

CARE UNDER CARCERALITY: STRATEGIES OF WOMEN WITH INCARCERATED  
LOVED ONES

by

Christina Higashi Howard



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Preceptor: Kailey White

Faculty Advisor: Chad Broughton

## **Abstract**

Mass incarceration disproportionately affects Black people, both in terms of who is literally caged, as well as who has to bear the emotional, social, and financial costs imposed by the incarceration of a loved one. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine women with incarcerated loved ones, this paper advances understanding of the effects and reach of mass incarceration by exploring the strategies developed and employed by women with incarcerated male partners or sons as they care for their incarcerated loved ones. By focusing on this question, I seek to contribute to literature on how incarceration affects family members of incarcerated people. I draw on theories about gendered care work to build on Comfort's concept of secondary prisonization and develop the idea of a double emotional burden carried by women with incarcerated loved ones. Findings demonstrate that the strategic behavioral adaptations women use to navigate control of the prison and care for their loved ones are manifestations of secondary prisonization. I argue that attention to the experiences, analyses, and agency of women caring for incarcerated loved ones is necessary to expand and nuance understandings of mass incarceration and its implications.

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## Introduction

*“And people don’t understand, we’re serving time with them.”* - Willa, mother with two incarcerated sons, James and Ben

With this pithy statement, Willa captures a reality shared by approximately one in four women in the U.S.—and nearly one in two Black women—who have an incarcerated loved one (Lee et al. 2015, 270). The U.S. prison population has stabilized in recent years after nearly 40 years of continued growth (The Sentencing Project). However, the U.S. still leads the world with two million people in prisons and jails across the country—a population in which Black and Latino men are over-represented (The Sentencing Project). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a disproportionately high death rate among incarcerated people and created new barriers to communication and connection across prison walls due to lockdowns (Equal Justice Initiative 2021). These conditions have heightened the stakes of advocacy—often led by women of color—for the safety and freedom of incarcerated people, making newly visible the labor often performed by women to care for the wellbeing of their incarcerated loved ones. Yet, the harsh realities faced by women with incarcerated loved ones made visible and salient by the COVID-19 pandemic are not new. The care that women provide to their incarcerated loved ones is a daily practice that predates and will continue beyond the crisis of this pandemic.

Increasingly, sociological scholarship has taken up questions around how incarceration affects the family members of incarcerated people. Existing research has taken important steps in expanding understandings of the reach of criminalization and effects of mass incarceration. Much of the literature in this area has focused specifically on the effects of parental incarceration on children, across a variety of measures including educational and health outcomes. However,

with a few significant exceptions, there has been insufficient research focused specifically on the experiences of women who maintain relationships and provide care to incarcerated loved ones in the U.S. Scholarship in this area must incorporate awareness of care work as gendered and the costs of mass incarceration as racially differentiated, all of which puts Black women—and to varying degrees also other women of color—in a position that is uniquely challenging, as well as illuminating when it comes to understanding and ending mass incarceration.

Following the direction of Megan Comfort’s essential work on the “secondary prisonization” of the partners of incarcerated men, my study focuses on the partners and mothers of incarcerated men. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine women, I seek to answer two questions. My first research question is: What strategies do women develop and employ as they care for their incarcerated partners and sons? My second question flows from the first: How does the adoption of these strategies, and the needs that impel their adoption, affect women’s mental health? Ultimately, I find five strategies women utilize to care for their incarcerated loved ones, which reflect their understandings of the limitations imposed by the prison and relatedly, their efforts to manage the surveillance and control of correctional officers. These strategies are: 1) calibration of interactions to minimize risk, 2) adoption of habits of dress for prison visits, 3) adoption of a visit-focused mindset, 4) emotional management, and 5) development of supportive friendships. All of these strategies reflect the various ways the carceral logics of the prison pervade women’s lives, necessitating the adoption of behavioral and mental changes and the development of friendships that support women in performing vital and taxing care work for the incarcerated men they love.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I discuss three bodies of literature relevant to my project to construct the theoretical framework I utilize in analyzing my data and structuring my findings. I begin with a review of scholarship on the collateral consequences of incarceration and discuss the focus of and gaps in such work. Next, I move to a discussion of the concepts of secondary prisonization and family criminalization, which are essential to my understanding of interviewees' experiences. The third section addresses gendered care work and I pay special attention to research at the intersection of gendered care work and incarceration, where my research is also situated. Finally, I describe my contribution to the field, which currently lacks sufficient work on the experiences of women with incarcerated loved ones. I seek help fill this gap by foregrounding the voices, experiential knowledge, and analyses of partners and mothers of incarcerated men.

### *Collateral Consequences of Incarceration*

Despite the growing interest in the collateral consequences of incarceration in the era of mass incarceration, relatively little scholarship has focused on exploring and theorizing the experiences of the women who maintain connections across prison walls, embodying both care and resistance to the prison's isolating effects. The most notable exception is Megan Comfort's (2008) extensive study of women visiting men at San Quentin State Prison. That few qualitative studies in the U.S. since have focused on care work and interaction with prisons by women with loved ones inside represents a significant gap in understanding the implications of mass incarceration.

A growing body of scholarship has been dedicated to the collateral consequences of mass incarceration, focusing primarily on children, parenting, health, labor, and economic effects—for formerly incarcerated people as well as family members of currently incarcerated people. Grounded in the rising prevalence of parental incarceration, researchers theorize mechanisms that may link parental incarceration to children’s wellbeing, including the parent’s physical absence, the trauma associated with the criminal legal process, and the stigma of having a parent incarcerated (Murray and Farrington 2008; Turney and Goodsell 2018).

Existing work shows that there is abundant evidence that parental incarceration negatively affects children’s wellbeing throughout the life course and can increase inequality since children already vulnerable by other metrics are also the most likely to experience parental incarceration (Turney and Goodsell 2018). Investigators find strong associations between parental incarceration and various negative outcomes in children, including antisocial behavior, mental health problems, drug use, poor academic performance, and poor health outcomes into young adulthood (Murray and Farrington 2008; Turney and Goodsell 2018). However, the unavailability of experimental data means that parental incarceration may not cause these outcomes; rather, they may be associated with parental incarceration because of preexisting disadvantage (Murray and Farrington 2008; Turney and Goodsell 2018). Regardless, researchers have set forth several mechanisms through which parental incarceration may affect children: the trauma of parent-child separation and the criminal legal process, a parent’s physical absence, economic strain, strained parenting, and the stigma of incarceration (Murray and Farrington 2008; Turney and Goodsell 2018). Despite the impossibility of generating true causal data on the effects of parental incarceration on children because doing so would be unethical, the research



demonstrates strong associations between parental incarceration and adverse effects on children (Murray and Farrington 2008; Turney and Goodsell 2008).

While research has consistently demonstrated the negative effects of parental incarceration on children, there has been less work looking at the impact of incarceration on adult family members outside of their role as parents. A few studies have examined the effect of family member incarceration for women's physical and mental health (Wildeman et al. 2012; Wildeman and Lee 2021). Like for children, evidence consistently shows that a family member's incarceration is associated with worse mental and physical health for women, and may in fact increase a mother's risk of having a major depressive episode and decrease her overall level of life dissatisfaction (Wildeman and Lee 2021; Wildeman et al. 2012). Researchers find that very high rates of incarceration are concentrated in a small number of neighborhoods, which are the same neighborhoods that, on average, have very high levels of concentrated disadvantage (Wildeman and Lee 2021; Sampson and Loeffler 2010). As such, individuals who experience a family member's incarceration are also disproportionately exposed to a variety of other risk factors for poor health even before a family member's incarceration (Wildeman and Lee 2021). Scholars posit stigma and resulting social isolation caused by a family member's incarceration as one mechanism through which a family member's incarceration may negatively affect women's health both directly by increasing stress and indirectly by increasing the risk of negative coping behaviors (Wildeman and Lee 2021).

Scholars have also posited stigma as a force that operates not only at the level of individual relationships but also at the community and political level (Braman 2004). At the level of the individual and community, the stigma attached to incarceration adheres not only to the incarcerated person but also their family members, causing people to hide their loved one's

incarceration and ultimately diminishing extended family and community relationships (Braman 2004). At the political level, the social silence around incarceration also obscures many of the effects of incarceration from public view and scrutiny (Braman 2004).

