"I Had Nowhere to Go": Disenfranchised Grief and Support Groups for Families of Incarcerated Individuals

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ABSTRACT

Almost two million Americans are incarcerated in state and federal prisons, juvenile corrections facilities, and local jails. While many studies have examined the impact of mass incarceration on the daily lives of wives, female partners, and children, little is known about support groups for families of incarcerated loved ones. Throughout 2021, I conducted virtual interviews with 13 respondents across the United States who created support groups for families of incarcerated individuals or are executive leaders in these organizations. I find that support groups provide space for families to grieve without judgment, can help re-frame the grief experience and provide tools and community for coping with a loss that is not typically acknowledged by the public. I present findings according to two major themes about the role of support groups that emerged from the interviews: generating resilience through community and enfranchising grief. These findings highlight the need for more sociological work on the various ways families on the outside cope with the impact of incarceration and to further elucidate what good support looks like for these individuals.

Almost two million individuals are incarcerated in the United States in state and federal prisons, juvenile corrections facilities, and local jails (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022).[1] However,

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[1] Typically, one would cite the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) regarding how many individuals in the U.S. are incarcerated. However, that data is incomplete and not as up to date as that released yearly by the Prison Policy Initiative, cited here. Prison Policy Initiative not only incorporates data from BJS, but also includes data from the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Vera Institute to provide a complete picture of who is incarcerated across a variety of state and federal institutions. The U.S. system of mass incarceration includes the Federal Bureau of Prisons, 50 different state prison systems, over 3,000 county jails, over 25,000 municipal jails, juvenile justice facilities, and immigration detention, and that still excludes facilities like military and territorial prisons. Unfortunately, we cannot rely on only one set of data for these estimates as they are collected differently depending on the agency. For example, many individuals who have been convicted in local courts are held in jails for their state or federal prison sentences instead of being sent to prison. Thus, we have a distorted number of how many people are in jail on pretrial detention because of those already convicted serving

there are millions of additional individuals on the outside—mainly family members—who are also affected by incarceration. Incarceration especially impacts women on the outside, who often absorb greater childcare responsibilities to make up for the caregiving labor of an incarcerated parent (Braman, 2004; Murray, 2005) and suffer from stigma and alienation (Braman, 2004; Condry, 2007), and survive on limited economic resources when their loved one is in prison (Braman, 2004; Christian et al., 2006; Clear, 2007; Grinstead et al., 2001). In short, even those who are not incarcerated still "do time" on the outside and experience "secondary prisonization," a state of constant surveillance by government authorities (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2007, p. 279; Boppre et al., 2022).

Bipartisan policy responses meant to aid families left behind and communities affected by incarceration typically focus on poverty reduction or measures to help those reentering society after their sentence (The White House, 2023; Ray & Orrell, 2021). Those policies that do center on families tend to emphasize family involvement with the incarcerated, especially children of incarcerated parents, not support for families outside of their interaction with the carceral system. Research on the effects of incarceration on families primarily concentrates on children with incarcerated parents (Arditti, 2012; Turney, 2018; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014; Sykes & Petit, 2014; Johnson & Easterling, 2012). There is limited research on how adult family members find support when they have an incarcerated loved one, as well as on how incarceration impacts existing sources of social support (Ambert, 1999; McCarthy & Adams, 2021; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2011). Studies that focus on the effects of incarceration on families tend to look at the support families give the incarcerated and how that support can reduce recidivism (Mills & Codd, 2008; Mowen & Visher, 2016). Other studies focus on how incarceration affects a specific type of loved one, like spouses or children of incarcerated people, but these have been conducted outside of the United States (Ambert, 1999; Granja, 2016; McCarthy & Adams, 2019, 2021; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2001). Likewise, while support groups exist to help families manage the experience of being on the outside, the role of these groups in assisting families and moderating the impact of incarceration on communities remains poorly understood. This limited understanding of social support for families and kin of incarcerated people represents a significant gap in the literature with important policy implications. This gap matters because the incarceration of a loved one impacts millions of Americans, and social scientists do not fully understand the characteristics and scope of existing structures of support for those on the outside.

More specifically, the goal of this research is to investigate how and why support groups are created, what kinds of social support they offer, and what they view as the necessary resources for coping with incarceration. In this study, I use interviews with

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their sentences in jail. Please refer to the data section on the 2022 estimates by Prison Policy Initiative here: https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html#datasection.

founders and staff members of formal support groups for families of incarcerated people to examine how these groups help those on the outside navigate incarceration, with attention to how these organizations approach the stigma associated with incarceration. In what follows, I review the literature on the impacts of mass incarceration on families, introduce the social work concept of "disenfranchised grief" and apply it to an incarceration context, and outline recent work on support groups and their impact. I then describe the dataset and qualitative methodology, following with the study findings, which I categorize into two themes: framing resilience through community and experiencing loss, disenfranchised grief, and stigma. I conclude with the theoretical and empirical implications of the study.

Incarceration and Families

Although incarceration refers to any individual who is confined to a particular space and has limited movement and freedoms, it affects millions more Americans than the two million who are currently detained. Incarceration affects the families, friends, and extended kin of those behind bars (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2007; Christian et al., 2006; Mowen & Visher, 2016). For the purposes of this study, I focus on support groups for family members of loved ones who are imprisoned, but I use the terms "imprisonment" and "incarceration" interchangeably. About 45 percent of all Americans have ever had an immediate family member in jail or prison (Enns et al., 2019, p. 2). Prison is an expected life experience for many Black men—their incarceration rates are approximately five times higher than for white men (Carson, 2022, p. 14). The estimated risk of imprisonment at some point in life before age 50 is 21.1 percent for Black men, while only 5.1 percent for white men (Robey et al., 2023).

