

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

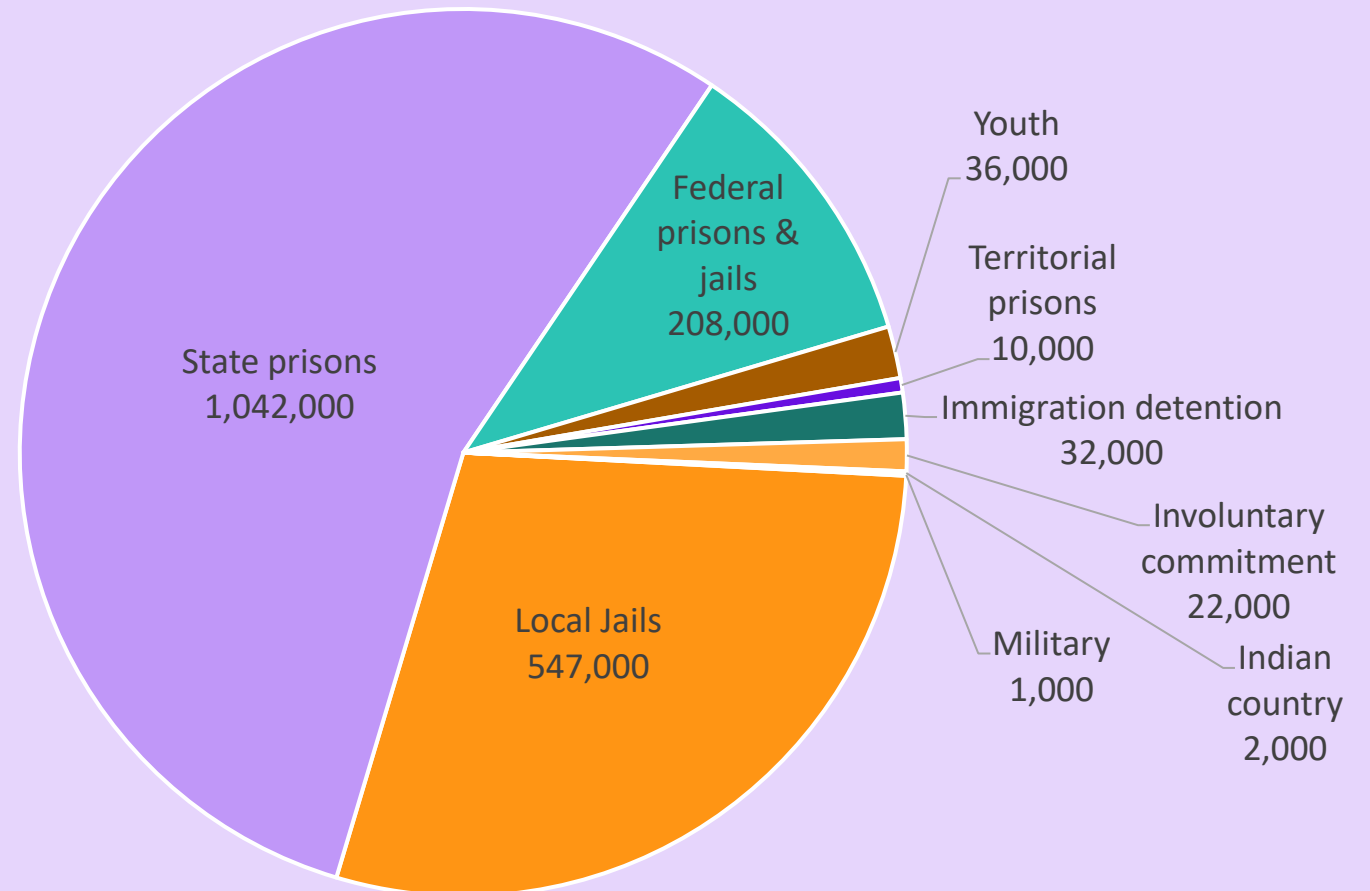
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Assisting Families of Inmates  
Family Seminar Series  
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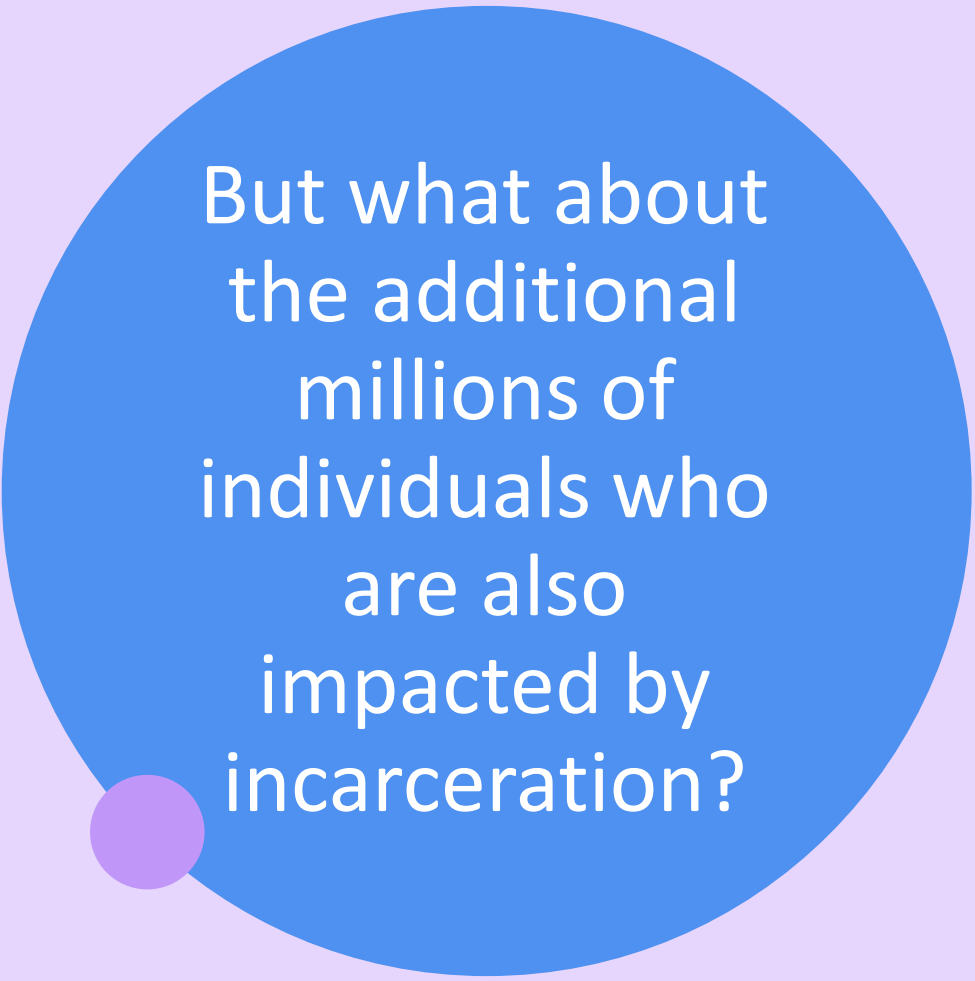
# Background

