence; see also Fischer, A. (2025) Depth in simultaneous familial imprisonment, Punishment & Society. Epub. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745251330055>, for the perspective of people co-imprisoned at the same time as their family members.

61 Talbot J.et al. (2015). *Relative Justice: the experiences and views of family members of people with particular needs in contact with criminal justice and liaison and diversion services.*

One participant, who was also a victim of crime, was shocked by the lack of evidence needed for conviction. Some felt that the legal process was biased towards those with power or wealth or believed the prosecution had lied or twisted information.

[If] it meant that my abuser walked free because there needs to be a higher level of evidence then so be it.

Partner

There's people what's killed and... they've got away with it because they've got money, because they've got power.

Partner

I thought courts were about finding out who had actually done what and I've learnt that it's not. They're abusing and misusing the resources and they're just lying.

Partner

Some participants who were mothers spoke about their loved ones becoming involved in harmful and influential situations at a young and vulnerable age. In several cases, they described the difficulty of proving that an offence was not – as one mother put it – “a deliberate act”, while recognising that establishing intent can make a huge difference to the accused. Among those discussing cases of youth violence, some participants reflected on the often-blurred line between victim and perpetrator.

It doesn't make it right and it's horrible as a mum to speak like that but at the end of the day when there is two sides...and the stories that come out aren't the truth.

Mother

ii. Sentencing

Negative views about the legal process were exacerbated by the sentence received and whether participants believed it was fair or proportionate. Some expressed frustration as they believed their loved one was not a danger to the public. Others were angry as they believed there had been a miscarriage of justice.

...if my child went to prison for something they did, I'd probably be furious about the fact that they weren't more lenient...or the whole system; the way it works, something like that. I would be furious, and I would fight it, but the pain of injustice, when you know for a fact, they didn't do it, they've been targeted, that's a different level. And no one ever talks about that, they never try to separate it out, work it out, what does that feel like.

Mother

This was a mind-wreck for me, that mine had done nothing to hurt anyone was then swiftly removed and sent to a place that I would describe as hell...

Mother, end of sentence

Issues around IPP sentences and joint enterprise convictions were raised, including where mothers felt that these were unfair or unwarranted. In 2024, over 1,000 people were still serving an IPP sentence even though it was abolished in 2012 (this was not retrospective).⁶²

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) tracked the use of joint enterprise in a six-month period (from February 2023) in six areas in England and Wales. It identified 190 homicide or attempted homicide cases involving 680 defendants using this law and found black people were approximately 16 times as likely to be prosecuted than white people.⁶³ Black, Asian or people from minority ethnic backgrounds on a joint enterprise charge are on average younger and serve longer sentences than their white counterparts.⁶⁴

It was so unjust, it was racist. He's never been in trouble before.

Mother

The people who run into the net of joint enterprise are those that are most vulnerable...My son is a white guy, but this law does tend to impact black and Asian men... We've had a few autistic, very young... they've got life...society just wants to get rid of them.

Mother

62 Ministry of Justice. (2024). Table 1.Q.17, Prison population: 30 September 2024. Offender management statistics quarterly: April to June 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2024/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2024>

63 Crown Prosecution Service. Joint enterprise Pilot 2023. Data analysis.

64 Ibid.

iii. The role of prisons

There is strong evidence showing that some prisons are failing to deliver environments that are rehabilitative and humane. HMI Prisons has made 21 Urgent Notifications since 2017.⁶⁵ In his latest annual report the Chief Inspector of Prisons, highlights the rising number of prisons failing to meet the inspectorate's Healthy Prison Tests,⁶⁶ calling for "a much bigger conversation about who we are sending to prison, for how long and what we want prisoners to do while they are inside."

[The system is] setting them up to fail... there's no therapeutic side.

Mother

A few participants were aware of government commissioned reports in this area (including the Farmer reviews). Most had strong views about the prison system, including the lack of support available to those inside facing mental health issues, and did not feel their experiences were consistent with Farmer's recommendations.

These reports... pay lip service, so the government can go 'yes we've had this... and we're taking this on board,' but [they] don't do anything.

Partner

Golden thread as they called us, that's what we were called... [yeah] right.

Partner

They absolutely do not support family ties.

Partner

Participants gave examples where prison staff had been supportive, but overall, this was not their experience. Many shared concerns about young and inexperienced officers, and several linked staffing issues to the impact of government resourcing and difficulties their loved ones faced in accessing education and training.

