Learning from Disrupted Connections: The Impact of COVID-19 on Relational and Professional Support in the Female Criminal Justice System

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ABSTRACT:

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The study employed a qualitative approach, conducting interviews with nine UK prison and community-based staff to explore how individuals in the female justice system maintained connections prior to COVID-19, the impact of pandemic restrictions on these connections, and strategies to support continued contact with family, significant others, and external services. A reflexive thematic analysis, using an inductive approach, was applied to identify key themes from the data.

The findings highlighted the pandemicâ€™s profound impact in intensifying isolation, severing vital family connections, and exposing critical gaps in professional support. However, they also pointed to meaningful opportunities for positive change - demonstrating how digital solutions can enhance resilience and how enforced distance from harmful influences may offer a foundation for healthier future connections.

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Abstract

Purpose: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted connections between justice-involved individuals and their families while straining professional support systems. This study explored the impact of these disruptions within the female criminal justice system, focusing on relational connectedness and examining staff perspectives on maintaining and adapting support structures during crisis.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study employed a qualitative approach, conducting interviews with nine UK prison and community-based staff to explore how individuals in the female justice system maintained connections prior to COVID-19, the impact of pandemic restrictions on these connections, and strategies to support continued contact with family, significant others, and external services. A reflexive thematic analysis, using an inductive approach, was applied to identify key themes from the data.

Findings: The findings highlighted the pandemic's profound impact in intensifying isolation, severing vital family connections, and exposing critical gaps in professional support. However, they also pointed to meaningful opportunities for positive change - demonstrating how digital solutions can enhance resilience and how enforced distance from harmful influences may offer a foundation for healthier future connections.

Originality: By centring staff perspectives, the study offers original insights into strengthening relational connections and refining crisis responses, highlighting underexplored avenues to enhance rehabilitation outcomes in the female justice system

Practical Implications: This work underscores the need for coordinated, long-term support systems to foster connectedness for individuals in and leaving prison, with practical recommendations for enhancing access to housing, employment, and mental health services.

Key words: COVID-19, connectedness, relationships, family, reunification, reintegration

An estimated 45% of individuals in the criminal justice system lose contact with their family during incarceration (Centre for Social Justice [CSJ], 2022). This disruption is especially impactful for those in the female estate, around 66% of whom have children under 18 at sentencing (Baldwin, 2017). For 85% of these individuals, incarceration marks the first significant separation from their children, often hindering their ability to engage fully in rehabilitation until family connections are restored (Farmer, 2019). Maintaining social and family ties is a well-established protective factor against recidivism, mental health issues, and the breakdown of parent-child relationships (Barrick et al., 2014; Cochran, 2019; CSJ, 2022; Duwe & McNeeley, 2020; Prison Reform Trust [PRT], 2020; 2021). For women, relational stability is not only crucial for successful rehabilitation and desistance (Farmer, 2019) but also central to identity formation and psychological wellbeing (Covington, 2007).

COVID-19 lockdowns and distancing measures further disrupted vital social connections in the criminal justice system, as services balanced immediate health risks with long-term impacts on wellbeing (Brennan, 2020; PRT, 2021). UK prisons adopted the COVID-19 National Framework—a centralised strategy focused on preserving life, maintaining safety and stability, and ensuring capacity (HMPPS, 2020). This framework remained in place until May 2022, after which decision-making returned to individual sites. A major operational change during this time was restrictions on face-to-face visits to limit contact and follow national guidelines (HMPPS, 2020). Alternative measures were introduced to support connections, including letter writing, extra credit, extended phone time, and reduced call costs. The most significant development was the rapid introduction of digital tools such as video conferencing (e.g., Purple Visits), which had been largely unavailable before the pandemic (HMPPS, 2020). This was greatly welcomed and had positive effects on wellbeing by allowing justice-involved individuals to maintain social ties within the isolated environment (Kyprianides & Easterbrook, 2020).

Access to agencies that support community reintegration and provide therapeutic services (e.g., education and training, provision of purposeful activity) were also halted. Some services adapted quickly and changed their models to provide virtual or in-cell support (Clinks, 2020), such as the Prisoner Learning Alliance who created an In-cell Activity Hub for collections of learning resources (Fair & Jacobsen, 2021). However, the impact of restrictions on services supporting community reintegration remains unclear yet is crucial to understand given that a continuum of care from custody to community is recommended to promote desistance and probation engagement, especially for individuals with complex needs (O'Meara et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2018).

