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“You have to talk with us, not about us”: Exploring the harms of wrongful accusation on those affected in the case of the Dutch ‘childcare-benefit scandal’

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Abstract

This article explores the consequences of the so-called ‘childcare-benefit scandal’ that has taken place in the Netherlands where approximately 26.000 parents have been wrongfully accused of fraud by the Dutch tax-authorities, largely as a result of discriminative algorithms and tight policies and attitudes towards welfare benefits. The parents affected were accused of fraud for more than a decade, going through a profound disempowerment, silencing and humiliation. Our research explored the consequences of the ‘childcare-benefit scandal’ with narrative interviews with wrongfully accused mothers by centring their stories and voices. The main consequences that transpired from the interviews have been organised in five themes: 1) consequences on their wellbeing (mental, emotional, physical and material), 2) consequences on their children’s wellbeing, 3) impact on their relationships with others, 4) impact on their attitudes towards state institutions, and 5) impact on their hopes and needs for the future.

Keywords

‘childcare-benefit scandal’, wrongful accusation, state-caused harm



1. Introduction

In November 2010, Natalie gets married and moves from Amsterdam to Rotterdam. She has at the time one daughter who goes to a childminder¹ family in Amsterdam. She lets them know that October will be the last month for which she needs the day care, but an automatic payment for the month of November of the children's benefits is deposited to her bank account. The childminder family wrongly reports to the government that Natalie's daughter went to the day care in November and that Natalie has to pay up. Although Natalie knew something was wrong, the initial debt that resulted seemed innocent to her at the time. However, this debt marked the beginning of the struggles Natalie and her family had to go through for more than a decade that followed. She was labelled as a fraudster by the Dutch tax-authorities and had to face severe consequences, which ranged from her family being evicted from their home, the end of her marriage, living through depression, anxiety attacks and high levels of stress that resulted in several strokes and even in a miscarriage.

Natalie's story is only one of the many shaming stories that are linked to the so-called 'childcare-benefit scandal' (*toeslagenaffaire*)² in the Netherlands, a period that lasted from 2005-2019, during which 26.000 citizens -at least half of whom had double nationality- were wrongfully labelled and accused by the Tax and Customs Administration of the Dutch state, responsible for implementing social security law enforcement policies and the administrative sanction system, as fraudsters as a result of institutional racism and racial profiling enabled through discriminative algorithms that regulated the distribution of childcare benefits (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2021; Hofs, 2021; Felix & Maroudi, 2021; Frederik, 2021; Ploeg, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021). Accused of making fraudulent benefit claims, the parents were required to pay back the allowances they had received in their entirety, sums which amounted to tens of thousands of euros, driving families into severe financial and other forms of hardship, such as house and job loss. Thousands of children were removed from their homes into foster care, families were destroyed, and some committed suicide (Heikkilä, 2022).

The case came to the attention of the public around 2018, leading afterwards to several investigations and reports by the National Ombudsman (2017), the Court of Audit (2019), a Governmental Advisory Commission (2020), and

1 Childminder family is translated from the Dutch word '*gastoudergezin*'. It refers to the job of a person who takes care of other people's children in his or her own home.

2 More precisely, the term "refers to a collection of harmful policies and practices of the Dutch tax authorities and the subsequent inadequate responses by other branches of the Dutch government to address the harms of these policies and practices" (Amnesty International, 2021, p. 8).



a Parliamentary Research Committee (2020), causing eventually the government to resign at the beginning of 2021 (Ramdjan & Wolthuizen, 2021; Henley, 2021; Felix & Maroudi, 2021; Peeters & Widlak, 2022). Most attention afterwards went to how the state and the tax-authorities failed and what they are doing to fix it. While the stories of those affected have been sporadically given some space in the Dutch media, the centring of the stories, knowledge and perspectives of those affected is still missing. When invited by the media to tell their stories, the wrongfully accused parents affected have to squeeze in a few minutes the enduring trauma, shame, pain and loss they went through for more than a decade. Furthermore, they are often treated as merely victims and not as (unwilling) 'experts' in what overcame them, even though their insights and knowledge are extremely important in understanding and preventing similar harm and wrongdoing from happening again.

Our exploratory research aims to provide an overview of the consequences of this form of state-caused harm, by centering the experiences and knowledge of the ones that were affected and harmed. The article starts with an overview of the existing and diverse research on the consequences of state-caused harm. After this, we first describe our methodological framework and then present the results, which we organise in five main themes: 1) consequences on wellbeing (physical, mental, emotional and material), 2) consequences on the children, 3) impact on their relationships with others, 4) impact on their attitudes towards state institutions and 5) impact on their hopes and needs for the future. We end with a conclusion that reflects on the findings and provides a perspective for the future.

2. Consequences for those affected by wrongful accusations

Wrongful accusations, allegations and convictions, often referred to as miscarriages of justice, constitute a particular form of state-induced harms and wrongs and require due attention for their serious consequences on those affected. In the past decades there has been a surge in studies that focus on the stories and perspectives of victims of state crimes, wrongs and harms, in particular victims of criminal justice systems (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021; Campbell & Denov, 2004; Hoyle *et al.*, 2016; Kauzlarich, 2014; Kauzlarich *et al.*, 2001; Konvisser, 2015; Leo, 2007; Weigand 2009; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). The goal of these studies has generally been to investigate the consequences of being wrongfully accused by the state by giving space to the voices of victims and as Konvisser (2015, p. 303) puts it "to personalise and contextualise the events surrounding the cases, to humanise the people whose lives have been destroyed, and to establish identities amidst an overwhelming sea of facts and statistics."



