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**Article:**

Sharpe, G.H. (2015) *Precarious identities: 'Young' motherhood, desistance and stigma*.  
*Criminology and Criminal Justice*. ISSN 1748-8958

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895815572163>

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## **Precarious identities: 'young' motherhood, desistance and stigma**

### **Abstract**

This article explores desistance from crime and experiences of stigma amongst 19 young mothers with a criminal past. Drawing on narrative interview data from a qualitative longitudinal study of women criminalised as children, I argue that young mothers with a history of lawbreaking, as well as other markers of a spoiled past, are likely to encounter intense forms of gendered surveillance, social censure and stigma across multiple domains of identity, regardless of whether or not they are currently involved in crime. Motherhood frequently motivated the women to desist from crime, most notably in order to avoid their children experiencing the scrutiny and harmful state interventions that had such a profoundly negative impact on their own young lives. However, I conclude that many ex-offending mothers continue to be stigmatized as maternally deficient long after they have left crime behind.

**Key words:** young motherhood, stigma, desistance, identity, women

**Final word count** (inc. abstract, key words, author affiliation, contact details & biography) = 7,937

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## **Introduction**

A trend towards later childbearing across the Western world<sup>1</sup> has encouraged a shift in normative beliefs regarding responsible and rational patterns of reproduction: namely, that young women should prioritise education and career over motherhood, at least temporarily. A consequence of this trend, together with an increase in births outside marriage, has been that the dominant discourse around 'problem' motherhood has shifted from extra-marital childbirth to teenage or 'early' motherhood (Arai, 2009). Young mothers are the subject of particular political concern and 'too young' motherhood is believed to substantially hinder young women's own life chances, as well as increase the likelihood of poor behavioural and mental health outcomes amongst their children (Phoenix, 1991; Thomson et al., 2011). The teenage or 'too young' mother is also frequently constructed as the mother of future delinquents (Wilson and Huntington, 2006). However, longitudinal research has challenged such assumptions and highlighted the heterogeneity of young mothers' life trajectories, as well as those of their children (Furstenberg et al., 1987).

While explicitly focused on age, class concerns are central to constructions of young motherhood as a social problem. An overall change in fertility patterns

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<sup>1</sup> In England and Wales the mean maternal age at first birth in 2012 was 28.1 years, compared with 24.2 years in 1962 (ONS, 2013).

towards later childbearing conceals sharp divergence according to class (Crompton, 2006): as advantaged young women increasingly defer or forgo motherhood in favour of a protracted path through education and career establishment, their working-class counterparts tend to follow a very different trajectory – shaped in part by class and community norms – in which motherhood plays an earlier and more central role (Gillies, 2007; Lee et al., 2004; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Early motherhood – the meaning of which is likely to be conditioned by cultural, as well as classed, norms and expectations – can also be understood as a rational and positive choice amongst women growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. As Edin and Kefalas have argued in their groundbreaking ethnography of 162 low-income lone mothers in Philadelphia, “early childbearing is highly selective of girls whose other characteristics – family background, cognitive ability, school performance, mental health status, and so on – have already diminished their life chances so much that an early birth does little to reduce them much further” (2011: 205). The authors contend that

Putting motherhood first makes sense in a social context where the achievements that middle-class youth see as their birthright are little more than pipe dreams: Children offer a tangible source of meaning, while other avenues

for gaining social esteem and personal satisfaction appear vague and tenuous (*ibid.* p. 49).

Research examining the impact of the transition to motherhood on women's criminal involvement has produced mixed findings. Quantitative research has tended to reveal little or no effect (Blokland and Nieuwbeerta, 2005;<sup>2</sup> Giordano et al., 2002). Giordano and colleagues (2002) argue that despite the prominence of childbirth as a 'hook for change' in many of the narratives of their female respondents with previous involvement in serious delinquency as youths, there was much variability as to whether such narratives corresponded with actual changes in behaviour post-childbirth. Qualitative research, by contrast, has emphasised the transformative and crime-inhibiting impact of motherhood (Edin and Kefalas, 2011; Hunt et al., 2005; Moore and Hagedorn, 1999). Graham and Bowling's seminal British self-report study (1995), for example, found that forming partnerships, marriage and childbearing were strong correlates of desistance for women, with the crime-reducing effects of motherhood being immediate for most mothers. Scholars undertaking qualitative research have suggested several causal mechanisms through which motherhood may promote

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<sup>2</sup> As Kreager, Matsueda and Erosheva (2010) observe, Blokland and Nieuwbeerta's study examined the relationship between parenthood and delinquency, but did not examine motherhood and fatherhood separately.

desistance: by prompting an identity shift, whereby a woman's identity as a mother and carer becomes paramount, thereby providing a source of motivation to go straight; through change in the value placed on risk of arrest; and through changes in routine activities linked to the identity of being a 'good' mother, such as spending time at home and making trips to the park and to health care appointments.

