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‘Like having your heart ripped out’: Metaphors of loss and survival in the narratives of incarcerated mothers separated from their babies

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Abstract

This article examines the experiences of women in prison separated from their babies. Based on qualitative data from the Lost Mothers Project, including 29 interviews with imprisoned women, this article adopts a secondary analysis drawing upon conceptual metaphor analysis as a methodological framework. The research revealed that enforced separation inflicts profound emotional and psychological pain, characterised by grief, guilt, shame, and enduring trauma. Many women describe the separation as a form of state-sanctioned loss, likened to bereavement, yet one they are not permitted to openly grieve. Institutional processes, such as delays in decisions about mother-and-baby units, inconsistent policies, and a lack of compassionate care, intensify this suffering. This article shows how metaphors can illuminate experiences obscured through incarceration and expose the emotional toil concealed in the prison environment. The findings illustrated the extreme emotional impact of separation and the structural and systemic failings that both surround and lead to separation.

Keywords

prison, separation, metaphor, mother, pregnancy

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Introduction

While concerns around pregnancy in prison have increased in recent years, not least due to increased media attention after high profiles tragedies (BBC News, 2019; Doughty Street Chambers, 2023) as well as increasing scholarship on the subject (Abbott et al., 2025), there has been comparatively little research exploring the experiences of separation of babies from women in prison. This evidence gap prompted the Lost Mothers Project, a three-year-long ESRC-funded research project, exploring women's experiences of mandatory separation of newborns and babies in prisons, as well as the professionals (prison officers, midwives, health visitors, social workers) who work with them. The Lost Mothers Project, in collaboration with Birth Companions and women with lived experience, is a pioneering research initiative that explored the effects and lived realities of mandatory separation of mothers and their babies in the English prison system, focusing on voices that have historically been silenced and examining the practices, policies, and emotional outcomes shaping these experiences. The project produced rich, sensitive interviews which the research team returned to after the main project had ended to conduct a secondary analysis of the data.

This article focuses on the testimonies of women interviewed for the Lost Mothers Project and provides a secondary analysis of the metaphors used by women when discussing their experiences of separation. The metaphors examined in this article are extremely visceral and are powerful indicators of the emotional weight of the experience of the separation as well as the institutional and structural failings in providing care and support preceding and following separation. Drawing upon conceptual metaphor analysis, the article highlights how metaphor can be a powerful tool for illuminating marginalised experiences as well as bringing to the fore the personal experiences and carceral trauma often erased in policy and public discourse. The findings underscore the pressing need for systemic change in addressing the needs of women who become imprisoned and experience social care involvement.

Background

Pregnant women account for a small but significant proportion of the female prison population in England, estimated at approximately 6% (Baldwin and Abbott, 2023). There are currently 12 women's prisons in England, and none in Wales, with six of these institutions accommodating a Mother and Baby Unit (MBU). MBUs provide the only formal mechanism by which incarcerated mothers may remain with their infants; however, access is tightly restricted, applications are frequently denied, and provision is uneven across the estate (Abbott et al., 2025). When admission is refused, separation is compulsory, with infants placed in foster care, with extended family, or adopted. For some women, separation occurs after pre-existing involvement with Children's Social Care (CSC); for others, decisions are triggered only by their entry into custody. In either case, the outcomes for maternal mental health and infant development are profound (Abbott et al., 2025; Broadhurst et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2017) and intensified by a lack of suitable emotional and psychological support and institutional insensitivity (Abbott et al., 2025). These experiences are compounded through the dual contact with

children's social care and prisons institutions, neither of which are able to offer adequate support to the intensity of the physical and emotional impacts of separation (Abbottet al., 2025: 11).

