



Involving mothers with criminal justice system experience in research

The Lost Mothers Project

Changes, Benefits and Learning from Public Contributors: Public Involvement Impact Case Study

Project Team:

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Introduction

The UK National Standards of Public Involvement are used as a framework for the ARC EoE Public, Community, Involvement, Engagement and Participation (PCIEP) Strategy and includes 'impact'. We define 'impact' as "**the changes, benefits and learning**, gained from the insights and experiences of patients, carers and the public when working in partnership with researchers and others involved in NIHR initiative's" (*NIHR Patient and Public Involvement Impact Working Group, 2019*). Through this, we seek improvement by identifying and sharing the difference that public involvement makes to our research.

The ARC EoE PCIEP Impact Case Studies are used to evaluate the impact of PCIEP on ARC EoE research and to highlight the changes, benefits and learning gained from partnership working and public involvement in ARC EoE.

Public contributors have been invited to co-produce the case studies and the perspectives of public contributors are included in the case study.



Public Involvement Impact Case Study: Involving mothers with criminal justice system experience in research

Project Title: [Lost Mothers Project](#)

What problem is this research addressing?

Out of 12 female prisons in England, six have separate Mother and Baby Units, and between April 2023 and March 2024, 229 pregnant women were held, with 53 giving birth, while the total number of Mother and Baby Unit applications rose to 93 (Government Statistics 2024).

There is little or no exact data about the numbers of new-born babies removed from their mother at or soon after birth. However, accounts from women facing forced separation from their new-born babies have demonstrated a deep sense of loss (Abbott et al., 2023) and increased adverse mental health outcomes (O'Malley & Baldwin, 2019).

Furthermore, the experience of pregnancy in prison can be isolating and frightening, as pregnant women in prison experience higher levels of miscarriage and pregnancy complications (Davies et al., 2020).

This study, undertaken in 2023 and 2024 explores the experiences of women who undergo mandatory separation of their new-born babies in prison. It is the first project to link the professions of social work, health visiting, midwifery and criminal justice staff with the experiences of women who have been in prison, in understanding their care needs and experiences.

Aims

- Explore the effects of mandatory separation of imprisoned women from their babies.
- Bring together professionals from health, social care and prisons to propose new guidance to actively support women.

- Develop a research-based framework to understand the impact of mandatory separation of babies from mothers in prison, contributing to the broader study of loss and grief.

How were the public involved in this research?

Lived experience involvement began in the development of and during the entirety of the project. We worked with the charity [Birth Companions](#) and their lived experience team throughout. This team comprised mothers with direct criminal justice system experience, and they assume a central role as co-creators and decision-makers, providing invaluable insights into systemic issues. We committed to non-hierarchical co-production to ensure equal partnership among stakeholders.

Every part of the study, ranging from the interview schedules and collaborative writing to the design of the project logo, incorporates significant input from the lived experience team. This extended to scrutiny of the language used with potential participants and deliberating emergent issues. Involvement took place through regular advisory board meetings (comprising women with lived experience, including members of the lost mother's project lived experience team, health, prison and social work professionals, academics, third sector organisations and a Member of Parliament) and online as a project group every 6 weeks, with three face-to-face meetings a year.

We held regular workshops with the lived experience team, with an agenda that was collaboratively developed at least three weeks in advance, with topics including 'non engagement' with health professionals. We used icebreakers, such as 'if you were to choose a superpower, what would it be' to start the sessions and foster a relaxed atmosphere. We held a mix of online and face-to-face meetings, and the charity Birth Companions usually arranged the venues for in-person meetings, often at locations in London to ensure accessibility. We also attended a writing retreat as a group too. At the writing retreat the aim was to come together discuss our project aims, to do a podcast together, write (poems and for publications) and create (artwork and podcasts). We also analysed some data together looking for themes in some of the transcripts and did some coding. You can read more about the retreat in this [blog post](#).

Each meeting we discussed our research, the aims, and what questions to ask. The team also wrote a letter for us to give participants to say thank you. They are involved in everything we do. It is meaningful as they are the ones with lived experience.