Some scholars have claimed that the crime-reducing effects of motherhood may be substantially greater for women in disadvantaged areas. Kraeger and colleagues' (2010) longitudinal quantitative within-individual study of 567 women in disadvantaged Denver neighbourhoods concluded that the transition to motherhood strongly predicted desistance from delinquency, as well as from marijuana and alcohol use, and that the impact of motherhood was greatest amongst women who became mothers as teenagers. Once again, Edin and Kefalas (2011: 180) explain why motherhood can be such a transformative experience for young marginalised women:

The poor women we came to know often describe their lives prior to motherhood as spinning out of control. They recall an existence blemished by more than mere economic insecurity. For most, the "rippin' and runnin'" days

before children were marked by depression, school failure, drug and alcohol use, and promiscuous sexual activity. Along with this self-made chaos were their sometimes troubled and abusive home lives and the danger, violence, and oppression of the neighbourhood.

However, motherhood may have a negligible impact on lawbreaking for women at greatest risk of incarceration, or with a history of imprisonment (Giordano et al., 2002; Kraeger et al., 2010; Leverentz, 2014): without some level of family support and other forms of capital on which to draw, women in trouble with the law may experience motherhood as yet another source of strain (Brown and Bloom, 2009; Giordano et al., 2011).

Selfhood and identity - including maternal identities - have been central concerns in studies of women's imprisonment, which have examined the operation of penal power and the construction of gendered identities within the prison walls (Bosworth, 1999; Carlen, 1983; Haney, 2010; Hannah-Moffat, 2007; Pollack, 2007; Rowe, 2011). Scholars have also focused on the significant structural challenges facing criminalised mothers on parole or release, highlighting that women leaving prison face conditions which are equally, if not more, disadvantageous than they experienced prior to imprisonment, in relation to housing, employment, addiction,

partner violence, ill health and trauma, as well a dearth of support from family, community members, and professionals (Brown and Bloom, 2009; Carlton and Segrave, 2013; McIvor et al., 2009; Ritchie, 2001). Women lawbreakers already experience higher levels of stigma than comparable males (Daly, 1994; Schur, 1984), and this stigma is only intensified if a woman is also a teenage or young mother.

Young motherhood as a marker for increased surveillance, stigma and social control has received limited criminological attention. This article extends knowledge about criminalised mothers through a focus on *young* mothers with histories of lawbreaking and criminal justice involvement, many of whom have no experience of imprisonment. Consistent with Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph's (2002: 1054) argument that "a perspective emphasizing cognitive processes, language, and identity work" is particularly relevant for understanding desistance amongst women, given the heightened levels of social stigma conferred upon women lawbreakers, this article examines the relationship between maternal identities, stigma and desistance from crime. Drawing on narrative data from interviews with women in their 20s with previous involvement in the youth justice system in England, I argue that both professional and peer surveillance and negative judgements about women's 'early' childbearing and previous lawbreaking

coalesce to produce precarious maternal identities. Stigma relating both to a woman's criminal past, and to her current status as a 'young' mother, combine to create spoiled presents in which the fear of being judged maternally deficient may endure long after a woman has left crime behind.

### **The study**

The data presented in this article are drawn from 25 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with 19 mothers undertaken as part of a larger longitudinal study of women previously subject to youth justice supervision as teenagers in the mid-2000s (Sharpe, 2011).<sup>3</sup> The majority had no history of penal custody, although six women had been imprisoned at least once. The sample was predominantly White British (n=17), and included just one Black British woman and one woman of 'mixed' ethnic origin.<sup>4</sup> Interviewees were aged between 20 and 27 years, with a modal age of 23 years. Their age at the birth of their first child ranged from 14 to 23 years, and thirteen became a mother as a teenager. Participants had between one and four children each, most commonly just one (n=11), and the children's ages ranged from three months to eight years. Five of the women had lost legal custody of their children, although all five maintained contact, albeit with varying

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<sup>3</sup> See Sharpe, 2011, Chapter 4, for a detailed description of the study methodology and the original sample.