If they're short staffed, they will lock them up for 24, 48 hours ... sometimes he'll say, we're not getting out this weekend, mum.

Mother

This is consistent with earlier Building Futures' consultations, where examples of care and support from staff were given, but where participants highlighted that commitment from prison leaders, officers and external agencies could be undermined by overcrowding and high caseloads.⁶⁷

If you're not empathetic, you should not work in a prison environment.

Partner

You're not supposed to punish them further once they are in prison.

Partner

Several participants felt security checks and surveillance undermined having a good visit. They appreciated these measures were needed, but wanted them used in a way that preserved dignity and privacy. Some raised issues of poor communication between prisons and those outside, particularly in relation to safer custody.

[Staff stand] 30 centimetres away from us each time we have a visit...we've never had any issues or problems...Either trust your checks or don't, you know.

Partner

Safer custody – what is the point in that. It's a recorded message and they only pick it up once a day.

Mother

There was a time when I rung the prison for two solid weeks to speak to somebody in safer custody and got no response.

Mother

⁶⁵ Information available through <https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/our-reports/> under the publication type 'Urgent notifications' (accessed 16 October 2025)

⁶⁶ Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons. (2024). Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons annual report:2023-2024.

⁶⁷ Hutton M., and O'Brien R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.*

The issue of racism experienced by those in prison was also raised. In addition, many felt frustrated by their lack of power to change things but felt compelled to try, even when this raised fear about making matters worse.

There's multiple occasions where I've told him, no matter what he says to you about your race... walk away...because they want that reaction.

Friend

If you don't complain, things go worse, but if you do complain, equally, they make things worse... you've got no cards to play. They've got... all the cards. That's the problem.

Sister

iv. The cost of contact

Previous research highlights the issue of families being able to afford contact, in particular the cost of calls and travel.⁶⁸ This can negatively impact people's relationships, particularly for foreign nationals or those whose loved ones lived outside the UK, and where an individual is held a distance from their loved ones.⁶⁹ It is important to note that for many of these families, these costs – or the restrictions on contact they brought – were borne over decades.

Can't visit him because he's so far away.

Partner

Emotional impacts

i. Initial shock and fears

For most participants, the arrest of their loved one was their first direct contact with the criminal justice system, and many talked about their 'ordinary lives' and not having expected to find themselves in this situation.

I've changed a lot of my friends' opinions by sharing my story ...showing them...The worst thing in the world could easily happen to them.

Mother, mid-way

Just so far removed from anything I ever thought I'd live through.

Partner

The experience of going through court, conviction, and sentencing with a loved one is likely to be stressful. These stresses are exacerbated where a serious charge is made and when the consequence could be a long time in prison. As well as the shock of the accusation and, often, the sudden absence of their loved one, several participants spoke about fear of repercussions where their case is covered by the media or where their home address has been made public. Comments by members of the public on social media can be distressing.

When the guilty verdict [in relation to a joint enterprise ruling] was announced and that was the worst time for me. I just fell to the floor...I couldn't do anything except lie on the floor like this animal screaming...and then I could hear the next mother screaming.

Mother

The papers put our address in there...I thought, we're innocent, we've not done anything, we didn't know anything...I felt scared for me, my kids, I thought something was going to happen to the house, I thought something was going to happen to my mum.

Partner

I had death threats.

Mother

Long sentences are likely to reflect the seriousness of a crime, and this can increase feelings of stigma, guilt by association, and fear of reprisal.⁷⁰ These feelings are sometimes evidenced by the actions of

68 PACT. (2023). *Serving a Hidden Sentence: the financial and emotional impact of a loved one's imprisonment.*

69 Pryce J. (2024). *Growing Old and Dying Inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences*, and Hutton M., and O'Brien R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences*

70 Condry, R. (2007). *Families shamed: The consequences of crime for relatives of serious offenders.* Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

others who withdraw from those whose loved ones have been charged or convicted and can result in them not sharing what they are going through. PACT's survey cited above found that 70% of respondents had lost contact with family and/or friends due to their loved ones' imprisonment, and nearly half (46%) always or often avoided sharing where their loved one was.⁷¹

Most participants had not expected to find themselves in their situation and felt that anyone could, under certain circumstances, end up in a similar position. Their sense of stigma and of being perceived negatively was shaped in part by their own awareness of how their perspectives had changed through direct contact with the justice system.

