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PRECARIOUS PATHWAYS

YOUNG PEOPLE'S JOURNEYS INTO AND OUT OF PRISON IN SIERRA LEONE

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2022
MY YEAR OF JOY

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We gratefully acknowledge the co-operation of all the research participants in this study. We have learned much from them and trust we have done their experiences and stories justice. Any errors or weaknesses in analysis are our own.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on a study of young people's pathways to and out of prison this report draws attention to the varied circumstances and situations that make people imprisonable. Drawing on interviews with formerly imprisoned young men and women the report gives voice to their experience and documents the constrained conditions that made them vulnerable.

We emphasise the role that precarious trade/business relations and situations of conflict play in pathways to prison as well as the significance of victimization and familial relations.

The study's participants cannot be understood to belong to a single 'criminal class', or to all fit the category of 'street youth' or habitual criminals. Generalising about the prison population or resorting to pejorative labelling must be avoided and the public and media should be made more aware of this. The young people who participated in our study were not born criminal, they were criminalised and thus rendered imprisonable by a combination of precarious circumstances, troubled histories and sometimes capricious policing.

While conditions and circumstances left people prone to prison, on another day at a different time they may well have evaded prison. Imprisonment, even for precariously positioned young people, is not inevitable. It is a contingent, unpredictable product of multiple factors. These could be given greater weight during sentencing.

The participants in the study call for enhanced livelihood opportunities, less precarity, more appropriate and accessible care and guidance from seniors, and means by which to become stronger, better-informed characters.

We issue the following call to policy makers and stakeholders:

- Acknowledge the diversity of prison populations
- Take circumstances of arrest including personal histories into greater account at sentencing
- Invest in programmes aimed at countering disruption to education
- Make guidance and mentoring programmes available to at-risk youth
- Initiate outreach programmes warning of the dangers of criminalisation and the perils of prison
- Generate real opportunities for young people to engage in sustainable remunerated work
- Listen more to young people

In short, our plea is for government, donors, and civil society to pay more attention to the life conditions of young people and the circumstances of loss, displacement, and disruption that characterise precarious pathways to prison.

INTRODUCTION

This report sheds light on the life experiences of young people (aged between 18-35) that preceded and followed imprisonment. It is based on a qualitative, explorative study and offers important indications about what actions might be taken to disrupt pathways to prison and mitigate the ongoing 'pains of release' (AAPP 2025).

Sierra Leone is a small country of just under nine million inhabitants sandwiched between Guinea and Liberia within the Mano River region of West Africa (World Bank 2024). Ranked consistently near the bottom of the UN's development index, Sierra Leone is most famous for its diamonds and its civil war, which caused widespread anguish and disruption between 1991 and 2002. After the war Sierra Leone was often labelled a 'fragile state' to indicate the weakness of the state institutions, the abject poverty, and the ongoing instability. In recent years there have been signs of development and strengthening of vital infrastructures in the country including electricity and roads. Freetown, the capital, has seen a huge building boom and expansion.

From 1808 to 1961 Sierra Leone was a British colony. Within ten years of independence in 1961 a multiparty system gave way to a de facto one-party state (in 1969). The war that broke out in 1991 interrupted moves towards multiparty democracy that were under way. While elections were held in 1996 the decade of the 90s was a politically tumultuous period. In the immediate post-conflict context, a large UN contingent was present. UN peacekeepers first handed over responsibility for security to the Sierra Leonean military in 2005 and maintained a relatively strong presence in the country until March 2014, when the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) finally drew down.

Since that time power has changed hands relatively peacefully through elections though more recently there have been signs of increasing political tension and popular dissatisfaction with the ruling regime including protests in August 2022 related to rising prices of basic commodities and an attack on a military barracks and the central prison in November 2023 that was later labelled an attempted coup (Aradi 2024).

The prison population in Sierra Leone is growing. Despite studies and campaigns aimed at decriminalising petty offences (that contribute disproportionately to the overpopulation) and widespread recognition that conditions are not conducive to humane containment and even less to helping people deal with the issues that led them to prison, the prison population has been increasing at alarming rates. In the 20-year period from 2004 – 2024 it rose from 1400 to just over 4400 – that is an extra 3000 people, equivalent to a 200% increase, while the imprisonment rate has risen from 26 to 57 per 100.000 inhabitants (See Figure 1). Globally, studies have debunked the thesis that imprisonment rates are directly related to crime rates. So, what factors drive or contribute to this increase? What makes people in Sierra Leone increasingly imprisonable?

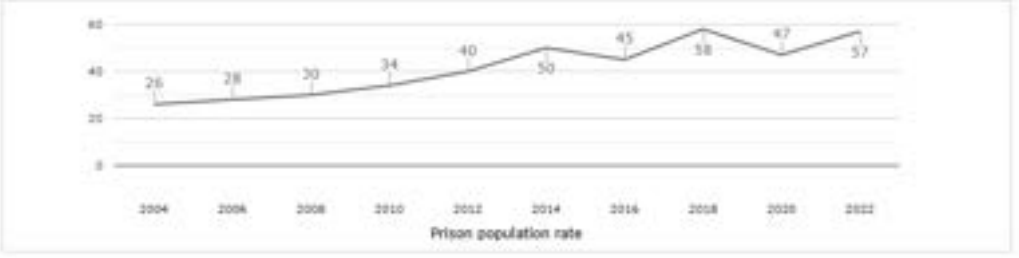

Figure 1: Prison Population Rate (No. of prisoners per 100,000 population). World Prison Brief 2024

People in prison have rarely sought prison; sometimes it seems as though it may have sought them. Through an approach that privileges the first-person perspectives of formerly imprisoned young people this report illuminates the prevailing conditions and dynamics that result, under certain circumstances in imprisonment. We also examine the experience of release and its aftermath, demonstrating how determination and desire not to return to prison, while likely a poor inhibitor, is nevertheless a key feature of post-prison narratives.

Our focus is not on 'inherent vulnerabilities' or 'offending behaviour' but the structural constraints and compromised circumstances that condition and partly determine why some people are more imprisonable than others. We show how under circumstances of abject poverty, precarious livelihoods and capricious policing *almost anybody* is at risk of imprisonment. However, there is no single common pathway to prison; young people's pathways to prison vary. We lament the absence of adequate systems of protection.

Few people seem to care. Apart from a handful of civil society organisations and religious groups, the plight of the thousands of men and women behind the walls of Sierra Leone's 21 prisons goes largely unnoticed. Except of course when the prisoner is a politician or there is a prison break. During the events of November 2023 that involved an attack on a military barracks and the forced opening of the central prison and were later labelled an attempted coup, social media and news channels were awash with images of people fleeing the central prison in Pademba Road accompanied by fear-inducing commentaries about all the 'dangerous criminals' now on the loose.

This report is not about 'dangerous criminals' but about those who actually comprise the majority of Sierra Leone's prison population – the relatively impoverished members of society struggling to forge livelihoods and care for and support families under constrained conditions. In what follows we share the results of our analysis of 30 interviews with men and women aged between 18 and 35 years and recently released from prison. Through a series of conversational, thematically-organised, qualitative interviews we have generated new insights into the factors that shape young men and women's pathways to prison and what challenges they face afterwards.