### *Secondary Prisonization and Family Criminalization*

Donald Clemmer's (1958) idea of prisonization, defined as the process by which the social and structural features of life in prison shape the psyches and behaviors of incarcerated people, is the foundation of more recent theory on the impact of incarceration on the loved ones of incarcerated people. Variables such as the duration of an individual's contact with the prison, degree of absorption into a "prison primary group," and level of resistance to the prison's cultural norms and codes influence the extent of his or her prisonization (Clemmer 1958). In *Doing Time Together* (2008), Comfort builds on Clemmer's prisonization, positing women with incarcerated partners as "quasi inmates," existing between captivity and freedom, a position which actually changes these women through their interactions with the prison. Secondary prisonization situates individual experiences within a structural framework and expands the analytical lens beyond individual actors to underscore the importance of socioeconomic, juridical, policy, and environmental factors that shape the experiences of those who have contact with carceral facilities (Comfort 2008; Comfort 2019). The subjection of incarcerated people's loved ones to regulation and surveillance is important to the process of secondary prisonization (Comfort 2008; Comfort 2019). However, the concept's utility in theorizing the impact of prisons and jails is in capturing the changes that contact with carceral structures produce in people as they adapt to these environments and restrictions and endeavor to avoid and survive totalizing institutional control.

While Comfort (2008) initially applied the idea of secondary prisonization to women visiting their partners at San Quentin State Prison, the concept can be fruitfully applied to other groups, including children visiting their mothers in jail (Aiello and McCorkel 2017) and formerly incarcerated fathers of currently incarcerated sons (Halsey and Deegan 2012). Most research on children with incarcerated mothers situates children outside of carceral facilities by focusing on the absence of the mother, stress on caregivers, and the emotional and social consequences of maternal incarceration. In contrast, Aiello and McCorkel (2017) focus on children's interactions with carceral facilities. Aiello and McCorkel (2017) make a connection between secondary prisonization and its impact on child development, finding that the emotional regulation and discipline of the body demanded by carceral facilities diverges from developmentally appropriate and healthy responses to the incarceration of a loved one. Halsey and Deegan (2012) push secondary prisonization in a new direction by revealing that "prisoner" and "visitor" are not mutually exclusive categories over the life course, finding that the secondary prisonization of the identity of parent/visitor is compounded by the vestiges of primary prisonization for formerly incarcerated fathers of currently incarcerated sons.

Out of a study comprised of in-depth interviews with low-income Black mothers of adolescents, Elliott and Reid (2019) develop the concept of family criminalization to explain the intertwining of Black mothers' and children's vulnerability to institutional surveillance and punishment. As with the concept of secondary prisonization, family criminalization highlights the family linkages in how carceral surveillance and punishment unfold in the lives of Black people, who are among those most affected by mass incarceration (Elliott and Reid 2019). The idea of family criminalization encompasses the ways mothers contend with and feel a deep sense of accountability for protecting their children from criminalization, as well as how mothers also

face criminal legal threats and sanctions through their parenting role (Elliot and Reid 2019). Using the concept of family criminalization Elliott and Reid (2019) illustrate the ways in which both formal and informal contact with the criminal legal system shape family life and influence protective mothering strategies, which reflect mothers' understandings of criminalization as ubiquitous, unjust, and high stakes for their children and themselves. While mothers expressed ambivalence about the strategies they employed and sometimes critiqued the institutions and rhetoric with which they had to engage, they felt that these strategies were necessary to protect and nurture their children (Elliott and Reid 2019).

Using 18 months of participant observation, Gurusami (2019) seeks to understand how the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated Black mothers as they resume their parenting roles shape and constrain their mothering practices. In Elliott and Reid's discussion of their studies, no mention is made of whether the mothers in their study have histories of incarceration. However, Elliott and Reid's idea and discussion of family criminalization is also relevant to the mothers in Gurusami's study, who are subjected to state surveillance in the form of post-release supervision and child welfare services (Gurusami 2019). Gurusami (2019) develops three types of motherwork employed in different contexts by formerly incarcerated Black mothers as they navigate multiple, overlapping sources of violence: collective motherwork, hypervigilant motherwork, and crisis motherwork. While Gurusami posits these types to understand mothering behaviors, they also provide a useful starting point for thinking through the strategies and tools used by people in other kinds of caring roles and with other experiences of incarceration. Secondary prisonization (Comfort 2008) and family criminalization (Elliott and Reid 2019) provide valuable frameworks for understanding how incarceration functions in the lives of the partners and mothers of men inside.

### *Gendered Care Work*

Sociologists have long found that care work is gendered (Meyer 2000). Care work refers to unpaid care for family members and friends, as well as paid care for others (Misra 2007). This kind of work includes taking care of children, the elderly, people who are disabled or sick, and domestic work such as cleaning and cooking. The term care work makes visible the physical, mental, and emotional labor essential to the functioning of society that is often unequally distributed and devalued (Meyer 2000). Much of the scholarship on care work has focused on the ways in which it is gendered and racialized (Hooyman and Gonyea 1995; Duffy 2005; Duffy 2011), the dynamics of globalization (Parreñas 2015), the complexities of paid and unpaid care work and the relationship between the two (Duffy, Armenia, and Stacey 2015), and the motivational and institutional landscape of care provision (Folbre 2012).

In the context of incarceration, the disproportionate burden of care shouldered by women is on display in prison visiting rooms, where women make up the vast majority of visitors (Comfort 2008; Fishman 1990; Girshick 1996). Research on care work in the context of incarceration has explored of the burden of care that falls on women and its implications. Drawing on feminist literature on family obligations and care, Codd (2002) posits a feminist interpretation of the value of self-help groups as pseudo-kin relationships. Codd (2002) argues that these groups allow women to access needed support without losing their positive self-identification as moral women—a position that requires women to adhere to their socialization as givers of care, rather than recipients. Self-help groups aid in the accomplishment of these two ends by freeing women from the need to maintain the balance of give and take within exchange

relationships since assistance within self-help groups is given with an ethos of generalized, rather than specific, reciprocity (Codd 2002).

Researchers have also studied how family relationships can be leveraged and mobilized as a resource for people who are incarcerated (Souza et al. 2019). Researchers find that while partners and families are expected to shoulder the burden of care and support for currently and formerly incarcerated family members, doing so may not be feasible due to their social circumstances and consequent lack of resources (Souza et al. 2019). The use of a feminist approach to studying interviewees, which incorporates attention to expectations that women be caregivers, gender differentiated vulnerability, and the function and effects of inequality at the individual- and systems-level is critical to Souza et al.'s (2019) findings.

While romantic partners are often the focus of studies on caregiving and incarceration, parents, and particularly mothers, are another important source of support and care for incarcerated people. Hutton (2019) takes an important step towards filling in a significant gap in the literature by interviewing parents of incarcerated adult men. However, Hutton's (2019) findings are limited by her small sample size (nine interviews) and the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of her sample, which may not be reflective of those impacted by incarceration in England and are certainly not reflective of the population affected by incarceration in the U.S. (Hutton 2019). Hutton (2019) posits parents as human rights protectors, finding that in response to the constant anxiety and fear for their child's physical and psychological wellbeing, parents develop strategies that sometimes subvert the rules of the prison.

As existing studies demonstrates, the adoption of a feminist perspective enriches studies of the effects of incarceration on women with incarcerated partners (Codd 2002; Souza et al.

2019). However, this kind of approach remains underutilized, representing a bridging of frameworks that would likely yield valuable insights if taken up. While there have been important steps taken to connect feminist scholarship on gendered care work and research on incarceration and its effects, this intersection remains underdeveloped. My research seeks to contribute to this area by approaching the secondary prisonization of women with incarcerated loved ones from an understanding of the prison as a producer of gender differentiation through the unequal violence it enacts, and the care work it necessitates and unevenly distributes according to gender.

### *Contribution to the Literature*

Most sociological scholarship about how incarceration affects family members of incarcerated people focuses on children. Yet, as the work on secondary prisonization and family criminalization demonstrates, it is critical to understand how incarceration permeates and shapes the lives of other family members. Few qualitative studies in the U.S. in the last two decades have focused specifically on the experiences of women who maintain relationships and provide care across prison walls. Yet, the burden of caring for incarcerated people, men specifically, continues to fall heavily on women and particularly Black women due to the disproportionate incarceration of Black men (Lee et al. 2015, 270). This presents a significant opportunity for expanding and nuancing understandings of mass incarceration and its harmful effects. Thus, in my work, I focus on the strategies women with incarcerated loved ones adopt to care for their loved ones and cope with the difficulties of doing so. With my research, I elaborate on Comfort's idea of secondary prisonization by discussing behavioral and mental adaptations evolved out of

secondary prisonization as strategies women use to navigate the control of the prison and care for their loved ones inside.