[I] used to think when the media put things out there it's more or less the truth... you're thinking badly, you know I've done it myself, I've thought bad of people.

Mother

I saw it as like only people with bad families go to prison and who hasn't been brought up nice or whatever... I realised that's not actually the case.

Partner

Participants' experiences resulted in them being more aware of the reasons why so many people end up in prison. Participants expressed empathy for others in the same situation and reported their loved ones' concern for peers inside. Some of the mothers felt that others believed they were guilty by association, and this was exacerbated by political and media rhetoric blaming parents for social issues.

Previous to the five years I've just lived, before that, I'd have been going, what do you mean, they're in prison and they haven't done anything, of course they've done something – I would have been one of them...

Mother

At the same time, the participants who were parents sometimes felt that they had failed their son or daughter even when they also felt that they had done all they could and that others could experience the same issues. These stresses are magnified when a long prison sentence and serious offence is involved.⁷²

We tried as much as we possibly could...I just don't know what I could have done... I wish I did because if I could turn back time... I wouldn't want to put myself through this...

Mother

What's also heartbreaking – and it's almost as if, he was my baby – this happened, and he's almost reverted back to the young man that we raised. That is so hard to comprehend because [pause] the conversations he has with [siblings] – concentrate on getting out, doing the best you can do, appreciate the time – I'm like – where's that come from? [My son said] I made wrong choices, and it's like what can you do about that?

Mother

Ethnographic work with relatives of people convicted of serious offences shows that, for some, this situation creates a difficult tension between wanting to support their loved one while not condoning their behaviour.⁷³ For our participants what came across was the despair they felt of not being able to change the system and to show that their loved one had made a mistake, could progress and be punished in a way that was more constructive to victims and the wider community.

ii. Anxiety

The length of sentence was a particular source of anxiety for participants whose loved ones were vulnerable. There are disproportionate rates of neurodiversity, people who have suffered trauma, bereavement, poverty and discrimination among the prison population.⁷⁴ For some mothers, their son was neurodiverse to the extent that they had expected them to live at home in adulthood if they were not in prison. Some talked about support being minimal or absent before convictions. Some mothers worried that they would die before their son was released.

When he comes out in 19/20 years' time... we might not even be here.

Mother

71 PACT. (2023). Serving a Hidden Sentence: the financial and emotional impact of a loved one's imprisonment.

72 Condry, R. (2007). Families shamed: The consequences of crime for relatives of serious offenders. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

73 Ibid.

74 PRT. (2025). Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, February 2025. Available at: <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Winter-2025-factfile.pdf>

I think – am I still going to be around in 27 years...probably won't [tearful] and I find that difficult, because I think who's going to look after him

Mother

For those whose loved one had already spent over a decade inside and had made progress during this time, there was anxiety about whether a further ten years or so would undermine this progress. Some were aware of the government's early release scheme and Independent Review of Sentencing and hoped for further changes. However, as stated above, the Sentencing Review and the Bill now before parliament will not usher in changes in relation to those people we focus on here.

After a while you're just defeating the purpose of him being there.

Friend

They are releasing prisoners [early]...but there's people [doing] life for joint enterprise or things like that...they've been in there 20 years, so they need to be rehabilitated and released. They're less likely to offend than the ones they're releasing now. [The government said] ...[it] will put... attention on joint enterprise...and IPP....I am holding onto hope.

Friend

iii. Grief and loss

Most participants talked of feelings akin to the "living bereavement" described by a mother in the focus group. Another talked about the five stages of grief but never being able to "hit the fifth one." Participants reported anguish that was likened by one mother to "mental torture", and a few had experienced suicidal thoughts or fears about family members who they watched closely.

You have to grieve for them – for that part of their – the life that you thought you were going to have with them...it's horrible. It's a horrible feeling.

Mother

This entire life is limbo. It's living in no man's land. I can't grieve.

Partner

I obviously knew he was alive but it just felt like a death...very weird.

Mother

While participants' responses differed slightly depending on the sentence stage of their family member, taken together, a key feature of what participants described was how all-consuming and relentless some of these emotional impacts are.

It's something you think about when you wake up, how many times in a day it comes in your head, it's just unbelievable – it's just always there. It's always there.

Mother

I would go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning and that's the first thing.

Mother

Those at the beginning of the sentence face having to contend with significant, rapid practical and financial changes, including, for some, the impact on children, as well the immediate shock and pain of what has happened.

