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Forgotten Family Relationships: How Incarcerated Brothers Experience Sibling Support

Estéfani Marín[1] | Kristin Turney[2] | Angie B. Monreal[2]

[1]Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin, United States | [2]University of California, Irvine, California, United States

Correspondence: Estéfani Marín (marine@lawrence.edu)

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ABSTRACT

Objective: We explore how incarcerated brothers experience support from their non-incarcerated siblings.

Background: Sibling incarceration is the most common type of family member incarceration, with more than one-quarter of U.S. adults enduring a sibling's incarceration (and, most commonly, a brother's incarceration). Despite the prevalence of sibling incarceration and the importance of sibling relationships throughout the life course, little is known about sibling support in the context of incarceration from the receiver's perspective (or other family members' perspectives).

Method: We use longitudinal in-depth interviews with 122 incarcerated adult brothers and 69 of their mothers to explore how system-impacted families negotiate non-incarcerated sibling support.

Results: We find that incarcerated brothers and their mothers describe navigating four types of sibling support: (1) unconditional, intrinsic support to incarcerated brothers and other family members shaped by cultural expectations of family reliance; (2) mediated, reluctant support to incarcerated brothers prompted by mothers; (3) disengaged, infrequent support to incarcerated brothers due to constraints and/or to protect themselves; and (4) absent, no support to incarcerated brothers because siblings have grown tired of their brothers cycling through the criminal legal system.

Conclusion: We advance scholarship on criminal legal contact and family life by documenting how incarcerated brothers experience support from their non-incarcerated siblings and highlight the considerable and enduring consequences of incarceration for the entire family system.

Siblings are central to family life, with most U.S. children having at least one sibling (McHale et al. 2012) and siblings providing important sources of socialization and support over the life course. Indeed, sibling relationships are generally the longest-lasting relationships one has (McHale et al. 2012). Stressors endured by one sibling—such as disability, divorce, or incarceration—can have important repercussions for social support between siblings, with provisions of support buffering against relationship strain, emotional distress, and financial instability within families (Benisty et al. 2021; Clone and DeHart 2014).

Given the ubiquitous role of sibling support throughout the life course, research documents the intra-generational transmission of criminal activity and criminal legal contact among siblings (Aaron and Dallaire 2011; Beaver 2012; for a review, see Wakefield and Baker 2024). However, little is known about how incarcerated siblings experience support from non-incarcerated siblings and how this support is embedded within families. This is an oversight because sibling incarceration, particularly a brother's incarceration, is the most common type of family member incarceration (Enns et al. 2019). More than one-quarter

(27%) of U.S. adults have experienced sibling incarceration (Enns et al. 2019). Further, existing research on sibling support in the context of incarceration (e.g., Benisty et al. 2021; Benisty 2022; Tadros et al. 2019) is limited to the perspective of non-incarcerated siblings. Therefore, less is understood about the relational dynamics of sibling support during incarceration from the perspective of incarcerated siblings or other family members (e.g., mothers) who are also embedded in support provisions. Including these perspectives is important for developing a holistic understanding of the contextual factors that shape incarceration support.

Drawing on family stress theory, which posits that the family is an interdependent unit where stressors endured by one person have spillover consequences for family members (Arditti 2016; Patterson 2004; Turney and Sugie 2021), experiences of sibling support (and expectations of support) during incarceration may be shaped by cultural meanings of family, intra-family dynamics, and the cyclical nature of sibling incarceration. Incarcerated siblings (and their mothers) may expect—and experience—unconditional provisions of sibling support from non-incarcerated siblings due to cultural understandings that sibling relationships are life-long bonds that can be relied on in stressful moments (Garza and Williams 2024; Jensen et al. 2023; Sýkorová 2023). However, experiences of incarceration support are likely not limited to unconditional support. Incarcerated siblings may experience sibling support as a result of parental pressures non-incarcerated siblings face to provide support during adversity (Hamwey et al. 2019), may experience conflict with their non-incarcerated siblings that impedes their support (Hood and Gaston 2021; Meyers et al. 2017), or may experience a withdrawal of support as non-incarcerated siblings become worn down by their sibling's cyclical incarceration (Feinberg et al. 2012; Oliveira et al. 2020). These dynamics likely yield heterogeneous provisions of support to incarcerated siblings, with some incarcerated siblings experiencing considerable support from non-incarcerated siblings, other incarcerated siblings experiencing more limited support, and others experiencing no support.

In this paper, we use data from the Jail and Family Life Study, a longitudinal in-depth interview examination of 123 incarcerated men and their family members, to understand how incarcerated brothers experience support from their non-incarcerated siblings. We focus on the incarceration of a brother given the overrepresentation of men in the criminal legal system (Mueller 2023). We analyze baseline and follow-up interviews with 122 adult incarcerated brothers and 69 of their mothers to explore sibling support during incarceration. We find considerable heterogeneity in how incarcerated brothers experience support from their non-incarcerated siblings. These findings extend prior research on the consequences of sibling incarceration and, in doing so, highlight how the consequences of incarceration ripple throughout families.

1 | A Family Stress Perspective on Sibling Relationships Over the Life Course

Siblings are a fixture of everyday life, particularly in childhood, when siblings spend most of their time together (Buchanan and Rotkirch 2021; Dunifon et al. 2017). Sibling relationships undergo transformation in late adolescence and adulthood (Conger and Little 2010; Gilligan et al. 2020). Life course turning points—including higher education, employment, marriage, childbearing, and incarceration—substantially alter sibling relationships and may result in heterogeneous provisions of support from non-incarcerated siblings (Conger and Little 2010; Jensen et al. 2023).

