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# **Disconnected: Exploring provisions for mother-child telephone contact in female prisons serving England and Wales**

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**Biography:** Natalie Booth, PhD, is a Lecturer in Criminology at De Montfort University, Leicester in England. She recently completed her doctorate in social policy at the University of Bath, which critically explored the intersection between family life and prison life when a mother is convicted and imprisoned in England and Wales.

## **Abstract**

Despite a growing body of international work describing the negative consequences of imprisonment for children and families, few studies have explored the accessibility and functionality of prison telephones. Mother-child contact has recurrently been identified as an important mechanism to alleviate and manage some of the emotional and practical adversities which accompany maternal imprisonment, and telephone contact has the potential to provide regular, perhaps even daily, contact for these separated family members. Responding to the knowledge gap, this article qualitatively explores the narratives of fifteen mothers in prison with first-hand experience of using prison telephones to communicate with their children. Thematic data analysis revealed four critical obstacles and challenges with prison telephone facilities for *Reconnecting in the first weeks*, in the *Cost of calling*, in *Telephoning privileges*, and *Inconsistencies across prisons*. Contrary to legal and policy guidelines, the findings illuminate how institutional barriers seriously affect mother-child communications, and recommendations are made.

**Key words:** Mothers in prison; Maternal imprisonment; Penal Policy; Telephone contact; Children of prisoners; Qualitative prison research.

## **Introduction**

The international growth in prison populations, alongside increased recognition of the impact of parental imprisonment, has generated increased policy and academic interest in the children and families of prisoners in recent years (Mills and Codd, 2008; Chui, 2016). Although women are a minority population in prison, constituting just five per cent in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice (MoJ), 2013); estimates have suggested that nearly 18,000 children

are separated from their imprisoned mothers every year (WilksWiffin, 2011) This is because more than half of the 4,000 women in prison in England are mothers. Relationships with children will be affected for *all* parents in prison. However, the disruptions can be more severe when that parent had lived with and cared (sometimes solely) for their dependent children prior to their sentence; as is the case for most women (Caddle and Crisp, 1997; Williams et al, 2012). A mother's removal into prison can be extremely challenging for mothers, children, and other family members, such as grandparents and female relatives, who step in and look after the children in the mothers' absence. Women in prison tend to be serving short sentences, lasting six months or less, for non-violent crimes (Prison Reform Trust (PRT), 2016). Yet, research has shown that custodial sentences – including these short ones of six months - can strain mother-child relationships, and bring about long-term social, economic, domestic, financial and psychological disadvantages for the whole family (Enos 2001; Flynn, 2013; Booth, 2017a; Baldwin, 2015).

For many women in prison, the hardest aspect of being incarcerated is separation from their children (Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Enos, 2001). Consequently, many attempt to sustain frequent and meaningful contact with children whilst in prison (Booth, 2017b). In England and Wales, prisoners are permitted contact with friends and family through visits, telephones, and letter writing in the post and, where available, through email-a-prisoner (HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), 2016). In recent years prison visits have received a considerable amount of academic research attention (Christian et al, 2006; Condry, 2007; Comfort, 2008; Dixey and Woodall, 2012; Sharratt, 2014; Tasca et al, 2016), meanwhile much less is known about other forms of communication. Responding to this gap, the current study explored all the different forms of contact which imprisoned mothers had attempted to use to stay in touch with

children whilst in custody. In doing so, the critical role of regular and meaningful telephone contact was revealed, as well as the limitations of the current provisions found in English female prisons. Thus, by drawing on the lived experience of imprisoned mothers, this article offers new and important insights into the accessibility and functionality of telephones in female prisons serving England and Wales.

## **Policy and legal context**

*“Special attention shall be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the best interests of both”* (Prison Rules, 1999, no. 4 (1))

The female prison population has trebled in the last three decades in England and Wales (MoJ, 2013). Consequently, a larger number of mothers and children are separated by imprisonment every year, and are relying on communicative facilities in prisons for contact. As demonstrated by the aforementioned Prison Rule, there has been strong support for the maintenance of prisoners’ family relationships in penal and policy documents in England and Wales (Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) 2002; Home Office, 2004; Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 16, National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2011; Farmer, 2017). In particular, family relationships have been identified as a key mechanism to help reduce re-offending, and families are subsequently conceptualised as an effective “resettlement agency” (Truss, 2017; Farmer, 2017). Given the prominent role which family ties appear to have been ascribed at policy level, it is reasonable to expect that this has led to improved facilities for prisoners’ to sustain their family ties in practice, and that provisions such as prison telephones effectively support mother-child contact.