The report is structured as follows: First, we present the notion of 'prison pathways' as described in academic literature; second, we describe the methodology of our study; third we present analysis of selected parts of the data, sharing stories told to us about the circumstances surrounding young people's imprisonment and their situations when released. The report ends with a conclusions, recommendations and proposals for action.

Pathways to prison

The notion of 'pathways to prison' has become a common trope in the feminist scholarship about imprisonment. It can be traced back to Kathy Daly's (1994) study of how decisions were made about sentencing in courts. Through analysis of court documents (including presentence reports) in New Haven Connecticut in the US in the mid-1980s, Daly systematically mapped men's and women's pathways into the criminal court, generating a typology of pathways that laid the foundation for studies later conducted in other US contexts and other places around the world. These later studies have tended to rely on detailed life histories rather than court documents. The approach has been regularly adopted in non-western contexts including Cambodia, Thailand, India, Kenya, and also, Sierra Leone (Cherukuri, Britton & Subramaniam 2009; Jeffries et al. 2019, 2021, 2022; Jeffries & Chuenurah 2018, 2019; Jeffries, Chuenurah & Wallis 2019; Jeffries, Chuenurah, & Russell, T. 2020; Russell et al. 2020). The approach is often called the 'Feminist pathways approach', in recognition of the way feminist epistemologies (for example, privileging women's gendered lived experience, rather than simply focusing on 'offending behaviour') informed its development. The approach has been used to examine not only women's routes to, from or through prisons but also men's, transpersons, and people identifying as non-binary or queer (Jeffries, Thipphayamongkoludom & Chenurah 2023; Mountz 2019).

It is an approach that is specifically attuned to people's experience and their ways of talking about that experience. Russell et al. (2020) offer a useful summary of the literature on specifically women's pathways:

> In the now growing corpus of FP [Feminist Pathways] scholarship, the life history experiences leading to women's offending/criminalisation comprise victimisation and trauma, disordered family lives, other adverse life experiences, deviant friendships, addiction and other mental health problems, male influence and control, limited education, poverty, familial caretaking responsibilities, and limited access to justice (Russell et al. 2020: 538).

Some pathways studies have focused on women in general, others on women convicted of specific offences e.g. homicide (Jeffries & Chuenurah 2018) or cross-border drug trafficking (Jeffries et al. 2024). A study of common paths to homicide in Cambodia among 18 women identified a series of threads across the women's stories: childhood instability, economic marginalisation, criminalisation connected to a romantic relationship to a man, as well as limited access to justice and/or the opportunity to take advantage of corrupted criminal justice practices. Additionally, six distinct pathways were drawn out of the women's life histories related to domestic violence; marital abandonment; traumatic life histories; acting non-normatively; male association; and feminine familial sacrifice. A study of the pathways of men and women arrested for trafficking drugs across borders in Thailand revealed three common pathways: 'deviant lifestyle, economic familial provisioning and inexperience and deception'. But across these categories there was also 'gendered variance', that is, men and women's pathways were not identical. For example, only women occupied the 'romantic susceptibility pathway' (Jeffries et al. 2021).

In 2020 the Vance Center and Advocaid conducted a study of 67 detained women, as well as prison officials, former prisoners, and other stakeholders in Sierra Leone (Cyrus R. Vance Center and Advocaid 2020). They identified poverty, prior experience of abuse, mental health, limited education and legal literacy as common factors informing pathways to prison. Our study featured very few references to poor mental health, and prior experience of abuse was not a dominant theme in the narratives of the women (or men) we interviewed. What our study does reveal is the way economic marginalization, and precarity as well as disrupted education play key roles in women's and men's trajectories.

The pathways that seem to best fit our material are the following:

- Economic marginalization / Precarity pathway
- Victimization / Gendered vulnerabilities / Taken advantage pathways
- Problematic familial relations pathway

In contrast to the broad typologies that feature in the existing literature, an important contribution of this study is our attention to specific features of economic marginalization and precarity and the specific circumstances around interrupted schooling.

Preparing and conducting our study

This is a collaborative study between Prison Watch – Sierra Leone (PWSL) and DIGNITY. PWSL has worked on and with prison issues in Sierra Leone for decades and has, in collaboration with DIGNITY, conducted various studies analysing prison experience (e.g. Jefferson & Jalloh 2018). In 2016, for example, PWSL enabled a small study looking at men's experience of release, stigma and the similarities and differences between life in prison and life in poor urban neighbourhoods including the extent to which release for some was simply a shift from one site of confinement to another (Jefferson 2017).

In the early phases of our study, we read the articles referenced above and took inspiration from them for our methodology. Given the team's ample knowledge of conditions behind the walls, for this study we chose to focus exclusively on routes ***in*** and ***out*** of prison. Our conversational interview guide (taking inspiration from Kvale & Brinkmann 2009) was roughly equally balanced (with regard to pre- and post-prison) but given the fact that people had lived much longer prior to their incarceration than afterwards our data is more heavily weighted towards journeys ***in*** than journeys ***out***. Our guide (which took inspiration from work conducted by Samantha Jeffries and colleagues) included the following themes: childhood experiences, significant relationships, education, health, circumstances surrounding arrest, previous experience of conflict with the law, significant turning points in life, feelings on release, reception by friends, family and member of the community, and perspectives on the post-prison future. We also enquired about whether people felt hope or regret at the time of the interview; whether they could think of anything that might have disrupted their life trajectory and asked about their current work situation and dependencies.

The influential work of Samantha Jeffries, in the 'pathways' field, has almost always been collaborative involving a team whose research capacity was strengthened as new knowledge was generated together. We adopted this model too.

On 1 June 2023 ethics approval was granted based on a submission that emphasised how our primary ethical concern was to 'do no harm' under conditions of post-prison vulnerability and potential post-election tensions.[1] We also registered that the safety of the research team and research participants was paramount and acknowledged that this would have implications for choices made at all stages and aspects of the project. We committed to adhere to key ethical principles of autonomy (informed consent); and confidentiality (data security). We ensured that interviews with women were led by women. Risks were mitigated as we went along informed by regular on-the-ground risk assessments. We were also conscious that it might be necessary to constantly review the balance between beneficence and risk in the light of the context especially in the post-election context which we expected might be more tense than usual. However, data collection proceeded relatively smoothly despite challenges identifying and accessing research participants (due to perilous road conditions) and keeping interviewees on point. In all, the team interviewed 30 young people, 11 women and 19 men. Interviews took place in Freetown, the Capital (10), and Kenema (4), Bo (6) and Makeni (10) in the provinces.[2] At the time of the interview 10/30 were not in regular employment (4f, 6m); 17/30 were working (9f, 8m); two men were engaged in irregular work and one man was a student. More than half (18/30) reported they were dependent on themselves (6f, 12m); eleven were leaning on relatives or friends (5f, 6m) and one on unspecified other people.

1 SLESRC No. 009/06/2023

2 We gratefully acknowledge the roles of Juhairatu Jalloh and Eleanor Kanu in data collection.

PATHWAYS IN AND OUT OF PRISON: PRESENTATION OF DATA AND ANALYSIS

In what follows we elaborate upon: childhood experiences of loss and disruption; significant adult relationships; interrupted schooling; previous experiences of conflict with the law; circumstances leading to arrest; turning points; feelings on release; and reception by family, friends and members of the community. At the end we reflect on what might have potentially interrupted trajectories towards prison. By weaving verbatim quotes into the analysis we aim to privilege people's voices, honour their stories, and shed light on an under-researched field from the perspective of those with first-hand experience.

