

Families Shamed

The consequences of crime for
relatives of serious offenders

Rachel Condry



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Rachel Condry
London School of Economics
2007

Introduction

Lionel Shriver's 2005 Orange Prize-winning novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is narrated by the mother of a serious offender, Eva Katchadorian. Eva's son Kevin has killed seven of his fellow students, a teacher and a cafeteria worker in a shooting at his high school. The book consists of a series of letters to her estranged husband Franklin in which she looks back to their life before they were parents, the 16 years they had with Kevin before he committed the crime, and how her life had changed afterwards. In her letters, Eva recounts Kevin's upbringing and attempts to unpick what might have led Kevin to kill. The book does not provide an easy answer to this question and Eva's account is brutally honest about the problems she perceived Kevin to have since his birth, her own lack of maternal feeling towards Kevin, her failings as a mother, and her husband's denial of their problems and determination to construct the family as happy and normal. The question of why Kevin did what he did is cleverly left open for the reader to decide (the back cover of the book reads: 'Nature or Nurture: what makes a monster?') and many of the reading group questions that appear at the end of the book are constructed around this central issue.

The book and the character and magnitude of the crime it describes are distinctly American and Eva's predicament, without disclosing how Shriver's book unfolds (several key elements are revealed towards the end), has some significant features that differ from the accounts of relatives of offenders on which my book is based. However, there are parallels between Eva's account and the stories told by the relatives that I met. Eva attracts blame as Kevin's mother, and this blame is expressed in covert and overt ways. Her neighbours regard her with suspicion; her brother won't let his children anywhere near her; and in the eyes of her father-in-law, she says: 'Kevin had proven defective, and I was the manufacturer' (p. 139). During one night a month after Kevin's crime, gallons of crimson paint are quietly splashed across the front of her house. Eva is sued in the civil court for being a negligent parent in a case

brought by the mother of one of the victims (this fictional account has a basis in reality; in the US, a number of school shootings have resulted in similar cases against the perpetrator's parents).

Eva is aware that apportioning blame might meet particular needs: 'Blame confers an awesome power. And it's simplifying, not only to onlookers and victims but to culprits most of all. It imposes order on slag. Blame conveys clear lessons in which others may take comfort: *if only she hadn't* –, and by implication makes tragedy avoidable' (pp. 65–6). She herself feels 'exhausted with shame' (p. 4) and describes her guilt, her 'own sense of complicity' (p. 69), and how she feels 'infected, contagious, quarantined' (p. 384). She is constantly aware of the ramifications of Kevin's actions: 'I wake up with what he did every morning and I go to bed with it every night' (p. 12) and feels the burden of having such a story to narrate: 'And one of our consuming diversions as we age is to recite, not only to others but to ourselves, our own story. I should know; I am in flight from my story every day, and it dogs me like a faithful stray' (p. 17).

The book challenges its readers to think about responsibility, blame, empathy, and forgiveness, and to address their assumptions about parenting and family life. It confronts us with perplexing questions: to what degree can we be deemed responsible for the actions of our children and who they become? Would we support – and visit in prison – a child who had committed such a heinous crime? If we were a victim of a crime, or the relatives of a victim, would we hold the perpetrator's relatives responsible? Why? And under what conditions might this vary? *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is of course a work of fiction which weaves one family's story in intricate detail. At the same time, it brings into focus some of the questions that this book will consider: what are the consequences of serious crime for relatives of offenders? How does life change once a serious offence is discovered and how do relatives adjust to and manage those changes? How do stigma and shame flow through kin relationships and why are relatives of serious offenders stigmatised? How do we make sense of our lives through the stories we tell? How do we make sense of 'interruptions' to our self-narrative and our sense of identity? How do we account for our own – and others' – actions? What purposes do our accounts serve?

This is a book about relatives of serious offenders in England. It examines the experiences of a group of relatives of those accused or convicted of serious crimes such as murder, manslaughter, rape and sex offences. A broader literature exists on prisoners' families, but few studies have looked specifically at those related to *serious* offenders, or considered their experience other than as prison visitors. Many of the difficulties faced by the wider population of prisoners' families are magnified for the relatives of serious offenders, by the seriousness and

stigmatising impact of the offence itself and by the severity of the consequences, which often include a long prison sentence.