It is widely agreed that women experience prison differently to men (Corston, 2007; Carlen and Worrall, 2004; House of Commons, 2013). This is often owing to the adversities they have experienced before custody, characterised by poor education, unstable housing, poverty, mental health, substance abuse and experiences of abuse (Burgess and Flynn, 2013; PRT, 2016; Williams et al., 2012). It also links to their domestic and caregiving circumstances and, specifically, the high proportion of women in prison who had been living with their children prior to custody. Appropriately, these domestic circumstances are acknowledged in policy documents. For instance, the independent body for reviewing the treatment and conditions of prisons in England and Wales, the HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), have gender-specific “expectations”<sup>i</sup> (2014, Section 4 (14)) for women’s prisons. HMIP anticipate that *“women are actively supported to maintain contact with children and families through regular and easy access”* to all forms of communication. Likewise, gender-specific guidelines in Prison Service Order (PSO) 4800 (NOMS, 2008) acknowledge that managing family life from prison can be challenging for women. PSO’s (as with Prison Service Instructions (PSI’s)) are policy documents which outline the rules, regulations and guidelines by which prisons are run in England and Wales. PSO 4800 is the only one of these documents to provide specific instructions to female prisons, and importantly, it draws attention to the crucial role of telephones for mother-child contact:

*“On average women use the telephone more often to maintain relationships and contact with children. Women often try to continue managing family issues and problems from within prison, although this is obviously very difficult”* (PSO 4800, NOMS 2008: 17)

PSO 4800 moves on to say that: *“children should not be penalised from visiting or contacting their mother because of the mother’s behaviour”* (p.17). Citing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), it reiterates that access to family life is the legal Right of the child. This convention applies to *all* children of prisoners, though in this PSO, reference to the UNCRC is made in an attempt to disentangle family contact from the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme in the female prison estate. IEPs were introduced in 1995 with the expectation that prisoners would earn privileges by demonstrating good behaviour, with the three rungs (entry, standard and enhanced) providing prisoners with incremental privileges (PSI 30, NOMS 2013). However, in both male and female prisons, IEP’s have been used to determine family privileges and parent-child contact. Evidence suggests that some prisons only allow the most trusted prisoners (those who were enhanced) to attend extended visits, such as family days (Sharratt and Cheung 2014; Farmer, 2017; Rees et al, 2017). These practices arguably shape the nature and quality of contact that both mothers and fathers can achieve with their children whilst in prison. Taken together, it is important to explore whether similar penal barriers arise for parents seeking to remain in contact by telephone which the current study examines through the experiences of incarcerated mothers.

## **Mother-child contact**

Sustaining contact with one another is often the most desired activity for many imprisoned mothers (Enos, 2001; Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Booth, 2017a), and their children (Sharratt, 2014). Contact can allow both mother and child to feel connected and stay attuned, which the COPING<sup>ii</sup> project (Sharratt, 2014) found to be beneficial for children who may otherwise worry about their parents, or who are experiencing adverse emotional, behavioural and psychological outcomes from the enforced separation (Laing and McCarthy, 2005). Research

with imprisoned mothers has found that telephoning can provide a crucial opportunity to connect or re-connect with their children, and to engage in maternal practices otherwise inaccessible during the sentence (O'Malley and Devaney, 2016; Baldwin, 2017a). For instance, one mother in Baldwin's (2017b) study wrote her families shopping list over the phone with her daughter; helping her to perform a more 'normal' mothering role whilst incarcerated. Hence, continued contact with children can help to manage the 'bad' mothering identity which has otherwise been found to develop following their placement in prison (Enos, 2001; Booth, 2017b). Equally, by sustaining relationships children and mothers are better prepared for the mother's release when, in many instances, they will be reunited and residing together again.

Telephone contact, unlike letter-writing and visits, has the potential to provide more *frequent* parent-child contact which is linked with more meaningful and satisfying relationships during parental imprisonment (Losel et al, 2012). Children interviewed in the COPING project reported that telephoning was an effective way to stay in touch because it facilitated regular contact, where daily occurrences and experiences could be shared with their parents (Sharratt, 2015). By comparison, infrequent or poor contact exacerbated the children's concerns about the conditions and treatment of their incarcerated parents in prison; indicating the important communicative role that telephone contact can play during parental imprisonment.

Despite the potential benefits of telephone contact, issues associated with access and privacy to communal prison telephones were identified as common barriers for family contact in a recent thematic report by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP, 2016). In contrast, women prisoners in Ireland are permitted one telephone call, lasting six minutes every day (O'Malley

and Devaney, 2015), and France have recently announced plans to roll out in-cell telephones in their prisons (Bremmer, 2018) to help address these issues of access to communal phones. Likewise, the new Justice Secretary in England and Wales, David Gauke, recently announced plans to expand in-cell telephones to support prisoners' family ties, and to respond to high levels of violence (BBC, 2018). At present, in-cell telephones are available in a small number (n=20) of prisons operational in England and Wales. Although Gauke's plans are welcomed, the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) found that calls from prison (whether communal or in-cell) could be more than six times more expensive than phone charges in the community (PRT, 2006), which has been found to directly affect mothers seeking to remain in contact on the phone with their children (Baldwin, 2017b). This again stands in contrast to practices in Ireland where the daily phone call is pre-paid (O'Malley and Devaney, 2016). Thus, although telephones may provide important opportunities for mother-child contact, they are also subjected to institutional restrictions. To better understand how this plays out in practice, it is important to listen to the experiences of mothers with first-hand experience of using prison telephones to contact their children.

