

Reactionary Brokering: How Families Navigate the Strains of Jail Incarceration

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Abstract: Research consistently documents the wide-ranging strains of family member incarceration, but less is known about the different ways family members work together to manage these strains or the additional strains stemming from this coordination. We use in-depth interview data from the Jail and Family Life Study, drawing on longitudinal interviews with 69 mothers and 85 romantic partners of incarcerated men, to understand the symbiotic harms of jail incarceration for families. We find that the strains of family member incarceration engender reactionary brokering, a concept we define as the collaborative work family members engage in (with each other and occasionally with institutional actors) to manage strains generated by the sudden absence of a loved one. We uncover three primary types of reactionary brokers—exhaustive, concentrated, and bounded—alongside a group of monitors who oversee but are largely excluded or exempt from the brokering role. We also trace the socially patterned processes that shape these roles. Although reactionary brokering can provide critical support for families, it also generates substantial new strains, particularly for families with harmonious relationships that facilitate brokering. The concept of reactionary brokering illuminates how family members experiencing the same strain—in this case, incarceration—arrive at divergent brokering roles that can create new inequalities.

Keywords: brokering; family member incarceration; inequality; jail

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THE considerable expansion of the U.S. criminal legal system over the past 50 years has made incarceration a common experience, especially for socially and economically vulnerable population groups (Alexander 2010; Pettit and Western 2004; Shannon et al. 2017). The large numbers of people who experience incarceration are connected to families, considerably expanding the reach of the criminal legal system beyond the incarcerated person (Adams 2018; Wildeman and Lee 2021). Indeed, nearly half (45 percent) of all adults in the United States have an immediate family member—including a parent, romantic partner or co-parent, sibling, and/or child—who has spent time in jail or prison (Enns et al. 2019). Jail incarceration is the modal type of family member incarceration, as annual jail admissions—about 7.6 million per year—are more than eight times higher than prison admissions (Sawyer and Wagner 2025; Zeng 2025a).

Incarceration is a consequential stressor for the confined person but also has rippling repercussions for the well-being of their family members, aligned with the proposition that stress and strain proliferate across people (Pearlin 1989; Pearlin, Aneshensel, and LeBlanc, 1997). Research consistently documents the wide-ranging strains of family member incarceration, especially for women who commonly incur caregiving roles (Collins 1994; Delorme 2025; Rosenthal 1985; Umamaheswar

2024), as even short-lived confinements fracture relationships, contribute to familial economic hardship, and precipitate worry and sadness among family members (Comfort 2016; Turney and Sugie 2021). Although research extensively documents the strains of family member incarceration—including for romantic partners (e.g., Comfort 2008) and mothers (e.g., Goldman 2019)—we know considerably less about how family members collectively coordinate to manage their loved one's incarceration (though see, e.g., Comfort 2016; Miller 2021).

Additionally, as family members assist one another in managing the strains stemming from their loved one's incarceration, it is unclear whether and how this care work and coordination—disproportionately concentrated among women—create additional strains for these caregivers. Coordinating with others to manage the deleterious consequences of a loved one's incarceration may ameliorate some strains, for both the incarcerated person and those connected to them, as social support can buffer the deleterious strains of stressors such as incarceration (Pearlin et al. 1981; Thoits 1995). Alternatively or simultaneously, coordinating with others to manage these strains can be costly. Because activating social support networks can be fraught (Harknett and Hartnett 2011; Smith 2005), working together to manage the strains of family member incarceration may create additional strains beyond those stemming from the incarceration itself.

We systematically analyze data from the Jail and Family Life Study, an in-depth interview study of incarcerated men and their adult family members (including 69 mothers and 85 romantic partners and co-parents), to describe and explain how these women coordinate among themselves, other family members, and institutional actors (e.g., attorneys and social workers) to manage the strains of a loved one's incarceration and the strains of these collaborations. We take a family systems approach, highlighting the interconnected nature of family relationships (Minuchin 1974), to forward scholarship on criminal legal contact, families, and inequality with three key findings. First, we find the wide-ranging, cumulative, and mutually reinforcing strains of family member incarceration engender reactionary brokering, a concept we define as the collaborative work individuals engage in to manage the destabilizing absence of a family member on behalf of themselves, their incarcerated loved one, or their children. In the context of incarceration, reactionary brokers take action to manage the strains generated by the (mostly) unanticipated and sudden absence of their loved one. Specifically, we identify three types of reactionary brokers—exhaustive, concentrated, and bounded—alongside a final group of monitors who remain apprised of their loved one by others but do not adopt a brokering role themselves. Second, we find that reactionary brokering is socially patterned. The relationship between the broker and the absent family member, the relationship between the broker and other family members, and constraints due to institutional exclusions or extreme precarity all converge to explain how family members enter or exit particular brokering roles. Third, we find that reactionary brokering, deployed to manage the strains of family member incarceration, simultaneously supports the family (including the absent family member, their children, and the brokers) and generates additional strain, paradoxically especially for families with harmonious relationships that facilitate brokering, thereby further expanding our understanding of the gendered symbiotic harms of incarceration

(Condry and Minson 2021). Taken together, these findings advance prior research on the repercussions of incarceration for families by documenting the understudied types, processes, and strains of reactionary brokering and by offering a concept applicable to other contexts of familial strain involving sudden network disruption (e.g., health crises, unplanned separations, deportation, and death).

Background

Scope and Inequality of Family Member Incarceration

U.S. incarceration rates are five times higher today than they were 50 years ago (Kang-Brown et al. 2023), as the criminal legal system has widened the scope and frequency with which people are ensnared in the system (Turney and Wakefield 2019). Jail incarceration is especially prevalent, with more than eight times as many people entering jail than prison each year (Sawyer and Wagner 2025). Jail incarceration is often short-lived—with men's average jail stay being 36 days—and cyclical (Zeng 2025a). More than two-thirds (69 percent in 2024) of people in jail have not been convicted of a crime and are instead mostly awaiting adjudication of their case, and jail incarceration can involve considerable uncertainty about the future (Walker 2022; Zeng 2025b).

Importantly, incarcerated people—93 percent of whom are men—do not exist in isolation (Mueller 2024). They are instead connected to families as parents, partners, siblings, children, and extended kin, meaning that many people endure punishment alongside their incarcerated family member. Indeed, nearly half (48 percent) of U.S. women have experienced an immediate family member's incarceration (Enns et al. 2019), with the vast majority involving jail incarceration because prison sentences typically begin with jail confinement. Although information about the percentage of men in jail who are fathers is not systematically available, highlighting a broader lack of attention to jail incarceration (Turney and Conner 2019), about half of male state prisoners have children (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2016; also see Mumola 2000).

Additionally, family member incarceration is unequally distributed across the population (Boen, Olson, and Lee 2022). Though no demographic group is immune from family member incarceration, legacies of slavery and existing patterns of structural racism mean this experience is concentrated among historically and contemporarily marginalized populations (Enns et al. 2019). Minoritized populations are overrepresented among jail populations, for example, with more than half of people in jail identifying as Black and/or Hispanic (Zeng 2025b). The unequal distribution of family member incarceration suggests its burdens are concentrated among vulnerable population groups already enduring systemic disadvantages. Taken together, the concentration of incarceration among men, coupled with women's disproportionate responsibility for supporting incarcerated people (Delerme 2025; Dwyer Emory 2026; Page, Piehowski, and Soss 2019; Umamaheswar 2024), underscores the importance of examining how women navigate and negotiate these caregiving demands.

Wide-Ranging Strains of Incarceration

Family member incarceration is a consequential experience (for a review, see Adams 2018). Guided by the stress process perspective, which links the concentration of stressors and strains among vulnerable groups to inequalities in well-being (Pearlin 1989; Pearlin et al. 1981), scholars posit that family member incarceration is a proliferating stressor with deleterious consequences (Arditti 2016; Massoglia 2008; Pearlin et al. 1997; Turney 2014). Indeed, research consistently shows that incarceration creates considerable strains for family members—especially romantic partners and mothers—who endure the punishment alongside their confined relative (DeLorme 2025). Romantic partners of incarcerated men navigate considerable relationship challenges, with incarceration commonly dissolving or weakening these unions (Turney et al. 2023; Western 2006; Widdowson et al. 2020). They also experience economic difficulties, which stem from both reductions in household income and the expenses of confinement, and physical and mental health impairments (Haney 2022; Harris 2016; Patterson, Talbert, and Brown 2021; Western 2006). Even the incarceration of a former romantic partner (and a co-parent) can generate strains for women, as incarceration creates new challenges for joint child-rearing and lasting stigma (Braman 2004; Turney and Wildeman 2013). The strains of confinement extend to the incarcerated person's family of origin, including their parents (Christensen, Turney, and Jang 2025; Goldman 2019; Green et al. 2006; Sirois 2020; Western 2018).

