

Helping or hindering? Welfare conditionality and women who have been in conflict with the law

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Welfare conditionality: principles, practices, perspectives

Session: Offending

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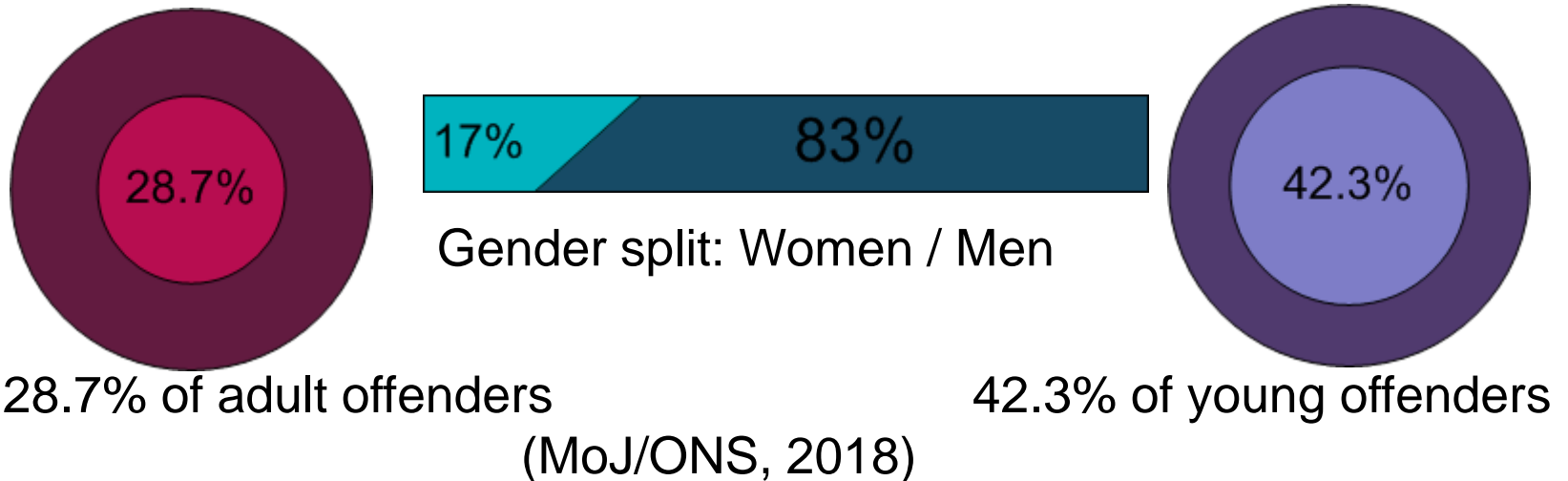
Background & context: welfare policy

- Shift from welfare to 'workfare' & "ubiquitous" conditionality (Fletcher, 2015; Dwyer & Wright, 2014; Beatty & Fothergill, 2016)
- Increasing use of welfare sanctions as part of "a huge secret penal system" (Webster, 2015)
- Women recipients of state support subject to high levels of surveillance, moral scrutiny and punishment (Bumiller, 2013).
- Universal Credit: groups will be worse off e.g. women, lone parents, disabled people and the most vulnerable claimants (Bennett, 2012; Brewer and De Agostini, 2015; Batty et al., 2015; Webster, 2017; Wright et al., 2018).



Background & context: women offenders

- Over 1/5th of people on unemployment benefits have a criminal record (MoJ/DWP, 2014)
- High reoffending rates:

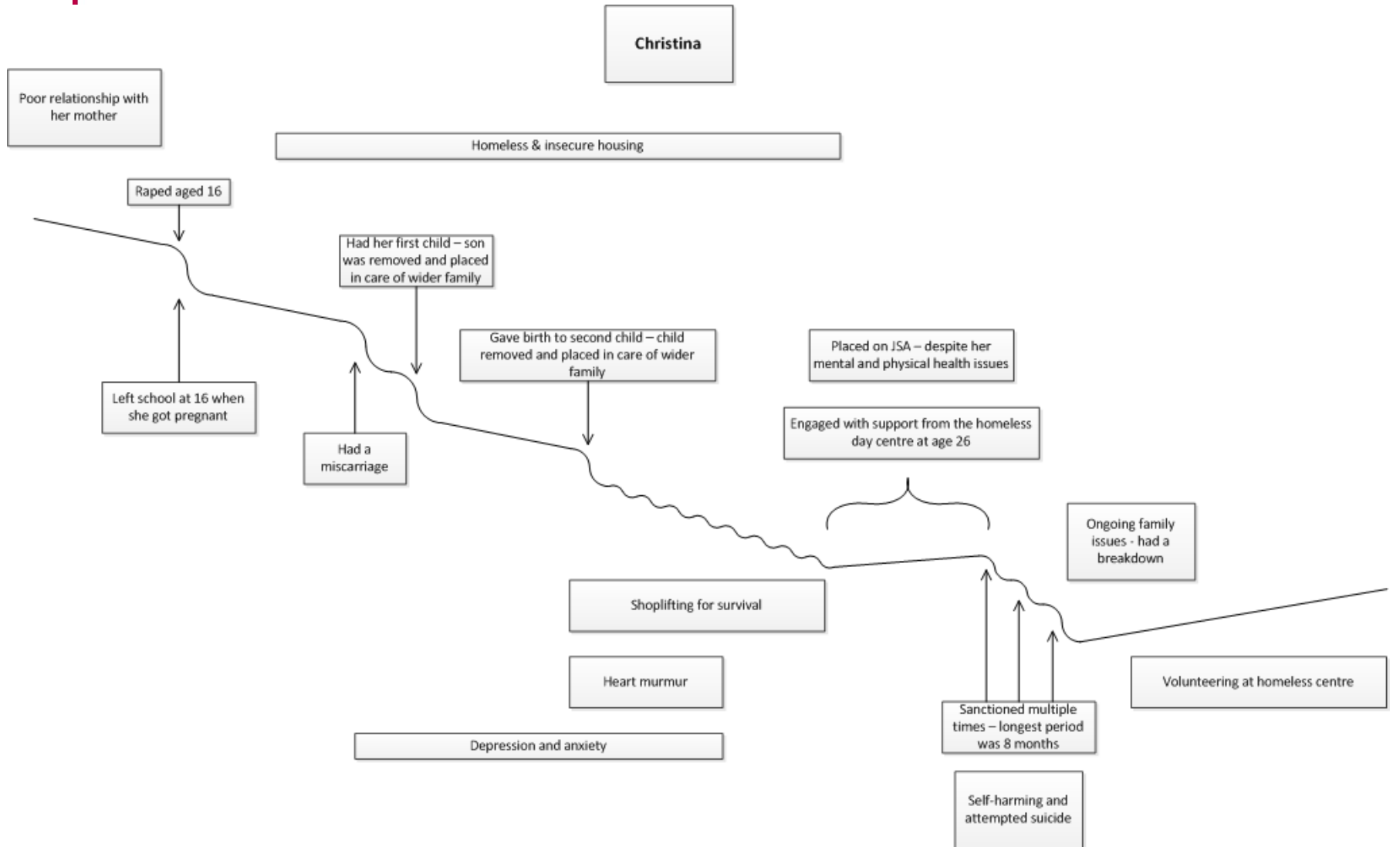


- Work has been recognised as an important pathway out of offending / reoffending
- Women exiting prison are 3x less likely to find work than men; most women do not have a home to go to (Prison Reform Trust, 2015, 2016)

Methods & participants

- In-depth repeat interviews with visual methods:
 - 24 women who had offended or were at risk of (re)offending / victimisation
- One in-depth interview:
 - 10 project workers and 2 project managers at the gatekeeper organisations where I recruited participants
- Ethnography - participant observer in support groups
- Cumulative adversities over the life course

