

The Carceral Contradictions of Motherhood: How Mothers of Incarcerated Sons Parent in the Shadow of the Criminal Legal System

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Abstract

The expansion of the U.S. carceral system profoundly shapes motherhood for marginalized women, yet little is known about how mothers navigate a child's incarceration. We use in-depth interviews with mothers of incarcerated men ($n = 69$), most of whom identify as Latina, to understand how jail incarceration shapes women's motherwork practices throughout the duration of their sons' incarceration. Building on theories of decarceral motherwork, we find that women with incarcerated sons engage in multiple practices—including crisis, collective, and hypervigilant motherwork—similar to those of formerly incarcerated Black mothers. We advance these insights, revealing how motherwork operates among a different population of system-impacted mothers—those with sons incarcerated in jail. First, we highlight the temporal process of motherwork by documenting the specific practices mothers adopt before, during, and after their son's incarceration. Second, we reveal how this motherwork process engenders substantial parenting role strains. Third, we find that cumulative parenting strains commonly lead mothers to engage in an additional motherwork strategy, distanced motherwork, which we define as the proactive—although often temporary—withdrawal of emotional, financial, and instrumental support to children. Thus, by illuminating patterns of motherwork in the context of a child's jail incarceration, and by systematically linking motherwork to parenting role strains, we advance an understanding of parenting in the shadow of the criminal legal system.

Keywords

criminal legal system, families, incarceration, motherhood

The rise in U.S. incarceration rates means that mothers are increasingly parenting their children in the shadow of the carceral system (Enns et al. 2019). The incarceration of an adult child has deleterious repercussions for families, with research documenting how a child's incarceration increases caregiving burdens, exacerbates financial hardship, and undermines mothers' physical and mental health (Goldman 2019; Green et al. 2006;

Sirois 2020; Western 2018). Enduring a child's incarceration, most commonly a son's, is

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concentrated among mothers navigating compounding stressors, such as systemic racism, poverty, housing instability, and under-resourced neighborhoods (Enns et al. 2019; Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Thus, child incarceration—an experience rooted in structural inequalities—has the potential to profoundly transform the context of motherhood, especially for poor mothers and mothers of color.

Research on contemporary motherhood increasingly points to the dominance of intensive mothering ideologies, or the idea that “good mothers” invest vast amounts of money, time, and energy into their children (Ennis 2014; Hays 1996; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020). Yet these ideals assume privileges that contradict both the realities of carceral conditions and the structural inequalities that shape the parenting practices of marginalized mothers—mothers enduring systems of structural racism and economic exploitation (Brantley 2023a; Elliot and Reid 2019; Randles 2021). Studies of Black mothers, who are disproportionately affected by the carceral system, demonstrate how Black women negotiate intensive mothering practices and engage in “motherwork” (Collins 1994) to support their families under circumstances of extreme precarity and state surveillance (Brantley 2023a; Elliot and Reid 2019; Gurusami 2019). These strategies include practices to prevent criminalization, such as sheltering children from neighborhood violence (Elliot and Reid 2019; Gurusami 2019) and monitoring peer groups (Brantley 2023a).

This scholarship provides a window into how mothers of incarcerated children may calibrate their parenting practices, but it has limitations. First, this research—which predominantly centers the experiences of Black mothers—has yet to systematically consider how motherwork operates among women diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and immigration experience. Motherwork is a culturally specific process (Collins 1994), and Black women’s motherwork emerges from a history of racial and economic exploitation distinct from the experiences of other marginalized

mothers (Collins 1994; Gurusami 2019). Second, we know relatively little about how the demands of mothering a child incarcerated in jail (including navigating caregiving responsibilities for grandchildren, communication difficulties, and interactions with criminal legal actors) shape parenting role strains over time. Jail incarceration—characterized by relatively short (usually less than one year) and cyclical bouts of confinement, often without a conviction—can have considerable implications for families (Comfort 2016). Yet, although jail incarceration is more common than prison incarceration, jails remain a relatively understudied aspect of criminal legal contact (Turney and Conner 2019). Finally, studies on parenting in the shadow of the criminal legal system focus predominantly on adolescent children unlikely to be parents themselves at the time (Elliot and Reid 2019; Turney 2023a). Little is known, however, about how women simultaneously navigate the aftermath of their adult child’s incarceration as mothers and grandmothers, leaving important gaps in our understanding of the intergenerational consequences of family member incarceration.

In this article, we address these limitations using in-depth interviews with mothers of incarcerated men ($n = 69$), most of whom identify as Latina, to understand how jail incarceration shapes women’s mothering and grandmothering strategies over time. Aligning with Gurusami’s (2019) theory of “decarceral motherwork,” we find that women with incarcerated sons engage in motherwork practices—including crisis, collective, and hypervigilant motherwork—similar to those of formerly incarcerated Black mothers (Banks 2022; Gurusami 2019). We extend these insights by demonstrating how motherwork operates among a different population of system-impacted women—mothers (and grandmothers) with sons incarcerated in jail who predominantly identify as Latina.

First, we identify the temporal process of motherwork by documenting how these strategies evolve over time, with women commonly adopting hypervigilant motherwork

before and after their son's (often cyclical) incarceration and commonly adopting collective and crisis motherwork during their son's confinement. Second, we reveal how this motherwork process engenders substantial parenting role strains. Third, we find that cumulative parenting strains stemming from women's motherwork often become overwhelming, leading mothers to engage in an additional motherwork strategy, *distanced motherwork*, which we define as the withdrawal of emotional, financial, and instrumental support to children. Yet distanced motherwork is not the end of motherwork; rather, distanced motherwork is both a proactive harm-reduction strategy used to protect one's family and a tool to empower women by regaining control over their own motherhood narrative. By illuminating motherwork patterns in the context of a child's jail incarceration, and by systematically linking motherwork and parenting role strains, we reveal the contradictions between the expectations of intensive mothering and the carceral conditions shaping motherhood for women enduring their children's confinement.

BACKGROUND

An Intersectional Lens on Motherhood

A growing body of research, grounded in the work of Black feminist scholars, reveals the complexity of mothering experiences among poor women and women of color (Brantley 2023a; Dow 2019; Randles 2021). Collins's (1994) theory of "motherwork" delineates the strategies and practices Black women use to ensure their family's survival, empowerment, and identity in the face of extreme structural precarities. By highlighting the multiple ways racism and poverty shape motherhood, motherwork challenges the assumptions of intensive mothering, that is, the ideology that "good mothering" is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays 1996:8). These practices charge mothers with

the primary responsibility of cultivating their children's academic and social success at any cost (Ennis 2014; Hays 1996). Intensive mothering ideologies continue to dominate motherhood discourses, yet these practices paint a portrait of "good mothers" that reflects opportunities afforded to white, middle-class, and highly educated women (Randles 2021).

Motherwork, in contrast, emerges in direct response to affronts to the safety and survival of racially and economically marginalized families (Brantley 2023a; Collins 1994; Dow 2019; Gurusami 2019; Randles 2021). Motherwork strategies overlap with the self-sacrificing and time-consuming nature of intensive mothering (Brantley 2023a), but motherwork emphasizes acts of survival, empowerment, and identity that are often assumed in intensive mothering. By centering the experiences of Black mothers, motherwork calls attention to the labor of "othermothers" who share in childrearing (Collins 1994; Pittman 2023), the protective practices involved in shielding children from harm (Dow 2019), and the innovative strategies mothers use to empower their children and themselves (Brantley 2023a; Edwards 2022). Ultimately, the theory of motherwork argues that motherhood cannot be understood in isolation from its context (Collins 1994). Given the exponential rise in incarceration over the past half-century, and its disproportionate repercussions for low-income and Black and Latinx communities (Rios 2011; Western et al. 2021), it is imperative that scholarship considers the carceral conditions shaping women's motherwork experiences across racial/ethnic identities and immigration experiences.

Motherwork in a Carceral Context

The expansion of the U.S. criminal legal system has profoundly shaped motherhood for poor women, women of color, and immigrant women (Banks 2022; Gurusami 2019; Turney and Wildeman 2013). Mothers parenting under carceral constraints must respond to a unique set of challenges and needs that differ from the dominant expectations of intensive

mothering (Garcia-Hallet 2022). Research on the parenting practices of formerly incarcerated Black mothers reveals the emergence of *decarceral motherwork*, an alternative form of intensive mothering that reflects rich traditions of survival and resistance among historically marginalized mothers (Banks 2022; Collins 1994; Gurusami 2019).

Decarceral motherwork includes three context-specific parenting strategies—crisis, collective, and hypervigilant motherwork—that formerly incarcerated women use to ensure their children’s well-being (Gurusami 2019). First, *crisis motherwork* refers to the labor of addressing immediate threats to mothers’ custody or reunification with their children. For formerly incarcerated women, crisis motherwork includes resource management strategies such as promptly identifying financial resources to alleviate a crisis (e.g., paying for housing) and engaging in emotional labor to mitigate distress among young children (Gurusami 2019). Second, *collective motherwork* includes the shared labor of “othermothers” that women commonly rely on for childcare (Collins 1994) and community strategizing about managing the aftermath of incarceration (e.g., navigating the child welfare system). Third, *hypervigilant motherwork* reflects the anticipatory labor of protecting children from state surveillance and intervention, including “hovering” strategies mothers use to keep a watchful eye on children (Gurusami 2019).

