

# “I had nowhere to go”: Disenfranchised grief and support groups for families of incarcerated individuals

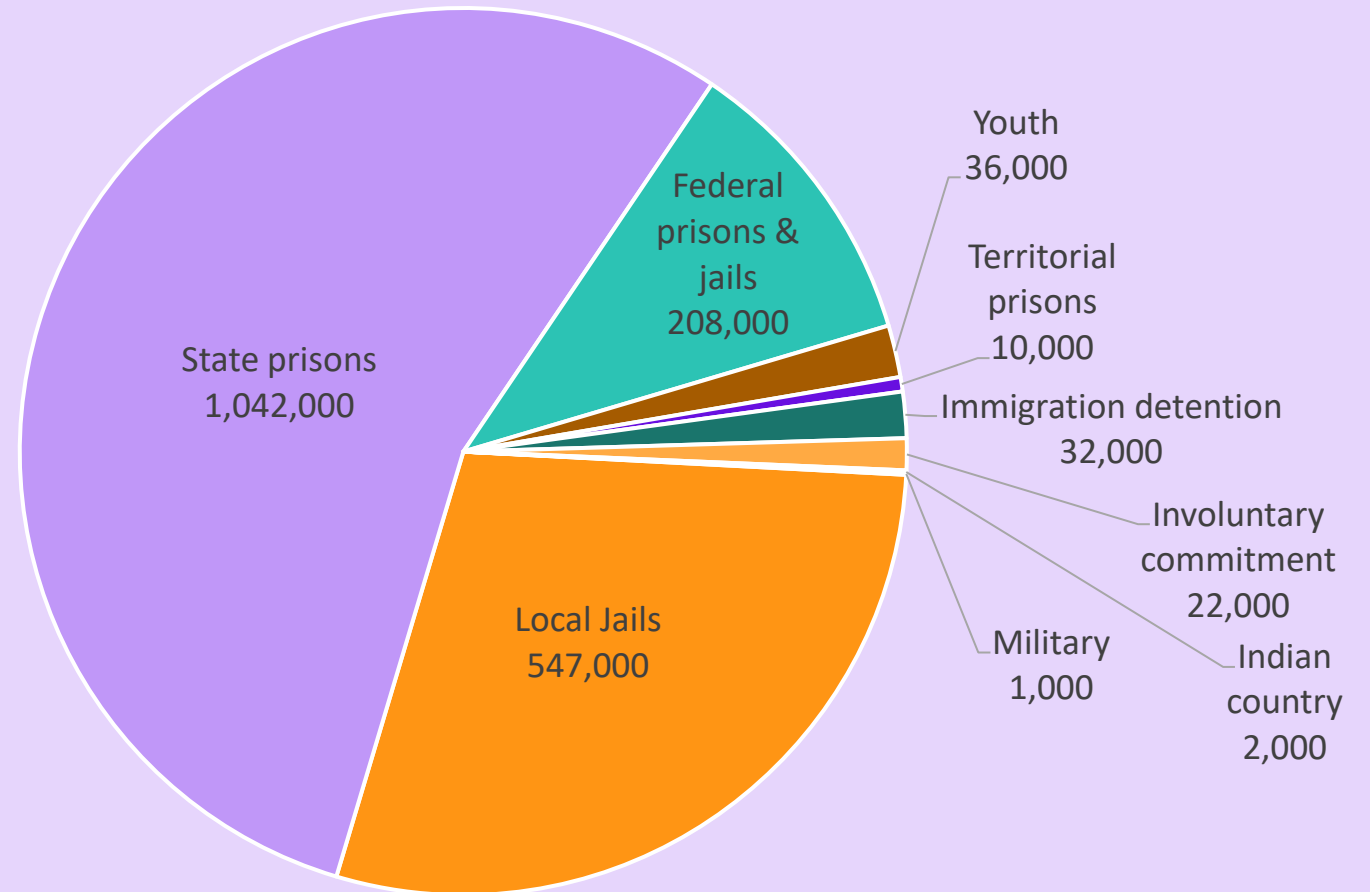
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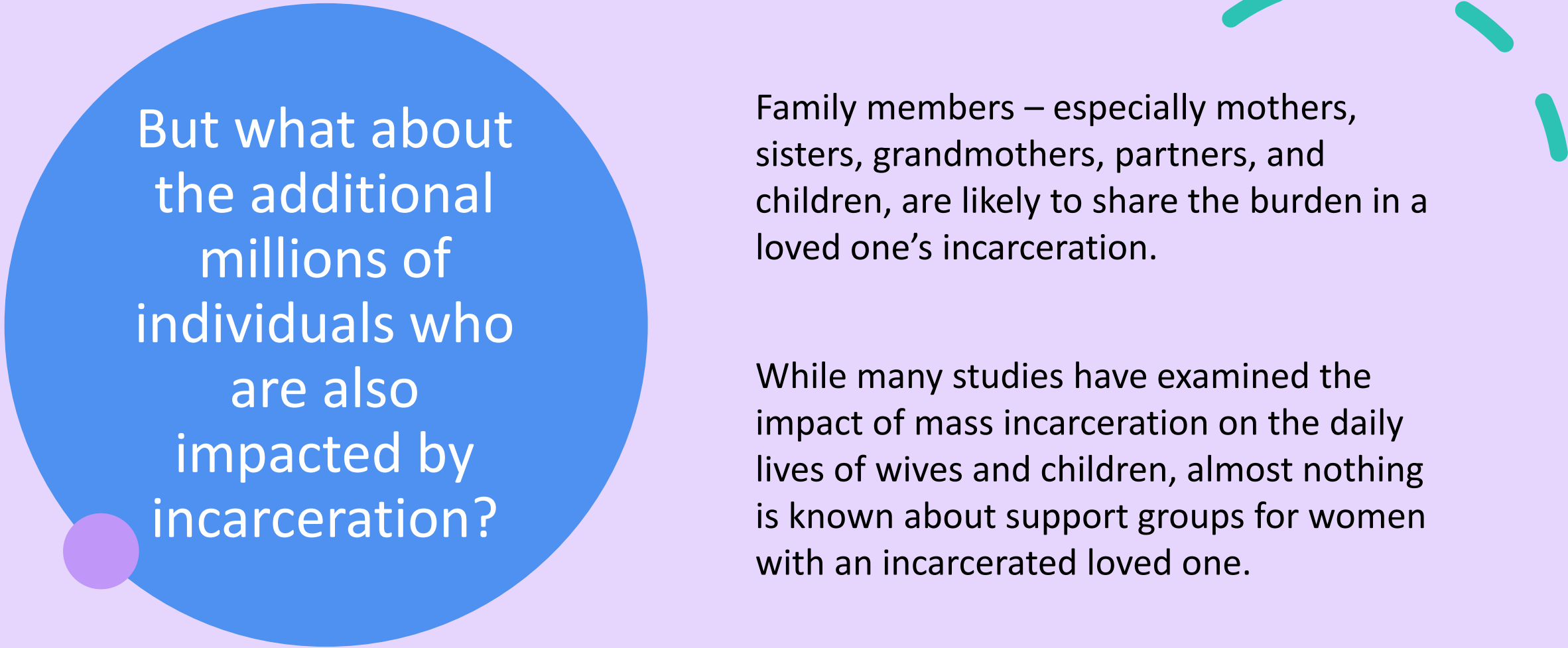
# Background

