



Lived Experience Research Toolkit



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This handbook has been designed as a toolkit of resources to support the development of research with women with lived experience of the Criminal Justice System (CJS). It has been co-created by a team of women, including academic researchers and women with lived experience, working together as the Lived Experience Advisory Group. The handbook is written for both groups and is organised into four linked sections:

- Co-production for researchers: key considerations when undertaking research with women with lived experience of the CJS
- Co-production for women with lived experience of the CJS: an outline of your rights as research contributors, as well as the benefits and challenges of taking part
- An evaluation tool: practical prompts to help assess the quality, authenticity and impact of co-produced research
- Useful resources: including skills, audits, support tools and additional materials

This handbook is accompanied by a short film illustrating effective co-production with women with lived experience, a zine, a podcast and a co-authored journal article exploring the value of researching together in helping to generate justice. It draws on our collective experience of co-production; existing scholarship on Participatory Action Research (PAR), Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE), lived experience research, feminist ethics of care and social justice; our experiences of the CJS; and, most recently our shared journey together as co-researchers on a project focused on improving the mental health of women in the CJS.

Throughout this handbook, the terms “we” and “you” are used to reflect different roles within co-production. “We” generally refers to those involved in the research process collectively, while “you” is used where the guidance speaks directly to women with lived experience.’

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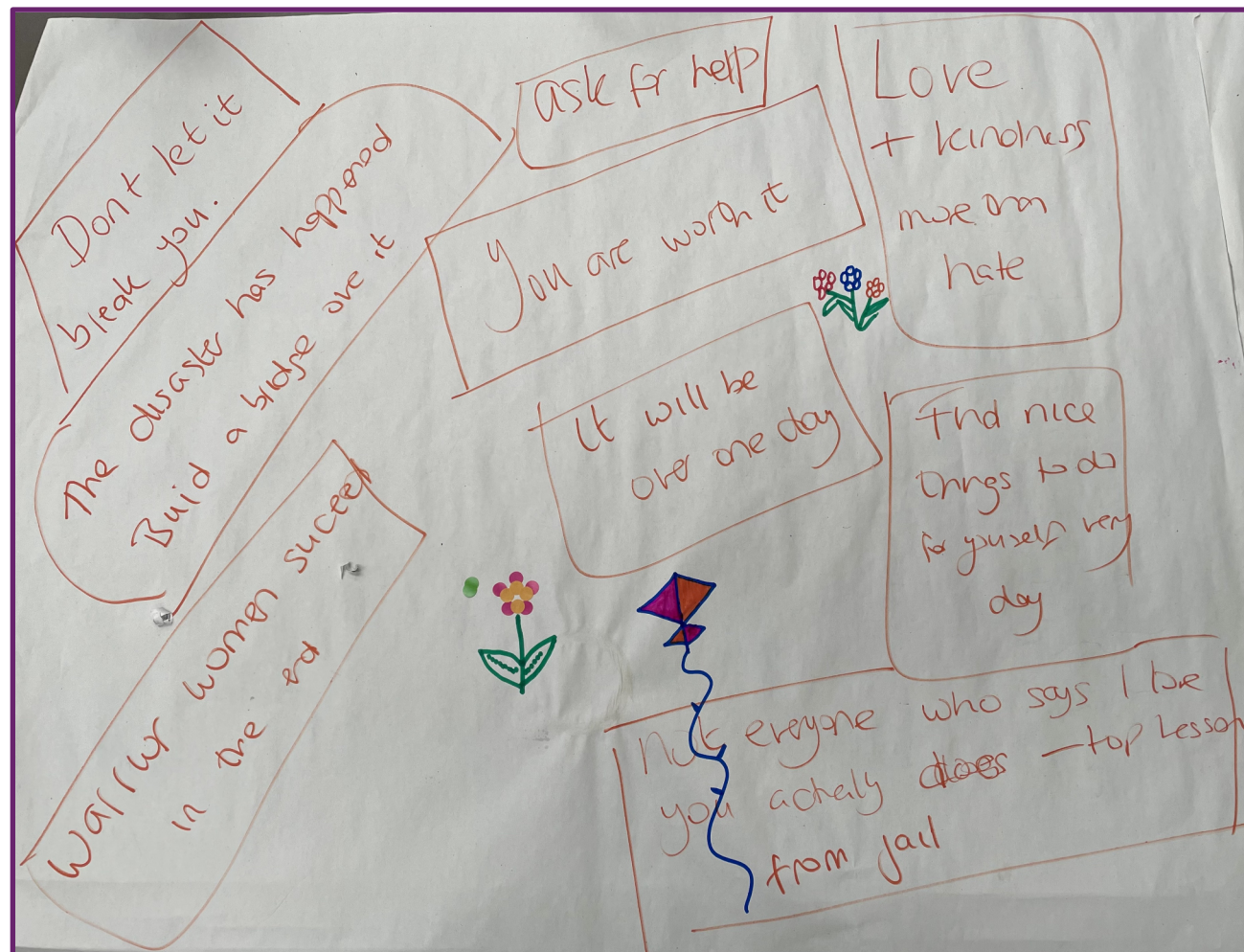