These challenges are particularly significant when viewed through a trauma-informed lens, which recognises that many justice-involved individuals have extensive histories of trauma including abuse, neglect, and systemic disadvantage (Covington, 2007; SAMHSA, 2014). International research has consistently confirmed high rates of sexual and interpersonal abuse among those in the female estate, who are also more likely than those in the male estate to report five or more adverse experiences before 16 (Kelman et al., 2022). From this perspective, the loss of meaningful contact, limited access to services, and increased isolation during the pandemic may have reinforced feelings of powerlessness, disconnection, and emotional insecurity, which are core features of trauma responses (Elliott et al., 2005; SAMHSA, 2014).

These emotional impacts were further compounded when, even after in-person visits resumed, ongoing restrictions such as distancing, face coverings, and no physical contact caused distress and led many to postpone visits until conditions improved (Brennan, 2020; Burrows & Bell, 2022). Additionally, efforts to maintain connections through digital means were hampered by outdated technology, connectivity issues, and a pronounced digital divide

among justice-involved individuals (Minson, 2021; PRT, 2020; 2021; Blomberg et al., 2021). This was especially significant for women, who often lacked confidence and trust in technology due to prior experiences of it being used to control, manipulate, or abuse them (Blomberg et al., 2021). Efforts were also contingent on the support of staff who were under pressure due to overcrowding, budget cuts, and staff shortages (Brennan, 2020). The pandemic therefore offered a unique opportunity to consider the factors influencing individuals' ability to maintain and enhance their support networks with family, significant others, and external services whilst in prison and during reintegration. By reflecting on the lessons learned from these disruptions, there is potential to improve future practices and strengthen systems to better support individuals' well-being and rehabilitation during times of crisis. This remains important beyond the pandemic and provides valuable insights that may benefit individuals across all aspects of the criminal justice system, especially considering that many people live in prisons and community settings outside their home areas.

In the UK, those in the male estate are housed an average of 50 miles from home and those in the female estate an average of 63 miles, making in-person visits more time-consuming and costly for families (Farmer, 2019). Specifically, Welsh individuals across the female estate are sent to England at all levels of custody (prison and the community) due to a lack of service provision. This distance also makes access to transitional services difficult, placing individuals at increased risk of reoffending and heightened mental ill health due to unfamiliar surroundings and a lack of knowledge about local service provision (O'Meara et al., 2019). Considering the limited support options available to this group, it is essential to identify the key factors that help those in the female system stay connected to their families, support networks, and essential services during their criminal justice journey.

Current Study

The current study aimed to assess the unintended consequences of COVID-19 restrictions through a gender-specific lens, focusing on individuals within the female criminal justice system—a population frequently overlooked in research (Byrne et al., 2020; Penal Reform International (PRI), 2020). Interviews with criminal justice staff (prison and community-based) aimed to identify strategies that promote long-term connectedness, aligning with the UK Women's Policy Framework (2018) and Prisons Strategy White Paper (2021). The study also explored effective communication methods bridging the 'inside' and 'outside,' and how staff overcame pandemic-related barriers to connections. Staff perspectives were crucial, offering unique insights into challenges faced and practical strategies used to support individuals and their families within the female justice system during crisis.

Data and Methods

Ethics

The study received ethical approval from xxx and was approved and registered with the National Research Committee (reference: xxx). All participants provided informed written consent prior to being interviewed.

Participants

Nine staff members from prison and probation services participated in virtual, semi-structured interviews with a single researcher to ensure consistency and reliability of outcomes (initials hidden for peer review). Participants were recruited from: one prison site

(N = 3), two Approved Premises (APs: residential units that house, monitor and manage ex-prisoners in the community) (N = 3), a Transitional Support Mental Health Liaison service (N = 2), and one prison third sector organisation (N = 1). All participants held positions where they provided support to individuals within the female justice system in England and Wales. All participants were White British with further sociodemographic factors such as gender, age, professional role, and length of service, detailed in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Recruitment was facilitated through consultation with staff within the criminal justice system using a snowball sampling approach. The approach aimed to ensure a diverse range of staff perspectives, thus the only inclusion criteria was that participants were required to have worked in a direct role with those in prison or the community prior to and during the pandemic to provide insights into the COVID-19 response.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted between June–July 2022 and were held remotely to mitigate resource implications and site demands. The interview structure was designed to capture several key aspects (the interview schedule can be made available upon request from the corresponding author):

1) How individuals in the female justice-system maintained connections with others before the COVID-19 response.

2) The impact of the COVID-19 response on the maintenance and mode of connections during lockdown and restriction periods.
3) Strategies to support those in the female system in maintaining contact with family/significant others and external services moving forward.