Family stress theory is a useful conceptual framework for understanding the role of sibling support in managing the stressors stemming from incarceration. Family stress theory posits that the family is an interdependent system where stressors experienced by one family member have rippling consequences for the entire family system (Arditti 2016; Patterson 2004; Turney and Sugie 2021; Turney 2023). This framework also suggests that a family's ability to respond to and cope with stressors such as incarceration is shaped by family resources and definitions of their identity as a family unit (Patterson 2004). Incarceration is a family stressor that disrupts relationships and, accordingly, may constrain sibling support provisions (Wakefield et al. 2024). Yet, the values and beliefs families hold about the role of family in adverse life course experiences may reinforce the importance of sibling support during incarceration (Patterson 2004). Additionally, family stress theory, which highlights the embeddedness of families during stressful events, implies that the sibling–sibling subsystem is influenced by the parent–child subsystem and vice versa (Arditti 2016; Woodard and Copp 2016). Parents, who are often invested in preserving family ties, may be integral to facilitating non-incarcerated sibling support despite sibling relationship strain (Hornstra and Ivanova 2023; Seery and Crowley 2000). In turn, non-incarcerated siblings may oblige to provisions of support during incarceration as a way of mitigating parental stress. Family stress theory is a useful conceptual framework to illuminate how sibling relationships operate within family systems and, accordingly, how incarcerated brothers and their mothers may experience heterogeneous support from non-incarcerated siblings during incarceration.

2 | Sibling Support During Incarceration

Having an incarcerated sibling—especially an incarcerated brother—is a common life course feature, with more than one-quarter (27%) of U.S. adults having a sibling who has spent time in jail or prison (Enns et al. 2019). Sibling incarceration is more commonly experienced than parental incarceration (18% of U.S. adults), romantic partner incarceration (14%), and child incarceration (12%) (Enns et al. 2019). Sibling incarceration is especially common among families of color, with sibling incarceration reported by nearly half of Black adults and one-third of Hispanic adults (Enns et al. 2019).

Sibling support may take on increased importance during adverse life experiences such as incarceration. Siblings can supplement other familial resources (such as parental support) to incarcerated brothers, and brothers may expect sibling support during incarceration (including instrumental, emotional, and financial support), especially from sisters who often shoulder the burden of family caretaking (Clone and DeHart 2014; Tadros

et al. 2019). In turn, non-incarcerated siblings may feel obligated to support incarcerated brothers, particularly if they experience guilt for not protecting their brothers from the criminal legal system (Benisty et al. 2021; McCarthy and Adams 2019; Tadros et al. 2019). Additionally, during incarceration, brothers may hold expectations about how siblings will support their reentry process, with incarcerated brothers anticipating emotional and employment support upon release, particularly from brothers (Clone and DeHart 2014; Hood and Gaston 2021; Miller 2021). Sibling support during incarceration may be especially consequential in the context of jail incarceration (relative to prison incarceration), where incarcerated siblings are commonly confined close to their families of origin and typically experience shorter sentencing lengths (meaning they reintegrate back into their families and communities relatively quickly) (Turney and Conner 2019).

3 | Heterogeneous Pathways of Sibling Support During Incarceration

Because family stress theory suggests heterogeneity in families' management of stressors, it is likely that families experience heterogeneity in sibling support during incarceration as incarcerated brothers, parents, and siblings respond differently to the stressors of incarceration (Hood and Gaston 2021; Naser and Visher 2006; Turney et al. 2024). Incarcerated brothers' and mothers' experiences of sibling support during incarceration may be shaped by cultural expectations of family support, the interconnected nature of familial relationships, and cyclical incarceration.

First, incarcerated brothers' experiences of sibling support may be shaped by cultural expectations that sibling relationships should emphasize solidarity and endure in times of need, in part because of the life-long nature of sibling relationships (DeHart et al. 2018; Kalmijn and Leopold 2018; Voorpostel and Blieszner 2008). Incarcerated brothers may expect considerable provisions of sibling support during this stressful time because of adherence to the cultural expectations that siblings are morally responsible and/or obligated to help the family (Benisty 2022; Clone and DeHart 2014; Meek 2008). Thus, brothers may expect to receive instrumental, financial, and emotional support from non-incarcerated siblings (Clone and DeHart 2014; Comfort 2016; Hood and Gaston 2021; Meyers et al. 2017; Tadros et al. 2019). This support provided by non-incarcerated siblings may extend to include assisting nieces and nephews who are navigating parental incarceration (Clone and DeHart 2014). Additionally, expectations of support may be particularly salient for siblings of color from poor or working-class backgrounds who commonly hold collectivist values that encourage mutual help (Leverentz 2011; Whiteman et al. 2011). Latino siblings, for example, are encouraged to provide sibling support in times of need, partly due to familism values that prioritize devoting resources to the family above individual needs (Marín 2024). Though sibling incarceration generates emotional distress (Tadros et al. 2019), the corresponding cultural expectations that emphasize solidarity suggest that incarcerated brothers may experience considerable provisions of support from their non-incarcerated siblings.

Second, given the interconnectedness of family relationships, incarcerated brothers' experiences of sibling support may be reinforced by parental efforts to promote sibling cohesion. Parent relationships, particularly mother–child relationships, are critical in maintaining family bonds (Hornstra and Ivanova 2023; Seery and Crowley 2000). Siblings describe mothers as the "pipeline for communication" that coheres sibling relationships (Hamwey et al. 2019). Parents play an important role in sibling relationships by stepping in when siblings are experiencing relationship difficulties, intervening to promote positive sibling relationships (McHale et al. 2004; Whiteman et al. 2011). Given these intra-family dynamics, we expect parents of incarcerated children to encourage sibling support and promote close relationships after experiencing a familial stressor such as incarceration. Although parents may encourage sibling reliance, non-incarcerated siblings may dissuade parents from providing support to incarcerated brothers. Research suggests that a son's incarceration can facilitate emotional distress among mothers (Goldman 2019), which has spillover consequences for siblings (Turney 2011). Because non-incarcerated siblings are likely to witness their mother's emotional distress, they may take on protective roles and encourage mothers to divest from their incarcerated brother (Ceciliano-Navarro and Golash-Boza 2021).