Further, telephone contact may be an even more vital way to sustain mother-child relationships in the prison context when we consider the limitations associated to the other forms of communication; through visiting, letter-writing and emailing. Firstly, although several academics have explored the visiting experience for families (Christian et al, 2006; Condry, 2007; Comfort, 2008; Dixey and Woodall, 2012; Sharratt, 2014; Tasca et al, 2016), there are only twelve women's prisons in England, with none located in Wales. It is widely acknowledged that this creates logistical and financial challenges for families visiting a mother in prison (Baldwin 2015; NOMS, 2013; Booth, 2016, 2017b). These difficulties can undermine



the visiting experience, which provide a special opportunity for mothers and children to meet face-to-face, interact, and “spend time” together during the sentence (Comfort, 2008; Tasca et al, 2016). Moreover, the statutory provisions only allow convicted prisoners visits from friends and family for two hours every fortnight (HMIP, 2016), which means that *frequent* contact may not be manageable through prison visits alone. The practical and emotional challenges of visiting leads some women to refuse to have their children visit them whilst in prison; especially when serving a short sentence (O’Malley and Devaney, 2016; Baldwin, 2017b).

Secondly, letter-writing is another established form of communication in prison, and in principle, an unlimited number of letters can be sent and received through the post by prisoners. However, aside from one pre-paid letter a week (PSI 49, NOMS 2011), postal contact must be financed by prisoners and their families. Written communication may also be problematic for family members, such as young children, who have limited literacy skills (Sharratt, 2014). Letter-writing does not facilitate real-time conversations, making it somewhat outdated in contemporary society where instantaneous messaging (e.g. text messaging) is a common feature of everyday life. Email-a-prisoner initiatives respond to some of these inadequacies by providing families with an online letter-writing service for a small fee (30p for a 50 line message) (HMIP, 2016), though current provisions only enable one-way emails, and in some prisons emailing services are not yet available.

In certain instances mother-child contact may not be in the best interests of the child, or well-facilitated during maternal imprisonment for reasons unrelated to provisions in the prison. For instance, formal proceedings (often in conjunction with social welfare agencies) may restrict the frequency and nature of mother-child contact, sometimes for reasons related to

the mothers' offence. In addition, previous research reported that caregivers act as "gatekeepers" of contact between imprisoned mothers and children, steering the level and types of contact which can be achieved (Tasca, 2016). Consequently, it should be remembered factors such as these (whilst not being the focus of this article) may serve to limit mother-child telephone contact in some families. We now turn our attention to the current study which reveals new and important insights into telephone provisions in English female prisons.

## **Methodology**

The findings presented in this article are taken from the author's doctoral research which explored the lives and experiences of families following maternal imprisonment in England and Wales. One aim of this study was to critically examine the different forms of contact used for mother-child contact. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen imprisoned mothers housed in one female prison in England. Although this may be a relatively small sample, it is important to note that between them, the mothers had 39 children, of which 21 had been living with their mothers' before her incarceration. Ethical approval from the University of Bath and permission from the National Research Council and the prison Governor were gained, as instructed in PSI 22 (NOMS, 2011). Analysis of the data revealed how achieving and sustaining telephone contact in the prison setting brought about several challenges for mothers as they attempted to maintain relationships with their children. Thus, the findings related to this theme have been extracted and further examined for the purpose of this article.

### ***The sample***

A purposive sampling strategy (Bryman, 2012) ensured that all fifteen mothers were convicted, with at least one child under 18 years old, and interviewed after two months of their sentence had elapsed. This timeframe was chosen so that the mothers had been in prison for sufficient time to be familiar with the prison regime, and to reflect on their familial circumstances. Information posters and leaflets were distributed under all cell doors, inviting eligible mothers to opt into the research and providing details about doing so. A snowball sampling approach was also used which meant that prisoners and staff signposted eligible mothers to the study.

Table 1.0 shows the demographics of the mothers in the study. Most self-identified as white British<sup>iii</sup>, with just over half aged between 25 and 30 years old (n=8). The mothers' 39 children ranged from 1 years old to 29 years old. Most of the mothers (n=11) were in prison for their first offence, and all the mothers were expecting to spend up to 2 years in prison. The sample may have been over-represented by first time prisoners as the women who participated expressed a desire to help 'other mothers'. They explained how the challenges they had experienced through their own imprisonment, and specifically of being separated from their children for the first time and for several years, meant that they wanted to share their stories to improve provisions.

