

**LONE MOTHERHOOD AND FAILED TRANSITIONS:  
PATHWAYS TO CRIMINAL CAREERS?**

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## ABSTRACT

The number of households headed by a lone mother is growing at the same time as the number of women sentenced to custody in England is increasing. While women as lone mothers or as prisoners have been studied, no information is routinely collected which links these discrete groups, or which demonstrates a woman's dual status as both prisoner and mother. This thesis sets out to explore the ways in which women who are the sole carers of dependent children become involved in committing an offence which causes their imprisonment, and consequent separation from their children.

The study comprises an investigation of 20 lone mothers' perceptions of their early lives, and any factors which might predispose them to becoming, firstly, a lone mother and, secondly, an offender. The consequences of imprisonment on the mothers and their children are explored through the perceptions of the mothers. Poverty, unsurprisingly, emerges as a pivotal influence in shaping the mothers' responses to their individual situations. There is cause for concern where, as a result of their mother's imprisonment, some children are shown to be subject to the same precursors which were influential in contributing to their mothers' offending behaviour. The identification of factors which might place lone mothers at risk of offending, or which might protect them against committing an offence, complement work on risk factors in relation to ex-offenders and reoffending. Some benefits and disadvantages of imprisoning lone mothers are considered in the light of the findings. Implications for policy are discussed in terms of sentencing, anti-poverty initiatives (including teenagers who live independently but are not currently eligible for benefit), and support for children after they have made the transition from the care system to independent living.

Lone mothers after prison: perceptions of influences and consequences associated with offending behaviour

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Does any young person set out with the ambition of becoming a criminal? Leslie James, a barrister, has contrasted:

The lot of the unemployed, poverty-stricken delinquent of the inner-city with that of the fat cats of the financial world, milking away millions and enjoying their several homes, their fast cars and luxurious yachts. Yet both are no more than the outcome of chance - the chance to be born rich or poor, clever or dull, well or poorly motivated, fortunate or unfortunate in the lottery of life, Neither blame nor desert can be attributed to either since they are both no more than the vehicles of their own thought processes.

(James, 1997: 792)

Informal conversations with women in prison, over the course of a single period of imprisonment lasting over twelve years, indicated the surprisingly - to me - large proportion of lone mothers sentenced to custody, for reportedly trivial offences, with all the complications that situation entails in terms of care and emotional problems for the lone mothers and their children. Their stories corresponded poorly with the portrayal of lone mothers in general, promoted by politicians, the media and, in cases of criminal actions, the judiciary, of a largely workshy and feckless group of women who, I then realised, lacked a voice to explain their own perceptions of their situations. The trigger for the research was a lone mother whose three young children had been taken into care when she was imprisoned for failing to pay a fine imposed upon her for using the television after her licence had expired.

The aim of this thesis is to provide information from the empirical study which could assist in the formulation of policies and practices which promote a reduction in both the offending, and the imprisonment, of lone mothers. Events related to lone mothers' financial situations, their housing needs, or to their social circumstances may be implicated in their decisions and transitions along the pathways to criminal careers. It is the task of research to show how policies might be amended to produce a more appropriate set of circumstances in which lone mothers are less predisposed to solve their problems by engaging in offending behaviour.



This research examines the routes through which some lone mothers become involved in offending behaviour which leads to their arrest, conviction and imprisonment, and attempts to identify underlying reasons for these career pathways.

This chapter begins by outlining some of the issues associated with sentencing lone mothers to custody. The the aims of the study are set out in the following section, folowed by a description of the research design. The chapter concludes with a profile of the structure of the thesis.

### **1.1 Rationale for the study**

The proportion of the population held in custody in the United Kingdom is higher than in any other Western European country. While men form the majority of prisoners in England, at the time of writing the number of women sentenced to prison continues to increase, both in proportion to men and as a total number. Few studies were carried out on women in prison prior to the 1970s, partly because men conducted the majority of research, and partly because, compared with men, women comprised a small proportion of the prison population.

Over the past decade the imprisonment of both male and female offenders in England has increased very quickly (Home Office, 1998b), and the number of women in prison almost doubled in this period to over 3,000 in 1998 (White, 1998). The rate of increase was substantially greater for women than for men and is cause for concern. This increase is despite women being more likely than men to be first offenders (Home Office, 1998a), who should therefore be less likely to receive a custodial sentence.

Female prisoners are described in official statistics as 'women', but this obscures an important role which attaches to more than half of the women in prison. This is the role of mother (Caddle and Crisp, 1997).

It is not possible to assess the scale of offending or the scale of imprisonment of lone mothers as a discrete group beyond the fact that it will be related to the scale of total

female offending. It is not, at the time of writing, Home Office policy to produce statistics, or indeed to collect information, on the dependents of women who are imprisoned, nor to ascertain any details of their domestic arrangements (Lewis, 1997b). Although information about the number of mothers in custody is not routinely collected by the Home Office, a survey carried out by the Research and Statistics Department found that slightly more than 60 per cent of women in prison had children under the age of 18 (Caddle and Crisp, 1997). It is likely that the proportion of mothers in prison exceeded this figure, since Woodrow (1992) has found that some mothers in prison refuse to declare their children, because of anxiety that the involvement of social services could result in their children being taken into care. It is of particular concern that the proportion of lone mothers in prison exceeded, by a factor greater than three, the proportion of lone mothers in the general population (Caddle and Crisp, 1997).

Going to prison is recognised as a major life stressor. Any person who becomes involved in lawbreaking can be sentenced to imprisonment, which is a traumatic experience for the offender, as well as a source of great unhappiness and anxiety for families and friends. Further negative consequences can include the loss of employment, as well as the longer term effect of limited opportunities for employment after release. In addition, people in prison may lose their homes, and relationships with partners frequently break down. In particular, the children of imprisoned fathers can suffer practical hardship as a result of a reduction in the family income. They can also suffer emotional pain as a result of the father's absence. Such children are usually cared for by their mothers (Caddle and Crisp, 1997), who often struggle to keep the household together while maintaining contact with their imprisoned partner (Shaw, 1992; Richards, 1992)

Women, as mothers, are traditionally the main carers of their children. The relationship between a mother and her children can be harmed by the mother's absence even when the father or other significant persons remain to care for the child. Children's emotional health can be seriously damaged, for example, as a result of their mother having to go into hospital. The resulting disruption to the family structure, the sense of loss and the emotional problems which can often result, for both mother and child, may endure for



long past the mother's reunion with her family and may sometimes even be permanent (Bowlby, 1969; Shelley, 1994). Thus, the consequences of sending a mother to prison are generally far more severe in their impact, both on the mother herself (Haley, 1977) and on any children, than when a father is sent to prison.

The effects of these consequences are seriously increased when the absent mother is a lone parent. A custodial sentence for a lone mother encompasses a high risk that the family home will be lost, as there is no other adult to maintain the tenancy or to make mortgage repayments. Lone mothers, by definition, are the sole main carers of their children. When a lone mother is removed from her family there is, therefore, no natural substitute carer. There is no 'other parent' to maintain the household and a routine of normal activity in the family home. Children may have to move to a strange house, and live with unfamiliar people. They may have to change schools, and may be separated from their siblings.

#### *After prison*

The effects of custody do not end when a prisoner is discharged from prison. Studies show that more than a half of prisoners lose their accommodation while they are in custody (Eaton, 1993; Paylor, 1995; Carlisle, 1996), although more than a half of the *women* in a national study were found to have retained their homes (Carlisle, 1996: 56). Mothers who lack suitable accommodation may have difficulty in retrieving their children from the care of the local authority. This delay in being reunited with their mother may increase the deprivation experienced by their mother's imprisonment. Prior to custody the majority of lone mothers in prison had been in local authority accommodation, and housing debts on release were a continuing problem for some women (Wilkinson, 1988). Indeed, it is likely that the financial circumstances of all discharged prisoners have worsened (Hagell, Newburn and Rowlingson, 1995) compared to their situation prior to imprisonment.

Kevin Haines comments, in his comprehensive review of literature on after care services for released prisoners, that women prisoners are likely to experience more problems than

men after discharge, and highlights the importance of their children's welfare (Haines, 1990).

### *Opportunities*

A number of courses are available to women in prison. Some prisoners hope to find employment as a result of completing a course of education or City and Guilds while in custody. However, many prisoners are reluctant to embark upon an educational course in prison, and it is doubtful whether such courses effectively improve their opportunities in the labour market (West, 1992). Prisoners may also attend pre-release courses, which are designed to prepare them for the realities of life such as claiming benefit and finding accommodation, if they require housing.

Probation practice has, however, been found to have a masculine orientation, with little integration of feminine values (Kandel, 1997) which is unhelpful to women needing support.

### *Closed doors*

Almost everyone released from prison requires financial support to buy food, clothes and to establish a home (NACRO, 1993b; Hagell, Newburn and Rowlingson, 1995). However, people discharged from prison find that disclosing their offence practically spoils any opportunity for working, while people who do not disclose their offence are in constant fear that their deception will be discovered, with the consequence that they may lose their employment or, for those on parole, be returned to prison (West, 1992; Eaton, 1993).

Lone mothers have been identified as a vulnerable group in society (Lewis, 1997a). Despite their recognised vulnerability no literature has been found which seeks to explain the high proportion of lone mothers among the female prison population.

## **1.2 Aims of the study**

This study seeks to understand how certain factors may predispose lone mothers to



taking pathways which lead to a criminal career. Factors which place mothers at risk of inclining toward pathways which can lead to a criminal career may be the same factors which were influential in their becoming lone mothers.

The term 'lone mother' can cover a variety of situations, including women whose partner has died, women who are divorced, and women who have never married. The definition of a lone mother for the purpose of this study is that the mother was caring for dependent children at the time of her offence, and that no male partner was actually living with the woman at that time.

This study is, therefore, an attempt to understand why a defined group of people acted in certain ways. The specific objectives of the research were to discover:

- 1) What factors might predispose women to, or protect them from, offending activities?
- 2) Which of these factors, if any, might also predispose women to lone motherhood?
- 3) How do policies and practices, relating to sentencing, affect the likelihood of offending lone mothers being imprisoned?

Some of the factors examined in the study are associated with sociological explanations of offending. These include, for example, lone mothers' experiences of being in care, the age at which they left home to live independently, and involvement with other offenders. Lone mothers' material circumstances, their experiences of poverty and employment, and of the social security system, may have an impact on their decisions to initiate a criminal career.

Other factors which may help to explain influences on lone mothers are personal and psychological in nature, and include experience of abuse in childhood, bereavement and other felt loss, poor levels of social support, and experience of substance misuse.

The study also examines the ideological conditions under which women who break the law are sentenced. There is, clearly, a distinction to be made between the *act* of offending

and the *consequence* of imprisonment: committing an offence is an act by an individual, which does not of itself incorporate a custodial sentence. For example, after an offence has been committed, the police play a detective part, and must then prove that an individual is responsible for the offence. The next, and crucial, stage involves a decision by a magistrates' or crown court on whether to impose a community sentence or a custodial sentence. This significant decision determines the longer term effects of her offence for the lone mother and, by definition, her children. Inconsistencies in sentencing, especially in relation to women whose lifestyle varies from the traditional role of a wife living in a household with her husband, have already been the subject of some research (Farrington and Morris, 1983; Morris, 1987; Ashworth, 1994). The research embodies the ways in which these external influences on the imprisonment of women are significant in their removal from their community and their families.

Over recent years the volume of literature on the population of women in prison, and on lone parent families, has grown substantially. However, very little has been written which makes a connection between these two groups, or is concerned with the situation of lone mothers in prison. Findings from the few studies on mothers in prison have been reported, but these studies tend not to differentiate between mothers who are married, or living with partners, and lone mothers (Catan, 1988; Casale, 1989; Shaw, 1992; Woodrow, 1992).

While existing studies on the separate topics of lone motherhood and on women offenders have provided data and insights into these as two discrete groups of women, lone mothers who offend is an issue which has attracted very little academic attention. Although this field has, so far, been neglected as an area for research, it is particularly important now that both the numbers of women in prison (Home Office, 1998b) and the numbers of lone mothers are increasing (Haskey, 1998).

The research questions were developed from reviewing existing research on lone mothers and on female offenders, and on youth to adulthood transitions. Success or failure in the transitions from education to employment, from living in the parental home or in care to



independent accommodation, and from family of origination to family of destination provide an analytical framework for the study. The principal questions generated are:

1. What sociological influences might lead young women to failure in each of the three youth to adulthood transitions?
2. What psychological influences might lead young women to failure in each of the three youth to adulthood transitions?
3. How does success or failure in the three youth to adulthood transitions influence their pathways to criminal careers?
4. What is the influence of social security policy on lone mothers' decisions to offend?
5. How do explanations of women's lawbreaking interact with these influences?
6. What is the role of policy in sentencing lone mothers to custody?

These questions revolve around both personal agency and the impact of outside influences, and lead to some general theoretical questions. First, to what extent can lone mothers be said to experience freedom of choice in their decisions to become involved in offending? In seeking circumstances and factors which may influence lone mothers into pathways which can lead to a criminal career, I identify two contrasting types of factor. These are (i) factors which may contribute to place lone mothers at risk of offending, and (ii) factors which may modify the risk factors to some degree, and so protect lone mothers from becoming involved in offending. Exploring the longer term history of women's employment, housing and relationship careers, contributes toward establishing whether pathways which lead to criminal careers are always, or necessarily, or ever, the result of a logical analysis in which the consequences of offending are compared as costs versus benefits.

The functional aim of the study is to influence the design of future policy initiatives toward promoting a decrease in the number of lone mothers who become engaged in offending and, in relation to those who commit offences, a decrease in the proportion who are sentenced to custody. This would avoid the damaging effects on the mothers in their attempts to provide a home and a livelihood for themselves and their families after

a period in prison. By bringing some insight into the reasons why lone mothers offend, information can be available which might be useful in designing policies which discourage lone mothers from criminal careers.

### **1.3 The design of the study**

This study uses a critical analysis of the literature to provide a context and a theoretical framework for the empirical research, which contributes information about the coincidence of two groups of women: lone mothers and female offenders. The study approaches its research questions from the points of view of the women themselves through in depth interviews with lone mothers who have spent time in prison. It explores the perceptions of their lives from childhood through to the time when they committed the offence for which they were sentenced to prison. The mothers' perceptions of their lives are examined as a means of identifying explanations and causes for their initial successes and failures in the transitions from youth to adulthood, and consequent forays into actions or behaviours which led them to criminal careers. These influences are examined against the background of structural and cultural influences on their career paths in employment, housing and family formation.

The rationale for wanting to see their world as the mothers saw it is an attempt to understand how they first became engaged with risk factors which led to criminal careers. The investigation is conducted within the wider context of how the structural state systems of control, of social policy, and ideology impact on young women and their attempts to care for their children and maintain their households. Within this context the influence of risk factors and protective factors on pathways leading toward criminal careers, which led to their imprisonment, can only be tested practically in the context of the sentencing regime in England and Wales.

The research questions determine the design of this exploratory, qualitative piece of work. The aim, at the outset, was to find out why women whose imprisonment caused them so many traumatic effects and difficulties as lone mothers had been involved in criminal actions.



I considered that the aims of identifying success and failure in the employment, housing, and relationship careers in the mothers' lives would be most satisfactorily achieved through gaining an understanding of the experiences, motivations and intentions of lone mothers whose criminal careers resulted in their imprisonment. In order to ascertain their subjective experiences and to see the world from their individual and idiosyncratic points of view, I attempted to comprehend their qualitative perceptions of their own situations.

Face to face interviews are more appropriate for gaining a view of individual experiences and motivations than a formal, structured questionnaire, which may embody undesirable undertones of officialdom, as well as inaccessibility for some women whose literacy skills are limited. I recognised that the interviews might involve some sensitive topics, and therefore rejected focus groups, or group interviews, as an appropriate design for this piece of research. I selected qualitative, semi-structured interviews for the study as the most appropriate method for exploring in greater depth an individual's understanding of their situation. Qualitative interviews allow for detailed accounts, as well as the emergence of new concepts in this exploratory study.

Analysis of interview transcripts allowed assessment of the significance of common factors from the mothers' experiences as influences on their transitions from school to work, from parental home to independent home, from birth family to lone motherhood, and on careers involving crime. The use of grounded theory allows concepts and theories to emerge as a part of an ongoing process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Growing involvement in the analysis facilitated the construction of theories, which in turn informed the ongoing analysis. Examination of the data highlights the differences between significant events and transitions described by the mothers, as well as the various types of offence for which they are sentenced to custody.

#### **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

The review of the literature in Chapter 2 critically informs the work, and provides background material so that the concept of an interface between lone mothers and

offending can be introduced. It serves as a context against which to more fully understand the empirical aspects of the study. Contemporary patterns of offending are examined. Studies on children in care (who have been 'looked after' by a local authority) are reviewed, and additional literature on abuse and other significant events in childhood are reviewed. Characteristics of lone mother households are examined and, in particular, the issue of poverty and the social security system, and ways in which poverty might be linked to offending. The chapter concludes with a discussion of inconsistencies in sentencing, and the different sentencing outcomes for women who represent a socially more acceptable lifestyle to the courts compared with lone mothers.

Chapter 3 reviews literature on the youth transitions from education to employment, from living with the parental family to living in independent housing, and from living in the original family to the formation of a new family with a partner. Experiences and events which place these transitions at risk of failure are examined, as well as some characteristics of lone motherhood which may represent risk factors for adopting criminal careers.

Details of the rationale for the design of the study form the basis of Chapter 4. The method of data collection is described, followed by a discussion of some of the ethical considerations for the research. The way in which the study sample was recruited and some limitations of the research design are examined. (A brief life history of each of the twenty mothers in the sample who form the substantive element of the study is provided in Appendix 3, as a reference for the analytical chapters.)

Chapter 5 focuses on events and dynamics in their early lives in relation to the mothers' transitions from education to employment. Various types of abuse within families of origin which might influence the transition are examined, and I present an analysis of the relationship between elements of being in care and the potentiality to become involved in offending. The chapter inspects the mothers' relationships to employment, or unemployment, and their financial situations. Effects of race which may influence access to the job market are discussed. Among contributory influences, such as the influence of



peers and the misuse of illegal drugs and alcohol, missing school emerges as a factor critical to the mothers' success or failure in the transition from school to employment, and links between these early years and later decisions to offend are explored. The importance of earning an adequate wage is highlighted as crucial to success in the transition to maintaining an independent household.

The mothers' transitions to independent living are examined and analysed in Chapter 6, which encompasses progress from adolescence, through the experience of leaving the families of origin, the effects of local neighbourhood, differences between dependent and independent housing, and ethnicity. The difficulties of living independently after leaving care are well-documented (Stein and Carey, 1986; Biehal *et al.*, 1995), and study participants' pathways out of the care system, and how this in turn might have influenced their transitions into offending, are examined.

Transitions from the family of origin to the formation of a new family form the core of Chapter 7. Routes to lone motherhood, the relationships with the fathers of their children, failure of those relationships, any experiences of violence in relationships, and mothers' connections with substance misuse are explored. Positive and negative effects of lone motherhood are described, and the impact of failed family formation on criminal involvement are examined.

Having built up a picture of the long term histories and transitions of the study participants, I first discuss in Chapter 8 some limitations of study. Within a summary of the causes and effects of failed and successful transitions, I identify factors perceived to be influential in placing the lone mothers at risk of embarking upon a criminal career. The characteristics of the offences for which the mothers were imprisoned are explored in relation to factors which might have influenced the mothers to become involved in an offence. Mothers' perceptions of their choices and the decision making process preceding involvement in an offence, the perceived costs and benefits and whether the mothers saw this as a process which embodied freedom of choice, or whether they felt coerced by

some force, either a person or circumstances, external to themselves when becoming involved in the offence, are discussed.

Social support carries with it positive notions of help and comfort, but equally, I suggest here, support may simultaneously provide the impetus into offending when close family, or another close person, proposes committing an offence as a solution to a mother's problem.

I suggest a list of factors which might be used to indicate the risk of a lone mother offending and, importantly, a list of factors which might protect a lone mothers against involvement in criminal activity. The lone mothers in this study demonstrate the diversity of ways in which women might become enmeshed in offending, some in a planned way, to cope with problems which appeared otherwise insuperable, others apparently without recognising where their actions might take them. Their actions took them to prison, but in the thesis I question whether the mothers' punishment was appropriate, or whether any benefit accrued to any person or group of persons as a result of their imprisonment, and I attempt to demonstrate a convincing argument for this doubt.

Issues identified by the thesis have criminological, political and social dimensions. Essentially these involve sentencing policy, social policy as it affects lone mothers and low income families, housing policy, and practice issues for social services. The narrative here is an interpretation of events in the lives of women from a feminist perspective; other perspectives might present an alternative, and possibly conflicting, explanation of mothers' offending. Likewise, other feminist commentators might produce different versions and understandings. As the author of this study, it has been my dilemma to select which perspectives, themes and issues to explore or to discard. The narrative which follows is one of several possible, and legitimate, explanations, and cannot claim to be the only and privileged truth.



## **CHAPTER 2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Introduction**

An examination of lone mothers who were sentenced to prison for their offences forms the core of this study. The women's accounts are, however, located in the contexts of policies relating to lone mothers, for example housing and social security benefits, and of sentencing policy and practice, and so I examine the significance of policies which are likely to affect the lives of lone mothers and women offenders. Literature is drawn from the fields of social policy, criminology, psychology and sociology.

Policies which exert the greatest impacts on the lives of many lone mothers are discussed in the first part of the chapter. Politicians have, for several decades now, been increasingly exercised by the search for policies which will provide a recipe for reducing the growing numbers of benefit dependent lone mothers. Despite their continuing efforts, the great majority of lone parent families remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in society (Ford, 1998), dependent on income support and excluded from employment which would provide them with a wage sufficient to lift them out of the poverty to which they are accustomed. Literature on the prevalence and incomes of lone mothers is reviewed, as financial circumstances may be related to law breaking, and some of the ways in which living on a low income affects lone mother households are discussed.

The chapter continues with a review of research and literature relating to women offenders. Women comprise a small proportion of all offenders, as the great majority of crime is committed by men, but the numbers of women convicted of offences and sentenced to custody continue to increase. Explanations of why some women offend are examined, from the early positivist view that only 'unnatural' women committed crimes, to more recent structural explanations and feminist critiques of former androcentric perceptions of women who break the law.

Policy in the criminal justice system relates to the police and the law, to the courts and

the judiciary, and to the prison and probation services. The focus for this study in respect of the criminal justice system is sentencing practices. Literature on the courts' approach to sentencing in relation to men and to women is reviewed. Women who break the law are often perceived by the judiciary to be doubly deviant, because they are considered to have offended not only against the law, but also against their 'feminine nature'. It has been suggested that women law breakers are punished for both their offence and for stepping outside their feminine role as submissive nurturers of husbands and children (Kennedy, 1992a). Sentencing decisions which determine disposal to either a community penalty or to a period in custody are pivotal to the lives and well being of a lone mother and her children. Although they are generally talked of as two discrete groups, women offenders are, very often, also lone mothers.

## **2.2 Lone mothers: the policy context**

Many European countries exert no moral regulation on lone mothers, but have adopted a gender neutral approach by paying benefit universally and independently of the status or gender of the recipient (Roger, 1995; Stoltz, 1997). Lone mothers in the United Kingdom, in contrast, are often referred to by politicians and in the media as feckless and undeserving members of society.

This was clearly the view of the Conservative government which, after its re-election in 1987, began a concerted drive to reduce welfare dependency by policing those members of society whom they believed to be reluctant to shoulder their fair share of work. Benefit dependency was perceived to be, at least in part, structurally maintained by the combination of few employment opportunities, low wages and regressive rules applied to the incomes of people receiving benefit (the 'benefit trap'). The government and the opposition, in the person of Frank Field, as Labour chair of the House of Commons Social Security Committee, reached a consensus that the number of people dependent on benefit should be reduced. The new political accord to promote financial independence for families by motivating them into paid employment applied equally to lone parents and to the wider population (Department of Social Security, 1995).



### *The benefit system and employment*

The Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher encouraged lone parents to enter paid employment by introducing Family Credit in 1988 as an in-work benefit available to families with dependent children. In the period 1996-7, 303,600 lone parent families were in receipt of this benefit, including 270,000 lone mothers. The uptake of Family Credit by so many lone mothers suggests that a substantial proportion were attempting to become financially independent despite earning only a very small wage (Department of Social Security, 1997: 65).

The new Labour government, elected on 1 May 1997, took on the mantle of the former Conservative administration by pledging to campaign for continued welfare reform in the shape of policies designed to restrict eligibility for benefit. Indeed, the policies contained within the Social Security Bill, published in July 1997 by the Labour government, were unaltered from the previous administration. Despite arguments from campaigning organisations, such as the Child Poverty Action Group, against the abolition of One Parent Benefit to new claimants of Child Benefit, and against the reduction in the period for which claimants could have their claims backdated (from twelve months to one month), the Bill was published in its original form.

The benefit restrictions placed lone mother households, widely recognised as one of the most vulnerable groups in society (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Lewis, 1997a; Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998), in greater financial difficulty as they struggled to balance their budgets. However, the government remained unmoved, and argued that the effects of the New Deal for Lone Parents would offset any cuts in benefit.

Under the New Deal for Lone Parents, implemented nationally in October 1998, lone mothers are invited to seek help in finding work with the aid of a Personal Adviser. Participation in the New Deal for lone parents is voluntary, and targets parents whose youngest child attends school, although parents with pre-school children may also participate. It is, ideally, integrated with good quality child care (Finch *et al.*, 1999). Nevertheless, the vast majority of lone mother families remain dependent on Income

Support. Unfortunately, few lone mothers view their state benefit as an adequate amount for essential expenditure including food, clothing, all utility bills, cleaning materials, transport expenses and social outings (Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998).

The ideal of employment for all people of working age in the UK is increasingly encouraged. The Labour government's Budget Statement of 1997 demonstrates their desire for lone mothers to take paid employment to improve their financial situation, possibly in recognition of the success of such policies in the United States. It describes an ideology encompassing high levels of growth and employment to create an effective welfare state in which people move away from benefits and toward employment.

The United Kingdom has no cohesive policy on the family (Bradshaw, 1994), and there is generally a growing recognition of lone mother households as equally valid and acceptable as any other living arrangement (Kissman and Allen, 1993). Nevertheless, the reality of few suitable jobs and low wages provides lone mothers with little opportunity to increase their incomes through employment (Finn, 1998). Typically impoverished groups such as lone mothers have been unable to challenge their financially marginalised situation (Beresford and Green, 1996) and many remain in poor financial circumstances.

There is, to date, small solace for lone mothers in the knowledge that one of the targets set out in the optimistically titled Green Paper *New Ambitions for our Country: A New Contract for Welfare* (Department of Social Security, 1998) was increased contact between lone parents and the labour market. While the Department of Social Security was attempting to decrease lone mothers' dependence on benefit, the Department of the Environment was withdrawing the entitlement of homeless lone mothers to security of tenure in social housing under the terms of the Housing Act of 1996, thus compounding financial difficulties with problems in gaining access to suitable accommodation.

### *Housing allocation*

Families with dependent children comprise more than half the total of statutorily homeless households, and number over 60,000 (Department of the Environment, 1998).



Such families were catered for under the terms of Part III of the Housing Act, 1985, according to which homeless families with dependent children were entitled to be housed in local authority accommodation.

Homeless lone mothers used to be treated as a priority group in the allocation of council housing, but this entitlement was modified with the advent of 1996 Housing Act, under which they are excluded from social housing except when they become eligible through the normal waiting list. They are, instead, provided with temporary accommodation, up to a maximum period of two years, as a result of some politicians' views that those presenting as homeless are jumping the housing queue (Department of the Environment, 1994). Households that have not found accommodation within this period can then re-present themselves as homeless, and the process starts again. This legislation can have a negative impact on families as their security of tenure and the stability of home environment in a familiar neighbourhood are at risk, and has worrying implications for lone mothers. Lone parent households are at particular risk of homelessness as a result of relationship breakdown (Lowe, 1997).

Ease of access to social housing has deteriorated since the number and the quality of properties available to local authority tenants has declined as a result of the Right To Buy legislation and the collapse of the local authority building programme (Bramley, 1993). Consequently, the type of accommodation offered to mothers may not meet their needs, for example a high rise apartment, far from shops and other services, perhaps in a run-down area, is not suitable for a mother with a small child. The 1985 Housing Act allows a prospective tenant to refuse up to two properties without penalty, but those who refuse a third are offered no further accommodation. Thus mothers might be obliged to inhabit accommodation which they dislike and which is inappropriate for bringing up their children. The most recent government comment on housing is that teenage lone mothers should be provided with hostel accommodation, rather than a tenancy of their own (Brindle, 1999). It is unlikely that this policy would help young lone mothers develop the sense of personal identity and responsibility for their surroundings which is embodied for women in their 'home' (Watson and Austerberry, 1986), which may represent the only



security for some after the breakdown of the relationship with the child's father. Relationship breakdown can present stresses of its own, not least as a result of the Child Support Act.

### *The Child Support Act 1991*

Since 1993 the Child Support Agency has attempted to trace the fathers of children who become dependent on the State as a result of their fathers' absence under the terms of the Child Support Act, 1991. The Agency has no duty to trace the fathers of children whose mothers care for them without claiming state benefits.

While the anguish of some fathers, a few of whom committed suicide as a result of their contact with the Child Support Agency, has been highly publicised, the damaging effects of the Agency on mothers with care have had a lower profile, but constitute a burden of stress on mothers for a range of reasons. These include, for example, the Agency's unwillingness or inability to trace some absent fathers or, having located a father, being deceived by him about the amount of his income. Hardship and distress to lone mothers are also caused by delays and inaccuracies in money received through the Agency. Mothers become angry and upset when they see their children's fathers living in comparative luxury with a new partner, while they and their children have insufficient money to provide a nourishing diet and experience a minimal social life (Hutton, Carlisle and Corden, 1998). Other mothers are anxious that providing the Child Support Agency with the name and address of their children's father might provoke a violent reprisal from him. A majority of mothers who have contact with the Child Support Agency find the experience stressful, which may be a factor influencing the actions of lone mothers who become involved in offending.

### **2.3 Lone mothers: prevalence and characteristics**

#### *How many lone mother households?*

The number of single parent households in the United Kingdom has continued to increase throughout the 1990s, although the rate of increase appears to be declining (Lewis, 1997a). The proportion of single parent families was recently estimated to be 19 per cent

of all households, of which lone mothers represent 18 per cent and lone fathers represent one per cent (Pullinger, 1998). Perhaps the current '*best estimate*' is 1,600,000 lone parents (Haskey, 1998), calculated by averaging information collected from six independent sources<sup>1</sup>. Haskey estimated that lone fathers account for 1.8 per cent of the number of lone parents (Haskey, 1998: 8), which leaves a total of 1,571,200 families headed by a lone mother. The provisional '*best estimate*' of dependent children living with a lone mother is 2,749,600 (source: Haskey, 1998: 7; own analysis).

At the start of the decade it was estimated that almost a quarter of West Indian households consisted of one parent families (Hardey and Crow, 1991). More recently this has risen to 47 per cent, compared with 17 per cent of white households; at the same time, unemployment rates are higher for the main ethnic minority groups than for the indigenous population (Dholakia and Sumner, 1993). It has, however, been suggested that children from a non-white family background respond more positively to their lone parent family status than white children, as it is more readily accepted as a family unit within West Indian culture (McLanaghan and Sandefur, 1995).

Overall, the number of single parent families in Britain doubled between 1970 and 1990 and the number of births outside marriage in Britain is approaching one third of all births (32 per cent in 1994, although only 26 per cent of births were a sole registration (Lewis, 1997a)). Bradshaw and Millar (1991) found that 53 per cent of lone mothers in their survey had been married, that 34 per cent were single (69 per cent of whom were living with parents) and nine per cent cohabited. They also found that the main reason for separating was infidelity (24 per cent), followed by incompatibility (19 per cent), while 13 per cent left because of their partner's violent behaviour. These factors may or may not be related to offending but nevertheless provide a profile of lone mothers which illustrates the typical situations of the population in the study. A lone mother's age may also be significant to this study, and it has become the norm for women aged under 20 to be single when having their first child (Phoenix, 1991: 42).

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<sup>1</sup> General Household Survey; Family Expenditure Survey; Family Resources Survey; British Household Panel Survey; Labour Force Survey, and Social Security Statistics.



The above figures are, necessarily, inexact and provide simply a guide because the status of lone mothers is fluid, and the circumstances of their relationships may change several times over a period of years. Although many of their living circumstances are similar, lone mothers are not a homogeneous group of people: they enter lone parenthood by different routes, and comprise several alternatives to the traditional nuclear family (Hardey and Crow, 1991; Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998). Some are single women who are separated from a former partner, some have never lived with a partner, and some have never experienced living in a stable relationship; some move in and out of relationships with partners who may or may not be the fathers of their children; some are divorced women who have experienced the division of their family home; and some have had other stressful experiences. The children's father, or a step father, may move in and out of the family home, lone mothers may move in with their own mothers, or a new partner, or enter some other living arrangement, and so their status may be continually redefined (Crow and Hardey, 1992; Burghes, 1993). However, the most common current scenario for becoming a lone mother is a single woman who gives birth (Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998).

Although official (Department of Health and Social Security, 1974) and unofficial attitudes to sexual morality have relaxed (Land and Lewis, 1998) lone mothers are still sometimes considered to be deviant because of their life style (Kennedy, 1992a; McKendrick, 1998) and they remain at risk of social exclusion.

### *Isolation*

One of the problems for lone parents, related to their impoverished way of life, is loneliness. Hardey and Crow (1991) express concern that:

In addition lone parents occupy a marginal position in social life more generally, being effectively excluded from full participation in mainstream activities not only by their lack of income but also by the couple-centred 'family' ideology which permeates the social structure. (Hardey and Crow, 1991: 1)

Bradshaw and Millar's (1991) study demonstrates the importance of this dimension: 57 per cent of the lone parents who participated in the survey said that the '*worst things*'



about lone parenthood were, jointly, loneliness and financial difficulties (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991: 14).

McKendrick has commented that:

Without [childcare] support, lone parents are at risk from social exclusion in the broadest possible sense of engagement with wider society.

(McKendrick, 1998: 100)

Social exclusion may be even more of a risk for lone mothers from minority ethnic groups, who are less likely to be in employment (Alcock, 1997). Whatever a mother's ethnic origin, a full social life is not possible on a minimal income.

### *Financial situations*

'Poverty' is a socially constructed and relative concept. Alcock (1997) emphasises the need for a definition to enable an understanding of poverty, and suggests Bradshaw *et al.*'s (1987) budget standards as appropriate. The poorer financial circumstances of women in comparison with men are well documented. Before the 1980s women's poverty was obscured because of the way in which poverty studies used families or households, rather than individuals within households, as the unit of measurement (Millar and Glendinning, 1987; Alcock, 1997). Millar and Glendinning (1987) argue that women are only marginally involved in paid employment because they perform caring tasks within the home, which, although essential, carry no remuneration. One third of all children now live in families whose income is less than half the average<sup>2</sup> (Cohen and Long, 1998), and many lone mothers experience '*downward mobility*' by the time their children reach seven (Burghes, 1994) because of their deteriorating financial situation.

Poor financial circumstances represent a major concern for many lone mothers, and are associated with some types of offending. Almost twenty years ago Popay, Rimmer and Rossiter (1983) remarked on the income of lone parents that:

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<sup>2</sup> Less than half average income is generally accepted as a poverty line.

The ratio of two parent to one parent families living on incomes of less than 100 per cent of supplementary benefit represented 65 per cent of all children in families dependent on supplementary benefit in 1979... These figures suggest a gross over representation of one parent families amongst the very poor.

(Popay, Rimmer and Rossiter, 1983: 14)

Poor material circumstances have more recently been identified by Bradshaw and Millar (1991) as one of the major characteristics of lone mothers. The profile of lone mothers in their survey (1991) shows that 93 per cent of single mothers were receiving supplementary benefit in 1986, a clear indicator of the severe scale of financial hardship experienced by this group.

In Bradshaw and Millar's sample, 73 per cent of lone mothers were worried about money '*quite often*' or '*almost always*' (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991: 31). Perhaps the most recurrent theme when studying lone parents is their tendency toward poverty, and this must be seen as a pervasive and debilitating condition, from which few escape (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Phoenix, 1991; Lewis, 1997a; Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998).

The financial situation of lone mothers has not improved. Rather, Lewis (1997a) has traced the way in which state support for lone mothers is decreasing and so increasing their tendency to poverty. Closely related to lone mothers' difficult financial situations is their lack of general amenities. These range from essentials for young children such as adequate heating, clean, well-ventilated accommodation, a washing machine and telephone, to items which are related to emotional rather than physical well-being, for example new clothes, toys, television, and enough money for regular trips out.

An additional cause of financial problems among lone mothers is their use of expensive credit facilities, for example 'shopacheck' (Berthoud and Kempson, 1992), which some use to try and buy items they otherwise could not afford, but which often involves them in excessive debt.

Different ways of measuring poverty suggest different cures, and some commentators



support the notion of using deprivation, in addition to income, as an indicator of poverty (Nolan and Whelan, 1996). It has, for example, been suggested that 'replacement' income might be paid to mothers who stay home to look after their children, as part of a child centred approach, which might in the long run be cost effective by saving money on, for example, fostering and remedial education (Martin, 1995). At best, their poor financial circumstances limit the social and housing options available to lone mothers who depend on social security. Such hardship may be relevant when looking at the types of offence committed by lone mothers in the study.

### *Employment*

Finding work, either part time or full time (often not feasible when a mother has sole care of her children) has rarely provided a way out of the poverty in which many lone parents find themselves. Joshi (1987) quoted a wage of £125 per week as the amount which would have to be earned to improve the weekly income, which surpasses the incomes of many mothers in the study in 1992.

Demographic factors contribute to the growing numbers of lone mothers, since it has been observed that young men are less likely to form relationships, whether involving legal marriage or a common law arrangement, when they are not working (Phoenix, 1991). Thus rising unemployment throughout the early 1990s may provide a link between recession and an increase in the number of lone mothers. This, in turn, may precipitate various categories of people into criminal behaviour and, concomitantly, affect the scale of female offending (Box, 1987).

Only 40 per cent of lone parents were earning a wage when Bradshaw and Millar conducted their study, of whom 23 per cent worked full time and 17 per cent worked part time. Some of these parents were also dependent on other sources for a part of their income, and 72 per cent were receiving Income Support. Thus 60 per cent of lone parents were entirely dependent on statutory benefits.

Recent statistics show that fewer than half of lone mothers are in paid employment, and

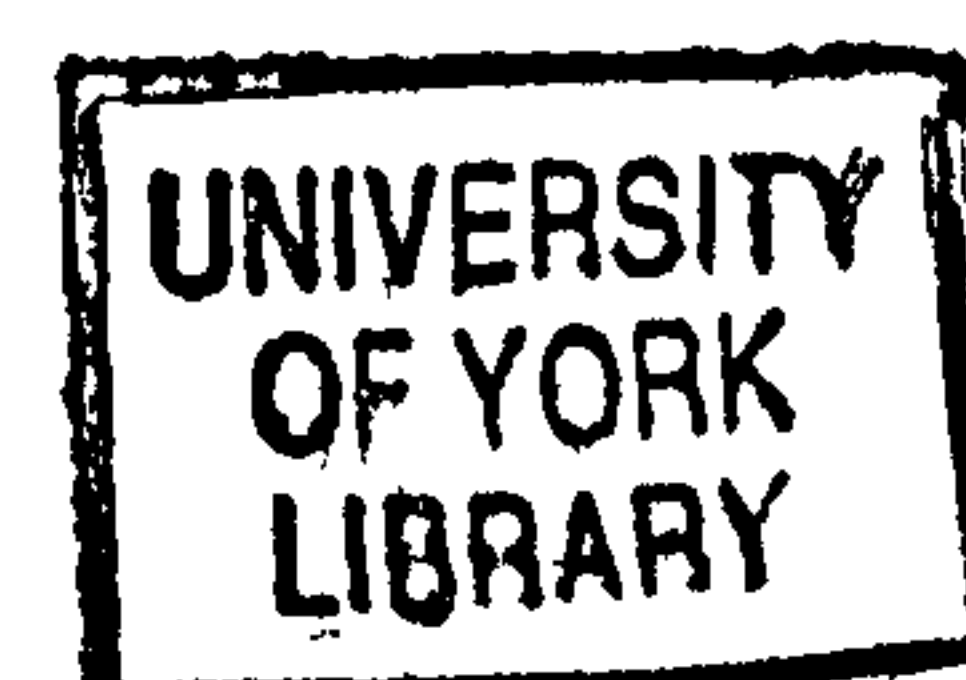
fewer than one in six need no recourse to state benefits (Ford, 1998). A declining proportion of lone mothers are in work, and the difference in the material circumstances between lone mothers and two parent families has increased (Haskey, 1998). As well as being fewer in number, the profile of lone fathers is different from lone mothers; lone fathers, on average, are older than the typical lone mother and, importantly, have a higher income (Ermisch and Wright, 1989; Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Pullinger, 1998).

Going to work is, in itself, a costly business, with fares, clothes and possibly having to eat in the staff canteen, all of which take a proportion of earnings. In addition, child care costs represent a substantial expense for working lone parents if, indeed, satisfactory child care is available. Cost alone does not constitute the only barrier to employment, but is one of the elements a mother will consider in deciding whether she feels taking paid work would benefit her financially (Ford, 1998).

The United Kingdom is already the exception within the European Union in not providing affordable, quality child care for mothers who go to work (Waldfogel, 1996). Lone mothers are thus caught in a comprehensive poverty trap which prevents them from taking steps to begin paid employment and, progressively, a less deprived existence. These factors combine to create a disproportionate number of the poorest households comprising one parent families.

### *Accommodation*

Housing is, normally, consequent upon income, but the advent of housing benefit means that accommodation costs do not subtract unduly from the general weekly budget. Nevertheless, on becoming a lone parent, many mothers suffer a deterioration in their living standards. Attempts to maintain their former standards by committing property offences may provide a link between lone mothers and offending. Suggestions of a fall in the standard of accommodation is supported by the finding that 58 per cent of parents had to move house following the breakdown of a relationship (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991: 93).





Lone mothers' accommodation is generally rented, and is generally at the bottom end of the market. It may lack items such as a washing machine or a telephone, and have inadequate heating (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991: 19).

Contrary to popular belief, two independent studies, one by Bradshaw and Millar (1991) and another by Phoenix (1991), found no evidence to support the theory that young women became pregnant in order to use their infant as a means of putting pressure on local authorities to acquire a house. Nevertheless, as I have already noted, their living accommodation is often inadequate, and so this may be a factor influencing the propensity of some lone mothers to offend, if they attempt by illegal means to improve living standards for themselves and their children.

#### **2.4 Lone mothers: summary**

Policies associated with the benefits system, housing provision and child support constitute structural influences that channel and direct the lives of the people they affect. The agency of lone mothers to freely conduct their own lives is diminished, and they cannot establish full control over their lives while their options are limited in respect of their incomes and accommodation. Such policies can result in lone mothers having insufficient income and living in poverty. They can also affect lone mothers at risk of homelessness, who may be limited to temporary accommodation or poorer standard social housing as a result of recent changes in policy. Some lone mothers experience stress as a result of contact with the Child Support Agency. Thus policies and welfare structures do little to help lone mothers establish control over their own lives.