Jail incarceration likely creates distinct and considerable strains for family members.¹ Like prison incarceration, jail incarceration involves a family member's physical absence from the home, an ambiguous loss with cascading challenges for relationships, economic well-being, and health (Arditti 2016). That is, even a short jail stay can create communication challenges that damage relationships (e.g., Apel 2016), contribute to financial instability (e.g., Muentner et al. 2019), and generate worry and sadness for family members (e.g., Comfort 2016). Jail incarceration may additionally produce unique exigencies for families, as the pretrial period involves decisions about whether and how to post bail, hire a private attorney, or attend court dates (Dwyer Emory 2026; Eife 2026; Walker 2022).

Emergence of Reactionary Brokering

We introduce the concept of *reactionary brokering* to theorize how families manage the well-documented strains stemming from incarceration. We define reactionary brokering as the collaborative work individuals engage in to manage the wide-ranging, cumulative, and mutually reinforcing strains generated by the sudden absence of a family member, either on behalf of themselves, their incarcerated family member, or their children. This is aligned with a family systems approach that suggests the importance of considering families holistically, with family members working interdependently to assist one another and jointly navigate challenges (Minuchin 1974). This is also aligned with recent research highlighting the importance of social relationships among those enduring family member incarceration (Umamaheswar 2024).

Our concept of reactionary brokering is broadly informed by research on brokering in organizations and, more specifically, by a distinct literature that conceptualizes brokering as an important survival tactic among disadvantaged families. Organizational theory offers an understanding of how the coordination of care occurs, that is, the relational architecture through which care is organized, redistributed, and mediated. Organizational sociologists have shown how brokers occupy advantageous structural positions that allow them to connect two otherwise disconnected alters and use their brokerage role to diffuse knowledge across groups, enhance interactions within the same group, and gatekeep resources (Fernandez and Gould 1994). Organizational theory, and the corresponding empirical research on brokering, provides a framework for understanding both the costs and benefits of this coordination of care (Gittell and Weiss 2004). Brokers themselves benefit from greater access to and control over information and other resources (Kwon et al. 2020), but looking beyond the firm complicates this favorable assessment. Recent research among disadvantaged families shows how the benefits of brokering also arrive with substantial costs. For instance, children brokering on behalf of their immigrant parents provide social, legal, and economic support (Delgado 2020; García Valdivia 2022), but this process also generates substantial stress and anxiety (Umaña-Taylor 2003). Other research highlights how coordinating support among families with few resources, in general, can be difficult, draining, and can strain already fragile relationships (Harknett and Hartnett 2011; Smith 2005). This research suggests that brokering occurring in other contexts is not unambiguously advantageous.

The concept of reactionary brokering highlights how families coordinate support—or struggle to coordinate support—to manage the strains of incarceration, the labor required to coordinate assistance from different actors, and how and why family member incarceration prompts time-consuming entanglements with people across institutions, including schools, child welfare systems, health care systems, housing markets, labor markets, and the criminal legal system. Scholars have long highlighted how historically marginalized women, and mothers in particular, mobilize community support systems to navigate systems of “racial domination and economic exploitation” (Collins 1994:45; Edin and Lein 1997). By drawing analytic attention to the collaborative work associated with managing and coordinating around the strains of family member incarceration, our concept of reactionary brokering extends our understanding of the symbiotic harms of incarceration (Condry and Minson 2021; also see Umamaheswar 2024), beyond simply documenting such strains or the fact that families, in some cases, work together to manage these strains.

Though reactionary brokering likely arises across all forms of family member incarceration, jail incarceration may create unique demands. First, the pretrial period involves considerable uncertainty about the adjudication of their family member’s case (Turney et al. 2024), potentially necessitating that caregivers work together to collectively monitor court dates, secure legal representation, and arrange employment, housing, and sobriety upon release. Second, jails’ proximity to one’s pre-incarceration residence may implore family members to coordinate regular visitation (Tasca, Mulvey, and Rodriguez 2016). Finally, jail incarceration is often

characterized by a series of short stints of confinement—as opposed to prison incarceration, which involves a longer and more predictable period away from family members—and this churning between jails and families may necessitate particular brokering needs and coordination between family members (Leverentz 2018).

Elements of reactionary brokering, as a relational process with distinct conditions and consequences, have appeared across research on the strains of incarceration. Consider Miller's (2021) account of navigating his brother's incarceration. He writes, "[My brother's letters from prison] would always include lists of things for me to do," including gathering information on college grants and sending him books (Miller 2021:138). Miller could independently handle some tasks, but, for others, he needed to coordinate with others to support his brother. He describes the work to secure his brother's housing prior to his parole hearing, looping in his friend who had an apartment to rent; though this arrangement ended up falling through, almost ending the friendship, it demonstrates the brokering work—and its consequences—that occurs during family member incarceration (Miller 2021). Similarly, evidence of reactionary brokering occurs in other research on the familial strains of incarceration. Research on families navigating a loved one's prison incarceration describes participants who collaborate with others, including participant Diane, who coordinates with her son to manage the caregiving strains of her daughter's incarceration, and participant Lydia, who engages with her brothers to support her children during their father's incarceration (Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt 2012). Other research describes how loved ones work together—with each other and with institutional agents such as social workers—to manage the strains of family member incarceration (Comfort 2016). Although this research critically identifies the existence of what we would term brokering, it stops short of theorizing how family members arrive at different types of brokering roles or the additional strains brokering creates beyond the direct strains of family member incarceration.

Types and Processes of Reactionary Brokering. Reactionary brokering is likely not a uniform experience, and the type of reactionary brokering that one engages in may be shaped by several factors. First, family members with amicable or harmonious relationships with the absent person may be more willing to engage in reactionary brokering on their behalf than those with strained or nearly nonexistent relationships (Harknett and Hartnett 2011; Turanovic et al. 2012). Relationships can become strained for many reasons, including the activities that led to one's incarceration, fatigue associated with repeated incarceration spells, and the stigma associated with incarceration (Braman 2004; Condry 2013); the closeness of these ties may structure familial responses to incarceration. Those with strained relationships with the absent family member may be willing to broker on behalf of this person's children, given the collective work people engage in to support children (Collins 1994; Gurusami 2019), or they may want to minimize children's access to their incarcerated father (Roy and Dyson 2005). Second, as reactionary brokering often involves engagement with other family members, those with close familial ties may engage in frequent brokering or brokering that cuts across multiple domains, as

amicable family relationships facilitate such brokering (Louie 2012). Third, though most people with incarcerated family members experience vulnerabilities independent of the incarceration, constraints due to institutional exclusions—particularly related to legal status or language barriers—or extreme precarity may inhibit certain types of reactionary brokering and relegate family members to the sidelines, despite them wanting to help.

Strains of Reactionary Brokering. Reactionary brokering generates strains that can extend beyond the immediate strains of incarceration, simultaneously supporting families although also placing new strains on them. The stress process perspective, with its focus on how social support can buffer the deleterious repercussions of strains, suggests that reactionary brokering may be beneficial for both incarcerated people and their family members (Thoits 1995). Incarcerated people may benefit from having their family members work together (and with institutional actors) on their behalf; they may get more assistance when their family members collaborate (e.g., to cover the financial costs of incarceration or to provide care for their children) than they would receive when family members operate in isolation. Family members, too, may benefit from the collaborative nature of reactionary brokering (e.g., if the financial costs of incarceration or child care responsibilities are spread out over multiple people). Family members of incarcerated people may experience intrinsic benefits from engaging in reactionary brokering and may feel supported by their social networks; such support may buffer the strains of family member incarceration (Fahmy and Testa 2021). Alternatively, reactionary brokering may have deleterious strains that extend beyond the strains of incarceration, especially for family members of the incarcerated. Both coordinating and providing direct assistance can be physically, emotionally, and financially draining, and reactionary brokering may create additional strains for families navigating a challenging time (Comfort 2008; Harvey 2025; Miller 2021). Reactionary brokering with family members can lead to relationship conflict or mental health impairments, and reactionary brokering with institutional actors may risk additional punishments (Edwards 2016). We anticipate that frequent brokers accumulate both the costs and benefits of brokering, whereas infrequent brokers are shielded from both.