Third, incarcerated brothers may experience limited support from non-incarcerated siblings due to resource constraints and the cyclical nature of incarceration (and corresponding fatigue associated with providing constant support). Siblings of incarcerated brothers may experience their own economic precarity, given they likely grew up in similarly resourced households and communities as their brothers, and may have financial responsibilities to their own families, both of which may make the provision of sustained support difficult (Benisty et al. 2021; Bourgeois et al. 2022; Comfort 2016). Additionally, cyclical incarcerations may erode sibling relationships. Incarcerated brothers may experience their non-incarcerated siblings growing fatigued and hopeless and, accordingly, these non-incarcerated siblings may refrain from providing support to protect their emotional well-being (Hood and Gaston 2021). Similarly, the stigma of cyclical incarceration may lead siblings to feel that their incarcerated brothers are undeserving of help (Meek 2008). Non-incarcerated siblings may direct judgment and blame to their brothers, resulting in the perceived absence of support during incarceration (Benisty et al. 2021; Gardner 2011).

4 | Method

4.1 | Data

We use data from the Jail and Family Life Study, an in-depth interview study of incarcerated men and their family members, to investigate how incarcerated brothers experience sibling support during their confinement. We recruited 123 incarcerated men enrolled in educational programs (including parenting, financial literacy, and substance abuse courses) across three jail facilities in Southern California between 2015 and 2017. Participants had to be incarcerated for at least 2 months and have at least one child they saw in the month

prior to their incarceration (as the larger study was interested in children's well-being after paternal incarceration). We asked men to provide contact information for their family members (primarily their children, their children's mothers and caregivers, and their own mothers) during their baseline interview and, as soon as possible after this interview, we contacted these family members. Each family was assigned a primary interviewer to build rapport and allow interviewers to complete field notes with special attention to discrepancies between family members. We attempted to interview all participants—including men and their family members—during the incarceration period and about 2 months after release (or, for those not released within a year of their baseline interview, 1 year later). We conducted all baseline interviews with brothers while they were incarcerated. Their incarceration status varied at follow-up (with some brothers experiencing continued incarceration, some experiencing a new incarceration stay, and others living in the community). Similarly, we conducted most baseline interviews with family members during the brothers' incarceration, but the brothers' incarceration status varied at follow-up.

We draw on interviews from all adult incarcerated men with at least one sibling (122 baseline interviews and 89 follow-up interviews) and mothers of these men (69 baseline interviews and 56 follow-up interviews). We examine accounts of sibling support during the incarceration period (including brothers' expectations of support during their eventual reentry), examining contemporaneous accounts during incarceration and retrospective accounts after release. We use reports from both incarcerated brothers and mothers to provide as complete a picture as possible. The brothers' interview guide, drawing from family stress theory, includes open-ended questions about experiences with the criminal legal system, family relationships, and the consequences of criminal legal contact, among other things. We asked mothers similar questions. Interviews with brothers lasted between 3 and 4 hours. Interviews with mothers lasted between 2 and 3 hours. We conducted most interviews with incarcerated brothers in English. We conducted about half of the mother interviews in English and the other half in Spanish.

We audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim all interviews except the baseline interviews with incarcerated brothers. The county jail system would not allow us to audio-record baseline interviews with incarcerated men, requiring us to adopt a systematic and labor-intensive process for conducting these interviews. Two members of the research team conducted each interview, with one person primarily responsible for conducting the interview and a second taking extensive—and verbatim, as much as possible—notes during the interview. Immediately upon completion of the interview, both researchers reconstructed the interview in audio form using their notes and memory. We provided participants with a $50 Visa gift card for each interview (though the county jail system did not permit participants to receive compensation while incarcerated).

Conducting research with system-impacted populations necessitates a thoughtful consideration of ethics (Barragan et al. 2023). We took several steps to protect research participants throughout the study. First, we prioritized the privacy and safety of participants by carefully considering interview locations. We conducted interviews with incarcerated brothers in jail visiting rooms during busy times of frequent movement to minimize the risk of unwanted exposure. We gave mothers the agency to select interview locations (including homes, parks, restaurants, and coffee shops) where they felt most comfortable given the sensitive nature of interview questions. Second, interviewers read through the consent documentation prior to interviews to ensure participants understood each point and to provide them the opportunity to ask questions. Interviewers told participants that they could not provide legal advice and that study participation would not positively or negatively affect their case (or their son's case). Interviewers reminded participants they could end interviews at any time, skip interview questions, and withdraw from the study. Third, the research team maintained confidentiality for each participant by assigning all participants an ID number, allowing each participant to choose a pseudonym, and not sharing information between family members.

4.2 | Sample Description

Table 1 presents descriptive characteristics of the analytic sample. Most incarcerated brothers identify as Latino (68%), reflecting the demographics of Southern California. On average, brothers are 31 years old and have two children. About two-fifths (39%) of brothers have less than a high school diploma, two-fifths (35%) have a high school diploma or GED, and one-fifth (18%) have some post-secondary education. Nearly two-fifths (37%) of brothers are awaiting trial at baseline. Half of brothers have spent less than 6 months in jail during their current incarceration (50%). About one-fifth of brothers (24%) experienced one to three jail incarcerations, two-fifths (42%) experienced four to seven jail incarcerations, and two-fifths (34%) experienced eight or more jail incarcerations. Most of the men's mothers also identify as Latina (77%). On average, mothers are 55 years old and have four children.

4.3 | Analytic Strategy

We used a flexible coding approach suitable for large qualitative projects that involve team-based coding. This flexible approach includes deductive coding (also referred to as index coding), inductive coding (also referred to as analytic coding), and extensive memo-writing, while paying attention to inter-coder consistency practices throughout (Deterding and Waters 2021).

In the first analytic stage, under the direction of the study PI, a team of trained graduate students conducted deductive coding of interview transcripts, working collaboratively to identify broad themes from the interview guides. For example, we created a code called “Parent and Sibling Effects,” which was derived from a question in the incarcerated brothers' interview guide (e.g., “How have things been for your parents and siblings since you went to jail?”). We created a similar code for interviews with mothers. Note that these codes include direct responses to interview questions and any instances of the participant discussing the theme throughout the interview (even if not prompted by a specific question). The research team coded interviews with brothers first, coding 10 transcripts together to

TABLE 1 | Baseline characteristics of the analytic sample.