It's just so raw. I just want to get to the stage where it doesn't hurt so much.

Mother

There were about 18 months at the beginning...that I don't even remember... apparently, I just sat at the kitchen table just processing...your brain shuts off to protect you.

Mother

Those further down the road reflected on these initial impacts, but also talked of how having a loved one lose their freedom for a long period of time still affects day-to-day life. While this is particularly the case around family events such as birthdays and religious festivals, everyday activities can be painful.

I wouldn't want to go back to how I felt... I've probably protected myself a little bit from that, not blocked out but not wanting to relive how awful that was.

Mother and grandmother

I can't listen to music...because music was his life. He loved music – he'd come out the shower dancing. It's silly things like that that people don't understand how much it kind of gets to your heart and knowing that he's not there anymore.

Mother

Participants found it difficult to get on with their own lives because of the suffering their loved one was experiencing. This psychological trauma continued over long periods with participants feeling that they could not be 'whole' until their loved one was released. Thoughts of their loved ones are always present. Many family members described going to great lengths not to miss a phone call and feeling devastated and anxious when they did. Several spoke of the constant vigilance this creates – looking forward to a time when they no longer need to take their phone everywhere, even to the bathroom, and feeling panicked if they are momentarily unavailable in case they miss a call.

No matter what you're doing... you will have a thought of him not living his life...and that's just a feeling that never goes away...it's always on my mind... I almost feel like I can't, you know, be happy with anything...it consumes me.

Friend

Those phone calls, so engrained in my life.

Mother, focus group end of sentence

Ways of coping and support

i. Managing and minimizing

An area of exploration was the extent to which participants sought to protect their loved one in prison - such as concealing or masking their own pain - and whether this protective behaviour was reciprocated. Several agreed with one who said, "it works both ways".

You affect each other I think because he can pick up on my tone if I had a bad day or, or I'm not feeling great...and equally the same for him.

Partner

Some felt that they had to hold back on enjoying themselves and taking part in some activities because they felt guilty. At the same time participants talked about not wanting their loved ones to know they were doing this or pretending they were not doing anything but feared this would create barriers.

If we're doing anything or going anywhere, you don't tell him because you don't want it to look like you're doing all this and not bothered, and he's stuck in there.

Grandmother

You don't want to tell him that you've got no life that you don't do anything because he doesn't want to hear that.

Mother

I didn't want to rub his nose in it either - so it's like a fine balance.

Mother

Participants described being constantly vigilant, including not putting pressure on loved ones whose mental health was a constant concern. Some tried to minimise unnecessary stress for their loved one by not sharing issues at home. Others said they found it easier to be completely honest as having to constantly negotiate how and what to say in these circumstances is exhausting for them and their loved ones.

If anybody's ill you over-exaggerate – oh no don't worry it's fine.

Mother

I realised early on, there's no point hiding anything, if it's going to be bad news you have to say it.

Sister

These findings echo *A Long Stretch* where some participants talk about trying to protect their loved ones outside by not – as one put it – sharing the "reality of the situation" inside. Others stopped children/grandchildren visiting or ended relationships in an attempt to alleviate the impacts of their sentence on those they cared about.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Hutton M, and O'Brien R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.*

ii. Support services

There are a range of services supporting family members and significant others. Organisations such as POPS provide help both with the initial process of coming to terms with a loved one's long-term incarceration, and with ongoing practical and emotional support.

POPS

POPS is a user-led organisation, supporting families through their contact with the criminal justice system because of a loved one's conviction. It provides a range of prison-based and community-focused services, including:

- Support services in prisons in the North-West, Yorkshire and Leicestershire.
- Support for the families of those on probation across Greater Manchester.
- Community-based support for women in Oldham.
- Prison and community-based education programmes.
- Awareness training for professionals.
- Community-based interventions for prisoners from BAME backgrounds.
- Advocacy and support for under-represented communities.

Source: POPS <https://www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk/>

Participants spoke about some of the organisations supporting families, stressing the importance of having someone show compassion and kindness without judgement. Several participants said they would have liked more practical support to help them understand the criminal justice system and its processes, including how to communicate with the prison and where to find relevant contact details for support.

...someone from that [organisation], she constantly private messages me to see if I'm ok and any time I need a chat.

Partner

She's absolutely lovely... I really do like [her] she's really nice and understanding.