## Data and Methods

To study the caretaking strategies women with incarcerated loved ones adopt, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine women who currently have or have had a loved one who is incarcerated. An important characteristic of my interviewees is that interviewees all spoke about loved ones who are men and thus, my findings represent experiences arising from relationships with a specific gendered dynamic. Interviews touched on four core themes: the nature of the interviewee’s relationship with her loved one, how she cares for her loved one, experiences visiting the prison and interacting with prison officials, and the interviewee’s support network and relationships with other similarly situated women. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling with multiple starts.

To begin the recruitment process, I contacted Maria—a woman who I already knew—to request an interview. I knew Maria through our mutual involvement in Parole Illinois, an organization seeking legislative change to restore a discretionary parole system to Illinois, and I previously interviewed her for a different project. All participants were asked to share my contact information with other women with incarcerated loved ones who might be willing to speak with me, allowing me to use a snowball sampling method.

Name	Relationship to Loved One (L.O.)	Currently or Formerly Incarcerated	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Length of L.O.’s Incarceration	Incarceration Location
Maria	Married	Currently	40s	Hispanic	20 years	IL, state prison
Michelle	Romantic, not married	Currently	50s	Black	25 years	IL, state prison
Mecca	Married	Currently	40s	Black	20 years	IL, state prison
Carla	Engaged	Currently	40s	White	24 years	IL, state prison



Willa	Mother	Currently	50s	Black	10 years	DE, state prison
Diane	Married	Formerly	40s	Black	11 years, 7 months	Multiple states, federal prison
Olivia	Married	Formerly	40s	Latina	14 years	Multiple states, federal prison
Andrea	Mother	Formerly	70s	Black	30 years	IL, state prison
Althea	Mother	Formerly	50s	Black	10 years	IL, state prison

Table 1. *Interviewee Background Characteristics*

As Table 1 shows, five out of nine of the women I interviewed have a loved one who is currently incarcerated and the remaining four are women whose loved ones are now home, two of whom whose husbands were incarcerated in the federal system. Six of the women I interviewed are in romantic relationships with their loved one and they are either married to, engaged to, or in a committed long-term relationship with the men they spoke about. Three of the women I interviewed are mothers of sons who are currently or were formerly incarcerated.

While all participants' loved ones have been incarcerated for a decade or more, the length and continuity of their relationships ranges from three years to 30 years. Of the six women in romantic relationships, five of the women I spoke to have known their partner since their childhood or teenage years, though only one woman has been in a continuous relationship with her husband since they were teenagers. Incarceration of any length ruptures the life not only of the person incarcerated, but also their loved ones who are forced to shoulder exorbitant costs to visit, communicate with, meet their loved one's material needs that are not provided for in prison, and in some cases, pursue legal avenues for release. Incarceration lasting a decade or more represents a profound loss that structures the lives and behaviors of all who are affected, whether they have been in a relationship with their loved one for the entire duration of their incarceration or entered the relationship after their loved one was already in prison. Important to note is that the loved ones of the women I interviewed are or were incarcerated in a mix of state and federal prisons in Illinois and a handful of other states, all of which have different rules and

regulations around prison visits, dress codes, phone calls, and video visits, which impact interviewees.

Interviews lasted from 50 minutes to 90 minutes, with an average of 65 minutes. Almost all interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to ensure safety and comfort for all involved. One interview was conducted in person as the participant did not have access to Zoom. With consent, all interviews were recorded. Following each interview, the recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai, which is an online transcription service. All interviewees were compensated for their time with a 50-dollar cash payment. This was made possible by a grant from the Pozen Center's Human Rights Lab associated with the Lab's BA Thesis Fellowship.

While I used Otter.ai for the transcription of my interview recordings, I listened to each recording all the way through to correct any errors in the transcription generated by Otter.ai. This gave me an opportunity to review the contents of the conversation and to get a general sense of the themes present in the transcript. During this initial review of the recording and transcript, I highlighted parts of the conversation that I found particularly interesting and wanted to revisit. On my second reading of the transcript, I used open coding to assign codes to patterns I noticed. Once I had generated my preliminary codes, I read through the transcript again with the intention of assigning these codes to relevant passages. To distinguish my codes, I used different font colors for each code. This allowed me to easily visualize the frequency of different codes as well as any codes that co-occurred throughout the transcript. During my third reading of the transcript, in addition to assigning the preliminary codes I had already come up with, I took an inductive approach to assign codes to themes I noticed as I read.

Once I finished coding my first transcript, I had an idea of what kinds of themes might appear in subsequent interview transcripts. This gave me a starting point when I began to code later transcripts. For later transcripts, I also used a similar approach as described above. For all transcripts, I used the comment function to note passages that I found particularly rich and to document interpretations and meanings I was extracting as they occurred to me. These notes then served as the basis of more fully formed memos that I wrote after completing coding.

## **Results**

### *Overview*

During thematic coding, I found five strategies women adopt to navigate the prison and manage their experiences of its control to gain access to and care for their loved ones inside. These strategies are 1) calibration of interactions to minimize risk, 2) adoption of habits of dress for prison visits, 3) adoption of a visit-focused mindset, 4) emotional management, and 5) development of supportive friendships. Each strategy corresponds to one of the following subsections. The first four strategies relate directly to how interviewees navigate the prison's rules, officers, and conditions as they endeavor to access and care for their loved ones. Though not a strict division, the first and second strategies reflect behavioral adaptations and the third and fourth strategies reflect adaptations that straddle the mental and behavioral spheres. While still relevant to women's care work for their incarcerated loved ones, the fifth and final strategy pertains to the friendships women develop and nurture that support their own wellbeing and enable them to persist in caring for their loved ones.

*Action Calibration: Risk Minimization as Care*

The first strategy women use to care for their loved ones involves utilizing their knowledge of the potential risks to their loved one's safety and wellbeing to calibrate their interactions with people they encounter in the prison to manage and minimize risks to their loved one. This risk minimization strategy grows out of women's knowledge of the total control correctional officers have over their loved ones and, in their capacity as gatekeepers of the prison, also over the women themselves. This strategy, which structures the care work of women with incarcerated loved ones, takes two forms: seeking to minimize any fallout of their interactions within the prison for their loved ones and showing respect to correctional officers. With respect to the second form of this risk minimization strategy, for some women, showing respect to correctional officers also serves the function of endeavoring to foster mutually respectful relationships with correctional officers who they may repeatedly encounter over the course of their loved one's incarceration. In turn, developing and maintaining these kinds of relationships can be beneficial insofar as officers may grant women some leeway with rules or simply show some humanity and kindness to women during difficult moments.

Olivia is a middle-aged Latina woman who has a doctorate in clinical psychology. She has been married to her husband, Roy, for 20 years. Olivia and Roy were also high school sweethearts and were married for all 14 years that Roy was incarcerated on a 30-year federal sentence. Olivia's discussion of an instance when she was called a racial slur by a correctional officer while visiting her husband right after he had been granted clemency by President Obama demonstrates the first form of the risk minimization strategy:

And it was almost like they were trying to sabotage him. So, a guard said to me, you know, "Oh, you fucking spic" and my husband was like, "What did you just say?" And I grabbed my husband. And I said, "It's not worth it, honey. Remember? It is not worth it. That is what he wants. Don't ever give him the power. You're

going to be home soon. Ignore it, because you know what? It didn't hurt me. It didn't hurt me. That's his problem. Not mine.”

Given that this incident took place after her husband was granted clemency, Olivia was highly aware of the stakes of the interaction and responded accordingly. Rather than reacting as she wanted to and as she would have wanted Roy to (“of course, I want[ed] him to turn around and tell him where to go”), Olivia constrained both her and Roy’s reactions for Roy’s benefit. In this instance, despite discriminatory treatment that she viewed as targeted and purposeful by a correctional officer, Olivia responded in a way that minimized the consequences for Roy. In the situation Olivia describes, she not only implements what she has learned through previous experiences about the stakes of interactions with correctional officers, but also reminds her husband of the stakes. Thus, Olivia’s care for Roy manifests in two ways: her own restraint in choosing to ignore the correctional officer’s comment and the way that she looks out for Roy’s interests by reining in his response.