Data and Analytic Approach

Data

We examine reactionary brokering by analyzing in-depth interviews from the Jail and Family Life Study, a longitudinal qualitative study of 123 incarcerated men and their family members (primarily their mothers, romantic partners or co-parents, and children).² A team of trained graduate students recruited men engaged in various programming activities (e.g., parenting classes) across three jail facilities in Southern California. Men were eligible for study participation if they had been in jail for at least two months, had at least one minor child, and had interacted with their child in the month prior to their incarceration. We asked men for permission to contact their family members (and contact information for these family members) and, as soon

as possible after their interview, attempted to schedule interviews with their family members.³ Men and family members were interviewed twice, once during the incarceration period and once after release (or one year after the baseline interview for those not released during the study period, those reincarcerated during the study period, or those sentenced to prison). Interviews occurred between July 2015 and December 2017.

The analytic sample draws on data from 279 in-depth interviews with mothers and romantic partners.⁴ This includes 69 mothers of incarcerated men (including 54 follow-up interviews) and 85 romantic partners or co-parents of incarcerated men (including 71 follow-up interviews).⁵ We focus on reactionary brokering that occurs during the incarceration period, given the stark differences between confinement and reentry (Western 2018), but use both baseline and follow-up interviews (given that some participants had retrospective accounts of brokering and others were still navigating the incarceration during the follow-up interview). Interviews with family members occurred where they were most comfortable, often in their homes, parks, coffee shops, or restaurants. We conducted most interviews in person but conducted some (including 11 baseline and 10 follow-up interviews with mothers and eight baseline and eight follow-up interviews with romantic partners) by phone (e.g., when a participant lived in another state or country). We conducted most interviews in English but conducted interviews with 33 mothers and five romantic partners in Spanish.

During baseline interviews, we asked participants to tell us about their relationship with their incarcerated family member, their own childhood and family backgrounds, parenting strategies, interactions with the criminal legal system, and their hopes for the future. Follow-up interviews focused on similar themes as the baseline interviews, with an emphasis on changes following the baseline interview. Interviews were semi-structured, and we asked similar, mostly open-ended questions of all participants, but we varied the wording and timing of the questions to make the interviews flow as much as possible like a conversation. Baseline and follow-up interviews with family members lasted, on average, between two and three hours. We compensated participants with a \$50 Visa gift card for each interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviewers wrote detailed field notes after each interview, describing broad themes from the interview and contextual information about the interaction.

Analytic Approach

The analytic plan followed an abductive approach, allowing us to move iteratively between theoretical reasoning and empirical observations (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

First, a team of trained graduate students, under the supervision of the first author (and study PI), conducted deductive coding on each verbatim transcript using a codebook primarily derived from the interview guide. Codes included broad (and often overlapping) themes addressed in the interviews and derived from past research, such as “incarceration effects,” “mental health,” and “economic well-being.” We first coded the baseline interviews with mothers and then moved on

to baseline interviews with romantic partners, follow-up interviews with romantic partners, and follow-up interviews with mothers (in that order). For each of the four groups of transcripts, the team worked together to code about 10 transcripts and, after ensuring consistent coding, the remainder of the transcripts was coded by one person and reviewed by a second person (with the team working together to resolve discrepancies).

Second, we conducted inductive analysis of the “incarceration effects” codes across all transcripts. These codes included any discussion of the strains of incarceration on the incarcerated person, the person interviewed, and others (including family members, friends, and community members) connected to the incarcerated person. We read through these excerpts and field notes for each participant. We then developed a codebook that accounted for the specific strains of incarceration on family members (e.g., financial strains, child care strains, and health strains) and how family members managed these incarceration-related strains, where we identified the concept of reactionary brokering. We took several steps to ensure intercoder reliability during this coding stage (Campbell et al. 2013). First, we randomly selected four families to code together as a group. Then, after refining the codebook based on this discussion, the four graduate student authors each coded transcripts from a subset of families (including 14 mothers and 19 romantic partners). The whole team met to resolve coding differences. We coded the remaining families after achieving uniform coding outcomes.

Finally, we wrote analytic memos for each family that identified the frequency of brokering, domains in which brokering occurred (e.g., child care and financial support), who in each family took on which brokering tasks, and the positive and negative strains of brokering. Our inductive approach, which allowed categories to surface through repeated and close engagement with the data, identified three recurring types of brokers and one group that primarily oversees the brokering of others (described in detail below): (1) exhaustive brokers, (2) concentrated brokers, (3) bounded brokers, and (4) monitors. We then wrote analytic memos about each group to identify the key factors that explain placement in each group and the strains of brokering for each group, facilitating movement from description to explanation. Importantly, these groups were iteratively refined through abductive inference as we moved back and forth between individual cases and emerging patterns to consider whether a proposed category adequately explained the variation we observed. As a final step, we classified each participant into one of these four categories (also keeping track of participants who did not engage in reactionary brokering).⁶ Two authors categorized each participant, and we met to resolve any discrepancies. We used discrepancies as opportunities to refine and sharpen the boundaries between categories.

Sample Description

Table 1 shows demographic characteristics for the women in the sample. Most family members identify as Latina ($n = 53$, 77 percent of mothers; $n = 53$, 62 percent of romantic partners), consistent with the demographics of the county where the study took place. Mothers and romantic partners were an average of 55 and 31 years

Table 1: Baseline Descriptive Characteristics of Family Members.

	Mothers		Romantic Partners	
	N	% or mean (S.D.)	N	% or mean (S.D.)
Race/ethnicity				
Latina	53	76.8%	53	62.4%
White	11	15.9%	20	23.5%
Black	2	2.9%	2	2.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	1.4%	3	3.5%
Multi-racial/multi-ethnic	2	2.9%	5	5.9%
Unknown	0	0.0%	2	2.4%
Educational attainment				
Less than high school	13	18.8%	8	9.4%
High school or GED	8	11.6%	24	28.2%
More than high school	17	24.6%	42	49.4%
Unknown	31	44.9%	11	12.9%
Age	–	54.6 (9.4)	–	30.8 (8.4)
Incarceration history				
Yes	14	20.3%	33	38.8%
No	51	73.9%	49	57.6%
Unknown	4	5.8%	3	3.5%
Primary caregiver for father's child(ren)				
Yes	10	14.5%	64	75.3%
No	59	85.5%	21	24.7%
N		69		85

Note: Educational attainment was not ascertained systematically from participants, which explains the relatively large number of participants with “unknown” education.

old, respectively. About half ($n = 42$, 49 percent) of romantic partners had an education beyond high school. An incarceration history was not uncommon among family members, with about one-fifth of mothers ($n = 14$, 20 percent) and two-fifths ($n = 33$, 39 percent) of romantic partners reporting at least one incarceration. About one-seventh of mothers ($n = 10$, 15 percent) and three-quarters of romantic partners ($n = 64$, 75 percent) were primary caregivers of the incarcerated father's children.

Findings

Managing the Proliferating Strains of Incarceration through Reactionary Brokering

Our analysis of interview transcripts shows that the strains of family member incarceration lead mothers and romantic partners of incarcerated men to engage in reactionary brokering, a concept we define as a multidimensional process by which individuals coordinate support to manage the proliferating strains generated by the often sudden absence of a family member. In the case of jail incarceration, women engage in reactionary brokering to take on household tasks left by the incarcerated

person or to manage emergent strains from the criminal legal system, often on behalf of their incarcerated loved one or their shared child. This reactionary brokering departs from accounts that document the strains of family member incarceration and, instead, highlights how family members coordinate support to respond to these strains. We find evidence of reactionary brokering in nearly all families, with brokering occurring between fathers and family members, between two or more family members, and between family members and institutional actors.

We describe the types, processes, and consequences of reactionary brokering (summarized in Table 2). First, we distinguish between three types of reactionary brokers and one group that primarily oversees the brokering of others: (1) exhaustive brokers, women who frequently and exhaustively coordinate with people on behalf of the absent family member, his children, and themselves; (2) concentrated brokers, women who frequently coordinate with people but limit their brokering to one or two domains; (3) bounded brokers, women with strained relationships with the absent family member—usually resulting from patterns of cyclical absence—who engage in relatively less brokering, most commonly to support children; and (4) monitors, women who do a limited amount of brokering themselves—due to financial, health, geographic, or other barriers—but oversee the brokering that others do to support the absent family member and their children. Second, we identify the processes that funnel women into entering or exiting particular brokering roles. We highlight how the relationship between the broker and the absent family member, the relationship between the broker and other family members, and the constraints of institutional exclusion and extreme precarity structure brokering roles in families. Importantly, these typologies of brokers are not static and, instead, people vacillate between groups—sometimes even during the study period—as their relationships and circumstances change. Third, we describe how brokers often successfully coordinate support but simultaneously describe emergent strains of reactionary brokering. We emphasize how these strains—most commonly financial instability, poor mental health, fractured relationships, and foregone opportunities (such as deferring moves, education, or work transitions)—extend beyond the direct strains of incarceration and vary across groups. Though brokers across all groups describe some strains, they are particularly concentrated among exhaustive and concentrated brokers. We show how these strains emerge from participants' brokering roles, specifically, rather than the commonly described direct strains of family member incarceration. Reactionary brokers commonly mobilize substantial amounts of time, money, and emotional resources across cyclical incarcerations and, though some eventually pull back from brokering roles, most find it challenging to completely leave brokering behind.