It is a book about relatives like Anne, Jane and Pauline. Anne's son raped and violently assaulted a 16-year-old girl when he was 17. Anne described being in deep shock when she heard the news and barely being able to function. For 18 months before the offence her son had had considerable problems with alcohol, drug and solvent abuse, stealing, suicide attempts and abusive behaviour. She said she had tried to get help for him, and he had been under the care of a psychiatrist and drug support worker. She compared the devastation of finding out about the offence to bereavement, and said it took her two years to start to feel as if she was coping. She had palpitations and panic attacks, and described the impact as 'debilitating'. She struggled to understand why her son had offended, and worried whether she might be in some way to blame, although no-one else in her family, including her other two children, had ever been in trouble with the police. Her son had been released from prison when I met her, and she was providing counselling and support to a number of other relatives of serious offenders.

Jane was very upset when we met and cried frequently throughout our interview. Her daughter was in her early twenties and had just been sentenced to two years imprisonment after being jointly convicted with her partner for inflicting numerous injuries on their 11-month-old son. Jane thought the sentence would have been longer, but because they both pleaded their innocence the court could not be sure who had inflicted the injuries. Investigations showed that Jane's grandson had had previous broken bones and must have suffered prolonged abuse. Jane's grandson was adopted and had no further contact with his birth family, and Jane was heartbroken. She had been close to him and cared for him often, and still kept a room for him, with everything left just as it had been when he was taken away. Jane lived on a council estate and had become a virtual prisoner in her own home as a result of abuse she had received from neighbours following her daughter's conviction. She felt angry towards her daughter, but continued to be her main supporter. Jane was on income support and found the cost of supporting her daughter and visiting the prison difficult to manage. She said she felt very depressed most of the time, but had to keep going because she was a single parent caring for her teenage son.

Pauline's son committed a particularly brutal murder which was notorious in her local area. He killed a young man he met in a bar, and when he returned home he raped his girlfriend. He was arrested quite quickly and is now detained indefinitely in a special hospital. When it happened, Pauline said she did not leave the house for weeks, her 'nerves were shattered', and she was so devastated that if it was not for her other son (ten at the time) she thinks she would have attempted

suicide. It was seven years since her son's offence and although she said she could understand her son's anger and frustration, she was at a loss to understand the violence that came with it and was searching for reasons that might explain his actions.

The relationship between crime and the family has received attention in both academic and public discourse, yet very little is known about how offenders' families are affected by crime and its consequences. Academic discourse has been dominated by studies which attempt to identify family factors associated with crime, focusing in particular on the relationship between family breakdown and/or parental failure and youth offending. Within the wider context of public discourse about crime and its control, individualistic explanations for crime have held sway, firmly placing responsibility for crime with offenders and their families, while down-playing structural factors (such as material conditions or unemployment) and the complex processes that might lead to crime (Hil and McMahon 2001). The strongest version of individualistic explanations emerged in the discourse of the New Right in the 1980s which targeted the breakdown of the family as central to moral decay in society and to blame for rising crime rates (Abbott and Wallace 1992). Campbell showed powerfully how these ideas were seized upon in debates about disorder on a number of English housing estates in the early 1990s. Families – and particularly mothers – were blamed and made scapegoats for the young men's actions, diverting the focus from the 'crisis of masculinity' and the political and economic landscape they inhabited (Campbell 1993). Current political debate and policy developments continue to focus on 'problem families', feckless parents and individualistic explanations for crime; I consider these debates in Chapter 3.

We know very little about the home and family lives of offenders' families and how they manage their everyday circumstances. Offenders' relatives often only become visible when they enter a prison or a prison visitors' centre and are rarely studied in their own environments, which echoes the critique of 'courthouse criminology' (Polsky 1998; Hagedorn 1990): the tendency to study research subjects in convenient but non-natural surroundings rather than go into the field. Sitting in the public gallery in court or visiting a prison might be significant and important experiences for relatives of offenders, but only comprise a small part of their lives and one dimension of the difficulties they have to manage. As a population, however, offenders' relatives can be difficult to reach and doing so through a prison visitors' centre or self-help group might be the only realistic option. Even if relatives of offenders are found through visitors' centres or self-help organisations they are usually studied in those locations and not followed into their own environments. It may be possible to locate communities where prisoners' families are highly concentrated, and some work in the US examines the cumulative

impact of imprisonment on such communities and the families that live in them (see, for example, Rose and Clear 1998; Clear, Rose and Ryder 2001; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999) but this kind of work has not yet developed in the UK. Serious offenders' families can be even more difficult to reach. Most of those I met were guarded about their identities, did not want to court publicity and did not know another relative of a serious offender in their everyday lives, other than those they knew through mutual membership of a self-help organisation: this was their 'community'.