LIVES BEFORE PRISON

Childhood experiences of loss and disruption

When former prisoners described their childhood, many described experiences of loss and displacement. Only 8/30 were raised by two parents. Losses were due to death, divorce, abandonment or abduction. Under such circumstances it was common for children to have as primary caregiver not a parent but another relative, for example a grandmother, an aunt, an uncle or a sister, in one instance a rebel commander and later a peacekeeper from ECOMOG.3 Children who experienced the loss of a parent were thus able to depend on other relatives for care but such relationships could also feature tensions, jealousies, rivalries, neglect and lack of supervision and guidance.

A minority of interviewees (4/30) spoke about their childhoods in positive fashion referring for example to close friends with whom they discussed everything, played and did chores with. Two referred to coming from homes where they were shown care and 'abundant love'. Another spoke of a 'close and intimate' family life, and a fourth about 'harmonious' memories. But the overwhelming majority shared memories of loss, displacement and dislocation. Some losses occurred early in life due to death, war or abandonment, others later. Nine interviewees reported the death of a parent (or both) during their childhood. In one instance, another caregiver (an elderly man who had helped our interviewee flee to Guinea following separation from parents during the war) also died, leaving the boy to live on the street before relocating to a refugee camp and then, in his mid-20s, returning to Sierra Leone. He described how 'since then I have been all by myself without any family'. Without skills or education, he took to washing cars and motorbikes but was eventually helped by a woman whom he later married and had two children with.

Who to live with was a source of tension for children who lost their parents. One person expressed a preference for being with her grandmother since her mother gave preferential treatment to her younger siblings. Others reported discomfort at the preferential treatment given to other members of the family where their needs were under-prioritised. Parents or care-givers living in relative poverty and 'struggling to get food for the day' faced tough choices about which of their children to send to school. One interviewee described how she was not sent to school, but when she followed her friends there a teacher noticed her and ended up sponsoring her schooling. Alternative sources of support could sometimes be found.

Four interviewees described how preferential treatment was given to the biological children of their caregivers. While they may have felt well cared for temporarily, the arrival of new children in the family was experienced as a threat with real consequences for well-being. The remarks are quite striking, so we include all four here:

3 Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group, a peacekeeping force comprising soldiers drawn from the armies of members of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) to intervene in regional conflicts.

> When I am young, I recognised my uncle as my biological father but no sooner one of my uncle's female child join us at home, my uncle started to differentiate us and straight away I realized that, he is not my biological father (Female interviewee, Kenema).

> I grew up in a difficult way. My childhood was a bitter memory for me. My mother gave me away at age seven to her sister… My aunt did not send me to school… yet she sent all her children to school. I was left home to do all the house chores. She was in a good position to send me to school, yet she refuses (Female interviewee, Freetown).

> I grew up with my aunt and her husband in the eastern part of Freetown. I have no idea as to where my parents were… My aunt told me that they died during the civil war... Everything was going well until my aunt gave birth to her first child. She now sees me as a competition for her daughter… (Female interviewee, Freetown).

> Later on, my aunt frankly told me outright that, she will not be able to support my education because she also has her own children that she is paying school charges for (Male interviewee, Makeni).

The details are different, but the mechanism and sense of bitterness and resentment are similar.

Such experiences of disruption, deprioritisation, and conflict in the home resulted in some young people being forced to fend for themselves, pushed out of the home by the atmosphere and their treatment in the home, or drawn somehow to something else. Two young people made a conscious choice in favour of the street. One who came from an affluent family reported how 'something inside me' pushed him towards street life: 'I feel more comfortable with my friends on the street than with my family members despite all the comfort they give me'. Another found their father difficult to be with:

> My mother passed away when I was young, my father loves me so much, but I don't like to be close to him. My father forced me to go to school, but I refused, I used to go to the beach, I used to spend long time there about two or three months before going back home. I enjoyed living in the street [more] than living with my father even though he loves me a lot and treats me well.

Others felt pushed out, for example one who dropped out or was expelled from school for non-attendance preferring football to education:

> The pressure was too much from my grandmother and older siblings that I have to leave home and stay with my friend under the bridge. There I was introduced to all sorts of bad life.

Another felt obliged to leave the care of his uncle and aunt after 'maltreatment' by his uncle. He also spoke of the difficult environment that was 'full of bad people… [and] not too good for young people to grow up [in]'. He stayed until he had finished his schooling and then moved out. He later returned to his uncle's but resented him because of a conflict over land previously belonging to his father that the uncle had laid claim to. This resulted in a period of illness related to this conflict with what he referred to as a 'spiritual' dimension.[4]

Relative poverty meant that some caregivers spent more time generating income – sometimes to fund schooling – than actually parenting. This account is illustrative:

> My father left us when we were young and to date, we have not had a word from him. My mother struggled very hard to raise us up. She put all her energy and focus into feeding and giving a roof overhead. To achieve all this, she has to leave the house very early in the morning and retire very late at night. This has been the daily practice in our house. We are left with no adult guidance…

Some people reported how they received help and moral support from outside of their extended families. One person told how she was helped by a community chief after days of distress and frustration at her uncle's refusal to support her in vocational training. The chief counselled her and 'rescued' her when she was driven out of the house one night by her uncle. He also tried to mediate the conflict, though to no avail, so she resided for a period with the community chief.

Another person who lived with their elder sister - even though her parents were alive - described how friends filled the role of a family.

> We were like family doing everything together and watching each other's back. Even though I could not get parental love and care I must say I did not miss out on anything when I was with them.

In this section we have considered the ways in which our interviewees' childhoods were characterised by loss and disruption. Childhood was a time of struggle and tension and ambivalent relations with caregivers. While a few interviewees spoke positively of their childhood, family dynamics and relations with caregivers were often conflictual and inconsistent. As well as speaking about the quality of care, we have also considered how people's choices were informed by push and pull factors, that is by challenging circumstances in the home and, in one case, the allure of the street. Relationships during childhood – their absence and presence – were crucial. We turn now to look at significant adult relationships.

4 Our material does not indicate clear gendered distinctions around who felt pulled by the attraction of the street and who felt pushed out by the toxicity of the environment; sometimes it is even difficult to distinguish between push and pull factors reminding us that in everyday life situations relational dynamics and causal mechanisms are complex and multiple factors interweave.

Significant adult relationships

When asked about important relationships and friendships during adulthood just over one quarter of interviewees (8/30) spoke mainly about bad friends and difficult relationships. A slightly larger proportion (12/30) spoke mainly about good friends and productive relationships. And 10/30 spoke about a mix of good and bad relationships including relationships that turned sour.

In this section we give some examples of the character of relationships represented by these three broad categories.