Literature on the consequences of state-caused harm has mostly focused on exonerees, people who have been wrongfully accused by the criminal justice system and as a result also have been wrongfully incarcerated (Alexander-Bloch *et al.*, 2020; Campbell & Denov, 2004; DeShay, 2016; Grounds, 2004; Konvisser, 2015; Wildeman *et al.*, 2011; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Research has also been conducted with people who were wrongfully accused but who hold the status of ‘legal innocence’ (i.e. not been charged, acquitted, or had conviction overturned) and with families, foster families or care workers falsely accused of (child) abuse or neglect (Burnett *et al.*, 2017; Hoyle *et al.*, 2016; Pillai, 2002; Plumridge & Sebba, 2016; Rees, 2010; Nesmith, 2020; Zeman, 2005). Finally, even though these are not extensive, there are also a few cases of wrongful accusations of fraud at a large scale, such as the British Post Office scandal in the UK, which involved the wrongful civil and criminal prosecutions of more than 700 sub-postmasters for theft, false accounting and/or fraud, spanning a period of over twenty years (Lindsay, 2022), and the so-called “Robodebt” scheme in Australia, which was an unlawful method of automated debt assessment and recovery employed by Services Australia as a form of welfare-policing (see Nikidehaghani *et al.*, 2022; Rinta-Kahila *et al.*, 2023) which affected more than 400.000 people.

All the studies conducted have found that the consequences of wrongful accusations (and convictions) are extremely serious for those affected. For example, the mental health damage caused to wrongly convicted prisoners has been compared to that suffered by veterans of war and torture survivors (Weigand, 2009; Grounds 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Mental damage for those wrongfully convicted is so impactful that it often continues following exoneration and release from prison (Scott, 2010). Likewise, devastating effects emerged also in the studies on wrongful allegations of abuse by foster parents, including breakup of families, income loss and significant deterioration of health (Burnett *et al.*, 2017; Pillai, 2002; Plumridge & Sebba, 2016; Rees, 2010; Nesmith, 2020; Zeman, 2005). Similarly, in the case of “Robodebt”, the impact the automated debt system had on those affected was huge, leading to mental health problems, depression, anxiety, fear, and even “suicidal ideation” (Nikidehaghani *et al.*, 2022; Rinta-Kahila *et al.*, 2023). On top of everything, almost always in such cases, state compensation and reparation mechanisms, including acknowledgement of caused harm, are either nonexistent, fairly deficient, limited to monetary compensation, or come too little too late (Bernhard, 2004; Chunias & Aufgang, 2008).

Even though the cases mentioned in the literature are different, it is possible to identify similar themes and experiences that cross different cases, whether they are concerned with miscarriages of justice, automated power of



bureaucratic systems, or welfare-criminalization entrenchments. According to Kauzlarich *et al* (2001), most victims of state-caused harm have similar experiences, especially since most victims of state-caused crime are predominantly 'the least socially powerful actors'. Within the system of the state and its institutions, women, people of colour, and those with low financial (and other) capital are always more likely to be at the receiving end of a state-caused harm (Kauzlarich *et al.*, 2001), including wrongful accusation as it relates to both welfare and justice system.

Given our interest in understanding the consequences of the wrongful accusation in the so-called 'childcare-benefit scandal' first-hand by those who were wrongfully accused and harmed, we based our research on the themes that we identified in the literature of wrongfully accused victims of state crime and harm. Very helpful for this purpose was a recently published systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature on the consequences of being wrongfully accused of a crime, which identified eight key themes: change in self-identity; stigma; psychological and physical health; relationship with others; attitudes towards the justice system; impact on finances and employment; traumatic experiences in custody, and; adjustment difficulties (Books & Greenberg, 2021). Starting with these themes, our intention was to see whether and how the mothers affected by the so-called 'childcare-benefit scandal' lived these consequences.

3. Methodology

In order to investigate the consequences of the state-caused harm, five narrative interviews were conducted between March-June 2021, with wrongfully accused mothers of the 'childcare-benefit scandal'.³ The main goal of the interviews was to place the people being studied at the heart of the study process and for the respondents to tell their story in their own words, so that we could gain knowledge and understanding about what they think and feel about what had happened to them, privileging the meanings that they assign to their own stories (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Given the sensitive nature of our research and potential for secondary victimisation, the research started by contacting parents who had already appeared in the national and local media and/or who were active on social media. We anticipated that if they had already told their stories before, they might be potentially open for another interview. This seemed to be in line with advice

3 The research has complied with all the Ethical Guidelines for Student Research of the University of Amsterdam and with the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.



of researchers who work with victims, vulnerable subjects, and sensitive topics: to honour and respect their pace of sharing instead of intruding into their lives, stalking them with research needs and protocols, and risking therefore to re-traumatise them (Clark & Walker, 2011). The first response was from one of the parents, who has become also (rather unwillingly) one of the spokespersons of the group of harmed parents. She posted a message for our research in the Facebook group of harmed parents that she was chairing, after which four other mothers emailed with the message that they were open for an interview. Even though we asked them whether they could ask other parents to talk to us, they answered that the topic was too traumatic for most of the people they knew and that they were not ready to talk about it. In total five interviews were therefore conducted. While this practice clearly creates a voluntary response bias, given the adversities the wrongfully accused parents had faced for more than a decade, the wellbeing of our respondents was an absolute priority of the research process.

The small number of respondents constituted an obvious limitation for the research. Despite this limitation, we were not discouraged as there had been previous studies on the topic conducted with five participants that had shown important results (see Denov & Campbell, 2005; Campbell & Denov, 2004). In addition, almost all studies that have been conducted on the topic had small sample sizes, mainly because the wrongfully accused are a hard-to-reach population and may be unwilling to take part, and so the literature tends to be limited to those self-selecting to participate. As a result, “there can be no random samples or control groups with research on this type of population, and results may not be generalisable to the larger wrongfully accused population” (Books & Greenberg, 2021, p. 52). In this research, generalizability cannot be established and was not the main aim.