There is a wealth of knowledge about the demographics of the incarcerated, but we know less about family members and their structures of support because of limited data (Hutton & Moran, 2019, p. 82). For one, the concept of "family" makes it difficult to define who should be included in the data. Most definitions of "family" focus on biological kin, yet sociological research suggests that chosen families are as important to family structures (Nelson, 2014; Stack, 1975). Approximately 43.2 percent of all incarcerated individuals have a spouse when they are arrested, 25.6 percent have children under 17 living in their home, and 35 percent have other relatives living in their home, giving us some insight into who does time on the outside (Beatty & Snell, 2021, p. 20). These demographics tell us that many women are caring for children without the assistance of the incarcerated co-parent and may have to make significant adjustments to their childrearing strategies. Women tied to incarcerated men are also likely to be looking after the person's other affairs while they are incarcerated. This study focuses on adults with many different types of familial relationships (e.g., sibling, adult child, spouse/partner) to

complement the already existing literature on children with a parent in prison and explore whether themes vary or differ across relationship types (Hood & Gaston, 2022).

To understand why support groups are relevant, we need to recognize how incarceration impacts families. Support groups can help families mitigate the collateral consequences of mass incarceration, which I describe below. Research has shown that individuals who associate with others with shared experiences, in this case among those bereaving after suicide, have improved well-being due to joining a support group (Kearns et al., 2017). In these instances, individuals' experiences become more commonplace and less stigmatizing as they come to understand that many others are facing the same situation, leading to collective action within a support group (Bradshaw & Muldoon, 2020).

Experience of Doing Time on the Outside

Support for family members and those who remain on the outside becomes necessary because of the relationship changes, stigma, and psychological harms that result from having a loved one incarcerated. Incarcerated individuals leave a lot behind when they serve their sentences. They may have been earning a majority of the income for their household, taking care of children, offering emotional support, and providing other essential household duties that are then passed on to someone else (Tucker et al., 2010). For instance, 70 percent of women with an incarcerated loved one report that they act as the primary source of emotional support for that person (Clayton et al., 2018, p. 16). Women partners of incarcerated individuals experience "at least one serious health or employment challenge during their partner's incarceration: having clinical depression symptoms, lacking health insurance, being physically limited in their ability to work, or being unemployed" (McKay et al., 2018, p. 103). Maintaining a romantic relationship with an incarcerated partner can introduce even more emotional strain because of physical distance, the cost of phone and video calls, and the impossible challenge of maintaining a supportive, intimate relationship in a prison visitation room (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2007, 2008; Murray, 2005; Boppre et al., 2022).

Studies in the United States and the United Kingdom indicate that there is often greater shame and stigma for mothers of incarcerated men than for their fathers, as mothers are seen as personally responsible for who their children grow up to be (McCarthy & Adams, 2019; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2011). In the United States, mothers are more likely to face stigma in their communities if they are of a higher socioeconomic status (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2011, p. 995). While they might have access to more resources, they seem to experience more negative comments from peers, perhaps because of their social standing and inability to fulfill expectations associated with that status (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2011). Even for families with material and social support,

stigma remains a significant factor (McCarthy & Adams, 2021). Many family members experience courtesy stigmatization, a term adapted from Goffman (1963) applied to incarceration: it is the process through which a non-incarcerated individual is stigmatized simply because they associate with an incarcerated individual (Kotova, 2020, p. 1). Shame can also be self-inflicted, especially by mothers of incarcerated children who feel like they failed to raise their children a certain way. In this case, mothers blame themselves or internalize blame from family and friends (McCarthy & Adams, 2021).

Lastly, the incarceration of a loved one can constitute a significant psychological loss comparable to death or military deployment. Yet, unlike these other forms of loss, in which remaining family members are "met with sympathy, supportive rituals, and child assurance," partners of incarcerated men are likely to experience increased social isolation and suspicion and removal or reduction of government benefits (Arditti, 2012, p. 112). The power dynamics of prison visitation can also be psychologically damaging, owing to long periods of waiting—like during visitation or while scheduling appointments— and limited communication (letter-writing and phone calls), where families' time and confidentiality are devalued by corrections officers (Comfort, 2008). Family members report being rejected due to a loved one's incarceration and feel they have little control over the fate of their loved ones or even over their own lives (Halsey & Deegan, 2015, p. 139).

Framing Incarceration in Times of Loss and Grief

Disenfranchised Grief

The literature on "disenfranchised grief" from the field of social work offers important clues about the psychological and social impact of mass incarceration on families but has received little attention from sociologists. One recent study by Novisky et al. (2022) does address this issue concerning the perspectives of elderly incarcerated individuals. "Disenfranchised grief," coined by Doka (1989), refers to a loss that "cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (McCarthy & Adams, 2021, p. 801). In a "normal" grieving process, families turn to existing social support networks to process their loss and move forward with their lives. However, society's reluctance to accept incarceration as a "loss" makes it extremely difficult for families to grieve, leading to increased social isolation and shame (Bailey, 2018). Knight and Gitterman (2019) identify six factors that contribute to grief disenfranchisement: 1) the loss is ignored; 2) feelings in response to the loss are also ignored; 3) no support is received; 4) there are limited opportunities to grieve; 5) others condemn or question the bereavement; and 6) the loss is stigmatized. Coping with a loved one's incarceration, therefore, requires building resilience, and support groups can be extremely helpful in this respect because

building "dependable, encouraging relationships with others generally acts as a balm against adversity" (Boss, 2016; King & Delgado, 2021, p. 445) Given how integral social support is to resilience, it is important to explore how support groups assist those experiencing the loss of an incarcerated loved one.