<sup>4</sup> This largely reflects the ethnicity of the original sample and the geographical locations from which the women were recruited (Sharpe, 2011: Chapter 4).

levels of frequency. Fourteen of the women were interviewed in their own homes, three in a cafe or restaurant and two at the woman's parents' home where she was staying temporarily, and interviews lasted 74 minutes on average. Babies and/or small children were present during many of the interviews, although I met mothers of school-aged children during school hours wherever possible. Interview data were analysed using the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006), aided by NVivo10 qualitative data analysis software.

### **Young motherhood and desistance**

According to their self-reports, six women had stopped offending before becoming a mother, a further six while pregnant or around the time their first child was born, and four some time after becoming a mother. Two women were still active lawbreakers, although both 'talked the talk' of having left crime behind. Finally Kate, who had a long-standing heroin addiction, had stopped offending before the birth of her first child some eight years earlier, but had recently relapsed and was on probation when we met. Their children were a central theme in all of the women's accounts, regardless of whether they were in their care, and motherhood featured most prominently in their desistance narratives. Almost all of the women credited their children for the cessation of, or at least a substantial reduction in, their lawbreaking, and for many, motherhood featured as a redemption script

(Maruna, 2001) without which they would be 'dead or in prison'. For those women who had stopped offending, or at least slowed down, before becoming pregnant, their child(ren) cemented their resolve to stay straight.

Paid employment (past or present) featured prominently in the lives of just four women, notwithstanding their current child care responsibilities. Few had obtained any qualifications, most having either left school early (for two women, due to pregnancy or childbirth) or been excluded, and formal schooling had been, for many, a source of considerable strain (Sharpe, 2011). Erin (23), the mother of three-month-old Summer, was the only woman in the sample to have attained the 'traditional respectability package' (Giordano et al., 2002) of paid employment and a male partner: Erin was on paid maternity leave from her job as an administrator, and planned to return to work part-time after taking a year's leave.

Male (ex-)partners, by contrast, occupied a substantial amount of the women's time and energy, but rarely for positive reasons. Just three women had remained in a relationship with the father of their child or children (although one of these men was in prison<sup>5</sup>) and none were, or had ever been, married. Eleven reported past and/or current experience of domestic violence, which in several cases endured

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<sup>5</sup> A fourth had very recently reunited with the father of two of her children after a long period of separation.

throughout pregnancy. Three women had spent time in refuges. While male partners have the potential to support female lawbreakers' efforts to desist from crime, previous research indicates that this is rare in practice (Leverentz, 2014; Wright et al., 2012). The only role that male partners were reported to have played in facilitating desistance amongst women in the current study was by restricting their social (including illegal) activities through coercive control.<sup>6</sup> For twenty-five-year-old Zoë, the time, energy and opportunity to continue her prolific shoplifting habit had been sharply curtailed by the combined demands of a violent partner and a new baby. Zoë and her four-year-old son, Harrison, had lived in refuges during Zoë's pregnancy, when her then-partner Richard's violent and controlling behaviour escalated, before returning to live with Richard a few months after Harrison's birth. After leaving school with no qualifications (she was excluded for a 30-day period and thus precluded from taking her GCSE exams), Zoë embarked on two college courses but was asked to leave both after Richard repeatedly entered the college premises making threats and 'causing trouble'. Zoë attributed stopping binge drinking and shoplifting - which she described as "a really bad habit I just couldn't break for ages" - to growing out of crime (Rutherford, 1986): "it just sort

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<sup>6</sup> Lisa and Erin, who were still romantically involved with their respective children's fathers, both reported that they had ceased any criminal involvement some time before becoming pregnant. The extent to which Kate's relationship with her partner was crime-increasing or inhibiting (or neither) was unclear. Although there was a history of domestic violence, Kate's partner had also been the primary carer of their two children throughout Kate's struggles with heroin dependency and periods of imprisonment.

of wore off, and then the more I never did it, the more I just carried on not doing it, until shoplifting would just be like something I'd never done."

The demands of Zoë's full-time job as a hotel receptionist had combined with the time-consuming labour of caring for a small child and negotiating an abusive partner:

I think because of the all the problems that I've had, it's like my life, if I never had my son, if I never met Richard, I don't know how things would have gone. Like I think even though it's been really bad, it's made me better, that part of my life. Because going out, getting drunk and shoplifting and whatever I was doing, was something that I... my mind wasn't about that, I had other problems. I had my son to look after. I had Richard to manage... It's like all that isn't necessary when I've actually got real serious issues going on that I need to sort out. Getting arrested for just being an idiot, it's not really helping anything.