Illustration produced by the Lived Experience Advisory Group during a participatory workshop.

Section 1 – Undertaking Research with Women with Experience of the CJS

What good co-production looks like

Avoiding tokenism

Good co-production is grounded in meaningful communication, collaboration and solidarity. It involves working together as a connected community and applying participatory action research principles from the very beginning. This approach requires flexibility, integrity, curiosity and long-term commitment. Knowledge is created collectively through open dialogue and critical reflection, ensuring that lived experience remains central throughout the research journey – from design and data collection to analysis and dissemination. Our work must contribute to genuine change, and we must actively avoid tokenism by ensuring involvement is never superficial or performative.

We:

- Prioritise communication, connection, collaboration and solidarity
- Use participatory action research approaches, supported by training for everyone
- Commit to embedding these values from the outset
- Work with flexibility, integrity, curiosity and commitment
- Generate knowledge together through dialogue and critical reflection
- Ensure involvement leads to meaningful change
- Include everyone in all parts of the research journey
- Avoid tokenistic practices that undervalue lived experience

Building trust and relationships

Building trust is essential for effective co-production. We must create open, inclusive and emotionally safe spaces where women feel genuinely heard and respected. Taking time to build relationships strengthens understanding, supports deeper insights and enables assumptions to be challenged. We recognise that barriers to participation often stem from systems, stigma and exclusion rather than from individuals. It is therefore our responsibility to earn trust by valuing lived experience, offering recognition and developing reciprocal relationships, supported when appropriate by trusted brokers.

We:

- Create open, emotionally safe, non-judgmental and inclusive environments
- Invest in rapport building to support deeper insight
- Work to build trust and provide recognition
- Understand the systemic barriers women face
- Acknowledge trauma while maintaining a strengths-based focus
- Involve trusted brokers where needed
- Commit to emotional openness and reciprocity

Feminist and ethical values and approaches

We embed feminist ethics of care throughout our work emphasising empathy, trust, compassion, solidarity and shared responsibility. We acknowledge that research takes place within gendered systems, including the Criminal Justice System, and we actively challenge inequality and harmful structures. We commit to showing up authentically, acknowledging the “whole person” and valuing diversity. We build connections across difference and recognise that meaningful co-production requires us, as researchers, to be open and vulnerable too. We challenge stigma and avoid approaches that are pathologising or overly protective, ensuring that all contributions are respected and understood within their wider context.

We:

- Centre feminist ethics of care, including trust, empathy, compassion and solidarity
- Critically examine gendered systems and challenge inequalities
- Value authenticity and show up as whole people (recognising our children, pets, circumstances etc)
- Connect across our diverse identities and experiences
- Value diversity and difference
- Challenge stigma without pathologising or over protecting

Managing power, boundaries, expectations and potential conflict

Co-production with criminalised women requires us to recognise and redistribute power. Lived experience is a form of expertise, and without

acknowledging this, our work risks becoming extractive. We must be transparent about power dynamics, work in non-hierarchical ways and ensure participants feel able to hold us accountable. Flexibility is essential – valuing people as people first – and we share responsibility for navigating challenges and maintaining equitable relationships.

We:

- Share power and avoid hierarchy
- Openly discuss power imbalances and how we can address these from the outset
- Value everyone at a human level and adapt to their circumstances
- Remain accountable to the women we work with
- Understand the importance of epistemic justice, recognising and valuing lived experience as genuine expertise

Practical considerations when working with women with experience of CJS

Co-production relies on clear, ongoing communication about roles, expectations and boundaries, as well as shared understanding of goals and commitment to meaningful change. Ethical practice is central. This includes ensuring that informed consent is treated as an ongoing process, providing clarity about confidentiality and anonymity, upholding participants’ rights and addressing issues of co-ownership of outputs.