In relation to 'bad friends & difficult relationships' one man described how when living on the street it was his friends who influenced him to steal. A woman described how mingling with drug users caused her to leave home and get involved in selling drugs and sex to simply survive on the street. She shared a room with three of these friends. A change of school led to another interviewee associating with friends who led him into trouble (including stealing and drug use). This resulted in him being evicted from his uncle's home and having to survive on the street. Another interviewee described a difficult situation where he was accused of impregnating a teenager when he was 18. A settlement was reached, and when the baby was born, they stayed with the mother. Lack of support from his uncle led to him exchanging home for the street and a problematic period living there. A man was asked to leave his aunt's place and the only place he had was the street. After being helped by an organisation working with street youth he stayed with a man in exchange for helping out around the house but when that arrangement broke down, he was driven out of the house and ended up back on the street, where eventually another aunt helped him out. Another young man chose the street so as to be less a burden on his mother. He would sleep on tables at the market or on available verandas. Here he mixed with 'bad friends', doing irregular work to survive, and sleeping around with 'street women' in exchange for 'rum or drugs'. Another interviewee described how, driven by a desire for money and to ameliorate his parents' poverty, he joined friends to steal from a shop in the village. He was, in fact, on his way to bed when his friends called him out to help them, so we see here again the influence of others. They broke into the shop and stole 'assorted items… such as mobile phones, building materials, bags, shoes, books, etc.' After a week one of his friends was arrested and confronted with the stolen goods. He confessed and led the police to our interviewee who was also duly arrested.

Interestingly, the street is a central feature in all but one of the cases here. It is life outside the home that features in most accounts of bad and difficult relationships. In these narratives it is the street that is associated with trouble. But not all accounts of difficult relationships involved the street. Households, as we have already observed, can also feature strained relationships. One woman, for example, described how she felt forced to move from her father's friend's house because of difficulties in her relationship to her father's friend's wife, including demands that she contributes towards expenses.

Positive relationships and strong bonds in adulthood were characterised by terms such as 'wonderful' or 'enjoyable' and 'loving' and 'peaceful'. One man referred to his wife as 'my strength throughout the struggle'. Another person shared how they had stayed with their spouse, committed to their four children, despite having it revealed that the married couple were siblings (who had been separated during childhood). These examples refer to relationships between spouses. Others referred to strong business partnerships based on long-lasting friendships, mutually beneficial financial dependencies and friends who 'never led them into bad ways'. One man spoke of being 'popular' at the university club where he became organising secretary, implying he was respected and well-liked among his peers. A former child soldier did not describe the relationships he was caught up in during the war except that he ran errands for his ECOMOG liberators. But later when in the refugee camp he made friends who became like family to him.

Not surprisingly some interviewees gave accounts that featured both positive and negative experiences with relationships and friends. One person expressed strong views about the difference between female and male friends believing that female friends would get her into trouble and not necessarily have her best interests at heart, whereas male friends would be able to advise appropriately. She chose only male friends. Another described a mutually helpful years long relationship he had with a girl when he was 18. However, it did not last due to his frustration that she did not get pregnant and the pains he felt seeing his friends with their children. A woman spoke about friends who gave positivity, in contrast to previously experienced bad company, which had slowed her progress:

> Upon relocating to my new environment, I encountered friends who were giving me positive reality of life. And were helping me to forget about my past way of life and focus on doing something mindful for my life. As an adult I realised that I would have achieved a lot as a young girl coming up, but bad company slowed down my progress and made me where I am now.

Her regrets are mitigated somewhat by the discovery of new encouraging friends. Another woman, also looking back in time, mentioned how she had 'endured' her first husband (who she was forced into marrying by her aunt) but was helped in dealing with the struggles of her life by her second husband.

Another woman also exited a marriage she was obliged to enter by her mother and relatives. She had initially felt unable to defy the wishes of her mother and family but after having two children and not liking the man she left him and was met with disapproval from her family. She relocated and was able to make some good friends who were helpful in business.

A man who described his existence as 'hustling' and 'hand to mouth' seemed to enjoy the community of peers and the protection provided by a godfather figure on the street.

The changing and changeable nature of relationships through time was captured quite strikingly in the case of a woman who left home aged 15 when the situation 'became unbearable'. She moved in with a friend 'who has been a great help'. Later she met a man who 'met her needs' and entered into a relationship with him. However, after becoming pregnant, as she put it, 'his behaviour towards me changed; he abandoned me and the pregnancy'. To prepare for the birth she washed clothes and cooked for neighbours; a friend upon whom she had relied previously was facing her own difficulties and could not help. She told how when the child was born, she 'handed it over to the woman I used to be house help for since I could not afford taking care of the child' She returned to the street 'hanging out with the girls to make a living'.

A man described how he became an adult while on the street, part of a community of friends but in competition with others:

> The hustle was too hard as we have competition from other group who are stronger than us, they overpower us, and we were forced to move from our spot and start living in the street during the day and at night sleep on market tables. That has been the pattern of life.

At this time, he wanted to go home but felt ashamed about his previous behaviour and so as he put it, he 'had to endure'.

In this section we have looked at how our research participants experienced a range of different kinds of significant relationships in adulthood - some bad, some good, some mixed. It is clear that pathways to prison were not in any sense uniformly driven, for example, by the predominance of only bad or problematic relationships. The heterogeneity of our sample in this regard points already to a key finding of our study namely that pathways to prison are not uniform but varied. Noteworthy too is the way changing circumstances give way to changing opportunities and challenges; lives are not static but in motion.

We considered earlier the experience of disrupted childhood. Another area where disruption was a feature was education, which we come to next.

Interrupted schooling

When asked about their educational background a shared theme among respondents was that educational trajectories were interrupted at one or more points. 20/30 respondents described how their education had been interrupted at different times for different reasons and 3/30 (only a small minority) had no schooling at all and went into trade/business at an early age. More than two-thirds of our sample (23/30) therefore had either no schooling or interrupted schooling. Some had schooling interrupted at an early age, others when they were teenagers. Cost was a factor in the interruption of several educational trajectories. Others dropped out due to getting in with 'bad friends'; having 'no love for education'; the outbreak of war; abduction into war; or were expelled

for non-attendance. This compares with six interviewees who made it through school with college/university level qualifications or beyond. Two completed school and had university-entry level qualifications; One took a diploma after secondary school; two went to university and one made it to nursing school.

If there is a surprise here it is that several people did make it to further education. That is, our research participants do not only comprise poor, marginalized, uneducated persons. Prisoners are a heterogenous population. While disrupted education may serve as an indicator of other life challenges that may contribute to somebody in Sierra Leone ending up in conflict with the law and in prison it is obviously not a direct cause. So, while it might be tempting to point to lack of education as a core driver in the trajectories of people who end up in prison the cause-effect relationship is more subtle. Nevertheless, disrupted education is an important contributing factor.

A common slogan in Sierra Leone shared by one respondent is: 'School days are the best but not the happiest'. This reminds us of the value put on education in Sierra Leone but also that there are expectations that education might not be easy.

In sum, a large proportion of our study participants had their schooling disrupted in different ways but not everybody. Interrupted education is one feature among others of pathways to prison, though as we shall see later it is one that participants weigh quite heavily.