It is important to note that most of the mothers (n=10) had also been primary caregivers to their children before being sent to prison. Analysis of the data identified some differences between the mothers who were primary carers, and those who had not lived with their children for some time (for further information see Booth, 2017a). However, the experiences of all but one of the mothers (Verity) are discussed in this article because of their first-hand experience of using prison telephone facilities to contact their children. The study found that

telephone contact was the most used form of communication. Fewer mothers were using letter contact (n=12) and/or engaging in social visits (n=11). Even less were participating in extended visits provided on family days (n=7) (for more information see Booth, 2018b). This shows the value of telephone communication for these mothers separated from their children.

Mothers in this sample were serving sentences longer than the national average (PRT, 2016). This meant that all the mothers had experienced the prison regime at another establishment before coming to the prison in which they were interviewed; which provided them with rich and varied insights into the telephone facilities across different prisons. Furthermore, research from the US found cultural differences in the experiences and response of families during maternal imprisonment (Enos, 2001). However, as the sample in this study predominantly self-identified as British or white British, the findings may not be representative of all women in prison; considering that 26 per cent are from ethnic minority groups (PRT, 2016). Likewise, there was no representation of foreign nationals, which means that mothers' experiences of negotiating telephone contact with children and families located overseas was not explored.

**Table 1.0 Demographics of mothers in sample**

<b>Pseudonym<sup>iv</sup></b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>Age of children (years)</b>	<b>Primary caregiver</b>
Eve	38	White British	2	19, 13	Yes
Sarah	28	White British	4	11, 7, 4, 3	No
Esther	30	White British	2	10, 7	Yes

Becca	27	White British	1	3	No
Verity	26	White British	2	9, 7	No
Leanne	29	White British	2	8, 1	Yes
Kathleen	47	White British	2	15, 14	Yes
Carly	27	White British	2	12, 4	No
Stephanie	44	Other	7	23, 21, 19, 16, 16, 13, 7	Yes
Kelly	43	Romany Gypsy	4	27, 16, 12, 9	Yes
Keira	26	Other	1	5	Yes
Kayley	29	White British	1	5	Yes
Betty	46	White British	3	15, 13, 11	Yes
Vanessa	46	White British	3	29, 15, 11	Yes
Rochelle	32	White British	3	14, 10, 7	No

### ***Ethics and methods***

Women who self-identified as mothers opted into the research, and informed consent was secured verbally and in writing before and during the interview. Semi-structured interviews compliment qualitative inquiries, as they produce insights into the participants' own understandings, perspectives and experiences in a sensitive and reflective way (Warren, 2002). They also facilitate some flexibility during data collection, allowing the conversation to follow an interview guide and pre-selected topics, as well as the participants own sense-making. All interviews were conducted in a private office, audio-recorded (with the permission of the participants) and transcribed. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Thematic data analysis produced the over-arching themes in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013), identifying telephone contact as an important means to contact children, whilst four sub-themes further revealed the intricate operational and practical issues associated to telephoning.

## **Findings**

The four main sub-themes revealed in the data concerning telephone contact are explored in this section. The first highlights the difficulties in *'Reconnecting in the first weeks'* owing to obstacles in establishing telephone contact. The second outlines the challenges associated to the *'Cost of calling'* from prison, whilst the third identifies *'Telephoning privileges'* which illuminates the relationship between telephoning and the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme. The final theme unpacks the *'Inconsistencies across prisons'* as the mothers narratives shed light on the different regimes in establishments, and the way in which these varying practices intertwine with telephone contact.

### ***Reconnecting in the first weeks***

Within the first 24 hours newly received prisoners should be given a reception telephone call (PSI 49, NOMS 2011), though many of the mothers in the study, including Betty, were not. Instead, they had to wait a number of days before their PIN account<sup>v</sup> was configured and operational. Betty did not know who had assumed care for her three children following her committal into custody, and describes how her first night in custody was profoundly traumatic as a consequence of this.

**Interviewer** – *did you get a phone call when you first came into custody?*

**Betty** – *no*

**Interviewer** - *when was the first time you were able to call out?*

**Betty** – *a few days after, I was able to call out when the PIN was put on the phone and so that was the first point at which I was able to ring*

**Interviewer** – *what was that like?*

**Betty** - *I can just remember being frightened to death and being there all night and being in such a state, not knowing where my children were, who had them...it was a nightmare* (**Betty, mother of three**)

Betty's experience is similar to previous research which reported how mothers were imprisoned not knowing their children's whereabouts (Corston, 2007; Boswell and Wood, 2011). The mother's in this study had mixed experiences of arranging childcare; some, like Betty, entered prison not knowing who had assumed care because they had not expected a custodial sentence. Others, also not expecting to go to prison, had left last-minute instructions and/or wishes with solicitors or family members who had accompanied them to court. Whereas, a few mothers were made aware of the high likelihood of a custodial sentence from legal professionals, and had made preparations with family members ahead of their sentencing. In all instances, having a reception phone call was critically important for mothers; whether to discuss, clarify, or resolve childcare arrangements with potential caregivers, and/or to simply check how their children are faring during this difficult time.