Offering practical support is a key part of valuing lived experience expertise and enabling genuine involvement. This includes proper payment, covering expenses,

providing training and ensuring access to opportunities. Following through beyond the project, including feedback and continued engagement is essential for sustaining trust and accountability.

We are transparent about boundaries, levels of involvement and expectations.

We:

- Are committed to change but recognise that it may be slow and at times frustrating
- Enable people to define the limits of their involvement, allowing flexible membership
- Are all clear about the project’s end goal and committed to achieving it
- Follow through on issues and provide updates at the end of the project so people know what happened during and after the research

We are committed to ethical research and practice.

We:

- Ensure everyone understands their rights as participants and co-researchers
- Treat informed consent as an ongoing process
- Are clear about boundaries regarding participation, confidentiality and anonymity and remain attentive to HMPPS and other relevant institutional guidance
- Explain how we will respond to any disclosures and do so with empathy
- Navigate co-ownership of outputs, respecting individual preferences
- We provide food, travel and accommodation for events
- We ensure co-researchers and participants are properly paid, recognising lived experience expertise. Within prison settings, payment may take the form of pin credit or other resources
- We offer broader support, encouragement and opportunities, including a training needs assessment and access to resources and further opportunities

Recognising the challenges

Co-production is not without difficulties, and tensions or conflicts may arise. It is important to acknowledge these openly from the beginning and agree on collective ways to address them. We recognise that women with lived experience may feel uncertain about participating and may have been let down by people in authority before. We therefore create supportive

environments that anticipate potential difficulties and respond to them in ways that sustain meaningful and inclusive collaboration. We discuss from the outset how we will handle any conflict or tensions, sharing responsibility for resolving issues

Summary Box

- Co-production
- build trust and work together openly
 - recognise the value of lived experience
 - involve people meaningfully at every stage
 - create safe and inclusive environments
 - be clear about roles and expectations
 - avoid tokenism and act on what is shared
 - learn together through reflection and dialogue
 - recognise challenges and support each other
 - keep working towards positive change

Section 2 – Women as Co-Researchers: Valuing Lived Experience in Research

What is co-produced research?

Co-produced research is a way of working where you and researchers work together as equal partners throughout the entire project. Instead of research being done *on* you, it is carried out *with* you. Your lived experience is valued as expertise, and you help shape the research from start to finish from deciding the questions to sharing the findings. Co-production aims to create meaningful research that leads to real and lasting change.

- You work with people with lived experience, rather than being researched about
- Your lived experience is valued as expertise alongside academic knowledge
- You collaborate at every stage of the project (design, data collection, analysis, dissemination)
- Power is shared, and decisions are made collectively
- Work takes place in trusting, respectful and inclusive spaces
- Roles, expectations and purpose are clear
- Your contribution must be meaningful, not tokenistic
- Your involvement aims to create real-world impact and change

Why lived experience matters – recognising lived experience as expertise

Your insight provides essential expertise about systems, barriers and what truly works. You can identify challenges others may overlook and offer a deeper understanding of how situations unfold in real life. Your

contributions ensure that research remains grounded, practical and truthful. This perspective strengthens project quality and impact.

- You bring knowledge drawn from your own experiences
- You recognise challenges, barriers and unforeseen consequences
- You can anticipate where problems may arise
- You know what is likely to work and what will not
- You add depth and understanding to the research

Benefits of being involved

Sarah M: being part of this group has made me feel seen, valued and appreciated, despite what I've done or what I've been through. To share my lived experience on a platform that doesn't judge or condemn is invaluable. The fact that I'm treated as an expert in the field of lived experience and paid for my input is rare. Never have I been part of something so genuine and beneficial to not just the group, but to progression and change for women within a system not built for us.

Being involved in co-production can be rewarding and offer meaningful opportunities for personal growth. You may gain confidence, new knowledge, and a stronger sense of the value of your experiences. Your voice helps shape research and influence change,

and your involvement may lead to further opportunities, including training or pathways into employment. Being part of a supportive community can also create a sense of connection, shared purpose and recognition of your strengths.