Exhaustive Brokers

Exhaustive brokers comprise about one-third (34 percent) of the sample. Exhaustive brokers are those who frequently coordinate and interact with other family members and institutional actors on behalf of the absent family member, his child, and themselves. Exhaustive brokers engage in a high amount of brokering across multiple domains (e.g., financial support, child care, and navigating the criminal

Table 2: Summary of Brokering Types, Processes, and Consequences.

<i>Type</i>	Exhaustive	Concentrated(1)	Concentrated(2)	Bounded	Monitoring
Family member	Mothers and romantic partners	Mothers	Romantic partners	Mothers and romantic partners	Mothers and romantic partners
Domains of brokering	All	Some - tasks directed toward incarcerated loved one	Some - tasks directed toward child(ren)	Usually related to child(ren)	Some - tasks directed toward incarcerated loved one
Intensity of brokering	High	High	High	Low	Low
<i>Processes</i>					
Relationship with absent family member	Amicable	Amicable	Fractured	Fractured or nonexistent	Amicable or fractured
Relationship with other family members	Amicable	Fractured relationship with partner	Fractured relationship with mother	Amicable or fractured	Amicable
Institutional exclusions	No	No	No	No	Yes
Extreme precarity	No	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Consequences</i>					
Strains of incarceration	High	High	High	High	High
Strains of brokering	High	Moderate	High	Low	Low

legal system). Their reactionary brokering is routine, recurring, and often part of daily life. Three factors explain how family members end up as exhaustive brokers. First, exhaustive brokers generally report amicable relationships with the absent family member, which facilitates both frequent brokering and brokering across multiple domains, as loved ones work to support the absent family member and his children. Second, exhaustive brokers generally report amicable relationships with other members of their (and the absent family member's) family, which further facilitates frequent brokering and brokering across multiple domains. Third, though these brokers undoubtedly face challenges to their ability to support their incarcerated loved one, the challenges are not insurmountable. Exhaustive brokers often find themselves in time-consuming entanglements as they manage the strains of incarceration such as financial difficulties, new child care responsibilities, and managing children's responses to their father's incarceration.

Nicole, a 27-year-old, is an example of a participant who engages in exhaustive brokering to manage the strains of incarceration. Her partner's absence created new strains for herself and their shared child and, in navigating these challenges, she brokered support from other people. Her partner had a lengthy incarceration history that predated their relationship, as he had churned through jails and prisons since he was 11 years old. The couple had been together for three years and, though his incarceration exacerbated their relationship challenges (specifically, she describes the high cost of phone calls as limiting their communication and the uncertainty of his current jail stay as introducing relationship ambiguity), they were committed to their family life. Nicole described serving as an intermediary between her partner and their shared one-year-old son to keep a strong father-child relationship. Nicole visited her partner in jail twice a week. She said, "The first day, I take our son and I don't talk at all because [our son is] so hyper. Then, I'll go the next day and just talk to him alone." She hoped her visits would help maintain her partner's relationship with his child and their other family members, explaining: "When I see him, I try to involve him as much as I can. Like, 'I'm gonna go look for a piñata for [our son's] birthday, what kind should I get?'" Things like that." In addition to brokering between her partner and her son, Nicole also brokered with actors in the criminal legal system to manage new burdens created by his incarceration. On behalf of her husband, Nicole put money on his commissary account to ensure he had "the essentials," learned how to send him approved books in the mail, contacted his attorney for trial updates, and took over his bail payment from a previous incarceration. Therefore, for Nicole, her romantic partner's incarceration included considerable strains that necessitated considerable brokering—with other people—to support him.

Many exhaustive brokers, particularly romantic partners, relied on their incarcerated loved one's financial assistance prior to his incarceration. The incarceration of their loved one commonly left a destabilizing absence, one with severe financial consequences, which required brokering. For example, like many others navigating family member incarceration, Nicole incurred many direct costs stemming from her partner's incarceration. She involved others to manage the financial strains of his incarceration. To secure stable housing and resources for their child after her husband's absence, Nicole coordinated with her grandmother (who further

supported her by allowing her to stay rent-free) and brokered with social service actors to apply for WIC, Medi-Cal, and a low-income payment plan through her health insurance company. Nicole also brokered financial support from her and her partner's family to coordinate lapses in state support for her and her child. She told us, "Last month, we had a situation with welfare, and they didn't give me anything. I had to make the car payment, and [his mom] made it for me." Nicole brought others into her navigation of the strains of her partner's incarceration, leveraging her social ties for financial support to help her stay current on her car payment (and she repaid the loan after receiving her backpay). Similarly, Jade, a 21-year-old who shares two children with her partner, who had been to jail five or six times during their relationship, told us about her financial challenges stemming from his incarceration and the corresponding brokering she engaged in to manage these financial strains. Jade, like others, endured considerable economic strains because of her partner's incarceration, and she struggled to cover basic expenses for their shared child: "I'm the one that has to pay the bills, buy the diapers, everything by myself. . . I'm trying not to cry. Money is hard right now." To achieve housing security for her and her child, Jade brokered with her in-laws and her own grandmother. She coordinated with her in-laws to move in so she could save on housing costs, and she brokered financial support from both her in-laws and her grandmother to pay her bills. By brokering to support their incarcerated loved one or child, many respondents—particularly romantic partners—also managed to support themselves. That is, brokering sometimes enabled participants to access tangible resources, such as housing or financial support, and to simultaneously coordinate care for their incarcerated family member or another loved one.

Additionally, exhaustive brokers, particularly those connected to men with young children, were frequently drawn into brokering to manage the absence of men who previously helped with everyday child care tasks. For instance, Nicole told us that she struggled to manage caring for her one-year-old son along with her own pregnancy (as she was eight months pregnant when we first interviewed her): "Now that he's gone, it took a big toll on me. He did a lot for me." As a result, Nicole brokered child care with her own family: "I started staying [with my grandma] because I have more help here." She also relied on her sister and uncle to watch her son when she visited her partner in jail (when she did not bring their son) and to watch him when she ran errands. Nicole told us that she hoped her family would help her watch both children, after her daughter was born, so she could go back to work and save up enough money to move to her own home. Therefore, Nicole, like many others enduring the absence of their child's father, worked with other family members to manage these strains.

Exhaustive brokers also managed the negative strains of incarceration on children, requiring engagement with people working in health care institutions, schools, and child welfare systems. For instance, another exhaustive broker, a 54-year-old named Yolis, told us that she had cared for her son's 16-month-old child since he was most recently incarcerated and that she had been coordinating with a social worker to make the custody arrangement permanent. "I never thought I would start over. . . with a grandson!" she reflected. "Can you imagine if [my grandson] wasn't with me? That baby would have been lost."⁷ Here, Yolis acts as an intermediary

both to access needed resources for her grandson and to ensure that her son can maintain his relationship with his child in the future. Others broker to manage the health strains of their loved one's incarceration for his children. For instance, Nicole sought out medical care for her young son when she noticed that he stopped eating after his father's incarceration. She said, "When [my partner] first left, my son stopped eating food. He wouldn't eat at all. I asked the doctor, and the doctor said sometimes they get a separation anxiety type of thing when maybe he might notice that his dad's not here." Therefore, Nicole engaged in brokering—in this instance, with a health care provider—to manage the strains of her partner's incarceration on their child.

In sum, exhaustive brokers often found themselves managing multiple responsibilities—prompted by their loved one's absence and its corresponding strains—across many different domains of family life. In many cases, romantic partners and mothers of incarcerated people turned to other family members to manage these strains, typically on behalf of their shared children or their incarcerated loved one. In other instances, family member incarceration prompted time-consuming, semi-involuntary brokering with institutional actors (e.g., social workers) that participants were obliged to manage. These brokers generally had amicable relationships with their incarcerated loved one (as they were often motivated to support him) and with their family members (as these relationships were necessary for exhaustive brokering to occur). They undoubtedly faced challenges to brokering, often because of scarce resources made even more fraught by their loved one's incarceration, but these challenges generally did not impede brokering.