Mother

Probably at the beginning I would have really, really wanted someone to walk me through how the system worked.

Partner

There are support services offered in some courts. For example, PACT's Court Support Service, in some London courts and one Welsh court, offers emotional and practical support, including information about how sentences are calculated, which prison a defendant is likely to be sent to, and how to contact the prison with any concerns.⁷⁶

Interviews with practitioners highlighted the challenge of sustaining support over extended periods and the complexities of planning adequate resources. This resonates with the Clinks' state of the sector research which in 2024 found that the criminal justice voluntary sector operates in a challenging and uncertain environment, particularly when it came to government contracting (as opposed to grant funding).⁷⁷

If you were to say...we can support families for, you know, 12 weeks or something, that's of very little use to someone who's going to be... there for 10 years plus. So it's [about] how to make sure families know they can keep coming back for support.

Practitioner

When it came to gaps in services, several participants highlighted the need for counselling, in particular specialised support from those who were qualified and understood the emotional issues that the imprisonment of a loved one brings, particularly over a long sentence.

I think getting some sort of talking therapy would benefit me massively...I never get the chance to speak about it.

Friend

⁷⁶ PACT. Support for defendants' families in court. <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/get-help/families/court-support/>

⁷⁷ Clinks State of the Sector 2023-24 <https://www.clinks.org/state-sector-2024>.

If I was to go to a counsellor now and say oh my partner's in prison...I feel like there would be some [judgement]. Whereas if I was [able to] speak to a counsellor who already had loads of clients with the same situation I would feel more comfortable.

Partner

If somebody dies you might get offered counselling, bereavement counselling from your GP, charities...when it's this kind of bereavement, you just don't get offered the same amount of support.

Partner

iii. Advocacy and supporting others

Several participants turned to campaigning - not only to support their loved ones but also others in similar situations – and for some, this has also served as a coping mechanism.

That's the only thing that helps us and keeps us going is the opportunity to fight. You know, someone giving us a platform.

Mother

It's not hope as such, it's not like immediate hope but it's like, right, you just have to keep chipping away, perseverance...finding different avenues to show that this is wrong and that something needs to change.

Mother

I've kind of immersed myself in that kind of area because I feel it will benefit other people through my experience, but it also kind of therapeutically benefits me to think that, you know, I'm there and I can hopefully try and make a difference.

Mother

Several participants – whose loved ones were further along in the sentence - had become involved in supporting others. Most described offering support to families and prisoners they had met through visits or phone calls. A number also highlighted how prisoners often looked out for each other, particularly if it was difficult to contact family.

The first time I went to see him, I was in bits leaving him and the amount of mums that come up to me and gave me a hug and said is this your first time...it was absolutely overwhelming and so nice... Even mums that were sat in the car got out the car and gave me a hug and stuff like that...it was lovely, you know, it's – awful.

Mother

If there was a reason, because he had no credit on his phone or whatever – he would get another kid to ring their mum, to give my number and some strange woman would ring me up and say – he's fine don't worry about him.

Mother

I've met some of the loveliest people in prison...this little, little boy in a man's body who's never really had, you know, a lovely life because his life went wrong when he was [young]... One of the symptoms of complex trauma is this hyper vigilance.

Partner

For those involved in advocacy and campaigning, motivation was partly driven by awareness of public attitudes. Some participants felt that if the public understood that 'this could be them', and recognised how long prison sentences have become, it could generate the pressure needed to persuade policymakers to reduce sentences to a level that maintains hope and supports rehabilitation. Others highlighted the challenges of generating such support given the limited public understanding of the realities of long-term imprisonment.

Don't expect people who haven't been in your situation to feel any empathy... like the powers that be, it's all about 'they've done something wrong, put them in jail, lock them away, throw the key away'... trying to get support from joe public for change and reform is going to be very, very difficult.

Partner of mother, focus group

Without doubt the early years of the sentence were the worst; 'the coming to terms' years. Looking back, I simply don't know how I managed to carry on or to function. I think I was on some kind of auto pilot. But I had to carry on as I had one younger child to look after and the sentence affected him deeply. I also had aging parents who gradually fell into poor health, and I had to look after them too.

For years I felt guilty for ever experiencing a modicum of happiness in my life. How could I be happy when my boys were locked in a prison cell? I would cry looking at the sea or mountains knowing they were unable to see such beauty. On one occasion, whilst on the phone, an ice cream van pulled up outside and my son, not having heard the familiar sound in 10 years, asked if I could get him a 99 with a flake! I laughed but it actually broke my heart!