Gurusami’s (2019) concept of decarceral motherwork brings to focus the profound contradictions of motherhood. Unlike intensive mothering, which focuses on cultivating children’s social and academic well-being (Hays 1996), decarceral motherwork reveals how formerly incarcerated Black mothers navigate their family’s survival, undermine controlling images of Black motherhood, and protect themselves under extreme conditions of state surveillance. Applying the theory of decarceral motherwork to our sample of predominantly Latina mothers enduring a child’s jail incarceration can provide important insights into the complex cultural and

carceral conditions shaping women’s motherwork and, in doing so, advance a broader understanding of the circumstances under which motherwork emerges and adapts.

Motherwork among Mothers of Incarcerated Adult Children

Despite attention to how formerly incarcerated Black mothers enact decarceral motherwork to shield their children from criminal legal contact (Banks 2022; Gurusami 2019), and theoretical reasons to expect that mothers of incarcerated children engage in similar motherwork practices, relatively little is known about the parenting strategies of mothers whose sons are experiencing jail confinement, especially among Latinx families. This is a nontrivial oversight given the commonality of enduring an adult child’s incarceration, especially a son’s incarceration (Enns et al. 2019). Furthermore, men of color—including Latinos—are disproportionately criminalized in the United States (Rios 2011) and disproportionately endure jail incarceration (Western et al. 2021). In fact, nearly half of all Latinxs have experienced an immediate family member’s incarceration (ranging from short jail stays to lengthy prison sentences), suggesting that Latinas commonly mother in the shadow of the carceral system (Enns et al. 2019).

Parenting during a child’s jail confinement poses unique demands. Mothers cannot freely interact with their incarcerated children, which may be particularly challenging as they adapt their parenting strategies in response to the crisis of incarceration. Studies of romantic partners of incarcerated men find that women invest a great deal of time and money into alleviating the crisis of a partner’s incarceration (Comfort 2008; Turney et al. 2023). For mothers of incarcerated children, who face similar caregiving constraints, crisis motherwork may include putting money in commissary accounts so their children can purchase food and hygiene products, paying for phone calls, or paying for visitation-related expenses (e.g., transportation). Consistent with the expectations of

intensive mothering, mothers may also suspend their own needs to financially and emotionally support their children through the confinement period. Indeed, research reveals how marginalized mothers emphasize the importance of “being there” for their children and their willingness to make sacrifices to meet their children’s basic needs (Dow 2019; Elliot, Powell, and Brenton 2015; Randles 2021). For instance, in Latinx households, mothers often adhere to the value of familism, which emphasizes the social support of family members and the expectation of placing the family before the self (Campos et al. 2014; Sabogal et al. 1987).

Additionally, jail incarceration creates compounding childcare responsibilities for family members left behind, likely prompting mothers (and grandmothers) to engage in collective motherwork. Incarceration impairs parenting among romantic partners of incarcerated men (Turney and Wildeman 2013), and these consequences may extend to mothers of incarcerated children. For women, collective motherwork may include the additional labor of caring for their adult child’s family and children during confinement. This care burden may especially exist in multigenerational households. For Latinxs, familism involves the notion that mothers may co-parent grandchildren or take on primary childcare responsibilities typically incurred by parents, especially in times of crisis (Derlan et al. 2018). In some cases, grandmothers may experience coerced mothering, or pressure to take on caregiving responsibilities beyond their desired level or capacity (Pittman 2023). Mothers of incarcerated children, who often come from backgrounds with long traditions of familism and collective caregiving, may feel responsible for the well-being of their adult child’s family and step into caregiving roles in their child’s absence, regardless of their caretaking capacity.

Mothers may also be hypervigilant of their adult children throughout their incarceration experience. There is evidence that, in an era of mass incarceration, mothers of adolescents protect their offspring (Brantley

2023b; Elliott and Aseltine 2013; Elliott and Reid 2019; Turney 2023a). Mothers of Black adolescents are hyper-aware to shield their children from criminalization and anti-Black racism (Brantley 2023b) and use sheltering strategies—including isolating their children from potentially harmful peers—to limit their children’s exposure to criminal legal contact (Elliott and Reid 2019). Mothers also increase their disciplinary strategies in response to adolescent police contact (Turney 2023a).

Within Latinx households, family members are expected to manage their behavior (and the behavior of others) to maintain family honor (Campos et al. 2014; Sabogal et al. 1987). Latina mothers may increase parental monitoring of adult children after release (or between incarceration spells) to manage their children’s safety and the stigmatization of incarceration. Mothers may arrange their children’s housing, employment, and transportation, thereby ensuring their children meet community supervision requirements (Western 2018). They may also solicit information from their children about their social networks and whereabouts. Although the role expectations of parenting adult children look different than the expectations of parenting adolescents (Seltzer and Bianchi 2013), mothering an incarcerated adult child may require an extended period of hypervigilance to protect the child from further criminalization and stigmatization.

Linking Adult Children’s Incarceration to Parenting Role Strains

Jail incarceration is likely a chronic stressor as mothers try to protect their children. The stress process perspective, which highlights how stressors exacerbate inequalities in well-being, is a useful theoretical framework for understanding the consequences of an adult child’s incarceration (Pearlin 1989; Pearlin et al. 1981). Parenting role strains, one aspect of the stress process perspective, is particularly relevant. Four types of stressors stem from the demands associated with the

parenting role: *role overload*, the perception that the demands of parenting exceed an individual's capacity; *interpersonal conflict*, or the conflict occurring between parents and their children; *role restriction*, the extent that parents feel "stuck" in the parenting role; and *interrole conflict*, which occurs when parents experience competing parenting and life demands (Pearlin 1989).

An adult child's incarceration, and the corresponding motherwork, likely engenders considerable parenting strains. First, jail incarceration creates new tasks for mothers (e.g., putting money on the books, communicating with attorneys, caring for grandchildren), increasing the possibility of parental role overload as mothers incur compounding responsibilities (Goldman 2019; Green et al. 2006). Second, incarceration exacerbates chronic stress through increased interpersonal conflict (Smith and Coleman 2024). Jail incarceration may create communication challenges, engender stigma, and foster feelings of anger toward their children or the unjust carceral system, all of which can increase conflict and fracture familial relationships (Elliot and Reid 2019; Smith and Coleman 2024; Turney 2023b; Widdowson et al. 2020). Third, women may feel especially restricted in their role as mothers and grandmothers during their children's incarceration. The expectations of motherhood as child-centered, labor-intensive, and self-sacrificing (Hays 1996) may lead mothers to provide obligatory support, or coerced mothering (Pittman 2023), for their children or grandchildren throughout the incarceration, heightening parenting strains. Finally, by removing people from households and creating new parenting roles and responsibilities, incarceration may exacerbate interrole conflict among mothers who are simultaneously caring for children and grandchildren (Pittman 2023), working (at times multiple and unpredictable jobs), and supporting their incarcerated loved ones. Even after their child is released from jail, mothers may continue to face conflicting roles as they increase monitoring of their adult children (e.g., providing transportation

to work and probation appointments, setting curfews, providing financial support).

Parenting strains are also contextual, with the demands of parenting and the resources available to mothers likely changing across cultural and carceral contexts. For instance, the emphasis that familism puts on social support and close family ties suggests Latina mothers may benefit from familism when it comes to navigating the role strains associated with parenting an incarcerated child (Campos et al. 2014). Indeed, familism has been widely linked to well-being among Latinxs (Corona, Campos, and Chen 2017; Katiria Perez and Cruess 2014). Yet, under particularly stressful conditions, such as a child's incarceration, certain aspects of familism (e.g., childcare obligations, prioritizing the family over the self) may also exacerbate role strains, particularly for mothers. Considering that parenting role strains are culturally specific, understanding how Latinas perceive and respond to the demands of parenting an incarcerated child is imperative for research on stress and family member incarceration.

Parenting strains are likely also shaped by the conditions of confinement. Jail incarceration often begins in early adulthood, with people entering and commonly churning through the carceral system throughout their young adult years (Sampson and Laub 1992). For mothers, the financial, time, and emotional strains associated with lengthy sentences or cyclical incarceration likely accumulate, potentially exceeding their parenting capacities. Although we know relatively little about the mothering experiences of women with incarcerated children (but see Braman 2007; Western 2018), research provides insight into how jail incarceration imposes specific forms of stress on families (Comfort 2016). Compared to prison incarceration (see Comfort 2008), the conditions of jail incarceration are particularly destabilizing. Individuals frequently churn through jails, often without a conviction or a clear release date. For romantic partners, incarceration—and the corresponding instability and uncertainty—leads some women to re-evaluate and ultimately end

their romantic relationship (Comfort 2008; Turney et al. 2023). Mothers, compared to romantic partners, have different constraints and motivations for caring for incarcerated loved ones, yet parenting strains may also lead mothers to re-evaluate their role in their incarcerated child's life, with some mothers distancing themselves from their adult children altogether. Understanding how women enact motherhood throughout their child's jail incarceration is critical given that jails engender considerable instability for family members (Comfort 2016) and strong parent-child relationships can reduce recidivism (Schroeder, Giordano, and Cernkovich 2010).