Interviews were recorded via Dictaphone for professional audio transcription, and all identifying information was anonymised prior to analysis. Video recording platforms were used optionally, with participants having the choice to turn off their cameras. The duration of interviews ranged from 29-82 minutes, with a mean duration of 46 minutes.

A reflexive thematic analysis method was employed, characterised by an inductive approach to data analysis that does not impose a pre-determined theoretical or conceptual framework (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2020). Data were initially open coded by one researcher (initials hidden for peer review), with the final coding framework established through a verification process involving two additional researchers (initials hidden for peer review). Discrepancies in the coding framework could involve a third reviewer (initials hidden for peer review) however, consensus among the primary reviewers were reached. Several measures collectively enhanced the rigor, reliability and trustworthiness of the study's findings and interpretations in terms of the analytical (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2020) and reflexivity approach (Bryne, 2021; Yardley, 2000):

1) Credibility: Peer debriefing was utilised to validate findings.
2) Transferability: The adequacy of detail to support interpretations was continually reviewed.
3) Dependability: Logical and traceable analysis and interpretation were ensured through auditing.

4) Confirmability: Conclusions and interpretations were scrutinised to justify theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices.

Reflexive Statement

The research team have varying levels of professional experience in forensic psychology and criminal justice research and were therefore positioned from the perspectives of both an 'insider' with shared contextual understanding and an 'outsider' with no direct involvement in the participants' roles or institutions. This dual positioning helped ongoing reflection on how assumptions and prior knowledge could influence the interpretation of data. To mitigate potential bias and enhance analytic rigor, the team engaged in iterative reflexive conversations and peer debriefing throughout the coding and interpretation process. The team remained mindful of the power dynamics inherent in discussing institutional dynamics and aimed to create a respectful and open space for participants to express their experiences, recognising their professional vulnerability within a system under scrutiny during the pandemic.

Results

The study identified four superordinate themes that related to specific aspects of relational connectedness: 1) the role of family in emotional and behavioural stability; 2) breaking the cycle of harmful relationships; 3) adapting to digital communication; and 4) barriers to support and strain on professional relationships. By comparing experiences before and during the pandemic, the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on connections with family and supporting services is examined within these themes. The findings are illustrated using

direct quotes from the original interviews, with pseudonyms used to maintain confidentiality. Participants place of work is noted as being prison or community based.

The Role of Family in Emotional and Behavioural Stability

Family contact consistently emerged as a central factor in supporting emotional well-being and behavioural stability. Staff frequently highlighted the importance of these connections, particularly with children, as a source of hope and motivation. "Eleanor" (Community Based) explained that she works "… exclusively with women [and] that contact with their children can be the only thing they're looking forward to and what keeps them positive and… happy in themselves."

In-person family contact was viewed as fostering positivity for both justice-involved individuals and their families, largely due to its incentivising role. It was described by "Ruby" (Prison Based) as having a "positive effect behaviourally" as those in prison worked to maintain prison visit entitlements, and it provides an opportunity for individuals in prison and the community to showcase their progress, which "can have such a positive impact on everybody."

The introduction of COVID-19 restrictions severely disrupted family connections, as face-to-face visits were temporarily halted. This loss of direct contact was considered by staff to be closely linked to declines in emotional stability, with "Eleanor" (Community Based) noting that "a lot of women destabilised [and] self-harm increased." Staff consistently emphasised the protective role of family contact in mitigating risks of self-harm and suicidal behaviours, highlighting a notable decrease in these behaviours when support was received from the family. "Grace" (Prison Based) observed that "when you're dealing with specific acts and self-harm, suicide, people at risk of that, family contact is a massive thing in helping support those people that are vulnerable."

The loss of physical contact was considered by staff to have a significant effect on the sense of closeness and connection with families. "Sophie" (Community Based) observed:

> [individuals missed] that physical contact… and being touched and hugged and stuff is important for everybody… for children or other family members who are building up trust and relationships, to have that then put on hold for that period, is really tricky …it's just the break in relationships and trust-building really.

This was not only seen to heighten feelings of loneliness, isolation, and sadness but also compounded the impact of reduced interaction with peers within the prison environment. "Not being able to come out of their cells, not being able to have any kind of visitation, not being able to move around [the unit/wing] or necessarily speak to the other people on the wings" ("Charlotte", Community Based) was seen to have a profound effect on prisoner's emotional wellbeing. Consequently, some prisoners lost "…privileges [for not abiding by behavioural principles] because they lost the motivation of contact with family and friends" ("Isabella", Prison Based).