In the UK, the organisation Action for Prisoners' Families has worked hard to raise the profile of prisoners' families and the difficulties they face, liaising with government and acting as an 'umbrella' organisation for a number of smaller self-help groups. There is also a growing literature which is sensitive to the difficulties faced by the broader population of prisoners' families (see Chapter 2). Only a small number of studies, however, have specifically considered the experiences of relatives of *serious* offenders. In the UK, May conducted interviews with relatives of eight people convicted of murder and looked at how they accounted for the offence and how they experienced and managed stigma (May 1999, 2000) and Howarth and Rock have written about Aftermath, a self-help organisation for families of serious offenders and the main fieldwork site in this study (Howarth and Rock 2000). In the US, two authors have written about the families of those on death row. King examines the crimes and their consequences, devoting a chapter to each of nine cases (King 2005), while Sharp provides an analysis of the 'complicated grieving process', pain and trauma faced by the families of death row prisoners who endure a cycle of hope and despair with the uncertainty generated by years of legal wrangling (Sharp 2005). Smith and Trepper have written about the parents of five sexual offenders and how they responded to the 'ongoing crisis' in a similar way to those who experience grief through bereavement (Smith and Trepper 1992). In Canada, a professor of psychiatry followed a single family through the suspicion, charge and finally the conviction of their son for murder (MacLeod 1982); in contemporary Germany, Bar-On interviewed 51 children of perpetrators and witnesses of the Nazi Holocaust about the legacy of their parents' involvement (Bar-On 1989). The following book is the first study to combine long interviews with individual relatives of serious offenders in England with fieldwork in a self-help organisation over a number of years.

The emotions that flow through our connections to kin are many and varied. The actions of our close kin can cause us to well with pride or to hang our heads in shame. We might feel pride in their achievements, in a kind act they have performed, or just feel proud of the person they have become. Conversely, we might feel ashamed because they have broken strongly-held norms or taboos, hurt someone, or behaved in a

way that appals us. This book tries to understand how, when a serious crime is uncovered, relatives of offenders are drawn into the shaming processes that follow, and exactly what it is that underlies these processes. In Chapter 3 I suggest that their stigma is more than just a shadow of the offender's stigma, and that it has its roots in notions of kin contamination and kin culpability.

Being stigmatised can elicit a range of emotions: anger, sadness, humiliation, embarrassment, for example (Jones *et al.* 1984), but shame is one of the most significant. The title of this book, *Families Shamed*, refers to this as the key factor that defined the experiences of the relatives I met: the stigma and shame they experienced because of the seriousness of the offence. It refers both to the stigmatising and shaming processes to which they were subject in interactions with others, and to the subjective feelings of shame that most relatives expressed. In this book I draw on a number of theories of stigma and shame to understand these processes, including Goffman's theory of stigma as a 'spoiled identity' and as something that can be experienced vicariously as a 'courtesy stigma' (Goffman 1963); Nussbaum's theory of shame and its structure, thought-content and role in human life (Nussbaum 2004); and Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming (Braithwaite 1989; Braithwaite and Braithwaite 2001).

There is no unified single approach to the study of shame: 'theoretical work on shame has occurred across many disciplines and in a haphazard manner, such that well-defined schools of thought have not developed systematically' (Harris 2001: 90). Shame has been conceived in a range of different ways by scholars from a number of disciplines including psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, sociology, law, and criminology. Theorists disagree on shame's key defining characteristics, on how it differs from other emotions such as guilt, and on whether it can be a positive force for good. Harris has provided an organising framework for some of the most influential approaches to shame, based on three key conceptions: shame as an individual's perception of social rejection or disapproval ('social threat conception'); shame as something that occurs when individuals fail to live up to important standards and perceive their whole self as a failure ('personal failure conception'); and shame based upon a recognition that one has committed a moral infraction or breached an ethical value ('ethical conception') (see Harris 2001: 90–93). Harris argues that the complexity in the study of shame can thus be reduced to three key issues: (1) how we feel others think of us; (2) how we feel about ourselves; and (3) views about what is ethically shameful that we share with others, and theorists take different positions on these themes (*ibid.*: 78–9). A similar approach to those classified under the 'personal failure conception' has been taken by Nussbaum (2004), and in Chapter 3 I suggest that although all three of the above themes were important to understanding the shame of relatives in this study, this

conception was particularly salient. Because the relatives' shame flowed through the actions of kin and was constructed around their kin relationships, it went to the very heart of their identity and their whole self, and as a result for many it was devastating.