Maria is a 44-year-old working Hispanic mother and grandmother married to a man she has known since they were teenagers, though their relationship began again after David had already been incarcerated. In addition to working a full-time job and attending to familial responsibilities, Maria works tirelessly to bring David home both through advocacy directly on his behalf as well as involvement with two Illinois-based organizations pushing for legislative change and decarceration. Maria and David became involved in each other’s lives again almost six years ago, at which point he had already been incarcerated for 20 years on a 45-year sentence. Maria shared an experience she had when visiting David in which she counseled another visitor on the importance of being aware of the repercussions of their actions for their loved one:

One time I was there some man didn't have his second ID and he started cursing and I said "Stop, because guess what, they're gonna stop you from coming in. And then [your loved one] has to feel the wrath of it, not you. Just relax, there's a DMV down the block, go get a copy of your ID, your state ID and come back with it." As soon as you can, even if you get an hour with that person, you still, you got to see them, they got to get out of their cell for that hour. But cursing off the CO [correctional officer] that's just doing their job is not necessary.

While Maria herself has also had experiences with frustrating prison rules and arbitrary mistreatment by correctional officers, she has adopted a habit of considering the impact that her actions could have on David. In this passage, she advises another visitor to respond to a frustrating situation calmly, rather than arguing with the correctional officer. As Maria describes, arguing with the correctional officer would be futile and would ultimately only harm the man's loved one by jeopardizing the possibility of a visit on that day. In counseling her fellow visitor to maintain his composure, Maria shares her experiential knowledge, thus reflecting how Maria, and other women I spoke to, perform care work not only for their loved ones but also for other people with incarcerated loved ones. Ultimately, by sharing her knowledge of how best to navigate the prison in order to access a loved one, Maria extends her care not only to the man she offered guidance to but to the loved one he was at the prison to visit.

These two examples show that incarcerated people can be harmed not only by correctional officers but also indirectly by interviewees themselves should they react to any situation in the prison in a way that causes conflict with the correctional officers who are the gatekeepers to their loved ones. In response to this precarious position, the women I spoke to develop the consciousness and skills to delicately balance their desire to care for their loved one with the reality that to do so sometimes means accepting frustrating and degrading treatment.

In their descriptions of interactions with correctional officers and other prison staff, the majority of the women I spoke to recounted experiences in which they were called names and

slurs, subjected to physically degrading searches by correctional officers, or otherwise mistreated by correctional officers. Yet, many of them also emphasized the importance of treating correctional officers with respect and embodying a certain self-presentation as a courteous, rule-following person. This approach stems from an understanding of the total control correctional officers have over their loved ones and the potential for decent, or at least not disrespectful, treatment that can come from treating correctional officers respectfully.

With respect to the second form of the risk minimization strategy—showing respect to correctional officers—Maria’s reflections are informative. Describing her approach to interacting with correctional officers, Maria explains:

So, when I'm there, although I've always been a respectful person . . . But, I am also representing him when I'm there. So he's this really nice guy . . . So, when I'm there, I try to be myself, be courteous . . . And I just kind of build a relationship, you know. Not because I need to be any special treatment or anything but because you have my loved one. You know, you have my husband here.

For Maria, treating correctional officers with respect reflects not only her character, but is also part of her efforts to represent David well. Maria is careful to explain that she tries to build good relationships with correctional officers not because she is seeking “special treatment,” but because she understands the power that officers have over her husband’s life. As such, for Maria, adopting a courteous towards correctional officers is a way in which she cares for David indirectly. During this part of our conversation, Maria also told me about an interaction she had with a correctional officer when the prison went on lockdown when a video visit with David was supposed to begin. Maria explained that the officer “took it upon herself” to go to David’s cell to tell him that Maria loved and missed him since they were not able to have their video visit. That this story came up as Maria explained her more general respectful and open-minded stance towards officers indicates the reality that although she is not seeking preferential treatment by

being courteous to officers, there can be benefits that come with doing so. While Maria emphasizes that she starts from a baseline of respect for officers, she also delineates the boundaries of her respect as contingent on reciprocity of respect towards David and other men in the prison.

Diane is a middle-aged Black woman pursuing a doctorate in law and public policy administration. Home since 2015, Diane’s husband was incarcerated in a federal prison for 11 years and seven months after being sentenced to almost 20 years. Diane expressed a similar outlook on the importance of treating correctional officers with respect as Maria, reflecting certain shared experiences despite their husbands being incarcerated in different prisons. Like Maria, Diane explains the value of creating rapport with correctional officers, expressing that doing so can lead correctional officers to make the visiting experience a little easier. Diane contextualized the development of rapport with correctional officers by explaining that correctional officers got to know her because her husband was at the same prison for a long time. However, she also articulates the limits of rapport:

They can't ever get to know you know you but once they know what to expect from you, they're not a difficult person, they're not going to make my job hard, they're just here to visit, they're not going to break any rules or do anything, [correctional officers] tend to just leave you alone . . . But every now and then someone would come along to remind me that there is a us versus them . . . I think that those relationships, if you want to call them that really depends on the people involved.

Diane recognizes that there can be benefits—though they depend on the correctional officer—to developing rapport. While Maria insists that there is not necessarily a “me against you” kind of situation, Diane asserts that the relationship is fundamentally antagonistic, as demonstrated by reminders of the “us versus them” situation even though she complied with rules and did not cause problems when visiting her husband.



Though Diane, and other women, do all they can to be respectful and foster positive relationships with correctional officers, in service of their goal of taking care of their loved ones, this can only take them so far. Diane's explanation of the relationship between her husband's behavior inside the prison and how she is perceived and treated by correctional officers is illuminating:

The other side to that is how your loved one is behind that wall with [correctional officers], right, because they see your loved one more than you do. So, if my husband was back there, and he was gambling, and he was drinking, and you know then they know what they're dealing with. So they're probably going to treat you the same way. My husband worked, he went to school, he tutored people, he worked out, he was in everything he could possibly be in. And so they respected him.

As Diane explains, there are at least three factors that affect how she is treated by correctional officers: her actions, her husband's actions, and the correctional officer's disposition. In her case, both she and her husband behaved in ways that were acceptable to correctional officers, thus contributing to correctional officers' neutral treatment—captured when Diane says, “they left us alone.” Where Maria conceptualizes her behavior as a representation of David, Diane's discussion at the end of this passage shows that the linking of representation and respect goes both ways in that the respect Diane's husband garnered for his good behavior also affected how she was treated.

### *Managing Unpredictability by Developing Habits of Dress*

The second strategy that women employ centers on ways of dressing to gain entry into the prison. Prison visits are a primary source of unpredictability for women with incarcerated loved ones. Visits are a nexus point of unpredictability because correctional officers have the authority to use their discretion to enforce rules differently from one visit to another. With regards to visitor dress codes, this unpredictability arises because the enforcement of the dress code

depends on correctional officers' readings of visitors' bodies, who are often women. To deal with the unpredictability created by prison visiting dress codes and their enforcement by correctional officers, a strategy women use is the adoption of habits of dress with the goal of minimizing their chance of failure. Here, failure is understood as being turned away from the prison by a correctional officer and not being able to see their loved one at a visit. In interviews, I found three tactics related to habits of dress used by women to contend with the unsettling and varied circumstances they may encounter and assert control in situations where correctional officers exercise authority and discretion. Ultimately, these three tactics are encompassed by the broader strategy of adopting behavioral changes in response to prison dress codes and their inconsistent enforcement.

Olivia, Willa, and Michelle's experiences all took place at different prisons with different dress codes. However, dress codes at three of the prisons they mentioned generally prohibit garments shorter than knee-length, sheer clothing, "clothing which reveals the buttocks or breasts," and spandex pants or leggings (Federal Bureau of Prisons; Delaware Department of Corrections; Illinois Department of Corrections). These dress codes also require underwear for all visitors and bras for female visitors specifically (Federal Bureau of Prisons; Delaware Department of Corrections; Illinois Department of Corrections). These dress codes and their enforcement reify a deeply gendered form of surveillance enacted by correctional officers, reflecting an assumption of hypersexualized female bodies in need of disciplining to standards of "decency" (Delaware Department of Corrections; Comfort 2008, 53). For all three women, strict prison dress codes were a point of potential failure. Responding to their secondary prisonization, each managed dress code restrictions in different though related ways, reflecting different kinds of adaptation.