DATA AND METHODS

Data

To examine how women enduring the stressor of their sons' incarceration enact motherhood, we use data from the Jail and Family Life Study, a longitudinal, in-depth interview study of incarcerated men and their family members. Study participants include 123 men incarcerated in three Southern California jails and their families (including their children, children's mothers and caregivers, and their own mothers). We focus on incarcerated sons rather than daughters given that men are more commonly incarcerated than women (Enns et al. 2019). Men were eligible for participation if they had been in jail for at least two months and had at least one minor child they interacted with in the month prior to their incarceration. We asked men to provide names and contact information for their family members (including their mothers), whom we invited for study participation. We interviewed men and their family members twice, with baseline interviews occurring during men's confinement and follow-up interviews occurring after release.¹

Our analytic sample includes 69 mothers of incarcerated men, most of whom were interviewed twice (56 of the 69 respondents participated in follow-up interviews), facilitating an examination of how women enact motherwork over time.² Mothers' baseline

interviews occurred between August 2015 and September 2017, and follow-up interviews occurred between January 2016 and November 2017. We conducted interviews at a location chosen by mothers, usually their homes, restaurants, or parks. During both baseline and follow-up interviews, we asked mothers to describe, among other things, their family background, parenting strategies, relationships with their son and other family members, and the role of their son's incarceration in their lives (see the online supplement for the complete interview guide). Interviews focused on establishing temporality of events, specifically with respect to their son's incarceration (e.g., changes in caregiving responsibilities following their son's incarceration). Interviewers wrote detailed field notes after each interview. We interviewed nearly half ($n = 33$) the mothers in Spanish, with the remaining interviews conducted in English. We audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim all interviews (and translated Spanish interviews into English).³ Baseline and follow-up interviews lasted an average of 128 minutes and 108 minutes, respectively. We provided all mothers a \$50 gift card per interview.

Analytic Strategy

We adopted an abductive approach to data analysis, which involves an iterative analytic process that moves between deductive and inductive coding (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). An abductive approach is particularly useful because it allows us to develop new theories based on existing theoretical concepts while inductively identifying themes from the data (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This process occurred in three primary stages. First, led by the study PI (and second author), a team of trained graduate students conducted deductive coding of all interview transcripts. This coding process involved organizing interviews into broad themes primarily based on the interview guide. These themes included information about each mother's family, parenting, and well-being. The research team initially coded transcripts

together to ensure consistency across coders. Once we reached consensus on how to apply each code (after coding about 10 transcripts together), one team member coded each transcript, and another team member carefully reviewed that transcript (working together to resolve remaining discrepancies).

Second, we coded each transcript using a subset of the deductive codes from the first round of coding ($n = 11$), including *relationship with son* (comprising mothers' discussions of their relationship with their sons) and *self parenting* (comprising mothers' discussions of parenting).⁴ Our abductive approach involved systematically testing for the presence or absence of themes derived from prior work (Gurusami 2019), while also inductively coding emergent themes based on the interview data (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This coding process captured four motherwork strategies: (1) crisis motherwork (e.g., discussions of financial, instrumental, and emotional support for their sons), (2) collective motherwork (e.g., discussions of shared childcare and community support), (3) hypervigilant motherwork (e.g., discussions of parental monitoring, managing their sons' probation or parole, arranging employment), and (4) distanced motherwork (e.g., discussions of withdrawing support and corresponding discussions of protection and empowerment). Themes of crisis, collective, and hypervigilant motherwork were guided by prior work on decarceral motherwork (Gurusami 2019). Distanced motherwork emerged inductively. Both the first and third authors coded the subset of deductive codes from each interview transcript and worked together to resolve discrepancies to ensure intercoder consistency.

Third, based on the second round of coding and field notes for each participant, we created analytic memos for each respondent that described mothers' accounts of parenting role strains (e.g., discussions of feeling overwhelmed, trapped in caregiving roles, conflict with children), paying particular attention to the motherwork strategies linked to each parenting strain. We then tracked the enactment

of each motherwork strategy—and corresponding parenting strains—before, during, and after their sons' incarceration, focusing on how women experience motherhood across the cycle of their sons' carceral experience.

Researcher Reflexivity

Aligned with feminist theorizing on positionality, it is critical to consider the role of the research team in conducting research with mothers of incarcerated sons (Reich 2021). Nine researchers (the study PI and eight graduate students) conducted interviews for the Jail and Family Life Study. Seven interviewers identified as women and two as men. Five interviewers identified as white and four identified as Latinx. Thirteen researchers conducted deductive coding of the interviews. Twelve coders identified as women, and one identified as a man. Six coders identified as white, four Latinx, two Black, and one Asian.

In some cases, researchers shared similar backgrounds as the mothers (either via demographic characteristics or being system-impacted themselves). These shared identities often created an environment where mothers felt comfortable telling their stories, but they may have simultaneously led mothers to assume a shared knowledge of common experiences, potentially limiting their elaboration. Interviewers were trained to ask probing questions and inquire for elaboration instead of assuming mothers' responses.

Given the nature of the study, and the power differentials intrinsic to the researcher-participant dynamic, we recognize the positionality of the researchers likely shaped the questions asked in interviews, the nature of relationships with participants, and how the interviews were analyzed and interpreted. The team worked to attend to these power dynamics, building rapport with mothers, meeting regularly to reflect on the interview process, and adapting the interview protocol to align with mothers' experiences. The team also attended to conditions of motherhood by providing childcare during interviews and connecting mothers to community resources.

In doing so, we aimed to ensure our findings reflect the lived realities of system-impacted mothers as told through mothers' own narratives.

Sample Description

Table 1 summarizes baseline characteristics of the sample. On average, mothers were 55 years old and had four children. Most mothers ($n = 53$) identified as Latina; 12 identified as white, 2 identified as Black, and 2 identified as Asian or multiracial. Nearly two thirds ($n = 44$) were born outside the United States. More than three fourths ($n = 54$) of mothers were poor or working poor (e.g., unemployed or employed part-time).⁵ Nearly three fifths ($n = 39$) were in a marital or cohabiting relationship. On average, about one fifth ($n = 13$) of mothers had been previously incarcerated.⁶ Most mothers had sons with prior—and sometimes extensive—criminal legal contact, with nearly nine tenths ($n = 61$) of women reporting their son had been incarcerated prior to their current incarceration. Nearly one sixth ($n = 11$) had sons who had been incarcerated for five or more years, and one third ($n = 21$) had sons who had been incarcerated eight or more times.⁷

FINDINGS

Our analysis reveals how mothers of incarcerated sons experience motherhood under the shadow of the carceral system. Expanding scholarship on decarceral motherwork (Gurusami 2019), we document the process of motherwork, delineating how women enact motherwork over the cycle of their sons' jail incarceration experience (Figure 1). Mothers of incarcerated sons, most of whom identified as Latina, enacted the three (not necessarily mutually exclusive) types of motherwork—crisis, collective, and hyper-vigilant motherwork—identified among formerly incarcerated Black mothers (Gurusami 2019). These motherwork strategies, which change over time, generate considerable parenting strains; mothers of incarcerated sons

described the role overload, role restriction, and interpersonal conflict associated with their motherwork. Parenting strains lead many mothers to enact *distanced motherwork*, which we define as the proactive withdrawal of emotional, financial, and instrumental support from their sons. Distanced motherwork engenders its own parenting strains, including interrole conflict and interpersonal conflict, leading many mothers to cycle back through the motherwork process. We next describe the temporal process of motherwork and, in doing so, reveal how mothers with incarcerated sons experience the carceral contradictions of motherhood.

Crisis Motherwork: "We Need to Keep Supporting Him"

For many mothers, a child's incarceration is a crisis that requires rapidly responding to and assessing the child's needs, and it is followed by a prolonged period of instability, uncertainty, and hardship. Unlike intensive mothering, which emphasizes children's academic and social success (Hays 1996), mothers enact *crisis motherwork* to ensure the well-being and survival of their sons and their sons' families during the carceral period (see Figure 1). Crisis motherwork, described in more than three quarters of our interviews, involved providing immediate and often sustained financial, instrumental, and emotional support to their sons and grandchildren during—and at times after—their sons' incarceration. Simultaneously facing compounding caregiving responsibilities and financial insecurity, some mothers described barriers to enacting crisis motherwork.

The financial demands of crisis motherwork are deep, as mothers commonly spend hundreds of dollars a month on phone calls, commissary accounts, and legal fees. Juana, a 60-year-old Latina mother, described these financial demands. Juana and her son had a very close relationship before he went to jail, and Juana now remains dedicated to supporting him through his confinement: "We will support him for as long as we can. Even if it is just

Table 1. Baseline Descriptive Characteristics of Mothers

	Full Sample	
	Mean / Freq.	%
Mother Characteristics		
Age (range: 31 to 77)	55	
Number of children (range: 1 to 10)	4	
Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latina	53	77
White	12	17
Black	2	3
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	1
Multiracial	1	1
Social class		
Poor	21	30
Working poor	33	48
Working class	8	12
Middle class	7	10
Educational attainment		
Less than high school	13	19
High school or GED	8	12
More than high school	17	25
Unknown	31	45
Relationship status		
Married or cohabiting	39	57
In a romantic relationship	5	7
No romantic relationship	21	30
Unknown	4	6
Employed	35	51
Foreign born	44	64
Interview conducted in Spanish	33	48
Ever been incarcerated	14	20
Son Characteristics		
Age (range: 19 to 59)	29	
Duration of total incarceration		
Less than one year	15	22
Between one and five years	43	62
Five or more years	11	16
Frequency of incarceration		
One to three times	18	26
Four to seven times	30	43
Eight or more times	21	31
Prior incarceration	61	88
Incarcerated as a juvenile	23	34
Number of children (range: 1 to 5)	2	
<i>N</i>	69	

Note: All descriptives are from baseline interviews. Percentages for binary variables based on the interviews with non-missing data.