Trapped on the edges: the impact of sanctions



childhood

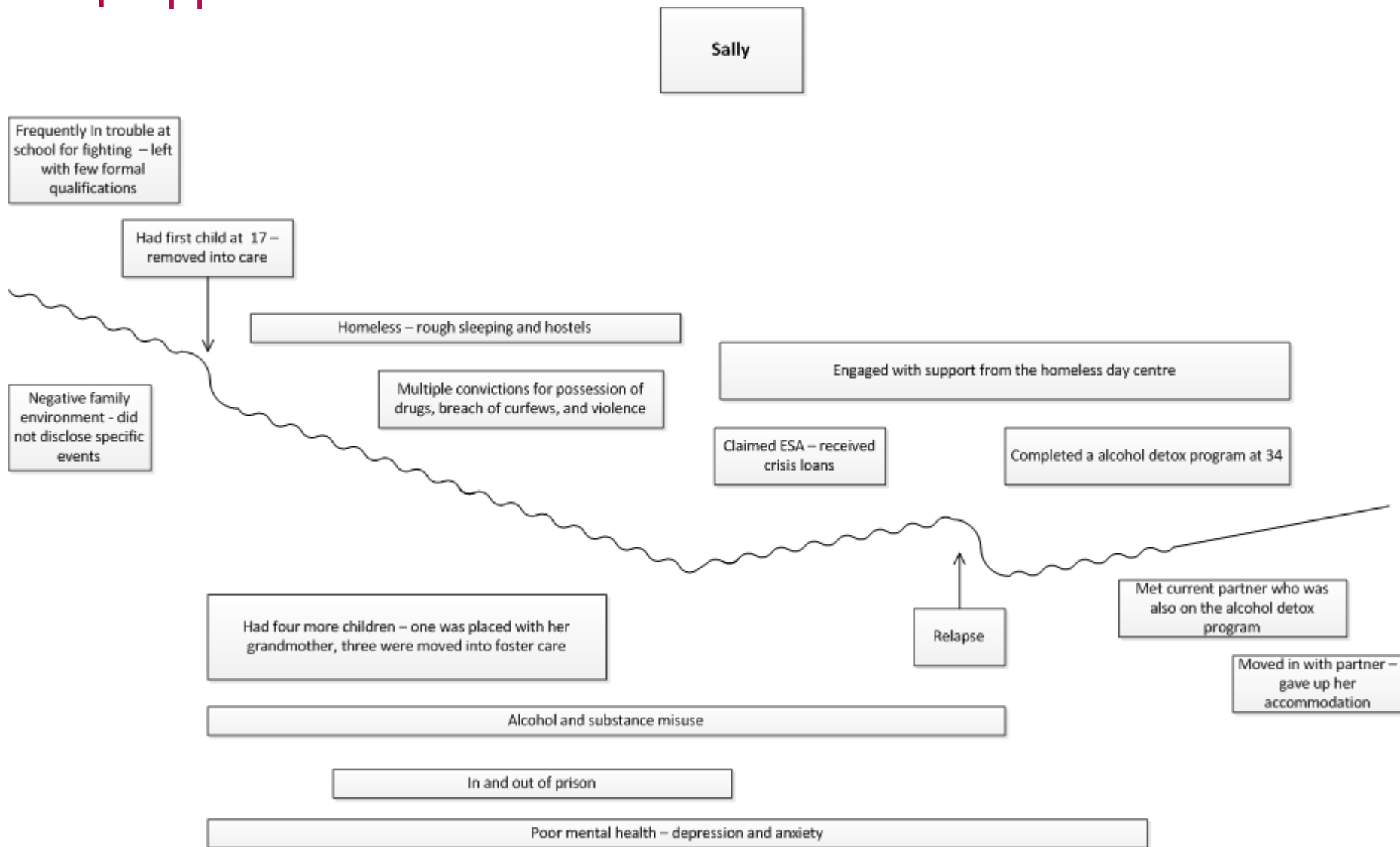
adulthood

Trapped on the edges: the impact of sanctions

I was...just trying to survive, keep my benefit, not commit suicide...Everything gets cancelled when you get sanctioned....each time I was getting sanctioned, they would go 'oh yes it is a 2 week sanction, because you haven't done your job search right', I was like 'I am struggling because I am dyslexic'. So I would go to the JobCentre...'you haven't done it, you haven't done your 40 jobs' and I would be 'how can I apply for 40...jobs I am dyslexic I have no qualifications?' ...Sanction again and they just kept doing that for 8 months...in the end I stopped applying for hardship because it was pointless because ...I was being re-sanctioned which cancelled out the hardship...

(Christina, 30, JSA)

A bridge too far? Work aspirations and employability support



childhood

adulthood

A bridge too far? Work aspirations and employability support

Larissa: Do you think in the future you might want to move into full time work?

Sally: I'm happy as it is, just now, because I know I can mess up at any time. And I've seen people like with jobs, fast cars, money, and then now I see them in here, homeless, on the street. That's why I want to get myself, my own head right, before jumping straight in.

(Sally, 36, ESA WRAG)

PHOTO REMOVED

Photo by Sally, self-portrait after finishing a shift where she volunteers

A bridge too far? Work aspirations and employability support

*I need some training...cake decorator...that is my dream...I really want to do that but there's no funding for that either... I did find a [cake training] course, and I got there and they said I'd have to pay for it. There was no way I could afford it.
(Caitlin, 30, JSA / ESA WRAG)*

*I want to do my drug and alcohol [counselling course] cos I want to be a drug and alcohol worker cos I've experienced the drug side...The job I want to do you've got to have training, so I'm happy to volunteer at minute and do my training and then look, but there's always part time work and weekend jobs so I'm happy to do anything.
(Whitney, 26, ESA WRAG)*

Unintended outcomes: Making it harder to support vulnerable women

Jobseekers is an absolute nightmare...it is a nightmare. Trying to do job search for the amount of hours that they are wanting, if people are rough sleeping, is just...not achievable. It is beyond ridiculous. People are getting kicked off benefits and ESA constantly. (Kerry, project worker)

Larissa: Have you found that any of your caseload have been sanctioned?

Catrin: Yes the majority of [them], so through the course of it, it is just it is an utter nightmare. And then you ring up benefits and you are holding on the phone for 40 minutes before anyone answers....and then 'oh right I need to put you through to another part', so they put you through to another bit and you are on hold again - it is just chaotic. It is chaos. (Catrin, project worker)

There are definitely hot potato issues that come up every now and then. Not long ago there were a lot of women referred...on Truancy Orders for not enforcing their children's attendance at school. Lots of the women referred...have problems with welfare conditions and sanctions, particularly those living 'chaotic lifestyles'. The most common offences for women referred to us through the courts are welfare fraud and shoplifting... (Amanda, project manager)

Conclusion & recommendations

- Sanctioning ex-offender women causes destitution and effectively (re)criminalises them, and places strain on other services.
- Recognition of the distance from the labour market, basic needs need to be met first.
- Long-term voluntary work should be recognised as a key step in reducing re-offending; recognised as valid contribution for those unable to enter paid work due to complex needs.
- Recognition that the transition from voluntary work to paid work can take years, and is dependent on the individual and their management of physical and mental health conditions.
- Employability support for ex-offenders needs to be more flexible; holistic packages of support; training that aligns with their aspirations and life experiences.

Thank you for listening

Any questions?

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