What were the outcomes of public involvement in this project?

During our initial discussions in the first workshop, the phrase "feeling lost" emerged, prompting a comprehensive exploration of the project's title. The lived experience team collectively assessed whether the term "lost mothers" aptly encapsulated the project's overarching theme. The group reached a consensus that "lost" indeed accurately described the emotional spectrum associated with their experiences of being mothers in prison, symbolising isolation, undeserved circumstances, and a sense of being adrift in a forgotten and empty space.

Using art supplies, the lived experience team crafted a visually striking logo, it is described by the team:

"The heart within a heart symbolises two lives, the big heart the mother and the little heart, the womb or the child. The birds flying out symbolises the mothers broken heart with pieces floating

away, the relevance of the number three representing pregnancy, birth and postnatal.” (Lived Experience Team)



Original (left) graphic designed by the lived experience team and final graphic agreed by all (right).

These initial meetings promoted inclusion in the decision-making process from the start. The lived experience team were involved in the creation of a thank you letter to share with people who took part in the project (see a copy at the end of the case study).

In one of our workshops, we talked about the phrase "criminalised women," which had been used on our Lost Mothers website. The women who had been through the justice system did not like the label. They felt it was unfair, making it sound like they can never move past their past mistakes and grow. It sparked a thought-provoking conversation for all of us, making us reconsider the impact of labels like these in our discussions.

How did public involvement influence the project overall?

This research, in partnership with Birth Companions and their Lived Experience Team (LET), focuses on getting direct input from mothers who have been in the justice system. The LET is made up of mothers with their own experiences of the system and is crucial in shaping the research. They actively contribute to decisions, like refining the project's title and logo. This involvement aims to make sure the research is not just about them but includes their perspectives, reducing feelings of isolation.

The co-production approach in The Lost Mothers Project is seen as a way to create more understanding, and equality when undertaking research. The [published article](#) stresses that co-production is not just a trendy idea but a crucial part of making positive changes in how we understand and address issues in the criminal justice system. The LET's active role, both in shaping the research and making decisions, shows the real impact of always including the viewpoints of people who have personally been through the prison system.

What was the feedback from public contributors involved in this project?

The power of the lived experience team voices and the authenticity of their insights are instrumental in driving this project forward. The following quotations are extracted from the publication about involvement in this project by Abbott, Chivers & Moncrieffe, 2024.

“All of my input feels valuable and not just for the project itself, but for my own personal well-being. It has been amazing so far. You often feel like after you’ve done something that you are capable of anything. It puts a battery in your back and makes you feel more powerful, I feel more purposeful.” (Suzy, Lived Experience Team member)

“We were getting to hear how people think and their thought processes, so I feel like we gelled quite well because we all see things from a different lens which I think has made our research stronger. Personally, it has made me feel like an integral member of the team and not just an accessory or a tick boxing exercise as often when I am engaging with other projects, it kind of feels like that.” (Suzy, Lived Experience Team member)

“The one thing I hope that people get from this is that having an uplifting experience, the team can be as fruitful as you want it to be, and that it’s not just for the end, it can be from the beginning and for the middle. It is not just an accessory - this could be pivotal in your research, in your work and in your day-to-day operations.” (Suzy, Lived Experience Team member)

“I am grateful to be a part of it and use my lived experience to make an impact with this project to try and make change for all the other mothers that have been through the criminal justice system and the mothers that are currently in it.” (Lived Experience Team Member)

What are the reflections and learning from public involvement in this research?