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


Incarceration in the United States, 2022



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



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



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



We want to  
hear from  
you!

## Live Poll

Where are you joining us from?

Do you have a loved one who is incarcerated? If so, what is their relationship to you?

How did you find out about today's presentation?

# Focus of this study

This study focuses on the role of organizations, such as formal support groups, in helping families experiencing the shock of having a close loved one incarcerated.

The guiding questions for this study were:

1. What kinds of organizations exist to support families with incarcerated loved ones?
2. How do these support groups attempt to ease the impact of incarceration on families?
3. To what extent and how do these organizations work to intervene upon how families think about the experience of incarceration?
4. What do these findings suggest about the benefits of organizational social support as compared to existing personal networks?

# Disenfranchised grief

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

Six factors contribute to disenfranchised grief:

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

# Ambiguous loss

- **Ambiguous loss:** a “situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution” (Boss 2016, 270)
  - *physical*: no one knows if the person is dead or alive – body is physically absent, but thoughts of that person are still present
    - examples: incarceration, missing soldiers, kidnapping victims
  - *psychological*: person is physically present but psychologically absent
    - examples: those suffering from a traumatic brain injury, severe mental illness, or addiction

# Support groups and social support

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



# Framing institutions

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

**“Framing institutions generate language, adaptive skills, and practical knowledge that shape how individuals interpret a new life condition and whether they ultimately see it as a platform for growth.** They operate as intermediaries between micro-level perceptions and actions and macro-structural forces and systems, positioned between one's personal response to a new circumstance and the larger set of privileges and disadvantages that she experiences due to her social location.” (2030)

# Research participants

- To be included in the sample, the organizations must primarily support families rather than only children, and their services must include some type of regular meeting arrangement.
- Final sample consists of 13 leaders from 11 organizations

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



# Live Poll

Have you attended a support group before?

If yes, was it online or in-person?

If no, would you be open and/or interested in attending one?

# Findings

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

I organize my findings into two major themes: experiencing loss and finding community.

# Experiencing loss: Mona

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

# Experiencing loss: Donna

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

# Finding community: Lisa

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

# Finding community: Gabriela

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



# Discussion

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



THANK YOU!

Help us learn  
more!

**RUTGERS**  
THE STATE UNIVERSITY  
OF NEW JERSEY

## Participate in an important research study!

*Investigating the effects of  
support groups for families  
of incarcerated individuals*

Have you:

- attended at least one support group meeting for families of incarcerated individuals before?
- never attended a support group meeting but have a loved one who is currently incarcerated?

Are you over 18 years old?

I'd love to interview you for up  
to 90 minutes via Zoom! All  
participants will receive a \$25  
Target e-gift card.

**To join, email**  
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