

The ripples of death: Exploring the bereavement experiences and mental health of young men in custody

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“How many more people do I have to see die? I’m only 19 and that’s five people died already and I keep thinking to myself ‘are the rest of them gonna die?’ And then I’ll grow up alone”

Bereavement is an inevitable part of life and predictably forms a common childhood experience, with the bereavement rate among UK children estimated to be between 43% (Hight and Jamieson, 2007) and 78% (Harrison and Harrington, 2001). Previous research indicates that young people involved in offending are more likely to experience multiple, traumatic or parental bereavements than the general adolescent population (Vaswani, 2008). In turn, traumatic and multiple bereavements are linked with a significantly increased risk of depression; and comorbidity (Dowdney, 2000); as well as negative outcomes in relation to education; self-esteem and risk-taking behaviour (Ribbens McCarthy, 2005). As such, issues around grief and loss may further disadvantage an already vulnerable group in terms of outcomes and mental health. In order to further understanding of bereavement issues in a Scottish youth justice population, 33 young men in prison were surveyed to identify the extent and nature of their bereavements among family, friends and other relationships identified as important to them. In-depth interviews were undertaken with a subset of 11 young men in order to document bereavement experiences from their own perspective (Vaswani, 2014).

Key Finding 1: Prevalence and nature

Almost all (91%) of the young men had experienced at least one bereavement, with more than three-quarters experiencing traumatic bereavements (for example, loss through murder or suicide) and two-thirds suffering from substantial bereavements (four or more).

Key Finding 2: The pain of grief

Young men often attributed a bereavement experience to an increase in their substance misuse, behavioural issues, entry into prison and indicated that frequent losses had caused them to cease caring about life. Young men articulated the enormity of their losses and also the challenges in dealing with the wider ‘ripples of death’ that affected their lives following a bereavement.

Key Finding 3: Coping strategies

Many of the young men subscribed to the school of thought that 'men don't cry' and stoicism was common. Coping strategies were almost invariably avoidant, and centred on 'forgetting' either via self-medication or other distraction techniques. These strategies often led to the young men acting out their frustrations and resulted in the negative behavioural outcomes outlined above. However, young men felt that help-seeking for their bereavements, and for other problems, was difficult.

Key Finding 4: Bereavement in the prison context

It was clear that the realities of prison life disrupted all aspects of young people's grieving. This complicated their grief responses, which could manifest as behavioural problems in the prison and also hinder successful rehabilitation and reintegration back into the community (Childhood Bereavement Network, 2008).

Key Finding 5: Storytelling and interventions

Participants were adamant that 'talking was not for them', although most acknowledged that having someone to talk to was an important resource for 'other people'. At the same time, many of the young men appeared to find some comfort in telling the stories of their loved ones and research suggests that constructing stories has an important role in processing grief (Bosticco and Thompson, 2005). Taking a narrative or biographical approach may therefore prove useful in bereavement interventions with young men, although the study did not explore whether there were gendered responses to grief and so the applicability to young women is not yet clear.



For more information please see the full **report** in the Howard Journal of Criminal Justice.

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