The urgency of this issue is underscored by the body of research and policy that highlights the 'first 1001 days' as a critical window in which early experiences shape long-term trajectories of health, attachment, and well-being (Leadsom et al., 2013; Miller-Brunton and Kitchen, 2023). When mothers and babies are separated during this period, the consequences may be devastating. Historical cases, such as those of Roseanne Irvine in 2004, and Michelle Barnes in 2016, illustrate the severe psychological toll of forced separation, with both lamentably culminating in maternal suicide (Baldwin and Abbott, 2023). More recently, the death of Baby Aisha Cleary at HMP Bronzefield in 2019 revealed systemic failings in prison, healthcare, and social care provision, and highlighted the embodied distress experienced by women anticipating removal of their babies (Dyer, 2023; Minson et al., 2025).

Despite increasing recognition of the needs of pregnant women in prison, including the recent His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) frameworks (HMPPS, 2021) and previous scholarship (Abbott et al., 2020, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2024, 2025), critical gaps remain in our understanding of compulsory separation (Abbott et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; De Backer et al., 2024a). Little is known about how women experience the loss of newborns, the decision-making processes that underpin separation, or the institutional arrangements that sustain it (De Backer et al., 2024b). These issues extend beyond those who give birth in custody, encompassing women who enter prison already separated from young children, a group largely absent from current data yet equally affected by grief, stigma, and poor health outcomes (Baldwin, 2018).

Experiences of separation

Experiences of enforced separation from infants are consistently described in the Lost Mothers Project as profoundly traumatic, with women articulating feelings of grief, shame, and disorientation that resonate with, yet are distinct from, other forms of maternal loss (Abbott et al., 2025). Unlike bereavement that is publicly recognised, prison-based separations are often shrouded in secrecy, producing what has been termed 'disenfranchised grief' (Abbott et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Doka, 2002). Furthermore, the stigmatisation of the experience of separation is exacerbated through the involvement of both the prison and children's social services, adding to the experience of disenfranchisement (Abbott et al., 2025). Mothers interviewed within the project reported struggling to reconcile the physical absence of their baby with the embodied traces of pregnancy and birth, an incongruence that left many in a state of living bereavement. For women whose applications to Mother and Baby Units were denied, the bureaucratic and unclear nature of decision-making (Sikand, 2015) often compounded their distress, reinforcing a sense of powerlessness over their circumstances and their maternal roles.

The accounts collated in Lost Mothers' further highlight how separation is not a singular event but an ongoing lived condition. Several women described enduring reminders within the prison environment such as other mothers caring for infants in MBUs, or

encounters with pregnant women, which intensified their sense of exclusion and loss. This daily confrontation with absence can erode women's sense of self and identity as mothers, producing long-term consequences for mental health, attachment, and maternal confidence (Abbott et al., 2025; Baldwin, 2018). Some mothers spoke of attempting to maintain maternal agency yet were frequently constrained by institutional rules and surveillance, leaving them with only partial or conditional expressions of care.

Importantly, the project also illuminates the cumulative effects of prior trauma in shaping women's responses to separation. Many incarcerated women have experienced multiple adversities, including domestic abuse, care experience, and prior child removals (Baldwin, 2018; Broadhurst and Mason, 2020). For such women, separation in prison was experienced not as an isolated rupture but as part of a cycle of loss, often reinforcing pre-existing fears of permanent disconnection from children and family life. The sense of inevitability expressed by some participants speaks to deeply embedded mistrust of statutory services and a pervasive resignation that undermines prospects for rehabilitation or reunification (De Backer et al., 2024a).

In this way, the Lost Mothers testimonies point to the structural as well as emotional dimensions of maternal separation. Compulsory removal not only disrupts individual relationships but also reflects broader institutional logics in which risk management and custodial order outweigh considerations of maternal-infant well-being. The systematic silencing and disparaging of women's perspectives in formal decision-making leads to mothers' own accounts of capacity, care and attachment being frequently overlooked and devalued, resulting in exclusion of their perspectives from decision-making processes within the prison system (Abbott, 2023). Understanding separation, therefore, requires attention not only to the intimate and embodied consequences for women, but also to the institutional practices that both generate and obscure these harms. Metaphor is crucial in this context, as it allows mothers to articulate the depth and complexity of their experiences, expressing trauma, grief, and loss in ways that literal language alone cannot capture, and making the unseen realities of separation tangible for policy makers, practitioners, and the wider public.