Support Groups and Social Support

Broadly speaking, social support can be described as "the feedback provided via contact with similar and valued peers" (Gottlieb, 1985, p. 9). Sociological research has examined support groups for people with cancer (Baxter, 2018; Ussher et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2014); child welfare-involved families (Lalayants et al., 2015); parents of soldiers (Kacen & Sofer, 1997); and religious individuals (Nguyen et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2014; Wolkomir, 2001). I suggest the incarceration of a loved one shares similarities with some of these experiences, as it is also deeply challenging and highly stigmatized. In the case of cancer support groups, people with rare or difficult diagnoses tend to find more support when they connect with peers with similar diagnoses. Members of these groups express that they did not receive enough (or any) support from existing networks, leaving them feeling rejected or even "completely abandoned" (Ussher et al., 2006, p. 2569). Moreover, the stigma associated with both cancer and incarceration means that language is an essential part of combatting disenfranchised grief. Shared experiences provide greater opportunities for speaking and expressing emotions freely, rather than having to temper them to assuage others. Thus, support groups provide emotional support that the average person cannot: a true understanding of one's experiences and a secure environment to share them (Kacen & Sofer, 1997; Lalayants et al., 2015). When feelings expressed in a support group are shared by others, this builds collective identity by allowing members to recognize aspects of themselves in others and feel as though they are not alone (Wolkomir, 2001). Support groups can help families reconsider their future as a potential opportunity for personal growth and move away from frustration and resentment.

"Framing institutions" is also relevant to understanding how support groups generate resilience among members and help them interpret their life circumstances. This idea was developed by Watkins-Hayes, Pittman-Gay, and Beaman (2012), who argue that:

> Framing institutions generate language, adaptive skills, and practical knowledge that shape how individuals interpret a new life condition and whether they ultimately see it as a platform for growth. They operate as intermediaries between micro-level perceptions and actions and macro-structural forces and systems, positioned between one's personal response

to a new circumstance and the larger set of privileges and disadvantages that she experiences due to her social location (p. 2030).

Using the case of Black women newly diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, the authors show how support groups fill in specific gaps left by friends and community members by providing the tools to encourage perseverance and "challenge dominant narratives that construct Black women as powerless" (Watkins-Hayes et al., 2012, p. 2033). Not all framing institutions are successful in this way—while the goal is to focus on how people interpret their new life conditions, not everyone joining a framing institution will necessarily view their situation positively. Despite the literature referenced above, little is known about the role of support groups in providing social support after the imprisonment of a loved one. I help remedy this gap by expanding our understanding of what organizations exist for families of the incarcerated and the strategies organizations provide for managing the grief and loss of incarceration that regular networks of family and friends cannot.

Data and Methods

I interviewed staff and founders of family support groups operating in the United States to learn about the circumstances under which these groups were created, the types of support services they offer, and how they potentially act as framing institutions for interpreting a new life situation. To find support groups for families of incarcerated people operating in the United States, I first found two online databases listing organizations that serve families: one maintained by The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (NRCCFI) at Rutgers University-Camden (2023), and another by The Administration for Children and Families (ACF), a division of the United States Department of Health & Human Services (2023). The NRCCFI database lists 162 state and national organizations, while the ACF database includes 22 state and national organizations. Twelve organizations overlapped between these two databases, bringing the total number of organizations to 172. I then generated another list of organizations not included in the databases using a simple Google search.[2] This search revealed an additional 16 eligible organizations. I did not limit the search by state or region; the goal was to include organizations across the United States, with as much regional representation as possible.[3] I then verified that the groups listed in the databases are active—defined as having a regular support group meeting schedule—and support families (rather than only children) with a loved one in prison (not jail) by visiting the organization's webpage or contacting the organization. Two organizations from the ACF

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[2] Search terms included "support groups for families of incarcerated," "support groups for women with incarcerated loved ones," "support groups for families of prisoners," and "prison family support groups."

[3] The initial sample of organizations before exclusion did not include any groups in the following states: Colorado, Delaware, Maine, North Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

database were eligible, which were already included in the NRCCFI list. Only eight organizations from the NRCCFI list were eligible, leaving eight organizations to contact from the two databases. The remaining 164 organizations did not meet eligibility criteria—a majority only served children, currently incarcerated individuals, or focused on reentry. The NRCCFI list had one additional organization that was eligible, but the website link did not work, and efforts to search the organization via Google failed. These efforts produced a total of 24 organizations to contact.