Olivia's preparations when going to visit her husband represent one form of behavioral adaptation enacted as a dress-related strategy:

Whenever I went to visit my husband, I took, I took a suitcase full of clothes...I am not the type of woman who has ever dressed inappropriately...But...it was always something. And then what would happen was for example, if [correctional officers] would send you out to change again, because they felt that the color was wrong and then they would make their own changes, every weekend it was something different...I had t-shirts of every color in the car. It was ridiculous.

Olivia describes how she not only had to contend with a strict dress code but with the reality that correctional officers constantly changed the dress code, or at least the enforcement of it. Because of this unpredictability, she adopted the strategy of over preparedness by having many options on hand in case something she wore was deemed inappropriate.

Willa is a middle-aged Black woman who is a professor, podcaster, artist, and the mother of three adult children. Her two sons—James and Ben—are both incarcerated. Willa identified gender as a factor that influenced how the rules are applied and expressed that her experiences made her feel that the prison intentionally made visits difficult for loved ones:

So, the rules tend to apply to women . . . So, you know . . . you can't wear tank tops, can't wear sheer clothing, you can't wear leggings, you can't wear you know, really tight jeans, you can't wear this, you can't wear that . . . it's like you can't breathe, you can't do whatever . . . And they don't tell you that on the phone [when scheduling a visit] . . . like people think you can just go and have your visit and that's it . . . They would never make it that easy because the point is to discourage people from going because they don't really want to facilitate those kinds of relationships.

As Willa out, prison dress codes are not only targeted at women, but also make visiting difficult, which she understands as an intentional effort by the prison to isolate incarcerated people from outside relationships. In response to the gender-targeted prison visiting dress code, Will adopted a fixed way of dressing:

I have what I call my uniform for the prison. I don't usually wear very bright colors. I would never wear orange because they have orange uniforms there and things like

that. I usually go in black, something subdued, really big, baggy, and all that stuff, you know, close toed shoes, whatever, and an attitude (laughter).

Rather than going to the prison with multiple options as Olivia did while her husband was incarcerated, Willa decreases her chances of running into issues getting into the prison by wearing what she calls her “uniform for the prison.” She adopts this particular “uniform”—subdued colors and baggy silhouettes—as her tactic for managing the unpredictability of the dress code because she is sure it will be within the stringent limits of the dress code no matter how a given correctional officer might interpret the rules. Though she adopts this style of dress for the prison, during our conversation via Zoom from her home, she wears a bright orange sweatshirt, which she would never wear to the prison. This demonstrates how, though the prison constrains her behavior when she must interact with correctional officers, it does not invade and dictate her dress outside of her visits to the prison.

Michelle is a 50-year-old Black woman who works as a vocational rehabilitation counselor and is in a relationship with a man who has been incarcerated for 25 years. Though Michelle’s approach is distinct from Willa’s, both of their behavioral adaptations in response to the dress code involve steps to ensure conformity to the dress code:

You always take \$1 in quarters, because you might go through shakedown, and then [correctional officers] have you take something off that even though I you know, I've got myself, I don't wear earrings anymore. I don't wear a necklace anymore (gestures to bare ears and neck). I don't wear rings. But I take that 50 cents [for a locker at the visiting center], because I know that, you know, there's gonna be something and you just kind of prepare yourself for it.

While the changes to Willa’s way of dressing are confined to her visits to the prison, the changes to Michelle’s way of dressing extend beyond her visits to the prison into her everyday life. Not only has she stopped wearing jewelry to her visits, but she has also removed these items from her regular, day-to-day appearance as is reflected in her lack of jewelry during our conversation.

Michelle minimizes the chance of failure when getting into the prison by forgoing jewelry. She also prepares herself for the reality that, despite her preparedness, failure is an unavoidable possibility due to correctional officers' discretion in enforcing the dress code. Michelle prepares for the possibility of failure by bringing some quarters to use for the lockers in the visiting center in case she needs to take something off to satisfy the correctional officer enforcing the dress code.

As these excerpts show, the prison enacts control not only over the bodies of people who are caged, but also over those who pass in and out of the prison to see their loved ones, many of whom are women. Prison dress codes and their enforcement by correctional officers are a gendered form of surveillance and discipline, which reflect an understanding of women's bodies—and particularly the bodies of women of color—as hypersexualized and in need of regulation (Comfort 2008, 53). Thus, interviewees' interactions with the prison's demands generate behavioral changes through a process of secondary prisonization.

### *Persevering Through the Adoption of a Visit-Focused Mindset*

Using thematic analysis, I found that the third strategy women use is the adoption of a visit-focused mindset—a survival strategy that allows them to persist in caring for their loved ones in the face of a carceral system with near total control over all aspects of their loved one's life and wellbeing. For the women I interviewed, the adoption of this mindset is spurred by and facilitates the suppression of their reactions to the brutalities and indignities their loved ones and they themselves are subjected to within the prison. While the specifics of their experiences differ, the following four interview excerpts all represent the adoption of a visit-focused mindset as a

strategy employed by women as part of the care work they perform for their incarcerated loved one.

Michelle has an incisive understanding of the dynamics of the prison from which her approach to visiting has developed:

When you go to prison, you notice that there's this power dynamic. The correctional officers, they have complete and total control over everything that happens in that prison. You just learn to understand it. And you change your mind . . . I was talking to a lady about this the other day, because I just went for a visit yesterday. And I say, you know you have to train your mind to say, my objective is this visit. Period. That's what I'm trying to do is to visit. You know, if I'm asked something, if somebody comes at me crooked, my objective is to visit. And that's how you have to approach it.

Michelle understands the all-encompassing power correctional officers possess over her incarcerated loved one and by extension, over her as a visitor to the prison. In response to this unchangeable reality, Michelle describes changing her mind to adopt a visit-focused mindset. This mindset entails always remaining focused on her objective of seeing her loved one when going to the prison for a visit, no matter what obstacles may arise in the process.

Willa also uses the visit-focused mindset as a strategy. Speaking about the experience of visiting her two sons—James and Ben—who are both incarcerated, Willa describes adopting a visit-focused mindset as she traveled to a different state to see her sons:

[Correctional officers] make it really difficult, you know, from ridiculous dress codes and arbitrary rules, and all of these things, that you know, you don't want to be there, right? And I was like, okay, I'm going to make my visits and I'm coming down here to see [my sons]. I'm not going to, you know, try to embroil myself in whatever institutional bullshit is going on because I'm already walking in angry (laughter). Angry at the system, not angry at [my sons], you know?

In this passage, Willa describes three factors that make the visiting process difficult to navigate: strict dress codes, arbitrary rules, and “institutional bullshit,” which encompasses, but is not limited to the first two factors. In addition to these difficulties built into the prison itself, Willa

faces the additional challenge of having to drive at least a few hours round trip to get to the prison where her sons are. To cope with these multi-layered obstacles, Willa adopts a visit-focused mindset as a way to manage her anger at the system, which aids her in persisting in her desire to see her sons.

Maria's discussion of the hard parts of visiting her husband illustrate the mental changes and submission to the prison's control necessary for the adoption of a visit-focused mindset:

Just the getting searched part, some [correctional officers] are fine with it and some [correctional officers] will treat you like garbage. You can't say nothing, you can't say nothing because that person that you love is up there waiting for you. So, once you walk on Stateville property, once you walk on IDOC property, you are part of IDOC, you are incarcerated, you better follow every rule that they have because you will pay the consequences. They will not let you see who you love. So, on my way there, as soon as I get to Airport Drive, I start praying to God and asking him to give me patience.

Later, Maria elaborated, saying that she not only asks for patience because of correctional officers but also because of other visitors. Like Michelle and Willa, Maria also understands that to access her loved one she must submit to treatment that manifests correctional officers' discretion and control over women's bodies—like the degrading process of being searched—without resistance. As Maria describes, she draws on her faith to give her the patience to withstand the degrading treatment that stands between her and her husband when she enters the prison. In adopting a patient disposition toward difficult correctional officers and other visitors who may be inclined to push or break certain rules, Maria shifts her mindset to remain focused on her goal of seeing her husband when she goes to the prison for a visit. Maria's adoption of a visit-focused mindset is motivated by the high stakes of interactions with correctional officers as her ability to see the man she loves hinges on her cooperation with the prison's many rules.