The negative impact of disrupted connections was considered to be particularly pronounced for certain sub-groups across the female system. For instance, individuals housed far from home faced compounded challenges in maintaining family bonds which intensified feelings of isolation and disconnection. This was especially noted for individuals from Wales placed in English prisons or APs. However, "Charlotte" (Community Based) highlighted that this is a pre-existing issue:

> In terms of any kind of contact with families in custody, it's just significantly less available [to Welsh women] than what it is in other areas. And then you see that kind of reflected in the quality of lives that those women have. The drug use is significantly higher.

Those eligible for Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) during the pandemic were also considered to be additionally affected. The restrictions on ROTL not only hindered opportunities to repair critical family relationships and resume caregiving roles, but also limited the ability of individuals to rebuild connections within their communities. “Amelia” (Community Based) emphasised the importance of ROTL in fostering these links:

> The very reason of having a release on temporary licence is to encourage and maintain those family links, which are really important, and to come back to the area that you’re going to be going into, so I would promote that as much as I could for the women coming out of custody.

Staff considered that the intensified feelings of being alone and disconnected underpinned behavioural infractions in some people. “Amelia” (Community Based) observed that those transitioning back to the community via APs during the pandemic were “isolated in their own bedroom, to the point that we just, unfortunately, sadly, had to send people back to custody because they refused to comply.” Some individuals in the community also prioritised time with loved ones over adherence to license conditions, stating to staff that 'they would rather take the risk of being recalled and have their extra time with their partner' (“Sophie”, Community Based). However, this was also noted to be an existing issue within the female estate prior to COVID-19.

Breaking the Cycle of Harmful Relationships

This theme revolves around staff's perception that the COVID-19 response created opportunities for some individuals to strengthen their rehabilitative pathways by ending harmful relationships and unhelpful social ties.

Staff noted the significant impact that harmful or damaging personal relationships can have on criminality and risky behaviour. Affiliating with partners/ex-partners who encourage recidivism, substance misuse, or who have been violent towards them was seen as particularly detrimental, and for a "…lot of women in custody… families have been a source of why they're in custody in the first place and actually those relationships are… quite negative sometimes" ("Charlotte", Community Based).

Although the pandemic and subsequent criminal justice response created barriers to delivering supportive processes, staff also recognised the opportunity for some individuals to initiate positive change. One notable aspect was the ability for individuals to distance themselves from damaging relationships without feeling solely responsible for doing so. "Charlotte" (Community Based) noted that:

> …if there is a negative family relationship that's not particularly healthy and doesn't impact the client in a particularly good way, I guess there is the positives in that the person can have that really good excuse [COVID restrictions] to keep a distance.

Staff observed that individuals who ended damaging relationships experienced improvements in their overall wellbeing and behavioural compliance. "Charlotte" (Community Based) highlighted that COVID helped her see that a "… lack of contact [can be a] safety factor… [and] sometimes it's a blessing not to have contact with certain people." This also had broader positive effects, such as diminishing access to alcohol and illicit substances in the community, which played a crucial role in supporting individuals' efforts to recover from addictions:

> …in terms of compliance it was a pretty good period of time … it actually really helped some people in their recovery because they came out to a safer space… the same level

> of temptations weren't on the doorstep like they would normally be… ("Amelia", Community).

As contact with criminal peers decreased, those in the community were also able to retain mobile phones for longer which facilitated continuing contact with support services post-release. "Amelia" (Community Based) explained that: "we [community service] provided them with mobile phones… and because they weren't going out and about they kept those phones… for much longer than I've ever seen."

Adapting to Digital Communication

This theme provides insight into some of the challenges and opportunities faced by supporting staff and justice involved individuals when engaging with digital forms of communication.

Digital resources introduced as part of the criminal justice response to COVID-19 provided a novel opportunity to support individuals in new ways. Staff expressed appreciation for Purple Visits, as it reduced uncertainty about visitation and allowed justice-involved individuals to see family more frequently:

> A lot of women quite liked that because it took them… to their home and a familiar environment on the screen. And that was quite positive for a few of the women that I spoke to, and it also took away some of the anxiety ("Lily", Community Based).

In-cell telephones installed in some prison wings significantly enhanced communication between individuals and their families. This initiative not only strengthened attachments by facilitating more frequent contact but also reduced the potential health risks associated with sharing facilities during a contagious period. Staff, like "Charlotte"

(Community Based), highlighted the importance of this facility in giving individuals '… far more opportunities to be able to keep in contact," especially for individuals whose families lived farther away.