- You may feel rewarded by seeing how your input contributes
- You can grow from the experience and gain in self-confidence
- Your voice plays an important role in shaping research and change
- Your involvement may open up new opportunities
- You will gain knowledge and skills, including reflective practice
- You will be part of a community of experts

Rights as a contributor/co-researcher

Zoe: I love that we have had the opportunity to put together something that will have an impact on people's lives – not only in helping them navigate managing thoughts and emotions inside of those prison walls, but then to support their thinking and emotional management when navigating through their wider life experiences. The bonus is having a space where we connect with each other in a place where we can safely be vulnerable.

It is important that you understand your rights when taking part in research or becoming a co-researcher. Researchers must follow ethical standards, which include making sure you have clear information about the research before you agree to take part. Consent is an

ongoing process, meaning you can change your mind at any time without pressure. Researchers must also explain any limits to anonymity and confidentiality, including how they will respond to information you share. Together, you will discuss how your contributions will be used, how decisions are made and how outputs are owned. Sharing your experience is valuable, and you have the right to decide what you share, how you share it and what you prefer to keep private.

- Researchers will make sure you understand your rights as a participant and co-researcher
- Researchers follow ethical standards, ensuring that:
 - You receive clear information about the research before giving consent to take part
 - Consent is an ongoing process, and you may withdraw at anytime
 - Your involvement may be shaped by HMPPS guidance, which researchers will explain
 - You have the right to remain anonymous within the research
 - Researchers will outline limits to confidentiality and explain how disclosures are handled
 - You can discuss how outputs are owned so everyone's contribution is recognised and preferences respected
 - You will understand how your personal information (data) is stored securely and responsibly
 - It is your choice whether, and how, you share your story and experience
 - You can ask questions at any stage, and researchers must respond clearly
 - Your wellbeing is always fully prioritised

Brave and respectful spaces

Nadia: We inspire each other, getting each other through the darkness and have built unity and family as a team together.

Effective co-production requires us to create brave, respectful and non-hierarchical spaces where everyone's voice is valued equally. This means prioritising people over processes and recognising that your level of engagement may vary for many reasons. Researchers remain flexible to your circumstances and understand that changes in participation do not reflect a lack of commitment. By building an environment grounded in honesty and mutual respect, we can work together in ways that support open conversation and meaningful collaboration.

- You will co-create a space where power is shared, and everyone's voice is equal
- You and your contributions are valued

Relationships and trust

Tharan: for me, it's being part of a family that understand you. A family that does not judge you and will fight for you. This group has inspired me, and we all inspire and support each other. It's a network I rely on.

Strong relationships and trust are essential for co-production. Building these requires time, being open and

recognising the diverse identities and experiences that we all bring to the project – as women, mothers, advocates and experts by experience. Research takes place within gendered systems, including the Criminal Justice System, and together you will actively challenge inequality and harmful structures. Researchers show up authentically and recognise the “whole person” and value diversity, while creating connections across differences. This work is grounded in a feminist ethics of care, meaning we act with empathy, solidarity and shared responsibility. You can hold researchers to account, knowing your contributions are respected and genuinely valued. This shared approach strengthens relationships and supports meaningful collaboration.

- You will build trust together, and your contributions will be recognised and valued
- You will connect as a group valuing diversity while also sharing identity
- You work with a feminist ethics of care – centred on care, empathy, solidarity and shared responsibility
- You hold researchers to account

Challenges of bringing your lived experience perspective to research

Being involved in co-production can raise emotional and practical challenges, including the risk of re-traumatisation, uncertainty and frustration when change feels slow. You will be taken seriously and not treated tokenistically. Together, you will acknowledge these challenges and share collective responsibility for addressing tensions. Recognising that

participation can be demanding, you will also understand the rewards can outweigh the difficulties. Knowing support is available helps you take part in ways that feel safe and meaningful.

- You will discuss early on how conflict or tensions will be handled
- Any worries or feelings of apprehension will be acknowledged
- You understand research can be triggering, but support will be provided
- You recognise that change can be slow, and frustrations managed together
- You know that your contribution must be valued
- The rewards of being involved can be greater than the challenges

Recognising tokenism

Good co-production is very different to tokenistic approaches, where lived experience is included only superficially or for appearance. To avoid tokenism, researchers will be open about roles, expectations and purpose, ensuring everyone has a shared understanding of goals and a genuine commitment to change. You can define your level of involvement, including how your input will be used and how you want to contribute. Researchers will work alongside you through the whole research process and follow-through with you afterwards about any impact from the research. You may also have the opportunity to be involved in sharing those outcomes. This approach ensures that your contribution is always meaningful and never performative.