	Incarcerated brothers		Mothers	
	N	**% or *M***	***N***	**% or *M***
Race/ethnicity				
Latino/a	83	68%	53	77%
White	25	20%	12	20%
Black	5	4%	2	3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	1%	1	1%
Multiracial	6	4%	1	1%
Unknown	1	1%	0	0%
Age		31		55
Number of children		2		4
Educational attainment				
Less than high school	48	39%	13	19%
High school or GED	43	35%	8	12%
More than high school	22	18%	17	26%
Unknown	9	7%	31	48%
Incarceration length				
Less than 6 months	50	41%		
6 months to less than 1 year	36	30%		
1 year or more	25	20%		
Unknown	11	9%		
Number of prior incarcerations				
1–3 times	29	24%		
4–7 times	51	42%		
8 or more times	42	34%		
N	122		69	

achieve inter-coder consistency. Remaining transcripts were coded by one team member and reviewed by a second, with the two coders working together and with the larger team to resolve any discrepancies. We followed a similar process in coding interviews with mothers.

In the second analytic stage, the authors used the aforementioned deductive codes to identify analytic excerpts about the repercussions of sibling incarceration. Sibling support emerged as the most common and poignant theme and, therefore, we focus our analysis on perceptions and provisions of sibling support during incarceration.

The third analytic stage involved extensive memo-writing. We wrote family-level memos documenting the range of experiences in sibling support during incarceration. Our memos documented heterogeneity in sibling support, with incarcerated brothers and their mothers reporting "unconditional," "mediated," "disengaged," and "absent" support. Subsequently, we categorized each family into the predominant sibling support category based on the extent of sibling support during incarceration and the familial dynamics that shaped these provisions. We categorized 10 families into a predominant sibling support category, reviewing one another's categorization to refine support definitions. We categorized families as "unconditional" if siblings provided incarceration support to brothers, parents, and other family members (e.g., nieces and nephews). We categorized families as "mediated" if siblings' support to incarcerated brothers was facilitated by a family member. We categorized families as "disengaged" if siblings report infrequent support to incarcerated brothers due to constraints and/or to protect themselves. Finally, we categorized families as "absent" if siblings once provided incarceration support but no longer provided said support. Not all families in our analytic sample could be categorized into a sibling support group, as there were interviews where sibling support did not emerge. This was most common when siblings had strained relationships, endured incarceration themselves, and lived outside of the United States.

During the analytic process, we triangulated brothers' and mothers' reports of sibling support. We noted discrepancies in brothers' and mothers' reports and found mostly congruence across accounts, but noted discrepancies in nine families. In these cases, incarcerated brothers make no mention of receiving support from non-incarcerated siblings and express sibling distancing, but mothers report multiple ways siblings provide continued support (e.g., financial, instrumental, and emotional). In these instances, we rely on mothers' reports of sibling support during incarceration to categorize families, as mothers provide a third-party assessment of support provisions. We highlight the nuances of support provisions in the findings.

Additionally, we leveraged the longitudinal data to assess changes in sibling support. First, we used the baseline interviews to document how families experienced sibling support during incarceration. Second, we assessed the evolution of sibling support in follow-up interviews, where many brothers continued to experience confinement (same or new incarceration) and, if released, we used their retrospective accounts of sibling support during the incarceration period to further triangulate information. We found little evidence of changes in sibling support during incarceration between the baseline and follow-up interviews (on average, conducted about 1 year apart). In the few instances of observed changes in sibling support, support shifted from "unconditional" or "mediated" at baseline to "absent" or "disengaged" at follow-up.

4.4 | Reflexivity Statement

It is imperative to consider the positionality of the research team and interrogate embedded power dynamics when conducting

research with vulnerable populations (Allen 2004). The study PI and eight graduate students conducted interviews for the Jail and Family Life Study (seven women and two men; five identifying as white and four as Latino). Sensitive to the needs of Latino families, the PI prioritized training bilingual interviewers who could conduct interviews with Spanish-only speaking families. In some cases, interviewers shared identities with incarcerated brothers and mothers, which helped facilitate rapport but could also hinder elaboration due to assumed collective knowledge. Attentive to these dynamics, interviewers were trained by the PI to probe rather than to assume participants' experiences.

We practiced reflexivity in the data interpretation and analysis process. The inductive coding for the sibling analysis was conducted by the first author, a Latina who uses qualitative methods to study sibling relationships over the life course, and the third author, a Latina who studies the deportation and carceral systems, under the supervision of the second author (PI), a white woman who studies the consequences of incarceration on families. All authors were sisters (two older siblings and one younger sibling) who occupied different roles and responsibilities in the family and were cognizant of how our positionalities may have influenced data interpretation. We continuously challenged ourselves to adopt expansive definitions of incarceration support and worked to question our normative assumptions of sibling support (top-down) to consider how incarceration may reshape relationships.

5 | Findings

Our qualitative analysis reveals that incarcerated brothers negotiate four primary types of support from their non-incarcerated siblings: (1) unconditional, (2) mediated, (3) disengaged, and (4) absent. Unconditional sibling support is the primary type of sibling support identified in the data, reported in about three-fifths of families that describe receiving sibling support (with mediated, disengaged, and absent sibling support representing between 10% and 15% of families each). *Unconditional* sibling support is experienced as intrinsically available to incarcerated brothers and other family members (including their mothers, nieces, and nephews), despite non-incarcerated siblings enduring considerable emotional turmoil resulting from the incarceration, because of cultural assumptions that sibling relationships are life-long bonds that can be counted on. *Mediated* sibling support is interpreted as reluctant provisions of non-incarcerated support primarily facilitated through mothers (and, in some cases, support for their brother is demanded by their mothers). *Disengaged* sibling support is characterized by infrequent provisions of support to brothers and other family members that result from non-incarcerated siblings' financial constraints and/or a need to protect their emotional well-being. *Absent* sibling support is assessed as no provisions of support to incarcerated brothers or other family members, which usually arises as non-incarcerated siblings grow tired of their brother's cyclical incarceration. By documenting how incarcerated brothers experience sibling support during incarceration and how this support is managed within families, we illuminate how incarceration is a family stressor that proliferates to these often-forgotten family relationships.