"Sophie" (Community Based) felt digital resources enabled some individuals to have "… more time to build that relationship [with family], before having that face-to-face contact… In some situations, that might be quite a healthy thing to do." As a result, there were instances where family relationships healed, ultimately reducing tension and easing the transition back into the community:

> She was able to speak with her mother whilst in custody and actually started the relationship towards healing… when she was released, she had a much more positive outlook on how things were going to go in the community because she'd started that repair to the relationship with her mother ("Isabella", Prison Based).

These technological advancements also enabled individuals both in prison and in the community to engage more frequently with support services. Virtual meetings reduced the time commitment compared to physical meetings, making it easier for individuals to participate. This shift allowed for more regular interactions with support services for some people, promoting continuity of care and assistance throughout their criminal justice journey. As discussed by "Amelia" (Community Based), "before [technology was introduced] it was like, 'Oh no I can't come because I haven't got four hours spare', whereas actually now you don't need four hours spare, you just need half an hour."

On the other hand, digital technology introduced new challenges in staff-prisoner communication. Staff noted that while in-cell phones increased opportunities for communication, they also reduced privacy. Before the pandemic, staff could take prisoners to private rooms for confidential conversations and the lack of privacy with in-cell

communication made some prisoners less willing to share personal issues or concerns. Staff expressed concerns that this may have impacted the quality of support they received. "Charlotte" (Community Based) emphasised that the "… number one complaint [from those in prison] was 'Can you get me out of the cell? I don't want to talk about this information with other women around"… some of them just don't think it's very private so they won't [engage]."

A lack of digital literacy posed a significant barrier for some individuals, limiting their opportunities to communicate effectively with both family and services. Staff, like "Olivia" (Prison Based) recognised that "… some people… struggled with the technology, whether that was due to learning difficulties or age." Additionally, for some individuals the barrier to connect digitally was exacerbated by their families' lack of access to video equipment.

> …in terms of technology … family members didn't have it because they're coming from disadvantaged, deprived backgrounds, so we might have been able to offer it to them, but the other end didn't have it ("Isabella", Prison Based).

Technological issues, such as losing connection during virtual interactions, and COVID-related staffing concerns posed additional challenges that impeded communication between individuals and their families or support services. "Isabella" (Prison Based) felt that because of "… low staffing numbers and so much time constraints [on staff] that people were missing opportunities to have video links."

The transition from physical to telephone appointments with healthcare providers was also perceived by staff to have negative implications for assessing risk and understanding non-verbal cues. As "Charlotte" (Community Bases) expressed, "there's so much that you can get from being in a space with a person… from body language, from eye contact… the change in

voice, everything." Nevertheless, whilst digital resources had their limitations, they were recognised for their role in keeping individuals informed and connected to essential services during periods of restriction.

> I think probation did as much as they could during that time in terms of having that contact with the residents… and we'd constantly keep them updated anyway as to progress and how someone is getting on ("Ruby", Prison Based).

Barriers to Support and Strains on Professional Relationships

This theme emphasises the interconnected challenges of reduced professional support and the additional pressures on staff. It also highlights the ways in which both systemic barriers and strained professional relationships impacted justice-involved individuals and the professionals trying to support them.

The suspension of key rehabilitation processes, including group work, reintegration activities, and services to support housing and employment, created significant barriers to effective support. Staff observed how the closure of these services negatively affected individuals' rehabilitation efforts and heightened emotional strain, particularly for those nearing release. "Charlotte" (Community Based) reflected on how "getting closer to that gate… really builds so much feeling…. not being able to have any contact or be talked through that process would have just made everything a million times more stressful."

In addition to the suspension of rehabilitation programmes the limited availability of essential services, such as transport funding and communication with mental health services, further compromised the support systems in place. The lack of adequate support left many individuals without necessary accommodation or emotional support upon their release, contributing to a rise in homelessness. "Eleanor" (Community Based) revealed that "prior to

Covid it was nearly always guaranteed a woman would leave an AP to a permanent address, and now women are leaving AP homeless… it's a national crisis".

This shortage of professional support was further exacerbated by logistical barriers that affected both staff and the individuals they were supporting - challenges that existed even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Long-standing issues such as difficulties accessing public transport made it harder for individuals to attend probation appointments and other essential meetings. These barriers were intensified by pandemic-related travel restrictions, leading to delays and, in some cases, recalls to custody. "Charlotte" (Community Based) reflected on the broader challenges faced by individuals and explained, "… so many of the women that will come back [to prison] on a short recall… said, 'Well, it was just a shitshow getting back home and I just didn't get there in time.'" Her comment highlights how logistical barriers have consistently impacted individuals, not just in the context of the pandemic.