The respondents were all identified as female, aged between 35- 45 years old. To protect the wellbeing and safety of the respondents and their families all names have been anonymised and personal data is not traceable. The names we use here are fictional. More specifically: Amber (35), mother of one; Natalie (35), mother of four; Jasmine (36), mother of four; Serena (39), mother of three, and; Pamela (45), mother of two. Three of the respondents (Amber, Natalie and Pamela) identified as being Hindi. They were born and raised in the Netherlands, while their (grand)parents had migrated from Surinam. Serena was born in Armenia, but had her children in the Netherlands, whereas Jasmine has Moroccan and Dutch roots. Even though it might not be evident from the pseudonyms used, one thing they all have in common in real life, is not having a ‘typical’ Dutch name, which they all believed had an influence on their wrongful accusations.



Given that the research took place during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviewing researcher (first author) was able to interview two respondents face-to-face, and the other three through the videocall platform 'Zoom'. Given the loss of control over their lives due to the 'childcare-benefit scandal', it was paramount for the researcher to create all the necessary conditions for increasing a sense of agency and control for the respondents before, during, and after the interview. On the one hand, the face-to-face interviews allowed more space to connect and to show empathy, also through body language. Being outside, closer to their homes or places that they often go to, also allowed to see how the context they live in and to get a better picture of their realities. On the other hand, the online interviews allowed the respondents to stay in the comfort of their own home, without having to go out and to meet a 'stranger' (the interviewer). However, in these cases more interruption took place, like children walking in or connection problems. It was also harder to comfort someone if she became emotional during the interview, which happened quite a few times. Words can offer some comfort, but the barrier of the screen limits their effect.

The interviews took a narrative form and ranged from 1.5–2 hrs. During the interview, the researcher did not set out with a fixed agenda and tried to intervene as little as possible in order to create a safe and open space where respondents were able to talk freely and control the direction, content and pace of the interview (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Halperin & Heath, 2017). Only when an interview was getting far off topic, the respondents were asked something in relation to what they said earlier that related more to the research. This resulted in open conversations, where most respondents discussed matters that were extremely personal and intimate. The fact that the interviewer is herself the child of a middle-class immigrant family in the Netherlands led to identification and proximity with the respondents, which both helped the respondents share rich and difficult stories, while also creating potential bias within the research. The interviews were originally held in Dutch but were translated in English by us for this article. Some meaning might get lost in translation as a result.

Interviews were transcribed non-verbatim and transcripts were analysed through a combination of inductive and deductive approach. Through the literature review and first analysis of media interviews, a number of themes were written down and used as a framework. The transcripts were re-read several times and coded in categories and themes that helped in answering the research questions. The analysis is based and organised around five major themes, which are discussed below. While similar themes can be found in the literature on wrongful accusation, here we have adapted and simplified them according to our data.



4. Exploring the harms and consequences of the ‘childcare-benefit scandal’

This section elaborates on the results of the analysis based on the interviews with the wrongfully accused mothers. which is organised into five central themes: 1) harms to wellbeing (physical, mental, emotional and material), 2) harms on the children, 3) harm to their relationships with others, 4) impact on their attitudes towards state institutions and 5) impact on their hopes and needs for the future.

4.1. Physical, mental, emotional and material wellbeing: “I was as a matter of fact almost dead”

The ‘child-benefit affair’ has had a huge detrimental effect on the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of our respondents. All the respondents reported that their existing diseases had worsened or that they became newly ill due to the stress, including in some cases hospitalisation. Other ‘less serious’ consequences involved significant weight loss and accelerated aging. Amber, for example told us:

When I was fired [as a result of the wrongful accusation of fraud], I lost 34 kg in three months. As a result, I got a heart attack and part of my body became sort of paralysed. What I have is a conversion disorder. If I experience stress, this side of my body just falls out [...] It is just so heavy [referring to the ‘childcare-benefit scandal’]. I dyed my hair two and a half weeks ago and look, I’m grey again already. None of this is good or healthy, I cannot recover. (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Natalie also told us about the impact of the child-benefit affair on her physical wellbeing. In finding out she was pregnant in 2017, she was really angry with herself, as she thought she could not afford having another child and therefore contemplated having an abortion, even though it gave her immense feelings of guilt. The thought of abortion became so strong for her, that she planned to make an appointment at the hospital, but meanwhile she had a spontaneous miscarriage, for which she still blamed herself:

It [the miscarriage] made me feel even worse... That child probably felt that it wasn’t welcome so it though ‘I will end it myself’. I felt so awful, for many weeks. I locked myself in my room, didn’t eat, didn’t drink, just laid in bed. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

In August 2020, Natalie got a stroke for which she was hospitalised. After that she started eventually her revalidation process, but in December 2020, seeing the parliamentary enquiry about the ‘childcare-benefit scandal’, made her really angry, causing a relapse:



All those officials and civil servants were questioned and that made me so angry. I got so upset that it caused another attack and I got totally paralysed. It was then, that I knew I had to start doing things differently. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

In addition to the physical impacts, there were also significant impacts on the mental wellbeing of our respondents. All of them experienced multiple forms of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. While we don't have space here to discuss all the cases, Amber's case is quite illustrative. She used to work for one of the Dutch ministries but was fired on the grounds of being a fraudster. After being fired, Amber became depressed because of the debt and the difficult situation with her child (which will be discussed later), and therefore went to see a psychiatrist of the UWV (The Employee Insurance Agency in the Netherlands). She expressed her experience with this service as follows:

Well, I became depressed, I went to a psychiatrist of the UWV because I was on the WW [unemployment benefit]. But she [referring to the psychiatrist] thought 'this lady [referring to Amber] is wearing colourful clothes, is verbally strong, has polished her nails so it is probably not doing as bad as she says she is.' That's what they think, but that's not a reflection of the reality. I became sicker and sicker, and in a way, I was as a matter of fact almost dead. I was fainting all the time...' (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

In addition, Amber talked a lot about a feeling of constant sadness she experienced during the last ten years. The quote below describes the moment in which she received her first compensation by the government after she was officially recognised as one of the wrongfully accused parents. While literature generally suggests that an official apology or recognition can be potentially cathartic for the wrongfully accused people (Westervelt, 2008, p. 35), our respondents experienced the opposite:

On the day that I received the first 10000 euros, I woke up and saw that amount on my bank account, I was happy for 5 seconds, 5 numbers on my bank account, I never had that before. But after that, I just cried. Because that was the confirmation that all the misery I went through was indeed for nothing. (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Serena also indicated that together with other aspects of the case, the recognition of the state of her wrongful accusation, instead of coming as a relief, made her very angry. It led her to being even more frustrated, because it confirmed that all her misery had been actually unnecessary. She even compared the absurdity of the apology to being wrongfully incarcerated:

Yes, but it is like you're in jail for something you did not do. And then after 14 year a 'yes sorry you should not have been incarcerated; it was a fault in the system'. That is really ungraspable, right? (Serena, 2021 – online)

In addition to anger and sadness, feelings of (stigma induced) shame and guilt had a big impact on the mental state of our respondents as well, a finding that can be traced in other studies (see Zeman, 2004: 26; Brooks & Greenberg,



2021, p. 47). Zeman who had investigated ‘the experiences of loss among parents whose children were in child protective custody that resulted from false accusations of abuse or neglect’ found that the participants blamed themselves for the whole wrongdoing, continuously living in shame and guilt (Zeman, 2004, p. 26). Among our respondents, both Natalie and Serena mentioned that they blamed themselves for a long time for all the misery that their families went through. Natalie thought it was because of something she did wrong that the family ended up having huge debts and all the consequences that resulted from it. Serena said that according to her experience, debt was an extremely sensitive (taboo) topic and not discussable in the Dutch context. This resulted in feeling ashamed as well as in living in isolation (a theme that will be touched upon later). Natalie reflected on how her feelings of shame influenced her social life:

At a certain moment we did not open up our curtains anymore. I also said to my family members that ‘If you come by, call me first. Then I know it’s you.’ And other than that, I never opened my door for anyone. I was ashamed. Debt collectors and the police were also very loud, you don’t want to go outside anymore. Because the neighbours see everything, police cars in front of the door, they see it all. You are ashamed to go outside. So, we also started doing groceries in the evening and stuff like that. Because we were ashamed and lived in a sort of constant fear. (Serena, 2021 – online)

The ‘childcare-benefit scandal’ had unsurprisingly also a big impact on the financial situations of the wrongfully accused parents. The debt accumulated at the tax-authorities as a consequence of being accused of fraud, triggered a chain reaction, building up over the years, causing many more financial troubles. It resulted in not only having government debt, but also many private debts. For example, in many cases, so much money was taken by the tax-authorities from the paycheck of the parents, which they had no money left to pay for other bills like the rent or mortgage. Natalie’s debt at the tax-authorities was tripled over the years, from 3000 to 9000 euros, and she had to think of ways to pay for it.

I had a salary of 600 euros, are you going to choose to skip paying something of your fixed payments to pay for that 1000 euros? And just like that we unconsciously began to be indebted at other places, without really realizing it. Because you are busy with how we are going to pay for that debt, continuously. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

By not being able to pay rent for example, some parents were evicted from their home. This happened to Serena, Jasmine and Pamela. Pamela had to live at her mother’s house for a while with her children. Serena was forced out of her house with her two children and lived in a bungalow parc for a while. Jasmine also had to leave her house:

I told the judge that I had a lot of troubles but that I’m improving now and that all the debt is explainable. But still, the judges didn’t go along with it and they had me evicted. And then, there you are, with three children, being evicted. (Jasmine, 2021 – online)



Almost all parents also had to deal with the previously mentioned child protection services 'Veilig Thuis'. Moreover, in Amber's case, her son was even taken away from her after someone in her surroundings made a report. She says:

Someone made a report that I couldn't take care of my son. But we didn't have any money, we couldn't do anything. He couldn't always eat breakfast before going to school, because I had to pay his lunch break at school and it didn't always work. (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Often parents were also fired from their jobs because of the fraud mark that was associated with their name. This made it even harder to pay the debt collectors and made it hard to find a new job. This is the case of Amber:

In 2017 I was fired from my job, because something like 'financial supervision' also exists. You are not allowed to work with debt in the financial sector. They say that makes you 'allegeable for blackmailing', what is not true of course. (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Another effect of having spiralling debt, is that families had to live in extreme poverty. House evictions, food shortage, or not having warm water, became part and parcel of their lives. When Natalie's heating broke, because they were subject to the supervision of state administration, they had to receive an official approval to buy a new one, as they had no money to buy it themselves. However, they did not receive this approval and had to live in the cold for many weeks.

We all slept in the same room because we only had heating in that room. And we couldn't really shower, so we boiled water in the boiler and put a layer in the bathtub so we could wash the children a little. And then you have to explain to them in a creative way that this is just the way it is for a while. You really have to make things up for the kids so they do not realize what is going on. In the weekends we went to my mother, who lived in Amsterdam, to take a decent shower. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Literature on the consequences of wrongful accusation by the state concludes that large and devastating impacts can be expected on the psychological, somatic and economic level on those affected (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021). Our research confirms these findings. The 'childcare-benefit scandal' has worsened life for those affected in relation to all aspects which define wellbeing or the quality of life, such as material living conditions, productive or main activity, health, education, leisure, social interactions, economic security and physical safety, governance and basic rights, natural and living environment and overall experience of life (Eurostat, 2021). Sleep problems, depression, anxiety, high blood pressure, weight gain/loss, moodiness, irritability, stress, hopelessness, aggression, suicidal thoughts, and the fear of going out, feeling stigmatised and withdrawal from public life were all topics that literature discusses and which were mentioned by our respondents (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021, p. 48). From severe depressions and a constant level of stress, to feeling anxious all the time:



every interviewed parent went through an aggravation of their mental state. Existing physical diseases worsened because of the high levels of stress. Hospital submissions, strokes and even a miscarriage were linkable to the ‘childcare-benefit scandal’. Finally, as a consequence of the fraudster label and uncontrollable (government) debt, the respondents of this research had to live in (extreme) poverty, which resulted in not having enough money for basic needs related to food, housing, and taking care of their children.