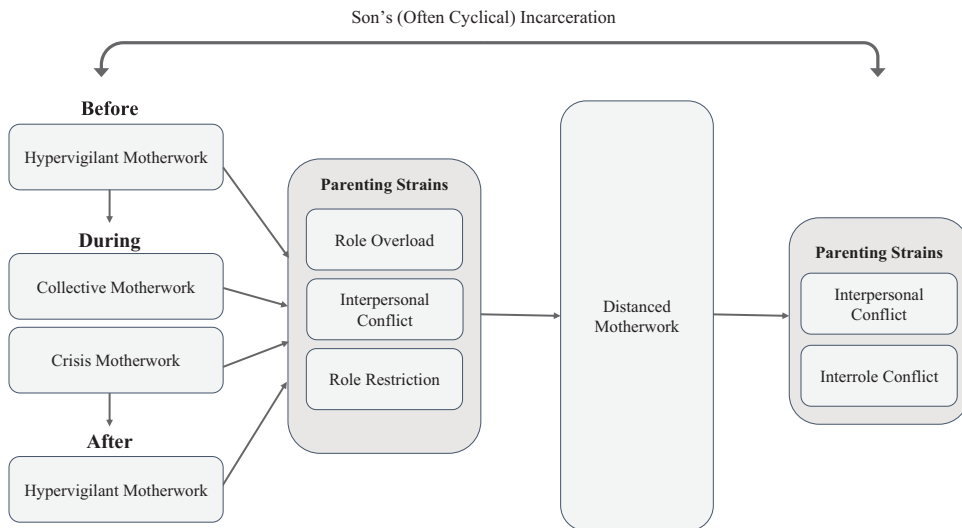


Figure 1. The Motherwork Process

with our presence and with words, we need to keep supporting him.”⁸ Despite enduring years of financial hardship, both prior to and exacerbated by her son’s incarceration, Juana told us the importance of prioritizing financial support for her son: “We put \$20 [on his commissary account] every time we can. Because for all the food that they give him there, it’s not enough. They are left hungry, and I don’t want my son to starve.” Similarly, Fina, a 51-year-old Latina mother, described the sacrifices of crisis motherwork. Fina regularly puts \$100 on her son’s commissary account so he can purchase food, toiletries, and other personal products in jail, a decision that necessitates her having a second job to make ends meet. Describing her financial situation, she said, “I’m hanging in there, little by little.”⁹ For mothers who are now unable to parent their sons as they would prior to the incarceration, enacting crisis motherwork via financial support—despite sacrifices to their own well-being—is one of the few ways they can support their sons and meet their most basic human needs.

Crisis motherwork also entails the provision of instrumental support to manage their sons’ legal cases. Mothers incur the labor of arranging bail, paying legal fees, working with attorneys, and attending court hearings to

secure their sons’ freedom. Consider Marsha, a 48-year-old Latina mother, who described the cumulative costs of managing her son’s legal cases and court fees over time. Marsha explained that her son’s legal troubles began in high school, costing her upward of \$10,000 in legal fees before he turned 18. Marsha reflected on this time: “It was a strain. Whether you have enough or not, they’re your responsibility. So, until they’re 18, you pay for the legal fees, the court fees.”¹⁰ Marsha continues to provide financial support for her son, and she also provides instrumental support via managing his legal cases and attending court hearings. Justifying her continued crisis motherwork, Marsha explained how withholding support would make her feel: “I’d feel guilty. I think it’s the guilty part as a parent.” Endita, a 54-year-old Latina mother, described the work involved in hiring a private attorney to manage her son’s case. The time and energy this required, in addition to the financial aspect of it, means she prioritizes his needs over her own. “I was saving that money for a car. Now the car is gone,” she said. Like many mothers, Endita identified her crisis motherwork as one means of fulfilling the self-sacrificing expectations of intensive motherhood.

Mothers' sustained emotional support is at the heart of crisis motherwork. Mothers commonly expressed a commitment to maintaining regular contact with their sons during their incarceration, despite the time and financial costs of this communication. For many mothers, phone calls and visits provide a critical opportunity to emotionally support their sons. Caisa, a 60-year-old Latina mother, engaged in this dimension of crisis motherwork. Caisa explained that she became fed up with her son's behavior, as he cycled in and out of jail, and threatened to revoke communication. Caisa eventually changed her approach, explaining, "Someone helped me. People from the church, they said, 'Why do you tell him that? What for? It's best for him to feel that you love him.'" ¹¹ At that moment, Caisa realized the importance of her emotional support and felt empowered to show up for her son during his confinement: "I started to make him laugh. . . . Stuff like that. I think that changed his mentality a lot and mine as well, and my husband's." Caisa explained that her crisis motherwork changed her son's outlook: knowing that his family continued to support him on the outside emboldened him with hope for the future. Caisa said, "I see him stronger now."

Many mothers pushed past their own feelings to enact crisis motherwork. Mothers did not want to burden their sons with their own feelings and described needing to stay strong for their sons. Lindsay, a 47-year-old Latina mother, explained that maintaining regular contact with her son was integral to his well-being, adding that she "always pretended to be strong so that he would be OK. . . . All I used to do was cheer him up, talk to him cheerfully, letting him know that I was here waiting for him." ¹² Like Caisa, Lindsay explained that her crisis motherwork was essential to her son's future outlook: "I think being there was useful for him because I see him different and willing to strive."

Importantly, the expectations of crisis motherwork are contradictory to mothers' realities, some of whom struggle to support their incarcerated sons in the face of insurmountable

language, documentation, and financial barriers. For some mothers, resource constraints prevent full enactment of crisis motherwork. The expenses of phone calls, visitations, and legal fees can be financially unattainable. Financial barriers inhibit women's ability to pay for phone calls or visitations required to emotionally support their sons during their carceral spells. Institutional barriers, such as the requirement of legal documentation (e.g., government identification) and a lack of available translators, can prevent women from accessing their sons altogether.

Carmen, a 44-year-old Latina mother, described the compounding barriers mothers navigate to support their sons. Carmen, who only spoke Spanish, described the most difficult aspect of her son's incarceration: "The hardest thing for me was not being able to communicate because of the language. It was hard for us to communicate, to have someone who could tell us what happened right." Carmen did not have information about translation services and, as a result, faced mounting difficulties communicating with lawyers, correctional officers, and other jail staff who could assist her with contacting her son. These barriers are consequential for incarcerated sons who rely on their mothers' financial and emotional support, and for the mothers who desperately want to be there for their sons. Ana, a 48-year-old Latina mother who lacks the government identification required for visitations, explained the consequences of these barriers: "Right now that's what really is killing me. That I can't visit him. And it hurts me thinking that he probably thinks I forgot about him."

Collective Motherwork: "I Wasn't Alone"

Mothers of incarcerated sons rarely carry the burden of incarceration alone. Rather than the individualistic expectations of intensive mothering (Hays 1996), three fifths of mothers described engaging in *collective motherwork*, the shared labor between themselves and their kinship networks to support their

sons and grandchildren during (and after) their sons' incarceration. One dimension of collective motherwork is the collective coping in response to their sons' confinement. Mothers rely on their family and community networks to cope with their sons' absence by building networks of support to mediate communication with their sons, transport them to facilities for visitation, and provide them with critical emotional and financial support.

Another dimension of collective motherwork in this case involved sharing childcare responsibilities for their grandchildren with their sons' co-parents and maternal grandmothers. Some mothers stepped in to support their son's family as primary caregivers of grandchildren; other mothers incurred the labor of maintaining their son's relationship with his children. Collective motherwork, like crisis motherwork, occurs primarily during incarceration, emerging as a direct response to the removal of their son from their family's lives (see Figure 1). It can also continue during re-entry, as mothers share in childcare and rely on kinship networks to navigate their sons' release. However, some mothers, who lack the resources to care for their grandchildren or do not have extensive support networks, face barriers to enacting collective motherwork.

For many women, motherwork is not done in isolation. Mothers recounted the generosity of friends and family members who helped them navigate the complicated carceral system by enabling their phones to receive their sons' collect calls, organizing visits to carceral facilities, and caring for their other family or work obligations. For example, after years of navigating her son's substance use, Marsha (introduced earlier) sought out support from a community group of parents facing similar challenges: "It was parents supporting each other on what worked and what didn't work. . . . It helped me to understand that I wasn't alone. And that it was a lot of kids going through this and it wasn't just me." Similarly, Martina, a 52-year-old Latina mother, described how her son's friends—whom she calls her "adopted sons"—stepped in after

both of her sons were incarcerated: "They all wanna take me down there to go see my boys. Because they know that I can't drive out there because of my medical condition." Without the support of her adopted sons, who pooled together money to rent a car to take Martina to visitations, Martina would be unable to see her two biological sons. For many women, the collective support of family and friends emboldened them to continue to care for their children despite constraints.