Braithwaite's (1989) theory of shame and its role in human life and in responses to crime has been enormously influential in criminology in recent years. He contends that shaming of a particular kind – reintegrative shaming – can be effective in preventing offending. Reintegrative shaming 'shames while maintaining bonds of respect or love' and 'sharply terminates disapproval with forgiveness' (Braithwaite 1989: 12). Stigmatising shaming, in contrast, amplifies crime by casting offenders out and pushing them towards criminal subcultures. The shame experienced by relatives in this book was largely what Braithwaite would describe as disintegrative, stigmatising and negative in consequence, and as such the picture of the reactions experienced by relatives in this book is perhaps more pessimistic than the one he presents (Braithwaite 1989; see in particular his example of the reactions to the family of an offender in a murder case pp. 75–6, and Chapter 3 of the following book). In Chapter 3 I consider the implications of my findings for Braithwaite's theory, and suggest that they raise particular questions about the involvement of relatives in shaming processes and about what expectations might be right or reasonable.

A further key focus of this book is on what relatives *did* with the shame and stigma they experienced, how they moved forward from the low point of finding out about the offence, and the various ways in which they managed their experiences. Finding out about the offence was an event that disrupted the coherence of their narratives about who they were and how their lives were progressing and was an event that had to be somehow assimilated. Other chapters in the book consider the changes wrought by becoming a relative of a serious offender, how relatives tried to make sense of the offence, how they tried to make sense of their own role and their own shame, and how they came together with other relatives in a self-help organisation to find ways to manage their stigma and to construct a collective story about their circumstances.

The research

The book is based on ethnographic fieldwork with Aftermath, a now-defunct self-help organisation which was specifically for families of *serious* offenders, and long interviews with 32 relatives (I describe Aftermath's work in more detail in Chapter 6, and reflect on my methodology in Appendix 1). Aftermath was based in Sheffield and existed for 17 years (1988–2005), supporting its members through a

newsletter, a network of telephone supporters, annual seminar weekends (which took place in a conference centre, lasting three days and having a variety of speakers), various training sessions, and self-help meetings for members known as 'lunches' and held on a Saturday, usually every six weeks, in three areas.

The research fell broadly into four phases. The first was an exploratory phase (October 1997–October 1998) which involved negotiating access to relatives of serious offenders through Aftermath, attending their annual seminar weekend, attending an Aftermath self-help meeting, talking informally with members and spending time in the Aftermath office talking to staff and looking at Aftermath files and records. In the second phase (November 1998–April 2000), I continued to attend Aftermath meetings and interviewed 24 relatives of male offenders, all of whom were Aftermath members. In the third phase (April 2000–December 2000), I sought access to families of female serious offenders. Fieldwork in this phase took place in the visitors' centre at a women's prison and interviews were conducted with eight relatives of female serious offenders. In the fourth phase (January 2001–July 2003), I remained in contact with Aftermath and continued to attend some of their functions.

Aftermath as an organisation was very open to the idea of my research, though understandably keen to protect the confidentiality of members and to stress that participation in the research would be an individual choice. Access to interviewees therefore had to be negotiated individually. In the first instance, I talked informally with members I met at Aftermath meetings and invited them to participate. I was introduced to some of my interviewees by other members, which enabled me to reach several people who had been active members many years previously but had since stood back and taken a less prominent role. One member in particular was very helpful, I stayed at her home for a few days and she made several introductions. Context was clearly important in shaping people's willingness to talk to me and to participate in the research. In particular, a personal introduction from an Aftermath member was important, whether during a meeting or afterwards.