4.2. Consequences relating to the children: “...they lost part of their childhood because of this”

The ‘childcare-benefit scandal’ affected parents and families with children. While the effects on the parents are indisputably serious, those impacts might be even bigger on their children. Even though these effects might become clearer in some years from now, some consequences are already evident, such as suicidal thoughts, depression, and behavioural problems.

A reoccurring theme when the mothers talked about their children is the feeling that due to what happened their children could not afford to be children but had to grow up too fast. Serena calls them the real victims of the ‘childcare-benefit scandal’:

I could not give them [referring to her children] what I would really want to give them for years. You have to live with that... They are in fact the real victims. They are totally outside the case but the impact on them is way bigger. (Serena, 2021 – online)

Natalie’s daughter also grew up too fast. Acutely aware of the struggles Natalie and her (now ex-) partner had and not wanting to burden her parents, the daughter, for example, decided to keep her emotions to herself and not share them at home, even though she was bullied outside her home and felt terrible about it.

Jasmine also noticed this effect of growing up and feeling responsible in her own children. When her first compensation instalment from the government was paid after being officially recognised as a wrongfully harmed parent, she said to her children that they would go to an amusement park when it opens again after the COVID-19 pandemic ended. After some calculations, her daughter responded that she thought this was nonsense since it would be quite expensive. Jasmine linked this to a survival mode her children had acquired after seeing her struggle so much. This survival mode also led many children to find a job to help their families:

My daughter also went working out of a feeling of necessity, because she saw that a few years ago we did not have any money. And that is such a normality for her now, that if she had to pick between doing something fun and working, she chooses to work.... It



is not necessary anymore, but it has become part of her. Sort of a survival mechanism. I think it is kind of sad, because I think they lost part of their childhood because of this. (Jasmine, 2021 – online)

In addition to the mental wellbeing on their children, not being able to be a 'good parent' due to the 'childcare-benefit scandal' was a big concern of the wrongfully accused parents. For Pamela, for example, it was especially because she had to say no to her children frequently. She could not do with them everything she would have wanted to do. The mothers mainly expressed the feeling of failing as a parent because they could not provide their children with what they needed. Pamela and Jasmine, for example, did not have enough money to provide their children with braces. To be able to purchase braces, one has to be additionally insured for a whole year before one can apply. However, with four children, a huge amount of debt, this was for them impossible. For Jasmine, the failure as a mother had to do with the fact that the situation forced her to do unlawful things to feed her children.

I have sunken so deep as a mother that I, [big sigh]. Well, it's nothing really, but I really had to do some wrong things in order to survive. I've been raised really harmonious, I grew up without violence, without drugs, without alcohol, without nothing. And especially without criminality. But at a certain point I started stealing food in stores for my children. It happened plenty of times. At a certain point I even became quite skilful in it. (Jasmine, 2021 – online)

In 2017, Natalie and her family went through what she calls it "the worst year their lives". During Christmas, they even had to eat from the food bank, something for which Natalie blamed herself:

Well, in that month we really felt like we had failed as parents. You start to blame yourself. You think back and wonder 'what kind of mistakes did we make? What did we do that we are failing so hard? That we cannot even take care of our kids and that other people have to do that?' So, that was the worst year for us. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Natalie's daughter also experienced severe physical problems that are linkable to the consequences of the 'childcare-benefit scandal'. Because of the stress it caused the family, Natalie and her children were living at her aunt's place for a while. Natalie's daughter was so stressed out because of the whole situation that she experienced severe problems with her intestines. She did not inform her parent about this for many days because she did not want to burden her parents with any more stress. When she stayed with her dad for the weekend, he found out that she had not been going to the toilet for many days and she needed to go to the hospital to be treated. After heavy medication and a night at the hospital, Natalie brought her daughter back to her (ex-)partner. Then she said: "I don't want to go back to auntie because I'm afraid to go to the toilet there. I'd rather have you come back home, then I know for sure I will stay healthy." Natalie stated that at that moment her heart broke.



Natalie talked about this feeling as well, as she talked about the injustice a childminder had done to her. The owner of the childminder agency would not give documents of the transactions to Natalie, so she could not prove to the tax-authorities that she was not a fraudster and had a right to receive the child-benefits.

She lived in the street of my daughters' school, so I went to her house and took a bold step because I was so desperate. She opened up the door, saw my face and just pulled the door back in and closed it. I had so much sadness at that moment. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Natalie expressed the effect of anxiety on her and her family when she discovered that her children were anonymously reported at a child protective service called 'Veilig Thuis'. As a result of the fraud mark and the debt of the child benefits that was on her name, she did not always have enough food and other supplies to take care of her children. In the quote below, she expresses how the contact with the child protection service increased her stress and her fear.

In the end they were registered at 'Veilig Thuis', because of the tensions at home. But then I thought oh no, I have to make sure they look good all the time and that there is enough bread in their lunchbox because before you know it, they are being taken away from you. So, you live in a constant fear. I have felt helped by them [child protection services] but also not, because it gave so much more stress. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Amber's son was also taken away from her by the child protective service 'Veilig Thuis', something that she says had serious effects on his mental health:

My son became suicidal last year when he figured out what was really happening. You also notice that at school when someone says 'Your mom', he loses it. He cannot have that. No one can say anything bad about his mother. He came along to the Catshuis and said to them: 'You took my mother. Every child needs his mum, but now I don't have my mother anymore. (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

The hardest part for most parents during the child-benefit affair was the fact that their children had to suffer. This made them feel like they had failed as parents. They believed that if they had been 'good parents' and in control of everything, things would have gone differently: the children would have gotten enough food every day and gifts on every birthday. One of the main themes transpiring from the interviews is the loss of agency and control over their own life. This theme was most prominent when the parents talked about the children. Other researches on wrongful accusations have also found that one of the consequences is this feeling of 'the loss of image of the self as a doting parent' (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021, p. 47). Zeman (2005) acknowledges this and states that after researching the experiences of parents whose kids have been in touch with child protective services, one of the outcomes was the loss of the illusion



'that they could protect their child' (Zeman, 2005, p. 19). Losing the feeling that they could care for their children how they wanted to, links to a feeling of losing control over the lives of their children.