Sadly, there are people who still think prison is easy. I worry everyday about my boys, because we all know that prisons are bursting at the seams. Violence is rife and suicide a frequent occurrence. I've had to believe that when my boys say they're OK, they actually are OK, or I'd simply worry myself sick.

They're doing really well. They're both engaged in work inside, one as a barber, the other as a chef. They're both avid readers and have educated themselves in subjects as diverse as quantum physics and biology. Now expert chess players, they engage in all and any educational courses available to them and have recently qualified as Advocates for fellow prisoners. Both are liked and respected not only by their peers but also by officers and governors too. They're doing their time as best they can. They just want to survive and get home.

Visiting them is always bittersweet. Body searches, strict regulations and rules which must be adhered to, otherwise visits can be cancelled even if you have travelled hundreds of miles to get there. So even after all these years I still get incredibly nervous that for some reason my visit will be cancelled. Once inside it's a joy to sit with them face-to-face, have a laugh and hug them. But then of course after a couple of hours I have to say goodbye, not able to see them again for another six to eight weeks. The seven-hour round trip is increasingly difficult. They do call me almost every day and that helps immensely.

Conclusion

In previous Building Futures' consultations, those serving long prison sentences powerfully articulated the critical role of supportive relationships in helping them to survive a long sentence, to maintain hope, purpose and to progress.⁷⁸ This report adds to the evidence on how these sentences impact those on the outside.

Participants highlighted the severity, complexity and relentlessness of emotional impacts they bore in relation to their loved ones' long prison sentences. For most, this combined shock associated with the conviction, with profound and prolonged feelings of grief and anxiety. Many talked of feelings akin to "living bereavement" These impacts were compounded by:

- Anger about what has happened and the length of sentence, while feeling worn down by trying to navigate the prison system, support their loved one and continue their day-to-day lives.
- Anxiety about whether prison staff were able to help their loved one progress and, for those whose loved one had been inside for over a decade, whether more time would undermine any progress made.
- The vulnerability of loved ones, particularly when they were young. Some mothers described having neurodiverse sons, whom they had anticipated would continue living at home throughout adulthood.
- Fear of repercussions when the case had been covered by media or where their address has been made public.
- Whether they felt heard during the legal process, and whether they perceived the outcome had been just and proportionate. Some raised specific issues around unfairness around joint enterprise charges and the uncertainty of IPP sentences.

Most participants raised problems their loved ones encountered in relation to the prison regime. Many felt stuck 'between a rock and a hard place', where they were compelled to raise issues, but feared that complaining could backfire on their loved one.

These findings echo forthcoming work undertaken in partnership with Building Futures by Families Outside in Scotland.⁷⁹ Whereas the context is different in some ways, both reports highlight the emotional and psychological impacts on those with a loved one serving a long sentence including anger, sadness, despair, isolation, fear and embarrassment. Our work chimes with Families Outside's insights around 'disenfranchised grief', where the complexity of loss and profound sadness is not validated or understood by others.

⁷⁸ Hutton M, and O'Brien R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences*.

⁷⁹ Hampton, C., Loucks, N. & Armstrong, K. (forthcoming). 'The Lang whang' (*The Long Journey*): *The hidden impact of Scotland's longest prison sentences*. Families Outside and the Prison Reform Trust.

Recommendations

Some of the changes that participants wanted to see were systemic, whether this was reducing the use of long prison sentences or increasing people's faith in the criminal justice system to treat people fairly, proportionately and to provide hope for prisoners and their loved ones. Specific issues were raised in relation to indeterminate sentences and joint enterprise convictions. One practitioner suggested that the maximum length of a sentence should be such that it still provides people with hope.

[This] provides an opportunity for people to hang on... satisfying the victim and giving the person who's committed the crime the chance to right him or herself and to make amends.

Practitioner

More than anything, participants want to see their loved ones home. In the meantime, they believed that greater awareness of the realities of prison life and the impacts of long sentences could increase public support for reducing their use.

Educate the general public a little bit more about how horrendous it is... educating the public about the reality of prison can also help.