Next, I contacted individuals at all 24 organizations to schedule an interview and asked for suggestions of other groups I may have missed in the initial search. Thirteen organizations did not respond to my requests despite several follow-up efforts by phone and email.[4] The final sample consists of 13 leaders from 11 organizations. While this sample is small and does not include all support groups operating within the United States, this study focuses on the experiences of an understudied population and represents an exploratory analysis of the universe of support groups for families with incarcerated loved ones. Other researchers have demonstrated similar difficulties in recruiting family members (Hood & Gaston, 2022; Western, 2018). Thus, I aimed to achieve information power rather than saturation, offering "new insights that contribute substantially to or challenge current understandings" (Malterud et al., 2016). Table 1 describes the final sample, listed in the order in which they were interviewed. At the time of the interview, all groups were formal, nonprofit organizations with 501(c)(3) IRS status. However, two respondents (R-04 and R-08) indicated that their organizations have since rescinded their 501(c)(3) status due to the financial and temporal burdens of paperwork associated with tax filings. Note that respondent R-10 included a group interview of three staff members for one organization. All but one of the interviewees was female; seven were white, four were Black, and two were Latina. The average support group meeting included approximately 10 to 15 individuals. However, these groups also had an average of 1,000 members on their Facebook page or an email listserv.

I chose to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews because they allow the researcher to get detailed answers and ask respondents to explain or clarify their statements—something that cannot be achieved through a survey (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). All interviews took place virtually using Zoom or by phone, depending on the participant's preference, and were audio recorded with consent. Interviews lasted between 25 and 82 minutes, averaging 59 minutes. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by my university's Institutional Review Board. I began each interview by asking the participant general questions about their experience at their organization. I then addressed the participant's involvement in the creation and leadership of the

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[4] While I do not know exactly why these organizations did not respond, I suspect that some of these organizations were no longer holding regular meetings, and others presumably did not want to participate in this study.

organization as well as its primary functions and goals. Each interview also included questions about the organization's membership, services the participant wishes the organization could provide, barriers to maintaining or growing the organization, and potential cultural differences in working with members. All participants were compensated with a $25 Target gift card as a gesture of appreciation for their time.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Respondent	Pseudonym	Title	Location	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity
R-01	Pamela	Chapter leader	Midwest	Female	White
R-02	Elaine	Founder	Northeast	Female	White
R-03	Mona	Founder	West	Female	White
R-04	Yvonne	Founder	Midwest	Female	Black
R-05	Lisa	Founder	South	Female	White
R-06	Jermaine	Director of Policy and Outreach	Southwest	Male	Black
R-07	Marsha	Executive Director	Mid-Atlantic	Female	White
R-08	Kamilah	Co-Founder	Mid-Atlantic	Female	Black
R-09	Donna	Founder	Southwest	Female	White
R-10a	Vivian	Staffer	Mid-Atlantic	Female	Black
R-10b	Cecelia	Staffer	Mid-Atlantic	Female	Latina
R-10c	Gabriela	Staffer	Mid-Atlantic	Female	Latina
R-11	Joan	Founder	Southwest	Female	White

As a researcher considered an "outsider" to this particular topic, I remained aware of my positionality throughout the study. I belong to an institution of higher education and am a white, upper-middle-class woman with no personal experience of having a family member imprisoned. My role as a researcher is to find a way to "counter the imbalance of benefit" and ensure this work addresses issues relevant to participants (Bridges, 2001, p. 378). Thus, I committed to making this research project collaborative—sharing data with participants and introducing them to each other and similar organizations with their consent. I volunteered to assist participants with administrative functions, including creating an advocacy toolkit and updating organizations' websites.

After transcribing and de-identifying the transcripts, I shared them with each respondent so they could approve the final text. Once they approved the transcript (no respondent requested edits), I assigned the interviewee a pseudonym and imported each de-identified transcript into NVivo. I used open coding to comb the data for general patterns and themes (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 265). The coding was completed alone. I then identified broad categories emerging from the data, following a grounded theory approach that discourages "forcing preconceived theoretical terms on the data" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 191). Next, I wrote extensive memos, applying the constant comparative method of grounded theory, looking for similarities and differences across

categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I paid close attention to the sample itself, attempting to achieve information power through the quality of dialogue with participants by specifically communicating study aims and finding similar patterns relevant to research questions across interviews (Malterud et al., 2016). By the sixth and seventh interviews, I noticed many complementary responses and experiences that continued to arise in the remaining interviews.

Findings

Respondents who created their support group did so soon after experiencing the incarceration of a loved one and feeling insufficiently supported by family and friends. From their accounts, support groups for families of the incarcerated are rare, and the existence of these groups comes and goes as founders retire, pass away, or move on to other priorities. Four of the 11 interviews were more open-ended, veering into other topics organically identified by respondents (e.g., COVID-19 in the prisons, religion, and reentry), and the remaining seven adhered to most of the pre-selected topics in a semi-structured format. Support groups provide space for families to grieve without judgment, can help re-frame the grief experience, and provide tools and community for coping with a loss not typically acknowledged by the public. Below, I present findings according to two major themes about the role of support groups that emerged from the interviews: generating resilience through community and enfranchising grief.

Framing Resilience Through Community: The Role of Support Groups

The support groups created by respondents promote resilience by developing communities that understand the unique experience of incarceration. Respondents gave two motivations for starting their groups: first, a lack of support for their needs, and second, a desire to meet others facing a similar situation. The complicated nature of this type of loss requires more than a sympathetic shoulder to cry on. Respondents' support groups mediate the experiences of grief, loss, absence, and relationship changes by providing families with a safe space to share their stories, resources to help them get by, and strategies for reimagining their future as a relative of someone incarcerated. The structure and format of support groups vary, but most often, members meet biweekly at an informal setting like a coffee shop or meeting room—somewhere that has no semblance of the prison environment. Some meetings are open-ended, while others have topic-based discussions planned in advance. Groups that started before the internet initially recruited members through flyers at local prisons and churches, newspaper advertisements, and word of mouth. Today, many have websites that members search for or find through Facebook. The most important role of support group meetings is to provide an environment in which families can share all of their feelings—good and bad—

without fear of being stigmatized. Gabriela, a Latina support staffer for a group in the mid-Atlantic, continually reiterated this point throughout our interview:

> It's the common journey, because you don't get it till you get it, you know…You don't feel it until you can really connect with someone like really going through it. And I think that's why this space is so safe, you know. We have—sometimes we have new individuals come in, but they feel, you know, the connection between each other, they don't feel no judgment. So, they're just so free to open up, you know.