4.3. Relationships with others: "I'd rather have debt collectors at my door than that sh*t from family"

The 'childcare-benefit scandal' had a significant impact on the relationships of the wrongfully accused parents and their surroundings. Firstly, because of the debts and all the consequences the debts led to, many parents started to live in isolation and withdraw from social life. The unannounced and frequent visits of the debt collectors were a main reason for this. This resulted in a fear of opening the door, and of pretending not to be home, a situation that lasted for many years. Some kept dark curtains so no one could look inside their house.

The isolation effect was also due to the stigma of their immediate surrounding of friends and family. Natalie, for example, isolated herself as a coping strategy, because of money-related problems but also because she was feeling a sort of stigma of not being able to participate in social and recreational life the way people expected her to.

And just like that, we started to isolate ourselves from the outside world. Not going to birthdays, also not to... you know, people who don't know about your situation wouldn't understand why you can't go to a birthday. Because you want to buy a present, but you can't afford it. And you want your children to look cared for. Sometimes it did work out to go a birthday, then my mother bought something nice for the children. Because I refused to let my kids look shabby at a party like that. Then I'd rather not go. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Besides the sustained isolation, our respondents lost many friends because they either did not want to tell them about what was happening or because they told them but the friends did not really understand the problem, did not believe them, or even blamed them (see also Konvisser, 2015). As Serena says:

For friends and family this is really incomprehensible! I didn't really ask them to be honest, because in the Netherlands it's like this: if you have debt it's your fault. I can't say that I have been financially exploited by the tax-authorities. It won't work, it can't. (Serena, 2021 – online)

Amber had a similar experience since her parents did not believe or understand their struggles. Only when her dad saw her on the NOS-evening news, he started to believe her story was truthful:

Well, they didn't really support me, they didn't understand. Because the government is holy, so it must be you. That was really hard. At a certain moment when Menno Snel stepped down in 2019, my dad saw me on the NOS-evening news. And only then he had something like 'Oh, it's real and not just her carelessness.' (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)



Some wronged parents even believed themselves to be guilty of all the debt and therefore did not say anything to anyone about it. They had to deal with feelings of self-blame or self-stigma, which made them ashamed to be with friends and resulted in ending some friendships. When asked about whether she was aware of her innocence, Natalie answered:

Actually, I was aware of it straight away, but I thought this is not possible, it is the tax-authorities we are talking about, so it must be my fault. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Once their innocence was recognised, some expected that former friendships or bonds would be naturally restored, but re-established relationships appear to be tainted with gossip, judgment or simply material interests. Pamela, for example, told about her neighbours following the case in the media and making inappropriate comments, such as “*Well, you order a lot of stuff, don’t you? You must have gotten you compensation, didn’t you? How much did you get?*” Natalie reflects on similar comments made by her family-in-law, whom she asked for a loan at a point when she and her husband were desperate, but regretted it:

*But it was like if my kid was wearing a shoe that looked kind of good, and they saw that, they would say: “Oh you can buy some new shoes but you can’t pay us back?” And then we were done with asking people for money, so we started working illegally in the weekends so we could pay them back and so we didn’t have to deal with all that shit. I’d rather have debt collectors at my door than that sh*t from family. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)*

Out of the five respondents, four were single mothers at the time of the interview and all of them had struggles with their (ex-)partners because of the ‘childcare-benefit scandal’. Natalie went through a divorce because of all the misery. It was the fact that she had to work extra shifts in order to pay all the bills, her miscarriage and him losing his job, which caused many tensions at home, leading eventually to divorce.

I was so stressed out and depressed. I didn’t want to do the housekeeping, the cooking, I was so grumpy all the time. My husband did not understand it, we didn’t speak to each other about each other’s day anymore and so we didn’t know what happened in each other’s lives. We started to react it off on each other and that’s how the tension raised. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

The husbands of Natalie and Pamela were fired because their employers were burdened by debt collectors, and at a certain point they did not want to deal with them anymore. There were other repercussions on their families. When Amber’s son was taken away, her parents and sister were not allowed to see him. Child protection service ‘Veilig Thuis’ said they needed to keep distance from each other. Amber also said that she believes that often families of the wrongfully accused parents were also forced to pay the tax-authorities back in some form.



It also happened with healthcare and rental-benefits. I first noticed it with my parents, I never knew it, they never talk about finances. But from the beginning of 2011 they also had to pay back. Together they might make 1600 euros, well then you always have a right to benefits. But when my benefits stopped in 2016, theirs stopped as well. (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Literature has also reported a possible effect of wrongful accusation being a 'strain on relationships', which links to the fact that after the unjust accusation the social networks of the exonerees crumbled down (Brooks and Greenberg, 2021, p. 48). Zeman found that also relationships between the parents and children were strained (2004, p. 26). This had its roots mainly in the feeling that they had failed as a parent and the 'loss' of the confidence they could protect their child (Zeman, 2004, p. 27). Divorces, break ups and loss of custody were also a result of some studies (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021, p. 48).