This added strain to an already difficult process of reintegration, which was noted as a particular challenge for individuals from Wales. "Charlotte" (Community Based) explained that some individuals from Wales must travel for up to "… eight, nine hours… on public transport and if not back in their probation area by 5 o'clock then they've missed their probation appointment and they can be breached." With "…the number one question… from women [being] "How am I going to get home?", "Charlotte" (Community Based) emphasised the importance of improving support for the most vulnerable women transitioning to the community. She highlighted that providing better transport options or mobile phones could greatly enhance their ability to stay connected to services and reintegrate successfully, though acknowledged that limited funding constrained the service's ability to achieve this.

Meanwhile, staff experienced growing pressure in maintaining their professional roles under these challenging conditions. The restrictions not only intensified their workload but also strained trust between families and professionals, as families often held services accountable

for the increased restrictions within forensic settings. "Amelia" (Community Based) shared examples where some family members are:

> … shouting down the phone 'That's not fair, they [non-justice-involved individuals] don't have to do it, why have you got your own rules? That's not what the government say.' And it's trying to explain to them that we're [criminal justice service] different.

Despite these challenges, staff worked to support individuals maintain contact with family through alternative methods, such as sending custody letters and providing telephone updates. For some, these strategies were seen as effective in keeping families connected which helped alleviate frustrations and maintained some continuity in relationships. "Ruby" (Prison Based) felt that some "… residents… could see that staff were trying to do as much as possible to make that experience as nice for them as we could… so they were always grateful for the support." However for others, these efforts were met with resistance as they had already distanced themselves from support services due to the breakdown in communication. Whilst staff in some services provided individuals in prison with pictures and biographies of themselves to support connections at a time in-person visit were not possible, "Isabella" (Prison Based) "… noticed… a much higher lack of engagement post release because we hadn't been able to put that relationship building in place beforehand. So, women were like, 'No, I don't want to work with you, I don't know you."

In some cases, the role of staff expanded beyond the professional sphere, with some staff taking on family-like roles to offer increased emotional support. This fostered trust and improved relationships, especially when staff empathised with the challenges families and individuals in custody were facing during the pandemic. "Amelia" (Community Based) felt that in taking on "…a family role [some individuals] started to open up more to us perhaps, whereas before they would have been having those conversations with family."

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted both personal connections and professional support systems, exacerbating isolation and emotional instability for individuals involved in the female justice system. Barriers to family contact, limited professional resources, and staff pressures highlighted the interconnected challenges faced, underscoring the need for more resilient, adaptable support structures within the justice system at times of crisis.

Discussion & Future Research

In this study, we conducted a gender-specific assessment of the COVID-19 criminal justice response for individuals in female prison and community services. Our focus was on understanding and enhancing connectedness as perceived by criminal justice staff—an area that has been underexplored in existing research.

Results emphasised the critical role of connectedness with family, support services, and the broader community in the well-being and rehabilitation of individuals in the female system. Without these critical supports and interventions, individuals faced significant challenges. These included maintaining positive behaviours, accessing essential resources for instrumental needs (such as housing and transportation), addressing emotional needs, improving mental health outcomes, and preparing for successful reintegration into society. Results align with previous research demonstrating that the quality and continuity of relationships—both during and after imprisonment —are pivotal factors in promoting positive outcomes (Bales & Mears, 2008; La Vigne et al., 2005; May et al., 2008; Niven & Stuart, 2005). These findings align with trauma-informed principles that highlight relational safety and continuity as vital for emotional well-being, especially for those with prior trauma (Covington, 2007; SAMHSA, 201). However, future research is needed to understand how

connectedness is impacted by different environments across the criminal justice service over time. The present study did not aim to consider the individual needs of prison and community populations, nor did it consider potential differences across regimes (i.e., general wings, therapeutic communities or psychologically informed environments etc.). Yet, there is a need to understand how individuals are affected by prison or community environments (Liebling et al., 2019).