Another common aspect of these groups is their emphasis that families do not have to serve their loved one's sentence, and they are not responsible for what their loved one did—a crucial message for parents of incarcerated children. One of the core components of Lisa's group is changing the language around incarceration: "When I talk to families, I'm giving them permission not to do their time." Lisa is a middle-aged white woman in the South who created her organization when her husband was sent to prison. Unlike other support groups, Lisa focuses almost entirely on providing family resources and has a limited social support component. Lisa felt she had enough emotional support from her church and existing networks and focused instead on creating a database of local social service resources. Usually, when Lisa answers the phone for her organization, families ask for resources, but they also want to discuss how their loved one ended up in prison. She described a standard phone conversation:

> So, typically they want to tell me what their person did and, especially if it's a parent, and how I did not raise them this way. So, if it's a parent of a grown child. The only ones in my experience who will not tell me what their person did are family members of people who've been convicted of a sex crime. And so, they'll tell me everything but what the person did. And usually by the time we get off the phone they're telling me that, too. Because I'm not here to judge.

Families consistently express relief to Lisa when they reveal their loved one's crime. Lisa never asks families to reveal sensitive information, so each confession is unprompted. By telling Lisa about the crime, families enfranchise their grief—naming their loss and its causes, reaching out for support, and countering the narrative that they will be ostracized for having this sort of conversation. They can only do this because Lisa provides a supportive environment for sharing and because Lisa knows the type of response that would have been helpful for her situation.

Incarceration brings up many new emotions that are hard to process, so Kamilah's support group hosts biweekly self-care workshops called "Breakfast and Betterment." Kamilah, a Black woman living in the mid-Atlantic region, founded her organization after conducting her doctoral research on the effects of incarceration on families, especially children. Her self-care program focuses on "getting individuals in the headspace of, I need to be healthy and whole first so that I can, you know, take care of myself, make better decisions, take care of my children, reintegrate into my community, into my family, into my work life, etc." Kamilah recognizes that families can be so focused on helping their incarcerated loved one that they do not take care of themselves. This focus can contribute to disenfranchised grief when their feelings are ignored, and opportunities to process new emotions are limited or unavailable. Thus, "Breakfast and Betterment" tackles these issues by providing families with the opportunity to focus on "self-care, self-awareness, mindfulness, problem-solving," healthcare, and stress management (Kamilah).

Lastly, support groups provide insider, first-hand knowledge of navigating the prison system, a process that can bring up even more trauma. Pamela, a white woman living in the Midwest, was also filled with grief when her grandson was sentenced to 21 years in prison on a first offense. Pamela told me that members of her group not only "are just wanting somebody to talk to, to listen to them, but they [also] just, you know, they don't understand why [the prison system] is so corrupt and why it's so difficult to get anything done for their loved ones." Some family challenges include not knowing how to contact their loved one, when or where their loved one is being transferred, how to send mail, obtaining special meals for religious individuals, and unclear rules about who can contribute to commissary funds. Over the years, Pamela's support group cultivated relationships with prison officials so that they had someone they could contact when other advocacy methods failed to gain traction. Pamela shared a typical conversation she has with families who need someone to advocate on their behalf:

> Most of the time it's how can I get a hold of them, I haven't heard from them in a week and, you know, how can I find out what's going on and, you know, things like that when they first come in…I usually tell them to try the chaplain first. And to call the chaplain at the prison and then ask them to go visit your inmate and, you know, make sure they're okay and call you back. And a lot of times that works and sometimes it doesn't work. So, then we go to the warden's office after that.

Because Pamela has a good relationship with the local warden, she has taken issues to him personally when families cannot get answers. This type of support is something that families cannot typically get from their existing networks, as it requires long-term contact with prison officials and knowledge of how to communicate with them

in a way that will deliver results. Support groups provide more than just a place to share feelings—they share resources, advice, insider knowledge, and community as a means of addressing the grief and stress of having a loved one incarcerated.

Experiencing Loss, Disenfranchised Grief, and Stigma

The support groups operated by the individuals in this sample address a difficult subject: losing a loved one to prison. These experiences of loss—and the lack of a support space to fully cope with that loss—led each of these individuals to start their organizations. Respondents indicated that incarceration was a loss that was unexpected, unclear, and without resolution. Elaine, who founded a local support group in the 1970s, was initially stunned when her husband was arrested in the mid-1960s. Elaine was middle class, young, white, and lived in a community where no one else was affected by incarceration. She shared that she "was absolutely crestfallen" when he was arrested for murder and sent to the county jail. Elaine shared her initial reaction to his incarceration this way:

> I had no idea what to expect. The-the shock of this happening plus the shock of entering a world that was—I call it like Alice in Wonderland going down the rabbit hole—the system from beginning to end, from arrest to incarceration, was kind of mind-blowing to someone who was very middle class. I was a second-grade schoolteacher and I was very alone, I felt totally isolated and alone. I knew no one else who'd ever been in any situation similar.