Lone mothers are also vulnerable in other ways, and often experience unstable family relationships. Simply the process of becoming a lone mother may be important to this study: relationships are dynamic, not static, and a lone mother's status is subject to change. As status fluctuates a lone mother may meet a partner, and live with them for several weeks, months or years. During this time she is not classified as a lone parent. However, separation and the break up of a relationship can be emotionally traumatic as well financially damaging. Mothers' behaviour may fluctuate with their status, and may

be related to a sense, or lack, of security or self esteem. It is particularly important to ask why lone mothers are in prison, with the inevitable result that they are unable to be with their children (apart from the few who have their babies with them in a prison Mother and Baby Unit (Caddle and Crisp, 1997)).

Although lone mothers now form a substantial proportion of households, it is a family formation which is still often seen as deviant. Lone mothers are often stigmatised by political and media coverage, and the majority are dependent on state benefits.

Many lone mothers experience financial anxieties, especially as their opportunities for engaging in paid employment are limited. Thus they are often unable to maintain good living standards and inhabit poor accommodation. The majority of lone mothers are dependent, to a greater or lesser extent, on social security which, as we saw in the first part of this chapter, provides insufficient financial security for an adequate life style, with nourishing food, travel expenses and a social life.

Although the number of lone mothers in the United Kingdom continues to escalate, their financial situations appear to be increasingly difficult, as access to benefits becomes subject to proliferating restrictions, and lone mothers are encouraged or persuaded to take paid employment which is, commonly, low paid and insecure. Perhaps the major element in relation to lone mothers and offending is their poverty, which can affect every part of their daily existence, including the ways in which they are able to care for their children. The financial circumstances of lone mothers may emerge as an influence on their pathways into crime, as they attempt to provide adequately for their children. It may also be significant to this study that the majority of female crime is property related (Home Office, 1998a).

## **2.5 Women offenders: prevalence**

I review here statistics which are provided annually by the Home Office on the numbers of convictions, described in the Criminal Statistics for England and Wales, and the numbers of people imprisoned, described in the Prisons Statistics for England and Wales.



*Comparative convictions of men and women*

Clearly it is not possible to calculate the exact number of men and women who offend because, by its nature, offending is a clandestine activity and offenders do not offer themselves to be counted. Thus the level of offending is necessarily higher than the number of convictions obtained, and some caution should be employed when using these statistics, since they do not present a true picture of the amount of crime committed. The statistics do, however, provide a bench mark against which increases in offending can be measured, and comparisons made between male and female rates of conviction for various categories of crime.

Type of offence	Men		Women	
	N	%	N	%
Violence against the person	31,300	90.5	3,300	9.5
Sexual offences	4,500	100	0	0
Burglary	30,700	96.8	1,000	3.2
Robbery	5,100	91.1	500	8.9
Theft and handling stolen goods	96,100	81.2	22,300	18.8
Fraud and forgery	12,900	75.9	4,100	24.1
Criminal damage	9,600	91.4	900	8.6
Drug offences	36,300	89.2	4,400	10.8
Other	42,400	89.3	5,100	10.7
Motoring offences	8,900	94.7	500	5.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>277,800</b>	<b>86.8</b>	<b>42,200</b>	<b>13.2</b>

**Table 2.1: Type of offence by sex (Source: Home Office, 1998a: 104)**

Patterns of offending for men and women are examined in this section using information from the Criminal Statistics for England and Wales 1997, the most recent year for which figures on offending are currently available (Home Office, 1998a).

These statistics show that a total of 320,000 persons were convicted of an offence in 1997, comprising 277,800 men and 42,200 women. Women thus accounted for 13.2 per cent of criminal convictions in 1997, a small proportion of the total.

Property offences are often perceived as typically a woman's crime, and Table 2.1 shows that theft and handling stolen goods was by far the largest category of offences committed by women, and yet women comprised less than 19 per cent of the total number of persons convicted of this offence. Less than one fifth of the number of women convicted of theft and handling stolen goods were convicted of fraud and forgery and, proportionately, this was the offence in which the numbers of women convicted came closest to men, comprising slightly more than 24 per cent. This could be explained by some women having the opportunity to commit fraud and forgery, either because of their familiarity with the benefit system, or their employment, which is often in offices.

Women constitute less than eleven per cent of offenders convicted of violence against the person, confirming that comparatively few women are involved in crimes of physical violence. Of these, it is likely that the majority of women were acquainted with their victim: only six per cent of women convicted of homicide between 1982-1992 assaulted a stranger (Lloyd, 1995) and the public at large has little to fear from female violence.

The total percentage of female convictions, at 13.2 per cent, demonstrates that the overwhelming proportion of crime is perpetrated by men. An analysis of self reported crime, however, suggests that *young* women approach approximately half the petty offending levels of young men (Box, 1983), but the ratio of male to female offenders increases from the mid-teens onwards (Graham and Bowling, 1995). Self report studies indicate that only one offence in three is recorded by the police, and only one in ten recorded crimes results in a conviction (Graham and Bowling, 1995). It has also been suggested that the level of *recorded* offending by women is low because their property offences are generally of low value compared with men's property crime, or even remain undetected for the same reason (Campbell, 1981).



Only a small proportion of all offenders are sentenced to custody and so the numbers in Table 2.1 do not present an accurate profile of the types of offence for which people are in prison. The Criminal Statistics serve to illustrate the comparatively small amount of crime committed by women, and this is reflected in the small proportion of women who are in prison compared with men (Ryan and Sim, 1995).

### *Comparative imprisonment of men and women*

Patterns of imprisonment for men and women are examined in this section using the Prison Statistics for England and Wales 1997 (Home Office, 1998b). The numbers of people in prison are shown in Table 2.2. These statistics should also be read with caution, since some prisoners serving short sentences will not be counted at all, and those serving a sentence of several years appear in several consecutive sets of annual prison statistics.

The majority of women in prison had care of children under 16 before being taken into custody, and reported having problems with their accommodation (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1997). Ten per cent of women in prison who normally reside in the United Kingdom are of minority ethnic origin, although ethnic minority groups comprise less than five per cent of the general population (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1991).

Table 2.2 (below) gives a profile of the prison population at 30 June 1997, and the type of offences for which people had been imprisoned. Comparison with Table 2.1 shows that while women convicted of theft and handling stolen goods numbered approximately three times those convicted of violence and drug offences combined, the greatest number of women in prison, more than one third, had been convicted of a drug offence, and the second largest number, almost one fifth, had been imprisoned for violence against the person. Demonstrably, the type of offence is significant in sentencing decisions, with offences involving drugs and violence much more likely to attract a custodial sentence. These two types of offence account for more than half the women sentenced to imprisonment, and some of these prisoners will remain in custody for several years.

Type of offence	Men		Women	
	N	%	N	%
Violence against the person	10,033	96.2	391	3.8
Sexual offences (including rape)	4,069	99.8	8	0.2
Burglary	7,976	98.7	101	1.3
Robbery	6,277	97.5	161	2.5
Theft and handling stolen goods	3,929	92.2	334	7.8
Fraud and forgery	1,104	90.1	121	9.9
Drug offences	6,483	90.4	691	9.6
Other/not recorded	4,547	96	190	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>44,418</b>	<b>95.7</b>	<b>1,997</b>	<b>4.3</b>

**Table 2.2: Men and women in prison under sentence by offence (Source: Home Office 1998b: 22)**

The greatest number of men are in prison as a result of violence against the person (robbery is also classed as violent offence), with drug offences comprising just under one seventh of all male offences.

Since women form 13.2 per cent of all people convicted of an offence, but only 4.3 per cent of the total prison population (although this is an increase from 3.4 per cent in 1989 (Home Office, 1991a)), these statistics appear to support the view that women benefit from a chivalry effect in being less severely punished for their offences than men. However, it has been argued that lighter sentences for women are the result of women committing less serious offences than men (Eaton, 1986; Chesney-Lind, 1988) and is the subject of discussion later in this chapter. Significantly, men discharged from prison are likely to suffer worse financial difficulties than they experienced prior to their term of imprisonment (Hagell, Newburn and Rowlingson, 1995), and it is to be expected that the same is true for women. Unfortunately no comparable study has been carried out on released women prisoners.



### *Women on remand*

In addition to the sentenced population, a substantial number of unconvicted prisoners are held on remand. At 31 July 1998 the prison population consisted of 51,222 men under sentence and 12,105 on remand, with 2,468 women under sentence and 721 on remand (White, 1998)<sup>3</sup>. The number of women on remand increased by almost a third between 1990 and 1997 (Home Office, 1998b) and represent one third of the total number of women prisoners held in custody in 1994 (Caddle and Crisp, 1997).

	Men		Women	
	N	%	N	%
Remanded	12,105	19.1	721	22.6
Sentenced	51,222	80.9	2,468	77.4
Total	63,327	100	3,189	100

**Table 2.3: Population in prison at 31 July 1998 (Source: White, 1998)**

As Table 2.3 shows, at 31 July 1998 the proportion of women on remand was reduced to 22.6 per cent (White, 1998), but women were still more likely than men to be remanded in custody. Although her figures have been challenged by Allison Morris (1987), Edwards (1984) has suggested that judges and magistrates are more likely to request psychiatric reports on women, who would then be more likely than men to be held in prison while they are 'presumed innocent'. However, only one-quarter of women remanded in custody receive a custodial sentence (Ryan and Sim, 1995) and the majority of women who are not sentenced to imprisonment are in effect treated unequally, as they are punished by being held in prison, with the concomitant distress caused to their families.

Research suggests that women are remanded for less serious offences than men (Stephen, 1993), although the impact on women and their families of women remanded in custody is generally worse than for a man (Carlen, 1998). The small number of female

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<sup>3</sup> These numbers include 529 civil prisoners.

establishments means a woman is likely to be allocated far from her home area, despite the probability that she has responsibility for dependent children or an elderly relative.

## 2.6 Sentencing practices

Not all persons convicted of an offence are sentenced to imprisonment, as described above, and detention in custody is not necessarily an appropriate response as the consequence of 'serious' offences. The type and length of a sentence is intended to convey a sense of the gravity of the offence which has been committed, so that minor crimes attract a community sentence, and more serious offences are registered by a period in custody. Different rationales for sentencing include retributive, deterrent and rehabilitative sentencing, and these vary as attitudes toward offending and offenders go in and out of fashion (Ashworth, 1994). However other, more complex rationales have also been suggested in analyses of penalty (Foucault, 1977), and Howe (1994) suggests a feminist analysis of penalty, in which 'offending' is not inevitably connected to punishment. A full review of the theories of imprisonment is beyond the scope of this study.

Gelsthorpe and Loucks (1997) suggest that the complexity of the sentencing process is greater than it appears because it is the outcome of several other processes. These comprise, for example, pre-sentence reports, and the opportunities available in community programmes, few of which are appropriate for women, as well as the particular beliefs and approaches of individual judges and benches. Although some studies have attempted to control for offenders' different circumstances (Chesney-Lind, 1978) it is not possible to include every independent variable in an analysis of differential sentencing, which remains the subject of argument rather than substantiated theory. Thus although double standards are evident, bias in sentencing does not readily lend itself to a single explanatory model.

A study of attitudes in the legal system comments on the very small proportion of female judges (3 per cent in 1982) and barristers in the United Kingdom (Pattullo, 1984). France, for example, has an equal distribution of male and female judiciary, although in



the view of Morris's (1987) finding that female magistrates were more punitive toward non-conforming women than male judges, the effect of greater female judicial representation cannot be predicted. Thus the criminal justice system is traditionally a male preserve. Pattullo (1984) comments on the collective use of the word 'gentlemen' which includes, but makes invisible, female counsel and emphasises the masculine nature of the proceedings.

There is often a discrepancy between the seriousness of an offence and the type of sentence delivered and this has been attributed to a gender bias in the sentencing of men and women by some commentators (for example Farrington, and Morris, 1983; Worrall, 1990; Lloyd, 1995). Notions of 'gender appropriate' behaviour for women influence sentencing policy as an integral part of the ideology on which the social construction of 'female deviance' was founded. Gender conventional women who match the patriarchal stereotype are approved of by courts and so tend to experience leniency in sentencing. Thus marital status is a factor in the sentencing of women.

This view is confirmed by Helena Kennedy, a barrister, who also describes how women, far more than men, are judged on their physical appearance in court; for example women who wear a skirt and blouse rather than jeans and boots, receive a more lenient sentence (Kennedy, 1992a). Thus women who show that they are amenable to the social controls which have been constructed to keep them in their proper (subordinate) place are less likely to be sentenced to custody.

Discussion on sentencing differentials for men and women ranges from a chivalry effect, which benefits women to arguments that there is a bias against women who appear before the courts. Pollak (1950) proposes that women receive lighter sentences than men, while later researchers argue that offences committed by women are, generally, less serious than offences committed by men, and so merit a lighter sentence (Farrington and Morris, 1983; Worrall, 1990); and women whose appearance and lifestyle demonstrates a lack of femininity and does not meet with the judges' approval receive harsher sentences (Carlen, 1985; Heidensohn, 1996).

Carlen suggests that, as women's offending is qualitatively different to men's:

Therefore the response to both men and women lawbreakers should be in part gender-specific rather than merely crime and sentence specific.  
(Carlen, 1998: 10)

In addition, it is argued that the same custodial sentence represents a harsher penalty for a woman than for a man, partly because of factors which do not lend themselves to measurement, such as mothers being separated from their children, and their homes. Women prisoners also suffer because of concrete factors such as limited opportunities for work, education and association with other prisoners (O'Dwyer, Wilson and Carlen, 1987; Women's National Commission, 1991; Lloyd, 1995) compared with the male estate. Because women are, generally, a greater distance from home than men, they are likely to receive fewer visits. Furthermore, excessive pettiness prevails in women's prisons, with a greater proportion of women being disciplined and experiencing the loss of pay or privileges than in men's prisons - despite women keeping to the rules and presenting less aggressive behaviour than men (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1997).

Racism is an additional element which women from ethnic minority groups must cope with, both in the community and in the criminal justice system (Carlen and Worrall, 1987). It has been suggested that differential sentencing to custody is more prevalent among women of minority ethnic groups whose culture places them further from the stereotypical 'desirable' behaviour of wife and home maker (Women's National Commission, 1991). Differences occur between sentences given to the indigenous population and members of minority ethnic groups (Cook, 1997), and Hood (1992) has described the over-representation of black, and especially Afro-Caribbean, women in English prisons, which is notable despite the small numbers of women in prison compared with men. There is, in addition, considerable inconsistency in sentencing in courts from one area to another throughout the country (Brown, 1991; Ashworth, 1994).

Some research supports the argument that women are imprisoned for less serious offences than men (Seear and Player, 1986; Carlen, 1998), and women are sometimes sentenced to prison for offences which are not normally punished by custody for a man



(Heidensohn, 1985; Carlen, 1998). Although women are, more often than men, given the lightest penalty, a caution, few women are fined compared with men. This is likely to be because women are less often in a position to pay a fine, which means they are instead placed on a supervision order (Gelsthorpe and Loucks, 1997) which, if broken, places them at risk of a custodial sentence.

The very fact that so few women commit offences compared with men labels the few who do as freakish (Lloyd, 1995; Carlen, 1998), who then attract a harsher sentence than a man for a similar offence. The effect of social class results in over-representation in prisons of those members of society with the smallest incomes (Carlen and Worrall, 1987; Carlen, 1998).

Sentencing is, then, used by the courts as a means of supplementing social controls. Farrington and Morris (1983) suggest that magistrates show their disapproval of non-conforming women by punishing them not only for their offence, but also for their 'undesirable' lifestyle. Similarly, Kruttschnitt (1982) suggests that harsh sentencing practices for women are an attempt to control undesirable behaviours, and explains why magistrates and judges give more severe sentences to women who are perceived as not fitting the accepted mould. Lone mothers, in particular, suffer from these harsh judgements (Eaton, 1986; Heidensohn, 1985; Smart, 1989: 63; Woodrow, 1992).

Gelsthorpe and Loucks (1997), for example, has highlighted the lack of congruence in sentencing women, and shows that the sentencing process is a lottery, in which lifestyle and self-presentation influence the sentencing outcome more than the circumstances of the offence. One, personable woman, living with her family and 'potentially middle class', killed her sister. She was given a community sentence on probation, and had no further contact with a psychiatrist. In contrast, a divorced woman, who had stolen a jar of coffee was subjected to electro-convulsive therapy.

Women, then, are subject to various social controls, both in the home and outside it, by their family and by social conventions, and those who are satisfactorily policed by these

social controls are looked upon favourably by the courts. Conversely, women who do not conform, and who behave in ways which are seen as inappropriate to their gender, are likely to suffer a more severe penalty in terms of sentencing, including custody. Farrington and Morris (1983) found that magistrates were influenced not only by the seriousness of the offence, but show their disapproval of lone mothers by sentencing them more severely than women who appear to be dependent on an man. Having responsibility for children is the single factor which most sways decisions on sentencing women to custody, but this is not a factor when sentencing men (Gelsthorpe and Loucks, 1997).

A recent report on sentencing women suggests that:

While the results suggest that the way women and men are sentenced differs, it would be inaccurate and unhelpful to see this in terms of deliberate discrimination. The findings do not point to any simple formulae which can be used to ensure that both sexes receive fair treatment, but the report ends with suggestions on how we can move in that direction.

(Lewis, 1997c)

In the same report (Hedderman and Gelsthorpe, 1997) the authors conclude that equality between men and women before the courts must be in the *approach* to sentencing, but will not necessarily be reflected in the outcome. Overall, they found that magistrates found men to be '*troublesome*', while women were inclined to be perceived as '*troubled*', which prompted a different approach (Gelsthorpe and Loucks, 1997).

Differential treatment because of gender is not peculiar to the criminal justice system, but permeates political, economic and social relations, so that laws and their enforcement are an integral part of the model (Emsley, 1999). Double standards are not peculiar to the United Kingdom, but appear to be remarkably consistent across North America and Australia, with a greater proportion of girls than youths being subjected to supervision or custody for trivial offences (Heidensohn, 1996).

Some magistrates place greater faith in their own moral judgements of defendants than



on recommendations from probation officers (Parker *et al.*, 1989). Probation reports, too, described 'good' mothers and 'bad' mothers (Eaton, 1985), which perhaps encourages magistrates to use these moral judgements in their assessments of women. Such admissions, from a group who are renowned for a middle class preponderance, help to explain why sentencing decisions appear to favour the stereotypical 'normal' woman.

Chesney-Lind (1988) comments on the intrusive nature of juvenile courts requesting information on girls compared with boys, and the greater number of young women placed on supervision so that their behaviour could be monitored. From their earliest years, women are still expected to have their lives controlled by others in ways which men do not.

Some commentators have described how the psychiatrization of women can also increase leniency, who may be given a sentence in the community with, perhaps, a condition of having therapy (Worrall, 1990; Lloyd, 1995). This may, however, be less lenient in its effect, since behaviour is monitored over an indeterminate period which may last for a long time. This outcome also presupposes that women are mentally less able than men, and is paternalistic as it denies that women have the same capability to act independently. A man must be seen to be far more mentally unstable than a woman before he is allocated to a psychiatric disposal. The way in which this masculine view of socialization is taken as normal may also be the reason why, proportionately, more women (about 60 per cent) than men are admitted to psychiatric hospitals, in which black and working class women are over-represented (Stephen, 1993).

It is likely that different theories will be required to explain different types of offending, for example property offences, drug related offences and violent offences, although there is likely to also be some cross over between these theories. These theories will, themselves, have to take account of both the individual and structural backgrounds to an offence. To make sense of why women are imprisoned will then have to include explanations of sentencing practices. I have not outlined here a comprehensive account of all the factors which must be part of an explanation of women's imprisonment but,

rather, have attempted to demonstrate the complexity and diverse nature which would be needed of such explanations.

A single theory of sentencing cannot encompass the influences of judges, probation officers, psychologists and psychiatrists, each with their own view of an 'appropriate' disposal, complementing the different circumstances of women defendants, for offences ranging from petty theft, through benefit and other fraud, to burglary, assault and homicide.

## **2.7 Women offenders: explanations**

Theories examined in this section attempt to explain why women offend. Evidence, provided annually in the Criminal Statistics shows that men commit far more crimes, in every category, than women and this disproportionate pattern of offending between the sexes is matched by the amount of written work which has been produced by - mostly male - criminologists (Lloyd, 1995). There is little literature to trace on the topic of female crime compared with male crime until the 1970s (Heidensohn, 1968; Smart, 1976).

### *Biological theory*

Although early theories of criminality were presented as gender neutral, they were effectively based on men (Eaton, 1986; Heidensohn, 1985; 1996). De Beauvoir highlighted how the feminine is defined in relation to the masculine, and so diminishes woman's status:

This humanity is male and defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. ... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.  
(de Beauvoir, 1972: 16)

Commentators went on to contend that criminal women were '*born*', and were '*typically*' criminal if they did not fit the feminine model in respect of their appearance, submissive behaviour and marital status (Lombroso and Ferrero, 1895). Female deviance



was defined largely in relation to women's sexuality, so that women who did not display the natural feminine traits of passivity and nurturing were considered biologically pathological (Freud, 1925; 1977). Since some offenders had proved themselves incapable of fulfilling their '*proper*' role in life as caring wives, mothers and daughters (Lombroso and Ferrero, 1895) they were not considered to be '*proper*' women. This theory neatly explained why, compared with men, the rate of female offending was low: only a small proportion of women were aberrant, and so only these few were involved in offending.

Pollak, in contrast, argued that women were heavily involved in offending, but rarely detected because of their inherent capability for deceit (Pollak, 1950). He suggested that a hormonal element was influential in women's deviance, but failed to demonstrate a link between periods of hormonal imbalance and female offending. Statistics show that the vast majority of women are convicted of property offences yet, typically, hormonal imbalance has most commonly been used to explain women's behaviour in relation to violent offences (Lloyd, 1995), and thus an explanation of female offending in general in terms of their individual biology is unsatisfactory.

Klein was one of the first feminist writers to draw attention to the assumptions of ahistorical and individual biological theories of female offenders. She described early accounts as classist, racist and sexist, written as they were by male scholars and imbued with prejudice relating to women's physiological and psychological characteristics (Klein, 1976). As Heidensohn (1985) argues, the idea that their biology is the root cause of female crime is self-defeating because of its over-determinism. If female biology, and the hormonal and physiological changes which it involves, were responsible for female crime, then a much greater proportion of women would have been engaged in criminal behaviour. The point to ponder in considering women's crime, Heidensohn argues, is why so few women break the law.

Despite comprehensive challenges to the validity of biological explanations (Box, 1983; Smart, 1984; Carlen *et al.*, 1985; Heidensohn, 1985), these theories continue to influence views of women offenders. Lloyd comments that:

The idea that women are ruled by their biology - as distinct from men who are autonomous human beings - is still around, a hundred years after Lombroso and Ferrero published their book on female offenders. (Lloyd, 1995: 40)

### *Social control theory*

Defining certain standards for women's sexual behaviour created a restrictive norm against which deviance could be measured. Women who strayed from their feminine role through adultery, or who left their husbands, were punished by having their maintenance withdrawn by the civil courts, which operated a dual standard in respect of the husbands, who suffered no sanctions for equivalent behaviour (Smart, 1984). Smart locates these ideas in a contemporary political context:

Not only did Thatcherism valorise the role of the mothers within the family, it created the conditions under which increasingly large numbers of women had little option but to conform to the ideal. (Smart, 1984: 137)

Thatcherite ideology gave a negative message for lone mothers, so that even women who suffered at the hands of men, sometimes physically, but often in other ways, by being humiliated, sexually degraded, or perhaps by suffering from a virtual dictatorship by a male partner over the daily routine, experience pressure to conform. It is socially unacceptable for women to *prefer* a single lifestyle or bachelor motherhood to a more conventional family arrangement because they are afraid of, or cynical about, men (Heidensohn, 1985). Women who opt out of the role assigned to them by men, appear to be independent, which is sometimes interpreted as a threat to male hegemony.

The criterion of sexual behaviour is not used for judging men, but a dual standard operates so that women who do not conform are condemned and labelled as deviant for behaviour which is accepted in a man, and women are judged to be deviant on the ground of their extra-marital sexual activities (Eaton, 1986; Morris, 1987; Hudson, 1996). The treatment of young girls who deviate from male-defined 'gender-appropriate' behaviour is indistinguishable from punishment. This often comprises detention, and is sometimes described as being for the girl's own protection, but constitutes an attempt to control young women. Arnot and Usborne (1999) have pointed out that women, in common with



children, lack the freedom and the power to behave freely without social constraint, and are treated paternalistically when they flout the rules. This has clear implications for lone mothers who become offenders.

More recent theories provide a critique of earlier, individualistic explanations. Commentators suggest that differences in the socialization experiences of boys and girls explain the low rate of women's involvement in crime (Carlen and Worrall, 1987). It is argued that the concept of deviance in women is constructed insofar as rules are invented which apply specifically to women, and especially to women from the lower social classes (Gelsthorpe, 1989). These rules are written about as though they form an axiomatic truth rather than having their foundation in discourses of power and social control.

Thus values are created either to suit the convenience of male dominance or to bolster the arguments which support it. Men who break the law are seen to be punished by the courts: the control of men is in the public domain, and straightforward. The control of certain women, by comparison, is less open. Women are apparently punished not only for committing an offence, but also for having the temerity to put themselves into an *active* role, instead of accepting their defined passive role. They are tacitly expected to remain in a housewifely and subordinate position in the family hierarchy. This, in part, constitutes the private nature of the control of women, which is difficult to combat because it is implicit rather than articulated. Nevertheless, as the accounts of lone mothers in the study demonstrate, a lack of choice was a central dynamic of their criminal actions.

The objective neutrality of the law was not questioned in respect of gender, class or race until feminists began to argue that the ideology on which the feminine role was constructed was created by the dominant group, that is men, to legitimate their own superiority so that it appeared to be a part of the 'natural' order. Gelsthorpe has described this kind of ideology as:

The capability of dominant groups or classes to make their own sectional interests appear to others as universal ones..[when it is used for] the distortion of knowledge and as a vehicle through which certain ideas about women are transmitted, inculcated and reproduced.  
(Gelsthorpe, 1989: 28)

Smart emphasises:

The material conditions under which women and men ... exist are not identical and these structural factors need to be accounted for in analyses of ... deviant behaviour.  
(Smart, 1977: 398)

While early psychologists assumed that deviancy was a characteristic peculiar to an individual (Freud, 1963; Adler, 1928), more recent psychologists (Laing, 1967; Szasz, 1971) and feminists (Heidensohn: 1968; Smart, 1984; Eaton, 1986; Morris, 1987; Klein, 1995), among others, have questioned the meaning, and even the existence, of 'deviancy' and of 'criminality'. They suggest that such concepts are constructed on a false premise, and are narrowly defined from a traditional, middle class point of view.

The concept of an 'offence' is itself a social construct which criminalizes persons who are convicted of certain actions, and which changes over time and across nations. The concept of what constitutes crime can be bent or turned on itself, as demonstrated in the ideological mythology of Robin Hood, whose stealing was applauded because it benefited the poor. It is the interpretation placed upon an action which construes it as '*criminal*' or not (Gelsthorpe, 1989). Offences may not appear to be criminal from the perspective of the women who commit them but, rather, as Carlen (1985) has argued, constitute a rational response to a situation which appears to be otherwise intractable. She argues that:

Women's lawbreaking is, on the whole, qualitatively different to men's.  
(Carlen, 1998: 10)

Heidensohn too recognises the differential offending behaviour of men and women, and points out, for example, that women offenders differ from their male counterparts by rarely becoming recidivist; and how, compared with men, it is unusual for deviance to be a dominant feature in their identity. Women, it seems, are more conforming than men and



more reluctant to contravene the rules of society as frequently as men. Heidensohn (1985) quotes the response of a woman whose crime had been discovered:

Well I was scared then. Went straight for years. The court and the police had upset me. And the shock. A glimpse over the edge really. I got the job on the magazine.  
(Heidensohn, 1985:15)

This encounter with the judicial process and the main actors in this process, a '*glimpse over the edge*' into an unfamiliar world, in which the usual rules and values do not apply, channels this woman back into her traditional role. She is forced to realise that she must make a choice. In order to keep the respect and the status to which she was accustomed, she prefers to conform to the rules, and in so doing demonstrates the effectiveness of '*social control*'.

The idea of the normal is powerful. To be seen as abnormal embodies a stigma. To be seen as abnormal attracts socially contrived sanctions, so that the stigmatised person may be isolated and marginalised by the rest of society. This is a painful and unpleasant experience, and so people try to avoid it.

Feminist and poststructuralist views are a threat to male dominance, by demolishing the well constructed and carefully nurtured belief that it is '*natural*' for women to be dependent upon men. The power of the notion of common sense is founded on its provenance as being natural and obvious - and thus inevitably true (see Carlen, 1976). Language serves several discourses of meaning; while these oppose each other, the conflicting versions of social reality compete. The official guardians of the state, in the ranks of the police, judges and the penal system ensure that a particular interest, or group of interests, is served. An effective way of maintaining the status quo of power relations is in the appropriate use of language, which is central to social control (Weedon, 1987).

Weedon describes how the influence of language can be an instrumental but often unrecognised force for creating ideas and interpretations:

It is in language that differences acquire meaning for the individual. It is in language that we learn how to differentiate pink and blue and to

understand their social connotations. Language differentiates and gives meaning to assertive and compliant behaviour and teaches us what is socially accepted as normal.  
(Weedon, 1987: 76)

Early theorists on female offenders did not consider the influence of structural factors such as male and female power differentials, the generally polarised financial status of men and women in society, or impoverished circumstances and material hardship in their explanations of female offending (Morris, 1987). The concept of offenders as the creation of social structures, rather than simply deviant individuals, did not exist.

Carlen has identified the ways in which supposedly gender-neutral concepts are actually male-centred, and place women in a *structurally* disadvantaged position. (Carlen, 1990b). Other texts, however, still do not acknowledge the male bias of theories of criminal behaviour and do not differentiate between the experiences of men and women in the criminal justice system (see Newburn, 1995). Heidensohn points out that women have been prominent in a small proportion of prejudiced accounts, in which they have been stereotyped, but are simply absent from the majority of literature which attempts to develop a sociological theory to explain general involvement in offending (Heidensohn, 1996).

While Adler suggests that the women's liberation movement is a cause of increasing female involvement in crime (Adler, 1975), he does not explain why women from the poorest sector of society, who generally had little association with this mainly middle class movement, continue to form the majority of those convicted. Growing emancipation has, however, seen the emergence of girl gangs (Pollock, 1978; Campbell, 1981), a phenomenon scarcely observed when women were constrained to their domestic role (Thrasher, 1963). Gender therefore appears to differentiate types of behaviour, which are more satisfactorily explained as the result of social conditioning rather than an effect of inherent biological factors.



The concept of feminist criminology as a discipline has been questioned (Carlen 1990b; Heidensohn, 1995; Klein, 1995) and the chapters discussing the empirical findings in this study demonstrate that a range of contributory elements are instrumental in shaping the pathways of the women in the study toward a career involving crime. The reasons why women offend are unlikely to be found in a simple and direct causal connection. There are likely to be several explanations for their offending, which embody the complexities and ambiguities of modern life, rather than one all-embracing explanation.

Equally, no one theory can explain 'women's offending' in the same way that no one theory can explain men's offending. Nevertheless, certain factors remain a constant in relation to crime, and predominant among these the low social status and poor financial circumstances of offenders. People with low incomes continue to be disproportionately represented among prison populations, and some researchers link women's offending to material deprivation (Miller, 1997). Carlen (1985) has argued that offences, examined in their social and material context, can be an appropriate and rational response by some women to their particular circumstances, especially when the class system and gender relations allow women fewer avenues for improving their situation.

### *Poverty*

A study of probation Social Inquiry Reports found that financial circumstances are not mentioned as an one of the seven possible explanations for offenders becoming involved in crime (Stephen, 1993). Although explanations provided by the male and female defendants are similar, probation officers *attributed* emotional problems to many of the women. The study sample of 21 men and 31 women is too small to be conclusive, and it may be that the women actually had emotional problems, but preferred not to offer this as an explanation. Equally, it may be that probation officers ignored the women's poor financial circumstances in favour of '*emotional*' explanations for their offending.

Women with low incomes are, however, over-represented in the prison population. In a thematic review of women's prisons the Chief Inspector of Prisons found that 70 per cent of women in prison had not experienced employment, and more than a third were

in debt on reception into prison. Over a half had been dependent on state benefits, supplemented in some cases by property offences (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1997).

The majority of crimes committed by women are trivial property offences which appear to be related to their inferior economic position. The factors which place women at risk of offending are rarely recognised by male theorists (Box, 1983; Heidensohn, 1985), although Box (1983) emphasises the importance of an economic marginalisation hypothesis, and remarks that unemployment and a relatively impoverished lifestyle are likely causes of increased female offending.

Ways of measuring poverty have traditionally treated the family as a single unit and thus mask the poverty of individual women, which is generally more extensive than poverty among men (Nussbaum, 1999). Poverty has been cited as a major cause of offending among women in general, and it is also likely to be a factor in the offending behaviour of some lone mothers. Lone mothers were identified as one of four main groups of women living in poverty (Townsend, 1987), and they are a group of households described as being at the highest risk of living in poverty, with 58 per cent falling below the poverty line (Dennehy, Smith and Harker, 1997: 18). Teenage mothers are often in financial hardship even before the birth of their baby (Phoenix, 1991).

Thus many lone mothers, in particular seem to be thoroughly enmeshed in a web of poverty and financial anxiety and, sometimes, mounting debt, and it may seem to some of them that benefit fraud, for example, is a rational response to their situation by providing a route out of poverty toward a better lifestyle, for their children and for themselves (Cook, 1992). The high incidence of television licence evasion is a prime example of the way in which women with insufficient money to pay for essential items are criminalized (Pantazis and Gordon, 1997).

Carlen (1998) describes the ways in which the state demonizes young lone mothers, by cutting their benefit and portraying them as the cause of social problems. She has



described how women's offending differs qualitatively from men's offending, yet does not provoke a gender-specific response.

## **2.8 Women offenders: summary**

Although statistics are routinely collected and published annually in the form of Criminal Statistics and the Prison Statistics, the numbers of female offenders are difficult to count because the great majority of crimes go undetected. Self report studies suggest that the level of female offending may be higher than is indicated by the Criminal Statistics, but this is, for the most part, likely to comprise minor acquisitive offences. Convictions of women accounted for 13.2 per cent of all convictions in 1997, and it is reasonable to assume that this reflects the small proportion of serious crime committed by women compared with men.

Overall, women's offences are less serious than crimes carried out by men, and so should in theory attract a lesser sentence, although this is not always borne out in practice. Women comprised only 4.3 per cent of the prison population in 1997, of whom the majority had been convicted for drug related offences, violence, and theft, in that order. Women offenders are often imprisoned on remand although, in contrast to men, few women remanded in custody receive a custodial sentence. The greater use of remand for women than men appears to be a result of the courts' wish to have additional information about the lifestyle of women, as sentencing judgements are influenced by the quality of *'fit'* into a feminine role, in which a woman, ideally, lives with her husband and children.

The courts' perceptions of women offenders, and the reasons they attribute to women for committing offences, can influence sentencing practice and, therefore, outcomes. Indeed, sentencing practices often appear perverse in punishing excessively women who already suffered deprivation as a result of poor living conditions.

Early explanations of offending behaviour tend to ignore women offenders. When commentators began to include women in theories of law breaking explanations focused on biological causes, which are still extant. Historically, women offenders were viewed

as doubly flawed, by being both criminal *and* deviant by opposing their feminine nature. Female deviance as a biologically determined phenomenon has been exposed by feminist writers as a purposive construction, based on false premises. They illustrate, rather, the structural nature of women's oppression in terms of a lack of political and financial power. Some writers countered this with the suggestion that the advent of the women's liberation movement encourages women to emulate men, and so is responsible for increasing numbers of women breaking the law.

Women offenders are, however, a heterogeneous group of people who commit diverse offences, and no single theory provides a satisfactory explanation of their behaviour. Nevertheless, as with male offenders, women who are imprisoned are predominantly from the lower socio-economic sector of society, and it may be that some choose pathways which lead to offending because of their relative poverty. However, structural causes encompassing unequal power relationships, social control theory and women's poorer financial situations provide convincing explanations of the ways in which women are conditioned not to break the law. The social control of women requires the application of severe sanctions to show that inappropriate gender roles are unacceptable to patriarchal society. The family situation of lone mothers is often perceived, and acted upon by the courts, as an additional criminal element deserving extra punishment. Women are punished for being lone mothers as well as for being offenders.

The broad remit of social policy incorporates both social security and the criminal justice system. While these two areas appear, on the surface, to be clearly differentiated, both may be perceived as punitive to lone mothers who are affected by the policies. When women are seen as being deviant for being lone mothers as well as for offending, their problems are likely to be compounded. However, not all lone mothers develop a criminal career. In the following chapter I examine literature on the characteristics and experiences of youth to adulthood transitions. In particular, events and circumstances associated with failing in the transitions are examined, which may constitute risk factors for involvement in criminal careers.



### 3.1 Introduction

Some of the effects that social policies have on lone mothers were described in chapter 2. In this chapter I examine ways in which policies may have direct and indirect effects on young women's transitions to adulthood. This includes the influence of social policies, which create the structural circumstances in which pathways leading to different careers are negotiated.

The success or failure of young people in negotiating the transitions between adolescence and fully fledged adulthood is critical to their career outcomes. Are government policies and their impact on structural factors influencing transitions associated with placing young women at risk of offending? Can policies be adapted to either prevent or promote intervention by social security, by social services, by health agencies, or by the police or probation services to protect young women from offending? Personal experiences, for example in the care system, may point to ways in which practices that lead to damaging episodes can be mediated.

It is a well trodden path which tries to identify '*the roots of criminality*' by exploring childhood circumstances and background, and current family circumstances (Walmsley, Howard and White, 1992: vi), on the assumption that later behaviour develops from previous experience. I review in this chapter literature on a range of possible contributory factors which might influence young women as they negotiate routes from law keeping to law breaking. Some affect only a small number of mothers and not all experiences are affected by policy. It is, nevertheless, important to provide as comprehensive an account as possible of predisposing factors to facilitate a coherent explanation of lone mothers' offending.

Transitions and career pathways are discussed in the first part of this chapter. Structural and personal factors which play a part in influencing pathway decisions, such as the effects of abuse in childhood, and experiences of the care system, are examined in

relation to the negotiation of career pathways. There follows a discussion of factors specific to young women's and lone mothers' predispositions to offend.

### 3.2 Transitions into adulthood

A distinction is made between a '*trajectory*' which implies a linear and directed progression, and a '*transition*' which is a temporary phase (Ainley, 1991). Trajectories are determined by market forces and the availability of employment, the effect of social class and family background, but also involve issues relating to gender, race and locality. The concept of '*career*', in contrast to the overly determining nature of a trajectory, embodies within it the possibility for changing direction and acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of youth transitions. This section examines the effects of the major transitions to gain an understanding of how they influence career pathways for young men and women.

The concept of '*career*' encompasses a sequence of events which accumulate into lifetime milestones, which are especially clustered in the period between youth and adulthood. Pathways lead eventually to a '*career*'<sup>4</sup>. As each smaller transitional stage is passed, so the final pathway becomes more narrowly focused; choices become more limited in some areas and wider in others.

Three main transitions are recognised as marking the route from dependence on parents to independent adulthood. These are the transitions from education to employment; from living in the parental home, or in care, to independent living; and from membership of the family of origin to the formation of a new family (Banks *et al.*, 1992; Coles, 1995). These transitions generally occur serially, and may be fractured, protracted, or delayed depending on individual circumstances.

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The concept of career is ongoing and progressive over time, but some lone mothers commit only one, or very few, offences so that their criminal '*career*' seems more to be associated with their imprisonment than with their personal agency.



### *Education to employment*

The education system has in the past tended to reinforce the class system through the generations, with middle class children expecting to go to university and working class children going directly from school into employment. More recently, social mobility has increased so that these distinct traditional routes have given way to intersecting and highly differentiated career pathways which provide increased choice. At the same time, current trends embody increased risk in terms of failure to secure employment, especially for those young people lacking appropriate educational qualifications (Evans and Furlong, 1997).

Transitions directly from school to work at age 16 were common until the mid 1970s: 53 per cent of school leavers entered directly into employment in 1976, but only 15 per cent of minimum age school leavers went straight into work in 1986. Young people continue in education or on youth training schemes so that the pattern has changed and the transition period is extended (Jones and Wallace, 1992; Craine, 1994). Jones and Wallace also note that unemployment among 16 year olds can no longer be calculated exactly because of changes in the way the numbers are assessed. Some young people have little real prospect of employment, but must endure training schemes which do not provide an end reward of paid work or risk losing their benefit entitlement.

Employment provides economic independence, a sense of self worth and responsibility as well as social contacts, but gender influences the employment expectations of young people, so that girls perceive a more limited range of opportunities for work (Roberts, 1993). They are often unable to move to a locality with better employment prospects because of the cost involved (Roberts, 1993). Young women from the lower socio-economic groups who try to find employment generally expect to enter gender stereotyped work such as caring for older people, low paid office work, or other manual occupation (Bates, 1993).

Young black women are doubly disadvantaged and are often encouraged to meet societal expectations by entering jobs caring for older people, which have no promotion prospects

(Bates, 1993). This might be described as implicit racism. Racism as it is experienced tends not to be a major event, but consists of:

Incidents [which] occur against a backdrop of everyday, routine level of racist harassment which official agencies fail to take into account. Hence when people do make a complaint they find that the victim's perspective is the first to disappear...

(Chahal and Julienne, 1999: 4)

Aspirations to socially valued and paid work are likely to be perceived as unrealistic for the majority of young black women in this kind of social environment. Unemployment leads to depression and poor self image whereas other young people, for example those undertaking long term training, are able to maintain a clear focus for their future (Jones and Wallace, 1992). Coles (1997) suggests that work, in contrast to unemployment, imparts social, emotional and psychological benefits as well as financial security.

In general, transitions from youth to adulthood are becoming increasingly extended and more complex (Roberts, 1997) and are, often, a process of cumulative mini-transitions. Career decisions made in mid-teens critically determine future careers (Banks *et al.*, 1992), while greater complexity has led to extended transitions and a wider choice for some young people, for example taking time out before starting at university. But for those lacking the appropriate education, often women from lower socio-economic groups or ethnic minority groups, choice is severely limited, outcomes are uncertain and the risk of falling by the wayside on the career pathway is increased.

#### *Family of origin to independent living*

Young people's transitions to employment underpin transitions to living independently in their own accommodation, since extra costs are associated with setting up home. Leaving the parental home may be delayed beyond the time when a young person wishes to live independently because they are unable to afford the costs associated with setting up their own household. Thus unemployment has a major effect on the ability of young people to make this transition successfully.

Diminishing state provision for young people leaving home means they must rely more



on their parents and, again, stay in the parental home for longer than they wish (Brannen and O'Brien, 1996). However, a survey of more than 4,000 young people in Scotland found that although just over a third of young people left home before the age of 19 at the end of the 1980s, many later returned to their parental homes for a period (Jones, 1995b). Although the average age at which children leave home is unknown because of the lack of satisfactory data, Jones has commented that:

It is not...uncommon for young people to leave home in their teenage years even though the current climate is generally less favourable to their doing so.  
(Jones, 1995b: 40)

which suggests that some young people prefer to chance living independently rather than remain with their family of origin, possibly as a result of difficult circumstances at home.

While it is not unusual for young middle class people to live in single person households, moving to separate accommodation is most often associated with family formation. Gender can have implications for success in the housing transition, and young women are perceived as having a better chance of securing independent housing if they have a child (Jones and Wallace, 1992).