### **Motherhood, maturity, and avoiding past mistakes**

Although motherhood may constitute a pro-social 'replacement self' (Giordano et al., 2002) for a woman ex-lawbreaker, difficulty in shedding the offender label can adversely affect her identity as a 'good' mother. For *young* mothers with a criminal record, both their offending past and their age attract social approbation and censure. The narratives of all 19 women discussed in this article revealed experiences of multiple forms of gendered stigma. As ex-offenders and sometimes ex-prisoners, welfare dependants, and in some cases current or ex-addicts, their status as (too) young mothers overlapped with one or more of these additional spoiled identities (Goffman, 1963). Many women felt negatively judged against the conventional identity scripts available to them - mother, worker, and citizen - and their identities in these domains were often precarious. Several of the women's identities were further spoiled by association: eleven had a partner and/or ex-partner who was or had been in prison, usually for violent offences, and many had ex-partners who were 'women beaters', drug addicts or alcoholics, which had attracted scrutiny from child protection agencies and suspicion about their own parenting capabilities.

While motherhood may be life-changing in its effects, like desistance, it is perhaps better understood as a process than a discrete event. Several mothers experienced becoming pregnant as a dramatic and immediate 'turning point' (Sampson and

Laub, 1993); however, this was relatively uncommon. For others, the desistance process only began some time after becoming a mother and following the birth of a second or subsequent child. These women described how they were not sufficiently mature to give up 'partying' on first becoming a mother as a teenager. Their accounts also attested to the role of having someone - usually their own mother - to 'fall back on' if they neglected their parental responsibilities in favour of a party lifestyle. Pregnancy and childbirth may prompt women to re-evaluate and re-negotiate their relationships with their own mothers. For young mothers in disadvantaged communities, families of origin are likely to value, and even embrace, young motherhood (Yardley, 2008), providing a buffer against widespread social condemnation. As teenagers, many of the women in this study described strained or non-existent relationships with their mother, often relating to her partner and/or her alcohol abuse (Sharpe, 2011). However, the passage of time, and a need for advice as well as practical and material support with childrearing, resulted in a number of women becoming much closer to their mothers: grandmaternal help was highly valued. Against a backdrop of scant state support, intimate partner violence or discord, limited personal resources, and public scrutiny, maternal relationships previously described as a source of stress came to be seen as supportive.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> My first step in re-tracing the women interviewed in the study was usually to visit the address

When I met Ellen, twenty-three-year-old mother of Ryan, six, and 13-month-old Aaron, she was living with her younger son, while Ryan divided his time between Ellen and Ellen's mother, in accordance with a court order. Despite having had a strained relationship with her mother and infrequent contact during her teenage years, when Ellen lived with her father, Ellen's mother had stepped in to look after Ryan when Ellen "started going off the rails" shortly after his birth:

...just not being there for [Ryan] when he needed me. Constantly having babysitters for him and stuff, when he should have been with me and not people he doesn't even know, when he's like two weeks old.

Ryan's birth, when she was seventeen, had not curtailed Ellen's frequent shoplifting outings with her best friend and long-time co-offender. Social services had become involved during Ellen's pregnancy, after Ryan's father assaulted Ellen, resulting in her being hospitalised several times whilst heavily pregnant. He had subsequently received a long prison sentence for a serious

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where they lived when I first interviewed them in 2005 or 2006. I had many conversations, and sometimes on multiple occasions, with the women's mothers, who reflected on the positive (and sometimes negative) changes that had taken place in their daughters' lives since they had been subject to youth justice supervision.

assault on another man. Ellen explained how, as a result of child protection concerns relating to the domestic violence,

social services started sniffing around me, and my behaviour, shoplifting with Ryan. Obviously I see now I've grown up, because obviously it's unacceptable and you shouldn't shoplift with your baby. But then again, I was young, dumb, silly, just had a baby, seventeen.