- In the quest for a more compassionate and equitable criminal justice system, the power of co-production has emerged as a guiding principle in the transformative journey of The Lost Mothers Project. This project, at its heart, is a testament to the invaluable role that lived experience teams play in reshaping the landscape of criminal justice, specifically concerning mothers within the system. Getting the LET team involved early in the project was invaluable.
- An essential consideration, particularly when collaborating with women who may have undergone trauma, lies in the nature of our engagement efforts and the manner in which we approach it with sensitivity. Although we may not explicitly label it as such, there seems to be a beneficial shift towards characterising this approach as ‘trauma-informed engagement.’ Emphasising a trauma-informed approach across all facets of our work is crucial in ensuring its significance. Focusing on recognising and addressing potential ‘triggers’ that may evoke past traumas in women, thereby enabling us to be trauma responsive. This is a delicate task that requires careful consideration, and one of the project's strengths lies in addressing such a sensitive issue by establishing the support and supervision provided, including guidance from Birth Companions and regular debriefing. For instance, all members of the LET and indeed, all members of the Lost Mothers Team are provided with opportunities to debrief after meetings or events to address any hidden triggers. These debriefing sessions are typically facilitated by a staff member from Birth Companions. All meetings offered one-on-one sessions with trained staff for support if anything was particularly triggering or challenging, maintaining a supportive ethos after each meeting.

- We prioritised compensating the time for the lived experience team members through payments (rather than vouchers, for example). We made sure the workshops accommodated childcare needs, with provision expenses covered if necessary.
- Active participation in decision-making was empowering and meaningful for them too, as well as influencing the project. There was a transformative worth of co-production that impacted on the well-being of the women involved.

Key challenges

- Power dynamics, language barriers (e.g., use of technical terms), stigma and resource limitations. The project addressed these challenges by collaborating with community and charity organisations, policy makers and prisons. We prioritised open communication and a culture of mutual respect and understanding. We used regular feedback sessions to identify common goals and areas of disagreement, which helped to align the work and ensure consensus was commonly agreed.
- Sometimes technical terms were used with the Lived Experience Team, but the project team ensured they took the time to explain these new terms to the group.
- We had challenges getting contracts sorted, and applying for sufficient funding to make sure everyone is compensated and making sure everyone was paid for their time. Ideally, we would have had a longer project and asked for more funds! We want to keep going so how do we do this as we have such a fantastic team!

Further information

- See project website [Home - Lost Mothers](#)
- What being part of Birth Companions Lived Experience Team means to me? [A lived experience team member experience video.](#)
- Below is a copy of the co-produced letter shared with people who took part in the project, created by the Lived Experience Team, an illustration from the Residential Writing Retreat and art works created by Beci Ward [Illustration | Studio Beci | England.](#)

Thank You

Dear

We want you to know that you are not alone in this challenging situation. We've walked a similar path and understand the difficulty you're facing. It's easier said than done, but we assure you, you can be strong through this. At times, you might feel isolated, but our source of strength was faith and a belief that things could change. Eventually, they did.

We have been out of a situation similar to yours, and life has transformed for the better. Some of us returned to studying and obtained qualifications in various areas. We have rebuilt relationships with friends, family, and children, and all of us find ourselves in a much happier place now. We share this with you to offer hope, knowing that tomorrow is another day, and this challenging period won't last forever.

On another note, we deeply appreciate your participation in the Lost Mothers project. Having been in your shoes, we understand the significance of your contribution, and want you to know how grateful we are for the invaluable help you're providing. Your involvement is vital to our research, and we wouldn't be where we are without you. As a team, we are immensely thankful for your support.

Remember, your current circumstances do not define your future. Things can change, and they can get better. If you ever need help or support, please know that you can reach out to us. Your release marks a continuation of your role in the project, and we consider you as much a part of it as we are.

Thank you sincerely for
everything,



The Lost Mothers Lived
Experience team
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Art Works by Beci Ward

References

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Art Works by Beci Ward [Illustration](#) | [Studio Beci](#) | [England](#)

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Davies, M., Rolewicz, L., Schlepper, L. & Fagunwa, F., 2020. Locked out? Prisoners' use of hospital care. Research summary. Nuffield Trust.

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The case study template is informed by GRIPP 2-SF (Staniszewska et al., 2017)

For more information, visit the [project webpage](#)

Visit our website: arc-oe.ninhr.ac.uk

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