#### *Family of origin to new family formation*

'Family formation' is defined in this thesis as the formation of a stable and enduring relationship as a household unit separate from either partner's birth family. New family formation:

May be structured by pressures emanating from the family which is being left, the inequalities of the market and the policies of the state.  
(Jones and Wallace, 1992: 93)

The employment status of young people is crucial to this transition which, ideally, but not always, succeeds or incorporates the transition to independent living. Family formation is associated with employment and setting up home away from the birth family, and so transitions are interdependent but not necessarily sequential. Family formation is more closely associated with leaving home to live independently with young people from the lower socio-economic group, while middle class young people tend to live away from

their family of origin as a result of continuing their education into their twenties (Jones and Wallace, 1992). Family formation no longer necessarily embodies marriage, and it is equally common for young people to cohabit (Kiernan and Wicks, 1990).

### *Summary*

As Coles (1995) argues, decisions which may influence the pathways which will in part determine their life careers are, often, imposed upon young people by parents or by state agencies. Transitions have been described as inherently risky (Allatt, 1997) and missed transitions, especially for those without family contact, constitute a fundamental element of social exclusion. Career does not necessarily signify positive progression but may, equally, involve a worsening of circumstances (Coles, 1995; 1997).

Both structure and process influence transitions to adulthood, the failure of any of which can have important consequences for future career pathways. Yet transitions from youth to adulthood are more complex and protracted than ever before, and fewer young people are able to gain employment on leaving school at 16. Knock-on effects mean that young people are less likely to be able to afford to live in their own accommodation, or form a new family. Failure to achieve transitions within the expected time frame can lead to insecurity, instability, and poverty, all of which increase the likelihood that young people become marginalised. There are many different types of career, and Craine and Coles (1995) describe how protracted and fractured transitions can lead to unemployment, homelessness and social isolation. Each new event heralds a new status in society which may, in turn, open up pathways to a criminal career. Little (1990) examines pathways which involve crime and lead to a 'deviant career'. Links between failed transitions and offending are discussed in the next section.

### **3.3 Failed transitions and pathways to offending behaviour**

The risk of unemployment in the United Kingdom in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is high. In a study for the Economic and Social Research Council 16-19 initiative, Banks *et al.* (1992) report that opportunities for employment vary hugely in the United Kingdom, and the rights of young people to work, and to full pay, are often seen as subordinate to the



rights of older groups (Coles, 1995). Therefore many young people, especially if they are women, from low income families, or from minority ethnic groups, fail to negotiate the transition from school to work successfully. The range of potential pathways is determined in part by the prevailing social and economic conditions, so that employment opportunities are restricted when no work is available. The transitions to independent living and family formation are largely predicated on success in gaining employment, and failure in the transition from education to employment fundamentally affects the success of these other major transitions.

Apart from the availability of employment, Evans and Furlong (1997) propose that social class, race, gender and educational qualifications are the elements most likely to determine career outcomes, and individual characteristics and aspirations, and personal agency, have little influence when the choice of pathway is already limited. Although education is crucial to achieving employment, they go on to stress the importance of an ongoing period of general education beyond the age of 16 in establishing personal identity. Moral learning develops during the teenage years and young people who leave school at 16 may not complete this stage of their moral development. Evans and Furlong (1997) argue that offending comes more easily to persons with an underdeveloped moral sense. Delinquent acts in adolescence are, at the same time, described by Banks *et al.* (1992), in the Economic and Social Research Council 16 to 19 initiative, as a part of the process of testing different behaviours on the pathway to emotional and moral maturity.

At the same time, unemployed young people are already at risk of social exclusion (Nagel and Wallace, 1997), and when legitimate opportunities are limited because little employment is available, opportunities for illegal ways of increasing income are sought. Thus young people who have no means of becoming financially independent might be at particular risk of offending.

Craine (1994) has described the interconnectedness of failed transitions, and the lack of real choice for young people who cannot find employment. Effectively, such young people have a '*choice*' only between competing alternative pathways all consisting of



predominantly illegal opportunities. A criminal career is one of several potential '*alternative careers*', which may be followed by young people who find that a career of employment is not open to them. Law breaking for young people is, however, more likely to be the outcome of a series of episodes and '*incremental decisions*' to take advantage of current opportunities (Little, 1990; Coles, 1997) than a carefully reasoned '*choice*' to become involved in offending.

Some young people emulate older people who, for example, defraud the benefit system, and do not see this as criminal because it is culturally acceptable within the local subculture (Craine, 1994). Similarly, young people's interpretations of their illegal activities may be that they are not criminal, but harmless (Coles, 1994): for example when there is no perceived victim such as in shop lifting. Now that unemployment is so widespread that traditional transitions of school-to-work no longer exist in some areas, the culture of a criminal career has gained a measure of social acceptance (Craine and Coles, 1995). Becoming more enmeshed in criminal activity leads to the development of a new role and self identity, and offenders are then likely to interpret events differently from observers or other commentators. Little reports that offenders' accounts of their criminal actions do not accord with reality (Little, 1990). However '*reality*' is not fixed but, rather, is a concept that can vary according to perspective.

Limited options change over time, and the benefits and drawbacks of breaking the law are not necessarily clear except with hindsight. Decision making is, therefore, often the result of whim or chance rather than of rational assessment. Four main elements have been suggested in the development of criminal career: motivation, illegal method, situational influences, and opportunities. Early offending is often spontaneous, to provide excitement (Coles, 1995) but, at the same time, marks a small step along the pathway to a criminal career. Options continue to change as a criminal career develops, as a result of the interaction between cultural beliefs, social circumstances, relationships and locality (Coles, 1995). Certain psychological, social and statutory processes are involved in the decision making process which inclines a young person closer to, or further away from, the pathway to a criminal career. Understanding how these decisions are made can



explain why some young people become involved in offending while others do not (Coles, 1995).

### *Summary*

Career pathways and transitions, then, are influenced by structural factors, such as government policies, the state of the labour market and the types of job available providing opportunities for employment. Locality has also been cited as influential in determining youth transitions because of the regional differences in employment opportunities (Coles, 1997). Ethnic minority groups tend to live in the poorer areas where the effects of structural poverty and disadvantage are most evident, and some young people from the black community have been criminalized because of their poorer circumstances (Coles, 1995).

Craine (1994) found that, when opportunities for employment and independent living, and thus adult status were:

Perceived as only a distant and diminished possibility alternative status systems were subculturally conceived ... which enabled participants to offset threats to psychological well-being posed by their objective labour market positions and provided alternative routes to income status, identity and meaning.  
(Craine, 1994: 10)

For some young people, including young women, these alternative routes involve offending.

### **3.4 The influence of social relationships**

Careers are moulded by major structural influences, but are also affected by social relationships and family backgrounds. Transitions to adulthood rely on forming satisfactory close adult relationships which enable successfully leaving the home of origin and new family formation. As Bowlby (1969) suggested, and more recent research supports (Heard and Lake, 1997), the need for attachment to a significant person in childhood, usually the mother, is instinctive. Children develop a varying intensity of attachment to a small group of caregivers, and psychologists (Rutter and Rutter, 1992; Heard and Lake, 1997) propose that this close emotional and mutual trusting contact

promotes protection against stress in children and adults. Heard and Lake (1997), however, also argue that individuals require peer company from an early age, and this need does not diminish.

Failure of the transitions from the home of origin to independent living and from the family of origin to the formation of a new family may reduce the development of positive self-identity, confidence, and a sense of empowerment, security and stability, which, in turn, can increase the risk of engaging in delinquent behaviour and offending. Events and experiences throughout childhood continue to be considered significant by researchers into family life (Bowlby, 1973; Burgess, 1973; Poster, 1978; Perez, 1978; Pollock, 1983; Porter, 1984; Briere, 1992; Finch and Mason, 1993; Brannen and O'Brien, 1996). The family has a public and a private persona (Dallos and McClaughlin, 1993), and it is the private elements that are more likely to explain later offending behaviour. The quality of family relationships is described as '*pivotal*' in the predisposition to an offending career for young people (Graham and Bowling, 1995: 85). Kolvin *et al.* (1990) similarly find that poor family relationships in early life are associated with adult offending.

Success or failure in transitions to adulthood may depend on childhood experiences of separation from parents, of abuse, or of living in local authority care. Bereavement caused by the death or departure of a parent can affect children for long after the event, and death, rejection or the absence of a parent may predict delinquency (Shelley, 1994). Children usually cope well, and suffer no long term ill effects from bereavement (Burghes, 1993), but some appear to experience adult depression as an effect of a parent lost in adolescence (Rutter, 1981). Children who have been unable to talk about the death of a parent can find it impossible to cope with their feelings of loss (Pettle and Britten, 1995).

Children who have little contact with their parents, and are expected to care for younger siblings, may experience difficulty in the role they are expected to fulfil (Gilfus, 1992). Non-parent carers have been described as an example of a '*discorded role*' within a family (Bagley and Thurston, 1996: 196), since it is inappropriate for a child to be



responsible for another, younger child which is properly the responsibility of an adult. Care by siblings, or of siblings, may create abrasive relationships in families, and even encourage a young woman to leave the family of origin although she has no suitable alternative accommodation.

Leaving home, or care, early is a temporally displaced transition, and girls are unlikely to have developed the skills to cope with their own household, nor to have an income adequate to pay for independent accommodation. However, this represents a survival strategy rather than a career '*choice*', for some women, and becomes for them a rational response to intolerable circumstances (including abuse) in their own homes, which nevertheless confers on them the status of delinquent (Gilfus, 1992).

Research suggests that as young people develop into adults they are less likely to cope with stress if their social relationships are perceived to be inadequate (Heard and Lake, 1997), and women who have experienced abuse in childhood are sometimes not able to forge satisfactory and supportive social relationships.

The search for factors which place persons at risk of offending led Graham and Bowling (1995) to compare offenders with non-offenders. They found that, although there is cultural acceptance of lone motherhood by lower socio-economic and benefit dependent groups, young people living in lone parent households were at greater risk of offending. Coming from a lone parent family is described as a risk factor, partly because the supervision of children from single parent families is less assiduous, as a single parent cannot provide the same close supervision over children's activities as two parents. Children in single parent families are also likely to suffer greater emotional stress (Utting, Bright and Henricson, 1993). Graham and Bowling (1995) identified an association between young offenders and a poor relationship with one parent, and, unsurprisingly, with family poverty. In their attempt to identify factors which predispose young people to become involved in offending, they found a statistical association in relation to young women and the proportion of their friends who were already in trouble with the police. Girls are more closely supervised in their adolescent years than boys (Graham and

Bowling, 1995), and this was thought to be a protective factor for young women who, as a result, are less likely to mix with offending peers, and may explain why fewer young women offend than young men.

Young offenders having contact with peers who are in trouble with the police constitutes an additional risk factor associated with law breaking. Friends can influence children to use drugs, and Kandel (1997) found that marijuana users often encourage their peers or partners to participate in drug use. The first step is often adolescent experimentation with marijuana (Little, 1990). Children who are unhappy are more likely to be susceptible to these offers, although, frequently, substance misuse is only one among a constellation of problems (Gilfus, 1992).

Having a close relation who is involved in offending presents another risk factor. One third of women offenders in a study in America had a sibling already in trouble with the police (Daly, 1994). Forty three per cent of prisoners had a relative who had a conviction, compared with 16 per cent in the general population (Walmsley, Howard and White, 1992), and it is likely that association with other offenders encourages, or at least diminishes the stigma of, offending for some people. Children of imprisoned mothers may become '*social casualties*' and so perpetuate an alienation from the mainstream of society. Morris (1965) notes that children of imprisoned fathers are predisposed to behaviour that she describes as disturbed, which might become delinquent as the children grow older.

### **3.5 Experiences of abuse and neglect**

Many women in the prison system have been subject to some kind of abuse (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1997). Abuse, however, remains a contested concept (Kempe and Kempe, 1978; Glaser and Frosh, 1988; Besharov, 1981; Hooper, 1992; Corby, 1993; Featherstone, 1997). Definitions of abuse vary, with physical punishment, such as smacking by hand or with a cane, seen as acceptable behaviour for which some people would not use the term 'abuse'. Other commentators, however, believe that any form of physical punishment incorporates the bullying of weaker people by physically stronger



people (Briere, 1992). Abuse of children ranges along a continuum from teasing, to death as the result of physical violence, and has no single agreed definition (Kempe and Kempe, 1978; Glaser and Frosh, 1988; Besharov, 1981; Hooper, 1992; Corby, 1993; Featherstone, 1997). Thus the current situation is that behaviours perceived as socially acceptable by some members of society are considered by others to constitute abuse.

Gelles and Straus (1988) have highlighted the critical effects of family violence, and have described the concept of abuse as political, rather than scientific. They propose that an act of abuse should only be so defined by a group of people who have experienced abuse and thus have the power to '*enforce the definition*' (Gelles and Strauss, 1988: 57). Feminist commentators have pointed out that, for the most part, definitions have been provided by men, rather than by the women and children who are the most usual victims of family violence. They seek to define such abuse as a fault of masculinity, although this approach neglects the occurrence of abuse by women (Hooper, 1992).

Definitions and standards for the measurement and regulation of psychological abuse have long been described as inadequate (Winnicott, 1989, first published 1965). Almost 30 years after Winnicott's book, Briere comments that, although children who suffer psychological or emotional abuse are likely to experience lasting damaging effects, it has not been the subject of comprehensive study (Briere, 1992). Researchers have found it impossible to separate out the various types of abuse, since it is probable that children who are abused sexually also suffer physical and emotional abuse. The individual and combined effects of each kind of abuse impact in different ways, depending on other variables such as the level of dysfunctionality within a family (Bagley and Thurston, 1996).

While physical abuse is a concrete and visible act, emotional and psychological abuse is less tangible and, consequently, more difficult to describe and define than physical abuse. Briere (1992) includes emotional neglect as a form of abuse which is particularly difficult to determine, but which nonetheless can have substantive negative outcomes in respect of forming satisfactory close adult relationships. This area is recently been addressed by

O'Hagan (1993), who argues that, while emotional abuse degrades children and damages their ability to express their feelings appropriately, psychological abuse damages a child's capacity to develop cognitive mental processes and moral judgement. All these factors have a major bearing on the propensity to offend in later life.

The kinds of abuse described above may exert an influence on the propensity of an individual to follow a criminal career, yet sexual abuse is often perceived to be the most damaging. Researchers at one time believed that it was most commonly a girl's stepfather who sexually abused her (Bentovim *et al.*, 1988; Bagley and Thurston, 1996), but abusers in a variety of relationships are now recognised, including siblings (Wiehe, 1997). Sexual abuse typically occurs in families where the mother is unable to provide protection for her daughter (Finkelhor, 1984; Porter, 1984).

Emotional mistreatment within a dysfunctional family, which is linked to other forms of child abuse, is most likely to be the core base of problems in later life (Briere, 1992; Brown and Gilligan, 1992; O'Hagan, 1993). Bagley and Thurston (1996) suggest that dysfunction within the family is the main potential cause of behavioural problems later in life, rather than child sexual abuse alone. They explain that cruelty and degradation cause the most harm, and that:

Family pathology...has stronger correlations with adjustment outcomes than child sexual abuse itself.

(Bagley and Thurston, 1996: 213)

Winnicott, however (1989), examines why some people commit offences, when others in an apparently identical situation do not. He suggests genetic differences between siblings as one explanation of this phenomenon. A child's gender in relationship to the parents' hopes, and their ordinal position as oldest, middle or youngest, may also influence the child's self-perception, and thus be important in determining attitudes in later life. Winnicott (1989) explains that even a minor deprivation can have long term effects on the way a person copes with their life, and may predispose them to offending. Bowlby (1969) too suggests that early damaging experiences determined adult behaviour,



but more recently Rutter argues that positive experiences later in life can compensate for early emotional damage (Rutter, 1981).

Briere (1992) and Jaffe *et al.* (1990), among others, have demonstrated that children base their self perception, as well their view of other people, on early experiences. Thus children whose early experiences include violence may be predisposed to behave violently in their own relationships. Indeed, research demonstrates that children whose experiences include a violent relationship between their parents perceive this behaviour to be the norm in intimate relationships (Jaffe *et al.*, 1990; Strauss, 1997; Corsaro, 1997). Children's development is likely to be affected by such experiences (Gelles and Strauss, 1988).

The importance of social relationships in childhood is acknowledged. O'Hagan (1993) and others (Briere, 1992; Bagley and Thurston, 1996) comment on the damaging effects of emotional abuse, so that in extreme cases emotionally deprived or abused children have difficulty in communicating, and display inappropriate emotions or other bizarre behaviour. Social isolation, in particular, is identified as a likely outcome for an adult who suffered physical, emotional or sexual abuse as a child (Bagley and Thurston, 1996).

Research suggests that drug and alcohol misuse is a major effect of childhood sexual abuse, and people who were abused as children may use drugs or alcohol in adolescence and adult life to ease their unhappiness (Michell and Anderson, 1988; Benward and Densen-Gerber, 1975; Briere, 1992; Moeller *et al.*, 1993). Using drugs to help to cope with the painful memories of abused childhoods is not necessarily a conscious behaviour, and adults do not always associate their current unhappiness with events in their childhood (Briere, 1992).

Briere (1992) stresses that sexual abuse, in particular, may engender a loss of self esteem and feelings of powerlessness in certain situations for the adult who was sexually abused as a child. Adults who were accustomed to being powerless in unpleasant situations as children, when they had lesser social status and less strength and size than their abuser,

often carry with them the inability to respond appropriately to pressure from other people. Typically, abuse occurs within a relationship where the abuser has greater power than the abused person (Glaser and Frosh, 1988; Hooper, 1992). Silence about the abuse by the abused person is the result of such unequal relationships, and of threats to the abused child (La Fontaine, 1990; Bagley and Thurston, 1996). The inequality of power relationships between a child and her abuser has the result that the child is, often, afraid to report abuse (La Fontaine, 1990; Bagley and Thurston, 1996).

Half the sample of twenty women prisoners, in a study in the United States by Gilfus (1992), suffered abuse and neglect as children. This research supports the theory that sexual abuse leads to girls running away from home, teenage prostitution and drug addiction (Gilfus, 1992; Daly, 1994). Finkelhor (1984) describes one of the outcomes of sexual abuse as impaired self esteem, and Bagley (1995) emphasises that there are likely to be severe long-term implications for the psychological health of an adult who was sexually abused from an early age. HM Inspector of Prisons comments upon the high proportion of women in prison who have experienced sexual, physical or emotional abuse, and suggests that an association exists between early abuse and emotional and behavioural problems as an adult (1997). He also notes that witnessing and experiencing abuse constitutes a predictor of drug misuse and alcoholism in women (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1997).

Daly (1994) identifies a group of female offenders with a history of victimization and associated psychological problems who leave home to live independently in their teenage years. She found that more than one third of women in a study of women offenders in the United States had experienced physical and sexual abuse (Daly, 1994). At the same time, Daly stresses that these pathways into offending are not fixed but suggest an assortment of routes and, usually, more than one gendered element, which often includes male violence.

Gilfus (1992) too found, in a qualitative study of 20 women prisoners, that their family backgrounds included violence, disruption as a result of death, abuse, divorce or



bereavement, care by grandparents, and placement into care. Girls were more likely than boys to have experienced a broken home, but pathways to delinquency most often comprise a cluster of adverse factors. Running away from home, dealing in drugs or prostitution provide the only means of escape from violence for some women who become criminalized as a result of trying to escape from victimization. Gilfus explains how:

The survival strategies selected by (or which are the *only options* available to) some women are the beginning of a process of transition from victim to offender. (Gilfus (1992: 85; added emphasis)

and so draws a link between gender, victimization and criminalization. Research shows that a substantial majority of young people living alone are:

Depressed, worried or anxious...worried about money...concerned about their futures.. worried about relationships, especially with their families. (NCH, 1993: 3)

and many try to escape the reality of their difficult lives by misusing drugs or alcohol.

Winnicott (1989) describes the need of young people to '*break the rules*' in order to establish their own identity as part of the transition to adulthood. He explains the adolescent's need for parents to accept even undesirable behaviour, and their continuing emotional dependence on parents while they develop their own identities. Winnicott (1989) describes how adolescents develop an anti-social tendency:

At the root of the anti-social tendency there is always a deprivation. ... Even a minor deprivation, if it occurs at a difficult moment, may have a lasting result because it overstrains the available defences...All sorts of things in the adolescents' struggle - the stealing, the knives, the breaking out and the breaking in, and everything - all these have to be contained in the dynamic of this group, sitting round listening to jazz, or having a bottle party. (Winnicott, 1989: 86)

Winnicott emphasises the need for all the different, and sometimes defiant or unpleasant, behaviour of adolescence to be accepted by the parents, together with the continuing

emotional dependence of their children as they develop their own identities over a period of several years.

Regulations and security measures are tested by children in an attempt to reassure themselves that the external controls are in place, when their own new emotions become alarmingly strong and less easy to control by themselves. At the same time, adolescents need to know that, if they wish to, it is possible for them to break the external rules and controls so that they can establish themselves as autonomous beings. Eventually, emotionally healthy young people develop who are confident in their own, and others', self-control and they develop a dislike of external controls, once they have no further need for them. This facilitates satisfactory transitions to be made in relation to employment and, particularly, to independent living and family formation. However, these transitions can be hazardous for young people who have experienced a period in the care of the local authority, as discussed below.

### **3.6 Living in local authority care**

Although around 10,000 young people leave care each year, they form fewer than one per cent of their age group (Biehal *et al.*, 1995) and were little researched until the 1980s (Triseliotis and Russell, 1984; Stein and Carey, 1986; Baldwin, 1990). The majority of children are placed in care because their families are too poor to manage problems such as maternal illness (Carlen, 1987). Poverty in a family can induce stress which, in turn, may result in children being placed in care (House of Commons, 1984; Baldwin, 1990). Bebbington and Miles (1989) suggest that, although the received wisdom is that children present behavioural difficulties as a result of parental separation, children's difficult behaviour may have been the cause of separation in some cases. Mixed race children are six times more likely to be placed in the care of the local authority than white children, and children of single parents are also over represented in the care system. Parents with learning difficulties are, at any time, likely to have at least one child in care (Booth and Booth, 1994). Two per cent of the general population spend some time in the care of the local authority in stark contrast to 38 per cent of young prisoners have experienced care (Walmsley, Howard and White, 1992).



The experience of care is associated with poor emotional development in children, which intensifies the risk of being socially excluded, and some young people may become involved in substance abuse while in, or on leaving, care (Biehal *et al.*, 1995). Being in care has been shown to weaken a child's links with their family, is associated with poor educational attainment, and fails to prepare young people for independent living. Young people entering care as teenagers tend to experience a large number of different placements, which inevitably incorporates stress and disruption that is likely to increase on each occasion because of the sense of failure that accompanies each move. Instability in their lives may only cease when they remain in residential homes (Biehal *et al.*, 1995).

It is acknowledged that being in the care of the local authority may be detrimental to normal progress in children, who may have poorly developed social skills. Loneliness has been described as one of the major hardships for children in care (Stein and Carey, 1986). They tend to be unhappy, have poorer health and less educational success than children who have been adopted (Triseliotis and Russell, 1984), and relationships with staff in residential care can be crucial to their happiness (Clough, 1988).

Young people leaving care can be at risk of offending because of difficulties encountered in negotiating the three major transitions. Their risk of failure is increased because of the early age at which they must make the transition to independent living. At the same time, care leavers are a heterogeneous group of young people who have different expectations, needs and abilities.

The majority of young people leaving care move into their own flats, but approximately half of these move again soon after, and although there is little information on where they go (Garnett, 1992), this pattern demonstrates the inherent instability in their housing transitions. Young people leaving care are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. They have to live independently at an earlier age than the majority of young people who live with their families, which compounds their disadvantage (Coles, 1995). Their own families become more important to young people when they leave care. Those who have no contact with their families are particularly vulnerable (Biehal *et al.*, 1995), as they are

emotionally exposed at this time because of the cessation of support from residential staff, and many experience a loss of self identity once they are living alone. Young black people are more likely than their white counterparts to live in temporary accommodation on leaving care, and sometimes receive more ongoing support than young white people (Biehal *et al.*, 1992).

Having a child usually provides a passport to secure housing, while minimising the possibility of employment. Young women who have been in care are more likely than the general population to start a family before they reach 20, and Coles (1997: 75) has described entry to parenting as the '*predominant transition*' for many such girls.

The typically poor educational attainment of young people in care places them at a disadvantage in finding employment. Children leaving care feel that the low expectations of staff give them little sense of purpose to achieve well educationally, and also lowers their already damaged sense of self esteem (Department of Health, 1998). Carlen (1988) describes how some young women leaving care perceive little choice but to engage in offending, and care therefore represents a risk factor for involvement in crime.

### **3.7 Risk factors**

Young people who, as they develop into mature adults, experience economic and emotional security which brings stability into their lives, and incorporate the qualities of positive self-esteem, empowerment and confidence, are at reduced risk of developing criminal career pathways. They may, on occasion, behave in a delinquent or criminal manner, which is to test the boundaries rather than a progression to a criminal career. Young people who lack the above security and personal qualities are threatened by failure to make successful transitions to adulthood. The risk of failure depends to some extent on structural factors, discussed in section 3.3, and partly on the nature of social relationships, discussed in section 3.4.

There has been a tendency to preoccupation with why so few women offend compared with men instead of attempting a fully gendered understanding of female offending



(Brown, 1998). Gender often dictates expectations. For example, men are frequently in the public domain by the nature of their employment. Women, in contrast, have traditionally inhabited the private domain of the home, and have been discouraged from entering the public domain. Power belongs to the visible, male public domain and gender relations in the private domain often reflect the power inequality (including physical power) between men and women. Becoming involved in offending, however, typically involves entry into the public domain outside the privacy of the offender's own home.

Young men tend to inhabit public space, where they sometimes behave violently, but the same is not true of the majority of young women (Lloyd, 1995). Young men offend in groups, which creates excitement (Little, 1990), and excitement has also been described by women offenders as a reason for committing crime (Carlen, 1985). Otherwise sociological accounts of male behaviour are rarely appropriate for women. A separate discourse is therefore needed on women and offending, since it cannot be properly explained through a male-centred prism (Moore, 1994).

Graham and Bowling (1995) suggest that the offending careers of young men and young women follow completely different paths, and that young women '*grow out*' of offending with their development to adulthood, based on the transitions of gaining economic independence, leaving home, becoming a member of a stable relationship, and starting a family.

#### *Risk and protective factors for women*

The essence of '*choice*' is being able to decide between a variety of options, but employment opportunities for young women lacking qualification are very limited (Bates, 1993; Roberts, 1993). This presents a possible risk factor for offending since more than a third of women in prison are in debt, and seventy per cent have not been in employment prior to their reception into prison, although many describe employment as the single most important factor in leading a law abiding life (HM Inspector of Prisons, 1997). In a thematic review of women in prison, HM Inspector of Prisons identifies '*a socially disadvantaged background*' (1997: 99) as a characteristic disproportionately high among

women prisoners compared with the general population. As options for employment diminish the involvement of young women in offending appears to be increasing (Asquith, 1996), although this may be the result of different ways of policing.

Kolvin *et al.* (1990) found deprivation to be a significant factor in young women's offending. White (1993) found that ex-prisoners without satisfactory accommodation were at greater risk of offending than those with good housing. Lack of money can result in inadequate heating, no social life and the need to perform many tedious domestic tasks which might otherwise be carried out by machines (Ramazanoglu, 1989).

Factors identified as protecting girls from delinquency differ from protective factors for boys, and include the presence of a father in work who lives with the family, which is not in receipt of benefit; in addition, Kolvin *et al.* (1990: 317) cite '*good temperamental qualities*', which might be described as emotional maturity. Whereas stressful social circumstances are associated with increased vulnerability, the most influential protective factor is identified as good parental care, which generally leads to the internalization of an accepted moral code (Kolvin *et al.*, 1990; Utting, Bright and Henricson, 1993). Asquith (1996) includes good social support as a useful protective factor.

A protective factor for some young women, who construct an escapist '*imaginary reality*', is located in the ideology of love and romance (Craine, 1994). Craine (1994) suggests that they perceive motherhood as a direct route to an otherwise unattainable adulthood. While young men:

Looked toward the self-protecting milieu of their peer group network with its celebration of masculinity..young women sought parenthood and maternity as the only viable option for displaying adult status and residential independence. (Craine, 1994: 607)

The best predictive factor of offending (71 %) in Kolvin's study was poor maternal care for children below the age of five. The converse also held, in which good maternal care before age five acted as a protective factor. Affectionate mothering was seen as encouraging internal controls on personal behaviour, and parental contact with the school



was another significant factor, but these factors proved beneficial for boys rather than girls. Kolvin *et al.* go on to suggest that:

Criminality has its origins in family deprivation and dysfunction.  
(Kolvin *et al.*, 1990: 369)

Research suggests that the influence of locality presents high risk of offending for boys but not for girls, and '*dull intelligence*' is also described as a risk factor which predicts offending (Kolvin *et al.*, 1990), but it is possible that such young people are less able at avoiding detection.

As we have seen above, experience of the care system presents a risk of offending for some young women. The Chief Inspector of Prisons (1997) found that 20 per cent of all women prisoners (including foreign nationals, who would not have experienced care in this country) had been in care, demonstrating care as a significant risk factor for being placed in prison. This might be explained by girls who have been in care experiencing feelings of guilt, difference, low self esteem and isolation when placements did not work (Carlen, 1987) which may have the effect of their seeking companionship with other apparent outcasts, and people involved in marginal activities, including law breaking. Girls in care lack the opportunity to learn how to maintain interpersonal relationships, and sometimes perceive other people as threatening. The experience of care negates the normal social controls, especially for girls who have no close contact with their families and who are already engaged in delinquent activities. The cumulative effects of various deprivations have increasingly damaging outcomes, and young women start misusing alcohol or drugs to blank out an otherwise unbearable life, which may be the first step along the pathway to a criminal career. Although absconding from care might be seen as a rational response to an unbearable situation, girls are treated like criminals on recapture (Carlen, 1987) and so are already perceived as on the path to delinquency.

Leaving care can place young women in immediate poverty and loneliness, with crime as the only means of providing escape. They are likely to be imprisoned for a minor conviction because there is no family to impose social control, which is perceived by the courts to be especially important for women who do not demonstrate gender-appropriate

behaviour. Essentially, for these care leavers, poverty and isolation lead to offending which leads to imprisonment (Carlen, 1987).

Young women who have experienced care are already outwith the privacy of their family homes. Carlen argues that women who have been in care lack a typical socialization into accepting the male inclusive family ideology, and therefore lack the internal buttons which operate the gendered social controls, described in chapter 2. Girls resent the restrictions and disciplinary function created by poverty and gender expectations, and sense of difference and exclusion as the result of continual assessments (Carlen, 1987). They are perceived to be beyond the usual controls, and are therefore potential offenders, who already perceive themselves as socially marginalised (Carlen, 1987: 130). In this condition, there may appear to be little additional stigma attached to the relatively small step to breaking the law.

### *Effects of lone motherhood*

Completing the transition to adulthood generally means desistance from offending for women, and especially for those who are married or in a stable relationship (Graham and Bowling, 1995), which clearly does not apply to lone mothers. Some factors place lone mothers at a higher risk than other women of following pathways which lead to a criminal career. The majority of women prisoners relied on state benefits prior to imprisonment, but the effects of targeting means tested benefits, and the development of a flexible labour market, have a greater impact on women than on men and, because of their relative distance from the formal labour market, the economic effect on lone mothers is particularly damaging (Millar, 1997). It is likely that the added media demonization of lone mothers contributes to the sense of failure in their lives, and increases their emotional stress levels.

Early motherhood has been identified by Craine as keeping young women economically dependent and socially isolated, although it can also secure independent accommodation for them and thus provide a passport to adult status (Craine, 1994). Craine and Coles found that some young mothers become involved in prostitution, drugs and fraud in an



attempt to gain financial independence. They seek alternative, and criminal, careers because of:

The seeming inevitability of unemployment and poverty, and continued dependence on families who were ill-equipped to provide for them.  
(Craine and Coles, 1995: 22)

Fifty five per cent of women prisoners become mothers in their teenage years, compared with 19 per cent in the general population (Caddle and Crisp, 1997: 11). This may be a result of poor relationships at home, leaving home in their early to mid-teens and experiencing loneliness. Girls in this situation replace emotional support from their home family with peer relationships, which assume increasing importance in the teenage years, when the need for peer regard is fundamental (Graham and Bowling, 1995; Evans and Furlong, 1997). Sexual relationships progress to early pregnancy and lone motherhood for some young women. Caddle and Crisp (1997) identified lone motherhood as a characteristic significantly higher among women in prison, at 27 per cent, than in the general population, at eight per cent. The representation of black mothers in prison, at 36 per cent, was even higher than white mothers. Thus lone motherhood in itself appears to constitute a risk factor both for offending, and for being sentenced to custody.

Offending can appear to be an appropriate response to the lack of legitimate opportunities for gainful employment, and choices leading to a criminal career can be understood as rational in these circumstances.

### **3.8 Summary**

The main transitions from youth to adulthood comprise the progression from school to employment, from parental home (or care) to living independently, and from birth family to forming a new family with a partner. Career pathways are influenced by structural factors such as the availability of employment, and personal factors, such as educational qualifications and family background, and other experiences, which might involve peer relationships or substance misuse. This chapter identifies some risk factors which adversely affect successful transitions to adulthood.

Factors identified as being associated with risk of offending include parental neglect, having relatives involved in crime, teenage pregnancy, and material deprivation. These effects tend to coincide and so have a cumulative effect. They may, however, be countered by close family and social support (Asquith, 1996). The experience of deprivation or negative events in childhood, which deeply affect children may be linked to delinquency (Rutter, 1981). Thus children who feel they lack parental love and care, or who feel abandoned by their parent (for example because of death or imprisonment), or suffer some form of abuse, may consciously or unconsciously be predisposed to react to, or compensate for, negative episodes in childhood in ways which lead to offending. Lone mothers who have experienced the negative childhood episodes described above may be at particular risk of offending, especially when compounded by severe financial difficulties.

Some of the events which combine to create the pathways which lead to a criminal career for women differ from men's pathways. Women are more likely to have suffered some form of abuse in their homes, to have run away from home, or to have become addicted to illegal drugs or alcohol as a result of abuse (Kolvin *et al.*, 1990).

It is equally important to recognise factors which protect against the likelihood of offending, and these frequently are the reverse of the risk factors. Many young people do not adopt a criminal career, although they appear to be subject to potential risk factors.

This study seeks to discover how lone mothers who have been in prison construct their own explanations for their behaviour, and to identify patterns of events or experiences from empirical research. The methods for the research are described in chapter 4.



## **CHAPTER 4    DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In order to discover how lone mothers perceive the routes which led them to become involved in criminal careers, the study is designed to explore the ways in which the sample, as young women, negotiated the major transitions from youth to adulthood. The impact of transitions which left mothers without employment, or without a satisfactory home, on their pathways to lone motherhood, and to criminal careers, are examined.

Different theories provide different explanations of women's offending, and were discussed in Chapter 2. Information from the present study builds upon existing theories by setting lone mothers' involvement in criminal careers within the framework of the three major transitions from adolescence to adulthood. This chapter presents information regarding the merits and disadvantages of potential methods for the study. The rationale behind the selection of depth interviews as the most appropriate method for the research is appraised, the issue of validity, and limitations of the study design and are addressed. The way in which the sample was selected, and the characteristics of the study sample are described. The chapter concludes with a consideration of ethical concerns associated with the research

### **4.2 Design**

The nature of an investigation dictates the design of the study, and it is important to employ the most appropriate techniques for achieving the aims of an individual project (Fetterman, 1989; Bowden, 1995). Within this broad dictum, some modification to the methods may be necessary to comply with constraints associated with time, funding and access to the source of data, depending on the particular circumstances relating to any study (Layder, 1993).

Quantitative and qualitative methods are both used in social research and each method has intrinsic strengths and weaknesses. While quantitative methods supply information in relation to a specific question about the numbers of people in a given research

population, qualitative methodologies allow social scientists to examine the complexity of attitudes and meanings behind the statistics produced from a quantitative survey. Sample size is related to the type of method. Large samples are generally associated with quantitative surveys which consist of representative, replicable studies. Qualitative methods, in contrast, usually involve a much smaller sample.

Depending on the overall aims of the research, it may be more or less productive to use a quantitative method employing, typically, a questionnaire offering multiple choice answers to pre-determined questions which might be administered by post, by telephone or face-to-face. The characteristics of qualitative methods, on the other hand, differ inherently from quantitative methods, as they involve interpersonal communication. Qualitative methods permit following up information as it unfolds with questions about 'how' and 'why' a respondent acted as they did in a certain situation, and can thus complement the statistical information provided by quantitative studies.

The discussion around the characteristic strengths and weaknesses associated with quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry in general is the subject of detailed debate elsewhere (see Bell and Roberts, 1984; Moser and Kalton, 1971; Bryman, 1988) and it is not my intention to reproduce a comprehensive account of those arguments here. Rather, it is appropriate to evaluate the particular dynamics and approach which relate directly to this study in the light of some criticisms which have been made of qualitative methods.

Qualitative methods can encompass depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and diary keeping. I decided, after considering the alternatives, and with reference to the literature, that the objectives of the research would most satisfactorily be achieved by conducting depth interviews with the lone mothers. Only depth interviews and focus groups are appropriate for discovering the kind of historical information required to fulfil the aims of this study.

Some of the topics to be covered by the research were of a sensitive nature, and lone



mothers might have felt inhibited by the presence of other people when talking, for example, about traumatic events in their personal lives, or about their offending activities. Focus groups were therefore rejected as an appropriate means of gathering the required data. Depth interviews were selected as the most appropriate qualitative method for addressing the research questions, as well as being the method best suited to the research sample. Themes associated with the transitions and pathways which led to offending were sought from these semi-structured conversations.

Qualitative studies have been criticised as merely descriptive, too subjective, or too arbitrary to be useful in promoting scientific advance. Positivists argue that the conclusions drawn from qualitative research may be distorted because respondents are seen to be self-selected by agreeing to participate in a personal interaction, and so may not be typical of the larger population of any specific group (see Arksey and Knight, 1999). Additional criticisms claim that data from depth interviews cannot be generalized, nor is it replicable, and so while qualitative research may produce interesting results and serve as a preparation to scientific investigations, the depth interview itself is not accepted by some researchers as a scientific method. Kvale, however, refutes such criticism:

The automatic rejection of qualitative research as unscientific reflects a specific, limited conception of science, instead of seeing science as the topic of continual clarification and discussion ... the qualitative research interview can produce scientific knowledge in the meaning of methodologically secured new and systematic knowledge.  
(Kvale, 1996: 61)

Depth interviews, then, are recognised as an important method of acquiring and collating novel data.

While Silverman (1993) suggests that interviewers construct both narratives and social worlds, and raises the question of how far interviews tend to be based on the taken-for-granted, but unspecified, world which is shared by interviewer and interviewee, Walker recommends qualitative methods which allow for:

The researcher “getting inside” the objects of his study so that he understands and knows them as subjects  
(Walker, 1985: 12)

and, especially, for exploring relationships. Relationships were of key importance in the lives of the study sample - indeed, the word ‘*mother*’ itself denotes a relationship. This method of gaining information accords with Kvale’s advice that talking to people is the best way to discover how they understand their own world (Kvale, 1996). Gelsthorpe (1989) and Walker (1985) recommend the interactive approach characteristic of depth interviews when the motivations behind a person’s actions are to form the basis of the analysis.

Characteristics of the depth interview, described by positivists as limitations, constitute precisely the indefinable qualities which may be instrumental in eliciting the kind of information which would, because of its abstract and individual nature, be unlikely to be discovered from a questionnaire. A semi-structured interview also permits the use of particular words and idiom which are familiar to individual study participants, and which vary from person to person; this could not be achieved with a standardised questionnaire, and represents a strength of the personal dynamics of the interview (Arksey and Knight, 1999).

The depth interview is a tool with which the researcher may comprehensively explore another's world by:

Actively participating in the process of seeking understanding.  
(Massarik, 1981: 203)

By choosing which features to make dominant, and choosing how they will respond to them, each person constructs their own individual world (Jones, 1985), and so the way in which each perceives the world is unique. A depth interview, by its relative lack of structure, allows the interviewer to be given a picture of this individual world view in a way which would be impossible from a questionnaire.

Interviewer based variables which may affect the information provided at the interview



are idiosyncracies such as an interviewer's personal social skills, and her ability to create a rapport and to empathise with the different people whom she interviews; in other words, all of her own individual personality that she brings with her to the interview. While positivists see this aspect as unscientific, Kuhn (1962) argues that method must go hand in hand with theory, and raises the issue of abstract qualities such as subjective beliefs, intuition and social context. These dynamic elements influence every scientific undertaking and research is therefore advanced more satisfactorily if these elements are integrated into the design framework.

Inevitably, contextual information too is prone to the subjective nature of qualitative research, as depth interviews embody the possibility of interviewer bias. For example it is argued that if the interviewer has a favourite theory firmly fixed in her head, her mind may be closed to any conflicting information which emerges during the course of the interview (Jones, 1985).

However, this possible disadvantage is balanced by the benefit that equality and closeness between the interviewer and the respondent enables shared language and interpretations, so that meanings can be inferred which might be missed by an interviewer who lacks experiences similar to those of the respondent (Gelsthorpe, 1989; Arksey and Knight, 1999). Interviewers should present a neutral attitude to the information being imparted, since the expression of either strong agreement or disagreement with the interviewee may influence the content or tone of the responses. Some interviewees want to '*please*' the interviewer, and may say what they think the interviewer wants to hear. Gelsthorpe, however, notes that:

Becker, for example, unashamedly concludes that the researcher "can never avoid taking sides"..and argues that any search for a "balanced picture" is illusory. (Becker cited in Gelsthorpe, 1989: 37)

Silverman (1993) suggests that qualitative studies lay themselves open to the accusation that samples have been selected to support a particular argument, whereas a complementary survey provides a sense of the body of data from which the sample was drawn. Contextual information relevant to this study in terms of the numbers of women

in prison (Home Office, 1998b) and the proportion of these who are self-reported lone mothers is already available in the form of the various statistics described in chapter 2 (for example Caddle and Crisp, 1997). Findings from the present qualitative study which seeks explanations from a sample of lone mothers after they have been discharged from custody, about their adolescent transitions and the pathways which led them to prison, complement existing statistics.

The lone mothers' accounts can, however, be criticised with some justification because respondents are susceptible to forgetfulness regarding events which span the years from childhood to the time of the interview, and to selective recall, as well as to purposive enhancement of their own part in a criminal activity. However, the research is exploratory, and seeks to comprehend *perceptions* of the major transitions from youth to adulthood, and how these can influence young women into following a criminal career. It is, moreover, not the purpose of this study to demonstrate evidence which reflects informed judgements of the sample group, but, emphatically, to enter the world of the lone mothers, to understand their problems and options as they themselves perceive them, with their - possibly - irrational ideas, coloured perhaps by a lack of self esteem, or incomplete knowledge about employment opportunities, or how to maximise their income from the benefit system. The fundamental reason for the study is to understand the individual transitions and pathways, the idiosyncratic motivations, and the felt imperatives, which the lone mothers perceived to have led them to engage in criminal careers.