In addition, reception phone calls take place shortly after the initial separation, and can therefore be exceptionally emotional for mothers, children and caregiver(s) as they reflect on their changed family circumstances. Eve explains how the realisation of the sentence began to dawn on her, the children and their grandfather, as the actuality of the prison sentence sunk in.

*"They gave me my first phone call to my family and that is when it really sunk in...when I spoke to my father he was inconsolable, I don't think he really realised that it was happening because then not only had he lost a daughter to prison, he's gained two children that he has got to take care of...[and] has*

*to deal with for the next two years ... I spoke to the children and they, obviously, they were crying” (Eve, mother of two)*

Not only could the first phone call provide time and space to collectively grieve the outcome of the sentence, but to also comfort and support one another. The mothers explained how this early contact was also crucial for settling and reassuring their children who, as with Eve, were highly emotional and upset. Following the reception phone call, mothers in the study reported further challenges in achieving telephone contact because of delays in the PIN accounts being set-up. A report by HMIP (2016) found that administrative delays were a common barrier to PIN accounts being configured for newly received prisoners. Likewise, this delay prevented Kelly from relaying important information about organising a visit at the prison.

*“It took ages to get like a PIN phone number and PIN credit so that I could make another call after that first call, it took about 2 weeks to get the phone number thing that you get...I couldn’t call or anything...it’s horrible because I didn’t know how they are or what’s going on or where they are or anything like that...I couldn’t call them to tell them when the visit was” (Kelly, mother of three)*

Similarly, it was twelve days before Keira’s PIN account was configured, and she could contact her daughter and family.

*“[It was] 12 days later (Interviewer - and how did that make you feel?) Agitated ‘cause I couldn’t speak to them...I was told it would only take a week, ended up taking 2 weeks” (Keira, mother of one)*



These accounts illuminate how many of the mothers experienced poor telephone contact in the first days and weeks of their sentence, despite the emotional and practical need for this communication.

### ***The cost of calling***

As previously stated by the Prison Reform Trust (PRT, 2006), the costs of calling from prison can be higher than in the community, whilst the earning capacity of prisoners is much lower; with wages averaging at around ten pounds a week. Similarly, the mothers in this study reported difficulties in affording phone calls<sup>vi</sup>. They discussed how the high charges affected both the length and quality of the conversation. Sarah had four young children, and explains how it was challenging to sustain a relationship with each of them when her telephone calls were short and irregular.

*“I’ve got 4 children and because of the money that we’re on, it’s hard not being able to speak to the kids...you’re just rushing on the phone just so you can get [time] and squeezing every phone call out of that money you’ve got on your credit” (Sarah, mother of four)*

Mothers commonly called the mobile phones of relatives or teenage children as they found that this was an easier and more direct way to reach their children than landlines. However, because calls to mobile phones are more expensive<sup>vii</sup>, this direct contact had to be weighed against the difficulties in affording the higher costs, and the shortened conversation that could be achieved. Rochelle explains how she tended to speak with her children while they were at their nana’s house, as that meant she could call the landline and spend more time talking with all three children.

*“The kids go to their nana’s every day and she’s got a house phone so I tend to try and phone them on the house phone there...it just costs a fortune [on] the mobile, and when you’re trying to speak to all 3 of them and give them enough time, do you know what I mean? So, sometimes I only get to phone them like once or twice a week, mostly once a week on a Friday” (Rochelle, mother of three)*

As with Rochelle, many mothers had to limit their telephone contact to once or twice a week because they could not afford to speak more frequently. However, it was clear that financing telephone calls to their children was a priority for the mothers. Despite the high costs of calling, and having limited financial reserves, many expressed their desire to put as much money on their PIN account every week to continue having telephone contact with their children. Demonstrating this, Leanne explains how she gave up smoking tobacco so that she had money to spend on the telephone each week.

*“You can’t afford to buy tobacco and telephone credit, and coffee and sugar, so I just quit smoking, so I signed up to the pharmacy and they put me on patches so now with my £10 a week credit, I can put [telephone] credit on” (Leanne, mother of two)*

Many mothers attempted to squeeze as much time out of their telephone credit saying that they would call their children as often as they could afford; suggesting how in spite of their best efforts, the high charges worked directly against them as they attempted to (re)connect with their children.