- Good co-production is the opposite of tokenistic spaces where contributions feel superficial or undervalued
- Researchers are transparent about boundaries, involvement and expectations
- You and the researchers commit to change while recognising it can be slow and frustrating
- You define the limits of your involvement
- You agree together on the end goal and how to get there
- Researchers will follow-up at the end of the project

Practical support and recognition

Sarah A: to be part of something with a team of strong compassionate women, with the same focus has been amazing. It is a space that is welcoming and inclusive, which enables great collaboration, all with one aim – to make changes. I have gained research skills, amongst others, that I will go on to use in the future. Above all of this, we have formed a sisterhood, championing each other, supporting each other. We all have space to bring something to the table, and we all bring our superpowers. We hoped we could create something that holds a little magic for the reader in their darker times and I think we really formed a big hug from us to them. And that feels amazing.

Meaningful co-production must be supported by practical measures that enable you to participate fully and recognise your experience as expertise. This includes covering any expenses

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such as travel and accommodation, paying you fairly and communicating clearly throughout the project. Researchers will offer ongoing support and ensure the project is brought to an end sensitively and respectfully. These commitments help you engage confidently, understand the process and feel valued for your contributions.

- Your food, travel and accommodation for events will be covered
- You will be paid properly – in prison this may be through pin credit or other resources
- You will be involved in planning and kept informed about what is happening
- You will debrief together after sessions and at the end of the project
- You will be supported throughout the entire project

Impact and hope

Amy: Being in the group has helped me focus on my own development and strength since coming out of prison. Helping others to not go through what I have is definitely the most empowering thing I have ever been a part of. I am proud to be more than just a voice, changing lives for the better for the future.

Co-production can create opportunities for real and meaningful change by ensuring that research reflects your real experiences. Sharing your story can support and empower others, challenge ineffective systems and contribute to improving processes and outcomes for other women. Working together offers a hopeful pathway for changing individual lives as well as wider systems. Your involvement ensures that the research outputs created genuinely reflect your experience, insight and contribution.

- Don't be afraid and have an open mind
- Sharing your experiences can help other women and may even save lives
- Working together, we can change experiences, improve processes and challenge the system
- The outputs you create reflect your experience and input

Summary Box

Being a co-researcher

- your experience brings knowledge that matters
- you work in partnership with researchers
- you help shape the research from beginning to end
- you decide how and when to take part
- your input can influence real change
- you have rights, support and clear information
- you can ask questions and challenge decisions
- involvement can build confidence and skills
- support is available when things feel difficult

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Section 3 – Evaluation Tool

This evaluation tool is designed to help you reflect on the quality and authenticity of co-production throughout the research process. It supports both researchers and women with lived experience to assess whether the principles, values and commitments outlined in this handbook are being put into practice. The tool can be used at the start of a project, at key milestones, and again at the end to encourage learning, growth and accountability.

Below are key questions to guide reflection on co-production:

- Are we working in ways that centre lived experience as expertise?
- Have we created safe, inclusive, and non-judgemental spaces where all voices are valued?
- Are we sharing power meaningfully, including decision-making at every stage?
- Are roles, expectations and boundaries clear to everyone involved?
- Have we embedded feminist ethics of care – empathy, trust, compassion and solidarity?
- Are we recognising and responding to trauma, barriers and emotional needs?
- Are we avoiding tokenism by ensuring all contributions genuinely shape the research?
- Have we provided fair payment, support and practical resources to enable involvement?
- Are we communicating openly, consistently and respectfully?
- Do participants feel able to challenge decisions and hold researchers accountable?
- Are we recognising conflict early and managing it collaboratively?
- Are we following through on commitments and demonstrating impact?

This tool is intended to prompt honest reflection, highlight strengths and identify areas for improvement. It reinforces the core principle that co-production is a shared responsibility and a continual learning process.

Summary Box

Reflecting on co-production

- take time to think about how you are working together
- consider how lived experience is shaping the work
- check that people feel included and respected
- be open about what is working and what is not
- listen to feedback and different perspectives
- take shared responsibility for improving practice
- notice strengths and build on them
- use reflection to support change and learning

Section 4 – Further Resources

This section provides additional tools, reference materials and sources of support to strengthen co-production work and assist women with lived experience in participating fully and confidently. These resources are designed to complement the earlier sections of the handbook and offer practical ways to build skills, identify support needs and access useful information.