Pregnant again with her second child four years later, and having been to prison five times in the interim for breaching probation supervision, Ellen was still shoplifting regularly, though not to the same extent as during her first pregnancy. Nevertheless, she was charged with stealing £5-worth of toiletries and, astonishingly, sentenced to six months in custody on the day she was due to give birth. The shock of this had caused Ellen to collapse in court, screaming. The "horrendous" experience of giving birth whilst imprisoned – a 'Damascene event' (Cusson and Pinsonnault, 1986) which Ellen feared Aaron would find out about one day – made her immediately resolve to go straight. Indeed, Ellen had stayed out of trouble since her last prison sentence apart from assaulting a woman who she caught in bed with her (now ex-)partner, for which she was on probation. Since leaving prison, Ellen had moved to a new town to be closer to her mother

and older son and further from her long-time female co-offender, and she had made new friends. Having “grown up a lot”, but only very recently, Ellen now felt that she had too much to lose by continuing to offend. She commented that, whilst for (working-class) men, going to prison brings kudos (Anderson, 1999), “it’s not a girly thing to do”. Most importantly, Ellen felt profound shame at having neglected her older son and she did not want to repeat past mistakes.

Ellen: I feel probably with Aaron, more, I don’t know, I don’t how to put it, more, not protective, but, I don’t know. It’s weird, because I have knackered up with Ryan. I don’t want to do the same with Aaron. Do you know what I mean?...I haven’t been really a good mum to Ryan in the past. I don’t want...I don’t know.

GS: Don’t want to do that again?

Ellen: No. I could have lost him. It was getting to the point where if my mum didn’t have him he could have went into care. It was serious stuff. Then I didn’t realise how actually serious it was. My mum was going to court to fight for Ryan. I wasn’t even turning up to court or anything. I was too busy getting drunk.

## **Gendered stigma**

Perceptions of negative appraisal and stigma affected several women's access to services. Kayleigh (22) had only recently started attending her local children's centre with her two daughters, two-year-old Sadira and Rafa, aged four months, "because when I went with [older daughter] when she was a baby [and Kayleigh was 19], you know, I used to go there and I was the youngest one there, and I used to get funny looks and stuff." Twenty-one-year-old mother of one Anna was the daughter of heroin addicts and her father, although now drug-free, was serving a prison sentence. Anna had been subject to a four-year ASBO from the age of 15, which she credited with 'sorting her out'. However, Anna still felt unable to attend her local Sure Start children's centre with her 21-month old son, Rajesh:

Honestly, because I used to get into trouble with the police, there's loads of coppers in [*home town*] that have had babies. So at this Sure Start centre, I sit there with...There's two women. They're going in, they've both got babies, and they've both nicked me in the past. So they sit there looking down their nose at me.

### **Avoiding social services involvement**

The childhoods of many of the women had been blighted by disconnection, disruption and exclusion, and many had a history of unhelpful or damaging welfare intervention (Sharpe, 2011). Giordano and colleagues suggest that it is only when an individual is able “to imagine a negative sequence of hypothetical consequences” (2002: 1040) of offending that behavioural change is likely to occur. In this context, the intrapsychic legacy of social services involvement in their own young lives motivated many of the women to stop offending in an attempt to avoid similar negative consequences for their own children. Twenty-three-year-old mother of two Maddison described discovering she was pregnant with her first child, Max, at 16:

...as soon as you see that pregnancy test turn positive you're like, oh! Your life just needs to change. Like I used to take drugs and stuff, and used to drink all the time, and I was bored. But as soon as you're a mum you can't do any of that. You need to get your head on your shoulders properly...So I just changed. There's two roads you can go down. You can either carry on doing it. And then your kids are just going to be fucked, in their head, because they're just going to be in and out of care. [...] So I knew I didn't want my kid being like that. And having social...being passed about from

foster carers, and things like that. Social services, they take you away from your parents to help you. But they don't really, it just messes with your head in the long run.

Maddison recalled her own experience of social workers as a young teenager, when she repeatedly ran away from home to be with her older boyfriend (who later became the father of her son, Max), of whom her parents disapproved:

[Social worker] took me over to the park, gave me a fag...spoke to me. And he said, "What's your mum and dad's problem? Why do you keep running away?" I said, "Because they don't like my boyfriend." He asked why, so I told him. He went back into the house, said to my mum and dad, "Maddison's going out with him, so you need to deal with it"... and [social worker] just walked out of the house, and just left me. Dad went crazy, went mad. My mum battered me. My dad went to find [boyfriend]. He [social worker] was just rubbish. He just left a child in such a vulnerable situation. It was crazy. [...] I knew I didn't want a life of social services being involved, and me being in and out of jail, and being in and out of the police station. I knew I didn't want that for my child. So I just stopped.