Elaine also had two children under the age of three at the time, leaving her the sole caretaker for her family. In addition, because her husband was arrested in the 1960s, she had few resources for contacting him during his jail stay: "They not only did not allow children under 16 to visit at all, and those days, there was no telephone communication, there was nothing." Elaine was worried not only about how to navigate her new status as a single head of the household but also about how to stay in touch with her husband and keep him in contact with their children. As a result, the relationship between Elaine's children and their father became strained. Not until Elaine's tireless advocacy for contact visits to become standard procedure in the prisons paid off was she allowed to bring the children to visit their father. Elaine had to manage her reactions to her husband's incarceration while advocating for him and had the additional burden of caring for children too young to understand her grief.

Yvonne, like Elaine, also started a support group more than 30 years ago. Yvonne is a Black woman in her mid-60s who started her support group in the Midwest, although she has since retired and runs her group online. Yvonne created an organization when

her then-16-year-old son was arrested and eventually incarcerated. The temporary loss of her son to incarceration left Yvonne devastated with no available outlet to express her pain, leading her to devise a way to resolve her grief and help others:

> And that—and it was basically—I was at my wit's end. My son was 16 at time and he had just caught a case and I had nowhere to go…And I tell the story to anyone that wants to hear that I was laying on the couch crying and in despair and I am a, you know, I'm a believer, and so I just heard the Lord say stop having a pity party and go out and help others.

Initially, Yvonne grieved the loss of her son to prison alone, unsure of how or where to publicly mourn his absence. Although Yvonne mentioned she believes in God, she said nothing in our interview about contacting or receiving assistance from her church. After years of meeting in person once a month at local coffee shops and libraries, Yvonne brought her organization online, creating a message board where members could log on at any time of day and post their thoughts. This message board is flooded with comments from families who need to express their grief and despair, many of whom are depressed and sometimes suicidal: "… there have been so many times when a new member comes on [the website], and they're saying, 'I'm going to take my life. I'm done-I'm done.' I've been there. I know. I have been there. I'm going to take my life and they—and I'll be so nervous, I'm shaking, I'm just like, oh hold on, hold on, you know, no-no don't do this. Don't do this." (Yvonne). Repeatedly, Yvonne and other respondents expressed concern and fear about how to adapt to this unexpected change in their lives, with many expressing not only grief on behalf of their incarcerated loved one but also for themselves. She argues that what people who have not had this experience "don't understand is they [the incarcerated person] don't just do their time; the family does…we're serving that sentence with them." Yvonne grieved the loss of her son and the loss of her way of life before incarceration, understanding that now she would have to serve his sentence in her way on the outside.

Some respondents reported ignoring their loss as a coping mechanism in response to social norms about suppressing open expressions of loss related to incarceration, highlighting the "intrapsychic dimension to disenfranchised grief" (Thompson & Doka, 2017, p. 187). Donna, another support group founder, exhibited this type of reaction. A middle-aged white woman living in the Southwest, Donna never told anyone about her brother's incarceration. She felt alone and did not mention it to her closest friends "because it's not something people talk about." She hid her experience from others and herself: "…during the whole time he was incarcerated, I didn't talk about it, I didn't tell anyone." It wasn't until her brother died from Hepatitis C in prison that she was finally able to acknowledge her grief:

And after he passed and then my mom passed and I really, you know, was looking back and I realized that I was living a hidden sentence and that's where it came from. I was a victim, and I was serving the sentence with him. And you hear me say this a lot, the only difference is that I was serving the sentence on the outside and I realized that that was happening to other people.

Only in the process of grieving multiple deaths did Donna finally acknowledge how much her brother's incarceration affected her and counted as a loss. By ignoring the loss to protect herself and out of fear that her friends would not understand her situation, Donna disenfranchised her grief. Donna eventually decided to share her story and take over an existing support group because "I didn't want anybody to go through it alone like I did." The lack of quality support that families face piles on to existing struggles and can leave them without a clear path to resolving grief. Those lucky enough to find support groups designed specifically for their needs can begin to process their grief and acknowledge it as such, and those who do not must try to make that space for themselves.

Families must also adjust to the physical absence of their loved ones. Over 20 years ago, Mona, a white mother of two living on the West Coast, had her life upended when her teenage son was incarcerated in another state. While her immediate family mourned his absence, her extended family never spoke of him again. Mona spoke of a time when her daughter became upset at Thanksgiving dinner:

And at the time, she was—let's see, I think she was about in the eighth grade when he went to prison, when he first went. And it was really hard on her because nobody in our family would even bring his name up. Like he had died…But one Thanksgiving—this is when it all came out, you know. We were going around the table, and my husband's family was there, and everybody was saying what they were thankful for, and we got to my daughter and she said, 'well I'm thankful for my family' and then she just burst into tears, and she said, 'and I have a brother, and nobody ever talks about him and you all act like he's dead.'

Mona's husband and daughter could not ignore that her son was in prison, but her other relatives acted as though he was no longer part of the family. Mona acknowledged that her extended family might have felt that bringing up her son's incarceration could cause more pain, but she still felt hurt due to their lack of concern, and worried that pretending he wasn't there was causing her daughter to develop severe stress. The unwillingness of Mona's family to acknowledge his absence and the reaction by her daughter shows the impact of how ignoring the problem disenfranchised their grief: "The

reluctance of societal members to recognize the loss represses the expression of these emotions, leading to the intensification of the griever's emotional responses" (Bailey, 2018, p. 643). Mona's daughter's grief intensified dramatically due to her relatives disregarding her brother's situation.