Metaphor in criminological research

While metaphors operate as fundamental and everyday instruments of linguistic conveyance, they are also a powerful tool of meaning making beyond stylistic flourish or the interpersonal. Post-structuralist philosopher Ricoeur (1975) argues that metaphors are profound tools, which can bridge the gap between abstract concepts and lived realities. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) likewise contend that metaphors are a fundamental means of navigating and making sense of the world, grounding the intangible in terms of the tangible. This is particularly salient when these experiences are abstract, and the notion of conceiving one thing in terms of another helps to facilitate the abstract into something which feels concrete and grounded (Jamrozik et al., 2016). Black's (1962) interaction theory further emphasises metaphors' productive power through the generation of new meanings rather than merely reflecting pre-existing ones. Taken together, these perspectives underscore that metaphor is not peripheral, but central to human understanding.

Metaphor is a fundamental tool within prison and criminology research, providing a means to articulate and organise the often-ineffable experience of confinement and its psychological effects (Canton, 2010). Ben Crewe's influential concept of the 'depth of imprisonment' frames incarceration through spatial metaphors such as 'depth, weight, and tightness' to capture the multidimensional pains of imprisonment (Crewe, 2021). The metaphor of depth elucidates how prison regimes consume the individual, isolating them from the outside world and shaping subjective experiences of loss and separation. Laws (2022) further emphasises the centrality of emotional experience within prison environments, exploring how prisoners adapt to and attempt to control their feelings of isolation, grief, and solitude, thereby highlighting the critical importance of attending to the emotional realities that underpin narratives of separation and imprisonment. Such metaphors allow prisoners and researchers alike to communicate dimensions of psychological suffering and existential disruption that literal language often cannot fully convey. More broadly, the metaphors embedded in criminal justice discourse also shape societal and policy responses, influencing how maternal separation and punishment are understood and contested at institutional levels. This is exemplified within Armstrong's (2009) metaphor analysis of Scottish criminal justice policy documents. Here, Armstrong (2009) highlights how figurative language can embed implicit assumptions into policy discourse that can reshape our understanding of legal and penal concepts. This trickle-down effect from policy into practice has material and phenomenological impacts upon women's experiences of incarceration.

In feminist criminology, metaphor functions as a powerful analytical lens to illuminate the gendered dimensions of crime, justice, and incarceration. Metaphors shape how women's experiences are understood and represented, often revealing the deep structural inequalities and societal norms that underlie their treatment within the criminal justice system. For example, metaphors of women as either fallen or pure reflect long-standing cultural narratives that dichotomise female identity and morality, which can marginalise women who do not conform to these roles or who resist dominant stereotypes (Gelsthorpe, 2020). Such metaphorical framings influence responses to female offending, victimhood, and rehabilitation, frequently oversimplifying complex lived realities into binary categories that obscure agency and intersectional experiences (Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2013; Smart, 2013).

Moreover, feminist criminology draws attention to how metaphors not only describe but also sustain power relations by shaping policy and institutional practices. The language used to characterise incarcerated women such as broken, contaminated, or lost carries symbolic weight that impacts how women are perceived, controlled, and managed within carceral spaces (Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Daly, 2010). Importantly, research drawing directly on women's own narratives reveals how many women use metaphorical descriptors to articulate their experiences of incarceration and separation. Women have described themselves as 'caged', 'trapped', or 'disappearing' to express feelings of confinement, erasure, and emotional fragmentation under conditions of punishment and maternal loss (Abbott, 2018, Abbott et al., 2025; Laws, 2022). These metaphorical self-descriptions underscore the embodied and psychological dimensions of their experience, providing critical counter-narratives to institutional discourses that often render women invisible or morally suspect. Engaging with these metaphors critically enables feminist

criminology to challenge punitive logics, opening space for alternative narratives that acknowledge women's resilience, care, and relational identities even amid marginalisation and separation (Heidensohn, 2006).