For mothers who do not speak English as a first language or for transnational mothers living outside the United States, collective motherwork is a critical resource during their sons' incarceration. Catalina, a 48-year-old Latina mother, explained how her daughter often attends visitation with her, as her daughter can translate the English spoken by jail staff that she does not always understand. Relatedly, four mothers in our sample lived in Mexico during their sons' incarceration. Because most facilities do not allow phone calls outside the country, these mothers relied on digital communication with U.S. residents to mediate contact with their sons, reflecting the transformative ways transnational mothers circumvent long distances (Francisco-Menchavez 2018). Rosa, a 55-year-old Latina mother living in Mexico, explained how her cousin uses two lines to facilitate phone calls between herself and her son. Rosa described these brief moments of contact: "Being far away, it's a pleasure to hear his voice."¹³ Collective motherwork is essential for transnational mothers, who may otherwise be unable to maintain their relationships with their incarcerated children.

Mothers both rely on the collective support of kinship networks and are pillars of support within their communities. As incarceration systematically removes fathers from children's lives, mothers commonly become "othermothers" to their grandchildren (Collins 1994), which sometimes means engaging in intensive grandmothering (Pittman 2023) by taking on the primary caregiver role for these children. For Marsha, her son's incarceration left her granddaughter without the care of both

parents. After her son went to jail, his girlfriend (and co-parent) started using drugs and was subsequently arrested. In response, Marsha stepped in to care for her granddaughter. She explained: "So, I've had to take care of my granddaughter four days out of the week and the other grandmother [cares for her] three days out of the week." Like many mothers, Marsha was under mounting pressure to assume more childrearing responsibilities than she anticipated. Despite experiencing coerced mothering (Pittman 2023), mothers remained dedicated to their grandchildren and made considerable sacrifices in hopes they would have a better future than their sons.

Collective motherwork also involves the labor of maintaining their sons' relationships with their children. Mothers are commonly the sole intermediary between their sons and their grandchildren. Lola, a 49-year-old white mother, explained that her 5-year-old grandson knows that his mother, particularly after his father was incarcerated, does not like to discuss his father. Lola said her role is to ensure her son and grandson still communicate: "When [my grandson] comes over here to visit, he'll go, 'Grandma, I want to write my daddy a letter.' And he gets the letter from me, and he goes and puts it in the envelope. I address it." Like Lola, mothers often emphasized the importance of their sons' relationship with their children for both parties. Kaylee, a 49-year-old Latina mother, illustrates the great lengths mothers go to keep children active in their fathers' lives. Kaylee regularly takes her granddaughter to visit her son in jail: "She talks to her dad and tells him 'I love you' in sign language. My son tells me that he appreciates everything I do for the kids. I tell him that I am tired." Many of these mothers love and appreciate being involved in their grandchildren's lives, but collective motherwork is an intense and exhausting practice, especially for mothers navigating complicated relationships with their sons.

The demands of caring for an incarcerated child—and often the grandchildren left behind—are undeniably heavy. For some mothers, particularly those lacking the social

support of family and friends, these parenting demands are nearly impossible to meet. Thalia, a 55-year-old Latina mother, described the weight of mothering alone. Thalia's son's siblings refused to visit him in jail when he was arrested for theft. Dissatisfied with his continued substance use and criminal behavior, his sisters disagreed with their mother's continued support of their brother and refused to support either of them. Thalia explained, "When he was in jail, they never gave me even \$20 to go and see my son in jail. Nobody offered me anything."¹⁴ Thalia found ways to engage in motherwork despite lacking familial financial support, which ultimately put a wedge between her and her other children: "When I need help, I don't see them there [asking] 'how can we help you?' They just criticize." Similarly, Rosario, a 52-year-old Latina mother, explained that her other children urged her to stop supporting her son (and she eventually withdrew this support). Rosario recounted a conversation she had with one of her children after her son's third incarceration: "They say, [my son] just uses you when he is in there. He just asks you for money and you send it. You take care of the kids, and [the parents] don't pay you."¹⁵ Frustrated with the emotional and financial sacrifices many mothers make to care for their sons and their grandchildren, other family members begin to push back, leaving mothers feeling isolated and alone.

Hypervigilant Motherwork: "I've Tried Everything"

Mothers commonly engaged in *hypervigilant motherwork*, the anticipatory labor of shielding their sons from the state as they cycled through the carceral system. As described in more than half the interviews, hypervigilant motherwork occurs primarily before and after a son's incarceration (although occasionally during), as women anticipate and react to threats to their sons' re-incarceration (see Figure 1). Hypervigilant motherwork parallels the expectations of intensive mothering, but for mothers of adult children, these practices continue beyond the typical period of childrearing (Hays 1996).

Hypervigilant motherwork involves monitoring adult children's criminal involvement before their incarceration, such as arranging for rehabilitation services and keeping their sons off the streets and away from old friends. Hypervigilant motherwork also includes efforts to keep children from re-incarceration, including providing free housing, arranging educational and employment opportunities, driving them to work, and managing their probation or parole. Mothers can face barriers to enacting hypervigilant motherwork, as the demands of hypervigilance often require extensive financial and instrumental resources (e.g., to facilitate a rehab stay, provide transportation to school or work).

Marsha, who earlier described both crisis and collective motherwork, exemplifies the lengths many mothers go to keep their children out of jail. Marsha developed a hyper-awareness about her son from a young age, becoming hypervigilant of his whereabouts (by dropping him off and picking him up from school or friends' houses) and requiring constant communication with him. Despite this hypervigilance, her son managed to escape her watchful eye: "I would literally go and take him to school, leave him in school, and they would call me an hour later, like, 'he's gone.' And this was, like, a pattern until of course he started getting arrested." Rosie, a 59-year-old white mother, explained that her son, who had churned through jail for half his life, has a long history of substance use. Rosie said she "tried everything" to keep him clean and off the streets. She facilitated group, family, and individual counseling for her son when he was a teenager, hoping to prevent him from entering the criminal legal system. She recounted spending thousands of dollars on interventions, rehabs, and sober living housing as his substance use increased: "We've tried supporting him. We've tried rehabs. We've tried sober living to help him get him started and paid for it." Rosie, like many mothers, believed her hypervigilance during her son's re-entry would reduce recidivism.

A child's release reintroduces opportunities for re-arrest, but it also opens new

opportunities for growth. When children have spent their young adult years churning through the criminal legal system, mothers often step in to help them meet certain markers of adulthood, encouraging them to move back home to focus on finishing school or getting a job. Because probation and parole agreements often require sons to maintain employment, acts of hypervigilance operate to both ensure sons' financial resources and maintain their freedom. Sharon, a 63-year-old white mother, illustrates the labor of hypervigilant motherwork. Sharon kept a watchful eye on her son after his release, helping him secure a bus pass, providing transportation to and from probation and counseling appointments, and even "helping him do his résumé." Mothers want their sons to thrive, and they are often willing to suspend their own needs to help them achieve this goal. Salma, a 45-year-old Latina mother, explained: "If he wants to go to college, I will support him 100 percent. And even if I have to work two jobs, I will help him go through college." Salma said her goal was to empower her son to become a "positive man," recognizing he would need her unconditional support to realize these hopes and dreams.

Hypervigilance is a time-consuming, expensive, and self-sacrificing motherwork practice that is not always attainable. For working poor and poor mothers, financial and time constraints limit hypervigilant efforts, leading some mothers to blame themselves for their sons' incarceration. Consider Pequeña, a 48-year-old Latina mother. Although Pequeña is now unemployed, she worked full-time as a nursing assistant while her children were young. She worked overtime to meet her family's needs, leaving for work in the morning and not returning until her children were asleep, and therefore could not always be as hypervigilant as she would have liked. Pequeña blames herself for her son's incarceration: "I always ask him if it was my fault since I left them alone for a long time. . . . That's why you fell into this because I didn't spend much time with you?" Pequeña, like many mothers, illuminates the structural

barriers many mothers experience to enacting hypervigilance. Pequeña was navigating an impossible balance of full-time employment and caring for her family. Unable to keep a watchful eye on her son, she blames herself for his incarceration.

The Parenting Strains of Motherwork

Motherwork—and the corresponding tensions and contradictions with expectations of intensive mothering—create considerable parenting strains for mothers, many of whom are navigating these demands along with other work and family obligations. As illustrated in Figure 1, the cumulative consequences of engaging in motherwork over the cycle of their sons' incarceration lead to narratives of *role overload*, as the demands of motherwork exceed women's parenting capacity; *role restriction*, or mothers' accounts of feeling "stuck" or obligated to care for their incarcerated sons and their children; and *interpersonal conflict*, often between mothers and their family.

Role overload. The cumulative demands of crisis, collective, and hypervigilant motherwork often become overwhelming for mothers, resulting in substantial role overload. Women engaging in crisis motherwork describe being overwhelmed by the difficulty of watching their children endure the criminal legal system. Marsha (introduced earlier) described the emotional toll of crisis motherwork and, like many mothers, how she puts her son's needs above her own. She said, "It's so sad. It's a sad place to be in. It's a sad place for anyone to wanna go in there. The only reason I do it is to maintain his morality. Because if it was really, really my choice, I'd rather not go." For mothers, the role expectations of crisis motherwork become overwhelming in a carceral context, as they struggle with the compounding pain of seeing a child behind bars and the secondary prisonization experienced during visits (Comfort 2008), all while juggling other demands.

Collective motherwork also contributes to role overload. Kaylee (introduced earlier)

spends much of her time caring for her son's children during his incarceration. As a result of financially supporting his children, and often his girlfriend, Kaylee sends her son money less frequently than previously. She said, "I tell him that I am sorry I can't deposit him money because I have to buy things for the kids. Their mother doesn't give me money for their expenses." Similarly, Salma (introduced earlier) said that the most difficult aspect of motherhood during her son's incarceration is taking on his child's expenses, explaining that the time and money required to support both her son and grandson have become completely overwhelming. Salma explained, "When it comes down to rent, to my payments. It gives me stress. Like, I'm depressed."