A common thread throughout the themes reported here is the impact a lack of physical contact had on levels of trust between justice-involved individuals, their families, and staff as they no longer had the mechanism for demonstrating change, growth, and motivation. For example, the suspension of ROTLs during the pandemic hindered opportunities for individuals to show progress and accountability, and intensified feelings of anxiety, detachment, and loneliness. This not only contributed to a breakdown in relationships with family and external services but also led some individuals to reject support from transitional services, as they lacked opportunities to build trusting connections. As a result, the likelihood of engaging in criminogenic and risky behaviours increased. This aligns with desistance research, which highlights the importance of external recognition of change, a sense of belonging, and meaningful engagement with the social environment in supporting individuals' efforts to move away from crime (Farrall et al., 2014; Gadd, 2006; Ugelvik, 2022). Further, trust, as described by Mollering (2001), is crucial in building and reinforcing relationships. In the context of the criminal justice system, where power dynamics and risk reduction are paramount, establishing and maintaining trust can be challenging, especially when face-to-face interactions are limited (Liebling, 2004; Ugelvik, 2022). Future research should explore ways to foster and sustain positive change and trust during periods of crisis or isolation, particularly within populations where past trauma has fostered negative cognitions, such as perceiving the world as dangerous or others as untrustworthy (Facer-Irwin et al.,

2023). A trauma-informed approach to release planning and service delivery, grounded in the principles of safety, empowerment, transparency, and trust, may help to buffer these effects and support engagement. This focus is critical not only in the context of acute events like the pandemic but also for individuals facing isolation for other reasons, such as a lack of external support systems or placement in segregation.

Despite these challenges, there were examples of staff using the pandemic as an opportunity to support individuals reflect on unhealthy relationships and consider how their support systems could promote positive change. Staff worked to empower individuals to establish heathier boundaries to prioritise their well-being and rehabilitation by helping them disengage from harmful relationships that hindered positive personal development. This highlights the adaptive potential of staff and how trauma-informed care can be applied even in high-stress, resource-limited environments to promote emotional safety and personal growth.

The positive role of family and social connections in the present study is as expected and a plethora of research shows its critical role (i.e., Mowen & Boman, 2018; Wallace et al., 2020). However, the findings here also show the importance of engaging services and family in meeting the instrumental needs (i.e., basic needs such as housing, financial assistance, and employment opportunities) of individuals. The loss of instrumental support due to national and criminal justice restrictions limited families' ability to provide transportation, which created challenges in adhering to licence conditions, particularly for those living in Wales. Moreover, the suspension of services supporting those living in prison and transitioning to the community, alongside the remote working of allied professionals, exacerbated the challenges. This led to instances where individuals were released without suitable accommodation, increasing their vulnerability to relapse and reoffending. Instrumental support is essential for

successful re-entry into society (Mowen et al., 2019), and significant in strengthening desistance from criminal behaviour as it is less affected by strains in relationships and directly addresses practical barriers individuals face upon release (Western et al., 2015). The pandemic highlighted the interconnected nature of these support systems and how their availability—or lack thereof—can affect an individual's ability to successfully reintegrate into society and avoid recidivism. Future research should examine how different forms of support interact and influence rehabilitation outcomes over time. This includes examining innovative approaches to maintaining supportive relationships and addressing practical needs in times of crisis or isolation, such as through remote support services and community partnerships.

The disruption caused by the pandemic in accessing support services is proposed to have caused a 24% increase in self-harm rates between July and September 2020 for those in the female estate (PRT, 2020; 2021). Underscoring the urgent need for environments that recognise and respond to the impacts of trauma. Further, the COVID-19 restrictions led to a loss of contact and disruption to family life, potentially impacting family reunification and resettlement of individuals after prison (PRT, 2020). Even before the pandemic, in-person visits could be distressing for children due to the security processes and lack of privacy that create an intimidating environment (Smith & Jakobsen, 2014). The use of technology for remote communication provided a vital lifeline for maintaining social connections and supporting emotional well-being amidst the constraints imposed by the pandemic. However, some individuals struggled to use digital tools and as a result, may have missed out on crucial opportunities to maintain relationships or access necessary support from professionals. This has been reported elsewhere (Kyprianides & Easterbrook, 2020; Minson, 2021; PRT, 2020; 2021) and the digital divide across the female estate emphasises the importance of providing

adequate training and support to enhance digital literacy among individuals, ensuring they can fully participate in and benefit from technological advancements in communication.

Future studies could examine how different communication methods (e.g., in-person vs. virtual visits) affect mental health and behaviour across the criminal justice system. Further, more research is needed to understand connectedness from the perspectives of justice-involved individuals and their families. While this was a limitation of the present study, it was not its primary aim, and further research is needed to explore firsthand experiences of maintaining relationships and accessing services during the pandemic. This would offer valuable insights beyond staff observations to explore these perspectives in depth.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Practice

The current work highlights the key factors and support needed to promote connectedness in the long term. Addressing the challenges raised in the present study requires a coordinated effort to restore and enhance support systems for individuals in prison and upon release, ensuring access to essential resources such as housing, employment opportunities, and comprehensive mental health services. Here we provide some recommendations to services.