Methodology

For this article, the research team undertook a secondary analysis of primary qualitative data collected through the Lost Mothers project, with a specific focus on the lived experiences of incarcerated women. The Lost Mothers project conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with women who were incarcerated or formerly incarcerated and had experienced separation from their babies (aged up to 18 months) at any point during imprisonment. The majority of interviews were carried out in person with women currently detained across five different prison estates, while online interviews were conducted with some staff members. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The project adopted a participatory, co-produced approach, involving women with lived experience at every stage to ensure that their voices and perspectives remained central throughout the research process (Abbott et al., 2024). This was a key part of the project, and a team of women who had lived experience of the prison system themselves, worked closely with the researchers to help design and analyse the research (Abbott et al., 2024). Women gave informed consent to take part and were clear that they wanted their experiences to be shared with decision-makers. Many told us they were determined that what had happened to them should lead to real change for others.

The research team took great care to work in a trauma-informed, sensitive way, always aiming to put participants' well-being first. However, the nature of the prison environment meant that this was not always achievable. Despite the challenges and impossibilities of always being able to truly enact these practices within the oppressive nature of the prison system, the research team worked consciously to embed these where possible, including regularly checking in with participants to ensure consent was as informed as possible throughout the entirety of the interview.

Women were asked questions in relation to their experiences of separation. This included questions around the emotional nature of their experiences, the support that was available to them before, during, and after separation, as well as questions around what might have improved their experience. Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify common experiences women may have shared through the process of separation. It was through this initial analysis that the research team noticed the use of metaphors by the women in interviews when talking about their experiences. Once the initial project was completed, the research team went back to the data to begin a secondary analysis of the metaphors used in the interviews.

Drawing upon the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Conceptual Metaphor Analysis was utilised to examine mothers' experiences of separation in prison. Metaphors were identified within the interview transcripts and analysed to develop understandings around what the systematic patterns of metaphor can reveal about the lived experience of separation. In this study, metaphors were systematically identified within interview transcripts from the Lost Mothers project, focusing on the language mothers used to describe their experiences of enforced separation. The analysis aimed to uncover patterns in

metaphorical expressions that illuminate how these women conceptualise their feelings, relationships, and institutional realities in the face of separation. For instance, metaphors of physical confinement, loss, or rupture provide insight into the embodied and relational nature of their trauma, offering a window into how separation is experienced not only cognitively but viscerally and physically.

By mapping these systematic patterns of metaphor, the analysis deepens understanding of the lived experience of separation beyond what literal descriptions alone can convey. This approach highlights how metaphor acts as a crucial resource for mothers to articulate and communicate the otherwise ineffable dimensions of their experiences within the carceral context.

Findings

The following examines the key themes derived from the conceptual metaphor analysis relating to women's experiences of separation. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the anonymity of the women who shared their experiences with the researchers.

Metaphors of loss

Embodied pain and institutional violence

The experience of maternal separation in prison was frequently expressed by women through the use of visceral metaphors, capturing the deep emotional and psychological wounds inflicted by institutional processes.

For many of the women, their descriptions of loss and grief were presented through metaphors depicting violent acts such as ripping, slamming, and tearing. These descriptions positioned the loss as an intimate act of bodily violence:

> The worst thing I could say I've ever experienced in this life, is the separation. It's like you literally take something from inside of me and take it away . . . They literally take a piece of your heart . . . It's like they leave enough to keep it beating, and the rest of it has gone. (Mollie)

> After six days, they came and picked her up, and I've never felt the pain like that in my whole life. It was like something ripping off me, even the nurses cried, I cried, the staff cried. I think they got traumatised as well, some of them. It was just really hard, and then I come back to prison, and I just collapsed. (Freda)