The lone mothers' poor financial situations, and their status as ex-prisoners may, among other characteristics of their lives, engender low self esteem. Walker (1985) proposes that depth interviews are the most useful technique when the interviewees may be inhibited, or of low social status and recommends using qualitative methods where:

The topic is complicated or sensitive, concerned with relationships or interaction; or with processes of change..[and where]..the research population is small, difficult to locate or discrete.  
(Walker, 1985: 20-21)



All of these characteristics apply to the sample of lone mothers recounting the youth to adulthood transitions. Some study participants were victims of abuse, or other traumatic experiences. It is clear from the literature review that, for the majority of lone parents, poverty is a dominant factor in their lives (Lewis, 1997a; Kiernan *et al.*, 1998) which may, at the same time, be associated with the success or failure of transitions to independent living and pathways to offending, and lone mothers who have served a prison sentence are not, normally, an easy group to identify or locate.

Depth interviews were, in addition, selected as an appropriate method for conducting this research because the aim was to reach a mutually shared understanding of her personal world with each mother. Graham (1984) suggests adopting a '*storytelling*' approach, as this encourages respondents to elaborate on their experiences in their own way, rather than being curtailed by an interventionist interviewer. The storytelling method is suitable for this particular study because it allows a woman to tell of her *whole* experience, rather than just those parts about which the interviewer asks, which can be misinterpreted in isolation from the context of the woman's total experience: facts separated from their context can be meaningless or even misleading.

Thus the most appropriate and fruitful method for this research, which is exploratory in nature, and aims for a comprehensive description of each individual account rather than for statistical data, is a conversational approach rather than a formal interview. Fetterman comments that some respondents will provide more, and richer, information than others, and also emphasises the value of quotations in providing validity:

Verbatim quotations are extremely useful in presenting a credible report of the research. Quotations allow the reader to judge the quality of work - how close the ethnographer is to the thoughts of natives in the field - and to assess whether the ethnographer used such data appropriately to support the conclusions.

(Fetterman, 1989: 22)

Some onlookers (or researchers) may view '*offending lone mothers*' as a homogeneous group, because they can all be classified by this description. Depth interviews, importantly, raise the profile of each person as an individual, who might flourish by being



recognised as individual, and in these conditions the relationship between the interviewer and the lone mother will be enhanced.

The interactive element of the interviews constitutes an essential ingredient in the study because, although the researcher and the respondent may experience a shared understanding in some areas, yet the relationship between interviewer and interviewee remains an association in which the researcher holds the greater power. It is the researcher who selects which data will be used; it is also the researcher who determines both the interpretation of any data and the ways in which it will be presented.

Another important element in research is validity, without which, although findings may be interesting, they become merely anecdotal. Validity of the in depth interviews was enhanced by checking within the interview that the interviewer's interpretations of what was said was agreed by the respondents (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Verification is an integral part of the process of analysis, an ongoing procedure in which the complete data set confirms or calls into question the inferences drawn in the earlier stages, as data reduction and display feed into, or throw doubt on, emergent themes and initial conclusions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). An additional means by which I checked my understanding of the conversations was to employ the psychotherapeutic technique of repeating the statement back to the mothers, which '*mirroring*' also encourages the disclosure of sensitive data (Gelsthorpe, 1989). Validity may be compromised when a respondent feels ill at ease and unable to talk freely. In contrast, validity is increased when she feels more at ease in familiar surroundings such as her own home (Gelsthorpe, 1989; West, 1990; Arksey and Knight, 1999), as in the present study.

The topic guide (Appendix 1) provides the initial framework for the research. In order to facilitate the '*storytelling*' approach, the topic guide for this study is designed to encourage first a chronological account of events, with trigger questions which cover a standard range of experiences, beginning with prominent events in childhood and progressing to the study sample's experiences of transitions from education to employment, from living with their parental family, or in care, to living in independent



accommodation, and from being a member of the original family to the formation of a new family.

Additional sections of the topic guide are designed to enquire about the lone mothers' involvement in offending, and their perceptions of how they progressed to pathways which led to criminal careers, their financial situations, and any other circumstances they perceived as pertinent to offending. Although I wished to allow the mothers to '*tell a story*' about the events they perceived as important in their lives, once a topic guide has been drawn up the basic structure of the interviews, and decisions about what is relevant and meaningful, have been decided - by the interviewer rather than by the interviewee - and so this may place some restriction on the range of areas covered in the interview (Graham, 1984). Standard background information, relating for example to age and income, was also gathered at each interview.

### *The sample*

No information is systematically collected on the proportion of women in prison who are lone mothers (Lewis, 1997b). However, I wished to have an idea of the scale of the problem of lone mothers in prison, both with regard to the lone mothers and to their temporarily orphaned children. On making an *ad hoc* count in August 1992, of the women in Askham Grange open prison who had been lone mothers at the time of their offence, I was surprised to learn that, at 43 per cent, they formed a substantial proportion of the total.

The sample for the study was selected on the basis of personally asking all forty three<sup>5</sup> lone mothers in Askham Grange prison in August 1992 if they were prepared to assist with the research. Only one mother declined. Self selection brings with it the benefit of cooperation, but can have disadvantages, for example interesting stories may be missed from people who do not participate. The majority of lone mothers agreed to be interviewed because they felt it would be in their own interests to have the opportunity

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<sup>5</sup>Coincidentally, Askham Grange held 100 women at this time

to tell their stories. The lone mother who refused to take part said (understandably) that she wished to forget about anything associated with prison once she was released.

Although Askham Grange prison is located in Yorkshire, the mothers were drawn from a wide geographical home area which stretched from Newcastle in the north east and Carlisle in the north west, to London and Kent in the south. The mothers in the study had served sentences ranging in length from three months to three and a half years, and had resettled into their communities by the time of the interviews. Their ages ranged from 21 to 53 years. The sample interviewed comprised women who described themselves as lone mothers at the time of their offence<sup>6</sup>.

		Recruited sample	Interviewed sample
Age group:	21-	19	8
	29	21	10
	30-39	1	1
	40-49	1	1
	50-59		
Total		42	20
Ethnicity:	White	30	16
	Black	10	3
	Asian	2	1
Total		42	20

**Table 4.1 Sample originally recruited and sample interviews achieved by age and by ethnic group**

As I recruited each lone mother, I kept a record of her sentence length, expected release date and address and, if available, telephone number. Not all the mothers had an address to go to on their release, and gave me instead the address of a relative or friend who would know where to contact the mother once she had found new accommodation.

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<sup>6</sup>Appendix 3 provides a profile of each lone mother who participated in the study.



At this stage the sample included women from various social backgrounds, although there are proportionately fewer women in prison from the middle and upper classes or from the upper income bracket. Table 4.1 shows some characteristics of the original sample and the achieved sample. Four mothers in the study sample were from minority ethnic groups, three Black British, and one Asian. I am aware that, because of the *ad hoc* nature of the way in which I recruited the sample, the mothers are not a purposive sample reflecting the larger population of lone mothers who serve a prison sentence.

Sample attrition occurred when attempts were made to contact the mothers by letter several months after they had been released from prison, and at this stage it was possible to contact only twenty of the original sample, all of whom agreed to a date when I could interview them. Despite repeated attempts to contact all 42 lone mothers who were originally recruited to the study, only twenty could be located from the addresses they gave before they were released from prison. However, twenty constitutes an adequate sample for a qualitative study (Walker, 1985). It is possible, if not probable, that mothers who could not be located fared worse than those who had been able to provide a stable contact address while they were in prison which enabled contact to be made up to 18 months after their discharge. It may be that some mothers who could not be located had returned to prison; several of the homes for which I had addresses were unoccupied, some with their windows boarded up.

Two lone mothers in the study said they were innocent of their offence, although they had been found guilty. Their inclusion in the study remains valid because they nevertheless experienced the prior events and the consequences of a criminal conviction. Julie denied any knowledge that the packages she allowed friends to store in her garage contained cannabis; Noreen said her employers, rather than she herself, had misrepresented the company accounts where she was employed as a bookkeeper. Their situation (which is not the issue in the research) may provide a useful comparison against which to examine the transitional experiences of mothers who describe their pathways to involvement in criminal careers.

### 4.3 The fieldwork

The fieldwork comprised semi-structured interviews with 20 lone mothers, which began in August 1993 and were completed by August 1994. Letters were sent, in the early part of 1993, to the forty two mothers who had been recruited while serving a sentence at Askham Grange prison in 1992. Twenty mothers were traceable at the fieldwork stage, within the time and funding constraints. I arranged to see the mothers in their own homes, having explained that the interview might take up to two hours.

The lone mothers were interviewed between six and eighteen months after being discharged from prison, and so were temporally distanced from the pain of imprisonment and had had time to re-establish themselves in the community. The findings of the research are based on these interviews, which lasted between one hour and two and a half hours. I explained to each mother the purpose of the research, and that she was not obliged to answer questions which, for whatever reason, she preferred to leave unanswered. I explained that anything she told me was confidential, and that she would not be identifiable from any of the outcomes of the interview. All the mothers agreed to their interviews being tape recorded.

Interviews were loosely structured by the topics outlined above, but I also allowed the conversations with the lone mothers to develop so that they engaged in other topic areas they viewed as relevant to the study. Questions were asked as prompts within the overall structure of the topic guide to encourage the lone mothers to consider the various dimensions of the transitions in their lives which had contributed to their involvement in criminal careers. I encouraged them to take the initiative by describing their own experiences and their perceptions of how they became involved in offending to gain insight into their own views of their lives.

The depth interviews uncovered links between lone mothers' major youth to adulthood transitions and lawbreaking, as well as between their perceptions of personal experiences and offending. The interviews provide a history of each woman's childhood experiences and her transitions from leaving school to having her own income, to living



independently, to adult relationships, and to motherhood. During the course of the interviews I attempted to identify the effects of each mother's subculture on her transitions and on her attitudes towards offending. I explored any non-offending behaviour which brought mothers into contact with the '*authorities*', since the literature shows that adolescent girls are liable to be detained as a precaution against '*immoral*' behaviour (Eaton, 1986), an experience which may have an effect on transitions and on later attitudes towards authority and the law. Links between lone mothers and offending might be the result of a lack of support, both material and emotional, and so I examined how social support affected their transitions and their ability to cope with their lives. At the end of each interview I asked each mothers if she had any queries about the research.

I made field notes immediately after leaving each interview in order to provide contextual data. This included, for example, information about the physical condition of their homes and their local areas, more than one of which was dominated by houses with boarded windows, and broken glass strewn the length of the street. I also noted any special events which occurred in the course of the interview. One mother, for example, received a visit from a drug dealer wanting money, and others from, apparently, shop lifters selling clothes cheaply. Both of these incidents threw light on the current situations in these mothers' lives. In addition, I noted any mood which was unlikely to be picked up by the tape recorder, such as a sad expression or unwillingness to meet my eyes, associated with a particular word or phrase, as information on non-verbal data may affect the interpretation of the content (Jones, 1985). The tapes were transcribed shortly after each interview.

#### **4.4 Analysis**

The raw data of a depth interview is the tape recording, supplemented by observational notes and field notes. When analysing the transcripts of the interviews, I began with provisional themes based on the main headings of the analytical framework. Concepts were then developed from the data beginning with some tentative categories and topics into which any common threads or themes appeared to fit. I coded the data directly from the transcripts onto data sheets in which columns represented the categories, while

remaining open to the possibility of unexpected categories or themes emerging from the data. I used the framework described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) with regard to grounded theory, so that emergent categories were created by a process of induction rather than being forced into the preconceived categories. Inevitably, however, any categories selected would be the result of a subjective decision as I related my categories to my interest in certain aspects of the research topic.

In order to achieve an awareness of any underlying themes, I listened carefully to the tapes, noting non-linguistic data such as intonation and evidence of affect, and compared these with the observational notes. I constantly compared material which had already been evaluated with the continually unfolding material. I compared the categories from later interviews with categories which seemed already to be established from the analyses of previous interviews, which process in itself produced new categories. I integrated some of the categories, and developed superordinate categories in order to clarify and to simplify, wherever possible, the presentation of the analysis. Data from observational notes and field notes formed an integral part of the ongoing analysis.

Some mothers may have preferred not to discuss sensitive issues in their lives in the interview, as has been found in other studies (Femina *et al.*, 1990). Some people do not feel comfortable about discussing abuse they experienced in childhood (Ghate *et al.*, 1995), and mothers in the study may have been sexually abused, but not mentioned their experience in the interview. I examined the apparent lack of a negative experience for some mothers in the context of their whole lives, in the form of the transcripts from the interviews, to see whether their descriptions of their early years were congruent with the whole of their life stories. In addition, I compared their stories with their life styles and local neighbourhoods as I saw them when carrying out the interviews in their own homes. Thirdly, I compared these accounts of childhood with the types of offence for which the mothers had been imprisoned.

#### **4.5 Some ethical considerations**

Interviewing denotes an unequal power relationship in which the interviewer holds the



power. Collaboration between the interviewer and the respondent, however, promotes the opportunity for the focus of the research to change through the mutual dialogue between the interviewer and the respondent. I believed it was important that the research should be collaborative as far as practicable, and hoped the mothers would feel that they exercised some control over the process, in contrast to the model of unilateral control (Torbert, 1981), where all the decisions about which features of the interviewee's life are important lie with the researcher.

The mothers were encouraged to ask about the research and to talk about whatever they felt was important in their lives where this emanated from the headings in the topic guide, so that their views of the predominant elements were captured on the tape. Ideally the interviewees should have an input to both the methodological design process and to the findings from the analysis of the interviews, but this was not practicable because I was unable to be in regular, close contact with the mothers.

An advantage of collaborative research is that, as well as being ethically more acceptable, the openness of the process may generate trust between the interviewer and the respondent. The resulting data may be both more reliable and more comprehensive than when a respondent is not fully informed about the methods and intentions of the researcher. This approach is particularly appropriate for interviewing lone mothers who have been in prison, as they are likely to be in the most impoverished and least powerful sections of society. I tried to create an atmosphere in which the mothers felt they were meeting the interviewer, as far as possible, on equal terms. To this end they were encouraged to recognise their importance to the whole enterprise.

I interviewed mothers from different ethnic groups, and was aware of the dynamics of a white woman interviewing a black woman (Edwards, 1990). I cannot, as a white woman, properly experience life as a Black or Asian woman experiences it. The power relation is even more unequal when the imprisoned lone mother is black. I recognised this dimension, and the importance of allowing the Black and Asian mothers to lead the interview as far as possible so that they could speak in their '*own voice*' (Gilligan, 1990).

Because culture and background inevitably differed between myself and black women I exercised vigilance by attempting to make no assumptions which seemed to me to be '*natural*' (Reiseman, 1987). Prison is a great leveller of persons. I hope that when I went to see the women - white as well as black - in their own homes, this levelling effect was not lost.

A final comment about the ethics of carrying out depth interviews concerns the respondents' understanding of the implications of giving their consent to be interviewed, in terms of how the information will be used. Before starting an interview I explained, in my own words, the nature of the thesis and any related outputs to all the respondents. I invited them to ask me any questions relating to the study, or to voice any anxieties or concerns they might have, as an attempt to equalize the balance of power within the relationship.

#### **4.6 Summary**

The methodological techniques and principles on which the research is based are described in this chapter. Depth interviews were selected as the most appropriate method for achieving the aims of the study, especially because of the exploratory, and potentially sensitive, nature of the material. Interviews were carried out with twenty lone mothers between six and eighteen months after their discharge from prison.

The data generated some common themes in terms of risk factors associated with transitions from youth to adulthood. Insights in relation to lone mothers and the various pathways along which they became involved in criminal careers form the findings which are discussed in the following chapters.



### 5.1 Introduction

The transition from education to employment is pivotal in the life of a young person, since employment can provide the means for a financially viable foundation on which to achieve the remaining two major youth transitions, from living in the parental home (or in care) to living in independent accommodation, and from being a member of the family of origin to the formation of a new family.

As we saw in chapter 3, one of the main reasons for young people failing to negotiate the transition from school to work is a lack of educational qualifications, since an incomplete education practically predetermines failure to gain secure employment (Evans and Furlong, 1997). Young people whose education is incomplete, or unsatisfactory, are thus less likely to succeed in achieving the transition to employment than students who obtain educational qualifications.

Lone mothers' perceptions of the circumstances and events which contributed to their experiences of a successful or a failed transition from education to employment form the basis of this chapter. Patterns which can be identified in relation to the lone mothers' perceptions of their early lives and family dynamics may contribute to providing an explanation of why some young people fail to negotiate the transition. This chapter begins by considering some aspects of the mothers' early lives which might have had a negative impact on their education. These include mothers' perceptions of the effects of abuse in childhood, the consequences of their placement into the care of the local authority, and the influence of peer group subculture and substance misuse. The effects of success and failure in negotiating the transition from education to employment are analysed in relation to the impact on the progress of lone mothers in the study to criminal careers.<sup>7</sup>

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Experiences in early life are also relevant to other transitions, and some of the events described in this chapter are implicated in the potential success or failure of transitions to independent living and to family formation.

## **5.2 Family dynamics and childhood abuse**

Events or experiences which influence behaviour in later life may unknowingly be inculcated at an early age, and children who are victims of abuse can suffer long term negative consequences (Bowlby, 1973; Briere, 1992; Brannen and O'Brien, 1996). As discussed more fully in Chapter 3, the abuse of children can take a variety of forms, and different kinds of abuse are often related (Briere, 1992; Bagley and Thurston, 1996).

There is no agreed definition of emotional or psychological abuse (Briere, 1992), which does not consist of the kind of concrete physical act associated with sexual or physical abuse, and the identification of histories which encompass emotional abuse is therefore less clear cut than for physical abuse. O'Hagan (1993) argues that emotional and psychological abuse can impair the development of children's cognitive mental processes. The effect of an impaired mental process, by its nature, has a negative impact on a child's ability to learn and, consequently, on their educational performance. Such children are unlikely to gain good educational qualifications and their opportunities to progress to fulfilling and well paid employment are diminished. Other effects of abuse which can have an impact on the transition from education to employment range from low self esteem and poor development of social skills to dependence on drugs or alcohol (Briere, 1992).

Experiences associated with emotional abuse emerged as common in the early lives of a number of lone mothers in the study, and instances of extreme strictness, and of social isolation, were established in the course of the interviews. Children can suffer from physical, emotional and psychological abuse as a result of an act of sexual abuse (Bagley and Thurston, 1996), and it may be that mothers whose family lives were affected by sexual abuse incorporated additional negative elements, which, while they cannot demonstrate a clear link with failure to make the transition to employment, are nevertheless likely to have had a substantial detrimental impact.

### *Non-attendance at school*

Missing school, however, does demonstrate a clear link between abuse and poor educational attainment. None of the mothers affected by sexual abuse gained any



educational qualifications, and evidence was provided of an association between sexual abuse and non-attendance at school:

Didn't even go to school for two or three years...because we might tell someone what were happening to us. They [parents] kept sending letters to school saying we were poorly. [Social workers] come round and they just said "Oh, we're poorly".  
(Mary, no qualifications)

Clearly, the chances of success in gaining qualifications based on education were seriously damaged as a result of losing two or more years schooling. It is, furthermore, astonishing that a young girl could be kept from school for so long without official action. However, professionals are sometimes more concerned to keep '*the family*' together than to confront the abuser, despite the consequence that their lack of intervention provides support for the abuser at the child's expense (see Driver, 1989). Alternatively, abuse may not be recognised by social workers in cases where a mother colludes with the abuser (Elliott, 1993), or they may be deterred by the abuser behaving in a threatening manner toward them.

Finkelhor (1984) suggests that sexual abuse occurs if the mother cannot protect her children, and her mother's collusion with her father in the abuse may have allayed any suspicions social workers had about Mary's '*illness*' or, as Elliott (1993) suggests, they may have retreated because of the hostility and anger associated with the idea that a woman is capable of sexual abuse. It is rare for a mother to sexually abuse her child (Hooper, 1992), yet Mary's perception was that her mother participated with her father in the abuse. Mary saw this as an inability on the part of her mother, who had learning difficulties, rather than a conscious desire to hurt her. This characteristic of her mother may have further implications which influenced Mary's offending activities: her mother provided a role model of submission to whatever demands were made on her by a man.

Non-attendance at school emerges as a consistent theme across mothers in the study who describe sexual abuse as a part of their early lives. While Mary was kept from attending school by her parents, another mother missed school when she ran away from home to escape abuse:

I was running away from home at the age of thirteen...the reason why I used to leave home was because I was sexually assaulted by my brother. He used to threaten me and he used to tell me that I was adopted and so if I told my parents they wouldn't take any notice. Basically saying that I'd have to leave home...my mum and dad wouldn't love me any more...all that emotional stuff. That's what cracked me up.

(Jenny, no qualifications, sexually abused by her brother)

Jenny provides evidence of the negative power of emotional abuse with her description of '*emotional stuff*' as the worst element of the mistreatment by her abuser. Jenny's failure to disclose the abuse until many years after it occurred may have been caused by a lack of confidence she felt in approaching anyone outside her family, as a result of her brother's insistence that she was adopted and so less loved by her parents and consequent diminished self esteem.

### *Isolation*

Isolation within their birth family, as differentiated from social isolation, affected several mothers in the study, who therefore lacked what should have been an intimate and close relationship, with their mothers:

I don't really have much to do with my mum, because she was in on it and all. When I told [about the abuse], my mum ran away, they were going to put her away as well, because she'd been interfering with us as well. She was there in everything he did. You just assume life's like that for everybody.

(Mary)

A belief that abuse in families is normal places a young abused person outwith the norm of society. In these circumstances other norms, such as attending school and finding work, are perhaps more easily rejected. Although, as she reached her teens, Mary appeared to realise that her parents were keeping her away from school illegitimately, her mother's involvement in the abuse helped to create a situation in the family in which Mary believed similar abusive acts occurred in all families. Her experience, of abuse by a woman, is unusual and, at the same time, more difficult to disclose partly because it remains a taboo subject, and partly because, since abuse by a woman is not generally recognised (Elliott, 1993), she was unlikely to be believed. Thus Mary suffered social



isolation from peers, over the period when she was kept from attending school, and was not allowed to play with other children:

Because we might tell someone what were happening to us. We all had to play with each other [siblings], weren't allowed to play with other children.

(Mary)

Fear of disclosing the abuse appears to damage the relationship between mother and daughter. Jenny dared not tell her parents that she was being abused sexually by her brother, and describes a poor relationship with her mother which included physical violence:

We used to fight like cat and dog, and we still do really. There's been times when we've actually hit each other and not talked for a couple of months.

(Jenny)

Jenny felt isolated from her own family, because she believed she was adopted, and because she had been afraid to explain to her parents, who were hurt and upset when she ran away, her reason for leaving home. Jenny was placed in care at the age of 13 as a result of running away to escape her brother's abusive actions.

In addition to other negative effects of abuse, mothers in the study describe an experience of which an additional outcome was isolation from their own families and from their peers. Disbelief about, or refusal to acknowledge, the abuse by other family members, and especially the mother (Ward, 1984), constitutes additional emotional abuse which can damage the abused child's self esteem. The acquittal of her father represented to Tara a public judgement that she had lied about the abuse. She therefore felt ostracised, with the result that she adopted the persona and ways of a '*rebel*' and had little respect for the law. Ethnic culture may have contributed to the attitude of Tara's mother, and may influence the ways in which various family members manage and respond to the disclosure of abuse:

I was really unhappy [when her father was acquitted of sexual abuse] because I thought "Well nobody believes us now." You just don't hear of things like that in the Asian community. When it come out, my mum had people at the house, you know, my dad's friends and everything, saying "Tell [Tara and sister] to say they were lying, and we'll sort it out amongst the community." They wanted to keep it covered up...relatives and everything who we'd not seen for years. We was forever like running away back to our mum...because my mum would not come and see us in the children's home.  
(Tara, Asian, no qualifications)

Tara felt as though she was already disowned by her family, and suffered emotionally when she was deserted by her close family, who refused to visit her over the five year period that she remained in care.

Emotional abuse sometimes took the form of strictness in the home according to mothers' accounts:

Like, we weren't allowed to talk at the table if my dad was there. Even if my dad wasn't there we got in that much into a habit we just didn't talk at the table anyway we wouldn't dare..or we got sent to bed with no tea.  
(Karen)

The power of '*habit*' in prescribing behaviour is shown here, as no-one in Karen's family felt able to talk even when her father was absent. Some mothers perceived the relationships in their own families when they were children as acceptable and normal, while others recognised their unhappiness:

My dad was very strict and I hated him.  
(Liz, Black English)

I hated my step dad...didn't like him at all, for the fact that he drank a lot, was violent.  
(Louise)

I couldn't stand it, all the arguing...I used to get out as much as possible.  
(Donna)

I had nay life at home. We just used to be left to ourselves.  
(Norma)



Left almost entirely to her own company, Norma decided to compensate for her lack of money or material goods while parents were out at work. Her parents showed little curiosity about where her new clothes came from:

I just said that somebody had give us them, or I found some money...she [mother] used to turn a blind eye, I think.  
(Norma, who stole shoes and clothes from shops in her local area from the age of nine.)

If her assessment of her mother '*turning a blind eye*' is correct, Norma was unlikely to develop a sense of moral code in which she perceived stealing is wrong, in which case she would have little respect for laws which did not appear to touch her own life. All these mothers sensed a dissatisfaction with the relationships within their families, and although they did not use the term abuse, they suffered from unhappiness as a result of a lack of love within their parental homes, which amounts to emotional abuse.

Ethnic communities are diverse, and also provide evidence of emotional abuse. Tara felt more closely confined within her ethnic community than the Black mothers in the study. She experienced what she describes as:

Not physical, but a lot of mental abuse and my mum got the physical abuse really.  
(Tara, Asian)

Violence from her father to her mother had a negative affect on Tara's own emotional well being, which was compounded when she was treated as an outcast by her family after disclosing her father as an abuser.

Lowered self esteem emerged as a secondary factor linking abuse in childhood to problems at school and, eventually, potential failure to gain employment. A sense of shame, as a result of being the victim of abuse, may influence attendance at school because of the attitudes of staff or other pupils:

It were after I come out of care...I went back to the same school and that were awful, it were all in the newspapers and everything. I had to go back to the same school, all the kids in school [saying] "sugar daddy, sugar daddy, we know what you've done,"...oh it were horrible.  
(Mary, no qualifications)

Isolation from her peers in school as a result of abuse is not immediately associated with the transition from school to work, but is closely linked to a risk of social marginalization, which emerged as a factor in some mothers' decisions to become involved in a criminal act. Isolation was associated with emotional abuse, or with harsh parenting, or with virtual neglect in the childhood experiences of several mothers in the study, for various reasons:

[parents] both worked, my mam part time, my father full time...we just used to be left to ourselves when we were young. I just used to go on my own way and just roll in when I wanted to when I was twelve or thirteen ...

(Norma)

Isolation from their own family could be a result of neglect from parents who spend long hours at work, or who show little interest in their children, or unconcern if the children stay out until late at night. Norma was sent to approved school at the age of fifteen (see Table 5.2) as a result of convictions for repeated shoplifting, which continued into her adult life. She perceived social isolation as a contributory element to the poor material conditions which led her to a criminal career.

Mothers in the study also felt marginalized from the mainstream of society. Several mothers in the study provide evidence of a strict home life, in which associating freely with their peers was forbidden:

I wasn't allowed to have friends stay or come round and play and I was never allowed to go to friends' houses. [Mother] just didn't like no-one in the flat, she was always funny about it.

(Jenny)

My mother would never let us play with friends. She was real funny like that. She was real strict.

(Karen)

#### *Implications of family dynamics for the transition from education to employment*

Although no clear evidence from this qualitative study links abuse in childhood to impaired cognitive function and consequent under achievement in school, other research (Briere, 1992; O'Hagan, 1993) has demonstrated that abuse is a factor related to poor



educational qualifications. The lives of some mothers in the study were fundamentally affected by abuse, and a critical consequence for the mothers who described sexual abuse as a part of their childhood experience was failure to attend school regularly, and consequent failure to complete their education. Mothers who had been victims of sexual abuse gained no qualifications, which suggests a relationship between sexual abuse and a low level of scholarly attainment. By the time they reached their early teenage years, these young women were already possible candidates for failure in the transition from education to employment. The qualifications achieved by the lone mothers by the time they left school are set out in Table 5.1. Less than half the mothers in the study gained any qualifications, and it is therefore to be expected that few achieved a successful transition from education to employment.

Isolation appears as a common element throughout the early lives of mothers in the study who suffered sexual or emotional abuse. These mothers felt isolated, from their own families or from peers and the wider society, and their social skills may have been impaired. Dynamics within their birth families exerted an influence on the lone mothers during their developmental years which had a substantial cumulative effect in terms of their transitions from education to employment. Lack of a legitimate working career may have influenced some mothers toward an alternative, criminal career.

Mothers in the study who were victims of sexual abuse, among others, had the common experience of being placed into local authority care, and the influence of a period in local authority care are examined below.

### **5.3 In the care<sup>8</sup> of the local authority**

As we saw in Chapter 3, an episode spent in the care of the local authority is recognised as potentially damaging to children's development in several respects. Children in care tend to be less healthy physically, and do poorly at school, compared with children who

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The term 'care' was used by all the mothers in the interviews and is used throughout this thesis, although the legally accurate term is now 'accommodated and/or looked after' (Home Office, 1991).

remain in their own families (Triseliotis and Russell, 1984). They may also experience impairment of cognitive skills and poorly developed social skills (Stein and Carey, 1986). Lower than average educational attainment is recognised as a major characteristic of children leaving care (Stein and Carey, 1986), and has clear implications for the transition from education to employment. Half of the lone mothers in this study had spent time in care as children, which suggests a close link with later offending behaviour. Possible connections between the reasons for entry into care, the experience of care, transitions to employment and pathways to offending are explored in this section. Table 5.2 (Appendix 2) shows reasons given by the mothers' for their placement in care.

### *Reasons for placement into care*

The primary causes of children and young people going into care may be implicated in success or failure in the transition to employment. Research shows that entry into care for many children is the outcome of stress as a result of poverty in a family (House of Commons, 1984; Baldwin, 1990). Teenagers from families living in poverty are sometimes placed in care because of maternal illness, and parents with learning difficulties are, at any stage, likely to have at least one child in care (Booth and Booth, 1994). However, Triseliotis et al. (1995) found that children who are placed on a care order as a result of unmanageable behaviour are less likely to come from a materially deprived family.

Findings from the present study suggest that family poverty was a factor in some lone mothers being placed in care:

My mother had to go into hospital. I was about nine year old...I was away nearly two year...she had cancer.

(Freda, no qualifications)

My mother went to prison when I was two and they took us into local authority care till I was eighteen, just went to live with her for a short when I was twelve.

(Lorraine, no qualifications)

Accounts from lone mothers who were placed in care as a result of illness and imprisonment suggest an element of material or social deprivation, as no other family



member had cared for these children while their own mothers were in prison or in hospital. Table 5.2 (Appendix 2) shows that these two mothers spent longer in care than other mothers in the study. Neither mother had an extended family who could care for them, and poverty is linked to a lack of social support in the lives of several mothers in the study from their early years. The experiences of these young women, whose placement in care was partly a result of poverty, supports previous research on the causes of children being taken into local authority care (Baldwin, 1990).

Protection from sexual abuse was the specific reason for other mothers being placed in care. Learning difficulties may have been an additional contributory factor in relation to Mary's care placement:

He [father] came out of prison, my mum had him back. He came out on parole and I ran away because my mum wanted him back, and me and all my brothers and sisters were going to go back in care again. At first she says she wasn't going to have him back, and then she says she was.  
(Mary, in care to protect her from further abuse)

Thus her mother colluded with her father in sexually abusing Mary. Although the '*collusive mother*' has been blamed as the person responsible for such abuse, Humphries (1997) argues that mothers are not responsible for a crime committed by their partners. Mary nevertheless blamed her mother for preferring to allow her abusing father to live in the family home<sup>9</sup>, and so forcing Mary to be returned to care.

Placement into care can also be an indirect outcome of sexual abuse. Jenny (described above), in contrast to Mary and Tara, did not disclose that she was being sexually abused by her brother, and was taken into care when she was thirteen as a result of repeatedly running away from home in an attempt to escape from the assaults:

They put me in care because I said I'd rather go in care than go back home.  
(Jenny)

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Mary's mother suffered from learning difficulties and, apparently, did not understand that she had committed an offence, and so was considered by the court to be unfit to stand trial.

Thus each of the mothers in the study who was affected by sexual abuse was placed in care, either to protect them from abuse or, in Jenny's case, because she continually ran away from home. The official reason for placing Jenny into care was her unmanageable behaviour, and her need for protection was not recognised; not an uncommon phenomenon, as other work has shown (Social Services Inspectorate and Audit Commission, 1999).

Unmanageable behaviour was the cause of a second period in care for some mothers, and a first placement for others when they were placed on a care order by the courts. Some mothers were in approved school as the result of a court order, but 'care' was the term commonly used by mothers for any kind of separation from home by an authority:

I wouldn't go to school so I was taken into care..thirteen until I was sixteen...I just wouldn't go to school...[in care] I was in a boarding school..just didn't like it whatsoever.

(Freda)

In contrast to Freda, some young people can thrive in the care setting (Baldwin, 1998), and a few mothers in the study were placed in care because they preferred separation from their own families:

[parents'] marriage problems affected my life. I just wanted to escape. In fact I did run away, and I was caught shop lifting and I went to an approved school. They called it a remand centre...and then I ran away from school and started taking drugs.

(Carol, GCSE and typing qualifications)

Despite a materially comfortable home life Carol left her home at the age of thirteen, which caused her to miss school. Debbie perceived her problems at home to stem from the death of her father, whose loss affected her deeply. In contrast to her life at home:

I loved it [being in care]. I wanted to go back, because...it was like I'd never had so much attention. There was a child psychiatrist, I could talk to him like my dad.

(Debbie, GCSE and typing qualifications)

Children who experience the death of parent are more likely than young people from intact (two parent) families to cope poorly with youth to adulthood transitions. Triseliotis



*et al's*. finding (1995), that children placed in care because of difficult behaviour are less likely to be from the poorest families is supported by the accounts of Carol and Debbie, who were the subject of court orders when their own families no longer wished to accept responsibility for their unlawful activities.

*Implications of being in care for the transition from education to employment*

A placement into the care of the local authority has a deleterious effect on the education of many children who are looked after by social services (Stein and Carey, 1986), and:

Social services should have higher expectations of young people of their success while in and out of care, for example, by believing they can get good exam results, go to college or university, get a good job (but remembering that young people in further education need support - emotional and financial). They need to build up our self esteem and confidence.

(Department of Health, 1998: 103, response from young person in care)

Evidence from the present study suggests that some participants' education suffered specifically as a result of their time in care, especially among mothers who missed school as a result of absconding from a placement, which led to poor attainment, or lack, of educational qualifications. Absconding was common among mothers while they were in care, and several demonstrated their unhappiness by running away.

These mothers were already at the margin of society in their mid-teens, and were predisposed to behave, at the least, unconventionally from an early age. Their situations augur poorly for prospects in employment and may, at the same time, contribute to their becoming involved in offending. Lorraine progressed from being placed in care, when her mother was unable to care for her from the age of two, to placement in what she termed '*approved school*'. Lorraine and her younger sister had stayed together in care, until:

We were separated when I was thirteen...I had a terrible time. I used to go to the home she was in and take her away and run away with her...it was terrible, the break, at first, because we'd been together all that time. I was the mother figure, so it was like somebody taking your child away from you.

(Lorraine, no qualifications)

Lorraine did not attend school for many months, as a result of absconding from care, and subsequently failed to gain any qualifications, as shown in Table 5.1 (Appendix 2). Separation between herself and her sister was imposed by people in authority, with no discussion of the young women's feelings. Lorraine perceived that, in order to be reunited with her sister, her only option was to go to the home where her sister had been placed. Lorraine's behaviour in this situation would be classed as unruly or unmanageable. However, her determination to find her sister, or '*abscond*' in the terms of the local authority, becomes a reasonable response to an intolerable situation when Lorraine explains her anguish at being separated from her only known relative. At the same time, by flouting the authority's decision to keep her apart from her sister, Lorraine was taking a small step on the pathway to a criminal career.

Few mothers who had been in care a few gained educational qualifications which could contribute to their successful transition to employment. Significantly, however, all those who achieved a qualification had been placed on a care order because their parents were unable to control their behaviour. Each gained GCSE and typing qualifications. This is interesting in the light of Triseliotis *et al*'s (1995) finding that children in care as a result of difficult behaviour are less likely to come from impoverished homes, and demonstrates the complex nature of pathways and transitions to different careers. As we saw above, Debbie preferred being in care to staying with her own family after her father died:

I loved my dad, and I always think everyone wants to grow up saying that word, don't they? You know, I always wanted my dad, and they said that I was a bit rebellious because I wasn't allowed to go to the funeral..I got hit for crying because nobody liked him...I started to go a bit naughty, not doing as I'm told, not coming in. I loved it [care].  
(Debbie, GCSE and typing qualifications)

Care was also a positive experience for another mother, though for a different reason:

I stayed in a home. It was like a six bedroomed house with a couple of girls and one man, so they'd got five of us in it, so we all got on like one big happy family.  
(Donna, GCSE and typing qualifications)

Such sentiments tell as much about the mothers' home lives as about life in care, and



mothers who appreciated their lives in care, for example Carol and Debbie, were unhappy in their family homes. However, perhaps the most significant element of their care experiences was their perception that leaving their own families and going into care was a positive move. These mothers were relieved, rather than upset, to be in care, which may have helped rather than hindered their approach to school work and thus their success in gaining qualifications.

It is the aftermath of care which is of interest to the present study, and evidence points to a post-care lifestyle typified by unemployment, poor accommodation, and little contact with family or friends. These effects are likely to be mediated by the length of time a young woman has been in care, and the age at which they leave care, since some young people return to their own homes before the legal age at which they are discharged from care.

Factors associated with being in care which have an impact on the transition to employment are, at the same time, likely to have some influence on the transitions to independent living and to family formation. Young people leaving care are, firstly, at risk of homelessness, which hinders their chance of finding employment and, secondly, teenage pregnancy is more common among young women who have been in care (Coles, 1997). Caring for young children is not conducive to working outside the home.

Young women placed in the care of the local authority have little choice in their companions or peer groups, and it is likely that what they perceive as normal or acceptable behaviour differs from the views of children who grow up in families with their own parents. Some lone mothers perceived a subculture within the care system of shop lifting, and of substance misuse, neither of which is conducive to the responsibility of finding and keeping employment.

#### **5.4 Peer influence and substance misuse**

Peer influence and substance misuse can discourage young people from finding and keeping employment. Their own families become less fundamental to their well being as

the influence of peers assumes an increasing importance in the lives of teenage young women (Graham and Bowling, 1995; Evans and Furlong, 1997). One of the outcomes for people who were abused in childhood can be the use of drugs or excessive amounts of alcohol in adolescence and adult life to deaden painful memories from childhood (Michell and Anderson, 1988; Benward and Densen-Gerber, 1975; Moeller et al., 1993). Briere (1992: 59) describes '*behavioural strategies*' in which abuse survivors use illegal substances to help them to cope with the memories of their abused childhoods, although this kind of strategy is not necessarily a conscious behaviour, and may not be related to childhood trauma by the user. Ettorre (1992) highlights the structural contradiction, in which:

Addictive substances are rooted in the very fabric of our society  
(Ettorre, 1992: 6),

while remaining counter to its ethos (see also Smart, 1984a: 34).

Howe (1994) argues that women who commit drug related offences are themselves victims. As bereaved children, both Tracy and Debbie were victims:

I first turned to drugs, you know, to try to block it out of me head then about dad and that. The doctor said he had two months to live, but he only lasted two weeks. It was a shock, it come so quick. It were horrible. I just started staying at a flat where a load of junkies were staying...and someone offered me some. I had an overdose...it's the first injection I'd had, you know, powerful drug.  
(Tracy, aged 13 when her father died)

I think I was a great attention seeker, because of my dad, I did go to see psychologists. I loved my dad, dead envious of anyone that's got a dad. They said I was rebellious because I wasn't allowed to go to the funeral.  
(Debbie, aged 8 when her father died)

Although Tracy was included in the family mourning of her father, she turned to drugs to blot out her misery, which had ongoing effects as using cannabis for immediate relief turned to addiction to heroin. Debbie, in contrast, had felt excluded from this family event when she was eight years old because she had not been allowed to attend the funeral. Talking about her father's death with her family might have helped Debbie to cope with her feelings of loss (Pettle and Britten, 1995). Having to cope alone with her



feelings resulted in behavioural problems which her mother could not manage, and as a result Debbie was placed in care. The death of a parent may not leave lasting negative effects, but the manner in which other adults respond makes bereavement a more traumatic experience for some children than others (Rutter, 1981). Nevertheless, participants in the study who experienced the deaths of their fathers were deeply affected.

Different experiences in their early lives led other mothers to misuse illegal drugs or alcohol. Even before she was affected by sexual abuse in her family, as we saw in an earlier section, Tara's childhood encompassed emotional abuse and shows a progression into offending from an early age, using stealing, rather than earning a wage, as the means provision:

I started shoplifting really like getting, you know, biscuits and stuff food and clothes because none of us really had anything. I mean I look back now and I think well maybe if I hadn't have been put into care I wouldn't have gone into the depths I did go into.  
(Tara, Asian)

Being in care and using illegal substances were linked for some mothers. Tara's view that she would not have used drugs if she had remained in her own home, which was a part of the close-knit Asian community, might be accurate.

In addition to substance misuse, she was shop lifting with other children from the residential home in which she lived, and was threatened, aged fifteen, with being placed in a secure unit. Tara's chances of finding employment were already limited as a result of her peer group and her lifestyle which, like Tracy's, was dictated by the need to fund her heroin habit. Both supported their addiction by large scale shop lifting, to the value of more than £300 weekly. The lives of Tara and Tracy were constructed around their need to use, and to provide the money for, a drug which is both expensive and illegal.

Several mothers in the study (including two whose offences were alcohol-related) misused illegal substances. Tracy and Tara started using glue or cannabis from the age of 13. Mothers whose habits were expensive to support failed in the transition to employment partly because they spent much of their time under the influence of drugs

and so were not able to work, and partly because they required sums of money to support their habits far greater than they could earn from employment. That is to say that they broke the law in order to maintain their supply of drugs, which were expensive to buy.

Tracy had been introduced to heroin by her partner. Once she found that her friends spent their days under the influence of drugs, Tracy gave up her job as a machinist, and she became addicted to heroin. In an attempt to rehabilitate herself, Tracy started to use methadone instead:

And sleeping tablets as well during the day, gives me Dutch courage to shop lift, but I'm getting a bit addicted to them now.  
(Tracy, no qualifications)

Young people's chances of finding, or even seeking, employment, appear very limited when they become addicted to drugs, which represents a major risk factor for failure in finding and keeping employment. In addition, addiction to drugs placed these young women on the pathway to criminal careers.

The ethos within which they lived their daily lives may have influenced some of the mothers' decisions to commit acts which they knew to be illegal. These mothers, in common with other women, will have been subjected to various and unquantifiable social forces, including sexism, racism, and a lack of access to power with which to address problematic elements in their lives (Banyard and Graham-Bermann, 1993).