In addition to experiencing loss and grief due to incarceration, respondents continually referenced the stigma of being associated with someone in prison. One consequence of the burden of stigma is that while sharing experiences with others may bring a sense of relief and community, sharing private details opens the possibility for further stigmatization. However, these support groups address the stigmatization of incarceration head-on. Families are stigmatized by their friends, religious institutions, coworkers, as well as judges, lawyers, and corrections officials. This fear of being ostracized is exactly why Elaine's organization name includes the word "anonymous," much like Alcoholics Anonymous—"because of the stigma." As Gabriela recalls, one member shared that she attends meetings because "due to her child getting incarcerated, she lost her friends, you know, everybody turned their back on her and everybody just— I'm sorry I'm getting emotional…[in the support group] they kind of lean on each other." When relaying this story to me, Gabriela became visibly upset as she witnessed this woman's pain from being ostracized by her loved ones. Fortunately, she found others like her in the support group, and they shared parenting advice they could not find elsewhere.

Stigma is a frequent problem faced by mothers of incarcerated children, who feel personally responsible for their child's incarceration by failing to raise them the 'right' way. Mona hid her son's incarceration at work because "there was definitely a—there's a shame, kind of. Well, it's just embarrassing and it's like, well how did this happen, you know? We didn't raise him that way." Yvonne shared that parents would log on to her website all the time to share their pain: "Some parents feel guilty, or they feel, you know, they feel ashamed. So, they just want to be there to read the discussions" in the chat room. Many parents in her group changed their opinions of other incarcerated folks once they were directly impacted by incarceration. Parents in Yvonne's support group would say, "'Oh, before my son or daughter, you know, was arrested, I just thought that they should just throw away the key. That's how I felt.' And now, they say, 'I see, you know, I understand the hurt and the pain that, you know, a parent feels when their child was incarcerated.'" Part of the benefit of support groups moving online is the opportunity to remain anonymous and thereby remove chances for further stigmatization. This anonymity means they do not have to worry about exposing their identity to "somebody they're going to see in the grocery store" (Donna).

Discussion

I interpret the motivation to start a support group for families of incarcerated loved ones as stemming from disenfranchised grief. Without a proper outlet to process the loss of their loved one to incarceration, the only solution for the individuals I interviewed was to create their organization. Watkins-Hayes et al. (2012) argue that an organization does not have to focus on health to be considered a framing institution: "*any* organization that helps individuals manage major life disruptions could qualify because of its capacity to support coping trajectories" (authors' original emphasis, p. 2034). Like the organizations supporting women with HIV/AIDS in their study, the support groups in this study act as framing institutions because they structure how families respond to incarceration, teach them how to adjust their emotions, finances, and responsibilities, and combat the stigma they face from others. When families receive conflicting messages about what it means to be incarcerated, framing institutions can help people determine how to interpret these messages. For instance, judges and prison officials may tell families that their loved one's incarceration is "for the best" of society and the family, while their lawyer could disagree. As a result, families turn to support groups for help renegotiating their relationship with their incarcerated loved one, learning to adapt to new challenges that arise with this status, and battling stigma. The challenges faced by participants in this study echo those found in previous literature, especially concerning difficulty maintaining connections with a loved one in prison (Comfort, 2007), experiencing symptoms of depression (McKay et al., 2018), and the extreme shame felt by mothers of incarcerated children (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2011). Mona indicated that a member of her group "actually had some of her neighbors quit talking to her" when they found out about her son's incarceration, which supports additional literature on social rejection (Halsey & Deegan, 2015).

The most common reframing message support groups provide to their members is the reminder that they are not alone. Importantly, these groups do not attempt to reframe a family member's reaction to incarceration but rather provide the message that others have had the same experience, addressing isolation and stigma. Support groups help reconceptualize what it means to grieve in a context not recognized as "typical" loss. Research on other types of non-death losses suggests the importance of grievers "seek[ing] community…with whom to commiserate and feel heard and understood" (Turner & Stauffer, 2023, p. 12). Support groups reframe incarceration as a situation that not only impacts the incarcerated person but also creates a "hidden sentence" for their loved ones on the outside. This language is crucial for those who feel like they are serving a sentence in their way because it renders their feelings and experiences of shame, isolation, and stigma in a way that is legible for others who may not fully understand the widespread impact of mass incarceration. Like others facing stigmatized identities, families with incarcerated loved ones may experience some form of social death or "the

potential loss of connections, existing resources, and social standing" (Watkins-Hayes et al., 2012, p. 2030). Support groups provide unique language for changing perceptions about how incarceration will impact those on the outside, using humor to adapt. Elaine talks about how "sometimes somebody new comes into a meeting, and they're astounded because there's laughter. And I promise them, I say, 'I just want you to know that whatever you're going through today, one day you'll be laughing with us.'"