### ***Telephoning privileges***

Telephone contact was heavily shaped by the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme. As Table 2.0 outlines, the IEP system is comprised of three tiers in the female prison estate, and at each level the prisoners' cash allowance is different. These cash allowances are the maximum amount a prisoner can spend each week on goods and resources, which includes credit for their PIN telephone account. In the sample, just over half of the mothers had attained an 'enhanced' status (n=8), whilst many were 'standard' (n=6) and one was at 'basic'. This enabled a rich exploration of the different 'privileges' associated to each rung, and importantly, how the mothers experienced the IEP system in relation to their access to telephone facilities.

**Table 2.0 Prisoners' IEP status and cash allowances**

IEP Level	Unconvicted	Convicted
Entry	£35.00	£10.00
Standard	£47.50	£15.50
Enhanced	£51.00	£25.50

*Information extrapolated from: PSI 30 (NOMS, 2013:17)*

Restrictions on cash allowances interfere with telephone contact, as all the mothers (as with all newly received prisoners) were positioned at "entry" level in the first weeks of their sentence. As Esther explains, by regulating how much money could be spent on the phone PIN account, this process simultaneously dictated the amount of time she could spend on the phone with her children. She explains how these restrictions were particularly difficult to navigate at the start of her sentence, which may extend and exacerbate the problems identified earlier in *Reconnecting in the first weeks* theme, and further disrupt communication with children in the weeks following the mother-child separation.

*“In the beginning you don’t have a lot of money because you’re only allowed £10 entry level and stuff and you’re not getting wages...it was tight, and then when you’re making more money, and your IEP status changes you get more money so you can spend longer on the phone” (Esther, mother of two)*

The IEP system was also found to affect access to prison telephone facilities. Generally, telephones are located on wing landings and shared between the residents in that area (HMIP, 2016). However, different wings or blocks hold different groups of prisoners, and commonly one area will house prisoners who have the highest “enhanced” IEP level; who are generally given more flexible lock-up and association times. Vanessa’s account indicates how varying lock-up times across the different wings directly shaped and affected her access to telephones.

*“I used to be locked in [my cell] at quarter to 8 so I wouldn’t manage to get hold of them that much in the week, and on the weekends you get locked in at quarter to 5 so it’s very restrictive on being able to have any telephone contact...now it’s not so bad [on the enhanced wing] because we don’t get locked up [in the evening] so I can ring up until 11 at night” (Vanessa, mother of three)*

Owing to the additional familial privileges of being “enhanced”, many of the mothers explained how achieving this IEP status was crucially important. Kayley reveals how her goal to become “enhanced” was motivated by financial and housing benefits which, as we have learned, could improve her efforts to stay in touch with her five year old daughter. However, she also explained how this process took time.

*"You can have £15 plus...so it's very worth [while]...I've been trying so hard to do all the course on my sentence plan, to get enhanced, to get on the resettlement wing, but the progress is so slow" (Kayley, mother of one)*

Despite reference to the legal human rights of the child in PSO 4800 (NOMS, 2008), which sought to divorce IEPs from family contact, there was overriding agreement from the mothers in this study that this 'privilege' system played a significant role in shaping telephone contact with their children.

### ***Inconsistencies across prisons***

All of the fifteen mothers in the study had been housed in at least one other prison establishment during their sentence and reflected on the different regimes which operate across the estate. Kathleen explained how the regime in her current prison, in conjunction with being "enhanced" on the IEP scheme, improved her telephone contact.

*"I found it difficult at my last prison 'cause you're locked up all the time, you can only use the phones at certain times. Coming here, I found it a much better experience...moving to the enhanced wing has been a lot better because all I wanted to do was ring the kids to, so because my daughter does gym until 9pm, I can now ring at half past 9 to make sure they're home so I can sleep knowing they're all home" (Kathleen, mother of two)*

The prison regime dictates when prisoners can make calls during the day, and these times can vary from prison to prison. Yet, the timing of phone calls was a particular area of concern for the mothers as they were not only navigating restrictions imposed by the prison regime, but also timing calls to their children around school and after-school activities. As Stephanie

explains, access to telephones in the early evening was imperative to call her youngest son (aged 7), as this is the only time she could speak with him after school, and before bedtime.

*“I know when not to phone my Mum because she picks the kids up from school, I ring them about 6, half 6, because my youngest son goes to bed at 7pm” (Stephanie, mother of seven)*

Given these institutional barriers, Esther revealed how in-cell telephones improved the quality of telephone contact that could be achieved with her two primary school-aged daughters; providing more flexibility with call times, and privacy during conversations.