### **5.5 Success and failure in the transition to employment**

The word '*career*' suggests a progression, a journey of cumulative stages. Sexual abuse was the first stage in a career of which the consequential second stage was placement into care for some mothers in the study. Lone mothers' accounts demonstrate that their education was influenced by abuse in an observable and direct manner, when it was responsible for curtailing attendance at school. However, some mothers experienced emotionally damaging events which are less easy to define and to identify than sexual abuse. Briere makes the point that:



The psycho social sequelae of child abuse often receive greater attention from clinicians and researchers than do ... the behavioural impacts of child abuse. It is likely that society's problems with drug addiction, alcoholism, violent crime, and suicide would be reduced substantially if child abuse were prevented and/or successfully treated.  
(Briere, 1992: 48)

In addition, the effects of abuse on education can be severe. Few lone mothers in the study accomplished a lasting transition to long term employment, and mothers in the study whose education was incomplete were at a disadvantage in finding work. Table 5.3 (Appendix 2) shows which lone mothers succeeded, at least initially, in making the transition to employment, which mothers never worked, and the length of time in employment of those mothers who did work. I use two years as a period which, although short in lifetime terms, appears to separate those mothers who perceived work as their expected daily occupation on an ongoing basis, from with mothers whose employment was terminated soon after they started (see Table 5.3). Additionally, as mothers, the samples' working lives would be interrupted by the birth of their children, followed by several years of caring for their young children.

Some participants in the study appear not to have made an association between completing their education and future security in employment:

Didn't take any [exams]. School to me was a place to meet your mates for a laugh, plus she took me out of the school I'd been to for years and put me in one nearer to the house and I just didn't go.  
(Denise, Black British)

Although Denise found work as a waitress, at the same time, she required benefit to raise her income to an adequate amount (see Table 5.4). As her career progressed (or regressed), however, low wages, and the high costs of actually getting to work, were responsible for Davina's initial success in making the transition from school to work seemingly ending in failure. She left her legal employment, started claiming benefit, and found work in a cafe which she did not declare, thus fraudulently claiming benefit. This arrangement, she found, provided her with enough money on which to sustain an adequate lifestyle. Low wages, and costs associated with employment translated into

failure in the transition to employment and, simultaneously, represented the first concrete step to an alternative, and criminal, career.

Similarly, and again despite lacking qualifications, Tracy found work before leaving school as a machinist in a local factory:

The school I were in, everybody went for interviews from our school, so it were just like all the girls from school. Work was ok, but it was costing me £10 each week in bus fares, you know, to get there.  
(Tracy, no qualifications)

Tracy was employed straight from school and was happy in her job, but found she could not manage on the small wage she earned.

Youth training schemes, similarly, were seen to provide little real benefit:

Always one of these government schemes..never led to proper job. I was getting nineteen pound a week working in a laundry. I worked Saturday and Sunday...making more Saturday and Sunday than I was making all through the week. I used to work, like, seven days a week to make my money up.  
(Freda)

It is not surprising nor, indeed, unreasonable that Freda was not keen to work when she earned so little money for working seven days a week. Her experience demonstrates that government schemes for young people need adequate funding, or else risk sending the message that benefit is financially more productive, as well as an easier option in terms of personal time.

Table 5.4 (Appendix 2) shows that only five mothers in the study were earning a wage at the time they committed the offence for which they were imprisoned and, of these, only three did not rely on benefit to support their earnings. Reference to Table 5.5 (Appendix 2) shows that eleven mothers had an income of less than £110 weekly with which to provide for themselves and their children at the time they committed the offence



for which they were imprisoned<sup>10</sup>. Six of these mothers committed an offence designed to bring them material gain, and it is arguable that poverty was the major factor in their decisions to offend. Poverty may have been a factor in the property offences committed by some of the mothers, especially following separation from the fathers. Poverty<sup>11</sup> is, in part, an effect of failure to make the transition from education to employment, and is one element in their careers which may contribute to lone mothers becoming involved in criminal activity.

The majority of young mothers are acknowledged to suffer from financial hardship while they are pregnant, and their situation does not improve once the baby is born (Phoenix, 1991; Lewis, 1997a). It is likely that one of the reasons why some lone mothers in the study experienced protracted transitions to employment, or failure to find employment, because of their status *as* mothers. None of the mothers in the study sample worked while their children were young, and so it is not surprising that those who experienced teenage pregnancy failed in the transition to employment. The transitions of education to employment and of being a member of the birth family to forming a new family intersect at this point. As their children grew older, and as *lone* mothers, many mothers find that life on a low income is very difficult. Several mothers in the study said they resorted to crime because they had an imperative need for money, which they could not acquire by legal means. Their incomes were insufficient. Usually because they were on benefit, after failing to make the transition to employment.

Some gave birth to children while they were teenagers, before they could establish themselves in regular work and, by the nature of the sample, as mothers the periods around and following the birth of children were not conducive to working:

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10

Some mothers reported a smaller income than others because arrears, for example of electricity or council tax, were deducted at source.

11

No definition of poverty is given in this thesis, partly because poverty is relative, and partly because some mothers were unable to reliably remember their income at the time of the offence.

The job meant everything to me, and then I found out I was pregnant.  
(Sally, no qualifications)

Sally's full time work on a YTS scheme ended when she became pregnant through a casual relationship at work. The birth of their first child was the reason for several mothers failing to make the transition from education to employment.

Diana left her nursing job because she was pregnant with her first child, but then as her children grew older:

I wasn't interested in going to work. All I was interested in was going out.  
(Diana, CSE x 5; GCSE x 2)

Problems with accommodation were another cause of failure in the transition to employment:

I got my CSE for typing so soon as I left school went straight into a job because I did work experience in this company and they offered me a job as soon as I left school. I had it till I was eighteen and then I left because I got kicked out of there. Well I'd got the flat broken into and I just left. So like with me not having a fixed address they got a bit funny about it. I left and I think it was because I didn't have a fixed address at the time.  
(Donna)

Donna perceived her time in care as a positive experience, and describes a seamless transition from school to work, until a burglary at her flat and consequent homelessness affected her employment. Thus the problems with accommodation experienced by many care leavers is perceived by Donna as responsible for her losing her job, when she appeared, initially, to be secure in her employment.

Ethnicity can exacerbate problems for some lone mothers. Unemployment in the United Kingdom is higher among black people than among white people, and unemployed periods last longer for black people (Alcock, 1997). Clearly ethnicity alone is not a predictor of failure to make the transition from education to employment. However, if ethnic origin attracts racist behaviour then it can influence the transition:



I couldn't find work...because they were very racist. When I used to ring up for a job they used to tell me to come straight down. I used to jump in a cab, I'd go there. I sound white on the phone, so obviously when I got there it was a different thing, the job had gone. I found that all the time.

(Liz, Black British)

However, finding work was not impossible for mothers in the study who had little education, and at least one overcame this drawback:

I got a bit of a part time job...in the restaurant, just serving the meals and taking the payments. Only three hours a day during school hours so I didn't have to rely on anyone to pick the boys up. I was on Family Credit. My Family Credit worked out higher than my Income Support so I was better off working, much.

(Denise, Black British, no qualifications)

Denise shows that she had calculated the benefits of working, and increased her income considerably, so that a lack of qualifications does not wholly preclude success in achieving the transition to employment. Mothers with qualifications (see Table 5.2: Debbie, Noreen, Julie and Cathy) were more likely to achieve success in the transition to employment. Noreen and Julie, exceptionally among the mothers, both owned their homes, were in full time employment at the time of their arrest, and said they were innocent of the offence for which they had been convicted.

One of these mothers demonstrated the intention to support herself by employment, even though this did not always go smoothly:

It was either going to be catering or science and I plumped for science. Sometimes I think I should have plumped for catering but the money's rubbish. Everywhere I seem to go to work I used to get made redundant...but it's a funny industry to work in.

(Julie, GCSE x 8; ONC chemistry)

Perhaps the important element was that Julie anticipated finding employment, and planned her education accordingly, in contrast to mothers who failed to attend school for substantial periods. It is significant that Mary and Tara, whose early lives involved both abuse and the care system, never earned a wage.

Few of the mothers who had been in care returned to their own homes, and they had little or no social support from family or state. Life for some mothers leaving care lacks official sanction after their departure from home or approved school, when they are below the age at which they can legally be employed. Mothers in this situation therefore had no legitimate means of survival, and their accounts illustrate the difficulties of being alone with no support. Difficulties were, however, countered by a determination to provide for themselves:

This was at the age of fifteen and ... started taking drugs and sleeping around. I worked in a bar. I also shop lifted in those days as well food and the odd items of clothing. I think I worked in a coffee factory with somebody else's insurance cards, and I worked on the market for a few weeks.

(Carol)

I told [employer] I was seventeen, but they kept asking where my insurance card was.

(Jenny)

Thus mothers saw no option but to place themselves outside the law, and established a pattern which included offending as an integral part of their lifestyle. The normal constraints against breaking the law had already been broken.

Although the increasing number of lone mothers prompts regular policy responses designed to encourage them into finding work (Department of Social Security, 1998), as described in Chapter 2, the proportion of lone mothers in full time employment decreased between 1973 and 1993 (Kiernan et al, 1998). David Roddan, head of the Prison Governors' Association, suggest that poverty is responsible for some cases of female offending in his recent statement that:

It's quite clear that a number of women in prison are there as a direct result of poverty and abuse.

(Roddan, 1998)

## 5.6 Summary

Events involving abuse were perceived to have a grave impact on the early lives of the study participants. Each instance of sexual abuse invariably initiated a progression of



events which constituted serious and damaging effects on the mothers' formal education, of which non-attendance at school is clearly implicated in the transition from education to employment.

The longer term outcome, for all of the mothers affected by sexual abuse, was premature separation from their birth families when they were taken into the care of the local authority. After leaving care the young women had to provide themselves with a home and subsistence in the community, with no support from their families. Abuse led to isolation, which led to a lack of social skills, which may in turn have hindered success in finding and keeping work. Thus abuse contributed to the failure of these mothers to make the transition from education to employment. As such, abuse in childhood can be viewed as the first incident in an ongoing sequence of multiple events in the lives of some lone mothers along the pathway which eventually led to a criminal career.

No neat route is identifiable between cause and effect, and the mothers demonstrate a variety of responses to being the objects of abuse. Isolation of the abused (or, in Tara's case, potentially abused) person tended to generate a feeling of detachment or exclusion from the mainstream of society, including the institution of work. Some negative early experiences demonstrate progressively damaging effects on their education, and thus on the transition to employment. The effects of the mothers' failure to negotiate this transition, their subsequent dependence on state benefit rather than a wage, and other effects of unemployment are possible risk factors associated with the mothers' taking pathways which led to criminal careers.

Spending time in care, then, was a second contributory element in the failure of mothers in the study to complete their education. Missed schooling has a negative impact on young people's chances of gaining qualifications, which are, generally a prerequisite in negotiating the transition to employment. It is not possible to demonstrate a direct link between the experience of being in care and offending, partly because the effects of care cannot necessarily be separated from other negative events which were the cause of entry into care. Being in care, particularly as a result of young people absconding and

consequent lack of schooling, exerts a negative influence on the transition from education to employment. Moreover, several lone mothers in the study who had been in care perceived it as a negative episode which contributed in some way to them becoming involved in crime.

Drug offences account for almost one third of the women in prison. Dependence on drugs or alcohol has been suggested as a possible effect of experiencing abuse in childhood, and despair in adulthood. Funding a drug habit, as well as excessive alcohol consumption, is costly in financial terms, which encouraged some lone mothers in the study along the pathway to criminal activity.

Findings from the research indicate that failure to make the transition from education to employment, for whatever reason, may contribute to lone mothers taking a pathways which lead to criminal careers, although these be small, incremental steps. Failure in other transitions, however, may also be implicated in career pathways, and the effects of the transition from living in the parental home (or in care) to independent accommodation are discussed in chapter 6.



### 6.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 shows why few lone mothers in the study made a successful transition from education to employment. Jones and Wallace (1992) emphasise the importance of paid employment in underpinning the transition to independent living, as only young people who have economic independence, generally as a result of employment or further education, are able to pay for independent accommodation. Progressing from school to work is an important transition. Nevertheless, for most young people:

Perhaps [the] most symbolic step towards independence is taken when they leave their parents' homes and begin to establish homes of their own.

(Jones and Wallace, 1992: 93)

This chapter is organised around the role of planning in the transition from living as a member of an established household to living independently, and seeks to identify factors which have an influence, to success or to failure, in the transition. The division of the lone mothers' housing transitions into the categories of '*planned*' or '*unplanned*' is, necessarily, an inexact and subjective exercise which does, nevertheless, allow a comparison to be made between mothers who felt compelled to leave their original accommodation, and mothers who were able to exercise choice in the timing and the destination of their move to independent housing. A plan may be conceived in an hour, or be the fulfilment of months of thought and decision making, but for the purpose of this study I propose that '*planned*' transitions comprise housing moves in which the mothers left their parental or local authority homes because of their wish to go *to* their housing destination rather, than a wish to escape *from* their current accommodation.

Young people can embark on individual housing careers for a variety of reasons: some young people move away from home to pursue higher education, others find employment which pays a wage adequate to cover the costs of acquiring and maintaining independent accommodation (Jones, 1987), as described in chapter 3. However, the most common reason for young women leaving their parental home is to live with a partner as they form

a new household (Jones and Wallace, 1992). The age at which a young person sets out to live independently may affect their eligibility for employment or for benefit, and thus their success in the transition to independent housing. Young people's housing careers are also mediated by the availability of suitable housing, which can limit the choice of home and thus influence the success of this transition.

Table 6.1 (Appendix 2) shows the range of reasons which the women in the study gave for initially leaving their family homes or care. After the initial transition their housing careers developed so that, at the time they committed an offence, the study participants were all living alone with their children. Table 6.1 cannot capture the dynamism of housing careers which are delayed or protracted, and which incorporate one or more periods of returning to live in the home of origin after an initial move to live independently.

The lone mothers' experiences of planned transitions from living in accommodation provided by their parents to independent housing are addressed in the first part of the chapter; looking first at the experiences of mothers who left home to attend college, or to set up a home with a partner, and then exploring the circumstances of mothers who were discharged from the care of the local authority. There follows an examination of unplanned housing transitions of mothers to independent living, and how being forced into independent housing can lead to failure in this transition. The mothers transitions show that living independently is a process, or career, in which one or more false starts may occur, followed by a return to home, before leaving again. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the effects of success or failure in the transition to independent living, and analyses the perceptions of the mothers in the study about any ways in which their housing careers influenced pathways to offending.

## **6.2 Planned transitions to independent living**

Leaving home is one of the significant rites of passage between childhood and adulthood. Some young people are able to plan the move to independent accommodation, and thus take control of their housing careers, and common sense suggests that a planned move



is more likely than an unplanned move to enable a successful transition. Other young people feel obliged to leave their parental homes precipitately because of conflict within the family. Young people who lack enough money to pay for satisfactory accommodation are unlikely to achieve a successful transition to independent living, and Jones (1995b) distinguishes between '*legitimate*' and '*non-legitimate*' reasons for leaving home. Legitimate reasons comprise, for example, going to college or to set up home with a partner, and illegitimate reasons might comprise unplanned departures, after an argument, or when a teenager feels compelled to run away.

### *Starting college*

It might be expected that young people whose housing careers are part of a plan to continue their education enjoy a smooth initial transition from their parental home. Although none of the college courses for which they originally enrolled was completed, and they came into conflict with their parents as a result, stability in the young women's housing careers was nevertheless maintained:

I was going to be a teacher and I went to training college. But when I got away from home, in college, I realized that wasn't really what I wanted to do...so I left, and the first job I got was as a wages clerk. I had to get a job straight away because I had to pay the grant back, and pay the rent on a bed sit.

(Noreen)

Noreen provides evidence of a well developed sense of responsibility. It may be that the relative stability in her early life gave her a sense of purpose and agency, coupled with an ethos around traditional values of training for an occupation to provide for herself which enabled her to succeed in the transition to independent housing.

Living alone, with sole responsibility for paying and maintaining themselves in their accommodation, gives a young person agency to conduct their own housing career. Conversely, although it comes under the term of '*independent*' living once young people leave the parental home, some mothers in the study voluntarily formed new households jointly with their partners.

Going to live with a partner was one the main reasons for leaving home, although it was not always the first step in the transition to independent housing:

I went to college in Liverpool, and met this guy, left college, and moved in with him. My mum was devastated. I suppose like any young person...own house, all the modern things...you want to play house in your own house.  
(Debbie)

*Leaving home to enable a relationship with a partner*

However, might these positive aspects of leaving home be offset by dependency in relation to their housing which influenced the success of the transition from parental home to independent accommodation for some lone mothers? Although sharing a home with a partner was a common reason for young women leaving home among the mothers, by the nature of the study, and as we shall see in Chapter 6, none of the relationships with partners lasted, and so they became lone mothers. It may be that some young women fail in the transition to independent housing because their accommodation is not truly '*independent*', since they must rely on the relationship with their partners continuing in order to maintain their housing. Thus mothers who lack their own means to pay for satisfactory accommodation when the relationship breaks down may subsequently experience an unstable housing career. Only one mother's housing transition which coincided with the formation of a household was planned:

I'd been going out with [son's] dad for about a year, and we decided that I should move into his flat once I was nineteen.  
(Cathy)

Age is a factor which may also have influenced this planned move. At nineteen, Cathy was the oldest in the study sample when she first moved away from home. Successful housing transitions resulted in stable accommodation, and homes which were maintained even after the separation from the children's fathers:

I found out he was seeing other people so I asked him to leave.  
(Cathy, still in the same local authority housing at the time of the interview)

Thus although she had originally moved into her partner's accommodation, Cathy assumed rights over their joint housing as a home for herself and her child when the



relationship failed. It is likely that the length of the relationship (over four years) and her status as mother gave her a moral, if not a legal, right to the shared home.

### *Planned discharge from the care of the local authority*

While child protection systems work well, the quality of care children receive is not monitored consistently, and the excessive number of different placements experienced by children in local authority care tends to build instability into their lives (Biehal *et al.*, 1995; Social Services Inspectorate and Audit Commission, 1999). Although, as we saw in chapter 5, these young people are disadvantaged in the transition to employment as a result of being in the care system, they are required to live independently from an earlier average age than children living with their own families, so that their chances of a successful housing career are further diminished. Researchers have identified the number of different placement experiences as unsettling for these young people, and a contributory factor in the pathway to homelessness, and also to a criminal career (Biehal *et al.*, 1992; Anderson *et al.*, 1993).

Researchers suggest that as many as 30 per cent of young people who have spent time in care later become homeless (Jones and Wallace, 1992). Some mothers who had been in the care of the local authority, as discussed in the previous section, had left home at what was a very early age compared to most young women. Support from their own families, as well as from social services, is crucial to success in leading an independent life in the period following discharge from care, and some mothers succeeded:

I lived in a flat for a few years, it was OK. Then when I was nineteen I was pregnant and got a two bedroomed house.  
(Freda, discharged from care aged 16)

At sixteen I left, got kicked out of care for violence. They offered me a flat, my own flat, and I had a job then, typing.  
(Donna, discharged from care aged 16)

Table 6.1 shows that young women in the study who left care to live independently were more likely than those who left their own families to experience a planned transition. However, total responsibility for oneself is vastly different from being in care

Budgeting skills are an important element of success in living independently, yet little literature exists about young people and how they perceive the different ways in which they have to cope with money. Common sense suggests that children who have had little or no experience of handling, saving, and apportioning money will be poorly equipped for managing their own finances when these become solely their responsibility:

I was never used to having money...they kicked you out [of care] and that was it, you had to fend on your own. I was in the hostel then I got a flat...I couldn't cope with money. On social security, I just couldn't cope. I used to get money for rent and I just used to spend it. I could never manage money. It's always been managed for us, even when we were in the homes we never had pocket money put in my hand, we were taken to the shop and our sweets were bought. I had never handled money, and when I got thirty pound or something, to me it was a lot of money and I used to just blow it.

(Lorraine, in care from age 2 - 18)

Even though it might be expected that young persons of 18 would have some experience of handling and managing money, this was not so for some mothers in the study, and those whose transitions are planned can fail at an early stage if they lack the necessary skills. A lack of budgeting skills can lead to non-payment of essential bills such as rent. Practically, a lack of skill in managing money is likely to contribute to failure in the transition to independent living.

#### *Key factors in the success or failure of a planned transition*

Certain themes recur among the experiences of mothers who achieved initially successful planned transitions. The main constituents of a successful housing transition for the lone mothers in the study comprise, firstly, time to plan the move, and enough money to pay for accommodation either from employment, benefit or student grant (student loan from 1999). The alternative route to independent living, although not truly independent as described above, was the outcome of being a member of a stable relationship, so that the move to independent accommodation incorporates the formation of a new household. Conversely, factors associated with failure in their housing transitions are related to a lack of budgeting skills and, by inference, a lack of support from family or professional agencies, experienced particularly by young women after leaving care. Thus young



people who graduated in a planned transition from their own families tended to exhibit greater success in the transition to independent housing than those making a planned transition from care. These findings support previous research, and identify some of the difficulties facing young women who leave care.

### **6.3 Unplanned transitions**

Additional difficulties related to their housing transitions are discussed through an examination of the reasons why some mothers made the move to independent living without the advantage of prior planning.

#### *Family conflict as a catalyst*

Leaving home is not always a freely selected option, but may be a result of difficult relationships between young people and their parents. Jones and Wallace (1992) suggest that young people who cannot choose when to make the break with the parental home are more vulnerable to both unemployment and homelessness, and young people in step families are particularly prone to experience homelessness at some point in their housing careers (Greve and Currie, 1990).

Conflict between parents was given as a reason for running away from the parental home:

I thought I got on with them [parents] but as I was growing older their marriage problems affected my life and I just felt as though I wanted to escape..probably thirteen when I first started to feel it. I used to want to run away.

(Carol)

Most typically, however, conflict between themselves and their parents is the catalyst which instigates young people to suddenly leave their home of origin. Such moves may be the aftermath of an argument, or an act of teenage rebellion, sometimes because parents disapprove of a partner:

I had a rebellious thing where you think you know it all. My mum didn't like me being with [partner]. We used to argue and she used to tell me to get out, and one day I just decided to go...I didn't have anywhere to go, I just went, stayed with some friends and stayed with my nana.

(Davina)

Initially Davina presents herself as homeless, staying in friends' houses when arguments between herself and her parents drive her away from her parental home. It is, however, significant that her description of her move away from her parental home goes on to provide evidence of the importance of membership of an extended family, when another relative takes on the role of parental substitute and provides support when there is conflict with immediate family, when she moved in with her grandmother.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Table 6.1 shows that a number of mothers in the study made an unplanned housing transition as part of family formation by leaving their parental home and moving into their partner's home. Thus their housing was established as the partner's home, rather than an equal venture, before the mothers moved in, and may never have been truly joint accommodation.

The isolation and strictness experienced in their parental homes may have been a contributory factor in some of young women's decisions to leave home prematurely, and some of the study sample who felt isolated and whose parents were seen as very strict left home when they were aged 15:

I was isolated and my dad didn't encourage us to mix with other children. If anybody came, any lads came through on a bike, just biking past, he'd say "Get in that house." We weren't allowed to even talk to lads.

(Diana)

Employment provided the means for some mothers to leave their parental homes when they found they could no longer endure the conditions placed upon them:

I was eighteen and my dad was still strict on me, not allowed to go out of an evening...I thought "Enough's enough, now I'm working for my keep." My dad come looking for me but he didn't find me.

(Liz, Black British)

The strictness experienced by Liz, and her staying until she reached 18 in such a restrictive regime, may be associated with her family tradition and ethnicity.

While some mothers made the decision to leave home voluntarily, albeit as a result of



conflict in the home, others were forced to leave by their parents. It is likely that poverty in the family was implicated in some mothers being forced out of the home by their parents, as the precipitating arguments revolved around money:

I had an argument because my sister was paying more board than I was and she [mother] chucked us out on the street..[I had to]..lie in parks and everything...I used to be found sound asleep at my machine...  
(Norma, aged 16)

### *Escaping from home*

A lack of choice regarding their housing options was described by some women in the study, who perceived escape from their parental homes as imperative, so that the kind of accommodation they acquired became a secondary consideration.

Crucially to this study, homelessness is suggested as one of the outcomes of experiencing abuse in the family home (Hendessi, 1992), and this may be seen as a part of the pattern of experiences of the lone mothers affected by sexual abuse. Mothers who were victims of sexual abuse were particularly vulnerable in relation to the transition to independent living. This transition placed the mothers outside the law, and at the same time directed them along pathways which led to a criminal career:

When I ran away I actually didn't want to go back, the police caught me. They put me in care because I said I'd rather go in care than go back home, but then I didn't like it there with all the restrictions, so I went back home and then I left again, and then I didn't go back home until I was seventeen...I was staying on fairgrounds and people's houses.

(Jenny, sexually abused by her brother)

Thus staying at home and staying in care were perceived as equally unsatisfactory, though for different reasons, and at thirteen Jenny's legitimate housing options were already severely limited. As we saw in chapter 5, mothers who were sexually abused as children were, at the same time, abused emotionally and isolated from the wider community. The perceived intolerable nature of their situations led to their precipitate departure to live independently at an early age, either to escape from their parental homes, or to escape from local authority care, where they had been placed in order to protect them sexual abuse.

Absconding to escape from the care system is a recurrent theme among mothers in the study. The determination to stay out of local authority care required the young women to find alternative accommodation, which placed mothers in situations where they perceived very limited options with regard to housing. Moves to '*independent living*' sometimes involved going to live in their partners' accommodation, or setting up home with their partner. In cases where the relationship is successful, this kind of transition to independent living is also likely to be successful, but relationship breakdown is identified as an event which can lead to problems with accommodation and homelessness (Anderson, Kemp and Quilgars, 1993; Bull, 1995). Some mothers managed the change to other accommodation after their relationships ended, but others found themselves trapped in a violent relationship because of their inability to find other accommodation:

My dad came out of prison. He came out on parole, and I ran away because my mum wanted him back, and all my brothers and sisters were going back into care. So I ran away from home rather than go back in care, which I knew would happen. They said they could put me away till I were twenty one because of what he'd done to me mentally. So I just ran away to these people who I thought were kind, this white woman who lived with a Pakistani man, and then I got married when I were eighteen to his brother, who come from Pakistan, he just wanted to marry someone to get British citizenship. I got married so they wouldn't put me in care. He beat me up for two and a half years, put me in hospital three times, so I said "I'm going to get a divorce," and he locked me in.

(Mary, mother of three children when she eventually left)

Accommodation is sometimes dependent on staying in an unwanted and violent relationship, and taking the initiative to find a different home, especially if she is worried about being sought by her ex-partner, can place extra stress on a mother. This stress is likely to be increased when a safe home must also be found which will accommodate her children. The sense of dependency begets a felt obligation to comply with the partner who holds the power by providing accommodation. Mary could not perceive herself as an autonomous human being, and could not see how to alter her situation by any action of her own. Mary perceived her life to be controlled by people with the power to provide or withhold a home for herself and her three children.



### *Leaving care*

Little research was carried out on this group of young people until the 1980s (Triseliotis and Russell, 1984; Stein and Carey, 1986; Baldwin, 1990) although it is estimated that around 16,000 young people, aged between sixteen and eighteen, leave care each year (Biehal *et al.*, 1995). Few of them progress from care through to a planned discharge and successful housing transition into the community (Biehal *et al.*, 1995). Several mothers in the study ran away from their care (or approved school) placements, and so lacked any help from their social workers in managing the transition from care to independence.

Absconding from care, especially when they were too young to be legally employed, placed young women outside the law and so established a pattern which included offending as an integral part of their life style. The normal constraints against breaking the law had already been broken. Life after an unofficial departure from approved school is difficult when a young person is alone with no support. However, for some young women, being found and returned to approved school can facilitate a planned discharge:

I went to my social worker and she got me foster parents, a trendy young couple, and I lived there for a few months...  
(Carol)

Even tenuous, regular support may aid stability:

I ran away and started staying with a friend. Social services, in the end, made an agreement with me that as long as I phoned twice a week to the children's home where I should be, they'd leave me where I was.  
(Tara)

Thus transitions which appear, at first, to augur poorly, can be saved, at least in the short term, by sensitivity from social services in tailoring their response to young people's individual needs.

### *Key factors in the success or failure of an unplanned transition*

The main reasons for failure in the transition to independent living were a lack of planning because of the urgency of the mothers to escape from their previous homes, rather than because of their readiness to progress to independent living. Precipitate

household formation with a partner appears unsatisfactory by tying their housing to a relationship, before either partner was ready for such a commitment. Thus mothers could find themselves in difficulty with their housing, a strained relationship with their partner, insufficient money, and a lack of skills required for living independently. Age is also associated with the success or failure of this transition when young women are too young to be legally employed, or to be eligible for benefit, which has clear implications for their entry to a criminal career.

Although few mothers initially made a successful housing transition, this section identifies some elements within the mothers' experiences of housing which played a positive role. The single most significant factor in promoting a successful transition to independent living, for mothers leaving their own families, was support from immediate or their extended family. The same is true of young women who left care, where even minimal ongoing contact appeared to provide some sense of stability after they had left the physical environment of the care system.

#### **6.4 Housing transition as process: returning home**

The transition to independent living is a process made up of, often, multiple mini-transitions rather than a single completed event. Some moves may indicate progress, while others may indicate a regression. While returning to the parental home may, at the time, be experienced as a backward move by some mothers, it represents a positive step for others:

I left home at eighteen for about a year, then I've always been, you know, I've always been at home with my mum.  
(Julie)

I was fifteen and a half when they caught up with me. My dad came to fetch me from the police station, they were just overwhelmed, relieved that I was alive. And then I lived at home, and had a very good job, until I fell pregnant when I was seventeen...and then I actually went to a mother and baby unit.  
(Sally)

Mothers who appear, at first, to have experienced similarity in their housing careers by



returning home are differentiated. Sally's disappearance from home contrasts with Julie's first departure to live independently at eighteen, by which time Sally had left home, returned for a substantial period, and left again. While seventeen is a young age at which to leave home, an additional two years in her parents' home provided an opportunity for Sally to return to legitimacy and some stability in both her housing career and her employment.

More concrete intervention by supportive parents can be instrumental in helping young people into independent accommodation:

I got pregnant and then I moved back in with my nana, and then I got a flat. Private flat, I paid a deposit, my dad gave me some money towards it.

(Davina)

The mothers quoted above describe a happy childhood (see Appendix 3), and enjoyed the support of their immediate and their extended family, yet went on to involvement in a criminal career. Although Julie describes herself as wrongly convicted (see Appendix 3), Sally and Davina became lifestyle offenders:

I carried on kiting<sup>12</sup> until I got arrested...quite a bad charge, forty thousand. I didn't stop and think of the consequences, it was just easy money.

(Sally)

It was shop lifting. I really enjoyed doing it. I used to get a buzz out of doing it. And the money used to make me do it...the thrill...bored, being bored but got through a lot of money, because it was easy money. I done it loads of times [for] money, pleasure, living the high life.

(Davina)

Other mothers saw little option other than action which, at the same time, constituted a criminal offence, while others knowingly chose to engage in criminal careers, despite having satisfactory housing, and demonstrate the multi-causal nature of offending.

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<sup>12</sup>Several women in the study used the term 'kiting' to describe the fraudulent use of cheques.

A few mothers who had been discharged from care, as well as those who had been living with their parents, returned to their parental homes after their first attempts at living independently. Young women who returned to their parental homes after being discharged from care tended to find it an unhappy experience:

After approved school I went home for a few weeks. I was upset because dad wouldn't speak to me.

(Carol)

Where parents refuse to support their adolescent children, returning home is unlikely to provide a productive development in their housing careers. Mothers who left care to live independently had, overall, little support compared with mothers described above who relied on their families after making the first move to independent living. They disliked being in care, but few mothers, as teenagers, were able to return to their birth homes, and engineered ways of escaping from care into the wider community, even though their situations, as girls in their mid-teens who were unable to turn to their families for help, were precarious.

The long term result, for all of the mothers affected by sexual abuse, was that they were prematurely taken from their birth families and, after voluntarily leaving care, were forced to provide themselves with a home and subsistence in the community with no family support.

### **6.5 Effects of failure to make the transition to independent living**

A working definition of '*failure*' in the transition to independent housing in relation to the study will facilitate the discussion of the effects of failure. Failure in the transition to independent accommodation is relative, and the mothers' perceptions of the adequacy of their accommodation are more important than a formal definition.

The developmental nature of the transition as a process is described above and so it is not surprising to find that, for the lone mothers in the study, the type and quality of their accommodation changed over time. Mothers who did not break the law for several years after their first move away from their family home may not have been influenced by their



housing situations into taking pathways leading to criminal careers. At the same time, the housing situation of mothers who were homeless when they embarked on a criminal career is likely to have contributed in part to their lifestyle. Young women who already perceived themselves as literally occupying the margins of society may have felt little constraint about improving their lives by carrying out activities which would criminalize them. Some lone mothers in the study were already engaged in offending in their early teenage years, and described how their earliest experiences of independent living contributed to the development of their criminal careers.

### *Age*

The young age at which nearly all of the lone mothers in the study left their family homes may be a significant factor in potentially placing them at risk of offending. As Table 6.1 (Appendix 2) shows, lone mothers left to live independently when they were younger than the average home leaver in Jones's (1995b) study of young home leavers in Scotland. These mothers were at risk of failure in the housing transition, firstly, because at the time when they were attempting to live independently they were not eligible for benefits (and especially housing benefit) and, at a later stage, if they experienced continuing failure in the quest to acquire satisfactory housing. Table 6.1 provides a pattern of the mothers housing transitions, yet cannot capture the complexity of the mothers' housing careers which included, in some cases, one or more returns to the parental home, as well as a sequential variety of housing situations, with partners or with friends (who may have had their own reasons for providing a home for a young woman), as well as alone with their children.

Nineteen of the lone mothers in the study first set out to live independently when they were aged 18 or below. Although it is not valid to generalise from such a small sample, this is clearly a high percentage (95 per cent) compared with Jones' (1995) study. The average age at which the study sample left home (or care) was sixteen years and four months. It is, then, not surprising that many of them encountered difficulties. Several mothers left home prematurely because of problems in their birth families which they

could not tolerate, and their departures under these circumstances meant that they received no emotional, financial or material support from their families.

Unpreparedness in relation to setting up an independent home is related to the young age at which some mothers were forced to make their initial housing transition, coupled with a lack of money to provide satisfactory accommodation:

[father] chucked me out. And we lived together in this little poxy one room thing for about three months, then moved into a flat, then we got married, when I was sixteen.

(Diana, left home aged 15)

Evidence of a direct link between leaving home prematurely and pathways to criminal careers is provided in an account of the need to steal at the age of thirteen after running away from home and being obliged to fend for herself:

I think I just went right off the lines after I ran away, that's when I started stealing.

(Jenny, who ran away from home aged 13, and from care aged 14)

A determination to avoid living in the care of the local authority led to other young women making a premature move to independent living, as described above. These mothers perceived a complete absence of choice in their lives. The need to provide for themselves when no legal means of doing so existed led them to become involved in criminal acts.

### *Budgeting skills*

Poor budgeting skills, as a result of inexperience in handling money while in local authority care, and possibly in their own families, is discussed above. The effect of being unable to manage on a limited budget is that insufficient money is available to cover all necessary expenditure, such as utility bills, clothes and food. When mothers have no other means of acquiring items which they consider to be essential to their children's or to their own well being, they may view stealing as a logical option. The usual social constraints against theft may be diminished as a result of the ethos of the area in which they reside.



### *Neighbourhood and accommodation*

A connection between a lack of satisfactory accommodation and a risk of reoffending has been established in studies of persons already convicted of an offence (Corden, Kuipers and Wilson, 1978; Haines, 1990). There is no reason to doubt that a similar risk exists for persons in poor housing who have not been convicted of an offence. While it may be assumed that having a home is a positive factor compared with homelessness, I emphasise that '*poor housing*' is implicated in contributing to the risk of offending, in addition to homelessness. Few lone mothers in the study achieved a satisfactory home or lifestyle for themselves in their first few years of independence.

Some researchers argue that the neighbourhood in which people live can inhibit their employment prospects (Campbell, 1993; Cook, 1997) and that, increasingly, households on council estates are headed by lone mothers in particular, so that 54 per cent of lone parents (this includes lone fathers, who comprise approximately ten per cent of single parents) live in local authority housing (Graham, 1993: 55-71; Power and Tunstall, 1995). As we saw in chapter 3, only a small proportion of lone mothers are in full time work, and the concentration of lone mothers on local authority housing estates places the poorest members of the community in a benefit ghetto, where there is an ethos of claiming benefit as the expected substantive income.

It has been suggested that offending is an integral part of the lives of some people who break the law (Maden, 1997). This finding is supported by mothers in the present study, who lived in the formerly industrial north east. They had similar life styles, which they unanimously reported as a typical reflection of the life style of the majority of people in their vicinity, both north and south of the River Tyne. In the course of two interviews '*friends*' arrived carrying shopping bags containing apparently new clothing for sale at very low prices. The inference is that these mothers participated in a local black market of stolen goods, supported by visible evidence as well as their own accounts:

Most of the time, after a couple of drinks, me and my friends have gone out thieving, to get more money for beer.  
(Norma)

This time there was seven of us, travelling all over the country, stealing things to sell again, to get money.

(Lorraine)

There was fifteen of us, shop lifting clothes, for ourselves and to sell on, to make a bit of money.

(Freda)

When I interviewed these mothers I saw that their local neighbourhoods, although several miles apart from each other, displayed remarkably similar characteristics. These landscapes were dominated by houses and flats which were boarded up, broken glass along stretches of the roads and pavements, gangs of children roaming the streets, and a total absence of parked cars. In the street where one of the mothers lived three children, aged around ten, toured backwards and forwards, all on one motor cycle, none of them wearing a crash helmet.

This picture is typical of a constellation of characteristics Power and Tunstall (1995) use to describe poor council estates: poor physical and social conditions, applicants with choice are deterred from moving in, the estate has low social status and its properties become harder to let, more vulnerable groups are housed, there is damage and disrepair, a lack of social cohesion, and chaotic conditions. These conditions aptly portray life in some local authority housing estates which are permeated with the fear of burglary and assault, and where these crimes are frequent and commonplace:

At the minute we're going through a bad stage, where they just...I mean around here they wouldn't think twice as putting a knife on you or a gun. The next door neighbour's just shifted out of the house over there and he only had been in two week...every night he was...his windows was getting put out. He was getting his windows put in again, and he never bothers nobody.

(Norma)

Whereas a commonality of situation was believed to cement social ties, so that neighbours would not offend against each other, although they offended otherwise, research in the United States shows that assault rates are high in poor white areas, and the constraint of social ties may be dependent on the type of estate where people live



(Warner and Rountree, 1997). A study of crime on Merseyside found that the *concentration* of offenders was a crucial factor, as was:

An amalgam of processes reflecting the demographic and social composition.

(Hirshfield and Bowers, 1997: 1290)

These findings were confirmed for certain areas in the present study, notably the north east of England. Some mothers were living in very poor areas, as seen when they were interviewed in their homes, and had lived in their respective neighbourhoods all their lives. The question in relation to these mothers appears to be not so much about how they were diverted into pathways which lead to criminal careers, but how they could possibly avoid becoming involved in criminal acts, when the general ethos of crime since is endemic in some areas.

Apart from the area in which they live, tenure may play a part in the likelihood of a lone mother taking a pathway which leads to a criminal career. Noreen and Julie (who both claimed to be innocent of an offence), exceptionally among the twenty mothers, both owned their homes, and were both in full time employment at the time of their arrest. Their situations provide evidence of the relatedness of these two transitions. Noreen and Julie appear untypical in comparison to the majority of mothers in the study in terms of their lifestyles and their financial situations. They may have been innocent of the offences for which they were convicted. On the other hand, it may be that committing an offence is less acceptable to people in their social milieu, and that admitting to having committed the offence came less easily to them than to mothers whose peers were, very often, also involved in criminal careers.

A need to escape from the present address because of the fear of physical violence, to themselves and to their children, prompted the involvement of lone mothers in crime:

I wanted to move because the man that beat me up had already been in prison for beating me and the children up, and he'd been released and been kicking my door in and I wanted to move. The council refused to move me because of the arrears so I got offered some money if I drove a car...like a getaway job [armed robbery]. I was desperate at that time to get to safety for my kids and myself, and so I agreed to it.

(Jenny)

Previous experience had involved Jenny in escaping from sexual abuse by her brother by running away from her parental home. It is possible that this event narrowed her perceptions so that the only solution to her problems seemed to be flight. Equally, from Jenny's account, going to new accommodation presents itself as the most satisfactory resolution to preventing unwanted visits from her ex-partner. However, as a lone mother, running away was much more difficult because Jenny also needed suitable accommodation for her children. Lacking the right to a move by the council, because of arrears, she perceived no other feasible option for acquiring the money which would allow her to move to another address than involvement in an armed robbery. Thus, although their reasoning was not acceptable to the criminal justice system, lack of choice about their criminal careers persists in accounts by several lone mothers.

### *Perceptions of choice and fate*

Women prisoners' lack of personal agency in directing their own lives has been observed by Eaton (1993), and appears to be one of the risk factors common to several of the women in both Eaton's study and the present study. Excessive restriction in childhood can lead to unconventional behaviour in later life (Winnicott, 1989), and may influence the career pathways selected, and increase the chance of engagement in a criminal career. Instead of some lone mothers in the study being able to test their approaching adulthood in progressive exchanges with other adolescents, their repressed urges were suddenly released when they broke free completely from all restraints by leaving home and, at the same time, any parental authority.

Mary's whole adult existence appears to have consisted of an attempt to find a home, since she had never been in a position to pay for accommodation, or had the knowledge



to apply for local authority housing. She always felt obliged to subjugate her own wishes to those of the person who was currently responsible for providing a home for herself and her children, usually a '*boy friend*' who made money from her earnings as a prostitute. She thus continued her criminal career:

... his sister says to me 'I want you to go to this house and knock on the door ... because I'm going to rob it.' I were living with her brother and I had her brother to answer to, and being scared of him, all led to pressurization of me going along with what she wanted to do.  
(Mary, with care of her three children at the time)

Briere (1992) suggests that sexual abuse in childhood leads to compliance in the abused person as an adult, which could help to explain why Mary agreed to participate in the offence. Lone mothers in the study who had been victims of sexual abuse were both persuaded into participating in serious criminal offences by ex-partners<sup>13</sup> (see Table 6.2, Appendix 2).

## 6.6 Summary

Just as we saw in Chapter 5 in relation to the transition from education to employment, the circumstances in which the lone mothers in the study left their parental homes to live in independent accommodation varied widely. Conflict within the home was responsible for some young women leaving their parents' homes in their mid teenage. Some left home as an act of rebellion, after heated arguments with their parents, often forming their own households with a partner. As we shall in Chapter 7, none of these relationships lasted, and the precipitate circumstances in which they set up home together may in part explain why the relationships foundered.

Some mothers who had been in the care of the local authority left to live independently at what was a very early age compared to most young women. Few of the mothers who had been in care returned to their own homes, and so had little or no social or financial support to help them maintain independent accommodation.

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Jenny: armed robbery; Mary: burglary and assault

Some young women who followed a planned discharge from care also found the need to follow a criminal career as a result of inadequate essential skills. Poor budgeting skills, perhaps a consequence for young people, especially in care, who have little experience of handling and managing their own money, are implicated in the failure to live independently. Poor budgeting is identified in this study, but other household skills, such as shopping and cooking, may contribute to young women leaving care taking pathways involving crime.

The young age at which nearly all of the mothers left their family home may be a significant factor in potentially placing them at risk of offending, both at the time when they were first attempting to live independently and at later stages throughout their housing careers.

The constituents of subculture which most affected the mothers in this study were their local neighbourhoods and their associates, including those who used illegal substances. The effect of neighbourhood is related to the number of jobs available, which impacts on access to housing. Suggestions that their neighbourhood spoils their employment prospects confirms the interconnectedness between the transitions of school to employment, and from minority membership of a household to independent living. The mothers perceived restricted opportunities to alter unacceptable elements of their lives such as the neighbourhood in which they lived and, in some cases, their associates and their accommodation. All of these factors, among others, may be a part of what is called '*subculture*', and can substantially influence the daily lives of the population, although defining the precise effect of each component is not feasible.