Skills audit and needs analysis for women with lived experience

A structured tool to help identify your strengths, areas where you may want further development and any additional support or training that would help you participate effectively in research. This resource can guide conversations with researchers and ensure that your needs are recognised and planned throughout the project.

Research Training Needs Analysis

Goals: Support lived experience co-researchers to build and develop research skills, identify existing skills and address any wider needs.

Name: _____

Do you have access to a laptop or tablet? Y/N

Do you have access to the internet? Y/N

Wider support audit for women with lived experience

A practical checklist to help identify the broader support you may require, such as wellbeing support, communication needs, access arrangements or other personal considerations. This helps ensure you can safely, comfortably and meaningfully engage in co-produced research.



Skill/Knowledge	Skill/Knowledge Level	Need for Training	Comments/Training Suggestions
What skills or knowledge do you think you want to work on? Examples: IT Skills	What level do you think you are currently at with this skill or knowledge? (Rating: 0-5) 0 = I am not at a good level with this skill/ knowledge 5 = I am at a really good level with this skill/ knowledge	How much do you think you need training and support for this skill or knowledge? (Rating: 0-5) 0 = I don't need support with this 5 =I really need support with this	Any comments? Can you think of any types of training that could help you improve this skill or knowledge? Examples: Training courses for IT
IT/Computer Skills			
Using a computer or tablet			
Microsoft Teams			
Excel			
Word			
PowerPoint			
Emails			
Internet security			
Research Knowledge			
What is research?			
What are research ethics?			
What is research data?			
How is research data collected?			
How is research data analysed?			
What is research impact?			
How are research and impact evaluated?			
Communication skills			
Presenting research			
Answering questions about the research			
Writing			
Reading			
Listening skills			
Working as a group			
Time Management skills			
Managing my Time			
Being organised			

Recommended Reading

A curated list of texts and resources that explore co-production, lived experience research, feminist ethics of care, social justice approaches and participatory methods. These readings can help deepen understanding and support reflective practice for both researchers and co-researchers.

- Abma, T., Banks, S., Cook, T., et al. (2019) *Participatory research for health and social well-being*. London: Springer.
- Arnstein SR (1969) 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation'. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*. 35(4):216-224. <https://doi.org/0.1080/01944366908977225>
- Arrondelle, D. et al. (2025) *Knowledge Equity: A Framework for Critical Reflection*, NCRM: https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4974/1/Knowledge%20equity_a%20framework%20for%20critical%20reflection.pdf
- Banks, S. (2022) *Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice*. Durham University: Centre for Social Justice and Community Action.
- Booth M and Harriott P. (2021) 'Service users being used: thoughts to the research community'. In *Critical reflections on women, family, crime and justice* (pp. 199-218). Bristol University Press. doi. <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447358701.ch010>
- Grace, S. et al. (2022) *Criminal Women: Gender Matters*. Bristol: University Press.
- Harriot, P. (2021) No justice without us: respecting lived experience of the criminal justice system, Involve: <https://www.involve.org.uk/news-opinion/opinion/no-justice-without-us-respecting-lived-experience-criminal-justice-system>
- Johns D, Flynn C, Hall M, Spivakovsky C, Turner S. (2022) *Co-Production and Criminal Justice*. London: Taylor & Francis. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429328657>
- King, H., Harriott, P., Lived Experience Advisory Group, Chew-Graham, C., Riley, F., Cowen, K., Roden-Lui, G. & Walker, T. (under review) 'Generative Spaces for Women's Justice', *Probation Journal Special Issue: 20 Years Post Corston: Where are the Women and Girls?*
- Masson, I. and Booth, N. (eds.) (2023) *The Routledge Handbook of Women's Experiences of Criminal Justice*, London: Routledge.
- Perry AG and Mullins E. (2023) '£25 and a biscuit: Women's Health Research and Public Engagement in the UK'. *Research Involvement and Engagement*. 9(1):120. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-023-00519-1>
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2009) *The SAGE Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. London: SAGE.
- Walker, T., Riley, F., Harriott, P., King, H. & Chew-Graham, C. (under review) 'Participatory Research with Criminalised Women: Lessons for meaningful involvement'. *Health Expectations*.



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