In the metaphors used by mothers, there is a sense of external, inflicted violence, as though the experience of separation constitutes a form of assault which has been enacted upon their bodies and selves. When a mother says, 'it was like something ripping off me', or 'they literally take a piece of your heart', she frames the loss not as an abstract grief, but as a forceful act done to her. In using this language, metaphors assign external agency to the act of violence, emphasising the physical embodied pain of institutional violence compounded through both the prison estate and children's social care. By

framing their experience through metaphors of violence, the mothers expose the punitive and injurious nature of institutional interventions, particularly when enacted through the carceral and social care systems:

> It was horrible . . . It's terrifying! It almost–it rips your heart out, literally. I've got that lump there. It was horrific! Absolutely horrific! I was saying, my heart was heavy, but it wasn't, it was fucking pulled out and slammed against that wall. (Leticia)

In Leticia's quote, we can also see how mothers may feel the need to censor their emotions under institutional power. 'I was saying, my heart was heavy, but it wasn't, it was fucking pulled out and slammed against that wall'. Here, Leticia's emphasis on the dissonance between how she said she felt, and what she was feeling, signifies an articulation of the invisible violence of emotional suppression under the weight of the prison system. Carrying trauma in a system that permits no space for its expression adds pain on top of pain as women feel unable to truly express the breadth of their emotions:

> I was so upset, it was worse than giving birth. That was the hardest pain of my life. I've never felt pain like it . . . It was just in here; in my chest; in my heart. Even in my belly . . . Oh, it was painful. It was the hardest day of my life. (Charlie)

At this juncture, we can see that women's grief is embodied, physical, violent, and inflicted. Women's articulations of their pain expose the inadequacies of prison and social care systems in addressing their needs. Therefore, we can see that loss is experienced not just as emotional pain, but as violent physical assault. These metaphors show how separation is not just felt emotionally but embodied as a brutal, invasive, and inflicted pain. The site of the embodied pain is powerful here too – references to the belly and heart connect to the maternal body, emphasising the act of separation as an assault on maternal identity.

Disintegration of maternal identity

The metaphors used by mothers to describe separation from their children also repeatedly signal a profound loss of identity. Grief becomes a collapse of the maternal self:

> It's definitely grief. Because you're angry. It's all them emotions. It could be in that same day, you might be happy in the morning, and then really angry at night, It's horrible! It puts your head in such a spin . . . it's all over the place and you can't focus, like even making a cup of tea or even having a wash or something, you can completely lose yourself in the sorrow . . . it's like losing a limb, losing your sight. It is, it's like losing any hope, because you know you'll never see that child again for a long time. (Leticia)

We can see how Leticia describes getting lost in the sorrow, unable to perform basic acts of self-care like making a tea or washing. This metaphor reveals more than sadness; it articulates how the maternal identity can become dislocated under the weight of enforced separation, as mothers struggle to come to terms with their disenfranchised grief, and struggle to maintain and prioritise acts of personal well-being:

> I wish I could just vanish in thin air. Do you know? Sometimes I can't deal with the pain, and it's really hard. (Bettina)

Under systems of surveillance and regulation, the emotional expression of this loss is also constrained. Mothers must often suppress or modulate their pain to meet institutional expectations, compounding the invisibility of their suffering and reinforcing the erosion of a maternal self:

> It made me feel like I was a big monster and I'm somebody that goes around hurting children, and I'm not . . . that's how it made me feel, like I couldn't even pick up my daughter without being watched. I'd do something and they'd be like, oh, no, not like that. And then I'm like, well, I know how to bring my daughter up, I've had plenty other children, and they're perfectly fine. How I've looked after them has been perfectly fine, up until you lot get involved. (Chelsea)

For Chelsea, her testimony reveals the dehumanising power of surveillance. Chelsea describes herself as a monster – a figure of danger, unfit to be trusted, and dichotomous to conventional norms of motherhood. Her parenting is constantly watched, judged, and corrected. She internalises the institutional gaze, coming to doubt her own maternal instincts. In this way, her sense of self and her maternal identity becomes disfigured and representative of the external gaze of the prison onto her perception of herself and her capacity to mother.