A return to their parental home can help to divert young women from pathways leading to a criminal career but, as we see in chapter seven, failure to maintain satisfactory relationships with partners can nullify all positive factors by their influence on the lives of some young women. The interdependencies between the transitions from school to work, and from the parental home, or local authority care, to independent living have already been discussed. The connections between these, as well as particular issues



associated with the third of the main youth to adulthood transitions, from family of origin to the formation of a new family, form the substance of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 7      FAMILY FORMATION

### 7.1 Introduction

Chapter six showed how failure to achieve the transition to satisfactory independent accommodation can contribute to placing young women at risk of engaging upon a criminal career. The effects of failure in the third of the major youth to adulthood transitions, from family of origin to the formation of a new family, are examined in this chapter. Relationships with significant others are crucial in their impact on the emotional well being of individual persons (Laing, 1972; Hobson, 1985). In addition to a lack of social support, failed relationships for mothers who had previously lived with a partner can also engender difficult financial circumstances (Haskey, 1998a).

The purpose of this chapter is to discover how certain experiences might have an ongoing influence on factors associated with the status of *lone* motherhood, and whether these factors are also seen as being implicated in the development of criminal careers by the lone mothers in the study. To this end the chapter seeks to identify experiences which are associated with the success or failure of the transition to family formation, and any consequent influences on pathways which lead to criminal careers.

As we saw in Chapter 6, a successful transition to independent living is often dependent on the continuing success of the transition from family of origin to the formation of a new family<sup>14</sup> and, although the temporal association between the three transitions has become increasingly extended since the middle of the twentieth century, the move to independent living and the transition to family formation still coincide for a substantial number of young people (Gillis, 1985). In common with the transition to independent living, the transition to family formation may be the result of planning over a period of time, or may be an immediate and unplanned response to intolerable circumstances in a young person's home of origin. The experience of abuse, for example, may precipitate a young woman

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Although the arrival of a child comprises the beginning of a new family, family formation is considered to be a 'failure' when the mother has no partner, even if the mother prefers a single lifestyle.



into an early housing transition which, at the same time, incorporates a transition to family formation if she moves in with a boy friend.

Outcomes of negative experiences in childhood may be manifest as problems in relating to other children and social withdrawal which, in turn, can influence success in relationships associated with family formation (Briere, 1992), as described in previous chapters. Thus damaging interpersonal relationships in the family of origin can contribute to failure in the transition to the family of destination. Members of the wider community may be unaware of problems within a household, and Poster describes how a family with young children:

Defines itself as a coherent whole with more or less clear boundaries...the individual family is a world unto itself.  
(Poster, 1978: 119)

Thus stresses within the birth family can hasten the process of family formation for young people who are unhappy in their parental homes (Jones and Wallace, 1992), while decreasing the chance of success. New families which are the primary consequence of a young woman's determination to escape from her birth family home may have a smaller chance of remaining intact than families which are solely the result of a desire to live together. Young women who leave home in their early teens may, then, attempt the transition to family formation for the wrong reason, and become prematurely emotionally or financially dependent on a partner because there appears to be no other person to whom they can turn for support.

This chapter begins with an examination of the mothers' perceptions of how they entered lone status: as a result of a chance pregnancy, or as the result of relationship breakdown among mothers who, initially, succeeded in forming a new family with a partner and, for two mothers, through bereavement. Violence in relationships is discussed as a separate issue which, while it represents an element in the breakdown of some relationships, has wider ramifications for a number of mothers in the study as a factor in decisions to offend. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the implications of failure in the

transition to family formation, and the ways in which lone motherhood can influence the potential for taking pathways which lead to criminal careers.

## 7.2 Routes into lone motherhood

The term '*lone motherhood*' apparently defines a solitary status, and thereby masks the complex, changing, and developmental nature of relationships. Mothers may move in and out of relationships and their situations, over time, are dynamic rather than static (Burghes, 1993). Although not all mothers in the study considered they had enjoyed a relationship with a partner, the start of a process which results in lone motherhood begins with the mother having some kind of contact with the father, although this may be brief or unwanted.

The study participants met the fathers of their children within a narrow range of ages, Diana being the oldest at 23 (see Table 7.1). Otherwise, the lone mothers were far from being a homogeneous group, and their circumstances varied widely. A few mothers had never cohabited with their children's fathers, while several others had relationships which lasted for a number of years, although Noreen's relationship, which ended when her husband left her after 22 years of marriage, was unusually long compared with the remainder of mothers in the study. Only three mothers had been legally married although, in the interview, many talked about '*my husband*' and may never have felt the need - or had enough money - to formalise their relationship. Freda described her relationship with the father of her five children as ongoing, and her partner officially lived at a different address in order to maximise social security benefits. All other mothers in the study perceived themselves as '*lone*' in every sense of the term in the period prior to their involvement in offending.

A number of mothers had children to more than one father, or had engaged in intimate relationships with other people since the birth of their children. Mary had three children all to different fathers, yet she had no relationship either with the fathers of her children or with her legal husband, whom she had married only for the twin conveniences of allowing him to stay in the United Kingdom, and providing herself with a home.



As well as comprising families of children with different fathers, lone mother households can encompass a range of compositions which include, for example, grandparents, older siblings and other persons (Manning and Smock, 1997). Lone mother households in the study, however, consisted only of the mothers and their children, except in the cases of Julie and Noreen, whose own mothers lived with them. Little similarity existed even between these two households, since Julie's mother helped with child care, whereas Noreen's (older) mother was in need of care herself.

Mothers in the study were also differentiated by the various types of relationship they engaged in with the fathers, so that while some enjoyed a loving partnership over several years before experiencing a breakdown in their relationship, or the death of their partner, others had only a brief contact with the fathers of their children, and had not expected to become pregnant as a result of their casual encounters.

#### *Chance pregnancy*

Young people can experience difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships for various reasons. The psychological unavailability of parents, which translates into a lack of love and affection from childhood experience, constitutes a primary cause of young people's inability to develop these essential elements as a part of adult relationships (O'Hagan, 1993). Young women who were abused in early life, as described in Chapter 5, can suffer long lasting effects, including an inability to trust other people as friends, lovers or colleagues, so that adults who suffered abuse as children have difficulty in forming long term relationships (Briere, 1992). Mothers in the study who became pregnant inadvertently did not consider they had had a '*relationship*' with the fathers of their children or, in some cases, with any man since; nor did they anticipate entering an intimate relationship.

Data from a survey in 1991 shows that 66 per cent of lone parents had previously lived with the fathers of their children (Burghes, 1994), which leaves a substantial proportion who had not cohabited. Similarly, some young women in this study simply bypassed the

stage of family formation, and it is likely that these mothers are at a financial disadvantage from the moment their child is born.

Mothers who experienced chance pregnancies tended not to expect practical help from the fathers, and demonstrated a lack of closeness or commitment to the fathers of their children:

I'd known [child's father] quite a while...I used to go to this American Air Force base, miles away, a few of us used to travel by train. It wasn't a steady relationship, we never lived together...I'd not say I loved him. I suppose I was young and stupid to fall pregnant. The relationship with [younger child's father] was similar. I never bothered with men after the kids came along. I never knew my dad...I suppose my mum's marriage rubbed off on me because it was bad...really put me off.

(Louise, pregnant at seventeen and again at twenty one to different fathers)

Louise, in effect, mirrored her mother's behaviour. She never knew her own father, and had only fleeting contact with the fathers of her own two children. Daughters of lone mothers tend to become teenage mothers (Burghes with Brown, 1995), and it may follow that mothers who were themselves raised in a lone mother household, and who held no internal model of membership of a two parent family, perceived no necessary connection between a sexual relationship and long term commitment with the children's fathers.

A lack of commitment to any lasting relationship with the fathers was also a characteristic of a few mothers who had lived in two parent families, for whom sexual intercourse was perceived to be a casual and perfunctory event:

I only went with this lad once, I didn't know it'd [pregnancy] happen so quickly..I never had no relationship with any of them.

(Mary, describing three different fathers of her children)

I slept with him about three times...just met up when we had time to spare. It was more like being friends than anything else. When I found out I was pregnant I didn't tell him straight away. And then I actually went into a mother and baby unit.

(Sally, describing her relationship with the father of her only child)



These accounts demonstrate the element of *chance* in becoming mothers. Motherhood was not planned, nor entertained as a possibility, and so was not a chosen event in the lives of these mothers. There may be a rationale behind the behaviour of mothers who had poor experiences with their own fathers, and it may be that Mary's experience of sexual abuse negatively affected her approach to men as sexual partners and as fathers. It is not possible to trace a direct link between these two events which may, equally, be unconnected. It is significant that Mary describes pregnancy as a condition which '*happens*', rather than having agency herself over whether or not to conceive.

In contrast, a loving and continuing relationship between Sally's parents is at odds with her own superficial and brief contact with her child's father, and no link emerges between Sally's history and her lack of relationship with the father of her child. Table 7.2 (Appendix 2) shows that Sally, in common with several mothers in the study, gave birth while still in her teens.

Chapter 5 showed that her chance pregnancy was the cause of Sally leaving her job, although researchers note that unemployed young women are more likely to become pregnant in their teens than those who have jobs (Phoenix, 1991). A lack of legal employment might, then, be expected along her pathway to lone motherhood. Mary failed to find employment, or satisfactory independent accommodation, and thus supports earlier findings on lone mothers. Sally, in contrast, had a job she enjoyed, and which she lost as a result of becoming pregnant. Such anomalies serve to illustrate that it is not possible to point to one particular cause for particular subsequent behaviour. It is, however, useful to examine trends, and the risk, or likelihood, of individual circumstances as a context for pathways to criminal careers.

Caddle and Crisp (1997) found that it was not unusual for Afro-Caribbean and Black English mothers to be living alone with their children at the time of their imprisonment, and this may be a part of their cultural background. Black mothers in the study felt involved in their relationships with the fathers of their children, but not to the point of living together:

I used to see [child's father] because my brother used to talk to him. I was seventeen or sixteen. He never lived with me...we just drifted apart.  
(Liz, Black British)

I met [child's father] at my mate's house. He was twenty eight and I was seventeen, so I was only with him about two months. We never lived together, like, it was my first boy friend and if he said do something, I'd do it. And then I was really upset because he went out with my friend when I was six weeks pregnant.  
(Denise, Black British, pregnant at seventeen and nineteen to different fathers)

These mothers both had children to two different fathers but never cohabited with the fathers of their children, and neither received either financial or emotional support from the fathers. Links between these family patterns and the mothers' ethnic culture cannot be determined, but their lone status supports the findings both of Caddle and Crisp's (1997) research on black women prisoners, and Penhale's (1989) finding that Afro-Caribbean women tend to become mothers at a relatively earlier age than white women in the United Kingdom.

Chance pregnancies demonstrate the mothers' perceived lack of agency in their lives. Moreover, these mothers received no material or social support from the fathers and appeared not to achieve the same level of intimacy as those in cohabiting relationships. Other mothers in the study became involved in relationships which, however, did not last, and suffered the pain of separation.

### *Relationship breakdown*

Success in maintaining relationships in adulthood can depend on childhood experiences of relationships in the birth family, and the ways in which children develop in their social milieu are considered to be increasingly important by experts who study family life (Bowlby, 1973; Burgess, 1973; Poster, 1978; Perez, 1978; Porter, 1984; Pollock, 1983; Briere, 1992; Finch and Mason, 1993; Brannen and O'Brien, 1996). Events in early life which influence later attitudes and behaviour are associated with the potential for success or failure as young people make the transition from living with their birth family to forming a new family of their own.



The strictness of parents of some lone mothers in the study made it virtually impossible for their daughters to have contact with other children outside school, so that they experienced social isolation. Poorly developed social skills may be responsible for some mothers failing in their relationships with partners:

My dad didn't encourage us to mix with other children. I didn't make friends very well because I was so cut off...brought up in a little village, no kids in the village apart from us.

(Diana, whose companions comprised her two sisters and a brother)

Thus relationships as adults may have been compromised by harsh parenting and a lack of practice in social skills as children. Few of the mothers had insight into their lack of social activity when they were young, and only Diana commented that she thought her father's refusal to allow her to associate with other children had made it difficult for her to develop satisfactory relationships when she was older.

Hasty decisions to move in with their partners, associated with problems in their parental homes or in care, may help to explain why some of the relationships foundered:

Had a big row on my eighteenth birthday. It was just, I think, being young and conflicting personalities. I went to a boy friend's house who I was with at the time. It was good, until he just did a runner. I was about seven months pregnant and he decided to do a moonlight.

(Julie)

Tension surrounding ethnic traditions may also have contributed to the breakdown of relationship for an Asian mother in the study:

My family is a bit more westernized, and his family was more cultural, and he started getting told off for pushing [child's] pram, changing her nappies and the like. His mum started saying "If you don't hit her then you're not going to have no authority left in your own home," so it did turn things really sour.

(Tara, Asian, in care from age 12 to 17)

Parental intervention appears to have contributed to the breakdown of the relationship between Tara and her husband. Tara, whose partner, like her, was of Pakistani origin, found the relationship with her baby's father threatened by his parents, who saw Tara as

'*too Anglicised*', for example because she expected her husband to help care for the baby. Tara explained that she had become '*Anglicised*' and detached from her ethnic background while she was in care, where she also began to misuse drugs.

Substance misuse, an offence itself, was further implicated in Tara's offending, as she needed to acquire the money to support her own and her partner's habit. Tara was already misusing drugs before she met her child's father. She may have felt that she was asserting some kind of independence through drug use, but she perceived her addiction to be responsible for the breakdown of their relationship:

When it came to drugs I was very greedy...so I used to have a lot of arguments over it. That's what really wrecked it. I just didn't want him coming near me...couldn't be bothered with him.  
(Tara, Asian, in care from age 12 to 17)

Tara thus blamed partly herself, and partly her partner's parents, for the breakdown of their relationship. Young people who have been in care often experience instability in their lives as a result of several different placements, either with foster families or in foster care (Biehal et al, 1995), and reconstruct instability in their relationships with their partners. A period of several years in the care system may also have contributed to Tara's failure in the transition to family formation. Her account provides evidence of three elements in her life (care, ethnic tradition and substance misuse), any or all of which may have contributed to the breakdown of her relationship with her child's father.

The influence of her partner, however, appears to have encouraged Tara in her criminal career:

I didn't know whether my relationship with [child's father] was...because I was the earner in the house he'd be better off with me, where he'd always have money. He's very honest...he wouldn't go shop lifting.  
(Tara, Asian)

Her partner may have induced her to continue offending, while Tara admired his honesty, believing that honesty is only related to committing a crime, and that knowingly benefiting from the proceeds of theft is '*honest*'. She was prepared to take on the moral



and legal blame for both herself and her child's father in order to keep him contented. Other mothers in the study also had partners who did not work, yet expected to receive the monetary benefits of the mothers' offending and, despite his unfaithfulness:

I needed money to give to that idle thing I was in love with, in a way it was for him so he could have money...he always wanted money. My first serious relationship ever, and it weren't a very good experience. He was in and out of my life and suppose because I didn't really have a good relationship with him...that didn't help. The worst thing was he used to stay with other women.

(Davina, Black British)

Ethnic origin does not appear to play a part in the lifestyles of either Tara or Davina and their children's fathers, although both women, unusually, provided for their male partners. Their partners were a cause of unhappiness, yet some mothers would nevertheless tenaciously attempt to save their relationships:

My boy friend was beating me up. I was living in his sister's house, I had my children and nowhere to go, so really manipulated, sort of thing. I felt like I were trapped, I wanted him to love me. I mean, he had me there as a prostitute, he had me on the game. I didn't want to do that, but I thought "Well if I don't do it, then he'll leave me," and I suppose you get scared that they're going to leave you.

(Mary, describing a 'partner' who was not a father to any of her children)

The mothers quoted above engaged in criminal behaviour in an attempt to please their partners, by providing the partners with money which was the product of shop lifting or prostitution. Fear that the relationships would fail, and they would lose their partners, emerges as a major motivating factor in Davina's and Mary's offending, neither of whom could see any other means of maintaining the relationships with their partners. Again, the mothers perceived a lack of alternative options for satisfying their deep need, for a mutual intimate relationship. Although these relationships ultimately failed (indeed, Mary's relationship with her partner can scarcely be defined as successful), attempts to maintain relationships with partners is implicated in their involvement in offending.

The relationships described above incorporate several negative components, and total domination by her partner was an additional feature of Mary's life. In addition to the fear

of losing him, she also lived in fear of routine assault. The threat of violence toward her children eventually caused Mary to leave her partner's home, to live in a women's refuge. She later left the refuge to live with the same partner's sister, and attributed her participation in her offence of burglary to her twin fears of further violence from the ex-partner, and losing her accommodation with his sister. Violence represents a dominant element in the failure of several relationships.

### *Violence*

Violent behaviour is often associated with the breakdown of a relationship, and is a factor which can be implicated in pathways to both lone motherhood and crime, although violence in a relationship is not always the cause of separation (Kirkwood, 1993). Potentially damaging effects of abuse in childhood include an avoidance of interpersonal closeness, and an expectation that some aggression between adults in close relationships is appropriate (Briere, 1992; O'Hagan, 1993; Corsaro, 1997). Children base their view of themselves and others on childhood learning (Briere, 1992) and tend to reproduce the behaviour they witness in their parents, unknowingly internalizing the attitudes and responses of their parents as appropriate (Jaffe et al, 1990; Strauss, 1997). Studies of families show that witnessing family violence between parents predisposes children toward violence in their own adult relationships, and children who witness violence and victimisation grow up in the belief that this kind of behaviour is normal and acceptable in intimate relationships (Jaffe et al., 1990).

Staff who work in shelters for battered women note that the children's development is affected by their exposure to parental violence (Gelles and Strauss, 1988). Such children grow up lacking a positive notion of what loving behaviour in families may be, and assume that the ambience of fear and assault to which they have become accustomed is commonplace. The same staff drew attention to the differentiated behaviours of boys in the shelters, who were noisy and rebellious, and the girls, who appeared submissive and withdrawn. As young people develop they adapt behaviour learned from their families, and may themselves use violent behaviour to resolve interpersonal problems.



Researchers found that girls, compared with boys, are more likely to believe they would be physically assaulted in their own relationships with male partners, and some showed distrust of men. Violence is perceived by some young women as a demonstration of love and, as such, an integral part of an intimate relationship. In excessively violent relationships, girls sometimes become aggressive themselves (Jaffe et al., 1990), and children who have been brought up to witness violence as the consequence of problems in relationships learn that aggressive behaviour is the appropriate response to problematic situations. Widom (1989) found that regular, routine, minor acts of violence experienced in childhood are a greater predictor of future violent behaviour than a single instance of violent behaviour, even though the single act might be more frenzied than routine acts of violence.

Jaffe et al. (1990) noted that children were affected by verbally aggressive behaviour between their parents much as they had been by physical assault from one parent to the other. Thus it may be that witnessing verbal aggression between their parents affected the ways in which some of the mothers behaved in their intimate relationships and towards their peers. A few mothers in this study witnessed physical violence by their fathers to their mothers, and a number described verbal aggression.

Previous research has found that, although women experience physical and emotional abuse, it can be difficult for them to leave a relationship because of their financial and emotional dependence on their partners (Hooper, 1996). The material and social hardship which they risk in trying to make a life on their own with their children appears, to some mothers, to be an insurmountable barrier to leaving the relationship (Kirkwood, 1993). Thus mothers have ambivalent feelings: the relationship with their partner is damaging, and yet remaining in the relationship, and hence the household, appears preferable to the loneliness and uncertainty of leaving with their children. Many women in violent relationships perceive no option but to stay (Choice and Lamke, 1997).

The absence of *choice* begins to emerge as a recurrent theme in the lives of several of the mothers, especially when the incidence of violence by their partners, either to mothers

or their children, is implicated in the decisions of some of mothers to participate in offending. An examination of the accounts of mothers' relationships with partners reveals that violence was the cause of separation for some mothers in the study.

Mothers encountered violence in their relationships, either from their children's fathers or in more recent relationships. Although it was not always straightforward for mothers to disengage from damaging relationships, some succeeded in making the break:

He used to knock me about and things...I laid in bed once, I looked at him and I just thought "This has got to be it. I can't live like this any more." I just clicked, and I thought "I don't want him."

(Davina)

Violence, then, was the direct cause of failed family formation for some mothers in the study. While violence between their parents predisposes some young people to behave violently, children who spend their entire childhood in care have no memories of their family home, and different foster placements may leave them with a sense of instability rather than providing a model of attachment (Biehal et al, 1995). Such children may have little personal experience of how close and loving relationships develop, and are thus unable themselves to participate satisfactorily in an intimate relationship with a partner:

It was a very stormy relationship, it was up and down, he was violent, he smashed up the house that many times, he's broken my nose..[but] I feel as though I need him here. I think it's companionship more than love. He keeps me right...sort of takes over and I can put all the responsibility on to him. When he's away I miss him, and then when he's home it's different.

(Lorraine, in care age 2 to 18, describing her most recent partner, who was serving a long prison sentence)

Mothers whose experiences of their family homes and care were violent fared poorly in maintaining relationships:

My mam put her bloke's head through a car window. I've got my mam's temper. I left him [child's father], in the end...it was completely violent in the end.

(Donna, in care age 14 to 17)

The fathers ended what had been violent relationships with three of the mothers, all of



whom were deeply distressed at being left alone despite the violent nature of their relationships:

I missed him terribly, and begged him to stay with me.  
(Lorraine, in care age 2 to 18)

In relationships, however, violence from their partners may have exerted a predisposing influence on some mothers' subsequent criminal actions, when it was perceived as an appropriate response to a problem. In particular, it is possible that instances in which ex-partners were directly involved in an offence, either as victims or as accomplices, was a progression from violence first demonstrated within the relationships:

At first we never went out without each other. Then we used to go out drinking, and the arguments started before I had [child]. I was almost due to have [child]..he used to drink with these Irish lads, and I walked in through the pub door, and got a good hiding when I got outside or when he caught me. My temper got worse and I started fighting back, and eventually I left him...and that's when I started taking drugs, when I was using heroin and barbiturates. The worst thing was his drinking and the violence that erupted around it.

(Carol, in care age 14 to 16, describing her child's father)

The experiences of verbal violence between her parents, later compounded with actual violence from her partner, may form the pattern of events which led to Carol '*fighting back*'. Violence appeared to be the natural response to problems in relationships. Carol therefore assaulted her partner, which resulted in her conviction for grievous bodily harm (see Table 6.2, Appendix 3), when she perceived no other means of expressing her anger.

Some mothers became involved with partners who were violent while their children were still young. The desire for a partner was, in some cases, so great that the damage an abusing partner might do to themselves and their families was overlooked, or not discerned. On several occasions assaults resulted in the mothers or their children requiring treatment at the hospital accident and emergency departments. Many of Jenny's problems stemmed from her partners, two of whom were instrumental in her involvement in offending. The acquisition of enough money to move to different accommodation, in order to protect herself and their children, dominated her thoughts:

I was living with a bloke, he beat me and the kids up. He, like, damaged [son] and now he can't talk properly, and that really hurts me, because I blame myself.<sup>15</sup> I wanted to move to escape from him, but I owed rent arrears. I got a letter saying I owed two thousand and something rent arrears, which I knew I couldn't possibly owe, but the council were saying I did owe it. They showed me a statement stating that I did. I knew housing benefit had boded up, but...and I got offered like a couple of thousand to drive a car in a bank robbery.  
(Jenny, absconded after 2 months in care at age 13)

Violence from an ex-partner was the underlying problem in Jenny's life, which was, crucially, compounded by her lack of money to expedite a move to different accommodation, and the local authority's mistake about rent arrears. Jenny saw these to be insurmountable obstacles to freedom from her violent ex-partner. She thus perceived no choice other than agreeing to become an accomplice in an armed robbery.

Both these mothers had a background of running away from their parental home when young and local authority care. Although no direct causal explanation is possible from events in their teenage, it is likely that their earlier negative experiences contributed to the perceived limited options available to the mothers for extricating themselves from intolerable situations.

The experiences of some mothers in the study support previous findings that witnessing violence in early life can lead to an expression of violence in adulthood, and also show that conflicting emotions in intimate relationships create extra stress for mothers whose circumstances are already difficult. The outcome for some mothers was their adoption of violence to resolve their difficulties, and consequent convictions for offences involving violence.

### *Bereavement*

Although they did not experience violence, or suffer the pains of rejection described by

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He had assaulted her 5 year old son who suffered permanent brain damage and lost the faculty of speech as a result of the assault.



some of the mothers whose partners ended their relationships, losing their common law husbands as a result of death can leave mothers devastated:

When he died I started heading for a nervous breakdown. And the kids took it bad, I had to get a psychologist for the middle laddie.

(Norma)

He were a right good bloke, never looked at another woman or anything. My mate was with him when it happened [overdose], and didn't get an ambulance, so I fell out with her. I just couldn't cope after he died.

(Tracy)

The sudden end of good relationships as a result of the death of their partners left the young women feeling lonely, vulnerable and unable to cope alone. These mothers had been living in very poor areas, as observed when they were interviewed in their homes, and both had lived in their respective neighbourhoods all their lives<sup>16</sup>. Both mothers had a limited network of family and friends in their local neighbourhoods, and neither appeared to benefit from these sources of informal support. Both suffered multiple negative effects as a result of their loss:

There is nothing good about being a lone parent

(Norma)

and suffered the effects of failed family formation, although the relationships had been described as successful up to their partners' deaths.

### **7.3 Effects of failed family formation**

Erikson's (1959) theory of personal development has been adapted by Olsen et al. (1989) to show how the personal growth of an individual adapts to become incorporated as part of a developing pattern in a newly formed family. At its best, family formation provides a mutually satisfying and enduring relationship. The children's father is part of a unitary group as well as, in some families, the kin network which comes with a long term partnership (Olsen et al., 1989). Single mothers, in contrast, struggle alone with significant life events, with changes in the structure of the family, and with the changing

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<sup>16</sup>Norma lived in the formerly industrial North East, and Tracy lived on the outskirts of Manchester.

needs of their children throughout the different stages of their development. In addition, lone mothers are unable to share with a partner the anxieties associated with financial problems, but are obliged to depend on their own resilience in difficult circumstances, for which some are ill equipped (Hardey and Crow, 1991).

### *Autonomy and independence*

A study of lone mothers in the Irish republic confirms findings from previous studies of lone mothers in the United Kingdom, that many of the women appreciated being free from the control of a partner. They enjoyed the independence and autonomy of being alone, and were not seeking to engage in another relationship (McCashin, 1996). These findings demonstrates that, while mothers generally in this study perceived a lack of choice with regard to having control over their own lives, it is possible to have some choice in life as a lone mother. While a number of lone mothers in the study found life difficult:

You don't get time to enjoy anything really ...you just cope. It's hard but you cope...  
(Mary)

there was, at the same time, satisfaction in the status of lone parent:

Every day that goes by, I don't know why, but you just feel good that you've achieved fetching up that child. Every day they get older and you think "I've done that." I've gone without to buy that kid some shoes. You've had to fight to get it and go without yourself. So every day that goes by it's like a double achievement...you've achieved for a father and yourself.  
(Mary)

In common with several mothers in the study, Mary lived solely in the present, with little or no thought about what the future might bring, either for good or ill. Planning ahead, which might have provided some personal control in their lives, was simply not considered.

Independence and personal autonomy, were, however, perceived by some mothers to provide adequate compensation for their lone status, and relief was found, for example,



in an absence of mind games, or arguments over money. The control exerted by some partners was resented, and lone parenthood was perceived as a release from unwanted control or abuse:

[partner since child's father] kept giving me a good hiding...was absolute hell. After that I loved being on my own. [Son] was just the apple of my eye. [I] used to dress him up and, a day like this, I'd never catch a bus and I'd walk miles with him, show him off to all my friends, and he was just brilliant.

(Sally)

Autonomy was perceived by participants in the study as the major advantage of living alone with their children, in circumstances where mothers felt able to do as they wished, and to look after their children as they wished, with no obligation to refer to anyone else. Thus, while lone mothers are becoming increasingly accepted as a household unit (Kissman and Allen, 1993), resilience in coping with their situation emerges as a major characteristic among mothers in the present study who enjoyed their lone status. They did not feel the need to be a member of a couple in order to feel at ease in the world, and had confidence in their own abilities:

He was seeing other people, so I asked him to leave. After I'd lived on my own he came to stay here for a fortnight, and it was just all the things that used to irritate me when he lived with me were even worse because I'd lived on my own, I was praying he'd get somewhere to live.

(Cathy)

Autonomy gave the mothers a sense confidence in their ability to cope with their situations, which may act as a protective factor against becoming involved in crime. Nevertheless, despite their appreciation of their personal autonomy, mothers in the study expressed ambivalence about their situation, and disliked the burden of having to cope alone.

### *Loneliness*

An additional negative dynamic of the mothers' existence was, invariably, an overwhelming sense of loneliness. Loneliness has been described as one of the greatest difficulties for young people to overcome once they leave the care system (Stein and Carey, 1986), as well as for lone mothers (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991). Although

mothers who felt themselves to be in a stable relationship may have enjoyed more security in their lives than mothers who did not cohabit, several suffered emotional pain as a result of the breakdown of the relationship with the fathers of their children. Commentators suggest that:

The pain is more acutely felt by the person who perceives him/herself as being emotionally abandoned.  
(Sprenkle and Cyrus, 1983: 59)

Not all mothers in the study had wished to end the relationships with their children's fathers, as we have seen, and some had experienced great distress as a result of the separation. Pain as a result of their separation followed by an overwhelming sense of loneliness was the typical experience of those mothers who had achieved the formation of a new family, and whose partners had subsequently left them:

He went off with somebody else. I was gutted.  
(Julie)

I was living at my mam's after he left but I was on my own. I liked the independence but it gets lonely...biggest thing is the loneliness.  
(Donna)

Mothers who had previously lived with their partners experienced a *change* in their status, from living as a member of a two parent household to being the head of a single parent family. These mothers had expected to raise their child within a two parent family and were devastated at their rejection and abandonment by the most important person in their lives. They disliked their lone status, when their plans for their own and their children's future had been predicated upon success in maintaining their newly formed family. As previous research suggests (Hobson, 1985), mothers suffered stress as a result of their unexpected lone status.

However, although some participants in the study progressed from being a member of a two parent family to become the - usually reluctant - head of a lone parent family, several mothers found that they could cope well after the initial shock:



I enjoyed the togetherness. And then he found somebody younger, which was a blow at the time. I was really devastated, it was the end of the world for me. I was absolutely terrified at first because I didn't know how I was going to cope. But being thrown in at the deep end, I'm not somebody who sinks. I came out fighting, got myself a mortgage, paid off all his debts, and then I started to feel much more confident.

(Noreen, after 22 years of marriage)

Many years of settled home life, first in her birth family, and then for a long period in her family of destination, may have contributed to Noreen's confidence and her ability to assume control over her household after her husband's departure.

However, mothers who succeeded in the early stages of family formation tended to suffer from loneliness after separating from their partner, and this was perceived as the main disadvantage among those who had enjoyed a fulfilling relationship, especially in the evenings and at bedtime. This was particularly true for women in the study who became lone mothers as a result of bereavement, who looked back on their two parent life together as a time of happiness and security, both financially and physically.

Loneliness constitutes a negative element in the lives of the study participants, and may have contributed to some mothers taking pathways which included offending. Worries and responsibilities appeared to be magnified when they could not be shared, but must be borne alone, and mothers felt burdened by their responsibilities.

#### *Burden of sole responsibility*

The reverse side of the coin to autonomy and independence is having sole responsibility for their children. Mothers in the study identified having no-one to turn to when their children were excessively demanding as particularly stressful, especially as children grew older and began behaving in anti-social ways. This was particularly true of boys whom, mothers often felt, lacked a father figure to provide a role model, as well as greater authority than they could muster themselves. Behavioural difficulties among children after their mothers were left on their own increased feelings of inadequacy as a parent:

When [son's] dad died he got away with a lot, and he's dead hard to control now, won't listen to anything I say. He needs a dad to keep him right.

(Tracy)

After he died I just couldn't cope with all the children's problems. Let myself go.

(Norma)

Having to cope alone with her son was the worst element of lone motherhood for Tracy. She thought her son had become disobedient after his father died because people felt sympathetic towards him and so had not checked his increasingly anti-social behaviour. Continuing money problems and no social life, compounded by anxiety when her eight year old son began smoking, abusing solvents and stealing from her purse were identified by Norma as particularly difficult to address. Regret because they were unable to share celebrating the milestones in their children's development with the fathers was a further negative aspect for several study participants. Mothers also missed adult conversation in the evenings, and simply disliked having to shoulder alone the responsibility for the whole household.

Being a lone parent was seen by some of the mothers as even less desirable than being in an unsatisfactory and violent relationship, and they tended to prefer life with a partner to living alone with their children. A more general fear of assault or burglary was a concern for other mothers who lived on poor housing estates:

Vandalism round here...the kids put the windows through, just come at you with knives and whatnot. I'm up all night and then I try to sleep all day...nervous, the thought of being in the house on my own.

(Norma, separated from her violent second partner)

Self-preservation, for themselves and their children, became a major anxiety for some mothers once they alone were responsible for the physical security of their households, and fear of crime was an additional worry. The fear of violence, and responsibility for their families, expressed by some of the mothers can both be stressors which, among other effects, can lead to misuse of drugs or alcohol. Thus failure in the transition to family formation and being forced to cope alone can represent a further risk factor for



engaging upon a criminal career. The importance of social support from sources other than partners is therefore increased.

*Extended role of other relationships*

Previous research has suggested that lone mothers' perceptions of their situations can vary, depending on the amount of support they receive from ex-partners and from their extended family (McCashin, 1996). Relationships with families and friends were important to nearly all the mothers in the study, especially, in terms of emotional support. Several were given support by their own mothers, and some described brothers or sisters who gave financial support when the need arose, although they usually had little money themselves.

Support from their families of origin provided important moral support for some lone mothers in the weeks immediately following the separation:

I've always had financial and emotional help from my family. They've never let me down.

(Noreen)

I got most help from my mum and dad.

(Cathy)

Important relationships, after separating from the fathers of their children, were often with mothers and grandmothers, some of whom helped to care for the children:

My mum gives me money every week. If I haven't got any money she'll pay my phone bill or whatever. I live with my mum and her mum, and it was always ok at home, she used to help with [son]. I was always used to having lots of money, to go out here, go out there. But I soon got over it and started budgeting. I started working for a friend, in a restaurant and shop.

(Julie)

Family and friends were thus a source of both social and financial support. Mothers who continued to live with their birth families were not physically lone householders, as their own (lone) mothers provided companionship and shared the responsibility for any

children, yet these mothers too missed the intimacy of the relationships they had experienced with the fathers of their children.

Even though the help the mothers described above received may have been unsatisfactory in some ways, they had not been forced to cope alone with their difficulties when relatives or friends provided support. Other mothers, however, had no help from their families:

We split up. I was on my own, and I just felt I had nobody to turn to.  
(Karen)

I never had any kind of help off my mum and dad. Got more help off my friends than what I did off my family.  
(Norma)

Some mothers in the study, who felt they had no-one to whom they could turn, sought support from other people, and a few became involved in criminal activity as a result of their association. Distinctively among the participants in this study, two mothers found mutual support. Although Denise received financial help from one of her brothers to whom she was close, her emotional support, since leaving the father of her second child, had been provided by Debbie, whom she had known for several years and whom she described as her best friend. Common interests helped to cement their relationship:

We both like talking about clothes, we've got lots in common, and our boys, because we've both got boys. We like doing our houses, phone each other, gardening today, and she says "Oh I've been gardening." We like buying things for the house, we like going shopping together...  
(Denise)

Debbie saw her mother and her sister every day and the care of her twins was shared with her mother. Denise and Debbie were the most significant persons in each others' lives at the time they became involved in a joint offence (see Table 6.2, Appendix 3) which is examined in greater depth in Chapter 8.

Other mothers too found themselves engaging in offending through associations with friends, family or ex-partners (see Table 6.2, Appendix 3). Thus, while social support



might be expected to provide protection against becoming involved in crime, close friends might also constitute risk factors for engaging in criminal activity.

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#### **7.4 Summary**

A dominant theme from Chapters 5 and 6, which re-emerges in this chapter, is the perceived lack of choice in the lives of mothers in the study, all of whom failed in the transition to forming a two parent family with a partner. Several study participants became pregnant by chance, as the result of brief and casual encounters with their children's fathers, thus demonstrating a lack agency over their own lives. Chance pregnancy developed into single motherhood for young women who had never engaged in intimate relationships with the fathers of their children. A few of these mothers were content with their way of life, and had no wish to '*succeed*' in the transition to family formation by taking a partner.

Other participants in the study, while they enjoyed choice in the decision to become mothers, later suffered the breakdown of their relationships. Mothers who took the initiative by ending an unsatisfactory relationship appeared to accept their status as a lone parent more happily than mothers who had not wished to end the relationship, and also appeared to cope better with managing their households. This may be because they felt, generally, that they were more in control of their lives.

Physical fear of their partners, combined with a fear of the partner ending of the relationship, was a prominent feature of some of the mothers' lives. Violence, from some of the fathers or partners with whom mothers had engaged in relationships, was a cause of stress, especially for those mothers who lived in fear of physical assault from a previous relationship. This fear, directly or indirectly, was a contributory factor in some mothers' decisions to offend.

Other mothers were unable to exercise the limited option about whether or not to leave their partners, but were abandoned by their partners, or left bereaved, with all the emotional pain and stress that entails. Mothers whose relationships had broken down or

who had suffered bereavement, in contrast to never partnered mothers, tended to perceive the failure of their relationships with the fathers of their children as a change for the worse, and for these mothers the term '*failure*' more accurately reflects their own feelings. Their accounts support research on the importance of intimate relationships in adulthood to the emotional well being of individual persons (Hobson, 1985).

Many lone mothers in the study found their lives to be characterised by loneliness, which some mothers described as the worst aspect of their single status. Others found that financial insecurity and bearing sole responsibility for the household constituted the main hardship. Overall the mothers received very little financial support from the fathers, and few fathers provided social support for the mothers. Anxieties associated with leaving established relationships, for example because of insufficient money to start a new household, or fear of loneliness (Kirkwood, 1993), were reasons why some mothers would have preferred to remain in violent relationships.

A number of mothers, in contrast, perceived benefits arising from their status as lone parents, especially in relation to personal autonomy and freedom from abuse. Their enjoyment of independence may indicate a poor quality of relationship with the children's fathers, and it may be significant that two mothers who became lone parents through bereavement, rather than because of a failed relationship, could see nothing good in lone parenthood.

Lone motherhood, for many participants in the study, was characterised by a lack of choice in the two other major life transitions. As young women they were unable to gain remunerative, fulfilling employment, and opportunities for work were further diminished once they were responsible for young children. Few had access to satisfactory, and truly independent, housing, and some mothers had no choice in their type of accommodation, or regarding the neighbourhood in which they lived. They perceived themselves to be passive onlookers to events which shaped their career pathways, yet over which they were unable to exercise any choice. Events, or other persons, were perceived to assume



control over their lives. A few mothers perceived failure in all three transitions as inevitable events which were beyond their control.

Overall, the fathers appear to have contributed to the mothers' stress, either by their complete absence, or by causing additional worries. Substance misuse was implicated in the breakdown of at least one relationship, and may have been a means of coping with their unhappiness after losing their partners for some mothers. Substance misuse, where it existed was, in some cases, the precipitating factor in the mothers' decisions to commit an offence. Unsatisfactory or damaging relationships with partners, or ex-partners, were directly or indirectly responsible for some mothers becoming involved in a criminal career.

Although there are no obvious links between relationship breakdown and offending for a number of the mothers in the study, it might be argued that failure in the transition to family formation contributed to the risk that mothers in the study would engage in criminal careers. While their lives were, to a certain extent, perceived to be controlled by forces outside themselves, some mothers may have taken pathways which led to criminal careers in an attempt to gain some kind of control over their lives.

A majority of mothers in the study were jointly convicted with friends or ex-partners of offences concerning property, drugs, or violence, and sources of social support were also sources of support for their criminal actions. The influence of associates, and other factors associated with lone mothers' involvement in criminal careers, are addressed in Chapter 8.

## **CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **8.1 Introduction**

The overall aim of this study was to bring together in one comprehensive conceptual framework two kinds of career, lone motherhood and female offending, which have previously been studied as separate and different phenomena. The major transitions from youth to adulthood provide the analytical framework informing the analysis, and success or failure to negotiate each transition is examined as a means of explaining how lone mothers become involved in offending. This thesis examines how lone mothers explain retrospectively their involvement in criminal situations for which they were sentenced to custody.

I explore first the features of the study participants' lives which might be associated with failure in each of the major youth to adulthood transitions. Experiences and events implicated in the failure of each transition, and the main effects of failure in each transition, are then considered as risk factors for taking pathways culminating in criminal careers. I also seek to identify the converse: that is, factors which may protect lone mothers against becoming involved in offending. Finally, implications for policy responses and some ways in which knowledge about risk factors and protective factors may help to diminish offending by lone mothers are suggested.

### **8.2 Failure in the youth transitions: pathways to criminal careers?**

The sequences of various events in the lives of young people contribute to determining their careers in employment, in housing and in the formation of their own families. The routes taken by the lone mothers in the study from childhood to adulthood were influenced and guided by a multitude of mini-events which combined to broaden opportunities in some areas, and to narrow available options in others. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 show that many of the lone mothers in the study faced difficulties in achieving one or more of the main transitions. The main factors implicated in the failure of each transition are identified here, and are considered as risk factors for taking pathways to a criminal career.



### *The transition from education to employment*

Elements which influence the transition from education to employment are, to some extent, dependent on the circumstances within the birth family. Some young people have a preponderance of positive factors so that, for example, they may go to university, or find satisfying work, where these opportunities exist (Coles, 1995).

None of the women in the study went to university, and non-attendance at school which resulted in poor education emerged as a determining factor in the kind of employment opportunities available to several mothers. Nevertheless, a number of mothers in the study whose education had not been interrupted found work which they enjoyed, and which was well paid for some (see Table 5.4, Appendix 2). Others were studying for qualifications to enable them to find the kind of work they wanted in the future. Success and failure are relative terms, and for the purpose of this study those mothers who were earning an adequate wage from their employment are defined as succeeding in the education to employment transition (see Table 5.4), while those undertaking training were still in the protracted transitional phase, and thus potentially successful.

A second group of mothers, in contrast, was not working, or their jobs paid too little to cover essential expenditure for themselves and their children. A third group of mothers also failed in the transition to employment, but nevertheless lived well as a result of developing productive criminal careers, and saw no reason to consider work as an option.

Some basic contributory factors to failure in the transition to employment by mothers in the study originated in childhood when, for example, abuse led to absence from school and reception into the care of the local authority which, typically and in common with young people in previous studies (Stein and Carey, 1986), led to poor educational outcomes. All mothers in the study who were affected by sexual abuse failed in the transition to employment. Several mothers in the study did not work and perceived themselves to have insufficient money, or to be living in poverty. Other mothers became addicted to illegal substances while they were in care, which led to a perceived need for large sums of money to support their habits.

Might those elements which contribute to failure in the transition to employment, then, constitute risk factors for pathways to criminal careers? Chart 8.1 shows how a typical progression of circumstances were implicated along routes to failed transitions to employment, and some effects of failure.