1) **Meaningful contact:** People should have the option of video visits due to the cost, time, and environmental implications. Many individuals find in-person visits stressful and prefer speaking in a private room, away from other prisoners. To address this, flexible visitation policies should be developed that balance local risk considerations with the need for meaningful contact with significant others and services. This could

involve hybrid models of in-person and virtual visits, ensuring equitable access to visitation for all individuals, regardless of their location or circumstances.

2) **Agency and autonomy:** During times of crisis, maintaining access to essential services—such as housing and employment assistance—is crucial. Individuals facing challenges should have the agency to seek and shape the support they need, while staff play a proactive role in identifying and addressing service gaps. While training strategies must account for the pressures on an already overstretched workforce, staff training should not only enhance their ability to recognise unmet needs but also empower them to work collaboratively with individuals. By fostering autonomy, empathy, and resourcefulness, the service can ensure that both staff and those they support have the tools to navigate challenges effectively.
3) **Transportation risks:** Tailored support and interventions are needed to mitigate risks associated with transportation during the reintegration process, which can help prevent individuals from engaging in risky behaviour upon release from prison. Strategies may include providing alternative transportation options, enhancing support networks to accompany individuals during travel, and implementing substance misuse prevention measures specifically designed for individuals leaving custody. Given the increased risk of substance use and other challenges during such transitional periods, these Human Rights Standards (HRS) must be worked through to ensure that these vulnerabilities are addressed effectively.
4) **Geographical barriers:** The lack of tailored service provision for individuals across the Welsh female justice service highlighted disparities in access to healthcare, mental health support and transitional services. These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive reforms and initiatives aimed at addressing the specific needs of those facing geographical and systemic barriers.

5) **Digital Access:** Maintaining communication is a key example of fostering trust and positive change, especially during periods of isolation. Ensuring that individuals can stay in contact with their families and support services is essential not only for emotional support but also for successful reintegration. This involves addressing challenges around digital literacy and providing adequate technology—reliable internet connections and fully charged devices—so that visits can proceed as scheduled. When technological failures occur due to issues within the prison, alternative arrangements must be made to uphold the right to family contact and access to reintegration support. Demonstrating a commitment to maintaining these connections builds trust between individuals and staff, reinforcing the importance of meaningful relationships in the reintegration process.

6) **Staff wellbeing**: Supporting staff wellbeing and managing workloads effectively are essential for fostering positive interactions and successful outcomes across the criminal justice system. During periods of crisis it is especially important to consider the increased resources staff may need to manage caseloads effectively without compromising the quality of their work (i.e., peer support, mentoring, recognition and incentives to acknowledge staff contributions and by creating a safe space for staff to share concerns with leadership without fear of repercussions). To sustain their effectiveness, regular health and wellbeing checks should be implemented, ensuring that those carrying extra responsibilities receive the support they need. By prioritising staff wellbeing, the service can enhance both individual and systemic resilience, even in the face of significant challenges. This ensures that trust and relationships are maintained, even under challenging circumstances, and that staff can continue to provide the necessary support for individuals navigating the system.

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Table 1

Demographic and site information for interview participants

Site Type	Gender	Age	Job Role	Time In Role	Interview Method
Community OPDP*	Female	51	Registered Mental Health Nurse	5 Years	Teams
Community OPDP*	Female	35	Transitional Mental Health Support	3 Years	Teams
Third Sector	Female	33	In Reach Worker	9 Months	Teams
AP	Female	46	Chief Executive Officer	14 Years	Teams
AP	Female	45	Senior Operations Manager	1 Year	Teams
AP	Female	37	Operations Manager	8 Years	Teams
Prison	Male	50	Group Facilitator Specialist Officer	4 Years	Phone
Prison	Female	49	Prison Officer	18 Years	Phone
Prison	Male	30	Prison Officer	8 Years	Phone

Notes: * Offender Personality Disorder Pathway (OPDP). This is a set of psychologically informed services that aims to reduce risk associated with serious reoffending and improve mental health within high-risk, high-harm individuals likely to meet the clinical threshold for a diagnosis of 'personality disorder' (https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/the-offender-personality-disorder-pathway/). Staff in the current study worked in the women's service.