After incarceration, hypervigilant motherwork generates substantial role overload among mothers who are now—often solely—responsible for maintaining the well-being of their recently released son. Mothers anticipate the strenuous labor of hypervigilance even before their sons' release. For example, Gia, a 64-year-old white mother who encouraged her son to move in with her upon release, described being "fearful" about his re-entry. She explained, "I felt like I had to do this for him and to help him. But I was just a little apprehensive."¹⁶ She was happy to have her son back home, and no longer confined, but she detailed the stress of trying to keep him at home and away from his previous girlfriend, whom she cites as causing her son's troubles. Similarly, Rosario (introduced earlier) described the strains of enacting hypervigilant motherwork after her son's release: "I don't have anything that doesn't bother me. Because with him, I have to be like if he were a little kid. Just making sure he does not continue to do bad things." For Rosario, the expectations of having to prioritize the safety and well-being of her grandchild while also monitoring her son's substance use, whereabouts, and employment surpassed her parenting capacity, leaving Rosario feeling overwhelmed by her son's release.

Similarly, Thalia (introduced earlier) explained how her hypervigilant motherwork

has become exhausting. Thalia makes every effort to keep her son at home, off the streets, and with his child, but her long work hours make it nearly impossible to always keep track of him. Despite Thalia's house rules, her son capitalizes on her absence while she's working. She said, "When I go to work, that's the time he uses to get his friends here and eat and shower and hang out here. But when I'm about to come from work . . . he quickly gets out with his friends." Thalia discourages her son from hanging out with old friends—whom she claims are using drugs—but her hypervigilant motherwork, coupled with her long work hours, has become exhausting. Like many mothers who struggle to meet the demands of motherwork, Thalia eventually reevaluated her hypervigilance and no longer gives him money or rides: "I have to punish him somehow. It hurts me, he's my son, but it's for his own good, so he sees that we're getting tired."

Role restriction. Mothers remain committed to collective motherwork despite experiencing role overload, in part because of an increased sense of role restriction. A son's incarceration—and his corresponding absence from his child's life—means mothers are often left to care for their grandchildren, regardless of their caretaking capacity. Failure to do so could leave families vulnerable to further state intervention and stigmatization. In some instances, the grandchildren's mothers had their own incarceration histories and struggles with substance use, resulting in some mothers losing custody of their children. Maternal grandparents often share in the childrearing of grandchildren, but some paternal grandmothers became solely responsible for their grandchildren. Consider Dana, a 52-year-old Asian mother and primary caregiver to her two young grandchildren (ages 1 and 2). When her son's girlfriend lost custody of their children shortly after his arrest, Dana and her husband were the only family members left who could retain full custody of the grandchildren. Dana described the challenges of taking on this coerced mothering role: "I am not able to talk to people,

I just go to work and I come home, I cook. By the time I'm done, it's midnight. I'm exhausted already." Despite being past her capacity, Dana felt there was no choice but to take on the parenting role for her grandchildren, leaving her and her husband exhausted.

Similarly, for Marsha, whose son started using drugs (and was confined in juvenile facilities) at a young age, the legal responsibility of caring for minor children coupled with the expectations of intensive mothering (Hays 1996) left her feeling restricted to collective motherwork. As Marsha explained, "Your life becomes second and you're a mother until you die, it's not when they're 18." For others, the instability caused by their sons' incarceration—and at times their release—leaves them feeling trapped in caregiving roles. When asked about her future, Fina (introduced previously) described having to put her life on hold to help raise her grandchild: "I can't. I feel tied down. I don't know how to do it. And it's all for helping with the child." Fina aspired to start working again and was considering going back to school. However, as long as her son continued cycling through the carceral system, she knew she would have to continue to prioritize her grandchild. Like Fina and Marsha, most mothers adhered to the value of placing the family over the self, and, as a result, found themselves restricted to caregiving roles.

Interpersonal conflict. The carceral contradictions of crisis, collective, and hypervigilant motherwork often strain family relationships. Dana, introduced earlier, described how crisis motherwork strained her relationship with her husband. She explained that although her family struggled financially, she insisted she and her husband hire a private attorney for her son. This expenditure created tension between Dana and her husband, who was now, despite working overtime, unable to pay their bills. Ultimately, Dana had to choose between supporting her son and her husband. She agreed to stop paying the private attorney to save her marriage, leaving her son's future in the hands of a

public defender. Dana justified this decision: "I don't want my husband to suffer anymore."

Collective motherwork also poses new parenting strains for mothers, many of whom are navigating complicated family relationships. Collective motherwork exacerbates interpersonal conflicts, especially between mothers and their sons' current or former romantic partners. As described previously, mothers aim to build and maintain relationships between their sons and their children, a goal at odds with many children's mothers who want to shield their children from their father and the state. Consider Lola (introduced earlier), who continued to facilitate her grandson's relationship with his father, despite the child's mother prohibiting him from visiting his father in jail. Explaining this decision, Lola described concern for her grandson, "It's heartbreaking. He thinks that we don't love him. . . . But he doesn't know that it's his mom." For Lola, the relationship between her son and her grandchild superseded her relationship with the child's mother.

Many mothers described feeling resentful of their sons for coercing them into additional childrearing responsibilities (Pittman 2023). Rosario (introduced above), who continued to care for her grandchildren even after her son's release, said, "All of the times that he has been there, I am the one that takes care of the kids. I have to figure out how to do it." One night, while doing laundry, Rosario reached her breaking point after receiving a text from her son that read: "We're downstairs. We came to pick up the kids." Rosario explained that her son and girlfriend had left abruptly that day, forcing Rosario to care for the children alone: "I was so angry. I told them, 'What if I wanted to go to the shop or something?' I couldn't because he left the kids with me. And he didn't even say, 'Hey, I'm leaving.'" Like many mothers coerced into caretaking roles, Rosario withdrew her collective motherwork over time as the stress associated with the corresponding mother-son conflict became too much to bear.

For others, hypervigilant motherwork generated parent-child conflict after release.

Lola, who described herself as an "overly involved" mother, explained how her hypervigilance exacerbated an already tenuous relationship with her son: "I'm all up in his fucking business. . . . What are you doing? Why are you over here?" Despite allowing her son to live with her in hopes of getting him back on track after release, their relationship worsened over time as her son undermined her efforts. In many ways, hypervigilance is a practice of tough love, often enacted against their sons' wishes. Lola's son rejected this tough love approach, creating conflict between them. He continued to use drugs and come and go as he pleased, disregarding the rules and expectations of her home: "[My son] gets real comfortable in expecting me to do certain things because of my own guilt and that codependency enmeshment, you know. . . . I do too much." Relatedly, Fina (introduced earlier) described her plans to continue to support her son after release: "I want to have something ready for when he gets out. I want to look for help for him so that he never goes back there." After his release, Fina begged him to move back home, volunteered to drive him to work, and offered to buy him a phone to facilitate communication. Once home, her son "became a stranger again." Describing the stress endured after her son's rejection, Fina explained that "the most difficult thing is to think how to help him, because I have tried a lot of things, but he doesn't let me help." Fina offered to take him to church, drive him to his probation, and find him mental health support, but her son's reluctance to accept her hypervigilant motherwork eroded their relationship.

Distanced Motherwork: "We're Just Tired"

Women's enactment of motherwork changes over the cycle of their sons' incarceration, as many sons endure lengthy or cyclical incarcerations. The parenting strains generated over years of engaging in crisis, collective, and hypervigilant motherwork led more than two thirds of mothers to enact

distanced motherwork (see Figure 1), that is, the proactive withdrawal of financial, instrumental, and emotional support from their sons. Distancing is not the end of motherwork and, typically, mothers do not cut ties with their sons altogether (although this occurs occasionally). Instead, distanced motherwork is an intentional, proactive harm-reduction tactic used by mothers to ensure the survival of their families and regain control over their own motherhood experience. In contrast to the ideals of intensive mothering (Hays 1996), these mothers commonly reduce the amount of time and money spent on maintaining contact with their sons, gradually withdraw emotional support, and, in some cases, cut off contact with their sons.

Some women deployed distanced motherwork before their sons' incarceration, as a practice of "tough love" to avoid enabling their sons' behavior. Others deployed distanced motherwork during and after incarceration. In these instances, distanced motherwork is an act of survival, a motherwork strategy used for the safety and survival of their family. However, the path to distanced motherwork is rarely easy, and mothers described parenting strains, including interrole conflict and interpersonal conflict, that stem from distanced motherwork. Ultimately, mothers seldom distance themselves permanently. Rather, in response to parenting strains, many oscillated between distanced motherwork and other motherwork strategies across the cycle of their sons' incarceration.

After years of financially and emotionally supporting her son and caring for his child while he cycled through jail, Marsha (introduced earlier) gave her son one last ultimatum: stay out of jail or lose her support. Her son continued churning through the carceral system and Marsha held him accountable: "That's one of the things that tough love kind of taught me. You need to have them pay for their consequences instead of helping them. Because when you help them, you don't help them." Mothers often retracted other motherwork practices to avoid enabling their sons, replacing their once self-sacrificial practices

of crisis, collective, or hypervigilance with distanced motherwork. For these women, distanced motherwork is not just the absence of other motherwork, but an active commitment to no longer enabling their sons' behaviors. Marsha explained this process: "It was your choice to come in here, and you put the whole family through this. But the next time will be my choice. I will not visit or write. I won't even accept phone calls." In this way, distanced motherwork is simultaneously an act of tough love and a reclaiming of agency for mothers who have spent years parenting under extreme structural constraints.

