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# Mothers separated from their children in prison: A ‘toxic burden’ for mothers and staff

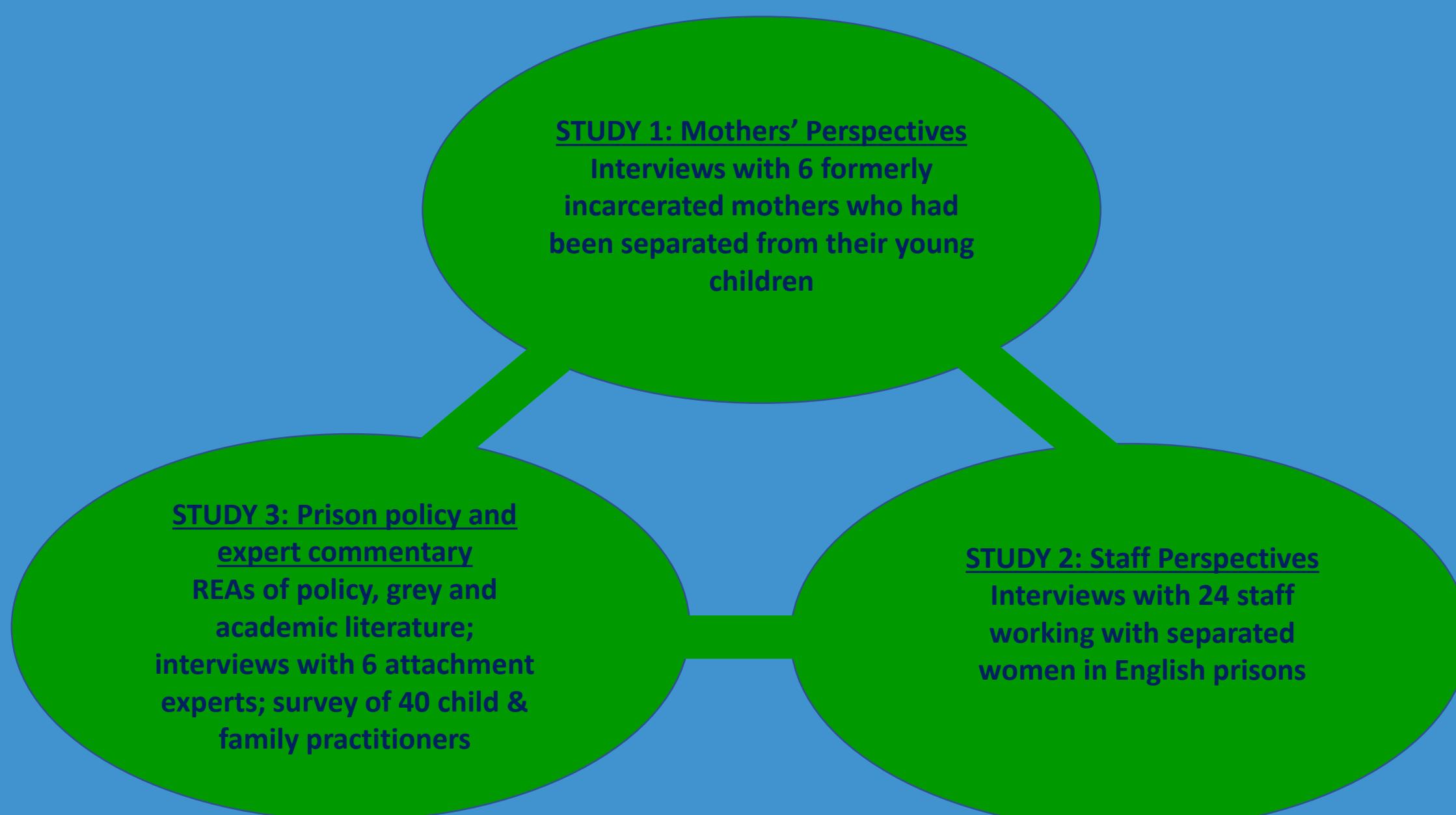
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## CONTEXT

- 3 897 women in prison in UK.<sup>1</sup>
- Approx. >17 700 children separated from mothers annually.<sup>2</sup>
- ≈ 500 women a year separated from infants under 18 months.<sup>3</sup>
- 6 prison Mother-Baby Units with 54 places so most mothers separated.
- Separation leads to increased risk for poor physical health and mental distress.<sup>4</sup>
- Relevant policies<sup>5</sup> refer to needs of mothers and staff but lack detail.
- Most research focuses on the impact of separation on children.
- For many women imprisonment leads to permanent separation from children.

## RESEARCH DESIGN



## KEY FINDINGS

### STUDY 1 – Mothers’ Perspectives

- Severe emotional impact of separation: guilt, depression, feeling suicidal. Continues on release from prison.
- Impact of prison staff: generally seen as unsupportive with reports of bullying, racism, xenophobia, sexual harassment and abuse by staff.
- Family situation: more important than prison staff and continues to be dis/advantage in prison.
- Systemic issues: lack of support on release, impact of the wider justice system.
- Open prison seen as optimal both for contact with children and for best prisoner-staff relationships.

‘The guilt around my children was, just, was just incredible. I thought I was going to die.’

### STUDY 2 – Staff Perspectives

- Staff challenges when supporting separated mothers: coping with the emotional impact and the complexities of negotiating with social services.
- Staff do not all have access to the same degree of support.
- MBUs may not be the answer – staff questioned whether they encourage sentencing to prison and pointed out that women with limited family support do not fully benefit.

### STUDY 3 – Prison policy and expert commentary

- Highlighted that separation from infants, in addition to women’s experiences of sexual abuse and domestic violence, combine to seriously increase risks to mental health.
- Suggested that women need psychological support and a range of flexible visit and child contact options.
- Impact of uncertainty during process of separation stressed as causing extreme distress.
- Advocated a case by case and individualised approach to separation.
- No agreement around the ‘best age’ of separation and agreed all mothers should have contact with new-borns.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Mothers’ lives before prison, e.g. poverty and social services involvement, have impact on experience of separation – need more joined up work with community services.
- Attachment theory is potentially harmful when used to justify separation at set ages. In addition, staff have a confused understanding of ‘attachment’ – a human rights approach might be more helpful.
- MBUs only ‘work’ for more advantaged mothers and appear to discriminate against most mothers in prison – can MBU criteria be expanded?
- Suggestions for improvement included: trauma-informed service, more counselling services, consistent staff, sentencing fewer women to prison.