Strains of Exhaustive Brokering. The exhaustive brokers endure considerable strains that stem from their brokering—above and beyond those strains that stem directly from the incarceration itself. These strains include financial instability, poor mental health, strained relationships, and foregone opportunities. Consider a 34-year-old named Leslie, who engaged in brokering on behalf of her incarcerated romantic partner (and co-parent of their eight-year-old son), and who experienced compromised finances, impaired mental health, and fractured relationships because of her brokering work (in addition to the strains she endured directly from her partner's incarceration). Leslie told us that she navigated hiring and paying for an attorney for her romantic partner and that she was committed to having her son maintain contact with his father, consequences of incarceration that contributed to thousands of dollars in credit card debt. "I didn't have a credit card when he went in, and now I do with a lot of debt on it and no savings," she said. To manage these strains, she brokered with her father, who provided housing and child care support for Leslie and her young son. This brokering—and corresponding assistance from her father—helped Leslie stabilize her family in the wake of her partner's incarceration. However, it also generated relationship strain with her father. "He's helpful with [my son] sometimes. It's just kind of hard living together. I like my privacy," she said. "I don't like my parents knowing my business, and they're kind of nosy and judgmental."

Similarly, Jade—who, as mentioned earlier, negotiated with both her family and her partner's family for financial and housing support—highlights the costs of

these arrangements when parenting styles conflict. Jade's mother-in-law provided a critical source of child care support in her partner's absence. However, Jade explains that her close interactions with her mother-in-law generated constant criticism of her parenting. The two women also have different communication styles, which led to ongoing conflict. For instance, Jade became frustrated when her mother-in-law took her children out without informing her. She said, "I told her, I need to know, where you're taking my son. . . I just want to know in case anything happens. I guess it's just that mom thing. But I guess she doesn't like that, either." Although her partner's family ostensibly provided support, this brokering also created challenges that exacerbated Jade's health struggles that are already heightened by the direct strains of incarceration. She said, "I do have anxiety, and I've been in pain for the last couple of months. My doctor thinks it is anxiety." Because brokering required activating social networks for assistance, brokers commonly experienced the well-documented strains that arrive when one mobilizes one's social ties for support. Therefore, for women like Jade, Leslie, and other exhaustive brokers, extensive brokering—above and beyond the strains of incarceration—provides some instrumental assistance, and also takes a toll on their well-being.

Concentrated Brokers

Concentrated brokers engage in a high amount of reactionary brokering, like exhaustive brokers, but diverge from exhaustive brokers because they concentrate their efforts in one or two domains (e.g., financial support and child care) as opposed to brokering across many domains. Concentrated brokers, who comprise about one-fourth (24 percent) of the sample, most often engage in reactionary brokering to manage the strains of incarceration for their incarcerated loved one or his young children, but not for both. Mothers who become concentrated brokers generally have an amicable relationship with their incarcerated son and direct their concentrated brokering tasks toward supporting their son (as opposed to their son's children). Romantic partners who become concentrated brokers generally have a fractured relationship with their incarcerated partner, both because of strained relationships prior to incarceration and because incarceration compounds existing tensions, and generally direct their brokering tasks toward supporting their children (as opposed to their incarcerated loved one).⁸ Additionally, concentrated brokers have varying relationship quality with their incarcerated loved one and other family members and, importantly, mothers and romantic partners who become concentrated brokers commonly have fractured relationships with one another. These concentrated brokers, like the exhaustive brokers, face considerable—but not extreme—barriers to engaging in brokering, barriers that they are mostly able to overcome.

Romantic partners who become concentrated brokers predominantly manage the strains of their loved one's incarceration for his children. These women primarily have frayed or broken relationships with their partner, but nonetheless must broker with other family members and institutional actors to manage the strains of his incarceration for his young children. For instance, a 27-year-old named Bridget ended her romantic relationship with her partner prior to his most recent incarceration, attributing their relationship dissolution to his substance use. "I left

him. I wanted to change my life and go back to school and really build something for my son," she said. She has maintained an arms'-length relationship with him (and has moved on to a new romantic partner), telling us that his incarceration made it easier for them to communicate, but that she mostly disengaged from their co-parenting relationship during his incarceration. "I distance myself a lot, to get myself going and to do what I have to do," she said. She held out hope that her partner would reengage in their co-parenting relationship but also came to terms with the fact that he might not. "I feel like I'm going to have to raise my son by myself. It's becoming more of a reality for me. I didn't want it to come to this point," she reflected. Though Bridget engaged in little brokering on behalf of her partner following his incarceration, she engaged in considerable brokering with her family to secure child care for their three-year-old son. Her partner's incarceration—and inability to co-parent like he had before his incarceration—left considerable child care needs for Bridget. Like others enduring partner incarceration, she often felt overwhelmed without a consistent co-parent: "I'm the one scheduling everything for [my son], making sure everything is OK. It's a lot, following up with all of that." To manage this strain, and balance child care with her work schedule, she coordinated daycare pick-ups and drop-offs with her mother, with whom she has a strained relationship, and her ex-partner's mother. She also coordinated her son's appointments with speech and behavioral therapists. Bridget also worked to broker a relationship between her son and his father by maintaining some contact with her former romantic partner, even though they are no longer together. She explained that stopping contact would feel like "giving up on the fact that his dad is not gonna be there, and I can't do that." Overall, Bridget, like many women we interviewed, did considerable brokering—working with others to manage and respond to the many strains of incarceration—on behalf of her son but did limited brokering to support the absent family member.

In contrast to the concentrated brokers who predominantly broker on behalf of the absent family member's child, other concentrated brokers coordinate on behalf of the absent family member but not on behalf of his children. This group consists most commonly of incarcerated men's mothers who remain in touch with their sons during their confinement but who are largely not responsible for the everyday care of their children, often due to relationship tensions between the absent family member and his partner. For instance, a 60-year-old named Juana told us that her son had been awaiting trial for nearly one year, an experience that was especially anxiety-provoking for her. Sobbing during the interview, Juana described some of the strains stemming from her son's incarceration: "I sometimes catch myself thinking and thinking of what might happen when it comes to the court dates. And what is going to happen is what keeps me thinking. What are they going to say? What are they going to decide? That is what stresses me more right now. Like I don't know what is going to happen. And I just keep myself thinking what is going to happen and see what they decided and if they are going to give him more time? If they are going to let him out? I don't know. That is what stresses me out more right now is having to think of that."⁹ These emotional strains of her son's incarceration led to brokering with others, including criminal legal actors and her other two children. Juana told us that she attended every court date as

she carefully monitored her son's case, submitted paperwork on his behalf to the court, and mobilized her other children to help her coordinate with his lawyer, a process that she described as "a hassle." These tasks—and the corresponding brokering with others—all emerged in response to her son's incarceration. However, her son's romantic partner was in a new relationship and did not allow Juana to see her granddaughter, and as a result, Juana was not involved in her care. "I respect her decision, but I'd really like to see her. My son asks, 'What about my daughter?' Well, what can we do? He wants to see her, but we can't." Therefore, like other mothers especially, Juana brokered with others to manage strains for her incarcerated son, but fractured relationships with other family members precluded brokering on behalf of her son's children.

Strains of Concentrated Brokering. The concentrated brokers, like the exhaustive brokers, experience deep strains resulting from their brokering—above and beyond the strains of having an incarcerated son or partner. Like exhaustive brokers, concentrated brokers are also able to mobilize their networks for support, which they receive, and this collaboration generates new strains. The strains endured from concentrated brokering are steep but typically less voluminous than those stemming from exhaustive brokering, likely because these concentrated brokers generally engage in fewer forms of brokering than the exhaustive brokers.

Consider Dana, a 56-year-old, who engaged in concentrated brokering. Following her son's last incarceration, she gained custody of her son's two young children, brokering with other people to provide her grandchildren with considerable support and successfully shielding her grandchildren from entering state custody. However, she pulled back from brokering on behalf of her son: "I worried for ten years. It sucked everything from my body." Dana told us that the financial ramifications of supporting her grandchildren, coupled with the brokering required to maintain custody (including court visits and social worker supervision), made it difficult for her to maintain steady employment and afford items beyond household essentials. She also told us that she had no leisure time between caring for the two children and coordinating their visits with their mother, who was allowed to spend time with her children if she supervised: "I'm OK, I'm sacrificing for them." But Dana also incurred opportunity costs in her brokering role. She told us that she wanted to visit her family in Cambodia, a trip she made regularly before incurring these new care obligations, but she has no longer been able to do so: "I want to do things for myself—not just be like this all the time," she reflected.

Conflicts over brokering also engendered new relationship strains for some concentrated brokers. Brokers occasionally reported strong disagreements with family members over whether and how they would support their incarcerated loved one. For instance, Dana also told us that she argued with her husband over how to support their son: "We never talk [about him]. If we talk, we have a fight. We fight because we disagree on everything." Though Dana decided to pull back from brokering directly on behalf of her son, this choice led to new relationship strains with her husband. As she explained, "We're fighting, too, he keeps thinking about him a lot. I don't want him to be sad, stressed, and depressed. We have two kids to take care of. We have to keep healthy. You don't need to keep thinking about

the one that grew up, that knows how to feed himself already.” In this instance, Dana experienced strains from brokering on behalf of her son’s children and not from brokering on behalf of her incarcerated son (and she would very likely endure other strains if also brokering on his behalf).