Previous experience of conflict with law

Almost two-thirds of our research participants had not been in conflict with the law previously. 18/30 shared unequivocally that they had no previous conflict with the law. Our sample was more diverse than expected in this regard. Respondents are not only representative of a marginalised and habitually criminalised population of young people. 5/30 effectively responded 'No, but…' For example, no but they had been involved in violence though it never reached the police; involved in violence but never reached prison; involved in many crimes but got away with it; regularly caught pickpocketing but settled the matter on the spot; had participated in various atrocities during the war but without legal consequences.

7/30 had been in conflict with the law before including: having been in police custody for various offences; having been in prison before; multiple experiences of conflict with the law ended through negotiation with the police; two alleged rapes settled out of court; having been wrongly accused of murder aged 13; and engagement in shop-breaking and stealing. That is, just under a quarter shared experiences about previous (alleged) criminal behaviour resulting in encounters with officials. Five others (the 'No, buts') were involved in crime but while there were, on three occasions negotiations and settlements, they never reached prison.

In total less than half (12/30) had troubled or troublesome violent or criminal histories.

Immediate circumstances resulting in arrest

The feminist pathways literature about people's routes into prison typically feature quite broad typologies, based on detailed life history mapping. The pathways we identify in this section are 'micro pathways' profiling antecedent events closely associated with imprisonment, rather than the typical kind of macro pathways that make up pathway typologies (e.g. histories of substance abuse, marginality, domestic violence etc.). Below we look at business gone wrong; situations of conflict; habitual 'criminal' lifestyles; wrong place, wrong time; and grudges and false accusations.

Business gone wrong

The predominant circumstance leading up to imprisonment (though not a majority) is business gone wrong. There are 11 accounts of 'business gone wrong'. What we mean by this term is work or trade-related activities that led to arrest and imprisonment. Most of them relate to business transactions turned sour or funds gone missing during a business arrangement. One was violent (related to sex work). 7/11 of the accounts of 'business gone wrong' featured women.

Here we give some examples:

One man stayed late at the car wash after a slack day for business and was arrested for loitering. The owner of an aluminium workshop sent his employee to purchase materials using a client's money. During the journey the materials went missing. The client suspected foul play and reported the owner to the police leading to their imprisonment. In another case a security guard was charged when property from the site he was protecting went missing.

A woman described how she was dependent for support on a friend whom she was living with, but the friend grew tired of supporting her, so she joined her working for a businessman. The man later developed a romantic/sexual interest in her, but since she had a boyfriend, she did not want to get involved. However, when she was abandoned by her boyfriend and in dire straits financially, she decided she would start a relationship with the man. The man promised to buy her land and build a house if the business was successful and she described how, with this incentive, she worked hard for the business, and it thrived. They did not live together and as time passed, she learned that the businessman had begun to see his former partner again. He showed little sign of fulfilling his promise to her of land and a house. Her resentment grew and one day they argued:

> One day I became so desperate and I told him to buy me the land he promised me about and he responded to me that we did not sign any document that stated that he should buy a land, and I said you must buy that land no matter what.

Not long after he gave her some money to buy cement, but she decided instead to use the money for the land he had promised:

> I became so excited because I saw this as an opportunity to get what I wanted from him.

He found out the money had not been deposited in the bank for the supplies. And reported the matter to the police and she became a 'wanted'. Sought after by the police she fled to her sister's in the countryside and there ended up using the money to pay for medical expenses for her sister's husband and otherwise used up the money. Eventually the police caught up with her even though she moved from village to village to avoid them and she was sentenced to five years in prison. After sharing this lengthy and quite complex, dramatic narrative she bluntly stated, 'This is how I ended up going to prison'. At the time she was three-month's pregnant and eventually gave birth in prison.

Another woman described how she worked as a trader. It is relatively common that traders operate based on trust and can in the course of their business arrangements be entrusted with goods on credit. She described how her suppliers would 'entrust her with the goods' and expect to be paid once they had been sold. She sold the goods but was confronted by armed robbers 'holding dangerous weapon like cutlass, big knife and sharp stick' who took the money. She 'was ordered by one of the men to drop down everything I had on me... I was stripped of everything I had on that day including the money I collect'. Out of shock and fear she failed to return to her place of business and when she finally returned her supplier did not believe her story and reported her to the police. She was sentenced on three charges – one of which was failure to act – to five years in prison. A trader victimised by crime became the victim of law.

The incursion of debts can also have problematic consequences. Another woman trader whose business was 'going bad' felt obliged to take micro-credit loans. Having borrowed and repaid loans on four occasions, on a fifth she was unable to repay the debt. She argued with the loan providers that her goods had been stolen implying it was not her fault she could not repay on time, but she was taken to court and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

For some people interpersonal conflicts around business had problematic consequences. For example, another woman – eight months pregnant when she was imprisoned – was accused by a jealous business rival of taking goods from a woman who regularly entrusted her with goods to sell. Unable to pay for the allegedly taken goods the matter was taken to court, and she was sentenced to four months in prison or a fine. Unable to afford the fine she was obliged to serve the prison term and to give birth to her child in prison all because of the jealousy of her rival because the supplier favoured her. Petty grievances incurred in the course of irregular business relationships lead in this way to prison. Precarious conditions or highly charged relationships and livelihood conditions have sometimes potent and painful consequences.

In other cases, traders end up in prison because they are held responsible for the actions of others. For example, a former child soldier turned country cloth maker/seller was held responsible for his apprentice's actions, and a man who worked as an electronics mechanic was imprisoned after he had bought a plasma TV that turned out to be stolen. More prosaically but also connected to his means of earning a living, a commercial bike rider was stopped routinely and found not to have his paperwork in order and to be using a private motorbike for commercial purposes. This led to his imprisonment.

A final example of business gone wrong features a sex worker who described how she had agreed to spend the night with a man at a hotel in exchange for a sum of money. He insisted he would only pay less than half the amount agreed and when she insisted on the full amount he got 'furious' and began to beat her with his belt. She described how in self-defence she grabbed a beer bottle from beside the bed 'and smashed it on his head and blood started to gush out'. She became afraid and fled the hotel room via the back exit but was apprehended by a security guard and later charged with wounding with intent and sentenced to three years in prison.

The above examples of business gone wrong are all examples of the criminalisation of people engaged in precarious livelihood activities. Trust, betrayal of trust, or lack of trust feature regularly, reminding us of the deeply relational character of generating an income and surviving under precarious conditions. Under these conditions people are intimately dependent on one another; lives are intertwined. Women are over-represented in this category, as they are in the next. Involvement in precarious livelihood activities can also mean being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Wrong place wrong time

This category features four women whose direct pathways to prison involved being in the wrong place at the wrong time and subject to capricious policing practices, and one who was arrested because of something her husband had done.

One described how she regularly sold drinks at a particular street corner and on one occasion while serving for a women's event a riot broke out in the vicinity. She did not flee but stayed with her drinks and was arrested in the clean-up operation. She pleaded with the police pointing out how she was just there to sell drinks, but they refused to believe her, and she ended up with a prison sentence and a fine. After a month in prison her family were able to pay the fine and she was released. Another woman was mistaken for a rioter during the August 10 riots while she was simply ***en route*** to her aunt's place. She was remanded in custody for a month with no information shared with her family as to her whereabouts and later sentenced to 18 months in prison. Another was similarly arrested in connection with the riots when she ran into a truckload of police as she headed to the market to acquire goods for her business. It is possible she overlooked a curfew order. And finally, one was sentenced for riotous conduct when heading over to a friend to collect some goods even though she had heard on the radio that people should go about their normal business in the wake of the riots a couple of days earlier. Like the former woman she was sentenced to nine months imprisonment.