I wanted to include some relatives of female serious offenders to understand whether and how their experiences might differ. Would these relatives be differently stigmatised? Would they experience additional difficulties? Female offenders are often deemed 'doubly deviant' (Lloyd 1995) and violent female prisoners, unlike violent male prisoners, are never glamorised (Carlen 1983; Lloyd 1995). Other studies have found that female prisoners face particular problems which centre on the family. When we look at the wider population of all female prisoners, over 60 per cent are mothers and 45 per cent have children living with them prior to imprisonment (Prison Reform Trust 2000). Studies have found the impact of imprisonment to be worse for their children than for

the children of male prisoners and that they are much less likely to be cared for by the prisoners' spouse and more likely to be looked after by other relatives or in local authority care (e.g. Caddle and Crisp 1996; Casale 1989; Gibbs 1971; Player 1994; Wilkinson 1988; Zalba 1964). Women in prison can experience additional pressure because they have failed to live up to traditional expectations of caring and nurturing motherhood (Tchaikovsky 1994), and deviation from an 'ideal' of motherhood might actually contribute to women being imprisoned in the first place (Carlen 1983).

However, access to relatives of female serious offenders was difficult to secure. They are clearly drawn from a much smaller population than relatives of male serious offenders (the majority of the female prison population are held for non-violent offences – in February 2005, for example, only 186 of the 5,792 prisoners serving a life sentence in prisons in England and Wales were women). Aftermath itself only had 49 families of female serious offenders as members (out of 1285 families) between 1988 and 2001, two of whom I interviewed. I approached several prisoners' families organisations and secured one interview through this route, and after a recommendation from the Director of Women in Prison, arranged to work as a volunteer in the visitors' centre of a women's prison for five months which led to five further interviews.

Interviews with the 32 relatives lasted between two and five hours, with three hours being the average. An interview of two to three hours would usually take place in one sitting, while a longer interview might be spread across the day with lunch in between. An interview guide was used to structure the questions, although this was flexible and interviews were allowed to flow conversationally and to diverge from the guide where necessary. The guide covered a number of areas: their experience of being involved with Aftermath or other organisations; whether they thought the experiences of relatives of serious offenders differed from relatives of those who committed less serious offences; their views about why people commit serious offences; what they understood about why their relative had offended; the details of the crime; their relationship with the offender; the effect on the family and on different family members; problems they had to cope with; what life was like before the offence; how people within and outside the family reacted when they found out; whether their relationship had changed with any of these people; how they found out about the offence; their experiences with the police, courts, and visiting a prison or special hospital; their experiences with the media; what they thought about the way Aftermath constructed relatives of offenders and their experiences; how they thought the public perceived families of serious offenders; and how they saw their future.

Most interviews took place in the interviewee's home. Participants would be more relaxed on their 'territory', we could break where

necessary for a cup of tea, and they could explain events that had occurred in the house or local area with much more ease. I would often be shown photographs of the offender and other relatives, along with files of newspaper cuttings about the offence and sometimes court or other legal papers; these 'personal props' (Plummer 1995) were important to the telling of their stories. It was also invaluable to be able to talk informally with participants between taping sessions. I was welcomed as a guest in people's homes, and shown hospitality, always offered tea or coffee and sometimes lunch. This welcoming attitude is often neglected in research reports (Finch and Mason 1993; Oakley 1981). Interviewees were spread across England in different locations and several interviews each involved a round trip of around 600 miles and an overnight stay in bed and breakfast accommodation. (Most of the lunches also involved significant travel – one involved a round trip of 150 miles and the other over 300 miles.)

I was interested in how relatives understood their circumstances and how they constructed their experiences. Relatives' responses to particular questions were important, and the transcripts of their interviews would later be taken apart and coded, but I was also interested in how they narrated their lives, how they told stories about their experiences, how they talked about their past, present and future, and the relationship between narratives constructed in the somewhat artificial context of an interview and the everyday narrative construction of life and self-identity.

Recorded interviews were also conducted with people working with families of serious offenders, including the chairperson of Aftermath during the main period of fieldwork; the director of Action for Prisoners' Families, a manager of a visitors' centre at a men's prison, the manager of a visitors' centre at a women's prison, the director of the organisation Women in Prison, and the director of an organisation for prisoners' families. Through these interviews I learnt more about the difficulties facing relatives of serious offenders, how these difficulties were understood by the people who work with the relatives, and what attempts were being made to support families and meet their needs. However, I decided not to quote from their transcripts in this book, but to concentrate instead on using quotations from the relatives whose voices, opinions and predicament are rarely heard (see Appendix 1 for further discussion).