Partner of mother, focus group

Research by Building Futures and others, including the Farmer reviews, have identified key factors that would better recognise these impacts and support those with a loved one inside and we outline these below. However, amongst participants a key desire, that goes much broader than specific recommendations, was for greater public awareness of the emotional pain of having a loved one in prison. Participants said this would help them feel less alone and more supported. For most participants the arrest of their loved one was their first contact with the justice system, and many said they had held very different views about prisoners' families prior to this. Some felt if the public were aware that 'this could be them', this could create the required pressure to persuade policymakers to reduce sentences to a level that maintains hope and supports rehabilitation.

Participants echoed the Independent Sentencing Review cited earlier, in wanting to see resources diverted from prison to invest in 'upstream' interventions around prevention and rehabilitation. Their contributions highlight that solutions lie beyond the criminal justice system and require attention to the root causes of a lot of crime. In the meantime, they identified changes that they felt would not only benefit the loved ones of long-term prisoners but to enhance the role they were able to play in supporting the prison and probation system.

In terms of specific recommendations, we have tried to reflect issues raised by participants in this consultation, but have also drawn on Building Futures' earlier work including long-term prisoners perspectives on relationships. Previous research has shown the importance of developing prison cultures where loved ones feel supported and engaged. For example, research has shown the importance of providing comfortable and safe spaces for visits, and opportunities for loved ones to ask questions and feel supported. These factors can increase trust and enable loved ones to engage in sentence plans, support and planning for release.⁹ Taking into consideration this Building Futures believes that there is a need for a 'Farmer refresh' informed by the increase in numbers of long-term prisoners, including those who are older. This central recommendation is set out in more detail below.

With nearly 10 years past since it first commissioned Lord Farmer's review on the role of relationships in the adult male estate, the MOJ should commission a 'Farmer refresh' to explore progress and consider the impact of changes brought by the pandemic (such as increased use of technology). The review should cover the whole adult estate and pay specific attention to the experiences and needs of long-term prisoners and those people who have no external visits or contact. Such a review should draw on existing consultations with prisoners and families and invite prisoners and their loved ones to suggest practical ideas in line with the Strengthening Prisoners Families Ties Policy Framework⁸⁰ and its emphasis on innovation.

Considering this and previous consultations, such an approach should include:

- **HMPs adopting a 'partners in progress' approach.** This should build on the the progress around the Farmer agenda but take a broader approach to identifying and enhancing potential sources of support. This should include the range of roles played by loved ones, peer workers, those with lived experience and volunteers, as well as the specific needs of long-term prisoners who are older and/or who have no visits/external contact.

⁸⁰ Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. (last updated 4 September 2019). Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strengthening-prisoners-family-ties-policy-framework>

Such an approach should be supported by HMPPS best practice guidance and aim to further embed lived experience (including that of loved ones) and peer approaches supported by skills training and qualifications where needed. In addition, all prisons should be supported to review their use of informal and formal peer workers including mentors and those supporting social care, prison visitors, pen pals and befriending schemes. As well as aiming to enhance and raise awareness of existing provision within the estate, the strategy should engage more members of the public to be partners in progress via pen pal arrangements, visiting schemes and so on.

- ***The government increasing investment in external agencies that provide emotional and practical support for prisoners' families.*** This should include increased access to early, clear information and support that helps people to navigate the legal process and, when a loved one enters custody, helps them to understand the prison system.
- Participants in this consultation were acutely aware of the vital role they play in supporting loved ones, and their experiences highlight the stress and tensions involved in this, while navigating their own feelings. There are services that provide emotional support for families and some evidence about the impact of therapeutic support during and after incarceration.¹¹ Consideration should be given to supporting external agencies to provide the loved ones of long-term prisoners with therapeutic support/counselling from qualified professionals who understand the psychological issues that the imprisonment of a loved one brings over a long sentence.
- ***HMPPS should increase provision of targeted practical and financial support to ease the burden on families of people who are serving long sentences.*** Our first Long Stretch consultation showed how prohibitive costs of contact – including travel – could be for the loved ones of long-term prisoners. Related to this, ***greater priority should be given to keeping prisoners close to home.*** Recent capacity pressures appear to have overridden this principle, to the detriment of family ties and rehabilitation.
- ***HMPPS should involve prisoners' families and other supporters outside prison in sentence planning wherever possible, routinely and throughout the sentence.*** They should be involved in relation to setting sentence plan objectives and planning for resettlement.
- Much has changed since the Farmer reviews were published. Revisiting its core principles and reviewing its impact would provide the opportunity to gain feedback from frontline staff and prison leaders on what has been most impactful and where the barriers lie. The review should include ***looking at whether HMPPS staff training is consistent with the Farmer agenda*** and be supported by ***HMPPS continuing to publish regular updates on progress against the recommendations of the Lord Farmer Review.*** Full implementation should be treated as a matter of priority.