Additionally, our research participants also include one woman imprisoned 'because of the husband'. (This is a commonly described pathway in other countries). She was arrested when a truck load of police raided her husband's house and found a stash of illegal drugs. Since she was present (in the wrong place at the wrong time), she too was arrested and ultimately sentenced to 18 months imprisonment.

Situations of conflict

Six accounts were provided of fights or violent conflicts, two related to perceived interference in relationships / jealousy and three to collective fights or altercations, and one to a case of gender-based violence in the home. We briefly present each.

A man was called away from work to a place where he found his wife together with another man. He 'grew angry and started fighting with the man', 'damaging' him in the process. This resulted in a sentence of three years in prison or a fine. In the first instance he could not pay the fine so served seven months before his family were able to have him released by paying the fine.

Another man described how he 'had a misunderstanding' with his girlfriend's friend who was advising her to call off the relationship between them. He was annoyed 'after advising her to stop on several attempts' and eventually he 'could not hold my anger anymore'. He took his scissors and 'stabbed her leaving her with blood gushing out. The whole club was turning upside down [with] people shouting saying I have killed someone'. The woman did not die immediately but did so later and he was charged with murder and sentenced to two years in prison.

A young hot-tempered guy with a good background and a bright future stabbed his friend with a sharp object during a disagreement.

Another man described how he was given a short prison sentence one month after getting involved in an altercation at a carnival during a night out with friends. It began with his friend getting into a fight after which two groups came to blows and they were all arrested.

A fifth man living 'the street life' described how he got into a conflict with a friend and stabbed him leading to his arrest and imprisonment. He was granted bail but could not provide a surety so served eight months during the trial and was then sentenced to one year in prison.

Another man told how he was convicted of domestic violence after being 'unable to control his temper' and beating his wife. She reported the matter to the police, and he was sentenced to two years in prison or a fine. After six months the family paid the fine and he was released and reunited with his wife and children whom, he said, 'burst into tears of joy when they saw me at home'. For his part, on release, he was hoping for forgiveness for 'what I had done which led me into prison.'

A different kind of incident involved a death that took place during an initiation ceremony at a student club. In this incident the narrator was charged with conspiracy to murder after being present at the ceremony and having a leading position in the student body (though not involved in the event).

Each of these violent incidents feature male perpetrators. The sex worker case that we considered under 'business gone wrong' was also convicted of a violent offence reminding us that there is some overlap of categories.

Habitual criminal/criminalised lifestyles

We heard four accounts of what we chose to characterise as 'habitual criminal lifestyles' though only two of these had been in conflict with the law before.

One man described how he had previously served six months for shop-breaking but on his release returned to the street and became friends with a soldier whom he described as 'mentally disordered'. Using the soldier's officially issued gun they began robbing people at night. His arrest was a result of an attempt to break into an office building when they were apprehended by a security guard and people in the neighbourhood. The soldier denied knowing him at the police station and was released, while he was sentenced to 10 years due to it being his second offence. An example of precarious conditions and a dubious friendship.

A woman who characterised her life as being on the street described how it was tough to afford the rent for the room she shared with four of her friends. She turned to sex-work and selling drugs and was the victim of a police sting operation (set up on the basis of a report filed by an acquaintance jealous of the income she was making selling drugs) where a woman officer approached her in a club requesting tramadol. At first, she refused but then decided she would supply her. Then she was approached by a male officer requesting drugs who then proceeded to arrest and handcuff her.

A man described how he and his friends would go to clubs to rob people (a scheduled and organised activity). On one occasion they snatched a mobile phone from a woman but were caught in the act. His two friends ran away while he was beaten by the people who caught him and then handed over to the police. Community justice often kicks in before law enforcement gets involved. In this case he was glad to fall into the hands of the police: 'If it hadn't been for the intervention of the police I would have lost my life'.

Another man described how he was mercilessly beaten by youths and market women after being caught by an alert market trader trying to pickpocket a mobile phone (again a regular activity) and then handed over to the police and sentenced to two years in prison.

Each of these persons presents as habitually involved in relatively petty crimes of survival while leading precarious lives. All but one were living a street life; the one exception was from a village where his parents were poor.

Grudges and false accusations

We have already registered the role envy can play. Grudges and allegedly false accusations also feature as reasons behind why someone might get accused of an offence; sex is involved in both cases described below.

One man described a flirtatious relationship with a young girl who sold water to him and his colleagues at their workplace. He described how an aunt who held an unreasonable grudge against him made an allegation that he had a sexual relationship with the girl and

reported the matter to the girl's father who happened to be a police officer. The case was reported to the police station as sexual abuse of a teenager, and he was sentenced to four years imprisonment. He expressed some bitterness given the fact that the testimony came from a family member and the powerful position of the father as a police officer.

Another claimed simply that he was innocent of the act of sexual penetration of a teenager and wrongfully accused. He was summoned to the police station from school. He was shocked and surprised, he explained, never having expected anything of this nature and claimed that the 'complainant built up a false story and false witness against me.'

We turn now from the immediate circumstances surrounding arrest to consider turning points in people's lives as they recounted them.

Turning points

In the course of the interview, we asked about any significant turning points that people could identify in their lives. With this question we sought perhaps a shortcut towards some single event or moment that led young people to prison. Of course, things are more complicated and, in fact, when answering, many responded by flagging their offence, its circumstances or their prison experience as representing their lives' most significant turning point. One spoke about how having their 'freedom seized' was a 'total setback' affecting their life 'for the worst'. Another lamented how having one's freedom withheld 'for even a day… is difficult in life'.

Almost half (13/30) referred to their crime or the experience of imprisonment as a significant turning point in their life. These 13 varied somewhat in their emphasis. Four spoke of their regret at doing what they did or being where they were when arrested. One spoke of the 'worst decision' they had ever taken; another of the realisation that they should never have gone to sell their wares at that particular point that day or at least should have left the scene as soon as trouble started and before the police came. Another spoke of regret at the consequences – the depreciation of their business; and a fourth about how it was too late for regret, but he wished he had listened to well-meant advice.

There is quite a strong sense that people hold themselves responsible for the events they got caught up in. They wished they had acted differently or made different choices. A woman spoke of what she had failed to do, regretting she had not reported being robbed or returned sooner to inform the suppliers of the stolen goods what had happened. Perhaps if she had shared what really happened sooner, she would have been given the opportunity to pay back the money rather than being taken to court.

For some, prison was a turning point because of changes in their behaviour while inside (e.g. beginning to drink and smoke). For others it was a turning point because of what happened outside while they were inside. One noted a sense of being abandoned by their 'friends and other people in the community'. After imprisonment her friends stayed away. Another regretted missing the opportunity of getting a good job which would have 'added more value to my life and that of my family'. Two described tragic events that occurred while they were

in prison leaving them both with a sense of having to 'start all over again'. One had their residence robbed losing their possessions. During the robbery their sister's teenage daughter was raped (she could not identify the perpetrators). She also expressed concern about how her son – born in prison – would be stigmatized. The consequences of prison are a family affair. This was emphasised by another woman who described how the 'time I spent in prison shattered my whole life and that of my children'. While she was in prison her elderly husband got sick and died and her children 'had to live at the mercy of my aunty'. But to avoid traumatizing her in prison no-one told her. It was first after her release that she learned of his illness and death. These circumstances still troubled her at the time of the interview:

> My biggest regret is that I was not around when my husband was sick to take care of him as he has always been there for me in times when I need help and I was even not around to pay my last respect to his remains.