Bounded Brokers

Bounded brokers are categorized by their relatively minimal engagement with brokering, unlike the exhaustive or concentrated brokers, and their desire to limit their brokering to providing support on behalf of the children of their absent family member (and to minimize the brokering they do on behalf of this person). Bounded brokers, comprising nearly one-fifth (19 percent) of the sample, are both mothers and romantic partners of incarcerated men. These brokers often have fractured relationships with their absent loved one, partially resulting from their loved one’s cyclical absence via repeated jail stays, and have varying (ranging from amicable to fractured) relationships with their other family members. Their incarcerated loved ones often have young children, which draws them into this limited brokering role. These bounded brokers minimize the brokering they do to directly support their incarcerated loved one, often due to emotional and resource exhaustion. Indeed, many bounded brokers describe engaging in more intensive types of brokering in the past. Bounded brokers also broker less intensely than concentrated brokers. The emotional valence around brokering varies, as bounded brokers report feeling anywhere from ambivalent to negative about their brokering roles. Their constraints mirror those of the exhaustive and concentrated brokers; that is, they do not have constraints that are nearly impossible to overcome, such as institutional exclusion and extreme precarity, but do face considerable barriers to their brokering. Bounded brokers generally endure considerable strains of incarceration, even despite often complicated relationships with their incarcerated family member, but experience relatively few strains stemming directly from brokering.

Bounded brokers are linked to incarcerated men through children and, accordingly, engage in some brokering. Many of these individuals are previous romantic partners (and primary caregivers of their shared children) who report fractured relationships with their incarcerated family member, but intervene minimally to maintain contact between children and their confined fathers. For example, Jackie, a 19-year-old, had decided to end her romantic relationship with her son’s father after his last incarceration. Though his incarceration was disruptive, prior to his confinement, they did not live together and she described everyday childrearing tasks (e.g., bathing, eating, and purchasing clothes) as “all me.” Jackie rented a room from her parents, and her mother continued to assist with child care after her partner’s incarceration. Nonetheless, Jackie brokered minimally to maintain a relationship between her son and his father. She took her son to visit his father in jail, allowed his parents to also take him, and shared the father’s letters and drawings with her son. She also made a pointed effort to talk about him each day: “I try to bring it up at least every day. I mention him so he won’t forget about him.” Jackie, like others who broker with family members and institutional agents to

manage the strains of incarceration on behalf of their children, did not completely eliminate her brokering duties.

Many bounded brokers have withdrawn from the absent family member. At some point in the life cycle of their family member's incarceration, these brokers decided to either eliminate or severely reduce their brokering. This decision was caused by many factors, including resource exhaustion, emotional fatigue, fraught personal relationships, and changes in priority for care in their social network (e.g., time and resources were better diverted toward others). For instance, a 26-year-old named Desiree spoke about how her former romantic partner's repeated incarcerations wore her down to the point of needing to withdraw support. He was in and out of jail from the beginning of their six-year relationship and, throughout the entirety of their relationship, she visited him during his incarceration stints and brokered with other family members to support him. Ultimately, though, these repeated incarcerations caused her to break up with him several years before his current incarceration. "He was in and out, in and out. It wasn't good for me or my kids. I told him, it's not gonna work out no more. I don't want my kids seeing the whole world like that." Eventually, after their romantic relationship dissolved and he was incarcerated, her brokering became limited to tasks that concerned her two children (ages five and eight), such as coordinating phone calls between her oldest child and her father. "I don't want her to later on say, because of you, you didn't let me talk to him. So, I let my daughter talk to him whenever she wants."

Strains of Bounded Brokering. Bounded brokers, in part because they do less brokering than the exhaustive or concentrated brokers, see fewer strains stemming directly from brokering with other people. We find that bounded brokers commonly endure strains of incarceration but report fewer strains from brokering, in part because of their limited amount of brokering. Several bounded brokers who coordinated at least some child care assistance from their network reported similar strains around conflicting parenting practices. Others reported strain with network members who disagreed with the degree to which they are willing to maintain their children's relationship with their father. For instance, a 29-year-old named Genevieve was no longer in a relationship with her son's father at the time of her interview. She was cautiously hopeful that her son and his father could repair their strained relationship upon his release, and she occasionally brokered with her son's school, coordinating therapy and extra educational support for his lower grades. However, her careful approach clashed with her ex-partner's mother: "He still has those moments, where he falls back and especially when he's distracted with the whole issue with his dad. . . That's why I had to talk to his mom, I told her, you need to stop making his dad so fresh in his mind." Genevieve's relationship with her ex-mother-in-law was also strained after she attempted to broker financial assistance to cover some of her son's day-to-day expenses and was rebuked: "I've called her because he had just ripped his shoes. I was like, can you please just help me. 'Oh, I don't have any money.' You're telling me you can't help me, yet you get like \$2000 every two weeks. That's bullshit." Similarly, a 21-year-old named Melody coordinated some child care support from her son's paternal grandmother to manage her partner's absence, which exposed her to unsolicited parenting advice: "That's really annoying to hear.

I get it, you wanna give me your opinion, but I didn't ask for it." She did her best to ignore her: "I hear her out, but it kinda goes in one ear and out the other. Because I'm the parent. She's just on the outside looking in."

Monitors

Brokering is more intermittent among the monitors (like the bounded brokers), who comprise about 8 percent of the sample. Monitors are family members, typically mothers but sometimes romantic partners of incarcerated men, who wish to offer support—to their incarcerated son and their grandchildren—but are unable to consistently incur brokering tasks given substantial constraints (most commonly institutional exclusions—via language barriers or legal status—and extreme precarity). These monitors are not engaged in as much brokering as the exhaustive or concentrated brokers but attempt to monitor the incarceration from afar through updates from family members who broker more regularly (and often enlist the help of other family members to do the work they monitor). The relationship quality between monitors and incarcerated men varies widely. Some monitors are mothers who have exhausted their emotional bandwidth for engaging with their son's repeated incarcerations and their corresponding strains yet want to support their sons in more limited ways from a distance. Other monitors are deeply and actively attached to their incarcerated son or partner and wish to have an active brokering role, but are unable to take on brokering tasks due to constraints. Despite varied relationship quality, monitors retain attachment threads with incarcerated men and rely on other brokers to carry out tasks and communicate with the incarcerated person. As a result, they generally carry out a limited amount of brokering duties themselves. Monitors usually have amicable relationships with their other family members (as these relationships are critical for monitoring to happen). Like bounded brokers, these monitors endure considerable strains stemming from incarceration but experience fewer strains from brokering.

Rosa, a 55-year-old, is an example of a monitor. Rosa's son had been in jail awaiting trial for more than five years when we first interviewed her, his first arrest but one that was quite consequential for him and his family. Rosa illustrates how barriers can lead some family members to adopt a monitoring role. Rosa lived in a small town in Mexico. She worked in a laundry, and her husband worked as a farmer. When we spoke to her over the phone, she told us that she struggles to receive updates about her son (as he could not make international calls from jail). She explained that her son had immigrated to Southern California with her niece and nephews, who have been passing along updates about his trial and his well-being. When we asked her what she knew about her son's case, she replied, "I don't know, to be honest. We're all the way over here."¹⁰ Rosa asked for updates from her niece, who visited her son in jail, occasionally put money on his books, and coordinated three-way calls on her phone so Rosa could speak to him from Mexico. Rosa and her husband also considered selling a small plot of land they own to support their son's legal fees, but she said that the exchange rate meant the money would not go far enough to meaningfully support her son. Barriers—in this case, transnational ones—limited the amount of brokering that Rosa could engage

in to support her incarcerated son, but she coped with these barriers by monitoring his incarceration via intermediaries, who were often brokers themselves.

Other mothers of incarcerated men reported health, financial, and geographic constraints that led them to be monitors. For instance, a 66-year-old named Lynn is retired and lives in Arizona. She was recently diagnosed with a chronic illness that severely limited her mobility and strained her finances. She told us that there was little she could do to support her son when he was arrested in California. Her fixed income and residence in a different state limited her brokering: “At one time, he wanted me to get him an attorney. I checked into it, and I told him, ‘I can’t afford that.’ You’re talking \$20,000. I can’t do it.” However, Lynn’s daughter lived in Southern California, and Lynn monitored her son through her close relationship with her daughter (who resembled an exhaustive broker): “He would let us know when he had court dates, and he contacted my daughter constantly with stuff he needed, you know, people he needed her to contact.” Though Lynn spoke with her son once a week over the phone (on an account her daughter set up for her), she saw his sister more frequently and asked her to support him with his upcoming trial. Lynn’s son had been sentenced to prison by the time of our follow-up interview with her, his fifth prison sentence since turning 18, and she told us that poor health made visits out of the question. “A trip like that for me is so hard,” she reflected. “I have my oxygen and everything to take. I might as well fly to the moon.” For Lynn, health, financial, and geographic constraints limited her brokering, and the bulk of the reactionary brokering occurring in the family fell on the shoulders of her daughter.