Survival and hope

Beyond loss, women frame their survival and hope in similarly evocative terms. Hope is described as fragile yet vital and works to sustain maternal identity under extreme conditions of loss, surveillance, and institutional control. Hope is a vital resource, a coping mechanism, and a refusal to give into despair despite the injurious nature of their experience and environment:

> If there was still hope, you would cope. That's all you've got, a hope. It's hard being in here, dealing with it all. Once I start talking about things, it just comes out. I could carry on and on about it, but it's a lot. (Priya)

> And I suppose it is good to have a little bit of hope, to get me through it. And my hope is that my children come and see me, I don't know, in about 19 years. But I know they will, and that's all I can live for. I live for myself, obviously, and I will never kill myself, because I want to meet my children. It's far in the distance, but I'll get there. (Leticia)

The resilience and power of hope is apparent for both Priya and Letitica, showing how the thought of reuniting with their children serves as a lifeline during deep emotional struggle. In Priya's quote, we can see that hope is the bare minimum for survival, a necessity in order to continue functioning within the prison system. Despite feeling helpless and at her lowest, Leticia's role as a mother gives her a sense of purpose and a reason to keep going. It highlights the contrast between despair and determination, where the strength of her maternal identity and desire to mother outweighs the difficulty of her

circumstances. This highlights the dichotomous nature of the maternal identity within the context of separation, as it serves both as a reminder of the loss, and a motivating beacon of hope:

> A lot of people look at me and just think, oh, well, you chose to take the drugs and drink. And we do choose, but people don't understand how hard it is. There's been times where it's either I turn to drink or drugs, or I'll kill myself. So sometimes drink and drugs have been the reason why my kids have still got a mum. (Mollie)

Mollie's reflection speaks to hope in survival's most difficult forms. Her words reflect and challenge simplistic narratives of personal failure or individual choice within substance dependency, reframing substance use as a means of staying alive, as a survival strategy in the absence of meaningful support. Her continued presence for her children, even though addiction, reflects a form of maternal resilience rarely acknowledged or empowered within punitive systems. Her statement also challenges normative assumptions around motherhood and drug dependency and choice, that often further punish and denigrate mothers who self-medicate through alcohol and/or drug use, highlighting how sometimes it is the absence of choice within survival that can arise through experiences of trauma, addiction, and incarceration.

Discussion

The metaphors explored in this article highlight the pain of maternal separation in prison. They shine light on the institutional violence enacted through separations and the tangible, embodied pain experienced by mothers who experience compulsory separation. They emphasise how the process of separation leads to a disintegration of a sense of self and a loss of connection to the maternal identity, despite struggles to hold onto and maintain this. While these metaphors undoubtedly expose the powerlessness of mothers who are mandatorily separated, it is important to also recognise the weight of emotion behind the language as not only expressions of distress but also acts of resistance – attempts by mothers to make their pain visible in a system that renders them voiceless.

Building on Crewe's (2021) framework of the multidimensional pains of imprisonment and Laws' (2022) analysis of emotional adaptation in carceral spaces, the metaphors highlighted in this article expose the intricate interplay between institutional violence and embodied suffering experienced by mothers subjected to compulsory separation. Crewe's (2021) metaphors of depth and weight elucidate how prison confines not only the physical body but also exerts deep psychological and existential pressure, threatening the coherence of maternal identity and selfhood. In parallel, Laws (2022) emphasises the emotional labour entailed in navigating loss, solitude, and control, revealing how metaphorical language serves as both an expression of distress and a means of resisting the totalising forces of incarceration.

This layered understanding is complemented by feminist criminological insights from scholars such as Smart, Canton, and Gelsthorpe (Canton, 2010; Gelsthorpe, 2020; Smart, 2013), who demonstrate how metaphors operate as cultural tools that both reflect and shape gendered power relations and societal responses to women in the criminal justice

system. Smart's (2013) work on the patriarchal construction of female criminality shows how metaphors often cast imprisoned women in dichotomous roles of deviance or victimhood, limiting recognition of their complex identities (Smart, 2013). Canton (2010) further adds that metaphors in criminal justice discourse perpetuate reductive images of confinement that obscure the lived realities and emotional dimensions of imprisonment (Canton, 2010). In this way, we can see how the nuanced context of women's imprisonment and separation becomes obscured through carceral logics of risk and security and leads to the demonisation of women in prison.