Diane and Jay married while Jay was incarcerated, becoming the first couple to get married in the prison where Jay was incarcerated. In recounting Jay's proposal, Diane described

two kinds of correctional officers: those for whom their work was just a job and “knew those men had to live there and tried to make life as easy as possible” and those who were “very difficult.” It was two officers belonging to the former group who made Jay’s proposal possible. Though she has had positive experiences with correctional officers, like with the ones who facilitated Jay’s proposal, Diane has also had experiences with officers who do everything to make visitors’ lives “hell,” which have informed her mindset. Describing how she came to think about officers and other prison staff who made life difficult, Diane explained, “It took a lot of years before I could just accept the fact that this is what it is. And the less I pour into it on that, in that regard, then, you know, if you don't water, it won't grow kind of thing. And so over the years, you start, you start to make the adjustment.” In this quote, Diane narrates the process of coming to accept the dehumanizing and unpleasant systems and actors she had to interact with in order to access and care for her husband.

This excerpt is comprised of three components that are important for understanding Diane’s adoption of attention focusing as a strategy. First, there is the centrality of time (“a lot of years”) to Diane’s ability to change her thinking. Second, as a result of the passage of time and the normalization of the circumstances, Diane ultimately came to accept a certain lack of control over the situation. Third, in the second sentence of the excerpt, Diane describes the strategy of attention focusing that she adopted. Diane’s decision to divert her attention and energy from being upset about difficult correctional officers and other prison staff is rooted in her understanding that expending emotional energy on mistreatment by correctional officers would only feed her anger towards them, which would ultimately not help her or her husband. The final sentence of this excerpt illuminates how this practice of redirecting her attention and energy to



the things that really mattered was part of a broader strategy of adapting herself to endure the experiences her husband's incarceration entailed.

While the shift in Diane's mindset differs from Michelle, Willa, and Maria insofar as her attention-focusing was not primarily about visits and staying focused on seeing her husband, Diane's experiences are reflective of the broader goal served by adopting any kind of attention-focusing strategy. This goal is to care for a loved one inside as best as possible by filtering out the institutionalized barriers to connection and care within and across prison walls in order to conserve mental and emotional energy. In the lives of all four women, the prison has not only transformed the routines of their daily lives but also their thought processes. The shifts in their mindsets represent strategic adaptations rooted in their love as well as their desire and commitment to caring for their loved ones during their incarceration in the face of burdensome conditions.

### *Carrying the Double Emotional Burden*

In addition to the difficulties that arise in the course of interviewees' experiences visiting the prison and interacting with correctional officers, women face challenges to their emotional and mental wellbeing related to their loved ones' incarceration. Building on Hochschild's (1979) concept of "emotion work," I develop the idea of a double emotional burden to describe the experiences of women with an incarcerated loved one. Hochschild's idea of emotion work refers to the act of trying to change the degree or quality of an emotion to render them appropriate to a situation. There are two elements to the double emotional burden. The first element is the emotional burden of loss, frustration, guilt, and isolation caused by a loved one's incarceration. The second element is the burden women take on of managing when and how they express their

emotions so as not to negatively impact their loved one. The second element of the double emotional burden entails emotion work by women with incarcerated loved ones to change the degree and quality of negative feelings of sadness and frustration due to their loved one's incarceration into emotions appropriate to the situation of having limited access to and time with a loved one due to incarceration. The shouldering of the double emotional burden represents an important way in which women care for their loved ones inside.

Through the course of their communications and visits with their loved ones, women become aware of the hardships their loved ones face every day in prison. One of these hardships is the loss of primary emotional outlets due to the inability to communicate freely, directly, and in a timely manner with family members and other would-be emotional supports on the outside. While men may develop close friendships with their cellmates or other individuals who are incarcerated, the hyper-masculine environment of the prison may inhibit emotional expression, meaning that men who are incarcerated rely primarily on loved ones outside for their emotional needs (Featherstone et al. 2003). In every interview, women described the emotional burden of having a loved one incarcerated. In addition to having to cope with the sadness, frustration, and longing stemming from the loss of a loved one to incarceration, women also face the burden of managing their own emotions to minimize the emotional burden felt by their loved ones.

Carla is a 47-year-old white woman who works in healthcare and has been with her fiancé Ken for almost 17 years. Ken is serving a natural life sentence and has been incarcerated for 24 years. Carla and Keith first met as teenagers and have a daughter together, though they did not date for very long and Carla raised their daughter by herself. Prior to his incarceration, Ken and Carla had some communication when Ken wanted to see their daughter. Several years into his incarceration, Ken wrote a letter to Carla asking to be part of their daughter's life, which led

to Ken and Carla “hit[ting] it off again” and they have been together since. Discussing her frustrations around the pandemic-related changes to visits, such as plexiglass barriers between visitors and their loved one, which make it hard to hear one another and reduce the sense of intimacy desired during visits, Carla described:

That stuff’s tough and it kind of makes you, not that it should, but it makes me aggravated. And so I feel like sometimes I’m not at my best when I go visit [Ken] because I kind of let that stuff get to me. But I shouldn’t, I should put that aside and try to be there for him. Because he’s looking forward to it.

The feelings and thought process Carla describes demonstrate her awareness of the importance of visits to Ken and her orientation towards Ken’s needs. Not only is Carla conscious of the value of visits for Ken, but she is also cognizant of the way in which her own aggravation—an emotional reaction to visiting conditions—hinders her ability to “be there for” Ken in the way that she wants to be. The emotional management entailed by the double emotional burden carried by women with incarcerated loved ones is comprised of two steps: first is the identification of an emotional response as problematic vis-a-vis a loved one’s wellbeing and second is the alteration of behavior to manage the emotional response identified as problematic. Though Carla does not describe how she manages her aggravation, her belief that she should put aside her emotional response represents the first step—identification—in the process of emotional management.

Describing advice that she offers to other women in a support group when they are going through a hard time, Maria states, “Because when we’re hurting, they can feel it. And guess what, we can turn around and pick up the phone and call somebody and we can message somebody and feel better. They can’t. They gotta wait till tomorrow.” This quote exemplifies Maria’s awareness of the connection between her emotional state and her husband’s wellbeing, as well as their differing access to emotional outlets and support. This awareness does not prevent Maria from sharing her troubles with David—an aspect of any relationship. However, it does mean that she

also relies on other relationships, like those with women in a similar position, for emotional support, especially when it comes to difficulties relating to David's incarceration.

Like Maria, Diane has a similar understanding of the unique challenges for emotional expression that Jay's incarceration posed. When discussing the experience of visiting Jay, Diane first explains her own emotions—feelings that were shared by other interviewees as well:

And then when it's time to get ready to leave, which is the hardest part, even though you know you're coming back tomorrow, there's just it was always something about seeing [correctional officers] walk [Jay] back there and you can't take him with you. And in the beginning, I used to cry all the time.

Then, Diane explains Jay's response to her visible emotional reaction upon having to leave him behind at the end of visits:

And then [Jay] explained something to me one day that I didn't understand, that I didn't think about. He said, I'm going to stop you from visiting. And sorry, it's kind of like, I'm emotional and it's all behind us now. He said I'm gonna stop you from visiting, because it's so hard for me when I see you like that, and there's nothing I can do. And then I have to go back there and deal with it and then it ruins the rest of my day. Not in a bad way but what can he do?

In this passage, Diane describes the process of coming to understand how her tears at the end of visits affect Jay's emotional wellbeing and mental state. Through Jay's explanation of the impact of her tears, Diane comes to identify her emotional response as problematic with respect to Jay's wellbeing—the first step in emotional management. This experience had a lasting emotional impact on Diane, which is evident in her apology for becoming emotional during the interview when describing Jay's reaction to her distress at the end of visits. Finally, Diane explains that she prioritized Jay's emotions upon leaving over openly expressing her own feelings: "So then I had to work, you know, find a way to leave, smile, and he made me not look back, you can't look back, you just got to go out the door." This quote illuminates the second step of emotional

management entailed by the double emotional burden: Diane altered her to manage her emotional response—crying at the end of a visit—identified as problematic.

Soon after this part of our conversation, Diane described the changes to her mental state when she would get on a plane to fly home, saying that the further she got from Jay, “everything about me just kind of went south...I was depressed about it. And it was hard. Then it was like detoxing, so the next three to five days, it took me a while to get out of that funk.” The double emotional burden Diane carried during Jay’s incarceration was not confined to the moments when she concealed her feelings for Jay’s wellbeing. Rather, the effects of this double emotional burden seeped into her day-to-day life, forcing her to find ways to “deal with it” so she could get out of bed to attend to her other work and familial responsibilities.