Defining serious offenders' families

All participants in this study had a close kin relationship with someone accused or convicted of a serious offence. The offences in question were violent or sexual or attracted a sentence of four years or more. None was

a property crime and in the main they were non-instrumental. The individual offences included murder, manslaughter, violent offences, rape, and sex offences against children (see the end of this chapter and Appendix 2). Of 32 interviewees, ten were wives or partners of the offender, 17 were mothers, one was a father, one was a grandmother, one was a sister, one was an aunt and one was a daughter. Aftermath defined its membership as the families of those 'accused or convicted' of serious offences, and I decided to follow this definition. There were two interviewees whose relatives were accused but not convicted (Harriet and Angela) and they defined their experiences in very similar ways to the other relatives and had to overcome a number of significant difficulties as a result of the allegations.

It is difficult to quantify the population of families of serious offenders because the category of 'serious crime' is a contested boundary (Francis *et al.* 2001). There are a range of components making a particular offence more or less serious, including the harm caused or risked by the offender's conduct, the offender's individual culpability and remoteness from the harm, and various factors of aggravation or mitigation (Ashworth 2005). There have been attempts to rank offences or allocate a category of high, medium or low seriousness, but this is far from straightforward and gives rise to complex debate about proportionality in sentencing which is beyond the scope of this book (see Ashworth 2005 for a detailed discussion). However, there is some constancy: 'In reality, at any point in time the 'seriousness' rankings of some crimes are being renegotiated while the 'seriousness' of others are being maintained' (Francis *et al.* 2001: 734) and surveys of public opinion tend to find that people give similar rank-orderings to crimes (Von Hirsch and Jareborg 1991). Participants in this study were self-defining as relatives of *serious* offenders and were found either through Aftermath, an organisation specifically for relatives of serious offenders, or, in the case of six interviewees, through a leaflet in a prison visitors' centre asking for relatives of serious offenders who were willing to be interviewed.

A very approximate estimate of the number of relatives of serious offenders can be obtained by looking at the number of prisoners serving longer sentences: in 2004 there were 25,837 prisoners serving a sentence of more than four years but less than life and 5,594 serving a life sentence (Howard League 2006). There were therefore 31,431 prisoners serving sentences of more than four years. Extrapolating from this section of the prison population to the number of families involved can only give a very rough approximation. This might overestimate – we cannot assume that all those prisoners have the support of their family, and we know that with more grave offences and longer prison sentences this becomes less likely (NACRO 1994) – or underestimate because it excludes a number of serious offenders, such as those who are no longer serving a

prison sentence but whose families are still affected by what has happened, or those who received a shorter sentence for an offence which would be deemed in the eyes of most as 'serious' and serious in its consequences for the family. One family in this study had their house attacked and their family torn apart by conflict following the conviction of the husband for sexual offences against children – the sentence he received, however, was only two years. But we can at least make a very approximate estimate of tens of thousands of families contending with difficulties of supporting a serious offender.

The relatives

When the research began, it soon became clear that this was a sphere in which women predominated. Almost all the active members of the self-help organisation were women; all but one of the participants who agreed to be interviewed were women, despite attempts to secure interviews with male family members; and as the research progressed it emerged that in most cases one female family member, usually a wife or mother, was taking primary responsibility for the offender and his or her needs and shouldering much of the burden of caring (see Chapter 2). We should not be surprised to find a higher number of wives or female partners taking the role of primary supporter – we know that in crime the sexual division of labour is distinctly marked and there are many more men convicted of crimes than women. In January 2006, for example, there were 4,229 women in prison in England and Wales out of a total prison population of 75,393 (Howard League 2006). We would expect, therefore, to see a higher number of women as primary supporters when the supporter is a spouse or partner.

However, it cannot be assumed that all offenders or prisoners are being supported by wives or partners. Surveys in a men's and a women's prison found that 51 per cent of male prisoners were visited by their parents, 46 per cent by their partners, 42 per cent by siblings and 36 per cent by children (Murray 2003a) while 56 per cent of female prisoners reporting visits received those visits from parents, 43 per cent from children, 39 per cent from siblings and only 28 per cent from partners (Murray 2003b). A discussion of the difficulties faced by offenders' families should therefore not be restricted to wives and partners (Mills 2004; Paylor and Smith 1994). Studies in the US have found prison visitors to be predominantly female: one described a visiting area at a male prison as 'a distinctly *female* space' with approximately 95 per cent of visitors being women (Comfort 2003); one found that twice as many mothers as fathers were prison visitors (Schafer 1994) and another that 'Men in prison are visited by their wives

and mothers and women in prison are visited by their mothers and sisters' (Girshick 1996: 24). The predominance of women in the fieldwork locations and in my sample of interviewees is therefore not unique and I consider some of the possible reasons for it in Chapter 6.