Emma, a 47-year-old white mother, gradually withdrew support over time. Her son has an extensive criminal history, which she described as beginning when he started stealing as a juvenile. She initially remained unwaveringly supportive of her son, engaging in crisis motherwork by bailing him out of jail, putting money on his commissary account, and attending every court hearing possible. Over time, however, she recognized she had done everything she could: "[He] needed more help than I could offer for his psychological and emotional issues." She learned to develop boundaries with her son, and no longer visited him as frequently, to protect herself and the well-being of her grandchild. Similarly, Elizabeth, a 73-year-old white mother, described her decision to stop financially supporting her son: "We spent so much money on [my son] through the years trying to get him lawyers and whatnot. It's not worth it. You smarten up and think, 'They're not gonna make it.'"¹⁷ Elizabeth explained that her son had troubles with the law since he was a teenager; now that he is 47 years old, Elizabeth, who is also the primary caregiver of his two daughters (ages 19 and 15), can no longer justify the prolonged labor: "We're tired. We're just tired physically and mentally." Like many mothers, Elizabeth was stretched too thin. After years of supporting her son and granddaughters, she ultimately decided to prioritize herself and her family on the outside.

Distanced motherwork is often necessary for survival. Weezie, a 61-year-old Latina

mother, provides an example of the lengths mothers go to protect themselves and their other children from their incarcerated sons. Weezie described her family as close-knit and explained that early on, she would sacrifice anything to give her children a life she never had. However, as her son started using drugs and churning through the criminal legal system, Weezie learned to hold boundaries with him: "That was the biggest thing, learning not to enable him. In a lot of ways, I'm getting stronger and have been getting stronger." However, Weezie explained that despite her boundaries, her son's behavior escalated: "He was doing his drugs, he was getting violent, putting holes in my walls, punching, just destroying my house." Ultimately, Weezie felt she had no other choice but to distance herself altogether: "I just could not take it anymore. I just couldn't. So I ended up filing a restraining order against him." Afraid of what her son was capable of while under the influence, Weezie decided to take back control of her own motherhood experience and filed a five-year restraining order to protect herself and her family. Like Weezie, mothers described distancing as a proactive strategy to protect themselves and their families from harm. As Emma (introduced earlier) explained: "I have a duty as a mom to protect my children. And if it means protecting one from the other, that's what I have to do."

Although distanced motherwork is intended to protect mothers and their families, it comes with parenting strains. For many, distanced motherwork exacerbates parent-child conflicts, especially among mothers who had previously practiced other motherwork strategies. Mothers described the anger their sons expressed in response to their distanced motherwork. Marion, a 45-year-old Latina mother, said she stopped communicating with and providing financial support to her son during his incarceration to regain control over her own life. Her son blames her lack of support for his most recent incarceration. In response, Marion told him, "Don't look for someone to blame. Your actions were yours only, not mine. I always looked for ways to help you

out. But would you make use of that? No son, you need to learn from your mistakes and stop looking for culprits."¹⁸ Similarly, Francisca, a 70-year-old Latina mother, described the fallout between her and her son after she desisted from crisis motherwork during his incarceration. Francisca told us he used to yell at her, blaming her for his incarceration. Now, after she stopped visiting him in jail, she said he only cries to her, "He says that he feels lost and that I don't support him, that I've never supported him."¹⁹ After years of visiting him in jail and putting money on his books, all without the support of her other family members, Francisca described her decision to distance herself—not completely, but enough to teach her son a valuable lesson: "What does he want me to do for him? I have already done everything I could do."

The decision to distance from a child also generates considerable interrole conflict, as mothers described a tension between the role expectations of motherhood and the realities of parenting under carceral constraints. When asked what constitutes a good mother, women commonly espoused traditional schemas of "good motherhood" as time-intensive and child-centered, narratives at odds with the labor of distanced motherwork. Yet, mothers acknowledged the necessity of distanced motherwork, identifying the practice as critical to their family's survival and their own personhood.

Distancing, however, can be devastating for many mothers. Consider Sammy, a 31-year-old Latina mother, who, after watching her son cycle through jail, withdrew contact for her own well-being: "Because what good would it do for me to step in and try to help, and then he gets out, and it's the same thing all over again? It's at that point it's putting me down again." As her son's legal guardian (and not biological mother), Sammy actively decided to serve as his primary caregiver years earlier. Cognizant of the parental expectations of this role, Sammy has a tremendous amount of guilt about distancing. Sammy described this interrole conflict: "Sometimes I do wonder, could I have done more? But you can't hold someone

tight if they don't want to be there. You just can't." For Sammy, despite wanting to be there unconditionally for her son, she knew she could no longer support his behaviors. Many mothers espoused similar sentiments regarding their distanced motherwork. Without knowing the outcome, mothers face conflicting ideas about whether they made the right decision to distance themselves and their families from their sons.

Ultimately, the sacrifice of distanced motherwork pushes many women to alternate their motherwork strategies, underscoring the carceral contradictions of motherhood. Many women move from distanced motherwork back to hypervigilant or crisis motherwork and—at times—back again to distancing. For these mothers, distanced motherwork was not worth the sacrifice. Realizing their tough love approach may not be as effective as they hoped, mothers decided to re-engage their crisis and hypervigilant efforts. For instance, Gia (introduced earlier) explained that after her son went to jail, she stopped all communication with him in hopes her distanced motherwork would change his behavior: "There was just a period where we weren't talking because I insisted that he learn a lesson." Eventually, she began to re-evaluate this strategy, expressing that her son would need her support if he were to be successful on the outside. Now, Gia visits her son regularly and is anxiously preparing for him to be released back to her home. For women with incarcerated sons, distanced motherwork is not the absence of motherwork; rather, distancing serves as one of many motherwork strategies women enact—at times simultaneously—over the span of their sons' incarceration.

DISCUSSION

Dramatic changes in the criminal legal system, and the subsequent criminalization of Latino and Black men (Rios 2011; Western et al. 2021), have rendered the incarceration of a son an increasingly common experience for women of color. Yet, research has largely neglected to document how, under

extreme conditions of carceral control, mothers (and grandmothers) support their incarcerated children during and after confinement. In this study, we use in-depth interviews with 69 mothers of incarcerated sons—most of whom identify as Latina—to understand how jail incarceration shapes women's mothering and grandmothering practices throughout their sons' incarceration experience. Building on research on decarceral motherwork, which reveals how formerly incarcerated Black mothers engage in parenting (Banks 2022; Gurusami 2019), we demonstrate how motherwork operates among a different population of system-impacted mothers—mostly Latina mothers (and grandmothers) with sons incarcerated in jail. In doing so, we advance theory on motherwork, documenting the temporal process of motherwork and uncovering how the parenting strains associated with motherwork commonly lead to *distanced motherwork*—a distinct form of motherwork used as a strategy of survival, protection, and self-empowerment.

We situate our study within a rich body of research on formerly incarcerated mothers (Banks 2022; Garcia-Hallet 2022; Gurusami 2019; Leverentz 2014) to understand how motherwork applies to mothers with sons incarcerated in jail, a population largely overlooked in research on the symbiotic harms of incarceration (Condry and Minson 2021). We find that the carceral system imposes structural constraints to caregiving not reflected in conventional intensive mothering practices (Hays 1996), with mothers of incarcerated sons (in our sample, most of whom identify as Latina) instead enacting similar motherwork practices documented among formerly incarcerated Black mothers (Banks 2022; Gurusami 2019). These women face unique challenges and circumstances that shape their adoption and enactment of motherwork. First, for mothers of incarcerated children, their motherwork is inextricably shaped by the conditions of jail confinement. That is, unlike formerly incarcerated mothers, these mothers must learn to anticipate and react to the rapidly evolving needs of their sons during

and after their jail incarceration. Second, by focusing on women who are simultaneously navigating their sons' incarceration as mothers and grandmothers, we reveal how motherwork operates across the parenting life course, and we underscore the intergenerational consequences of jail incarceration for families. Finally, whereas prior scholarship on motherwork has largely focused on the experiences of Black women (Brantley 2023a; Collins 1990; Dow 2019; Gurusami 2019), our focus on mostly Latina mothers extends prior research by illuminating the cultural contexts shaping women's mothering and grandmothering practices. By expanding theories of motherwork to understand the experiences of mostly Latina mothers of jail incarcerated sons, we document the repercussions of carcerality on families beyond formerly incarcerated Black mothers, and, in doing so, reveal the malleability and ingenuity of women's motherwork.