Some reference multiple turning points so crop up under different categories. 7/30 refer to bad choices e.g. leaving home, going to the street, engaging in criminal activities, including sex work and 'bad' habits. Four refer to the influence of 'bad friends'. For example, one woman described how the moment she joined the 'company of bad friends things began to go from bad to worse'. She told how she looked mainly at life as an opportunity to have a good time, dependent however on 'sleeping with different guys just so I would survive'.

In fact, a wide variety of turning points are registered by respondents including a school change making it to university, the desire for fun or fame; the lack of maternal care and a place to call home; abandonment by wife combined with responsibilities for children; youth pregnancy; and even 'spiritual' problems implying a curse or possession.

Most turning points were negatively inflected. But three people did share positive turning points related to gaining the opportunity to continue education to university level; the decision to buy a motorbike (become independent); and the decision to move to the city and acquire a house.

We turn now from examples of incidents and circumstances that led towards prison to the experience of life afterwards beginning with consideration of feelings on release.

LIVES AFTER PRISON

Feelings on release

Dominant emotions on release are happiness, joy, and wonder. People also felt relief:

> When I was released, I felt relief. I stood at the door of the prison for a while then I realised that I am free woman now. The feeling was so great to be a free woman.

> My heart was filled with joy upon hearing my release. It was a wonderful moment for me, and it is good to be free.

There were some quite striking expressions of emotion often illustrated by metaphor. For example, some spoke of release being like heaven, in contrast to hell; of feeling like they had won the lottery and could now go to any European country; and of feeling newborn with the status of a president. One person described how as they passed through the prison gate they shouted so loudly that it 'even drew the attention of the onlookers around the prison perimeter'. He knelt down and prayed. Some tears were shed; some spoke of their pleasure at being united with family. Others describe the pleasure they took in encountering the wind once again and of being 'masters of their own lives', referencing in particular how they had control over when they went to bed. A woman described how she stayed up late 'as I was in a new environment where going to bed is decided by me'. A man described the good feeling associated with being able 'to sleep when I want to' and not have movement restricted anymore. Another observed how he only felt totally free when he was the one closing and opening his door. These examples illustrate the sense of autonomy and control that it is possible to feel when no longer in the grip of prison.

However, a couple of people expressed mixed feelings. One said they were 'happy and sad at the same time', happy to see their family but sad 'because I would have to start all over again'. Another expressed concern about her new starting point given that she was now 'living with HIV and AIDS'.

One person only expressed sadness at leaving. His case is an important outlier, illustrating quite starkly the struggle of life on the street.

> I felt sad as I am going to miss my best friend whom I got. He was like an elder brother to me. He taught me about the way of life and how one should handle it… plus because I have been reformed, I did not want to go back to living in the street again. As survival in the street is doing the unthinkable to survive. Plus, I was having a good reception from my fellow inmates in the same cell and one officer who used to know my mother.

For this former prisoner the relations he made in prison were stronger and more significant to him than those on the outside, partly because they had enabled him to 'reform' or at least learn how better to handle life's challenges. His reluctance to leave features sadness at having to leave newly made friends and a realization that despite lessons learned surviving on the street was likely to be compromising.

After release most people went home, a couple to friends, one to his place of work, one to the home of a prison nurse, one to PWSL. One man headed straight to the scene of the alleged crime to engage in a cleansing ritual, following the advice or instruction of his grandmother. Some had hoped to be met at the prison gate by particular people but were met by others. It is not clear that everyone was met at all. A few met surprises: a dead mother, a dead husband, a wife gone, a warm welcome when rejection was expected, an elderly father who could not recognize them at first. Many were hoping to pick up and rebuild. Some expected very little. A couple immediately began thinking about work. A few expressed how they were hoping their possessions would remain untouched, and their family healthy, revealing perhaps a fear that this might not be the case. One woman was received well by her husband but rejected by her mother, illustrating the mixed and uncertain reception prisoners might encounter on release.

Reception by family, friends and members of the community

20/28 who responded to a question about how they were received by family and friends indicated they were largely treated well on release. For two of these, the initial encounter was uncomfortable due to the pending delivery of bad news. One was met with tears, generating confusion in her mind. Unbeknown to her, her mother had passed away and been buried while she was in prison. In a similar case, family members had withheld the news of a released woman's husband's death until they had made it home, making her release 'tragic and unfortunate'. Only 4/28 implied they experienced rejection or abandonment suggesting that post-prison stigma was not a massive part of people's experience at least not from family and friends.

However, in one post-prison stigma case a woman described how her family (especially her mother) did not accept her, due to failed expectations and disapproval of her lifestyle: 'Presently I am not in touch with any of my family', she said, 'I am alone'. Similarly, for a man who had also been living on the street, estranged from his family prior to prison this continued afterwards. Likewise, a man rejected by family due to perceptions of him being a 'hard core criminal' based on his life on the street. One woman simply had nobody and lodged, on release, with a prison nurse.

Not everybody was able to maintain contact with family after release. 23/30 did have contact ranging from regular to intermittent. 7/30 had no contact due to estrangement, disapproval, loss or earlier separation. Interestingly, people's reception by family and friends is mediated more by pre-prison experience than by prison experience. Very few were abandoned or rejected because they had been in prison. Rather, their relationships with family had been curtailed, prior to imprisonment.

Reception by the community seems more mediated by prison experience. Some people, at least, experienced stigma from members of the wider community. Expressions of stigma took the form of name-calling, finger-pointing, rumour-mongering, teasing, withdrawal or ostracization. One person was looking for a new place to live due to harassment by the landlord and stigmatization of her child born in prison. But this was not most people's common experience. Just over half (16/30) of our interviewees indicated that they received a warm and friendly reception from their local community when they were released. A common refrain is that they were received with 'open hands'; they were embraced, as it were. Around a quarter (8/30) reported a mixed reaction whereby some members of the community treated them fine, and others were more reticent to welcome them. For example, one person described somewhat resignedly how:

> Some people don't want to associate with me at all, and they were calling me all sorts of names while on the other hand others were giving me courage but that is life

Another, a woman, described how some people disassociated themselves from her because they 'have the perception that I am a fighter and also, I am a prisoner' but then others believed she was not at fault.

A woman – who referred to herself as a 'mature lady' felt obliged to relocate after an initial warm welcome that was followed by recriminations, including being blamed by her aunt for the death of her mother. Her father too 'turned his back' on her and she relocated with her younger brother. Her rejection by family and the community related to her prison experience and her pre-prison reputation. She told how as a young person she had chosen a form of hedonistic street life with 'bad friends' where she partied rather than attended classes and was dependent 'on sleeping with different guys just so I would survive'. When young she saw life 'as going out and having lots of fun on a daily basis'. However, she had given up this lifestyle and begun to train to be a nurse. Interestingly, despite her precarious and troubled pre-prison life the circumstances around her arrest suggest she was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time given that she was caught up in a police raid following the August 10 riots while on the way to visit her aunt. So, in this case having a bad reputation before prison was a factor affecting the way she was treated by the community afterwards. It is not only the fact of imprisonment that contributes to the sustainability or generation of stigma.