Mecca is a middle-aged Black single mom who has been married to her husband for two years since their reunion a year prior. She has known her husband—who has been incarcerated for 20 years—since childhood but they went separate ways after their paths diverged in high school. When asked about her experiences visiting her husband, Mecca mentioned difficulties with the dress code and referenced a time when she and her young daughter were initially turned away from the visit due to their clothing and had to go to Walmart to get new pants. At issue were a small tear on the pocket of her jeans and that her daughter was wearing stretch pants. Mecca described the aftermath of the incident: “So I end up getting back like five minutes before they locked the door. And they let me back in, but it was just irritating. And then try to change your attitude and perspective when you go down and see your loved one, it’s kind of hard to switch off that switch right there like that. You have to make the best time.”

Not only did Mecca experience the frustration of having to comply with the prison’s rules—which she felt made no sense—but she also then sought to conceal her feelings when she

was finally allowed to see her husband. In this way, like Diane, Mecca acts with the goal of making the most of the already limited time she has with her husband by taking on the double burden of changing her attitude to hide her frustration. In another part of the interview, Mecca told me about a conversation in which her husband told her that he has tried to stop taking things out on her because she is the only person he can talk to, demonstrating the limited outlets he has for emotional expression. This awareness ran through our conversation, shaping the topics she chooses to talk to him about and limiting what she shares with him about the emotional burden she feels because of his incarceration. For Maria, Diane, and Mecca, the prison limits the possibilities for emotional expression and support available to their husbands and consequently, to them as well. Consequently, these limits on emotional expression impel women to undertake the work of emotional management due to the double emotional burden they carry.

Like Mecca, Willa described the frustration of getting to the prison, being processed, and then having to wait for up to 30 minutes in the visiting room before one of her sons arrives and their visit begins. At the prison where Willa's sons are, being processed includes a COVID-19 screening implemented during the pandemic, presenting photo identification, and going through a metal detector, with the possibility of a "more intense physical search" (Delaware Department of Corrections). Since visits where her sons are incarcerated are capped at 45 minutes no matter how long prison officials have forced a visitor to wait before seeing their loved one, a visit would end up lasting only 15 minutes if forced to wait for 30 minutes. Describing what goes through her mind following such an experience, Willa explains how she thinks about what to disclose to her sons:

So you have to deal with [being forced to wait] and then make decisions around am I going to spend most of my visit talking about how frustrating it was just to get back here? Or are you not going to share that information with them because you

have things that you want to talk about or you just want to hear about what's going on with them, and they want to hear about what's going on with you.

Like Mecca, Willa recognizes the already limited time she has with her sons—a reality that necessitates a choice: share her frustrations with her sons or keep them to herself and instead discuss other topics during the visit. Like Mecca, Willa frames this choice by her desire to make the most of the already limited time she has with her sons. While not expressed as a way to care for her sons' emotional wellbeing, by seeking to make the most of the visit, Willa cares for her sons by engaging in emotional management to suppress her frustrations about the visiting process and shield James and Ben from this particular difficulty of their incarceration. To cope with the many frustrations of the visiting process, Willa relies on her relationships with people with similar experiences as an outlet for her emotional expression.

Beyond managing the expression of their frustrations due to the prison's visiting rules and procedures and the pain of leaving a loved one behind at the end of a visit, women's practices of emotional management extend to the process of navigating disclosure of losses that occur outside the prison. Althea is a 53-year-old Black mother of five children who owns a tax business as well as a business in the trucking industry with her boyfriend. While Jordan, one of Althea's sons, was incarcerated, Althea's brother and youngest son died. Althea's youngest son, Kai, was killed by gun violence. Althea's brother, who her sons were all close to, died seven months before Kai was killed. When Kai was killed, Althea went to the prison where Jordan was incarcerated to deliver the news, rather than telling him over the phone. Althea also waited until this visit to tell Jordan that his uncle had died.

Althea explained that she chose not to tell Jordan that his uncle had died when it happened because she didn't know how the news would affect him and wanted both to protect his feelings and his physical safety because she feared that he might get angry and fight

someone. Althea explains her choice to not tell Jordan about his uncle's death at first: "They say that when people are in prison if your loved one died, they let you go see the chapel or something and after that, you just on your own. So, you don't get that support you need. So that's why I didn't tell him because I didn't want him to go through all that." Althea's decision to wait to break the news until she was at the prison with Jordan's father and grandmother to break the news of Kai's murder in person when she could be there to support him reflect her understanding of the limitations imposed by the prison. Though the loss of her brother was a painful event for Althea, knowing that it would also be difficult for Jordan and that he did not have access to the kinds of support necessary to process such a loss, she chose not to disclose the loss of her brother, Jordan's uncle, when it occurred.

#### *Supportive Friendships as Pseudo-Kin Relationships in Times of Hardship*

In the face of the myriad of challenges—including the isolation, judgement, and stigma discussed in many interviews—women with incarcerated loved ones develop and nurture friendships with other similarly situated women. These relationships serve three primary functions: dissemination of information, strategic assistance, and emotional support. The emotional support embodied in these relationships is especially important given the double emotional burden carried by women with incarcerated loved ones. Among interviewees, these relationships are often forged in visiting rooms or through involvement in organizations working for legislative changes or otherwise advocating for the rights of incarcerated people.

Diane described the information disseminated through the relationships and networks of women with loved ones at the same prison, which were especially useful for her during lockdowns. During lockdowns, incarcerated people are confined for all or most of the day to



their cells, and visits are canceled—though the specifics vary depending on the prison and whether a whole facility is on lockdown or just a unit. Though the lockdowns Diane references happened prior to the pandemic, incarcerated people and their loved ones have been subjected to months of lockdowns during the pandemic. Given that she did not live in the state where her husband was incarcerated, Diane describes the role of her friendships with other wives:

So, the lockdown pieces are super hard because there's so many variables there that control something simple as your communication to your loved one, because you still don't know what's going on and [prison officials] are not gonna give you a straight answer when you call . . . I was 13 hours away so I couldn't do what some of the other wives could do that did relocate themselves [to the city where Jay was incarcerated] to be there every day, which is show up at the facility and demand questions. So, we had to lean off each other.

Friendships between women with loved ones incarcerated in the same prison serve the practical purpose of creating networks for the dissemination of vital information about what is going on in the prison and the status of loved ones. As Diane describes, because she could not physically show up at the prison when it went on lockdown to try to get information about what was going on inside, she had to rely on wives who were able to do so to try to find out what had happened. While lockdowns were a source of intense anxiety and even terror due to the uncertainty about whether her husband was okay, Diane's relationships with other wives provided her with information more quickly than she would have been able to obtain it without these relationships.

Like Diane, Maria valued the circulation of information through a network of women she has built relationships with, especially during lockdowns or other kinds of crises:

A bunch of my good friends are people that I met at Stateville. You become a family. Because see, when you have a loved one incarcerated, you find outlets, right. So, when Stateville goes on lockdown, sometimes it's just certain cellhouses that go on lockdown. So, we keep each other informed. Or if something if something happened with David, God forbid, he goes to seg [segregation, formally known as "restrictive housing"], he'll send a message with somebody to give the message to me . . . We network. And we're there for each other.

Not only are her friendships a way to distribute information about the circumstances of a lockdown, but they are also a way to relay direct messages from loved ones inside. While Maria's direct friendships are with other women on the outside, networks of loved ones cross prison walls. Thus, when and if David is unable to communicate directly with Maria because he is out on a medical visit and missed his opportunity to call her or is put in restrictive housing, he is able to send a message to her through a chain of people that begins inside the prison and ends outside of it. David can ask another incarcerated person to convey a message for Maria to their loved one when they talk to them; then, this person on the outside can relay the message to Maria. Maria describes the friends she met at the prison where David is incarcerated as "family," which points to the position of these relationships as pseudo-kin relationships operating with an ethos of mutuality and generalized reciprocity (Codd 2002).