Strains among Monitors. Because monitors experience barriers to their brokering, they largely do not endure the same brokering-related strains as the more intensive brokers described above. However, we find evidence that monitors experience emotional strain when constraints prevent them from brokering more intensely. Rosa, introduced above, fretted about the communication difficulties she experienced from Mexico: “When I start to think about him, worry about him, I feel sad and I wish I was with them [her family in the United States]. To know how he’s doing. Because as I mentioned, we don’t talk much, maybe every two or three months.” Lynn, also introduced above, felt similarly: “I would like to see him. To be honest with you, with the sentence he has, I really don’t think I’m gonna be around when he gets out. I’m trying to be positive, but chances are not good,” she told us, growing emotional.

Discussion

This study advances research on criminal legal contact, families, and inequality by introducing the types, processes, and consequences of reactionary brokering—the collaborative work individuals engage in (with each other and occasionally with institutional actors) to manage the (mostly) sudden absence of a family member. Drawing on 279-in-depth interviews with mothers and romantic partners of incarcerated men, we move beyond documenting the strains of incarceration to describe typologies of how family members work together to broker care and resources on

behalf of themselves, their incarcerated loved one, or their children; explain how they arrive at particular brokering roles; and detail the additional strains that stem from these roles. Our findings, consistent with a family systems approach (Minuchin 1974), are situated in a broader literature that documents the wide-ranging, cumulative, and mutually reinforcing strains of family member incarceration for romantic partners (e.g., Wildeman, Schnittker, and Turney 2012) and parents (e.g., Goldman 2019) of the incarcerated. They also align strongly with the gendered nature of caregiving generally and for incarcerated populations specifically (Collins 1994; Delorme 2025; Edin and Lein 1997; Paik 2021; Rosenthal 1985; Umamaheswar 2024), but use organizational theory to shift analytic attention from tasks alone to how network members coordinate, mediate, and redistribute tasks necessitated by incarceration (Fernandez and Gould 1994). Our analysis of interview transcripts suggests three primary conclusions.

Our first finding is that family members engage in considerable reactionary brokering to manage the destabilizing absence of a family member, typically on behalf of their incarcerated loved one or their child. In the context of incarceration, reactionary brokering emerges when a family member coordinates with others to fill a critical void left by the incarcerated person's absence (e.g., navigating child care when their loved one is not physically present to provide care) or to manage a new strain that emerges from the confinement (e.g., maintaining relationships between their confined loved one and his children). The concept of reactionary brokering can help scholars move beyond documenting the strains of incarceration on individual family members (for a review, see Adams 2018), as it highlights how women coordinate support to manage these strains and that this collaborative work requires substantial time, financial resources, and emotional labor (above and beyond the strains of incarceration). Notably, we find that reactionary brokering is challenging to avoid and persists over time, even among women with ambivalent or burdened relationships with incarcerated men and even as women occasionally move between brokering groups as their context evolves. Taken together, the concept of reactionary brokering highlights the work required to manage the strains of incarceration, the repercussions of this work for brokers, and how the symbiotic harms of incarceration can proliferate throughout families. Reactionary brokering is intentionally broad to operate across contexts and most closely applies to other contexts of familial strain involving sudden network disruption (e.g., health crises, unplanned separations, deportation, and death), but the concept may also extend to families that mobilize others to manage sudden strains even without family member absence.

Reactionary brokering in the context of family member incarceration shares similarities with brokering observed among other marginalized households, most notably immigrant families, wherein children often navigate institutions on behalf of their parents (Delgado 2020; García Valdivia 2022; Katz 2014), but it also diverges in important ways. Both forms of brokering commonly involve managing punitive or exclusionary systems and require managing liminal spaces (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Turney 2015; Zhou 1997). Yet, unlike brokering in immigrant families, where parental absence is less common, families with incarcerated loved ones are often forced into brokering roles because of the destabilizing absence of their incarcerated

family member. Further, although brokering in immigrant families primarily occurs among youth and young adults due to their acculturation, access to resources such as higher education, and/or citizenship (Delgado 2020), brokering among families connected by incarceration is mainly done by adults—typically women—and often to support children. Children of incarcerated fathers may step into brokering roles over time, a possible avenue for future research.

We also advance past research by identifying how family members arrive at distinct brokering roles, a point embedded in organizational theory on brokering that highlights how structural position, resource access, and network dynamics explain heterogeneity in brokering (Fernandez and Gould 1994). Our second finding is that pathways into types of reactionary brokers vary by family relationships and structural constraints, specifically, the family member's relationship with the absent person, the family member's relationship with other family members, and constraints including institutional exclusions and extreme precarity. We find that exhaustive brokers—women who engage in high amounts of brokering across many domains—commonly have amicable relationships with their absent family member and with other family members, relationships that facilitate this type of brokering. Family relationships cannot explain pathways into all types of brokers, though. Some monitors have amicable relationships with their incarcerated family member, and nearly all have amicable relationships with their other family members, but the barriers they face—typically institutional exclusions and extreme precarity—mean these women engage in a relatively small amount of brokering but, instead, monitor the incarceration from afar. Family relationships may also be fractured by stigma related to the criminal legal system, limiting whom family members can turn to for support (Braman 2004). Though stigma was not a primary driver of brokering roles in this sample, stigma could play a larger role in determining broker types in contexts where jail incarceration is less common. Identifying these pathways into different brokering roles extends past research on brokering in general, which tends to focus on need and resource availability (Delgado 2020; García Valdivia 2022) as key factors explaining brokering responsibilities within families. We find that family relationships, in the context of incarceration, play a critical role in structuring exposure to brokering roles (Turanovic et al. 2012). These findings suggest heterogeneity in pathways into brokering and, importantly, show the salience of relationship quality in shaping family dynamics in the context of incarceration.

Third, we find that reactionary brokering simultaneously supports the family unit—including the absent family member, their children, and those engaging in brokering—and generates strain that goes beyond the well-known strains of incarceration, a duality aligned with ideas from organizational sociology (Fernandez and Gould 1994). These strains, which vary across broker types, most commonly include strained relationships, financial instability, poor mental health, and foregone opportunities (such as deferring moves, education, or work transitions). Exhaustive brokers endure the most strains of reactionary brokering, likely because of their frequent brokering across multiple domains. Paradoxically, participants with relatively unified and harmonious family relationships prior to incarceration experience greater strains, as they turn to their network ties to broker assistance and feel let

down, disheartened, or judged. Concentrated brokers also experience considerable strains across domains but, depending on whether they broker for the father or his children, generally experience fewer strains than exhaustive brokers. We observe fewer strains for bounded brokers and, especially, monitors, likely because they broker across fewer domains compared to exhaustive brokers. This may partly result from the study design, which did not probe deeply around the consequences of brokering that did not occur. It may be that bounded brokers and monitors can conserve their limited resources through their limited exposure to brokering roles. It may also be that they experience emotional distress over their decision to withdraw support (bounded brokers) or the fact that they cannot broker more assistance (monitors). Future research should probe more deeply around the positive and negative consequences endured across groups.

The burdensome repercussions of reactionary brokering, especially for those family members extensively engaged in it, add nuance to past research on brokering roles that highlights the personal benefits of this structural position (Kwon et al. 2020). Consistent with this work, brokers in this study often benefit from coordinating support for their children, which concurrently provides time, financial resources, and housing opportunities that they may otherwise not be able to access. In this case, we also find that brokering can be costly and, for some broker groups (particularly those who broker on behalf of their incarcerated loved one), its benefits often accrue to others. These findings parallel research on children of immigrants, which shows that immigrant youth describe considerable stress and anxiety engendered by brokering roles (Umaña-Taylor 2003). These findings also parallel research on the cost of social support, which highlights how reciprocal norms and obligations strain social support dyads (Offer 2012). In addition to these dyadic strains, we find that support exchanges also generate family-level strains, as families disagree—sometimes strongly—over whether and how to support their incarcerated loved one. This aligns with past research on the ambivalent nature of some family ties, which simultaneously contain positive, negative, and neutral dimensions (Fingerman, Hay, and Birditt 2004). These strains stemming from brokering—beyond the strains of incarceration—suggest the symbiotic harms of family member incarceration are more expansive than previously considered.