Here is a more positive example:

> The community people also welcomed me because they never heard my name in bad ways, and this is the first time I fall into trouble with the police… I never had a bad record in the community.

Our data features a few examples of outright hostility shown to people on release. These do not overlap with those who we categorised as previously involved in habitual criminal lifestyles, suggesting it was prison rather than lifestyle that affected community members'

perception of them. Some even articulated this. For example, one man told how the community did not treat him well. Especially his neighbours started pointing the finger and calling him 'a "criminal". Which I am not'. Some labelled him irresponsible. Another described how he was barred from certain households classified as a 'hard core criminal' and a 'bad influence'. They had 'lost confidence' in him. Another shared how the community had always seen him 'as a bad influence even before prison so going to prison makes it even worse'. He was not met with 'friendly looks' and people in the community withdrew from him.

Perceived guilt or innocence can play a role in how people were treated by the wider community. One woman reported as follows:

> I was judged by many; some believed my story and some did not and were even spreading rumours about me to others not to trust me with their products because I will cook up story when I don't want to pay back but I ignored them and moved on with my life.

When asked about futures, respondents expressed a general sense of hopeful optimism often accompanied by declarations about unspecified avoidance behaviours. Responses were commonly self-directed and aspirational. For example, people said things like 'I will do all I can…'; 'If only I had…'. Except for one person who claimed to be unlucky, there is little sense that former prisoners see their circumstances (past or present) as in any way determined by external forces (such as poverty). They seem to acknowledge their own blameworthiness, even under circumstances that seem to have conspired against them, such as the cases of the four women subject to capricious policing referred to earlier.

In sum, most people were unsurprisingly pleased to be released from prison but faced ongoing challenges including ***changed*** circumstances inflected by loss and ***unchanged*** circumstances related to survival opportunities and stigma. People were, in general, hoping for the best.

We turn now to our final topic which relates to what people themselves believe might have inhibited their pathway to prison.

REVISITING PRE-PRISON EXPERIENCES

Potential interruptions

With this question we sought to explore possible inhibiting factors, things that people themselves believed might have interrupted their life trajectory and made prison less likely. However, the question betrays a faulty core assumption, namely that life courses were inevitably always heading in the direction of prison. This assumption seems at least for some to be false. Imprisonment was for many not an inevitable fact of life but a contingent, unexpected surprise.

Incidents and circumstances that led to people's imprisonment are unpredictable and, in some cases, arbitrary. Many people who struggle to survive, pursue precarious livelihoods, and experience interrupted education and conflicts do not end up in prison. And yet those who participated in our study did. Their histories, their circumstances, their actions and the actions of others rendered them vulnerable to such an outcome. The realization that no single factor can be isolated that 'leads to prison' presents a challenge to the way we might think about designing initiatives to mitigate penal harm by interrupting journeys to prison. Without wholesale societal change initiatives are likely to flounder. Thus, it is important that government be insistently lobbied to embark on meaningful initiatives to decrease precarity and generate real opportunities for the young people who are rendered imprisonable through the complex interlocking dynamics that feature in the life histories detailed above.

That said, a significant missing ingredient that young people themselves suggested might have directed their lives along a route that did not involve prison is education (12/30). Some relate lack of education to lack of livelihood opportunities or a profession that could have seen them thriving better. Others refer to bad decision-making related to the circumstances of the offence, bad friendships, even to inexperience in marriage, and a bad choice of husband. Three refer to lacking maternal discipline or supervision and another to missing the counsel of a senior or parents who are dead and missing parental love. Another to not heeding the advice of friends. Several spoke of their own stubborn character or lack of obedience. For example, the man who was accused by his aunt of having a relationship with a teenage girl described how he had 'failed to adhere to all the warnings she was making'. He shared that it was 'stubbornness and confidence [that] landed me in prison'. One claimed ignorance of law.

This can be summed up in the form of a list fulfilling the sentence 'If only I had…'.

> … got a decent education, a different livelihood; a skilled job; a profession rather than trading, access to more material resources. We might flag this as being about *livelihood opportunities*.
>
> … experienced parental love; maternal discipline; a senior's mentoring & counsel. We might flag this as being about *relationships and guidance*.

… listened to my parents, made better choices, chosen better friends, had a better husband, been less stubborn, arrogant and disobedient.

… ignored signs of trouble; and avoided the location of the alleged offence.

… known more about the law.

We might flag this as being about character and knowledge.

CONCLUSION & PROPOSALS FOR ACTION

With this report we have sought to illuminate young people's pathways in and out of prison. We have drawn attention to the varied circumstances and situations that have led young people to prison. The pathways to prison previously identified in the literature that seem to best fit our material are the following:

- Economic marginalization / Precarity pathway
- Victimization / Gendered vulnerabilities / Taken advantage pathways
- Problematic familial relations pathway

Our consideration of 'business gone wrong' and 'wrong place wrong time' emphasises the role trade/business relations and 'situations of conflict' can play in pathways to prison while our discussion of childhood and adult relationships and experiences has illuminated the significance of victimization and familial relations.

The above table gives a pointer towards spheres of possible intervention to impede pathways to prison. Participants in our study would seem to call (implicitly, if not explicitly) for enhanced livelihood opportunities, less precarity, more appropriate and accessible care and guidance from seniors, and means by which to become stronger, better-informed characters. However, the picture is complicated by the realization that chains of cause and effect are not clear. While conditions and circumstances left people prone to prison, on another day at a different time, they may well have evaded prison and somebody else might have taken their place. Imprisonment, even for precariously positioned young people, is not inevitable. It is a contingent, unpredictable product of multiple factors, which should perhaps be taken into greater consideration at the point of sentencing.

What our study also points to is that it is inaccurate to generalize about the prison population. While some commonalities of experience can be identified our 30 respondents have relatively distinct and diverse histories. They cannot be understood to belong to a single 'criminal class', or to all belong to the category of 'street youth' or habitual criminals. Generalising about the prison population or resorting to pejorative labelling must be avoided and the public and media should be made more aware of this. The young people who participated in our study were not born criminal, they were criminalised and thus rendered imprisonable by a combination of precarious circumstances, troubled histories and sometimes capricious policing.

Our study causes us to issue the following call to policy makers and stakeholders:

- Acknowledge the diversity of prison populations
- Take circumstances of arrest including personal histories into greater account at sentencing

- Invest in programmes aimed at countering disruption to education
- Make guidance and mentoring programmes available to at-risk youth
- Initiate outreach programmes warning of the dangers of criminalisation and the perils of prison
- Generate real opportunities for young people to engage in sustainable adequately remunerated work
- Listen to young people – they are the future

In short, our plea is for government, donors, and civil society to pay more – and more focused – attention to the life conditions of young people and the circumstances of loss, displacement, and disruption that characterise precarious lives, which in some, but far from all, cases also become pathways to prison in Sierra Leone.

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