**Predisposing factors:**

stage 1	abuse/conflict in family home		
stage 2	poor cognitive skills	placement into care	
stage 3	miss school		
stage 4	poor educational achievement	substance misuse	
stage 5	lack of qualifications		
stage 6	low paid or unskilled work	unavailability for employment	
stage 7	failure to find well paid, fulfilling employment		

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<b>Effects:</b>	dependence on benefit	poverty	
	insufficient money for essential items	insufficient money for social life	stress substance misuse

**Chart 8.1: Factors implicated in failed transitions from education to employment**

Although progressions are not necessarily linear, and not every lone mother who failed in the transition to employment experienced every stage, Chart 8.1 shows that abuse led



to care; some mothers were placed in care for other reasons, but few (see Table 5.1, Appendix 2) left care with qualifications which enabled them to find adequately paid employment. Conversely, a few study participants perceived care to be a positive experience compared with their lives at home, which may have contributed to their success in gaining qualifications enabling secretarial work.

Chart 8.1 shows how experiences in childhood can increase the risks of women having no employment or having low paid or unskilled jobs. As mothers progressed from stage 1 or stage 2 of Chart 8.1 to stages 3 and 4, they tended to find that options for ways of succeeding in the transition from education to employment became increasingly limited.

*The transition from a parental or local authority home to independent accommodation*

A regular and adequate income provides a secure basis for acquiring satisfactory housing (Jones and Wallace, 1992) but, as we saw in Chapter 5, few mothers in the study found their income to be adequate. In the same way that transitions to employment can be difficult or protracted, a housing career often spans a progression of different homes (Jones, 1995). Homes which mothers perceived as adequate represent successful transitions to independent accommodation in this study. Housing which depended on a lone mother maintaining an otherwise unwanted relationship, or was in the kind of deprived area described in Chapter 6, represents a failed housing transition.

Planned initial transitions to independent living, for example to attend college or to live with a partner, tended to result in satisfactory early housing transitions. On the other hand, unplanned moves from parental homes in attempts to live independently from a young age, often before reaching the age of eligibility for housing benefit, found mothers homeless or dependent on partners for accommodation. Chapter 6 showed that abuse and conflict within their birth families instigated several study participants to leave their parental homes. Such mothers received little, if any, social support from the families they left. Precipitate household formation often leads to early relationship breakdown, and is a recognised element in women's homelessness even for women whose main purpose in moving to a new home had been commitment to a relationship with their partners (Bull, 1995).

Mothers who were discharged, or who absconded, from care sometimes lacked budgeting and other domestic skills, which contributed to their failure in the transition to independent living. Chart 8.2 shows how some mothers progressed through various stages which predisposed them to failure in housing careers, and some effects of failure.

**Predisposing factors:**

Stage 1	deprived neighbourhood		abuse/conflict in family home	
Stage 2				placement into care
Stage 3		poor social support		early/unplanned move
Stage 4		stress		hasty family formation
Stage 5	few employment opportunities	substance misuse	relationship breakdown	poor budgeting skills
Stage 6	insufficient money to sustain household		homelessness	
Stage 7				failure to achieve independent living

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<b>Effects:</b>	stress	lose home	dependence on other people for home
	substance misuse		lack of choice in housing

**Chart 8.2: Factors implicated in failed transitions to independent living**

The deprived neighbourhoods where some mothers dwelt provided few opportunities for employment and, in some areas, were characterized by shop lifting, vandalism and substance abuse. Few mothers, however, had choice over the area in which they lived. Some research suggests that failure to establish a satisfactory home of one's own is



related to reoffending (Haines, 1990) and thus, it might be assumed, to primary offending.

As in Chart 8.1, options in Chart 8.2 become increasingly limited, firstly for those mothers who felt forced to run away from their birth homes, or from care, and again when they perceived no legal means of acquiring the money they needed to improve their housing, or to move to other accommodation. Some mothers perceived an overall lack of control over their lives, and no available options which might improve their situation.

A two-way relationship exists between employment and independent living: achieving independent accommodation is a result of earning a satisfactory wage but, equally, a stable home is the basis from which young persons conduct their working and social lives. Leaving home early can result in teenage motherhood which, while not intrinsically a negative situation (Phoenix, 1991), lessens opportunities for finding employment. Connections between the three transitions resurface when examining transitions to family formation.

*The transition from the family of origin to the formation of a new family*

Several mothers in the study made the transition to forming a new family at the same time as they moved from their parental homes to live independently. A desire to live together was the main reason for several study participants forming an intended permanent relationship, and some of these families may be said to have succeeded, for example where the relationship ended because of the death of a partner. In contrast, premature family formation was seen by some mothers to have been forced upon them because they needed other accommodation when remaining in the parental home became intolerable, and it may be that hasty unions which are formed primarily from a need for housing are more susceptible to failure than freely formed new families. The adage advises that we 'marry in haste and repent at leisure' and, by the nature of this study on *lone* mothers, all the participants, except those who were bereaved (and Freda whose partner lived at a separate address to maximise benefits), failed in their relationships with their partners.

Factors which predispose mothers to failure in family careers, that is as a two adult household, and the effects of failure, are shown in Table 8.3.

**Predisposing factors:**

Stage 1	abuse/conflict in family home			
Stage 2	placement into care			
Stage 3	poor model of relationships	poor social skills	hasty family formation	
Stage 4	lack of relationship	violence in relationship	poor social support	teenage motherhood
Stage 5	stress		relationship breakdown	
Stage 6	substance misuse			
Stage 7	failure to achieve/maintain family formation			

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<b>Effects:</b>	lone motherhood	lose home
	loneliness	stress
	seek new relationships	substance misuse

**Chart 8.3: Factors implicated in failed transitions to new family formation**

A poor model in their birth families, of how to conduct relationships, may have contributed to failed relationships with the children's fathers for some mothers, while those who never attempted to enter a relationship fail by default in this transition. Other mothers reported only brief encounters with the fathers, some perhaps imitating their



own mothers, or inclining to a cultural norm in the case of Black British mothers (Dholakia and Sumner, 1993). Their partners were also the fathers of their children for many mothers in the study, but for several young women motherhood was an unplanned yet fundamental change in their lives as a result of chance pregnancies.

The initial stages shown in Chart 8.3, as in Charts 8.1 and 8.2 demonstrate how multiple negative predisposing factors influencing mothers in the study effectively narrowed their options for a perceived acceptable lifestyle. Family formation predisposes young women to motherhood, which, in turn, decreases their prospects of employment. Several relationships failed, some as a result of violence, even among mothers whose primary intention was forming a new family, as opposed to acquiring accommodation. A number of mothers were very distressed when their partners left them, while others had not attempted to form a new family before becoming mothers.

The progressive nature of domestic careers is demonstrated by the flow chart, and mothers may join the chart at any point. Thus leaving home (or care) early to escape abuse, might lead to homelessness, and to early, and possibly violent relationships, as well as teenage motherhood.

A successful transition from education to employment is often a prerequisite which can provide the basis for independent living. Motherhood can influence both these transitions: positively, by entitlement to local authority housing, and negatively by limiting availability for work. Transitions to family formation, and leaving the parental home (or care) to live independently might, then, be described as *interdependent*, since although the formation of a new family can provide a home, needing a home can prompt the formation of a new family.

### **8.3 Pathways to criminal careers: risk factors and protective factors**

Not all lone mothers become involved in offending, and the issue of why people in apparently similar circumstances respond differently (see Winnicott, 1989) is discussed in Chapter 3. Some kinds of criminal activity might help to alleviate problems directly, for example stealing goods or money to improve material circumstances. Other kinds of

criminal activity might ease difficulties indirectly, for example by giving a sense of identity and self respect. Pride in their shop lifting skills lifted some mothers self esteem. Thus offending opened up choices for some lone mothers in the study in lives which were typified by restricted options for improving their or their children's opportunities. At the same time the propensity to exhibit criminal behaviour can be linked to the root causes of failed transitions, as well as with their outcomes, described in the flow charts in this chapter.

The three flow charts demonstrate recurrent factors which, over time, limited the career options in employment, housing and family formation of the mothers in the study. The elements implicated in failed youth transitions constitute risk factors along pathways to criminal careers, and the influences of these factors are examined below. As Chapters 5, 6 and 7 show, not all mothers experience every stage in the charts, and some mothers encountered fewer than two negative elements in their early lives. Some potential outcomes of failure in each transition are suggested in the charts. These do not constitute a comprehensive list, but represent the main influences on pathways to crime described by women in the study sample.

The influence of factors which predispose young women to failure in the three main transitions are analysed as risk factors for becoming involved in crime. The focal issue for this research is to identify factors which place lone mothers at risk of offending and, equally crucially, factors which might provide protection against becoming involved in criminal actions.

The evidence from interviews shows that factors associated with failed transitions contributed to the lone mothers in the study taking pathways which led to criminal careers.

### *Abuse*

Abuse in childhood has been described as an experience which is over represented among women in prison (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1997). The potential for some women to pursue pathways leading to criminal careers has its origin in early experiences.



Histories of childhood physical, sexual and emotional abuse, encompassing isolation, verbal aggression, witnessing assault, harsh parenting and social isolation, are common features among women prisoners in America (Singer et al., 1995). The sleeper effects<sup>17</sup> of such experiences are not measurable, but nonetheless have been found to have an impact on the psychological and moral development of young people (Clarke and Clarke, 1982) who, typically, have problems in coping appropriately with relationships which involve authority, for example with employers and thus employment, or intimacy, which is an essential part of family formation

The effects of abuse can be direct or indirect, and so the influence of experiences which are the result of abuse (stages 2 to 7 in the flow charts) create a cumulative effect. Abuse constitutes stage 1 in each of the flow charts representing pathways to failure in the three transitions. In this study mothers' accounts of their experiences include verbal, emotional and sexual abuse, and witnessing their parents' verbal or physical aggression. Young people who witness violence may internalise such behaviour as normal, and this early experience may have contributed to the lone mothers physically assaulting other people.

Sexual abuse emerges as a powerful negative experience, which generates a progression of continuing negative events. Mothers in the study who were victims of sexual abuse failed in each of the three major transitions. While failure in the youth to adulthood transitions may not, in itself, cause anxiety in relation to young people and offending, Mary's compliance with other people's wishes was shown in Chapter 7 to be a precipitating element of her involvement in a criminal offence. Compliance is one outcome of childhood sexual abuse (Briere, 1992) and it is likely that her abused past was a factor in Mary's criminal action. Mary's account of her life history after she had left home illustrates the typical submissive behaviour of a person who suffered serious abuse as a child. The sexual abuse she experienced as child had engendered in Mary compliance to the will of other people (see Chapter 5).

Abuse emerges as, at least, a contributory factor in explaining Mary's offence, in which

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<sup>17</sup>Sleeper effects are long term and unseen, but can have considerable influence on later behaviour.



she became involved because she was affected by inner emotional dynamics as well as poverty, which prevented her from finding satisfactory accommodation. Her fear that she and her children would lose their home if she did not comply with a request to help her partner's sister gain entry to a house in pursuance of a burglary demonstrates a continuing perception that she had no control over her life.

Even women who initially had a good relationship with their own mothers could be alienated: for example, Louise was sent to approved school as a result of the poor relationship between herself and her stepfather. The mothers' unhappiness and isolation from their families led to many of them apparently compensating for the loss of parental love by starting a relationship with a partner. Thus a poor relationship with their parents often led to an early relationship with a boy friend, and then to early pregnancy and motherhood. Because of the unhappy circumstances in which many of them had left home, they received little or no support, either emotional or financial, from their birth families.

Mothers in the study who were affected by abuse received little social support throughout their transitional years, either from their own family or, when their social skills were poorly developed, from peers. These careers demonstrate how one negative factor predisposes, or even predetermines, the next, and placement into care emerged as a consequential outcome of sexual abuse for mothers in the study.

### *The care system*

Rutter (1981) argues that, when all things are equal, a family home is preferable to an institution, but when a child receives no love in a disturbed home, then being reared in a good institution is preferred. Low self esteem as a source of feelings of powerlessness and lack of choice was discussed in Chapter 5, and doubts about their own worth, as a result of being in care, may have hampered search for an identity for some study participants. Experiences of care, as well as home life, vary considerably, and not all children suffer as a result of being in a children's home or a foster home. Forty per cent of women in prison experienced a period in care during their childhood, compared with only two per cent of the general population, and a period in care was one of four primary



reasons offered by female offenders for women's involvement in crime (Carlen, 1998: 12).

Half of the women in this study reported being in care. Why is the care experience - apparently - detrimental to so many women, including the mothers in this study. Study participants were placed in care for a variety of reasons (see Table 5.2, Appendix 2), and almost all of the mothers viewed the time when they were in care negatively, although a few mothers preferred being in care to living with their own families.

The dynamics of various care experiences, family experiences and broken relationships, then, form a complex pattern of unhappiness and disadvantage. Some mothers who had been in care appear to have committed offences as a result of emotional stress, and habitually resolving problems with violence:

I just went completely off my head, a couple of girls were picking on me, so I hit this girl.

(Donna, at age 16 while in care)

It was an emotional turmoil.

(Carol, in care age 14 to 16, describing her violent relationship with her child's father)

There was a family argument. This bloke was going to hit us so I picked a glass up intentionally to swill him with it and the glass slipped out of my hand and it glassed him in the face.

(Norma, in care age 15 to 17, at a public house)

Among others, Carol and Donna preferred being in care to being in her own home (see Chapter 5). Negative events within their own families, before entering care, may have contributed to their risk of offending. They favoured care over constant violent arguments at home, or enjoyed the special attention which they received in care. Preference for care indicates a high degree of unhappiness in the family home, and these prior causes, likely to comprise emotional abuse, rather than the actual care experience, may have contributed to the mothers engaging in criminal careers.

Although their incomes were small, and Norma and Carol had been previously convicted of theft, poverty was not the reason for their assaults, but anxieties about money must

have increased their levels of stress. The experience of care, while it appears to be implicated in the offences of some mothers, has links with negative events in childhood which were, in some cases, the cause of mothers being placed in care. Abuse, care and emotional distress may have combined to create in some mothers an inability to cope with the various stressors to which they were subject at difficult times in their lives.

An essential common element of care is that children are not with their own family. The importance of social support from family members is illustrated by Lorraine, who could not remember living in her own family home, but absconded from care to be with her sister when they were separated in their early teens.

A few mothers who had spent some time in care during their teenage years felt ill equipped to cope with managing their budgets. Others relate their experiences of care to their criminal careers, and may have been influenced by their association with certain peer groups who were already involved in criminal activities. At least one mother was introduced to drugs by other residents while in care:

Once I did go into care and then, like, started meeting kids that had been doing worser things, I learnt a lot of things like glue sniffing, gas sniffing, everything. I mean I look back now and I think well maybe if I hadn't have been put into care I wouldn't have gone into the depths I did go into.

(Tara, Asian, in care age 12 to 17)

Tara perceived her initiation into using illegal substances as a result of the contacts she made after entering the care system, and it is likely that other mothers were introduced to illegal substance misuse by peers while in care. Tara apparently independently progressed from sniffing glue to heroin as a result. Outcomes of abuse, and stress as a result of difficult lives, are other significant factors in decisions to use illegal substances. Thus distinctions between risk factors are blurred, as abuse can lead to care, and experiences of abuse or care can lead to substance misuse.

### *Substance misuse*

Previous research has found that women typically turn to alcohol as a means of relieving stress in their daily lives (Reed, 1985; Ettorre, 1992). Some mothers in the study suffered



from emotional strain caused by the breakdown of a relationship and stress was perceived as the reason for excessive alcohol consumption:

I was terrified of him. It was a traumatic time, and I'd started drinking at home, but I was fed up of doing this and I went out. That evening I had taken a hammer with me, with the intentions if he did come near me I was going to hit him on the head with the hammer.  
(Carol, after separation from her child's father)

It was the drink...I took to the drink. I couldn't handle things...stealing for my drink.  
(Norma, after the death of her husband)

In effect, these mothers used alcohol to try and cope with unbearable stress in their lives.

Alcohol was then perceived to be a contributory factor in their violent offences.

Another appeared to occur by chance:

Just gone out drinking one night, me and a friend went to a night club, and I was driving back home and I crashed the car...  
(Cathy)

but might be related to poverty, as driving her own car was cheaper than using a taxi.

This offence is examined in relation to protective factors later in this chapter.

For a few mothers the inability to cope alone meant a continuing dependence on drugs or alcohol, and the associated need to offend in order to support their habits. This may tenuously link their lone status to offending although, as described earlier, some mothers had been taking drugs while they were still with their partners. Tracy was introduced to the habit by her partner and her peers:

[Time] just dragged because I knew all my mates were down at the flat all the time getting stoned and I was sat in work.  
(Tracy)

The need to support an expensive drug habit accounted for the property offences of mothers addicted to heroin. Tara and Tracy both described incomes in excess of £300 weekly from shop lifting to pay for drugs (see Table 8.2, Appendix 2).

Ettorre (1992) notes that despite its illegality, the world of drugs operates in a manner similar to the mainstream of society, with access to power limited by gender, race and

class. Evidence from this study suggests that gender is more disadvantageous than race, and that Black people held the greater power in this situation:

The kind of people that I was dealing with at the time, they weren't very nice people. And I think they [Black British men] thought "Oh yeah. One white woman, she don't know what she's doing. Take this off her." You know what I mean?  
(Diana)

Diana recognises that she is not meant to have any authority as a dealer herself. Hser et al. (1987) suggest that women are initially influenced by men in their use of heroin.

Cannabis was not described by participants in the study as a major contributory factor in their criminal actions although, unexpectedly, it is the subject of further discussion in the section on factors that provide protection against involvement in criminal careers.

#### *Precipitate and problematic housing careers*

Current legislation encourages young people to stay in their parental home until they can afford to pay for housing (Brannen and O'Brien, 1996). Only one mother was still living in her parental homes after the age of 18 (see Table 6.1, Appendix 2). Several mothers in this study, however, experienced problems in the transition from living in the family home to independent accommodation before they attempted the transition from school to work. As we saw in Chapter 6, some mothers left their homes (or care) to live independently when they were in their early teenage years to escape from their unhappiness. Those who left home before they were 16 years old were too young either to be legally employed or claim benefit. Victims of abuse who were placed in care, did not achieve satisfactory housing, and some were forced to be dependent on partners for their homes.

The offending activities of several mothers may have been culturally influenced by the area in which they had lived since birth. Shoplifting for resale had been an accepted means of acquiring money for many people in some neighbourhoods. It was apparent when I visited Norma's home to carry out the interview that theft was a normal part of



the daily activities. She inhabited a subculture where hardly anyone was legally employed, and stealing was the only, and the normal, means of obtaining material goods.

Losing their homes, or fear of losing their homes, placed mothers with unsatisfactory housing under stress. The need for a secure home was the main factor in the offences of Mary and Jenny, as described in Chapter 6 (see also Table 6.2, Appendix 2).

Evidence has already been provided in Chapters 5 and 6 of clear links between a successful housing career and a successful transition to employment, while failure led to poverty for many of the study participants.

### *Unemployment and poverty*

It has been argued that poverty is a broad concept incorporating:

Relational issues, in other words, inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power...  
(Room, 1995: 5)

rather than simply the unequal distribution of material goods. Social exclusion is a concept which has particular relevance for people who commit criminal offences. Law breaking and imprisonment might be among a constellation of effects found among women at risk factors of offending.

Deacon and Mann highlight the significance of agency, and regret that

Sociologists have focused only rarely upon the behaviour of the poor. Rather they have highlighted the structural obstacles that confront them: labour market discrimination, educational disadvantage, spatial segregation, class location, economic restructuring, unemployment, benefit traps and, at a more abstract level, the requirements of a patriarchal capitalist economy.  
(Deacon and Mann, 1999: 414)

Employment returns a wage, which is usually the source of an adequate budget for a household. Households which lack an adequate income live in poverty, and this can lead to some mothers offending to provide for the family (Cook, 1992; Pantazis and Gordon,

1997). As Chart 8.1 suggests, some mothers who failed in the transition from education to employment experienced poverty.

Poverty is one of the dominant characteristics of lone mothers (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998) and of female offenders (NACRO, 1996). It is, therefore, not surprising that several mothers in the study reported difficulties in organising their money. However, as the majority of the mothers had very little money to organise, it may simply have been a lack of sufficient money which led to their financial difficulties. Almost all of the mothers in the study suffered from worries about money at some time.

Although many mothers in the study had difficulty in managing on their budgets they received little financial help from the fathers of their children (see Table 7.3, Appendix 2). The income of, especially, mothers living on state benefits was very low (Table 5.4, Appendix 2), and some found their inability to cope was a cause of added stress. Some of these mothers attempted to alleviate their poverty by offending. Mothers who earned a satisfactory income did not express anxieties about money, in contrast to mothers who achieved a similar income from criminal activities.

Poverty was a dominant factor in the lives of many mothers in the study, in common with lone mothers generally (Ford, Marsh and McKay, 1995; Lewis, 1997a; Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998). Property offences tend to be related to difficulties with money. As we saw in Chapter 2, teenage mothers are often in financial hardship even before the birth of their baby (Phoenix, 1991). The majority of the mothers found it difficult to cope on their income, and so it is likely that poverty had an affect in offences of violence as well being a factor in property offences. The mothers' financial circumstances, and associated anxieties, were discussed in Chapter 5 on the transition from education to employment, but, often, material difficulties emerged as a secondary effect of failed family formation. Although loneliness caused them distress, the most tangible of the mothers' difficulties after separation from their partners was associated with financial problems:



After I left him, that's when I started shop lifting. Just started, and it gradually creeps up on you, getting food and little extra things to help out.  
(Carol)

Mothers who were convicted of a property offence, might, because of their offence group, be expected to fall into the poverty category, since all of them gave their financial situation as the reason for committing a property offence. Jenny and Diana also fall into the '*poverty*', category, since it was attempting to acquire money which prompted them to become involved in, respectively, armed robbery and drug dealing which led to assault.

More than half the mothers in the study described worrying constantly because they had too little money to cover essential expenditure, and highlighted a lack of money as their primary problem in the period before they committed an offence. Karen's weekly income, including single parent benefit, totalled £31, because her back payments for council tax and electricity were being deducted at source. She had to make frequent visits to the hospital with one of her children, and attributed her attempt to acquire extra money to her impossible financial situation. The effort to maintain comfortable homes was a cause of stress:

Always under stress. Always, because of money..under a lot of stress so I went to see my doctor and he give us tablets, mainly because the sleep, can't sleep. Nearly everything's second hand. I would have bought brand new things, you know, just to make a nice home..that's really your main priority.  
(Lorraine)

This kind of comment was typical of lone mothers in the study, whose main ambitions were to provide well for their children, and to:

I wanted to make a nice home, find a way of covering the bare, horrible, dark walls.  
(Liz)

After the utilities (electricity, gas and water) mothers in the study generally prioritised buying items of clothing, first for their children, and secondly for themselves. The mothers' third priority, as illustrated above by Liz, was to make their homes comfortable,

with carpets, furniture and well decorated rooms. Few lone mothers in the study, however, were able to achieve their ambitions on their legal income.

The greatest proportion of mothers perceived poverty as the main reason for committing an offence. However, at the point of committing an offence, the majority of mothers in the study felt compelled to improve their material circumstances. Priorities which caused the mothers to engage in property offences consisted of the desire to provide adequate food; essential travelling; items of clothing for their children of equal status to the clothing worn by their peers, so that they did not feel inferior to other children, carpets, furniture and decoration to make their homes comfortable.

Poverty was also cited as the initiating factor in the offences of two of the four mothers who were convicted of fraud. Both Karen (whose weekly income was below £50) and Liz were arrested at their first attempt at fraud, which they undertook only because they could see no other way of paying for items which they perceived to be essential to their children's well being. Karen explained that she had to take one of her son's to hospital each week, but could not afford the bus fares. Liz attributed her inability to find employment to racism because of her Afro Caribbean origin. She worried constantly about having no money put by in case of an emergency, or for an unexpectedly large bill. While some mothers felt they needed money to help with an exceptional and compelling situation, Liz was unique among the mothers in expressing a wish to have money not only to improve her current circumstances, but also:

To save for a rainy day.  
(Liz, Black British)

Offending by the low income mothers was carried out on an *ad hoc* basis, and mothers who stole occasionally from shops did not enjoy a high income. They became involved in offending as a last resort, often at Christmas, which was characterised for them by high expectations from their children, and an inability to fulfil those expectations. Christmas emerged as a stressful time in the year when mothers in the study felt pressure to provide for children. Louise and Freda borrowed money from a credit company which charged an exorbitant rate of interest (36 per cent). However Louise, who ceased employment



aged 17 when her first child arrived, was refused her usual loan one Christmas and, determined to provide what she perceived as essential presents for her children, went into town with friends who stole for her the items that she indicated to them she would like. She believed that she would not be convicted of an offence if she did not handle the stolen items herself:

It was near Christmastime, I'd say it was in December, and I went to town with friends and I wanted them to get me some presents for the children because I was pretty short at the time. I usually get a Shopacheck loan but they refused me, so I thought "Well I've got no money this time, so I'll have to resort to something else." So we went into town and they got me the stuff.

(Louise)

The amount of money or goods the lone mothers acquired was sometimes enough to improve their lives in the most fundamental ways. For some mothers this meant having enough food on their tables, and for others meant providing their children with clothes and trainers of the same standard (that is with designer labels) as their peers. Other mothers were detected before gaining any benefit from offending.

Diana and Jenny, whose crimes were the outcome of poverty, perceived offending as the only means which could provide a solution to their difficulties. Diana had set out to acquire extra money to provide her three children with presents and other festive items at Christmas by selling cannabis. She borrowed money from her bank to finance her initial purchase, but the dealer did not supply the cannabis although Diana had paid him £400. An enterprise which had been engaged upon for the purpose of making money in practice had the effect of worsening Diana's financial circumstances, as she had no cannabis to sell, but still had the bank loan to repay.

The inability to pay for what they saw as essential to their own and, in particular, their

children's well being caused an increasing sense of frustration. This so affected the lives of some of the mothers that acquiring extra money became their overriding preoccupation. Difficult financial circumstances can have an effect on every part of daily life. In addition to any direct effects of difficult financial circumstances, a discussion of poverty is relevant to the examination of links between lone mothers and offending since it is recognised that poverty induces stress (Reid, 1994). Significantly, some mothers sought to relieve stress through drugs or alcohol.

It would be a simple matter to link cause and effect if all the mothers in the poorer, top part of Table 5.4 were involved in property offences, to offset their poverty, and the remaining mothers were involved in some other type of offence. However, the complexity of the links between a particular set of circumstances and the decision to offend does not permit a simple causal connection.

Examination of Table 5.4 shows that, if we disregard for now those mothers whose incomes were derived in some part from crime, and notice instead that, while mothers whose only income was from benefit are, for the most part, in the poorer sections of the table, mothers whose incomes included a wage from paid employment have a higher income than those who are solely dependent on benefit. These mothers incomes begin at the level of £91 or more each week, and extend, in Julie's case, into the top level of more than £300 a week. Although it is not valid to generalise from such a small sample, these mothers nonetheless demonstrate, in support of government policy (Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998) that mothers who participate in the labour market are likely to increase their overall income compared with mothers who exist only on benefit (Bradshaw et al., 1996).

Four primary factors which female offenders gave as reasons for offending in a study by Carlen (1988: 12), comprised poverty, being in care, drug or alcohol addiction, and the '*quest for excitement*'. While poverty, being in care and substance addiction are features of the lives of mothers in this study, the '*quest for excitement*' may be explained as a perceived way out of impoverished lives. Table 6.2 (Appendix 2) shows the type of offence for which the mothers were imprisoned, whether they acted alone or with an



associate and, if the crime was committed jointly, who their associates were. Offences committed by the lone mothers in the study are categorised in Table 8.1 (Appendix 2). To enable an investigation of any links between the type of offence, and whether offences were committed alone or jointly. Before I begin a discussion of the various types of offence I should provide the caution that it was not a simple matter in all cases to assign an offence to a particular category, (for example Cathy's offence of driving a car while under the influence of alcohol). The categories comprise offences which involved (i) violence, (ii) property, or were (iii) drug related.

Although the mothers with the lowest incomes did not improve their weekly income as a result of their offending, this was the result of a lack of success rather than a lack of will, since all except one had committed property offences with the sole aim of benefiting financially. However, some mothers who achieved a substantial weekly income expressed difficulty in managing, as their tastes changed to accommodate an extravagant life style:

When I was shop lifting I used to get about a hundred pound a day. But in the end that seemed like, I couldn't even live on five six hundred pound a week. I needed more and more. I didn't care, I used to just waste it.

(Davina, Black British)

Ethnic origin may play a part in offending activity, as an indirect response to racism. It is also important to note that people from ethnic minorities are over-represented in the courts and in the prison system compared with the general population (Hood, 1992; Home Office, 1997b). Liz (Black British, of Afro-Caribbean origin) said that fraud seemed to be the only means of acquiring the money she desperately needed.

Some of the mothers in the study, especially those who had been in care for a major proportion of their adolescence, were unable to cope with handling money. This resulted in need for extra money, usually as a product of shop lifting. Some mothers' income from benefit was inadequate. Petty shop lifting developed into a quasi-career:

I was pregnant with Brian, my first [and needed] like baby clothes and a pushchair and things like that. It wasn't for money then actually it was for things for my son. But now it is to sell things again to get money. It's been like that for a long time. Going every day, in an average week, I would make at least five hundred, six hundred pound<sup>18</sup>, travelling all over the country in a car, this time there was seven of us. It's just like a skill really. You have to have somebody to carry the bag out, somebody to fill it, somebody to look about, somebody to maybe pull the shop assistant, it's a skill more than anything else, everybody has their own role to play.

(Lorraine, began shoplifting soon after leaving care, when she was 18)

Lorraine appeared to enjoy raised self esteem as a result of her prowess at shop lifting. Lorraine estimated the number of her previous convictions as greater than 15. She began stealing because of poverty, and then became proud of her skill as a successful shop lifter, regarding it as work. Her skill appeared to give Lorraine a sense of self esteem which had previously been lacking in her life.

None of the mothers who relied on benefit (or maintenance from the children's father in Diana's case) thought that their income was adequate, although not all of them resorted to stealing to improve their material situation. Only those mothers who worked had felt that their legitimate income was adequate to support themselves and their children.

Not all the mothers had been poor when they committed the offence for which they were imprisoned, and some had a weekly income of £111 or more, which they perceived to be adequate. However, examination of the *source* of income for these eight mothers (disregarding Freda) in the top three income groups shows that only four of them received their income by legitimate means. These four mothers were in paid employment, and Denise had her wage supplemented by benefit.

The remaining mothers achieved their incomes of over £300 a week (at the time they committed the offence) as a result of theft. Although they had a good income at the time they were arrested, these mothers describe a lack of enough money to cover essential expenditure as the reason they had first started to steal. This included funding their heroin

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<sup>18</sup>Lorraine did not include gains from offending in her income.



habits for Tracy and Tara. Shoplifting became a habitual occupation for three of these mothers, which provided them with a regular income. They spent a substantial proportion of their time, several days each week, stealing from shops, which they regarded as work. They travelled to distant parts of the country so that they would not become familiar to, or recognised by, the staff in the shops in their local town.

Sally achieved a high income from fraud. She too had been living on an income she described as inadequate until she became an accomplice to her new boy friend (not her child's father) and lived very well for a while on the fruits of her fraudulent activity.

Poverty was described as the primary reason for offending by a number of mothers, although some who had started offending because of poverty improved their life style substantially by successful theft. Thus the reasons for offending, of mothers who had not been caught early in their criminal activities, changed from necessity to a wish to continue their comfortable existence, which was made possible only by continuing to break the law. What began as theft for necessity became a habit which regularly financed a lifestyle well beyond some of the mothers' original needs or expectations:

As you can see, my life's just quite dropped. It was just that. [I would] go out to dinner every night of the week. Have breakfast in a restaurant. Have dinner in a restaurant, go to the pub and think nothing of spending hundred pound in a pub in a couple of hours. Me and [her son] used to go to dinner every night with my friend and her little boy.

(Davina)

Mothers who successfully made a good income from theft continued stealing partly because of the '*quest for excitement*' another of the four factors suggested as related to women's offending (Carlen, 1988), but these mothers too began their criminal careers as a result of financial difficulties. Davina's shop lifting and its rewards had become a way of life and, despite her high income, she found herself continually short of money, and needed increasingly large amounts as time went by. While it might be thought, intuitively, that mothers who steal from shops would be among the poorest in the study, reference to Table 5.5 shows that these mothers' incomes exceeded £300 a week.

Thus Davina, came to regard offending as a regular, generally successful and exciting



enterprise, in contrast to mothers who put their energy into a single endeavour in an attempt to extricate themselves from their immediate problems. Denise and Debbie, similarly, had no *need* to commit their offence, but they, unlike Davina, only became involved in one such offence (although they had used cannabis over a period of time without detection).

The above offences are exceptional among the more mundane needs of the majority of mothers for extra money to provide their families with what they considered to be the essentials of everyday life. One of the objectives of the study is to ascertain the mothers' perceptions of why they committed their offences. Carlen (1988: 108) suggests that '*Individual human will is but one factor, and not a major one in shaping someone's life history*'. It is likely that mothers who were arrested for their first offence were inhibited from making further attempts to increase their income in this way, whereas mothers whose early efforts were successful continued to offend, over several years in some cases. The reasons why some mothers became involved in the offences of which they were convicted are less tangible than the pursuit of material benefit.

#### *Social support and the influence of other people*

Relationships are crucial to the emotional health of human beings (Laing, 1972; Hobson, 1985). However, a few mothers in the sample never lived with the fathers of their children, and described their relationship with the fathers as non-existent or casual. Other mothers suffered the loss of a meaningful relationship with the fathers of their children, and some found the separation very hard to bear. Only Freda, whose common law husband lived at a separate address, but with whom Freda otherwise remained in a stable relationship, had not experienced such loss.

Mothers had been very upset when their partners left them. Although some mothers could appreciate the benefits of autonomy and being in charge of their households, none would have chosen to be alone. These mothers who took the initiative in ending relationships felt more in control of their lives once they were living alone with their children, while regretting the loss of the relationship. Almost all the mothers felt that carrying the sole responsibility for their children was a heavy burden. Although a few



mothers were able to share some responsibility for the children with the fathers, their contact was infrequent in most cases. Mothers expressed concerns which ranged from money to loneliness, or violence from an ex-partner.

I discussed the importance of social support from family and friends in Chapter 7. However, social support was a double edged sword for some of the mothers, when the same people who provided support were instrumental in helping them to offend. Mothers who had only a small circle of social support perceived an especially difficult choice to make when a member of their support circle suggested committing an offence. Their particular relationship with the person may have added another dimension to the decision making process. Committing an offence with friends may be seen as an easy, and even companionable, option. The reverse may be true if a mother refuses to participate in the suggested offence, especially if her social support consequently threatens to desert her. The dynamics of carrying out a criminal act alone or with other people was crucial to some of the mothers' decisions to commit an offence. However, other than crowd, mob and gang effects (Thrasher, 1963), in which the primary element was the group of people, rather than the offence, little literature was found on offenders acting alone or jointly.

While many of the mothers cited loneliness as a major disadvantage of lone motherhood, a majority committed an offence jointly with another person or persons, and the influence of other people may emerge as another factor contributing to women becoming involved in offending.

Table 8.1 (Appendix 2) shows that few mothers committed the offence for which they were imprisoned alone, and the majority carried out the offence jointly with one or more associates. Their accomplices comprised partners, ex-partners, friends and, in one case, a sister. Table 8.1 shows that it was more usual for mothers whose offences involved theft (without violence) to be convicted with friends. Julie also became involved in supplying cannabis through her friends.<sup>19</sup> Table 8.1 shows that only two categories of

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<sup>19</sup>Julie claimed to be innocent of her conviction, but associated with people who committed offences.

offence, violence against the person and theft and handling, fraud and forgery, were carried out alone. Offences which involved other kinds of violence were carried out either alone or with a partner, or ex-partner. Mary perceived her involvement to have been instigated by the sister of her ex-partner, of whom she was afraid, and she felt *as if* she were being influenced by him through his sister.

Although one mother carried out a property offence with her partner, none of the mothers carried out an offence incorporating violence with a friend. Violence is perceived as a more serious crime, and Table 8.1 demonstrates that involvement in a more serious crime was undertaken only with someone with whom the mother had already developed a close relationship. Thus it appears that greater trust between accomplices is required in an offence involving violence than in an offence involving only property.

Denise and Debbie, who described sharing a close relationship, were jointly convicted of kidnapping and assault as the result of an outing to a night club together. It may be that the involvement of other people gave courage to some of the mothers to actually commit themselves to carrying out their offence, while spreading some of the responsibility for acting illegally. Offending jointly may also be the result of female psychological development and its relation to women's subordination, exemplified in deference to the influence of others.

### *Acting independently*

Mothers who committed their offence without the aid, or the involvement of another person had, in contrast to the mothers described in the previous section, made an individual and conscious decision to engage in a criminal action. Three of these mothers had assaulted an acquaintance against whom they had a grudge. The victims who were assaulted by the mothers had been responsible for the breakdown of a relationship, one with the mother herself, one with a mother's sister, and the third with a mother's daughter. The assault in these three cases appears to have been entirely the result of stress. Noreen's offence, which she denied, of falsifying accounts at her place of work, by its nature, is only likely to involve one person.



Tracy and Tara had carried out their shop lifting on their own, in contrast to the other three mothers who were convicted of shop lifting, who carried out their offences as members of a group. Success for them was vital, as they felt that a regular supply of heroin was essential. They therefore always went shop lifting alone. However, the mothers who were most heavily involved in drug related crime offended on a regular daily basis to support their habit, committing offences which generated a high monetary value compared with other mothers in the study. They both operated alone when shop lifting, because this was safer than 'working' with other people. Non-violent offences which had been committed for gain, with an associate, appeared to lack the urgency and emotional involvement of offences involving violence. Davina, for example, was convicted of conspiracy to steal jointly with a girl friend, as a result of their shoplifting together.

Two mothers who shoplifted in order to support their drug habit differ from other mothers in the study who went shoplifting. Their need for money was imperative as they could not envisage life without heroin, which they bought on a regular daily basis. Both mothers said that they had started out shoplifting with friends, but had opted to do so alone because they found that they were more likely to be caught when offending with others, who were less skilful than themselves.

Although the relationships with their partners had failed, other people influenced a substantial number of mothers towards their criminal acts. Table 8.1 shows that only six of the mothers committed their offence by themselves. Debbie and Denise are unusual because they committed their offence together. They were very close friends, who always went out together, and neither of them had a partner. Indeed, it may be that they were partners in a lesbian relationship, although they did not say this in their interviews. Karen is unusual because she committed the offence with her sister. No other mother in the study offended with a family member.

Jenny perceived the plan to rob a bank as the only way out of a seemingly impossible situation. Jenny's perception was that, in her individual circumstances, her response to her situation was rational. Diana, especially, became involved in crime as a result of her

black partner's culture, and links through him to other members of the black community who were engaged in criminal activities. Diana's partner, whom she saw approximately once a week, suggested assaulting the dealer to force him to honour the bargain. Diana therefore became involved in a *violent* offence at her partner's suggestion.

Emotional distress and abuse in childhood might usefully be added to factors associated with women's offending. Some mothers saw little option other than action which, at the same time, constituted a criminal offence, while others knowingly took pathways to criminal careers, and demonstrate the multi-causal nature of offending. Some mothers describe a happy childhood, and enjoyed the support of their immediate and their extended family, yet went on to involvement in a criminal career.

### *Identifying protective factors*

The offences of the '*successful*' mothers cut across the offence group classifications described in Table 6.2 (Appendix 2) so that drug offences, property offences, violence against the person, and motoring offences are represented. In view of their income groups it is perhaps not surprising that only one of the '*successful*' mothers committed a property offence. Julie was convicted of a drug offence (even if Julie were innocent of the offence of which she was convicted, she nevertheless used cannabis and was close friends with the people who had asked her to store it); Denise and Debbie were jointly convicted of a violent offence (kidnapping); Cathy was convicted of a motoring offence, and Noreen was convicted of false accounting.

An examination of the situations and offences of the '*successful*' mothers may illuminate the contrasting circumstances of the mothers with problems. Of the five mothers who were successful in their employment and housing careers, Julie denied knowledge of the offence of which she had been convicted (storing cannabis), Noreen denied her offence of fraud in her employment, Cathy's offence was a motoring accident, and so not planned, and Debbie and Denise spontaneous jointly kidnapped a man who gave them a lift home from a night club, by locking him in Denise's house. It can be argued, firstly, that none of these offences was planned, and they are therefore qualitatively different from offences committed to alleviate poverty emotional distress, or to provide drugs.



Factors which have been identified as possibly associated with risk of offending and protection against offending are set out below.

<u>Risk factors</u>		<u>Protective factors</u>	
1	abuse in childhood	1	good enough parenting
2	placement into care	2	childhood in family home
3	poverty, lacking opportunities for:	3	paid employment, full or part time provides:
	i) social contact		i) social contact
	ii) purpose each day		ii) meaningful and structured day
	iii) insufficient money for		iii) money for
	a) essential items		a) essential items
	b) social life		b) a social life
4	less than two separate sources of social support	4	at least two sources of social support
5	addiction to hard drugs	5	no substance addiction
6	Housing	6	Housing
	a) leaving home before 17		a) leaving home age 17 or later
	b) unsatisfactory accommodation		b) satisfactory accommodation

**List 8.4 Risk factors and protective factors in relation to offending**

It can secondly be argued that all the offences committed jointly occurred in association with a significant person in the mothers' lives: Julie stored packages for friends, Cathy went with her friend to a night club, and Debbie and Denise's were mutually important to each other. (That three of the five 'successful' mothers were convicted as a result of an evening at a night club is also interesting, but will not be pursued here because their offences appear to have happened by chance or spontaneously.)

	Denise	Debbie	Noreen	Julie	Cathy
employment	successful	successful	successful	successful	successful
housing	successful	successful	successful	successful	successful
domestic	failed	failed	failed	failed	failed

**Table 8.5: Mothers who succeeded in employment and housing careers**

The interesting point is that mothers who, in contrast to the majority in the study, were successful, apparently had the means and the opportunity to enjoy a social life which was not available to many of the mothers. Thus a social life may prove to be a '*protective*' factor, as opposed to a risk factor, in relation to offending.

Further differences between the five '*successful*' mothers and the other mothers can be found in Table 5.3 (Appendix 2), which shows that the successful mothers were working.<sup>20</sup> Therefore a regular occupation, such as employment or study may be a protective factor in relation to offending<sup>21</sup>. Work is recognised as having meaning in several important ways in addition to providing an income (Jahoda, 1982). Apart from the structure they impose on the daily routine, work and study at college provide regular and sustained social contact as well as, for the mothers in paid employment, the financial means to support a social life. Thus paid employment may provide protection against becoming involved in an offence in three discrete ways: firstly, by providing social contact at work, secondly by giving meaning and structure to the mothers' lives, and thirdly by providing an income so that mothers could afford to go out socially.

Examination of Table 5.4 (Appendix 2) reveals that, apart from the working mothers described above, only mothers whose income was a product of criminal activities had a weekly income in excess of £300. If they had not offended it is likely that their income would have been low, since inadequate income was the reason they gave for starting to

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<sup>20</sup>Cathy was simultaneously studying for a child care qualification.

<sup>21</sup>Mothers in employment are also less likely to be sentenced to custody.



offend.