With respect to the second function—strategic assistance—served by these friendships, Diane's experience fighting for her husband's freedom by pursuing legal avenues for relief and filing motions in the court illustrates the assistance and care realized in these relationships: "And we all fought and when one went to court and lost, we all lost. When one of us went to court and won, we shared the motions, and we shared the how we did this so you can get your loved one out." Given how expensive legal representation often is and how time consuming independent legal research is, the sharing of this kind of knowledge in relationship is essential to sustaining women's ability to effectively fight for the freedom of their loved ones.

Michelle and Willa's comments about their relationships with other similarly situated women reflect the third function of these relationships as essential sources of emotional support. As Michelle describes, she feels more comfortable opening up about the toll of having an incarcerated loved one to other women who are going through the same thing:

[Having a loved one incarcerated is] something you don't discuss in your day-to-day life, it's something that you're judged for . . . it's something that I had never talked about until I hooked up with this [loved one support group]. I would have never discussed this. And have never discussed it throughout the entire time if it weren't for that group . . . That's really the only time that I do discuss it . . . Having that outlet has really made me aware that I've been changed by this process. I've got trauma related to this process . . . being able to verbally process what you're going through and to have support with it, it builds your strength, lets you know you're not alone . . . It's been a godsend to help my sanity, help my mental health.

Through her involvement in a support group specifically for the loved ones of people inside, Michelle finds an avenue for expression and vulnerability that she had not had before the COVID-19 pandemic when the support group was formed. Not only has the support group given Michelle the space to open up and discover how she has been changed by her experiences, but it has also been a source of strength and reassurance, especially during the pandemic, when she was hearing from her partner about deeply disturbing conditions inside.

Though Willa is not part of a formal support group, she has been able to connect with mothers of incarcerated sons in various ways, which has proved critical for her ability to persist in caring for her sons:

I don't know, how you do this, without having that kind of support system. Like, I have several people that I can talk to about this, and it's like I don't have to fill in the blanks, you know what I mean? Like, it's just, there's, it's not even a code. It's just like, you get what I'm saying. And that's it like, I don't have to go through a long-drawn-out explanation with these folks. And that also, you know, because it's emotional work, right? You're doing emotional labor, of supporting them, but also trying to figure out how you attend to yourself in the midst of, you know, probably caring for multiple people in your own home, whether they're elders, or nieces, nephews, whatever. We're doing, we're doing a lot and sometimes too fucking much.

This passage embodies one of three layers of emotional support realized in friendships between women with incarcerated loved ones like the kind described by Willa. Mia Mingus (2011) defines “access intimacy” as a form of automatic intimacy arising from shared similar lived experiences that facilitates vulnerability and mutual support rooted in an understanding of

another person's needs. Though Mingus originally developed the concept out of her experiences as a physically disabled person, she notes that access intimacy can be experienced by anyone. Thus, the intimacy Willa finds with other mothers, which eliminates the burden of having to explain what she is going through and feeling can be understood as a kind of access intimacy. In turn, the access intimacy experienced in these friendships serves as an essential balance for the emotional work women perform in caring for not only their incarcerated loved one, but also, as Willa points out, likely multiple other family members for whom women simultaneously care. The second layer of emotional support found in these friendships is the provision of much-needed levity beyond the realm of "doom and gloom" in the shadow of the prison.

The third layer of emotional support fulfilled by these friendships is the creation of opportunities to process difficult and overwhelming emotions associated with a loved one's incarceration:

But we also talk about things like, you know, the overwhelming guilt that we feel. How do we not lose ourselves in all of this stuff by feeling like, there was something I could have done, you know, we all ask ourselves the same questions. What could I have done differently? Was there something I could have done to disrupt this? Was there something, did I not advocate enough for them when they were in school and, you know, with teachers and other people? So, it's a lot of having to process that stuff.

More than other loved ones, mothers are in the unique position of feeling responsible for the fate of their children, which translates into the "overwhelming guilt" Willa describes. For Michelle, the loved ones support group serves as a space to process her experiences. Similarly, in her friendships, Willa is able to process—or at least feel understood in—her guilt around her sons' paths to incarceration.

## **Conclusion**

As previous research has shown, mass incarceration has significant negative effects not only on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, but also the families and communities they are removed from, will likely return to, and maintain contact with during their incarceration.

Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine women with partners or sons who are currently or have been incarcerated in state or federal prisons, I investigate two questions.

Firstly: What strategies do women develop and employ as they care for their incarcerated partners and sons? Secondly: How does the adoption of these strategies, and the needs that impel their adoption, affect women's mental health? To effectively address the wide-ranging devastations of mass incarceration, it is necessary to understand how people on both sides of prison walls experience and navigate incarceration. There has been important research done on how women are affected by mass incarceration. However, there has been insufficient focus on understanding the experiences of women with incarcerated loved ones, outside of how their parenting is affected by their partner or co-parent's incarceration. Though not physically caged, mothers and partners of incarcerated men often feel that they are "serving time" with their loved one, encapsulating an experience that is critical to understanding the depth and breadth of the prison's reach.

In this study, I find that two of the strategies women develop through the process of secondary prisonization are the visit-focused mindset and habits of dress. Both the visit-focused mindset and habits of dress affect how women present themselves to correctional officers as gatekeepers exercising discretion in deciding whether women will gain entry into the prison and be able access to their loved ones. The visit-focused mindset enables women to persevere in caring for their loved ones. This mindset facilitates perseverance by helping women to reframe and minimize the impact made on their mental state and disposition by obstacles encountered

while trying to visit their loved ones. Habits of dress adopted by women in response to their encounters and frustrations with gendered prison dress codes that are enforced variably at the discretion of correctional officers also help women to successfully navigate the prison to see their loved ones. While women approached conforming their habits of dress to the prison's rules with varied tactics, all their methods reflect a desire to successfully enter the prison coupled with the knowledge that to do so means to comply with the prison's dress code and anticipate how the dress code may be interpreted differently by different correctional officers. These two strategies both help women to manage the unpredictability inherent in visiting the prison such that they can achieve their goal of spending time with their loved ones.

Another finding is that secondary prisonization entails strategic behavioral and mental changes that affect women's mental health. Bringing together theories about gendered care work, "emotion work," and secondary prisonization, I develop the concept of a double emotional burden carried by women with incarcerated loved ones as part of the care they provide for their partners and sons (Hochschild 1979). The disconnection and restricted access created by incarceration and enforced by the prison's rules and officers create the circumstances for women to take on the double emotional burden as part of their care work. Incarceration of a loved one is a loss that causes women sorrow, frustration, guilt, and anger—the first element of the double emotional burden. Simultaneously, the intentionally limited and encumbered opportunities for connections between loved ones across prison walls hinder full, uninhibited emotional expression and mutual emotional support between women and their loved ones inside. Thus, with the knowledge that their loved ones have limited access to emotional supports, women engage in emotional management of their sorrow, frustration, guilt, and anger. Women engage in emotional management for the benefit of their loved ones as an important way in which they care

for their incarcerated partners and sons. The double emotional burden borne by women with incarcerated loved ones creates a need for outlets for unencumbered emotional expression and mutual support. Some women address this need by building pseudo-kin relationships with other women going through similar experiences. These friendships are inscribed with deep meaning, held with great care, and create space for emotions women would otherwise not be able to express.

The primary limitation of my research is the limited number of women I was able to interview, which restricted my ability to parse the similarities and differences between the strategies used by women in different kinds of relationships with incarcerated men. Though I did interview both partners and mothers of incarcerated men, a larger pool of interviewees would be required to meaningfully explore commonalities and differences in the kinds of care work performed by women occupying different roles. This would be a fruitful and worthy direction for future investigation given how common it is for women to have an incarcerated loved one (Lee et al. 2015, 270). It is also important for future studies to explore the care strategies women adopt when their incarcerated loved ones are also women, which may look different from the findings of this study.

With my research, I seek to take seriously the experiential knowledge and analyses of women with incarcerated loved ones. The women I spoke to embody incredible resilience, strength, and tremendous dedication to their incarcerated loved ones in the face of structures and processes designed to disrupt and dissuade the maintenance of relationships across prison walls. In discussing the strategies they use to navigate the prison, care for their loved ones, and persist in achieving both these tasks while also managing other work and family responsibilities, interviewees articulated incisive conceptualizations of the carceral system. These kinds of

understandings can only come out of routine contact with carceral institutions and actors over years and even decades for some interviewees. While interviewees are not literally incarcerated, the strategies they adopt to care for their loved ones reflect the depth of the prison's penetration into their lives; this is a testament to the need to expand our view when evaluating and formulating criminal legal system policies.



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