The sample of interviewees was slowly built and relatives were selected by availability and opportunity. I was fortunate to gain access to 32 interviewees – one study of murderers' relatives reports taking 21 months to reach and interview members of eight families (May 2000). I was not able to select Aftermath members or prison visitors to provide a random sample, or to select participants on the basis of particular characteristics (other than all sharing a close kin relationship to a serious offender). Certain factors might therefore affect the degree to which the sample is representative. Compared to the general prison population the interviewees showed greater ethnic homogeneity and a higher socio-economic level. Thirty interviewees classified themselves as 'white UK', four of whom classified the offender as 'mixed race', and only two classified themselves as 'black UK'. Ethnic minorities are consistently over-represented in the general prison population; prison statistics 'suggest that around one and one-quarter per cent of the black population in England and Wales is in prison, about eight times that of the white population' (Bowling and Phillips 2002: 241). Work is emerging in the US that highlights the collateral consequences of mass imprisonment for relatives of prisoners, and how significant numbers of African-American women in particular are affected (see, for example, Comfort 2003; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002; Sokoloff 2003); the figures from England and Wales suggest there might be a similar disproportionate effect not reflected in my sample.

The relatives I met could be described as working or middle class, but most were not what might be described as 'socially excluded',¹ in contrast to both the general prison population and some of the families I observed at prison visitors' centres. According to the Government's Social Exclusion Unit, many of those in the general prison population have experienced a lifetime of social exclusion with high levels of unemployment and drug use and a significant lack of basic reading, writing and numeracy skills (Social Exclusion Unit 2002: 6). The Government has defined social exclusion as 'a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, unfair discrimination, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown' (Social Exclusion Unit 2004). Those I interviewed had individual problems to contend with, but these were not of the same magnitude or severity as many of the relatives I observed in prison visitors' centres.

I asked all interviewees for their current or most recent employment with the intention of making some assessment of their class position.

However, this was far from straightforward. Many described themselves as 'housewives'; some had not worked for some time due to illness; some were retired; and others were employed in a voluntary capacity. Only ten out of 32 could straightforwardly name an occupation: a teacher, a care worker, a cook, two charity workers, a social worker, a solicitor, a 'stress management therapist' (working in the sex industry), a counsellor and a childminder. This was not enough on its own to assess the class composition of the sample. It may be possible to make some inference from their housing situation. Twenty out of 32 interviewees owned their own homes, 11 were in local authority accommodation and one in a housing association flat. Those who owned their own homes tended to live in houses with two or three bedrooms.

Appendix 2 records interviewees' characteristics. Only five interviewees were no longer supporting the offender, all of whom were former wives or partners. The ages of interviewees ranged from thirties to seventies (I asked participants to choose age bands rather than specific ages); there were no younger relatives in their twenties or teens. For most participants this was the first member of their family to go to prison, and many spoke of their offending relative having little prior history of serious offending. This may be another factor colouring my sample: it is perhaps more likely that families with less experience of crime would join a self-help group – in particular a self-help group such as Aftermath which claimed that families were traumatised by having a serious offender in the family (see Chapter 6) – or agree to take part in research. Interviewees might also not have known the full extent of their family member's offending history (see Chapter 1).

None of the rape or homicide victims was a member of the interviewee's family, other than Debbie whose husband killed his grandmother. Some of the sex offence victims were within the interviewee's family (nieces, a foster daughter, step-children and grandchildren) as were some of the violent offence victims (grandchildren and a father) but none was the interviewee's own child. I met other relatives through fieldwork where the victim of both homicide and sex offences had been in the immediate family, but perhaps not surprisingly they were underrepresented in a group such as Aftermath where the majority of relatives continued to support the offender.

None of the offenders was part of an organised or professional crime network (as far as their relative was aware). In fact, relatives were keen to distance the offender and their family from these types of criminals (see Chapter 5). This is an important difference. Hobbs describes how the family unit and kinship networks enable and enhance organised crime activity which relies on 'interlocking networks of relationality', trust and loyalty, concluding that 'kinship is as relevant to understanding contemporary British organized crime as it was in the days of the Krays and the