5.1 | Unconditional Sibling Support: "Willing to Do Everything"

We find unconditional support is the most common way incarcerated brothers experience sibling support. First, non-incarcerated siblings are framed as intrinsically and unreservedly supporting incarcerated brothers during their confinement, providing support that often bolsters family resources. Second, this support extends beyond brothers to other family members (including the mothers, nieces, and nephews of non-incarcerated siblings) who are also navigating the repercussions of the incarceration. Third, although unconditional sibling support is framed as intrinsic, families recognize this extensive support often generates emotional distress for non-incarcerated siblings.

5.1.1 | Intrinsic and Unreserved Sibling Support During Incarceration

Incarcerated brothers commonly experience unconditional financial, instrumental, and emotional support from non-incarcerated siblings during the confinement period. This support provided by non-incarcerated siblings includes visiting their brothers, accepting collect phone calls, sending letters, putting money on commissary accounts, paying for attorneys, and signing bail bonds. Lucy, 52 years old and mother to three sons, told us about the wholehearted support her oldest son provided to his two incarcerated brothers (one of whom we interviewed). She described her oldest son as having a "really close" relationship with his brothers and, as the oldest, he was "always looking out" for his two younger brothers, including when they are incarcerated. Lucy explained, "He always puts money on the phone for them to call … If I need him to help me out, I do one, he does one. So, a lot of times we switch up and take turns … He helps me out a lot." Lucy, in asserting that her oldest child will "always" caretake for his younger siblings, highlights the assumed life-long and non-cancellable bond of sibling support provisions even under adverse conditions. Moreover, this support underscores the substantial role unconditional siblings play in bolstering family resources during stressful events.

Similarly, 74-year-old Cruzecita, who managed her son's incarceration from Mexico, shared that her son was in constant contact with his three sisters who provided her updates. Their brother, 35-year-old Anteater, told us that his sisters sent letters, visited, put money on his commissary account, and lifted his spirits with good advice. He noted that his sisters "are willing to do everything" for him and that is how they "show love" during this difficult time, highlighting the boundlessness of unconditional sibling support during incarceration. Ramone, 35 years old and the second oldest of four, similarly reflected on the unconditional support he received from his sister. When asked what made him sad, Ramone said, "I think about my mom. I've put her through a lot. Not just her but my sister. She had to go through all that and she's still there." Ramone framed his sister's support as unwavering despite the strain of his incarceration. During jail incarceration, unconditional siblings—like Anteater and Ramone—experience unreserved instrumental, financial, and emotional support from non-incarcerated siblings.

Incarcerated brothers also anticipated unconditional sibling support after their release. Brothers often expected non-incarcerated siblings to help them with employment opportunities and housing accommodations. Matthew, 41 years old with two siblings, is an illustrative case of the unequivocal support anticipated by brothers. Matthew described a "really tight" relationship with his sister, who attended court hearings, communicated with lawyers, visited bi-weekly, and put money on his commissary account. When asked during his follow-up interview, conducted in prison, about his expectations for his sister's support upon release, Matthew expressed that he could count on her for unconditional support despite her weariness: "She's gonna be there for me, whatever help I need. There's gonna be a place for me to sleep. Just like the same for me. When I get on my feet and I have a place, if she ever needs anything, I owe her a lot already. I owe my sister being a big brother." Matthew, given his relationship with his sister, unquestionably expects her to provide support upon release to secure housing accommodations. Mario, 35 years old with three siblings, shared similar expectations about sibling support during reentry. Mario shared that his brother worked for Tesla and that he would "for sure" get him a job upon release and, furthermore, that his sister offered to take him in upon release. Mario's pooling of family resources showcases how siblings often work together to manage their brother's incarceration. The expectations of unconditional siblings upon release are also shared by mothers of incarcerated sons. For instance, when asked about her son's financial situation upon release, Cruzecita confidently shared that, "He'll have his sister's support. To help him live, eat, and have a car. To me, this is going to be a test to see how God opens up doors for him." Cruzecita's declaration suggests that unconditional siblings are expected to support incarcerated brothers after release.

5.1.2 | Extending Sibling Incarceration Support to Family Members

Unconditional sibling support also includes supporting their mothers in navigating their brother's incarceration. For example, 26-year-old Charlie shared that his incarceration prompted changes in his family's dynamic. Charlie's sister, who was previously living with their grandmother, moved back in with their mother to provide her emotional support during his incarceration. He said, "I went to jail and no one was there with my mom. I think [my sister] went to comfort her a little more." Additionally, in cases where mothers solely spoke Spanish, unconditional siblings provided them with both emotional and instrumental support, helping them navigate the criminal legal system while simultaneously providing direct support to their brother. Take 48-year-old Catalina (mother of four), for instance, who told us that her son's siblings put $40 a month on his commissary account. Catalina also disclosed that she was scared to visit jail facilities alone and, therefore, relied on her adult daughter to help navigate visitations. She explained, "Sometimes I don't like to go alone because they speak English to me. And I don't know what window I'm gonna get to see him. And so, I take my daughter because she knows English and I don't know English." Therefore, unconditional siblings help families manage their brother's incarceration by supporting their mothers.

In addition to supporting mothers, incarcerated brothers and their mothers described how non-incarcerated siblings provide caregiving assistance to the nieces and nephews of these children. Some siblings held custody of their brother's children or were in custody battles. For example, 33-year-old Abraham, signed temporary custody of his 13-year-old child to one of his brothers, who stepped up without hesitation to care for his nephew. When asked how he decided which of his 11 siblings would take custody, Abraham said, "I honestly didn't decide. He, my brother, took it upon himself to take my son. Because my parents are old, and my dad's real strict, and he just does not parent. So my brother took over, and he's had him since." Similarly, 26-year-old Tiny was appreciative of his sister who took custody of his child upon his request. Tiny expressed relief about this arrangement because now he did not have to fight the courts to see his children. Octavio, 28 years old, also noted that his brother "was pretty good, he had him do a lot of rounds for me, he had to go visit me, he had to take care of my son, he had to fix the car, for all that happened while I was gone." Octavio remarked, "If I didn't have [my brother], I don't know what I would do." Therefore, involvement in childcare responsibilities was another way incarcerated brothers experienced unconditional support from their siblings.