4.4. Change of attitudes towards institutions: "It's the government who doesn't trust its citizens!"

Another consequence of the 'childcare-benefit scandal' on the wrongfully accused parents is that their trust in the government, in its institutions and in other institutions, including society, is profoundly shaken and sometimes non-existent. This is not surprising, however important to note because they still depend on institutions in getting their life back on track. They do not feel heard or respected by the government and the tax-authorities. While there is a group of parents that can give advice to the government, this advice is reportedly not taken seriously. Amber talks about the times she and other parents were invited to talk with the ministers at the Catshuis:

The first time I did feel heard. The meeting was planned for 2,5 hours but it became 5. No one was distracted, but I think that we were invited because we sent an open letter to the cabinet with the question if they could resign. The invitation came afterwards. We wanted a follow-up meeting to see what they would do with all our advices. And during the second meeting, last Saturday, they already knew they were going to do nothing with our advice. There was more attention to the time, and a careful selection was made of our points. They didn't do anything with those points. At the end, one of the parents asked: 'Can you keep us posted?'. They answered with: 'No we have the parent group for that'. So, it was all for show. We were truly used. (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

One of the main reasons for the loss of trust in (government) institutions is the problems the parents had to face when they communicated about what was happening to them. The tax-authorities did not believe them when they stated that they did not do anything wrong. The communication became like a game of who was right and who was wrong. The mothers soon realised this was a game they were never going to win, that they had to pay the debt no matter what. They reported that they had sent all the material that proved their



innocence, but the tax-authorities repeatedly said that they did not receive it. Amber states:

They told me ‘You received the childcare allowance on your bank account so you have to prove that you transferred the money to the child care agency.’ Well, I did that. Again, sent the documents and again they did not receive the documents. Again ‘you have not responded to anything.’ (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Jasmine explained a similar situation with the tax-authorities:

And we didn’t understand it, we asked so many times for documents and overviews. I even went to the tax-authorities office in Amsterdam together with the lady of the day-care, with all the documents that showed my contribution. But still, they said that they received nothing. (Jasmine, 2021 – online)

Like Pamela, Amber and Jasmine, Natalie and her family also had to be under the supervision of the state administration. Someone from the administration dealt with everything related to the money related. Someone took over her bank account, paid all the bills, and transferred living money every month. At a certain point, it appeared that the person who was in control of her bank-account, was a fraudster and never paid for any bills they had coming in, which made her debt only bigger. She talks about the communication problems they faced:

At a certain point, the communication didn’t go so well, they were unreachable. Many times, we didn’t even receive our living money to do groceries. They were so unreachable that we even went to their office but they didn’t open the door for us. When he finally answered the phone, he said irritably ‘Do you want a roof above your head or do you want food for your children?’ (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Jasmine also mentions being treated badly from the tax-authorities due to her ethnicity:

I have a Moroccan first name but a Dutch last name. They definitely looked at that, first-last name combination, what area you’re living and where you’re coming from. I’m sure of that, also because of the conversations I had at the time with the tax-authorities. Very inhuman. Then I said ‘but I have three kids to feed’ and they answered ‘from our tax cents?’ (Jasmine, 2021 – online)

Amber mentioned communication problems with the child protection service ‘Veilig Thuis’. She talks about the moment when it was decided she would not be able to see her son anymore:

At one point I mentioned that this is not right. It happened on 5th of February 2019, well it’s my birthday on the 11th so I said, really stupid, I got tickets for the cinema. We were going to see Aquaman, nice for him but also nice for me [laughs]. They [child protection service] said that was okay, they said ‘of course it is okay, it’s not the point that you don’t see each other anymore, it is only temporary. To help you [...]’ Then I was called on the 10th of February by Veilig Thuis, whom I still hadn’t seen, no appointment. ‘Yes, we think it is better if you don’t see each other for now. Let him get used to his new



home situation.' Yes, but that wasn't the agreement, right? But I couldn't do anything. And then it was decided at that point that I couldn't see him anymore... (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

Our respondents had all lost trust in the government. When asking Serena if she still has trust in the government, she answered saying that “*It's the government who doesn't trust its citizens!*”. According to Jasmine, the government and its institutions have failed her too many times for her to trust them again.

*Willingly they destroyed people, it has nothing to do with a mistake. It's one big corrupt sh*t mess and we are in the middle of it. They want to make us depended and with the benefits, they did. I don't have any trust left in the government, but I'm scared. Well, scared... for the people who register after the deadline⁴. (Jasmine, 2021 – online)*

The constant negative contact they had with child protection services, the childminder agencies and of course, state administration and the tax-authorities led our respondent to feel a loss of control over their lives. They had to deal with many institutions that were supposed to help them get a grip over their debts and money flows. This simultaneously resulted in having to be extremely open about something that felt like a shameful topic. They had no privacy anymore. The institutions got control over their bank accounts, over their homes, over their cars and even over their children. Most parents stated they had proper knowledge in how to deal with bills and accounts, and they did not need any support. Some felt infantilized and ‘othered’ by the way these institutions talked to them, which made them angry but also left them feeling powerless.

4.5. Hopes and needs: “I don't see the misery ending in the next few years...”

This last theme is about the hopes and needs of the wrongfully accused parents. The way they see the future and faith that things will get better, is highly influenced by their trust in the government and the tax-authorities. As argued so far, the ‘childcare-benefit scandal’ has harmed the wrongfully accused parents in many aspects. This has not only influenced their lives at the moment of the interview, but also on how they see the future. Things they needed or that made them happy before, do not seem to matter anymore. Amber talks about repurchasing a Louis Vuitton bag when she received a payment of the government:

I had to sell that bag in order to eat, it was this speedy. When the money came, I ordered another speedy. It arrived, I opened the box, and I had something like god dammit, 1100 euros for a bag, give me a break. I sent the bag back, it didn't make me happy. I had bought it before to celebrate my son's birthday but now, it was not fun at all. (Amber, 2021 – Amsterdam)

4 The deadline Jasmine refers to was decided by the government for the wrongfully accused parents to declare and register themselves as wrongfully accused.