- Today, almost 1.9 million Americans are incarcerated in a variety of penal institutions, including state and federal prisons, juvenile corrections facilities, and local jails.
- Approximately 90% of these incarcerated individuals are men.

Incarceration in the United States, 2022



Source: Sawyer, Wendy, and Peter Wagner. 2022. "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2022."  
Retrieved July 14, 2022 (<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html>).



But what about  
the additional  
millions of  
individuals who  
are also  
impacted by  
incarceration?

Family members – especially mothers, sisters, grandmothers, partners, and children, are likely to share the burden in a loved one's incarceration.

While many studies have examined the impact of mass incarceration on the daily lives of wives and children, almost nothing is known about support groups for women with an incarcerated loved one.

# Focus of this study

This study focuses on the role of organizations, such as formal support groups, in helping women experiencing the shock of having a close loved one incarcerated as well as how these organizations can help mitigate the stigma of disenfranchised grief.

The research questions for this study are:

1. What kinds of organizations exist to help women and what do they see as their role in mitigating the impact of incarceration on women and families?
2. To what extent and how do these organizations work to intervene upon how families think about the experience of incarceration?
3. What do these findings suggest about the benefits of organizational social support for women experiencing a type of loss that can be ambiguous and grief that is unacknowledged or stigmatized?

# Disenfranchised grief


**Disenfranchised grief:** a loss that “cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (coined by Doka 1989, cited in McCarthy and Adams 2019, 3)

Six factors contribute to disenfranchised grief:

1. loss is ignored
2. feelings in response to loss are also ignored
3. no support is received
4. limited opportunities to grieve
5. others condemn or question bereavement
6. loss is stigmatized



# Support groups and social support

- Social support can broadly be described as “the feedback provided via contact with similar and valued peers” (Gottlieb 1985, 9)
  - Research on support groups generally focuses on those helping people with a new, severe health diagnosis or similar major life change, with nothing on support groups related to incarceration
  - Support groups provide a type of emotional support that the average person cannot: true understanding of one’s experiences and emotions and a secure environment in which to share them (Lalayants et al. 2015; Kacen et al. 1997).
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# Framing institutions

Watkins-Hayes, Pittman-Gay and Beaman's (2012) concept of framing institutions is relevant to understanding how support groups generate resilience among members and help them interpret their life circumstances:

**“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.” (2030)

# Research design

- Using a simple Google search, I identified support groups that serve women with incarcerated family members. To be included in the sample, the organizations must primarily support women and families rather than children, and their services must include some type of regular meeting arrangement.
- From there, I used snowball sampling to identify similar organizations across the U.S. and contact their founders and/or other key leaders.
- Final sample consists of 13 leaders from 11 organizations


Name	Title	Location	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Pamela	Chapter leader	Midwest	Female	white
Elaine	Founder	Northeast	Female	white
Mona	Founder	West	Female	white
Yvonne	Founder	Midwest	Female	Black
Lisa	Founder	South	Female	white
Jermaine	Director of Policy and Outreach	South	Male	Black
Marsha	Executive Director	Mid-Atlantic	Female	white
Kamilah	Co-Founder	Mid-Atlantic	Female	Black
Donna	Founder	Southwest	Female	white
Vivian	Staffer (three interviewed together)	Mid-Atlantic	Female	Black
Cecelia	Staffer (three interviewed together)	Mid-Atlantic	Female	Latinx
Gabriela	Staffer (three interviewed together)	Mid-Atlantic	Female	Latinx
Joan	Founder	Southwest	Female	white





# Findings

My interviews suggest that certain women facing disenfranchised grief are **less likely to find social support in their existing networks and instead have to build solidarity with strangers**. Support groups provide space for families to grieve without stigma or judgment, can help re-frame the grief experience to help individuals interpret their new life situation, and provide tools and community for coping with a loss that is not typically acknowledged by the general public.



I organize my findings into two major themes: generating resilience through community and enfranchising grief.

# Framing resilience through community: The role of support groups

Gabriela: “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 judgement. So, they’re just so free to open up, you know.**”

# Framing resilience through community: The role of support groups

Pamela: “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.**”

# Experiencing loss, disenfranchised grief, and stigma

Mona: “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.**’”

# Experiencing loss, disenfranchised grief, and stigma

Donna: “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.”

# Discussion

- Support groups are essential for those facing ‘non-typical’ bereavement, as they are unlikely to receive what they need from existing support networks and those networks are ill-equipped to cope with such a difficult situation such as incarceration.
- The support groups created and maintained by my respondents act as a type of framing institution, as they structure how families respond to incarceration; learn how to adjust their emotions, finances, and responsibilities during incarceration; and combat the stigma they face by friends, colleagues, and prison officials.
- As framing institutions, these support groups promote resilience through community-building. Members resist both the knowledge put out by the prison-industrial complex but also what it means socially for someone to become incarcerated (resisting social death).

# Concluding thoughts

- 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.’”**
- While each of these support groups use different approaches, they all help their members realign their sense of self as they adjust to a new reality.
- 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.



THANK YOU!



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