5.1.3 | Sibling Emotional Distress Stemming From Incarceration

Although unconditional sibling support is endured as intrinsic and unreserved, families also acknowledged the emotional distress stemming from a brother's incarceration. Lynn provides a prime example of this. Lynn, 66 years old, told us her incarcerated son's sister was the most affected because he is constantly asking her to support him with incarceration-related tasks (including calling attorneys and assisting with paperwork). Lynn described the sibling support her daughter provided as burdensome. She explained, "It got a bit overwhelming for her because he demanded all this stuff to be done and she has a life of her own, you know, and she has to work." Though Lynn's son expected unconditional support from his sister during this time, the demands of this support were often emotionally distressing. Similarly, Salma, 45 years old, told us that her incarcerated son, Mario, and his younger brother shared a close bond and Mario received unconditional sibling support during this incarceration. Mario's younger brother provided incarceration support while simultaneously navigating the consequences of Mario's incarceration. Salma noted that Mario's younger brother "started going down, down" and his grades started to suffer. Though incarcerated brothers benefited from the unconditional support of siblings, family narratives underscored that this support comes at a cost for non-incarcerated siblings.

5.2 | Mediated Sibling Support: "If You Don't Do It for Him, Do It for Me"

Mediated sibling support, similar to unconditional sibling support, includes provisions of instrumental and financial support to incarcerated brothers. However, rather than being experienced as intrinsic, mediated sibling support is framed as reluctant provisions of support from non-incarcerated siblings at the request of their mothers (and, in some cases, as demanded by their mothers). First, incarcerated brothers commonly receive

mediated sibling support at the (explicit and covert) requests of their mothers and are often obliged to these requests to protect their mother's emotional well-being. Second, although non-incarcerated siblings provide direct support to incarcerated brothers, they simultaneously discourage their mothers from supporting their brothers.

5.2.1 | Mothers Facilitating Sibling Support During Incarceration

Incarcerated brothers receive mediated support from non-incarcerated siblings at the supplication of their mothers. Araceli, 64 years old and mother to three sons, provides a prime example of how mothers facilitate sibling support. Araceli told us that she asked her older son to support his incarcerated brother, but he said, "No! I gave him plenty of support and he doesn't want it. Let him drop dead!" Yet Araceli refused to accept her older son's stance: "We have to stand by his side … If you don't do it for him, do it for me, because you know how I feel." Araceli continued to beg her children to "send him at least $20. Go there and give him money, please, go there." Ultimately, because of Araceli's emotional pleas, her children contributed to their incarcerated brother's commissary account. Araceli said she would continue to encourage sibling support upon her son's release, as she expected to reside in Mexico then. She anticipated telling her non-incarcerated children, "Please support him. I won't be here. Support him, please." By pleading and stressing to her children that the support they were giving their incarcerated brother was also for her, her son's siblings obliged to their mother's requests to protect her emotional well-being. Although mediated siblings may prefer to distance themselves from their incarcerated brothers, concern and sometimes guilt from their mothers pushed them to provide their brother's support.

Will, 23 years old and the oldest of two, described a similar dynamic between his brother and mother. Will noted the only time he received a letter from his younger brother was "because [my] mom was there and sat [my little brother] down and was like you have to write your [incarcerated] brother back." Although Will wrote to his brother about five times, he only received a response from his brother when their mother intervened. The role of Will's mother in facilitating sibling support during incarceration underscores the power that mothers hold in maintaining familial relationships. Similarly, 45-year-old Roy, interviewed in a mandated rehabilitation program after release, told us his sister's support was evoked by their mother. He reflected, "It's funny because when I committed to the challenge, [my oldest sister] was the first person that came to visit me. And to see how I was doing, and to see what I was up to. Because she was surprised, everybody was surprised and I found out later that my mom sent her." Roy's sister's support was elicited by their mother who asked her daughter to check in on her brother to assess his well-being. Mediated siblings provide support to their incarcerated brother because of mothers' requests.

Although mothers' demands of sibling support during a brother's incarceration were often explicit, some requests were more covert. For instance, 48-year-old Marsha, mother of three, frequently asked her incarcerated son's younger brother to accompany her during visits, but he always declined. She said she would stop asking him because she was not a "pusher" and did not want him to "feel guilty," yet she regularly informed her younger son about his brother's incarceration status and communicated messages from him. She described prompting her younger son's support by declaring, "Your brother's birthday is in two days." Marsha also disclosed that, as a birthday gift, she would put money on her son's commissary account, telling us that these remarks prompted her son's younger brothers to contribute financially. The mother's reminder of their incarcerated brother's birthday draws on an unspoken expectation that siblings care for one another's well-being, especially during milestone life events.

5.2.2 | Siblings Dissuading Incarceration Support

Though mediated sibling support is provided to incarcerated brothers at their mother's requests, siblings often simultaneously encourage their mothers to refrain from supporting their incarcerated brothers. Emma, Will's 47-year-old mother, who encouraged her younger son to sustain a relationship with his incarcerated brother, also shared that her younger son discouraged her from helping his incarcerated brother. Emma recollected a time when Will's bail was set at $8500. She had the money to bail him out but first consulted his younger brother. Will's younger brother said, "Don't bail him out. He needs to learn a lesson sometime." Similarly, 56-year-old Sandra told us that her daughters wrote to their incarcerated brother and maintained contact with his children but simultaneously dissuaded her from supporting him. She explained how her daughters witnessed her worry excessively and told her, "Mom, don't worry so much. Look, we always help them. We always call them. They're too grown up to know they don't have to make those problems. You're getting old and they're doing the same things." His sisters later told her to, "Punish him, mom. Throw him out [to the street]." Because his sisters witnessed their mother's emotional distress, they actively encouraged their mother to pull back the support given to their incarcerated brother. Jean, 47 years old and mother of three, told us that her son's sisters, who put money on his commissary account and helped her visit and write letters, similarly dissuaded her from supporting their incarcerated brother: "If he comes here [upon release], do not open the door." Therefore, although mediated siblings support their incarcerated brothers, they often encouraged their mothers to pull away from incarcerated brothers to protect their well-being.

5.3 | Disengaged Sibling Support: "My Kids Don't Want to Deal With That"

Disengaged sibling support is described as having generally received incarcerated-related support from non-incarcerated siblings that has declined over time. The most common reasons for disengaged sibling support include non-incarcerated siblings experiencing their own financial hardship, making it challenging to provide consistent support to their brothers, and distancing themselves from their brothers to protect their own well-being.