*“Unless you know you can catch them at the right time, you’ve got to work around this regime so you can’t beat having your own phone in your room...I think every prison should have [it] because it really does make a difference when you’re keeping up contact with the kids and family in general...because you can phone at different times and you’ve got privacy” (Esther, mother of two)*

In-cell telephones are subject to the same level of security as those located on the wings, but they allow prisoners to make phone calls when they are in their cells (HMIP, 2016). Similar to the previous findings (National Audit Office, 2013; Sharratt, 2014; HMIP 2016), in-cell phones were highly valued by those mothers, like Esther, who had been housed in a prison with this facility. This is an important finding considering the Justice Secretary’s plans to further roll out in-cell telephones in prisons serving England and Wales (BBC, 2018).

## **Discussion and concluding remarks**

Given the increased international interest in the collateral consequences of parental imprisonment (Chui, 2009) and the recent policy focus on prisoners' family ties in England and Wales (Farmer, 2017), the new empirical findings from this study contribute important and timely insights into the accessibility and functionality of prison telephone facilities in English female prisons. Drawing on data produced from interviews with imprisoned mothers with first-hand experience of using telephones to contact their children, the findings draw attention to the limitations of prison telephones across the female estate with regard to: *Reconnecting in the first weeks; Cost of calling; Telephoning privileges; and Inconsistencies across prisons.*

The study revealed how a reception telephone call is crucial for families immediately following the mothers' removal into custody. This telephone call can have both practical and emotional purposes, especially as there can be ambiguity and sensitivity around childcare arrangements. The gender-specific guidelines in PSO 4800 (NOMS, 2008:9) highlights the importance of a reception phone call for women out of awareness of these issues, stating that: "*at least one 5 minute free phone call should be offered on reception to enable women to resolve urgent family and childcare issues*". By comparison, the findings from this study indicate that reception telephone calls were not consistently available to the mothers. Research already points to the damaging and disruptive outcomes for mothers, children and families during maternal imprisonment (Enos, 2001; Corston, 2007; Baldwin, 2015), while these results demonstrate how poor telephone facilities are creating unnecessary, communicative challenges for families as they grapple through the first days and weeks of their painful separation.

The study also indicated how the inadequate provision of the reception telephone call was widespread across the female prison estate; as the mothers from this study, although all interviewed at the same prison, had started their sentences elsewhere. Across the sample, problems with the reception call and the configuration of the PIN account had occurred in four different prison establishments, which accounts for a quarter of all female prisons (n=12) currently serving England and Wales. In reality, these poor practices and at the critical point of separation are likely to affect a large proportion of mothers being received into prison, and subsequently, thousands of children every year.

As with research findings from the US (Enos, 2001; Berry and Eigengberg, 2003; Celinska and Seigel, 2010) institutional restrictions through inadequate telephone facilities heavily shaped the nature, frequency and quality of family contact, as well as the mothers' opportunity to engage in mothering practices. This goes some way in explaining why prison is considered more distressing for mothers when it removes their status and role as primary caregivers (Berry and Eigengberg, 2003; Haney, 2013). Mothers are receiving a double punishment because these additional barriers in the prison environment not only punish them as prisoners, but also *as mothers*. This additional punishment is also unfairly impacting on the mothers' children whose needs are being severely overlooked, despite being innocent of any crime.

Although there appears to be some awareness of the telephone needs of newly received prisoners in government documents (e.g. PSO 4800, NOMS 2008; PSI 49, NOMS 2011; HMIIP, 2014), this study has shown how the experience of many mothers fall short of expected standards at a policy level. This may be because PSO's and PSI's are policy guidelines by which prisons *ought* to function, which means they have limited authority in practice. In a similar



way, the “expectations” outlined by HMIP (2014) underscore the need to support women to maintain their family ties, but also suffer from similar vulnerabilities as PSO’s regarding the prisons accountability for implementing these measures. As a result, there are concerning disparities between the benchmarks set in policy and the lived reality for mothers seeking to utilise prison telephone facilities in practice. At present there is no statutory organisation in central government responsible for the children and families of prisoners in England and Wales (Williams et al. 2012). This means there is an absence of top-down accountability for this population with regard to their familial needs and experiences. Moving forward, and following a recommendation already in circulation (Codd, 2008; Women’s Breakout, 2016; Booth, 2018a), it is proposed that a designated statutory organisation assumes formal responsibility for supporting and advocating on behalf of prisoners’ children and families in England and Wales.

Building on previous research (Sharratt and Cheung, 2014; Farmer, 2017; Rees et al, 2017), the mothers’ narratives also revealed how their IEP status shaped, and sometimes hindered, telephone contact with their children. Of particular concern is that the aspirations set in PSO 4800 (NOMS, 2008) make explicit reference to the legally sanctioned Human Rights of the Child as outlined by the UNCRC (1989). This PSO attempts to disentangle the ‘privileges’ awarded to prisoners for ‘good’ behaviour from the legal ‘rights’ of the child to have access to family life. Furthermore, the UNCRC (1989 Article 3(1)) states that *“in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”*. From a rights-based approach, prison establishments have a legal obligation

to prioritise the needs of *all* children able to have contact with their prisoner parents, rather than privileging *some* for reasons attributed to their mothers' behaviour.