Anna, discussed above, had been on the child protection register for a number of years due to both parents' heroin addictions. When I asked whether she had come close to getting into trouble again, Anna replied

Now I just think, is it worth it? Like there's enough people that I want to slap, but it's just like, it's not worth getting into trouble for, and spending the night in the police station. It's just not. And obviously that affects Rajesh, and all I care about is Rajesh. Like I wouldn't, not that I... well I wouldn't change my childhood anyway, because I wouldn't be the person that I am now, if I hadn't gone through what I went through when I was a kid. But I'd never do that to my son, ever... Like the whole, my mum and dad being addicted to drugs, I'd never, ever get myself in that situation, to put that onto my son, never.

Sophie, 22-year-old mother of two sons, Jackson, seven and Trystan, six, had become pregnant with her older son when she was 13, after non-consensual sex with a 24-year-old man who lied about his age and "took advantage of" her. Although in recent years she had generally remained on the right side of the law, Sophie had been involved in disputes with neighbours in recent months and had been the subject of several malicious (and unsubstantiated) child protection calls

to the police claiming that she had left her children home alone. Discussing her concerns about bringing up children in a disadvantaged neighbourhood where, in her view, there had been a general deterioration in children's behaviour and an increase in parental permissiveness since she was a child, Sophie differentiated herself from other parents:

I mean, just because I was naughty I don't want my children... It's not like I'm, "Yeah, *I* was naughty, yeah, they can do what they like." Because I'm not. I know a lot of people seem to judge, because I am young and I've got the kids. Especially older people. If the boys do something they're like, "Oh yeah. Well, look, the mum's barely old enough to look after them."

Sophie explained that she had remained largely out of trouble during recent years because "the boys look up to me. Like, I'm their mum." Resisting the temptation to offend meant that Sophie avoided the ultimate female 'feared self' (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009) – the mother whose children are removed into care. This scenario was easy for Sophie to imagine: she recalled another woman with whom she had previously attended a young mothers' education project whilst pregnant:

When I had the boys, I thought, I can't go on like that anymore. I can't. [...] I don't want to go to prison and my children get took off me. There's no chance I'd do that now. [...] Imagine someone coming in your house and taking your children, because I've been there. Like some other girl I know, she had a party in the flat, there was loads of people. And the police came, took all three of her children out of the house. And it's like, it does happen...Someone coming in, telling you they're taking your children and you can't do nothing about it. You'd have social services come in, police outside. I said, "no chance!"

### **Desisting to get children back**

All five of the women who had lost the care of their children cited their desire to get them back as their primary source of motivation to avoid further trouble.

Twenty-three-year-old Danielle had been released from a six-month prison sentence – her second custodial sentence for acquisitive crimes, in addition to a spell in prison on recall - seventeen months before our interview. Danielle, mother of six-year-old Brooke, had started to use heroin at thirteen, following the death of her grandfather who, together with her grandmother, had been a consistent and reliable source of support during constant childhood fights with her mother,

exclusion from school and coping with seven siblings. Brooke lived with Danielle's ex-partner, who Danielle suspected was "still on drugs" and who was "making out in court" that "because I went to jail and that, he's making out that [Brooke] doesn't know who I am".

Danielle, who was involved in a court custody battle over the care of Brooke, had weaned herself off heroin – the main cause of her past offending – without any professional help after being released from prison the previous year. When I asked whether she had been offered support with detoxing, Danielle explained that there was

Too much going on with courts, with my daughter, things like that...I don't want them to make me out to be bad. Because that's not who I am any more. So I don't want anything like that. So I'd rather not go to my doctors, not have drug workers. Because it all goes on paper. And it would be my luck that it came up in court and I'd be fucked for it. So I just, like, do it myself.

I met twenty-two-year-old Kelly at her tiny bedsit, which contained little more than a bed and a few toys. Kelly had been struggling with alcohol addiction since she was fourteen and had spent several years in foster care as a teenager,

following a childhood with a “raving alcoholic” father who regularly assaulted her mother. Whilst explaining that she had been “off the beer” for over a year, Kelly admitted to being in the midst of a relapse on both occasions I interviewed her, seven months apart. She was also offending regularly, although she had managed to avoid police detection. Kelly’s five-year-old daughter, Ruby, had been removed from her care in infancy and was living with Kelly’s mother. Kelly’s efforts to “keep her head down” and stay sober in order to make her daughter proud of her were hampered by a lack of structural support. In particular, she bemoaned the absence of accommodation for single young women in her situation who, she felt, needed support to make a fresh start:

Like I was getting into trouble. And even social services have said to [housing association] move me, get me out of [home town], where I don’t know anyone. And that’s my chance to start again. But you don’t have that opportunity in life, unless you’ve got the money to pack up and just move house. [...] If you’ve got a drug or alcohol problem or anything like that they should literally let you move, only if you wanted to, so you could start afresh. Like social services were saying to me, it’s the people you’re hanging around with. And like I said, when I’ve got five or six lads knocking on my door that were a bit drunk already, I’m not going to turn round and say,

“Fuck off, you can’t come in”, because my windows would go through. So it’s easier to let them in. And they didn’t understand that. [...] So yeah, there should be a cash fund for young girls or young women, just to be able to up sticks and change their life.

### **Precarious identities**

Fear of others, including their own children, finding out about their criminal pasts and, for some, previous drug use and imprisonment, was a common concern.

Twenty-seven-year-old mother of three, Kate, had been addicted to heroin since the age of 14, and had long-standing mental health problems, including anxiety disorder. Having been stable on prescribed methadone and heroin-free apart from “a dabble here and there” since becoming pregnant with her eight-year-old son, Tommy, Kate had stayed out of trouble for five years, before separating from her partner and moving away to live in a refuge (her (then) two children remained with their father). Around this time Kate relapsed into heroin use with a new partner, and there followed a series of arrests for acquisitive crimes, the birth of a third child, Aaliyah, and five short spells in prison, including stays of seven and ten days. When I met Kate, she was unofficially living back with her ex-partner and their two older children, while Aaliyah was living with her paternal grandmother.

Kate felt let down by the justice system: at her most recent court appearance she had asked to be sent to prison, after administrative and bureaucratic errors led to a seven-week delay in her receiving her methadone prescription administered by a private outsourced company. She also felt negatively judged – as a heroin addict, ex-prisoner and a bad mother – by the teachers at her children’s school. She commented that, “I think people think it’s all right for men to do crime and take drugs, don't they? But for a woman...when people know that, like, you have been a thief and that before, it’s hard sometimes, you know what I mean, because people can see you very differently to what you are.”

A woman’s status as a mother with a history of offending and imprisonment was sometimes exploited by ex-partners and peers as a strategy of bullying and one-upmanship. Accusations, threats and disputes were played out online, by text, and in person, and several women lamented the volume of surveillance and gossip that circulated in their (small) home towns, and particularly on social networking sites. Twenty-three-year-old Naomi was mother to four dependent children – Isla (six), Charlie (four), Freya (three) and ten-week-old Stanley – and the primary carer of a fifth, Rhys, the younger brother of an ex-partner. The three fathers of Naomi’s children had all been in prison, and Naomi, who had been prescribed antidepressants for three years, had recently suffered a ‘nervous breakdown’ after

splitting up with the father of her youngest child – a man who, like most of her previous partners, had “constantly leathered” her. This man had reported Naomi to the police for fraudulently claiming benefits for two of her children (although the children were living with her this led to her benefits being stopped pending further investigation), and alleging that her dog had attacked one of the children. Naomi was also involved in several ongoing disputes and fights with other women revolving around their respective children and had been goaded on several occasions:

It's just this bird, she doesn't like me. Since I got out of prison the last time, she's like, "I'll get you put back in jail. You're sick, you shouldn't have kids." She pissed me off bad. So I started arguing with her. [...] I don't do the school run because I don't get on with all of them down there. [Female friend] does it. And if I pick my kids up I'll pick them up at half two instead of three. So I don't see none of them. And they just wait down there and that for me, shout things...So I just won't bite now...It's different, though, because if she shouts at me or goes for me I won't ring the police, because I think they're fucking useless. She'll ring the police – bam! I get arrested and put in jail...That's why I'm so careful of what I do now. I wouldn't mouth at her because cameras are witnesses. No way! ... They'll try it [flirt] with my

boyfriend and then they're, like, "Come near me, I'm putting you back in jail, I'm ringing the police!"

Naomi feared that rather than helping her desist from crime, protecting or defending her children might "be my downfall one day" and cause her to be imprisoned, as had been the case two years earlier, when Naomi had served a second prison sentence for assaulting two women and attempting to injure an infant in a pram. Naomi explained that a young woman, with whom she has a long history, hit her on the back of the head following a verbal altercation, causing Naomi to stumble and drop her daughter Freya, then aged five months, in the street.