5.3.1 | Sibling Hardships

Disengaged sibling support is understood as limited provisions of support because non-incarcerated siblings are experiencing financial hardships that make it difficult to support incarcerated brothers. For instance, 48-year-old Pablo told us that his brother planned to help pay $10,000 in attorney fees but ultimately was unable to because of financial hardship. Pablo also shared that his brother recently stopped visiting on the weekends because of his work schedule. Pablo said, "[My brother] started working weekends and having two jobs so his free time was at night and you can't come here at night." Similarly, 23-year-old Carlos told us that his family was going through a tough time financially and, accordingly, his sister only occasionally put money on his commissary account. Although Carlos talked to his youngest sister on the phone, she could not visit because "they don't have the money [for gas] to come down there and to take the whole day." Financial constraints—like those of Carlos' sister—made it difficult for siblings to provide support. Consequently, disengaged siblings support their incarcerated brothers with less consistency compared to unconditional and mediated siblings.

5.3.2 | Sibling Distancing

Disengaged sibling support is also understood as the emotional distancing of siblings from their incarcerated brothers as a means of protecting their well-being. Maria, 58 years old and mother of eight, told us that her incarcerated son's sisters rarely visit and put money on his commissary account because they have undergone an emotional shift. Maria said, "[His sisters] used to suffer as well but now they tell him, 'No, it's your fault. You're there because you don't want to behave well.' But they used to feel bad about it. But I talk to them and they'd tell me, 'Well, mom he has to pay, because if he doesn't, he won't change at any point in his life.'" Although her son's sisters sporadically supported their incarcerated brother, occasionally visiting and providing financial assistance, they were no longer emotionally invested in his incarceration. The emotional distancing of Maria's son's sisters is further exemplified by her remarks upon his release. When asked about how her family will feel about his release, Maria said, "He doesn't have a house. He's created so many problems that my kids don't want to deal with that." Her son's sisters provided sporadic support to their incarcerated brother but, upon release, they no longer wanted to "deal" with their brother's problems. Thus, her son's sisters began to detach themselves from their brother.

The emotional distancing of disengaged siblings is also exemplified by 65-year-old Rosie and her three children. Rosie shared that her incarcerated son's siblings "have distanced themselves and they really don't want to have much to do with him at all." Despite the emotional withdrawal of her son's siblings, Rosie told us that his sister wrote to him when he was transferred to prison though his brother refused to reach out: "[His sister] has written to him. She's a little more sensitive like that." Rosie also expressed that it was emotionally difficult for her son's siblings to be there for him and, therefore, they have reduced their support. Similarly, 22-year-old Micklo says his sisters supported him during the incarceration by occasionally putting money on his commissary account and paying fees. Yet, when asked about how his family was doing upon his arrest, Micklo shared that his sister said he "deserved it and that he was in there for his own responsibility." Upon his release, Micklo told us that his sister moved out of the apartment they shared because she was "tired of everything, my situation, and causing problems." In this case, Micklo's sister both emotionally and physically distanced herself from his problems. Like other disengaged siblings, Micklo's sister reduced her incarceration support to protect her well-being.

5.4 | Absent Sibling Support: "They're Kind of Fed Up With It"

Absent sibling support is described as receiving no incarceration-related financial, instrumental, or emotional support from non-incarcerated siblings. Even when incarcerated brothers attempt to maintain contact, these siblings remain unresponsive to their brother's efforts. Absent sibling support families detail that non-incarcerated siblings harbored negative emotions (hurt and anger) and often held negative beliefs about incarcerated brothers. Overall, absent siblings described having grown tired of their brother's cyclical incarceration and having lost hope that their brother will change.

Absent siblings provided no incarceration-related support to their brothers and often held negative emotions toward them. For instance, 58-year-old Roxanne told us that her incarcerated son, who has cycled in and out of jail five times for drug possession, and his sister were always together growing up but about 5 years ago "she's got so much anger." Although Roxanne was unsure where the anger stemmed from, she told us that her daughter remarked that, "Well, he's a drug addict ..." Roxanne shared that her son wanted to maintain a relationship with his sister during his incarceration, writing to her, but received no response. When asked how her daughter was affected by his incarceration, Roxanne said, "She didn't care and she would always call him a criminal." Her daughter no longer spoke to her brother, provided him no support, and perceived him negatively.

Similarly, Robert's siblings were hurt by his incarceration and did not provide support, corroborated by his 68-year-old mother Teresa. Robert, age 37 with three siblings, says "everyone gave up on him" after more than 10 jail stays so he did not receive calls, letters, or visitation. When asked how his incarceration affected his brother, Robert told us, "He gets hurt when I go [to jail], especially this last time, that I left my daughter here over drugs. He doesn't like it. He tells me that he hurts when I'm not here." The hurt Robert's brother experienced was coupled with disapproval of his life choices. Similarly, 27-year-old Julio, who had been incarcerated four times for driving under the influence, told us that his brother "doesn't care" about his incarceration because he is a "troublemaker" and "they don't trust me." He said that his sister thinks he is a thief and believes that he is "always going to be doing bad things." Julio's siblings overall hold a poor image of their incarcerated brother and do not support him. Absent siblings did not help their brothers during their incarceration and tended to hold negative perceptions of them.

Absent siblings also grew tired of their brother's cyclical incarceration. Luke, 34 years old with six siblings, is an illustrative example of how absent siblings become "fed up" with their

brother's incarceration. When asked about his familial relationships upon his most recent release, after more than 10 jail stays for theft and driving under the influence, Luke said, "They were nice. A little distant, but that was expected. I've been doing this my whole life, so it's like they're kind of fed up with it." Luke reflected that "in the past, they've always put out the helping hand and stuff like that. And this time they weren't going to do that. They want me to do it on my own." Luke is an example of how sibling support during incarceration can change over time. He notes that he used to receive support from his siblings, but they grew tired given his long incarceration history and were no longer providing support. Hence, cyclical incarceration was one reason why absent siblings divested from their brother's incarceration.