Gelsthorpe's (2020) feminist perspective enriches this analysis by emphasising the intersectional oppressions embedded in metaphors surrounding imprisoned motherhood, showing how such language simultaneously marginalises and, importantly, provides women a resource for articulating resistance (Gelsthorpe, 2020). Mothers' metaphorical self-descriptions as caged, disappearing, or lost reflect a critical tension wherein metaphor becomes a double-edged position: one that reveals the pain and disempowerment of separation but also offers a mode for reclaiming voice and agency within a system designed to silence them. However, it is important to recognise that the spaces in which women can openly share these experiences are limited, and therefore women often feel the need censor their own experiences and emotions.

Together, these scholarly contributions underscore that maternal separation in prison cannot be fully grasped without attending to its embodied, emotional, and symbolic dimensions, all of which have been conveyed through metaphorical discourse in the women's testimonies. While of course metaphor alone cannot testify for policy and practice reform, the privileging of women's voices within the telling of their own experiences is highlighted through the examination of metaphor. This adds a compelling contribution to increasing evidence calling for policy and practice responses attuned not only to the physical realities of separation but also to the profound psychological and relational disruptions that incarceration inflicts on mothering identities. Such an approach aligns closely with feminist criminology's broader commitment to recognising women's voices, challenging narratives, and advocating for more humane, gender-responsive justice systems as well as alternatives to incarceration.

Conclusion

Using Conceptual Metaphor Analysis to re-examine the interview transcripts from the Lost Mothers project reveals how metaphors of loss, grief, and survival function as powerful frameworks for critique. These metaphors not only articulate the institutional violence, trauma, and fragmentation of self experienced by mothers separated from their babies in prison but also expose the structural and systemic failures that shape and perpetuate their suffering. In this way, the women's personal narratives of grief become collective testimonies against the social and institutional systems that have constrained their lives.

The metaphorical language highlights an embodied grief that goes beyond words, giving voice to the often invisible, disenfranchised nature of this loss (Abbott et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Gelsthorpe, 2020). As mothers grapple with physical and emotional separation, their metaphors reveal the cyclical tension between connection and

rupture, unity and loss, showing how forced separation disrupts relational identities central to motherhood. This embodied trauma is further intensified by the prison's control and erasure through policies that neglect the relational needs of mothers and children.

Importantly, these metaphors also perform acts of resistance. In a system designed to silence and disempower, mothers' metaphorical expressions serve as vital tools to make visible their pain and assert their enduring maternal identities (Gelsthorpe, 2020; Abbott et al., 2025). They challenge dominant narratives that reduce incarcerated women to 'offenders' rather than recognising their complex identities as mothers, survivors, and agents of resilience.

Consequently, metaphor analysis enriches understanding by illuminating how maternal separation in prison is experienced not only cognitively but viscerally and politically. Examining the metaphors used by women who have experienced separation grounds the abstract into the tangible, as the often neglected and obscured experiences of women are illuminated and brought to the fore. This strengthens calls for policy and practice changes that attend to the emotional and relational realities of separation as integral to justice, healing, and social reintegration. Ultimately, this study affirms the transformative potential of listening to and interpreting mothers' metaphorical language as a pathway towards more compassionate, gender-responsive alternatives to incarceration.

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Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the University of Hertfordshire ethics committee (HSK/SF/UH/05169 23/11/2022) and the Ministry of Justice National Research Committee (HSK/SF/UH/05169 22/09/2023).

Consent to Participate statements

Respondents gave written consent for review and signature before starting interviews.

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Data availability statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the data collected during the project, it will not be possible to share the data outside of the research team.

Any other identifying information related to the authors and/or their institutions, funders, approval committees, etc., that might compromise anonymity

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