Thus it appears that poverty is one of the major risk factors in relation to offending, which itself contributes to a second risk factor: an impoverished social life. The benefits of work, as protective factors against offending, were described above. None of the four '*successful*' mothers was in the lowest income group. Cathy, who received a student grant, had the lowest income of these mothers. The other mothers were in the two highest income groups, of greater than £150 weekly and could not be described as living in poverty. All carried out their offence with a friend, and Debbie and Denise with each other, which may demonstrate that offences related to '*excitement*' are more likely to be committed by more than one person - they might be described as sociable offences.

Social support is another factor which may inhibit a propensity to offend. All of the '*successful*' mothers had support from their own mothers as well as from friends. Indeed they are the *only* mothers in the study who had the support of both friends and mothers. Social support from more than one source is therefore likely to be a protective factor.

The age at which lone mothers leave home may, as suggested previously, be a factor in relation to risk of offending. The '*successful*' mothers left home later than the average for mothers in the study. Debbie left home at 17, Denise and Julie at 18, and Cathy stayed at home till she was 19 (see Table 6.1, Appendix 2). It appears, then, that mothers who leave home early are more at risk of offending than mothers who stay at home until at least 17 years old.

The use of soft drugs may be a risk factor in relation to offending (Debbie, Denise and Julie all used cannabis) although personal use is not an offence serious enough to warrant a prison sentence. However, it is possible that their judgment was impaired by cannabis, as Cathy's had been by alcohol, so that they spontaneously became involved in criminal acts which they might have shunned when not under the influence of cannabis. Hard drugs, such as heroin, on the other hand, incorporated an imperative need to acquire regular, large amounts of money to support the habit (Devlin, 1998), and addiction to these substances is therefore qualitatively different. Addiction to hard drugs likely to

constitute a risk factor (beside being in possession of the substance, itself an offence) for offending.

Thus the propensity to offend can be viewed as comprising a number of contributory factors. Mothers at high risk of offending, because of a preponderance of at risk factors, might balance these with protective factors, and so diminish the likelihood that they will break the law. The number of protective and risk factors is likely to be important in relation to the propensity to offend, and perhaps one protective factor provides insufficient protection for mothers whose lives are otherwise beset with negative risk factors. Many mothers perceived little real choice, in relation to their involvement in offending. Many unchangeable factors were directing the mothers to behave in a certain way that they perceived no other option.

#### **8.4 Conclusions**

Although policies appear to be made in the belief that potential criminals will weigh in the balance the likelihood of being apprehended for committing a crime, and the probable sentence which a certain crime will warrant, none of the mothers in this study displayed any indication of performing this kind of cost-benefit analysis. Most mothers could see no other way out of their difficulties, which were so pressing that the thought of arrest and the possibility of imprisonment seemed not to have entered their thoughts. In other words, sentencing to custody does not deter possible offenders.

The most fruitful means of decreasing offending at least, and importantly, among lone mothers, is to create the circumstances in which the risk factors for offending are diminished and the protective factors are supported, since currently:

Disturbed behaviour which does not challenge adult rules is frequently  
unrecognised.  
(Cleaver, 1996: 11)

This is not to advocate that lone mothers with small babies should be expected to work in paid employment. Rather, social support should be encouraged and, crucially, an adequate income provided for mothers with babies and young children. At the same time, free child care might encourage mothers to participate in part time work, with the concomitant protective factors of social contacts, lives which encompass structure and



meaning, and a wage so that they might benefit from a regular social outing.

The most damaging effect on the lives of the children of the mothers in this study was the separation because of the prison sentence. Thus a change in sentencing policy may have the most beneficial long term effects for lone mothers, and for their children. Little literature was found on studies which examine the effects of the presence of children at arrest or the dynamics of sole or joint offending. These are subjects which might provide fruitful areas for future research.

Leslie James, a barrister, has criticised the anomaly of judges and Home Secretaries who make speeches about '*right*' and '*wrong*' unsupported by a defined moral code (James, 1997; and see Chapter 1). I have attempted to show in this thesis that James is also correct when he argues (substituting the female pronoun) that:

It must, therefore, be accepted that the criminal is not ultimately responsible for what she is. She is the victim of circumstances. Unless all the effects of genetics and environment were excluded by free will, there could not be a true responsibility...There but for a different genetic and environmental history go I.

(James, 1997: 793)

Thus it is the responsibility of all, as policy makers, as judges, police, academics and the wider society to facilitate a decrease in risk factors, and an increase in protective factors in relation to lone mothers and offending.

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**APPENDIX 1**  
**TOPIC GUIDE**

Explain the reason for study, and objectives of the research. Explain that information is in confidence, and that participants will not be identifiable at any stage of the research by any person apart from the researcher. Explain that the mother is not obliged to talk about any topic if she prefers not to. Ask if mother has any objection to the interview being tape recorded on audio equipment.

**1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

1. Age
2. Racial group, and racial group of children
3. Home region in England
4. Length of time in lone status
5. Tenure and length of time in present home
6. Weekly income at the time of the offence (probe whether official and unofficial are different)
7. Details of welfare benefits
8. Approximate breakdown of weekly expenditure
9. Details of employment I) at time of offence ii) currently
10. Age and sex of child/ren
11. Details about legal custodian of all children
12. Marital status i) at time of offence ii) currently
13. Is mother in contact with the father of any child i) at the time of the offence ii) currently
14. Details of mother's siblings
15. Details of offences committed by other family members
16. Mother's age at first and subsequent arrests
17. Length of i) sentence and ii) imprisonment
18. Mother's offence
19. Details of any previous offences.



## **2 FAMILY BACKGROUND AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Relationship with own mother/ father/ siblings as child

Childhood mostly happy/unhappy; play with friends?

Experience of being in care

How mother came to leave home; did parents mind?

How met child's father; best/worst about relationship

Father working or on benefit? Did they share

(i) child care

(ii) money;

Did they go out socially? Where?

How became lone mother; did father

(i) pay maintenance?

(ii) see child?

Has mother had partners since? Probe how many, situation at time of offence, current situation

Best/worst thing about being a lone mother; any support from family or others

(i) financial

(ii) social

## **3 MONEY**

General financial situation

Views on employment

What would mother have spent on if she had had more money?

How might greater income have altered life?

## **4 MOTHERS' CIRCUMSTANCES PRIOR TO OFFENCE**

Feelings about life at time of offence

Any special person in life at time of offence

Most important relationship

Best/ worst thing about relationship

Any particular difficulties at time of offence

Coping strategies

Would mother recognise similar situation in the future?

How would mother cope with similar situation in future?

Circumstances under which mother would reoffend

Any relevant comments/questions

## **5 OFFENCE**

How/why commit offence; probe circumstances in which mother might not have offended

Reasons for thinking committing offence acceptable/not acceptable

Reactions to offending and imprisonment of

(i) family

(ii) friends



APPENDIX 2

TABLES

	<i>Age at leaving school</i>		<i>Qualifications</i>
Diana	15		CSE x 5; GCSE x 2 (college)
Norma	15 (at approved school to 17)	C	none
Louise	12 (at approved school to 15)	C	none
Carol	14 (at approved school to 16)	C	Pitman's RSA 1 and 2; GCSE x 2
Denise	16		none
Debbie	15 (secretarial college for 1 year)	C	GCSE x 5; typing
Noreen	18 (teacher training college for 1 year)		GCSE x 6
Davina	16		CSE x 4
Tara	13 (at approved school to 15)	C	none
Tracy	15		none
Karen	15		CSE x 2; RSA typing
Liz	17		none
Jenny	14	C	none
Sally	15 (at 16 YTS secretarial course)		none
Julie	16; day release to college for 3/4 years		GCSE x 8; ONC chemistry
Lorraine	13 (at 18 started nursery nurse training)	C	none
Mary	15	C	none
Donna	16	C	GCSE x 2; RSA typing
Cathy	18		CEE x 7; GCSE x 7
Freda	14	C	none

Key: C - Mothers who had spent a period in local authority care.

**Table 5.1: Lone mothers' educational qualifications on leaving school**

<i>Mothers in care</i>	<i>Age at entry</i>	<i>Reason for placement</i>	<i>Time in care</i>
Diana			
Norma	15	shop lifting and theft R	2 years
Louise	12; 14	i) running away; ii) affray R	6 months; 2 years
Carol	14	shop lifting F	2 years
Denise			
Debbie	13	behavioural problems R	2 years
Noreen			
Davina			
Tara	12	protection from abuse R	5 years
Tracy			
Karen			
Liz			
Jenny	13	running away (from sexual abuse) R	2 months
Sally			
Julie			
Lorraine	2	mother in prison F; R	16 years
Mary	14	protection from abuse R	2 years
Donna	14	behavioural problems R	3 years
Cathy			
Freda	9; 13	i) mother's illness; ii) truancy R	3 years x 2

Key: R - residential home; F - foster home

**Table 5.2: Mothers' perceptions of why they were placed in care, and the duration of their stay in care**



	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Reason for leaving</i>
Diana	psychiatric nurse	2 years	birth of child
Norma	machinist	< 1 year	fell asleep at work
Louise	shop assistant; factory worker	< 1 year	birth of child
Carol	cleaning: part time, undeclared	> 2 years	intermittent employment
Denise	waitress: part time	> 2 years	imprisonment
Debbie	typist	< 1 year	birth of child
Noreen	wages clerk; bookkeeping	> 2 years	continuing employment
Davina	none	-	-
Tara	none	-	-
Tracy	factory worker	3 weeks	became involved in drugs
Karen	factory worker	> 2 years	to look after partner's children
Liz	sales assistant; child minder	> 2 years	intermittent employment
Jenny	fairground; waitress	< 1 year	under age, so not legal employment
Sally	YTS	< 1 year	-
Julie	industrial colour chemist	> 2 years	continuing employment
Lorraine	biscuit factory worker	2 weeks	disliked work
Mary	none	-	-
Donna	secretary	< 1 year	lost accommodation
Cathy	in children's home; nanny	> 2 years	birth of child
Freda	YTS: laundry assistant	< 2 years	scheme ended

**Table 5.3: Mothers' employment records**

<i>Weekly income</i>	<i>Mother</i>	<i>Source</i>
£50 and below	Jenny Karen Donna	benefit benefit benefit
£51 - £70	Louise Liz Lorraine	benefit benefit benefit
£71 - £90	Norma Mary Cathy Diana	benefit benefit student grant maintenance
£91 - £110	Carol (p-t work)	benefit + wage
£111 - £150	Freda Noreen (f-t work)	benefit wage
£151 - £300	Denise (p-t work) Debbie (f-t work)	benefit + wage wage
More than £300	Julie (f-t work) Davina Tara, Tracy Sally	wage + maintenance crime + benefit crime crime

Key: f-t - full time; p-t - part time

**Table 5.4: Mothers' weekly incomes: amounts and sources, and offence type**



	<i>Age</i>	<i>Reason for leaving</i>	<i>Type of housing</i>
Diana	15	conflict at home/to partner	bed-sit 3 months, then flat U
Norma	16	discharged from care; ejected by parents	roofless UH
Louise	16	discharged from care	hostel P
Carol	15	abscond from care	friends' houses UH
Denise	17	birth of baby	flat P
Debbie	17	attend college; to form household with partner	bed-sit; partner's home P
Noreen	18	attend college	bed-sit P
Davina	16	conflict at home	friends' houses; flat UH
Tara	15	abscond from care	friends' houses UH
Tracy	15	live with partner	squat UH
Karen	16	ejected by parents	share flat U
Liz	18	conflict at home	bed sit U
Jenny	14	ran away from home after discharge from care	friends' houses UH
Sally	15	argument with mother	friends' houses UH
Julie	18	conflict at home/ to partner	partner's house U
Lorraine	18	discharged from care	flat P
Mary	17	to evade care, lived with partner*	partner's family home U
Donna	16	discharged from care	flat P
Cathy	19	live with partner	partner's flat P
Freda	16	discharged from care	flat P

\* partner in a marriage of convenience to give husband British citizenship

Key: P - planned transition; U - unplanned transition; H - homeless after transition

**Table 6.1: Age at leaving home, reason for leaving and subsequent type of accommodation**

	<i>Offence</i>	<i>Lone/joint act</i>	<i>Sentence length</i>	<i>Time in prison</i>
Diana	GBH, drug related	with partner	3 years	12 months
Norma	ABH+ wounding with intent	alone	15 months	5 months
Louise	handling stolen goods + s/l	with friends	6 months	3 months
Carol	GBH (previously attempted murder) s/l	alone	18 months	6 months
Denise	unlawful + false imprisonment	with Debbie	18 months	6 months
Debbie	unlawful + false imprisonment	with Denise	18 months	6 months
Noreen	theft + false accounting (claimed innocent)	alone	18 months	6 months
Davina	s/l and conspiracy to thefy	with friend	12 months	6 months
Tara	s/l to support drug habit	alone	12 months	6 months
Tracy	s/l to support drug habit	alone	6.5 months	3.5 months
Karen	fraud (£98 on credit card)	with sister	3 months	1.5 months
Liz	deception + fraud	with friends	12 months	6 months
Jenny	armed robbery (car driver)	with child's father	3 years 6 months	2 years
Sally	cheque book fraud	with partner	3 years	12 months
Julie	supplying cannabis (claimed innocent)	with friends	15 months	5 months
Lorraine	conspiracy to theft	with friends	15 months	6 months
Mary	aiding and abetting burglary	with partner's sister	2 years 6 months	10 months
Donna	GBH	alone	9 months	4.5 months
Cathy	death by reckless driving under influence of alcohol	alone	21 months	7 months
Freda	s/l + conspiracy to theft	with friends	15 months	6 months

Key: GBH - grievous bodily harm; ABH - actual bodily harm; s/l - shop lifting

**Table 6.2: Offences, associates, sentence and imprisonment lengths**



	<i>Age met</i>	<i>Status of</i>	<i>Cohabited</i>	<i>Lasted</i>	<i>Ended</i>	<i>Physical</i>
	<i>partner</i>	<i>relationshi</i>		<i>(yrs)</i>		<i>violence</i>
Diana <	23	married	yes	5	father	no
Norma	20	c/l	yes	13	death	no
Louise <	18	none	no	—	—	—
Carol	14	c/l	yes	10	mother	yes
Denise <	17	casual	no	—	—	yes
Debbie <	16	c/l	yes	3	mother	yes
Noreen	21	married	yes	22	father	no
Davina	16	c/l	yes	6	mother	yes
Tara	15	c/l	yes	5	father	no
Tracy	15	c/l	yes	5	death	no
Karen <	22	c/l	yes	5	mother	yes
Liz <	21	casual	no	—	—	no
Jenny <	17	married	yes	3	father	yes
Sally	16	none	no	—	—	—
Julie	18	casual	yes	1	father	no
Lorraine	18	c/l	yes	5	father	yes
Mary <	19	none	no	—	—	yes
Donna	18	c/law	yes	2	father	yes
Cathy	19	c/l	yes	6	father	yes
Freda	18	c/l	yes	12	ongoing	no

Key: < - children to more than one father; c/l - common law relationship  
The partners coded in Table 7.1 are the fathers of first born children.

**Table 7.1: Outline of the relationships between mothers and fathers**

	<i>Age at first baby</i>		<i>Age at first baby</i>
Diana	19	Karen	20
Norma	19	Liz	19
Louise	17	Jenny	18
Carol	17	Sally	18
Denise	17	Julie	19
Debbie	17	Lorraine	19
Noreen	21	Mary	19
Davina	17	Donna	20
Tara	16	Cathy	21
Tracy	18	Freda	20

**Table 7.2: Ages of mothers when first child was born**



	<i>Maintenance</i>	<i>Contact with child's father</i>	<i>Source of support</i>
Diana	£80 weekly	yes	none
Norma	none	no	sister; welfare officer
Louise	none	no	mother
Carol	none	no	none
Denise	none	no	mother; siblings; friend*
Debbie	none	no	mother; friend*
Noreen	none	no	none
Davina	none	yes	mother + father
Tara	none	yes	none
Tracy	none	no	mother
Karen	none	no	sister*
Liz	none	yes	none
Jenny	none	yes	mother
Sally	none	no	father
Julie	£17.50 weekly	no	mother; grandmother; friends*
Lorraine	none	no	sister*
Mary	none	no	none
Donna	none	no	sister
Cathy	none	yes	mother; friend*
Freda	none	yes	partner; father

\* denotes an associate in the offence

**Table 7.3: Money received from the fathers prior to the offence, and sources of social support**

	<i>Offence type</i>	<i>Lone/joint act</i>
Diana	drug related violence	with partner
Norma	violence	alone
Louise	property	with friends
Carol	violence	alone
Denise	violence	with Debbie
Debbie	violence	with Denise
Noreen	property (claimed innocent)	alone
Davina	property	with friend
Tara	property to support drug habit	alone
Tracy	property to support drug habit	alone
Karen	property	with sister
Liz	property	with friends
Jenny	property with violence	with child's father and friends
Sally	property	with partner
Julie	drug related	with friends
Lorraine	property	with sister and friends
Mary	property with violence	with partner's sister
Donna	violence	alone
Cathy	substance abuse	with friend
Freda	property	with friends

**Table 8.1: Type of offence and accomplice**



	<i>Offence type</i>	<i>Weekly income</i>
Diana	drug related violence	£71 - £90
Norma	violence	£71 - £90
Louise	property	£51 - £70
Carol	violence	£91 - £110
Denise	violence	£151 - £300
Debbie	violence	£151 - £300
Noreen	property (claimed innocent)	£111 - £150
Davina	property	More than £300
Tara	property to support drug habit	More than £300
Tracy	property to support drug habit	More than £300
Karen	property	£50 or below
Liz	property	£51 - £70
Jenny	property with violence	£50 or below
Sally	property	More than £300
Julie	drug related	More than £300
Lorraine	property	£51 - £70
Mary	property with violence	£71 - £90
Donna	violence	£50 or below
Cathy	substance abuse	£71 - £90
Freda	property	£111 - £150

**Table 8.2: Type of offence and weekly income of lone mothers**

## APPENDIX 3

### LIFE HISTORIES OF THE MOTHERS IN THE STUDY

Some of the mothers in the study experienced eventful childhoods, and their histories are therefore longer than those who had little to say about their early years. Table A3.1 shows the age groups of the mothers when the interviews took place.

Age group	Mothers
21-29	8
30-39	10
40-49	1
50-59	1
Total	20

**Table 3.1** Age groups of mothers at interview

#### 1. Carol

Carol's early years were characterised by rows between her parents, as a result of which she developed a close friendship with her uncle. She was not allowed to stay overnight with friends, nor to have friends stay at her home.

Carol started running away from home when she was 13. Consequently, she became subject to a court order to be detained at approved school for three years. By the time the order was made Carol was 14 years old and had been arrested many times for shoplifting.

Carol left school aged 14, when she met her child's father. When she was 15 Carol absconded from care and found work in a bar. She continued to shoplift, and started to use illegal drugs. After eight months she was recaptured and returned to the school. Shortly after this, Carol's mother made her one visit in the two years she was



at approved school, and her father disowned her. Carol returned to her parents' home for a few weeks when she was 17 after her discharge from approved school, but was distressed by her father's refusal to speak to her. Her social worker therefore placed her in a foster home where she stayed until she ran away with a boy friend, with whom she had a relationship before being detained, and who was to be the father of her only child.

Carol became a mother aged 17, and left the violent relationship with her partner when she was 24. Carol Pitmans typing and GCSE while in care.

Carol had several convictions for violence against the person, and had served several prison sentences. She was most recently convicted of GBH.

## **2. Cathy**

Cathy lived with her parents and her two older brothers, and enjoyed a happy and uneventful childhood. She stayed at school until she was 18, and left with 7 x GCSEs.

Cathy left home when she was 19 to live with her boyfriend of one year. Two years later they had a child and were allocated a house by the local authority, where Cathy was still living at the time of the interview. Cathy was very upset when her partner left her after four years for another woman.

She worked in child care, and was studying for child care qualifications at the time of the offence.

Cathy was convicted when she was 25 of causing death by reckless driving while under the influence of alcohol, and was imprisoned for 21 months. This was her only offence

## **3. Davina**

Davina, Black British, was brought up with two older brothers and a younger brother, and an older sister by her white mother and West Indian father. Relations between

herself and, particularly, her mother deteriorated when Davina started a relationship with a boyfriend of whom her mother disapproved. Davina's mother told her to leave home after a heated argument, and so she left, when she was 16.

She gained four CSE passes before leaving school at 16.

Davina became pregnant, and moved in with her grandmother for a while before moving into a flat of her own. Davina disliked the flat, and so presented herself as homeless.

Her baby arrived when she was 17, and she received the keys to a local authority house in March. Her baby's father occasionally stayed with Davina, but also stayed with other women. It was a violent relationship which Davina ended when her son was aged three.

Davina began offending when she was 16, to supplement her benefit, and continued for several years before she was convicted of her first offence. She still living in the same local authority house with her son, aged four, when was convicted for a third time, and sentenced to 12 months imprisonment for shoplifting and conspiracy to theft.

#### **4. Debbie**

Debbie was the youngest in her family, with two older brothers and a sister who often cared for Debbie. Their father died when Debbie was eight years old, which upset her greatly. Eventually her mother became so ill that she went to live with Debbie's aunt, and never worked again. Debbie's sister, who was ten years her senior, effectively fulfilled the role of a mother to Debbie insofar as she was her main carer.

Debbie had been distressed because she had not been allowed to attend her father's funeral. This had preyed on her mind, and she had become rebellious and an '*attention seeker*'. She felt envious of people who had fathers, and eventually was referred to a



child psychiatrist. She started truanting from school and staying out late at night, and was placed in residential care when she was 13, for two years, and continued to see the psychiatrist, whom she described as '*brilliant*', after leaving care.

After discharge from care she returned to her family home.

Debbie attended a course at college when she was 16 and gained six GCSEs. While there she started a relationship and moved in with her partner. She gave birth to her first child when she was 17. When she was 19 she 'lost interest' in her partner and left him. Debbie rented a flat near to Denise.

Debbie was 30 when she was convicted of her first offence of unlawful wounding and false imprisonment, jointly with Denise. They had been given a lift home from after an evening at a night club. They invited the man in after arriving at Debbie's home. They became involved in naked games, and refused to let the man out of the house. Debbie was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment.

##### *5. Denise*

Denise was Black British, the third of six children, with an older brother and sister and four younger brothers. Her father left home when she was four years old, leaving her mother with six children to bring up. The children visited their father each Sunday, although they were scared of him and felt they did not know him.

Her mother found work when Denise was 12, but was always at home when her children were home. The family was very poor, with possession of a television set varying according to their current financial situation. They always sat in the kitchen because there were no chairs or furniture for the sitting room. Denise never took friends home with her because she was ashamed of the lack of furniture in her home. From the age of approximately ten years old she stayed at a friend's house after school, sometimes until 11 pm, from where she would walk home at night.

Denise left home when she was 17. She met the father of her first child when she was

17, but only had casual, non-cohabiting relationships with the fathers of her two sons.

Denise left school when she was 16 with no educational qualifications. She went to college when she was 24 and gained three GCSE passes. Her two sons were aged

eight and six when she was imprisoned 18 months for her first offence of unlawful wounding and false imprisonment, jointly with Debbie.

#### **6. Diana**

Diana was the eldest of four children, with two younger sisters and a brother. Her early childhood was spent in a small village, in tied accommodation, where her father worked as a stockman to the local farmer. There were no children in the village apart from Diana's family. Her father was strict, and when other children visited the village he would not allow Diana or her brother and sisters go out of the house. At weekends Diana and her sister had to take turns to help their father at the farm.

Diana's brother had been involved with the criminal justice system, and had been imprisoned for nine months for receiving stolen goods. Her father poached deer and rustled sheep with his brothers, and also received stolen goods, but had never been arrested as a result of his criminal activities.

Diana enjoyed school, and had wanted to train as a nurse. Her father changed jobs as she was preparing to take her GCE examinations, which entailed moving to a different area and school, and had therefore been unable to complete the 'O' levels necessary for being accepted, but nevertheless gained two 'O' levels and five CSE passes. She left school aged 15.

Diana left home when she was 15 because of conflict with her father. She moved in with her partner, but later left and met and married her children's father when she was 18. Her first child arrived when she was 19. Diana's husband left her unexpectedly after five years when they had three children.



Diana started a non-cohabiting relationship with an Afro-Caribbean man, and had a child to him. He introduced her to cannabis dealers when Diana said she wanted to increase her income by dealing herself. The dealer took her money but did not supply the cannabis. Diana and her partner then assaulted him. This was Diana's first offence. Diana's children were aged 7, 5, 3 and 1 when she and the father of her fourth child were jointly convicted of GBH, and she was sentenced to 3 years imprisonment.

#### **7. Donna**

Donna had two older sisters and an older brother, as well as two younger brothers. She used to stay with a friend as often as possible because life at home was '*unbearable*', as a result of her parents constant and violent arguments.

Donna was taken into care aged 14 because of her repeated truancy, running away and violent behaviour. She assaulted another girl while in care and had to leave. She was 16 by then, and was given her own flat because of her violent behaviour towards other children at the hostel, although normally children leaving care were not allowed to have their own home until they were 18. Donna enjoyed living in the flat, which became her permanent home and which she maintained with her wage from working as a secretary, until she was burgled, and lost her home and her job.

Donna left school at 16 with 2 x GCSEs and an RSA in typing.

She met her child's father aged 18, but he left her for one of Donna's friends after two years. Donna's baby girl arrived when she was 20. Soon after the birth, Donna met the friend who was then living with her child's father in the local neighbourhood and assaulted her. She was convicted of GBH, her first offence although she had a history of violent behaviour. Donna was sentenced to 9 months imprisonment.

#### **8. Freda**

Freda had two older sisters and two younger brothers. Her childhood was unhappy as a result of her mother's strictness. Her mother would not allow her out to play with friends in the evenings. However, she did sometimes allow Freda to stay overnight at

the house of a friend from school, although no friend was ever allowed to stay overnight in Freda's own home.

Freda went into care for two years when she was nine years old, as a consequence of her mother being taken into hospital with cancer. She was separated from her siblings, who were also taken into care because of their mother's illness. The children were reunited with their mother two months after her discharge from hospital.

Approximately two years after returning to live with her mother, Freda's parents (that is her mother and her step father) asked for her to be taken into local authority care because her mother could not control her. Freda disliked school and refused to attend, although she enjoyed the company of the other children. She remained in care from the age of thirteen until nearly fifteen, when she ran away. Freda never returned to care, but provided for herself by working in laundries, bingo halls and cafes.

Freda stopped attending school when she was 14, and had no educational qualifications.

Freda met the father of her children when she was 18, and they remained partners 12 years later, when she was interviewed, although they lived at separate addresses to maximise benefit income.

Freda became a career shop lifter with associates from her local neighbourhood, and had many convictions for shoplifting from the age of 18. She had also served several custodial sentences before her imprisonment of 15 months for her most recent offence. Freda had daughters aged nine, six and three and a son aged eight.

#### *9. Jenny*

Jenny was the youngest in her family, with an older brother and sister. She was not allowed to stay with friends or to have friends to stay because her mother disliked anyone from outside the family coming into their flat. Jenny was sexually abused by her brother when she was 13 and he was 19. She did not dare to tell her parents



because the brother told Jenny she would not be believed because she was adopted. Jenny believed her brother, although when she eventually told her parents what had happened, 12 years later, she discovered that she was their natural child.

Jenny ran away from home, to escape her brother's assaults, which worried and upset her parents. Jenny was placed in the care of the local authority when she was 13 as a result of continually running away. She told her parents she would rather go into care than go back home, but gave them no explanation. Jenny's parents were upset and puzzled by Jenny's behaviour, and inevitably her actions were no better understood by social workers. Jenny left care to return home after two months, but still could not face life at home so she left, and did not return until she was 17.

Jenny volunteered to go into care, preferring to live in a children's home than in her own home, without giving her parents an explanation. Jenny stayed in care for two months, but found the restrictions irksome, and used to stay out late by climbing through a window. She returned to her own home, but her abusing brother assaulted her again and so she ran away to travel with a fair. She returned to her parental home for a short time when she was 17, when she met the father of her children. She married and moved in with him when she was 18. He left Jenny three years later.

Jenny had no educational qualifications. Jenny's life had also been influenced by another partner beside the fathers of her children. This partner had been extremely violent, and had injured one of her sons so badly that he was permanently brain damaged. He repeatedly went to Jenny's flat and tried to force entry. Jenny was, therefore, desperate to move so that he would no longer know where she lived. In her efforts to acquire different accommodation she became involved as the car driver in a bank robbery with an ex-partner, the father of one of her children.

Jenny had one previous offence for shoplifting when she was 18, for which she had received a custodial sentence. When she was convicted of armed robbery she received a 5 year prison sentence, which was reduced to 3 year and 6 months on appeal. She had two sons aged nine and seven, and a daughter aged one.

## **10. Julie**

Julie was the only child of a single parent. She was cared for by her grandmother while her mother worked full time during the week. Her mother had only left her childhood home for a brief relationship, during which she became pregnant, before returning home. Julie's grandparents, her mother and Julie lived together until Julie's only absence from the family home, which began on her 18th birthday, when she left home as the result of a violent argument with her grandfather. She went to live with her boyfriend, but was only there six months before returning to her family home, which she has never left since. She was, however, devastated when her partner ended the relationship for another women.

Julie's lifestyle echoed that of her own mother, as she worked full time while her mother looked after her son. This family demonstrated a strong matriarchal line, in which men appeared only as the means of continuing the line. The cycle would not, however, be repeated in the next generation, since Julie had a son (again an only child). The family appeared to be happy and secure and displayed a sense of continuity and security.

Julie had seven 'O' levels and went to college where she gained an ONC.

Julie's friends, with she went to night clubs weekly, asked her to keep some packages in her garage. The police later came to her house and examined the packages, which contained cannabis. Julie said she had not know what the packages contained, but was convicted of supplying cannabis. This was Julie's first conviction, for which she was sentenced to 15 months imprisonment, when her son was aged four.

## **11. Karen**

Karen had an older brother and sister and a younger brother and sister. They were forbidden by their father to talk at the meal table, and her parents did not allow her to stay with friends. Karen's upbringing was very strict.

Karen left home aged 16 when she and her older sister were both '*thrown out*' after



having a party in the house while their parents were away for the weekend. She and her sister shared a flat. Karen had one CSE when she left school aged 15.

Karen met the father of her first child when she was 19, but had only a casual relationship. She met and moved in with her second child's father when she was 22, and stayed with him for 5 years until she left because of his violent behaviour.

Karen had huge money problems, especially as a result of having to take her asthmatic son to hospital twice a week for treatment, because of the cost of public transport. She therefore attempted, with her sister, to procure £98 on a stolen credit card (which were easily available in her local neighbourhood). Karen's was convicted of fraud.

This was her first offence, for which she was sentenced to 3 months imprisonment. She had boys aged four and one when she was imprisoned.

## **12. Liz**

Liz, who is Black British, had an older sister, two older brothers and a younger sister and two younger brothers. She was neither allowed to stay with friends nor to have them to her home. She left school when she was 15 with no qualifications.

When she was working full time her father insisted that she go straight home from work, and if she went to a party she had to be home by 11 pm when at the age of 18. Liz resented his control, and so she left and rented a flat. Her mother told her afterwards that her father had gone to look for Liz to take her back to the family home.

Liz was 21 when she met the father of her first child. Her relationships with the fathers of both her children were casual, and she never co-habited. She had a son aged nine and a one year old daughter when she was imprisoned for 12 months for fraud and deception, her first offence.

## **13. Lorraine**

Lorraine and her younger sister had not lived with their parents. Lorraine had been taken into local authority care when she was two after her mother had been sentenced to prison, and there was no other family member to care for her. Lorraine's early life consisted of children's homes interspersed by periods with foster families. Lorraine spent her childhood in care because of her mother's drug addiction, which meant that she was regularly sentenced to prison, and so unable to offer Lorraine a of stable home between periods of imprisonment. Lorraine was staying at home when her mother died from a drug overdose. Although Lorraine herself had found her mother, she remembered very little about it. She and her younger sister enjoyed happy times in children's homes where Lorraine used to believe they were all one family, and had not realised until she was ten years old that their lifestyle was different from most other children's.

Her younger sister was the most important person in Lorraine's life when she was a child. Lorraine thought they had never been adopted because they wanted to stay together and people would not adopt two children. The first major negative experience in her life was separation from her sister at the age of 13, when Lorraine was sent to approved school. Lorraine absconded from the approved school back to the children's home where her sister was still staying, and then ran away with her sister, before being caught and returned to school.

Lorraine moved into the hostel, still under the charge of the local authority, when she reached 16. Once she was 18 Lorraine was given a flat. She found a job in a biscuit factory, which she disliked intensely, and only stayed there for two weeks. She was evicted from the flat for non-payment of rent two months after leaving the hostel. Lorraine lived on the streets for a few days before being offered a home sharing a flat with a friend.

Lorraine met the father of her first child aged 18. After the birth went to live with her aunt until she was allocated a house of her own by the local authority. She and her partner stayed together for 5 years, and she was upset when he left her.



Lorraine had effectively left school at 13, and had no qualifications. She said she had more than 15 previous convictions, and had served several custodial sentences. Her sons were aged 11 and nine and her daughter was aged seven, when she was imprisoned 15 months for conspiracy to steal and shop lifting.

#### *14. Louise*

Louise had never known her own father and was the only child in a single mother household until she was ten years old, when her step father entered the family, and they emigrated to Australia. Louise disliked her step father who drank excessive amounts of alcohol, after which he became violent.

Louise's mother gave birth to a daughter and then a son in Australia, after which the family returned to England. Louise became frightened of her step father and ran away from home. When her mother reported her disappearance to the police, the case was taken to court and Louise was placed in care. After a few months before she joined other inmates in drinking bouts, and was convicted of affray. Louise already knew a lot of the other girls who were there, and liked it despite being locked in dormitories at night, and only taken for an outing once a week in the school van. She left approved school after two years and moved into the hostel associated with the school. She had no educational qualifications.

Louise's step father ceased to be a member of the household when he was imprisoned for an offence, which precipitated her mother into divorcing him. After being discharged from the hostel when she was 16, Louise returned to live with her mother where she stayed until she was 21. Louise enjoyed a close relationship with her younger half-sister, in spite of a ten year age gap, and maintained a good relationship with her mother.

When Louise was 21 the council moved tenants in order to modernise their houses. Louise met her child's father aged 18, but only had casual relationships with both children's fathers. When she was pregnant, she was given a new house next door to her mother's. Louise was convicted of handling stolen property and shop lifting, and

had a previous conviction several years previously. She had two children aged 15 and 11 at the time she was imprisoned for 6 months.

### **15. Mary**

Mary was the eldest child in her family, with four younger sisters and two younger brothers. She described her mother as educationally sub-normal (ESN). Her mother had been unable to read or write, cook, clean the house or bath herself. Mary became a surrogate mother to her younger brothers and sisters as her mother was not capable of caring for them. Neither Mary nor her siblings were ever allowed to play with other children. Her father was *'very strict'*.

Mary had been abused for as long as she could recall, but said nothing until she was fourteen. Mary explained that her father had abused her from her earliest memories, and she had accepted that this was normal behaviour within a family. She only realised that it was not normal by discussing it with a girl friend at school.

Although they now had to allow Mary to attend school, her parents locked her in a bedroom once she arrived home. Mary trusted a *'kind'* neighbour who gave cast off clothing from her own daughter for Mary to wear, and wrote that she was being sexually abused on a piece of paper which she folded into an aeroplane, and threw out of the window as the neighbour was passing. The outcome was that the neighbour telephone the police and Mary's father was arrested.

Mary suffered sexual abuse from both her parents. Her father had begun to molest her sexually when she was very young, and her mother colluded and sometimes participated with the father in the abuse, so she had a poor relationship with her mother. The abuse continued until Mary was 14 years old. Her father did not molest any of her siblings, and her parents kept her from school from the age of nine until she was 12 for fear that she would tell someone. The parents sent letters to the school explaining that Mary was ill. When she was 14, while in conversation with another girl at school, Mary learned that her father's behaviour with her was wrong. Since she loathed her father's actions, she wanted to find a way to prevent them. Although kept



strictly in the house when she was not at school, Mary threw a note out of the bedroom window to a neighbour, and then told her parents what she had done. As a consequence, the police arrived at the house and took Mary and both her parents to the police station. After the court case, her mother was returned to the family home because she had such severe learning disabilities that she could not be held responsible for her actions.

After her parents' arrest Mary was taken into the care of the local authority at the age of 14, while her two younger sisters, another younger sister and brother went to a different placement, and two other younger brothers were placed in another different home. When her mother was released, Mary and her younger siblings were allowed to go home. Mary said that she was asked if she would like to go to a boarding school where she could learn to be a nurse, and although she would have liked to go, Mary chose to return to her family home because she knew that her educationally subnormal mother was incapable of caring for her younger siblings, and she felt that they needed her to look after them.

Mary's father was paroled from prison when she was 17 years old. Her mother wanted him to return to the family home, and so the children were returned to the care of the local authority. Mary ran away then because she had been told that she could be placed under the control of the local authority until she was 21 since she was considered to be mentally retarded as a result of the abuse. Mary believed this, knowing that she was considered to be vulnerable as a result of sexual abuse by her father.

She went to live with a family who lived on the same housing estate which consisted of an English mother, a Pakistani father and their two small children. When Mary was 18 years old she was asked to marry the father's Pakistani brother so that the brother could acquire British citizenship. Mary married the brother because the family threatened to return her to the care of the local authority if she refused. She stayed with this family for two and a half years during which time she was admitted to hospital three times as a result of the severe physical assaults from her husband. When

Mary's first child was aged three months she told her husband that she intended to file for divorce. Her husband beat her with an iron bar and locked her in the house. The neighbour heard Mary's shouts and alerted the police, as a result of which she was taken to a shelter for battered wives.

Mary left school at 15 with no educational qualifications. Mary had only very casual relationships with the fathers of her 3 children.

In the period leading up to the offence she lived with, and said she loved, a man who frequently assaulted her, and for whom she worked as a prostitute. Mary thus derived no social support from the fathers of her children, or her more recent partner, whom she appeared to feared rather than to love.

Mary was convicted of aiding and abetting burglary, which her ex-partner's sister persuaded her to do after threatening Mary with eviction from her home if she did not comply. Mary was sentenced to 2 years and 6 months imprisonment. She had sons aged 12 and nine, and an eight year old daughter.

#### *16. Noreen*

Noreen had an older brother and sister and a younger brother. Her mother was strict and had not allowed her to stay overnight with friends, because she considered them to be socially inferior. Noreen's childhood was otherwise uneventful, and she left school when she was 17 with six 'O' level passes. She left home to go to teacher training college, but realised she did not want to teach and found a job which paid enough for her find her own accommodation. When Noreen was 23 she met her future husband who worked for the same employer. Their relationship lasted for 16 years. Noreen's daughter was aged 13, and her long term foster son 11, when she was imprisoned for theft, false accounting and forgery in the course of her employment.

Noreen was convicted of false accounting, which was associated with her full time employment. she claimed she was innocent. When she started to work for a family firm, her employers were already falsifying their accounts, and therefore the



employers should have been convicted, whereas they gave evidence against her. Noreen said she had been concerned about continuing to keep false accounts and had tried to persuade her employers to put their books in order. Noreen was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment for this first offence.

### *17. Norma*

Norma was the second child of five, with an older sister and three younger brothers. She was never allowed to have friends to play at her home, but sometimes stayed overnight with a school friend. The friend used to visit Norma's home for tea, although Norma's mother never allowed the friend to stay overnight with Norma. She had started stealing when she was nine years old, to provide herself with the clothes and shoes she wanted, rather than the plastic shoes which her mother supplied. Norma's siblings acquired clothes and shoes in a similar fashion, and her parents appeared to believe them when they said that someone had given them the items, or that they had found some money.

Norma's father had worked in a shipyard close to the family home in the north east of England until he was the victim of a serious assault. Norma's older sister cared for the younger siblings while her mother worked part time.

Norma's sister had stabbed her husband and been convicted of shoplifting; her brothers had been convicted of burglary.

Norma was placed in approved school when she was 15 for one and a half years, after being caught stealing. Norma returned to her parental home for a brief period after leaving the care of the local authority when she was 16½. She was working as a machinist when her parents insisted that she leave home after a bitter argument between Norma and her sister about paying board. After leaving home she lived on the streets, and slept in public parks until she moved in with her boy friend. She had no educational qualifications.

Norma met the father of her 3 children when she was 20. They remained together for

13 years until his death from cancer, after which Norma found life very difficult financially. She had several convictions for shop lifting, and had served previous prison sentences, prior to her conviction for ABH, for which she was sentenced to 15 months imprisonment. Her children were then aged 18, 16 and 14.

#### **18. Sally**

Sally was the eldest child in her family, with two younger brothers. Her parents were financially secure compared with some of the mothers in the study, and her childhood was uneventful.

Sally left home when she was 15 as a result of becoming friendly with a school friend who was a '*bad influence*' on her. She left school at the same age with no qualifications.

Sally returned home six months later and remained with her parents until she was 17. Sally had a good job which she left on discovering her pregnancy. She met her child's father when she was 16 but had only a brief encounter with him. Her pregnancy led to an argument with her mother, so Sally left home and admitted herself to a mother and baby unit where she stayed until the baby was born. After the birth Sally was given a local authority flat.

She later became involved with a man who asked her to cash stolen cheques, and she was convicted of fraud, her first offence. She received a sentence of 3 years imprisonment. Her only child, a son, was five.

#### **19. Tara**

Tara, who is Asian, was brought up according to strict Muslim family tradition in which little physical affection was demonstrated between family members. Tara was the middle one of seven children, having two older sisters; her remaining siblings were all brothers. She enjoyed a very close relationship with an older sister who effectively replaced her parents while their father was away in Pakistan for long periods. Their mother spoke no English and rarely left the house.



Tara had not been allowed to stay overnight with friends because her parents had been worried that she would be contaminated by the contact, and the Asian community wished to maintain their strict traditions of dress and behaviour. Her father physically abused her mother, who spoke no English, and when Tara was 11 and her older sister was 14 he began to abuse the sister sexually. Tara thought her mother knew of the abuse, but was too frightened of the father to give constructive help to her daughters.

Tara had been affected when her sister was abused. Tara was able to tell someone who she saw was in a position to help. The abuse became known to the social services when Tara's eldest sister was about to leave the family home. Tara and her sister were placed in the care of the local authority and her father was arrested. Tara's parents separated permanently as a result of the court case. Her father returned to Pakistan after being acquitted at the trial.

Tara was 11 when she first went to a children's home, under an official care order for her to stay in care until she was 18. Her mother did not visit her and she felt that her family blamed her for bringing shame upon them. Tara ran away from the children's home to her own home, but was quickly caught. While in care she associated with children who sniffed glue and gas, and would not attend school, as a result of which she was placed in the secure unit. She effectively left care when she was 15 by going to a town some distance away to stay with a girl friend. She became addicted to heroin.

Tara had no educational qualifications.

Tara met only child's father when she was 15. He ended the relationship after five years, because of her excessive heroin addiction. Tara had several convictions for shop lifting, which supported her drug habit. Her most recent conviction attracted her first prison sentence, of 12 months. Her daughter was aged three.

20. *Tracy*

Tracy had two older brothers. Although her father had frequently been absent from home because of imprisonment for burglary when she and her brothers were young, his death when she was 15 years old caused great distress to herself and her mother.

Tracy met her child's father and left home when she was 15. At first she worked full time, but her partner and some of her friends from school were living in a squat and not working. Tracy gave up her job to move in with them and became addicted to heroin.

Tracy had no educational qualifications.

Tracy had several convictions for shoplifting, which supported her drug habit, and served a previous prison sentence. Her most recent conviction resulted in a prison sentence, of 6.5 months. Her son was aged two.