Limitations

Several features of the research design should be considered when interpreting these findings. To begin with, given that incarcerated men had to provide contact information for their family members and these family members had to agree to participate in the study, our sample may include more brokers than we would see in a population-based sample of those with incarcerated loved ones. The purpose of this study is not to document the prevalence of brokering but, instead, to identify the types, processes, and consequences of brokering in families.

Additionally, our sample comprises women family members who endure their son's or romantic partner's incarceration. The reactionary brokering that emerges following women's incarceration may be different from the reactionary brokering in our data, given the gendered nature of caregiving and familial relationships. We

anticipate two possibilities in the case of incarcerated women. Men experiencing family member incarceration may be less exposed to the exhaustive brokering category, as they have fewer caregiving responsibilities prior to incarceration. However, incarceration may be particularly disruptive to these caregiving arrangements precisely because women are more often primary caregivers, creating exhaustive brokering demands for men. Our data suggest that older women in these family networks (such as the parents of incarcerated men or women) may assist with caregiving responsibilities. Overall, we anticipate that although the distribution of family members across brokering types would likely be distinct for families that include incarcerated women, the types of brokering would remain similar.

Other features of our analytic sample merit attention. First, all incarcerated men in the sample had children and, given how caring for children is a prominent strain of incarceration that necessitates brokering, brokering may work differently in families navigating incarceration without these caregiving responsibilities. Second, our interviews with mothers and romantic partners highlight that brokering involves other family members—including siblings, adult children, in-laws, and other extended kin—whom we did not systematically include in our research design. Future research should investigate whether the processes identified here extend to men without children and how these other family members describe brokering. Third, most of our sample identifies as Latina. This considerably advances research on family member incarceration, as this group is underrepresented in this research, but processes of reactionary brokering may operate differently in Latino families than in non-Latino families, particularly given cultural differences in the role of family support (Ovink and Kalogrides 2015). Interestingly, we found that Latinas comprised a larger share of bounded brokers than exhaustive brokers, but these nonrepresentative data preclude definitive conclusions and more research is needed to understand if and how racial/ethnic differences emerge.

Finally, this study advances our understanding of jail incarceration, the most common form of incarceration that is often overlooked in research (Turney and Conner 2019). Jail incarceration has specific features—particularly its uncertainty, typical proximity to home, and cyclical nature—but we expect the concept of reactionary brokering is not specific to jail incarceration. The concept's core logic—families reorganizing in response to sudden disruption—is intentionally broad and likely applies to both jail and prison incarceration. The cyclical nature of jail incarceration—and its sometimes unanticipated and many demands—suggests that jail incarceration may produce more exhaustive brokers than prison incarceration. The concept likely applies to other crisis contexts, as noted, but we recognize that the mechanisms and dynamics of reactionary brokering may differ in important ways depending on the nature of the disruption and on how the affected family member is socially regarded. In contexts where the affected family member is unambiguously viewed as deserving—such as a parent with a sudden serious illness—we anticipate less family conflict over whether to broker, potentially more exhaustive brokering with broader network activation, but still meaningful strains from the demands placed on brokers. The pathways to brokering may be more heterogeneous in contexts with greater ambiguity in perceived deservingness. For example, deportation may generate sympathy and broad mobilization of support in

some contexts but carry stigma—or produce reluctance to engage with institutional actors out of fear of further legal exposure—in other contexts. Future research could systematically compare across types of familial strain to empirically test for similarities and differences in the social patterning and consequences of reactionary brokering.

Conclusion

The concept of reactionary brokering fundamentally reframes our understanding of the gendered symbiotic harms of incarceration by centering how women collectively navigate network disruption stemming from family member incarceration (Condry and Minson 2021). Our findings corroborate other research highlighting the considerable strains endured by those navigating confinement alongside their loved ones (Adams 2018). Critically, we simultaneously advance this scholarship by documenting how families work together to manage the strains stemming from network disruption via three primary types of reactionary brokering (alongside a group largely excluded from or exempting themselves from the brokering role who do extensive monitoring), the processes underlying these brokering types, and the cascading strains these brokering efforts generate. This brokering may further widen inequalities between those who do and do not experience family member incarceration and also create inequalities within those experiencing family member incarceration. These findings lay the foundation for a new wave of research on the strains of family member incarceration, which must adopt family systems frameworks that capture collective adaptation to these strains, and new research on brokering in contexts of network disruption.

Notes

- 1 Jails, operated at the local (city or county) level, are generally one's first type of criminal legal confinement. Jail incarceration is the confinement that typically occurs before prison incarceration. People incarcerated in jail are a heterogeneous group, as jails house people who have not been convicted of a crime (and are awaiting adjudication of their case via a trial or plea deal), people who have been convicted but are awaiting sentencing (and transfer to prison), and people who have been convicted of a crime and received a short sentence. People housed in jails are generally located closer to their pre-incarceration residence (and, often, their family members) than people housed in prisons (Turney and Conner 2019; for an in-depth look at the experience of jail incarceration, see, especially, Walker 2022). Most research focuses on the strains of prison incarceration (e.g., Braman 2004; Comfort 2008; Massoglia, Remster, and King 2011) or conflates jail and prison incarceration (e.g., Foster and Hagan 2013; Geller and Franklin 2014; for exceptions, see Apel 2016; Arditti et al. 2003; Comfort 2016; Wildeman, Turney, and Yi 2016).
- 2 We focus on incarcerated men because men comprise most of the incarcerated population and because men operate different social and caregiving roles than women prior to their incarceration (Mueller 2024). We systematically recruited incarcerated men, their minor children (ages 8–17), the caregivers of their children, and their own mothers. We also interviewed other selected family members, including sisters ($n = 14$), adult children ($n = 15$), and fathers ($n = 1$) of incarcerated men.

- 3 We systematically asked fathers to provide contact information for their children's mothers, regardless of their romantic or co-parenting relationship status with these women. This means that former romantic partners—including those with weak, conflictual, or largely severed ties to the incarcerated father—were intentionally recruited into the study. Importantly, when reaching out to potential participants with weak, conflictual, or severed ties to the incarcerated father, we explicitly told them that we were interested in the full range of experiences—including experiences of family members who had pulled back or disengaged—to encourage participation among those who otherwise might have assumed their experiences were not relevant to the study.
- 4 We excluded incarcerated men from the analytic sample, as our preliminary analyses showed that they were often not privy to the extensive brokering that occurred. We also excluded children from the analytic sample. Preliminary analyses showed that although children certainly endured the negative strains stemming from their father's incarceration, reactionary brokering was less common among children than among mothers and romantic partners. We excluded the other selected family members (sisters, adult children, and fathers) from the analytic sample because these family members were not systematically recruited.
- 5 Common reasons for nonparticipation among family members included the lack of contact information from the incarcerated person, they could not be located, they were deceased (more common among mothers), and refusal (more common among romantic partners). We compared demographic characteristics, socioeconomic characteristics, and incarceration histories of men with and without mothers and romantic partners in the analytic sample, which suggested few differences across groups. Men with mothers in the analytic sample, compared to men in the full sample, were slightly younger. Men with romantic partners in the analytic sample, compared to men in the full sample, were more likely to have been in a romantic relationship with their partner immediately prior to their incarceration.
- 6 We also identify an additional category of reactionary brokering. Enlisted brokers rarely appear in our analytic sample but, instead, are referenced by participants as those friends and family members whom participants actively enlist to manage the strains of incarceration (e.g., a participant who asks her other adult children to facilitate visits between her son and his children). Additionally, though we find that it is difficult for participants to fully pull back from brokering tasks, there are some participants (14 percent of the sample) who do not engage in any reactionary brokering stemming from family member incarceration. Most non-brokers are former romantic partners of incarcerated men without primary caregiving responsibilities for children they share with these men (though a few mothers of incarcerated men also fall into this group of non-brokers). In our sample, non-brokers are connected to men with extensive incarceration histories, with most men having at least five prior bouts of incarceration, suggesting that this cyclical incarceration may impair one's willingness to broker. Other commonalities among the non-brokers include experiencing substantial vulnerabilities—including their own criminal legal contact and homelessness—that make brokering difficult. Unlike monitors, non-brokers are almost completely disengaged. Given this group's distinct circumstances and limited engagement in brokering, we exclude this group from the remainder of our analysis.
- 7 This interview was translated from Spanish.
- 8 Relatively few romantic partners broker for their incarcerated partner but not his children. Those who do fall into this category have older children, or they are the recent partners of men who have children with other women but do not share a child with him themselves.

⁹ This interview was translated from Spanish.

¹⁰ This interview was translated from Spanish.

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