Our respondents have very little trust that the institutions will fix or repair the harms of the ‘childcare-benefit scandal’. Serena describes the attitude of civil servants in the municipality who were helping with her case:

They respond with ‘Oh how awful’ or ‘Yes how bad’. But they do not really take action. So, I don’t see the misery ending in the next few years.... (Serena, 2021 – online)

While she says she did have some hope in the beginning, when the ‘scandal’ came out and people seemed to care about the issues that affected her, she has now totally lost hope. Natalie also criticises the way the politics and the tax-authorities give false hope to them:

They said for example that they were going to cancel all our debts. Well, until today we have heard nothing about it. Yesterday I told this to Mrs van Huffelen, she responded with ‘It seems more complicated than expected’. So, I said, next time if you have a big meeting with press waiting outside, just say nothing if you don’t know if it’s practicable. Because by saying stuff like that you give hope to the parents, but you also cause suffering... (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

According to our respondents, the tax-authorities and other responsible institutions are both unable and unwilling to really listen to and understand the needs of the parents, and even less capable in fulfilling these needs. According to Serena, this has to do with an incapability of the people responsible:

And that it still keeps on going you know, you notice that there might be a will. Maybe from the state, from van Huffelen, and a team for recovery. But the incapability is not understandable for me. They don’t realize at all how big the impact is on the families. You try to function normally, but it just isn’t possible. (Serena, 2021 – online)

The respondents are also critical of the fact that the focus of the fixing, recovery, and repair is only on the compensation, while the problems the parents are facing because of the wrongdoing go beyond compensation issues. Jasmine says:

But they forget one thing, because even though we faced a tax-debt of 10000 euro’s, those people also faced immaterial damage. Those people may have faced years and years of problems. (Jasmine, 2021 – online)

An important need they have is not being seen as a fraudster anymore. They need that checkmark of being a fraudster next to their name erased, so they can move on with their lives. Serena stated when being asked what should happen now: “Someone just needs to be appointed and take care of the exoneration. This needs to be fixed.” Jasmine agrees:

Money isn’t everything, but you know the only thing I want is that fraud label gone from my name. Like two weeks ago I wanted to close a bank account for my son at the ING, well that didn’t even work. There is still a code next to my name.” (Jasmine, 2021 – online)



The 'child-benefit affair' has changed the parents in such a manner that they are not the same persons that they were before. Their goals and needs have changed and the way they value relationships with other people as well. Before everything happened, many had dreams and goals that they wanted to achieve in life. Now, many of those seem impossible and have been crushed. They had jobs, good relationships and a life that was in their control. Like Natalie who said that before everything 'went down', she really aspired to be a working mom and never sat still. However, because the whole case has caused her several strokes, she is forced to stay at home. This of course makes her depressed, but she also had to reset her goals. Now all she wants is to have a normal life, nothing special, nothing extraordinary.

But I think that whatever amount I get back, no amount can express the suffering we had to face. But I have to say because the affair is in such a spotlight, I don't feel that guilty anymore. I always blamed myself, and also now I know that I will be helped, I have a more positive image of the future. That we will come out of this and have a normal life. What you just asked, what will help you and what do you need at this point? I just want my old life back. I don't need to be rich, I really learned how to live with little. But that's all I want. To have my white-picket-fence back. (Natalie, 2021 – Amsterdam)

The respondents are trying hard to get back in touch with the person they were before everything happened, go back to school, date, go on vacation, and get back to work. Nevertheless, they had to pause their goals, dreams and ambitions for more than ten years that has had a great impact on their needs and changed them profoundly. This is also being discussed in the literature on the consequences of wrongful accusations. It is a common result to feel like a changed person after such an accusation as it influences many aspects of who you are and what you want as a person (Brooks & Greenberg, 2021, p. 47).

5. Conclusion

Whereas in reports and media coverage, most attention has gone to the institutional level of the 'childcare-benefit scandal', including institutional racism and the risks of causing harm and discrimination by automated algorithms, our research shows that it is equally important to listen to the stories of the wrongfully accused parents, as a way of acknowledging their experiences, harms, and needs and of restoring their agency, power and self. It is only by centring their voices and their stories, that the consequences and the suffering of the 'childcare-benefit scandal' are humanised. This research has centred this suffering by focusing on the severe consequences that the wrongfully accused parents talked about, consequences which have influenced the lives of the parents on almost every aspect. Families were driven to financial ruin and torn apart, parents were



left with lasting mental and physical health issues, and people of colour were disproportionately the victims. For the wrongfully accused parents the damage done is unfortunately irreversible. A simple life is all they want, but this seems like a goal with massive barricades. To have their debts remitted is one-step closer to this goal, yet the wounds and scars that have marked them are there forever. Their lost years, their mental and physical health, their broken relations are impossible to regain.

This article only includes five of the thousands of stories that deserve to –and should– be heard. Far more knowledge can be drawn from the parents and academic research on the topic is necessary to stimulate structural changes on institutional and individual levels. In addition, this research did not have the space to focus more broadly on the consequences on the children. However, this emerged from the research to be a highly important aspect within the case of the ‘child-benefit scandal’. The consequences on the children might be less visible than the ones on the parents. How a child grows up influences a lot on how they evolve later in life and so the severity of this case will leave a huge mark on them. However, how that will look like and what their needs are now and later is yet to be investigated. This is why more research and focus on the children is an important recommendation for follow up research and could highlight even more sides of the complicated case of the child-benefit affair.

The revelation of these stories and the consequences gives room for structural changes within the state and tax-authorities. Through the knowledge of the parents who are (unwilling) experts in what happened to them, specific areas are highlighted where things went wrong and this knowledge shines light on otherwise invisible loopholes in the Dutch childcare benefit system. However, the most important lesson that can be drawn from this research is that the conversation among the harmed parents, the state and the tax-authorities should be long from over and that the issue cannot be addressed without understanding and knowing the harmed parents’ needs. Talking with them in a sustained way is the only way forward, because some needs will require more time to be identified and clearly articulated. As one of the mothers in our research said, referring to researchers, government, media, and others “You have to talk with us, not about us!”

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