We build on Gurusami's (2019) theory of decarceral motherwork to delineate the temporal process of motherwork among mothers experiencing an adult child's jail confinement. We find that mothers of incarcerated children not only practice motherwork, but their adoption of these strategies changes over the cycle of their sons' incarceration. We find that during confinement, women adopt crisis motherwork strategies to respond to structural constraints to parenting. Under these circumstances, crisis motherwork becomes less about minimizing threats to child custody or reunification, as documented among formerly incarcerated mothers (Gurusami 2019), and more about confronting the crisis of incarceration itself (and providing corresponding emotional, financial, and instrumental support to their sons during this time). Thus, in contrast to the expectations of intensive mothering, crisis motherwork emerges as a means of reducing the harms inflicted by the criminal legal system. This confinement period is also marked by collective motherwork. Building off prior research on formerly incarcerated mothers (Banks 2022; Gurusami 2019) and scholarship on grandmothering

(Derlan et al. 2018; Pittman 2023), we demonstrate how motherwork—in the context of a child's incarceration—reflects long-standing traditions of familism, collective caregiving, and intensive grandmothering (Bruhn and Oliveira 2022; Pittman 2023). A child's incarceration leaves families vulnerable to state surveillance, and we find mothers of incarcerated sons provide additional childcare for their grandchildren to protect their families from state intervention.

Over time, women's motherwork adapts to the changing circumstances of their sons' carceral experience. After release—and in between jail stays for those enduring cyclical incarceration—mothers engage in hypervigilant motherwork to shield their sons from state intervention. Although hypervigilance looks like the “hovering” strategies of formerly incarcerated women (Gurusami 2019:135), mothers of incarcerated sons engage in hypervigilance not to protect their children from Child Protective Services or potentially dangerous strangers, but to monitor their sons' interactions and behaviors that could trigger new criminal legal contact. In doing so, mothers unintentionally take on a surveilling role like that of the carceral system. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that during re-entry, probation officers encourage household members to take on informal surveillance roles of their previously incarcerated loved ones (Sandoval 2020). However, because mothers cannot always be hypervigilant of their adult children, most of whom are young adults, many mothers outsource their hypervigilance. Like formerly incarcerated mothers, who spend countless hours gathering information to reduce the chances of new system involvement (Gurusami 2019), mothers of incarcerated sons mobilize their resources to gather information about rehabilitation services, employment, and counseling services to reduce threats to their children's re-incarceration. For these mothers, their sons' release requires a distinct form of hypervigilant motherwork to maintain their adult children's safety and survival on the outside.

Additionally, we advance an understanding of the symbiotic harms of incarceration by providing one of the first systematic accounts of the various role strains that stem from an adult child's incarceration (Condry and Minson 2021; Pearlin 1989). We show how motherwork is a precarious form of intensive mothering that contributes to parenting role strains among women, most of whom are navigating related adversities such as racism, poverty, and under-resourced neighborhoods (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Previous research links a child's incarceration to poor health outcomes (Goldman 2019; Green et al. 2006; Sirois 2020) and the adoption of intensive mothering to increased feelings of anxiety, stress, and depression (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020); here, we provide the first systematic detailing of how mothers experience and respond to the stress of a child's incarceration. A child's incarceration is undoubtedly a stressor, but the demands of mothering (and grandmothering) during and after confinement engender specific parenting strains. This finding is consistent with research revealing that family member incarceration heightens chronic strains, financial strains, and family conflict for Black mothers (Smith and Coleman 2024). Ultimately, for Latina mothers, the social support attributed to familism may not be enough to overcome the extreme financial, emotional, and instrumental labor required to care for an incarcerated child and grandchild (Campos, Yim, and Busse 2018).

By drawing attention to the chronic stress associated with motherwork, our findings reveal the profound consequences of criminal legal contact—in this case, a child's jail incarceration—for mothers' well-being. This insight underscores how these parenting strains emerge as a product of jail incarceration, which disproportionately affects marginalized mothers (Enns et al. 2019). Thus, policies aimed at advancing criminal legal reform (e.g., reduced sentencing lengths, bail reform) and increasing investments in social supports (e.g., affordable housing and child-care, access to mental health and addiction recovery services) are necessary to begin

addressing chronic strains associated with motherwork in a carceral context.

Finally, we advance scholarship on motherwork by outlining how parenting role strains lead to the emergence of *distanced motherwork*—a distinct form of motherwork that involves the withdrawal of emotional, financial, and instrumental support. Aligned with research demonstrating how parental incarceration fractures relationships between parents and children (Turney 2023b), we find that the cumulative demands of crisis, collective, and hypervigilant motherwork and the corresponding parenting strains fracture mother-son relationships, resulting in distanced motherwork. Although distanced motherwork is presented at odds with constructions of intensive mothering (Hays 1996), this motherwork strategy emerges as a necessary and intentional response to carceral infrastructures of control. That is, distanced motherwork draws attention to the resourceful, and often taken-for-granted, strategies that mothers evoke to protect their families and themselves under circumstances of extreme precarity.

For some, distanced motherwork is a strategy of tough love, a tool used to encourage their adult children to change their behavior. For others, distanced motherwork is born out of necessity, a harm-reduction strategy invoked for the survival and empowerment of the self and the family. Distanced motherwork is a proactive strategy of protection, yet this motherwork strategy engenders its own parenting strains, as mothers experience interrole conflict and interpersonal conflict stemming from their decision to distance. Thus, the emergence of distanced motherwork extends our understanding of the intergenerational consequences of incarceration by revealing how the repercussions of a child's incarceration extend to mothers' relationships with their sons and grandchildren.

Limitations

Several features of this study, mostly related to our sample, merit closer consideration. First, the sample leaves important gaps in our

understanding of the role of fathers. Given gender differences in response to stressors and the different ways mothers and fathers engage in parenting (Starrels 1994), understanding how fathers respond to their sons' incarceration may be particularly illuminating. Second, and relatedly, the motherwork strategies of women with incarcerated daughters also remain unknown. Motherwork likely looks different for mother–daughter relationships (Raley and Bianchi 2006), as maternal grandmothers commonly have closer family ties and invest more in childcare than paternal grandmothers (Chan and Elder 2000; Perry and Daly 2017). Third, although we endeavored to conduct interviews with all mothers of incarcerated men, we were unable to interview one-third of mothers who were not deceased. The motherwork strategies of mothers who chose not to participate in the study or who could not be reached may look different than the strategies of mothers in our sample. For instance, these mothers may be more disengaged from the motherwork process altogether. Finally, we find no meaningful differences in motherwork processes between mothers with and without their own incarceration histories. However, this may be due to the timing of the mothers' incarceration experiences (as most mothers were incarcerated many years prior to the study). Although incarceration becomes less common with age, future research could examine recently incarcerated mothers to understand if motherwork operates differently for women simultaneously navigating the criminal legal contact of themselves and their sons.

Conclusions

This study underscores the carceral contradictions of motherhood. For mothers, an adult child's jail incarceration means enduring lengthy periods of separation and navigating extreme financial and emotional uncertainty, all while continuing to care for their families on the outside. Despite these constraints, mothers continue to find inventive and ingenious ways to engage in motherwork to

manage their children's incarceration and mitigate affronts to their family's safety and survival. The precarity and stress associated with experiencing a child's incarceration, however, engenders substantial parenting role strains, leading some women to engage in distanced motherwork. By outlining how women with incarcerated children adopt and enact motherwork over time, we advance an understanding of how the criminal legal system shapes inequalities in motherhood and family life more broadly.

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Notes

1. We endeavored to conduct baseline interviews with mothers during their sons' incarceration. Occasionally, we were unable to interview mothers before their sons' release; in these instances, we asked mothers to reflect on their sons' incarceration experiences.

- We similarly attempted to conduct follow-up interviews with mothers during their sons' release, but the nature of jail incarceration presented challenges. Some men were released and quickly re-incarcerated and, in these instances, we interviewed their mothers as soon as possible. Other men were not released during the study period, as they were still in jail or were sentenced to prison; in these instances, we conducted follow-up interviews with mothers about one year after their baseline interview.
2. One participant was the legal guardian of the incarcerated person. Reasons for not having a corresponding mother interview include the following: son did not have contact information for his mother ($n = 19$), mother did not respond to invitation ($n = 14$), mother is deceased ($n = 13$), mother refused ($n = 2$), mother could not be located ($n = 1$), and mother spoke a language besides English or Spanish ($n = 1$). Observed differences between the full sample of incarcerated men ($n = 123$) and those with mothers in the analytic sample ($n = 69$) are relatively small. Compared to men in the full sample, men with mothers in our analytic sample are younger ($p < 0.05$). Differences across other sociodemographic characteristics were not substantively or statistically significant.
 3. One participant did not want to be recorded during the baseline interview. We took detailed notes during this interview.
 4. We also reviewed a subset of entire transcripts to ensure our use of these deductive codes included all information relevant to our research questions.
 5. Social class was determined based on detailed information that mothers provided about their occupations. We considered women to be poor if they were unemployed; working poor if they were employed part-time but reported erratic hours, low pay, and few benefits; working class if they worked full-time in positions with little or no managerial authority that did not draw on highly complex or educationally certified skills; and middle class if they worked full-time in professional or white-collar careers that either entailed substantial managerial authority or drew on educationally certified skills (i.e., college-level).
 6. We find no meaningful differences in the motherwork strategies of mothers with and without incarceration histories. This may be attributed to relatively few mothers reporting their own history of incarceration ($n = 13$) and, among these mothers, all but one were incarcerated many years prior to the study.
 7. All data are presented using pseudonyms.
 8. This interview was translated from Spanish.
 9. This interview was translated from Spanish.
 10. This interview was translated from Spanish.
 11. This interview was translated from Spanish.
 12. This interview was translated from Spanish.
 13. This interview was translated from Spanish.
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 15. This interview was translated from Spanish.
 16. This interview was translated from Spanish.
 17. This interview was translated from Spanish.
 18. This interview was translated from Spanish.
 19. This interview was translated from Spanish.

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