## **Conclusion**

For many of the women in this study the threat of the ultimate maternal 'feared self' (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009) – the mother whose children are removed into state care – functioned as a powerful motivational force inhibiting further lawbreaking. Related to this, determination to shield their children from what they perceived, on account of their own childhood experiences, to be damaging social services intervention, made offending a very unattractive prospect. Motherhood

featured as a powerful 'redemption script' (Maruna, 2001) in the women's narratives. For several, its impact was immediate upon discovering she was pregnant; more often, recognition of the incompatibility of lawbreaking (and particularly imprisonment) and maternal responsibility heightened as mothers matured and their children grew older, or after the birth of a second or subsequent child, prompted by a desire not to repeat past mistakes. However, the women's narratives indicate that, even where maternity causes a woman to leave crime behind by providing a prosocial replacement self (Giordano et al., 2002), a formerly criminalised mother's spoiled identity, as well as her current status as a (too) young mother, may be the source of continued stigma and social control.

It could be argued that the stigma faced by many of the participants in this study served to shame them into 'making good' for the sake of their own children since normative expectations of 'good' mothering are incompatible with offending. Rumgay (2004: 407) has suggested that recognition of "the conflict between a strong deviant identity and its associated behaviours and the demands of alternative pro-social identities which acquire new value...may...produc[e] the intense shame reported by many female offenders". However, despite individual 'cognitive transformations' (Giordano et al., 2002), stigma and social approbation frequently persisted well after women had left crime – and penal supervision –

behind. The stigma of a criminal record, even in the absence of any recent offending, interacted with being judged as a 'young' (and thus irresponsible) mother - and in some cases also an ex-prisoner and/or addict - to intensify surveillance by both professionals and peers and produce *enduring* judgements of maternal deficiency.

Much previous research on female lawbreakers who are mothers has focused on the impact of *formal* penal control, in particular the pains of maternal imprisonment and the collateral damage to women prisoners' children (Caddle and Crisp, 1997; Codd, 2008; Epstein, 2012; Haney, 2010). The evidence presented in this article strongly suggests that the effects of *informal* labelling and stigma from peers and the wider public may be equally significant. The mothers in this study were all in their twenties and all had young children. Their offending histories were, on average, rather shorter than those of the subjects of previous studies of motherhood and desistance reviewed above (Brown and Bloom, 2009; Giordano et al., 2002; Kraeger et al., 2010; Leverentz, 2014) and their involvement in the justice system far less entrenched. Most of the women enjoyed some degree of family support, usually from their own mothers, and few were addicted to Class A drugs. That maternal stigma emerged so prominently in their accounts suggests that the social control of young criminalised mothers through an imputation of

spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963) may extend well beyond those with current or recent involvement in crime.

I asked Rachel, the 24-year-old mother of Reuben, four and Scarlett, two, who had been sent to prison at the age of 16 for committing two street robberies, how she felt about her criminal past. When I first interviewed her at the age of 17, she seemed enjoy the attention she attracted as a young woman ex-prisoner. Reflecting back seven years later, Rachel told me that:

There's still people who know who I am. Like I've still got, like, "oh, that's Rachel." You know, it's not changed...I've always got my name, because [home town]'s such a small town, everyone knows everyone. I've still got that name. [*GS: Does it matter to you now?*] It doesn't matter to me. Because at the end of the day, everyone knows that I've got my kids and I've changed. Like my mum's friend was saying, "so and so was talking about Rachel, saying how much she's changed since she's had the kids, she's a totally different person." So I know that they say it in a good way, compared to what I used to be. Whereas when they were talking about me before, they were talking about me for what I've done and stuff. But now

it's all like, "oh she's done that, but she's had two kids now and she's got her place, and settled down."

For women with criminal histories, like Rachel, being perceived as a 'redeemed woman' – and thus a responsible mother – may well be more likely with the passage of (crime-free) time. However, since affirmation is important both for desistance from crime (Maruna et al., 2004), and undoubtedly also for a mother's self-confidence and for the well-being and healthy development of her children, the psychic impact of stigma on a population of women with histories of exclusion, victimisation and institutional neglect (Sharpe, 2011; Sharpe, forthcoming) may be profound, not only in terms of future involvement in lawbreaking, but also in repeating or compounding the traumas so frequently already experienced by justice system-involved young women.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust [grant number F/00118/BS]

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