In late 2025, at the end of the programme, Building Futures will bring together the findings of all the consultations we have undertaken, identifying common principles for reform, cross cutting themes and key strategic recommendations.

This report has highlighted some of the impacts that long-term imprisonment has on the loved ones that are 'left behind'. The experiences described are not only profound but long lasting as families and friends try to both support their loved ones and continue to live their own lives carrying what one participant described as a sense of continuous bereavement. The Farmer agenda and some of what has followed have underlined how important this support is. A 'whole person', 'whole family' approach would be one that not only recognises the critical resource that loved ones bring but would also recognise and seek to alleviate some of the pains of imprisonment that alight on those who seek to provide this over years and sometimes decades.

Jen

Even after 16 years I never think of the day they will be released as it's still too far off and I just can't cope with that yet. 16 years ago, I would have loved to have met 'the me' now. I think I could have given some good advice and perhaps some solace and hope to parents who are new to this dreadful institution known as prison, especially those whose children have been given long sentences. So, although I love my boys dearly, and I'm very proud of them, I have to admit that I too have been given a sentence.

Five years ago, I met a lovely man who is now my husband. He is my rock and gives me the kind of love and support at one time I could only dream of. He is kind and open minded and has allowed me to enlighten him to my experience of the justice system, which he would agree has made him a more understanding and tolerant human being. What's more is that my boys love him, and he loves them too. He takes great care of me and helps me get through days that can be difficult. The circumstance of our meeting is what I refer to as 'collateral beauty', because I wouldn't have met him had my boys not been in prison.

Since my boys went away, I've often felt isolated lonely and at times scared. Sometimes it feels never ending. However, along the way I've had the honour of meeting some amazing inspirational people, ex-prisoners, academics, prison reformers. It's so important for parents to reach out for help. They don't need to do this alone. As parents we are hard wired to keep our children safe and we do our best to keep them out of trouble. Sadly sometimes our best just isn't good enough. What you can't change, you have to accept. I have vowed to do everything and anything that will make their lives a little easier, and when the time comes for them to walk out of those gates, I will be there waiting for them.

Appendix 1: Prompts for one-to-one semi-structured interviews

- Where they were in relation in the sentence. For example at the start, half-way, near end, or post release and we have tried to indicate this where this is pertinent.
- How participants were feeling at the time of the interview.
- Whether participants could recall what were the worst points and whether this was difficult. For example, finding out about arrest, trips to court and prison and so on.
- How participants have felt at different stages, including feelings of anxiety, despair and sadness.
- Whether participants have felt hopeful during this period and the reasons for this.
- What the relationship was between how participants feel and how their loved one is coping.
- How participants dealt with the experiences, including whether they used tactics such as masking to try and protect their loved one.
- Participants' attitudes about and experiences of the criminal justice system.
- How participants feel about their loved ones, including anger, concern and so on.
- How participants feel about their quality of life and how it has been affected.
- Whether participants have had the chance to tell their story and if this is important.
- Whether participants have wanted any emotional/psychological support and been able to access this if so.
- What other support, if any, participants felt would be useful.
- Participants' experiences of visiting their loved ones, including practical issues around booking, travel, and quality of visit.
- How participants think visits could be improved if at all.
- Whether participants think there could have been a more appropriate alternative to the long sentence their loved one received?

The logo for Prison Reform Trust, featuring the words "PRISON REFORM TRUST" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, stacked vertically on a dark red rectangular background.

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This report presents the findings of a consultation carried out by Ruth Woolsey on behalf of the Building Futures programme. The consultation involved 27 participants with personal experience of supporting a loved one serving a long prison sentence - in most cases, between 20 and 30 years.

The report explores the emotional and practical impacts of having a loved one in custody for an extended period, examining the availability, accessibility, and quality of support for families and significant others. It identifies examples of good practice as well as gaps and challenges in existing provision.

Finally, the report sets out a series of insights and recommendations designed to inform future policy and practice, in line with the Prison Reform Trust's vision of a just, humane, and effective penal system.