The study reported how the prisons failure to promote the Rights of the Child under the UNCRC (1989) were, to an extent, being mitigated by individual women. For instance, some of the mothers reported giving up smoking to fund telephone contact with children and/or trying to become an 'enhanced' prisoner. Owing to the absence of responsible governance structures for prisoners' children and families' prisons are not being held sufficiently to account. Yet, realistically the mothers' attempts to alleviate some of the strain can only stretch so far. The combining of 'Rights' and 'privileges' raises significant moral, legal and ethical questions about the operational practices occurring in penal institutions. Although the evidence in this study pertains to the experiences of mothers, previous reports have highlighted a similar pairing of IEP status with family contact in the male estate (Farmer, 2017). Thus, the practices discovered here may well be happening elsewhere and affecting other prisoner family relationships, though further research is required to explore this more fully.

Navigating calls around the prison regime and children's daily activities, such as school, was a significant challenge for some mothers. In-cell telephones enabled more flexibility and privacy with telephoning; aligning with evidence from previous research (National Audit Office, 2013; Sharratt, 2014; HMIP 2016). At present, only a handful of prisons in England and Wales have in-cell telephones, but if it were rolled-out nationally, it would be benefit mother-child contact, and most likely, all relational ties for prisoners and their families. Such an initiative has been proposed in France (Bremmer, 2018) and, more recently, in England and Wales (BBC, 2018). This could prove to be an effective and practical way to assist prisoners' with their

family relationships. It may also better align prison provisions with recent policy initiatives which have discursively supported these relational ties (e.g. Prison Rules, 1999), and placed a great deal of responsibility of prisoners' families for addressing the issue of recidivism (SEU, 2002; Home Office, 2004; Farmer, 2017). However, we must remember that in-cell telephones are charged at the same rate as communal telephones which, as discussed earlier, can seriously hinder frequency and quality of mother-child telephone contact. Therefore, the introduction of in-cell telephones across an increased number of prisons in England and Wales might be thwarted if the phone charges remain stubbornly high.

Although this study has improved our understanding of prison telephones, it is not without limitations. The 'PrisonPhone' initiative was not mentioned by mothers in this study. This was recently implemented across the prison estate in England and Wales, providing prisoners and their families the opportunity to call mobile phones at the same charge as landlines<sup>viii</sup>. Conceivably, this may alleviate some of the financial difficulties facing mothers using telephones to communicate with children though further research is required. Furthermore, although reference to the rights and needs of children are described in the article, it should be remembered that the study did not directly engage with children.

Nonetheless, this article has shed new light on the accessibility and functionality of prison telephones; highlighting the legal shortfalls of current provisions with regard to children's Rights, the discrepancies between policy and practice, as well as making recommendations for the expansion of in-cell provisions. It should be remembered that at the heart of these issues are mothers and children separated by a custodial sentence, but hoping and seeking to stay connected, to maintain their relationships and stay part of one another's lives. Being supported to do so is imperative not only during the sentence, but also in preparation for

when the mother is released and returns to her family. It is hoped that this paper may serve as a stepping stone for further explorations into these communicative facilities for prisoner-family contact given the importance of these provisions for separated family members.

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<sup>i</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) is an independent government body which reports on prison conditions and the treatment of those detained. Their expectations describe the standards of treatment and conditions which they would expect a prison establishment to achieve.

<sup>ii</sup> The COPING project (full title - Children of Prisoners: Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health) covered four European countries: Romania, Sweden, Germany and UK. It was a child-centred study which investigated the resilience and vulnerability of children of prisoners to mental health problems. More information can be found: [www.childrenofprisoners.eu/the-coping-project/](http://www.childrenofprisoners.eu/the-coping-project/)

<sup>iii</sup> "Other" includes one mother who preferred not to record her ethnicity and another who stated she was British.

<sup>iv</sup> Names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

<sup>v</sup> PIN telephones are the only way for prisoners to have telephone contact with the outside; as prisoners cannot receive incoming calls, and are not permitted access to their mobile phones during their sentence (HMIP, 2016).

<sup>vi</sup> Prisoners can add money to their PIN account from wages earned at the prison for working, or from money sent in from family and friends (PSI 49, NOMS 2011).

<sup>vii</sup> According to HMIP (2016), the average cost of £1 credit on the telephone in prison would equate to a 10 minute call to a landline, or a 5 minute call to a mobile phone.

<sup>viii</sup> See [www.prisonphone.co.uk](http://www.prisonphone.co.uk) for more information about this initiative.