Similarly, Yvonne's group uses optimistic language to increase coping skills. She encourages members that "the glass, you know, that you look at and say is the glass half full or half empty, you know, make lemonade out of lemons…because even while they're in prison, they can make a difference. Their loved ones can make a difference, and they could make a difference as well." Kamilah's group uses self-care activities as a healing trajectory, reminding families that it is important to care for their emotional needs while also looking after their incarcerated loved one. Shame is an influential component of self-disenfranchisement (Turner and Stauffer, 2023), and learning how to take care of yourself and adopting tools to combat dominant social norms of what it means to love someone incarcerated, are essential components of membership in the support groups, including in this study. While each support group uses different approaches, they help their members realign their sense of self as they adjust to a new reality. The leaders of these support groups act as framing agents, informing how to interpret incarceration, reduce stigma, and provide legitimacy for feelings that might not be reciprocated in typical social settings. The result of this support is that families can now participate in activities that boost their self-esteem and provide increased feelings of control over their situation (Watkins-Hayes et al., 2012). Participants indicated that building a collective identity through creating and maintaining a support group contributed to increased relief and validation, decreased isolation, and a drive to help others in their position.

Implications

A few limitations constrain this research. First, the sample constitutes a unique intersection between those families impacted by incarceration and those who have the time, means, and ability to take on the work of starting a support group. As such, it is not entirely representative of those most impacted by incarceration, as incarceration in the United States is far more common in low-income, minority communities. Surprisingly, given the racial, ethnic, and social class composition of incarcerated people in the United States, the sample in this study is comprised of mostly white, middle-aged, working- and middle-class women who were generally unfamiliar with the experience of incarceration before their loved one's arrest and sentencing. Among this comparatively privileged set of individuals, social support comes in the form of creating a specific organization dedicated to emotional healing, resource sharing, and advocacy. Nonetheless, the

experiences of these individuals are consistent with many of the findings of the literature on the collateral consequences of mass incarceration. In this study, however, respondents' experiences motivated them to find a way to move forward while helping others through the collective action of a support group. This unique population has a lot to show us about who has the time and ability to create and share resources for others while experiencing disenfranchised grief and also highlights the need for more sociological work on the different ways in which families on the outside can improve their well-being through sharing their experiences with like individuals. Recent work by Turner and Stauffer (2023) suggests adding a typology to the literature on disenfranchised grief representing non-death losses that result from some form of discrimination, marginalization, or oppression. Future research should consider this additional typology for individuals and families who already experience racial and gender-based discrimination and economic disadvantages before the incarceration of a loved one. It is also important to note that many families on the outside may not feel negatively impacted by a loved one's incarceration and instead express relief and experience a decrease in stress levels (Comfort, 2007).

Second, this research does not explore the impact of incarceration on children. As previously mentioned, research already exists investigating the impact of parental incarceration on children and young adults (Arditti & Johnson, 2022; Krysik & Rodriguez, 2022; Benninger et al., 2023; Noel & Hoeben, 2022). Many organizations, I discovered, that serve children also do not provide support groups. Instead, they arrange activities and family days at prisons with incarcerated parents, distribute children's books explaining incarceration, match children with mentors, and administer case management services. Of course, children are an important component of families impacted by incarceration and should continue to be included in future research.

One final limitation is that this study did not include multiple coders during data analysis. Qualitative methodologies often encourage using multiple coders to confirm intercoder reliability (ICR), a quantifiable measure of consistent coding by different researchers (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). ICR does not necessarily increase objectivity, and other methods can be deployed instead, including producing "thick descriptions" and triangulating findings among similar studies (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020, p. 4). As the sole researcher, I implemented these processes to minimize coding bias, corroborating findings with participants to confirm the legitimacy of my interpretations. Nonetheless, it is recommended that other studies in this area of research use multiple coders when possible to confirm ICR regarding the generation of codes and themes.

Several policies could remedy some of the common strains in this study concerning maintaining contact during incarceration. As a result of the increased

implementation of video visitation technology, prisons across the country are making both in-person and virtual visitation more difficult and more expensive (Rabuy & Wagner, 2015). Phone calls are also prohibitively expensive, and although a new law allows the Federal Communications Commission to regulate pricing for audio and video communications further, it may not be implemented until late 2024 (Martha Wright-Reed Just and Reasonable Communications Act, 2022). Instead, states should follow the lead of Connecticut and California, where phone calls and video visits are now free (Brooks & Heffernan, 2023). In addition, state prisons in 24 states across the country now require some or all non-legal incoming mail to be scanned in and delivered either virtually or by photocopy, with original copies destroyed, claiming this process will reduce the flow of contraband into the prisons (Wang, 2022).[5] This means that an incarcerated parent will no longer receive original copies of their child's artwork to hang on their wall, and partners will lose the sentimental value of a hand-written note. Scanned mail is also more easily surveilled by private companies. Some states have already found that this practice does not reduce the influx of contraband (Wang, 2022). Mail policies are already extremely restrictive for families, and the increase in photocopying mail only adds to their burdens with no strong evidence of their stated purpose.

Losing a family member to incarceration is a common shock to communities in the United States, suggesting disenfranchised grief is a systemic societal issue. Social norms regarding those tied to anyone incarcerated continue to promote shaming, courtesy stigmatization, and extend punishment beyond the legal offender (Comfort, 2007). This study suggests that families are better equipped to help their incarcerated family members when they can acquire tools to enfranchise their grief, process the loss, and learn how to advocate for their rights. Support groups might not be able to fully change the experience of "doing time on the outside," but they certainly provide ways to reconceptualize what that "time" could or should look like.

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[5] This citation from 2022 indicates that 14 states scan all incoming mail, but in July 2023, I examined mail policies in all 50 states and found that 16 states now require all incoming mail to be scanned (Arkansas, Delaware, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin) and an additional eight states photocopy some mail or only have photocopy policies at certain correctional institutions (Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Utah).

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