6 | Discussion

Incarceration is a stressor that disrupts families and, despite sibling incarceration being the modal form of family member incarceration (Enns et al. 2019), we know relatively little about how families negotiate support from non-incarcerated siblings during incarceration (Garza and Williams 2024; Wakefield and Baker 2024). The experiences of incarcerated brothers (or that of other family members) in sibling–sibling support provisions are largely neglected, as criminal legal research largely focuses on overlaps in sibling criminal activity (Aaron and Dallaire 2011; Beaver 2012) and family research on sibling relationships during incarceration is limited to the perspectives of non-incarcerated siblings (Benisty et al. 2021; Benisty 2022; Tadros et al. 2019). Drawing on interviews with 122 incarcerated brothers and 69 of their caregivers, we find that incarcerated brothers primarily experience four types of sibling support: unconditional, mediated, disengaged, and absent. By documenting the heterogeneity of sibling support in the context of incarceration, we advance scholarship on the criminal legal system and families in two meaningful ways. First, we extend criminal legal system research beyond the documented overlap in sibling criminal activity (Aaron and Dallaire 2011; Beaver 2012) to underscore how a brother's incarceration is consequential to entire family units (Wakefield et al. 2024). Second, we build on existing research on sibling relationships during incarceration (Benisty et al. 2021; Clone and DeHart 2014; Deacon 2022; Meek 2008; Tadros et al. 2019) by illuminating–from the perspective of incarcerated brothers (and their mothers)–how contextual factors substantially shape incarceration support from non-incarcerated siblings including cultural meanings of family, familial pressures, self-protective mechanisms, and the cyclical nature of sibling incarceration.

We extend research on familial consequences of incarceration, which commonly focuses on parent–child relationships (Bourgeois et al. 2022; McHale et al. 2012), by centering how sibling relationships are (re)negotiated under the shadow of the carceral system. We draw on family stress theory, which highlights the consequences of stressors for families and emphasizes the interconnectedness of the family system (Arditti 2016; Patterson 2004; Turney and Sugie 2021; Turney 2023), to uncover how sibling support (and expectations) operate within families during the incarceration period. Consistent with family stress theory, we find that a brother's incarceration has rippling consequences for provisions of non-incarcerated sibling support (Benisty et al. 2021; Tadros et al. 2019), with incarcerated brothers experiencing heterogeneity in support (Clone and DeHart 2014; Hood and Gaston 2021) and this support being embedded in the parent–child and sibling–sibling subsystems (Turney et al. 2024; Woodard and Copp 2016).

Situated in family stress theory, our findings suggest that despite incarceration being a familial stressor that constrains family resources (Patterson 2004), cultural understandings of family support help explain unconditional provisions of sibling support. Incarcerated brothers and their mothers often expect unwavering sibling support from non-incarcerated siblings to navigate incarceration stressors. Incarcerated brothers' experiences of unconditional support are shaped by cultural expectations about the life-long and non-cancellable nature of sibling relationships (Benisty 2022; Garza and Williams 2024; Leverentz 2011). Experiences of unconditional sibling support draw on cultural narratives of familial relationships that emphasize unequivocal sibling solidarity, especially during times of crisis (DeHart et al. 2018; Kalmijn and Leopold 2018; Sýkorová 2023; Voorpostel and Blieszner 2008). Unconditional siblings provide financial, instrumental, emotional, and caregiving assistance to incarcerated brothers (Benisty et al. 2021; McCarthy and Adams 2019; Tadros et al. 2019). During incarceration, brothers expect unconditional siblings to extend their support upon release (Clone and DeHart 2014; Hood and Gaston 2021). The intrinsic and unreserved support of unconditional siblings often supplements familial resources and extends beyond incarcerated brothers to include parents, nieces, and nephews who are also navigating the carceral system. However, the provision of this support is not without considerable emotional distress (Clone and DeHart 2014; Tadros et al. 2019). Overall, experiences and expectations of unconditional sibling support highlight the relational pressures non-incarcerated siblings face to augment familial resources after experiencing a stressor (Hood and Gaston 2021; Marín 2024).

Second, in alignment with family stress theory, which suggests the sibling–sibling subsystem is influenced by the parent–child subsystem and vice versa (McHale et al. 2004; Whiteman et al. 2011; Woodard and Copp 2016), we find that some incarcerated brothers experience mediated sibling support facilitated by mothers. Mediated sibling support, like unconditional sibling support, involves direct instrumental and financial support to incarcerated brothers but diverges from unconditional sibling support because mothers plead for this support as a way of providing emotional support to them. This finding contributes to research documenting the integral role of mothers in maintaining sibling relationships (Hamwey et al. 2019; Hornstra and Ivanova 2023; McHale et al. 2004; Seery and Crowley 2000). We extend prior work by identifying mothers as active cultivators of sibling relationships after enduring a stressor such as incarceration that often contributes to the erosion of sibling relationships (Hamwey et al. 2019). We also advance prior work by uncovering how the sibling–sibling subsystem influences the parent–child subsystem to illuminate how non-incarcerated siblings provide support to incarcerated brothers and simultaneously prompt mothers to refrain from supporting their brothers to protect their mothers' well-being (Ceciliano-Navarro and Golash-Boza 2021; Turney 2011). In highlighting how sibling support

to incarcerated brothers is embedded in the family system (parent–child and sibling–sibling subsystems), we underscore consequential intra-family dynamics that shape how incarcerated brothers and their mothers experience sibling support.

Finally, family stress theory suggests that resource constraints and the prolonged endurance of stressors likely reduce provisions of sibling support. Some incarcerated brothers experience disengaged sibling support, characterized by infrequent help due to financial constraints (Bourgeois et al. 2022; Comfort 2016) and/or as a protective mechanism (Hood and Gaston 2021). Other incarcerated brothers receive no support from their non-incarcerated siblings, mostly due to negative feelings that emerge from their brother's cyclical incarceration. These findings suggest that harboring negative emotions (including anger, resentment, and stress) along with cyclical incarceration has the potential to strain sibling relationships and reduce sibling support provisions.

This study offers important implications for research, policy, and practice. First, our qualitative findings point to the important role of siblings in navigating incarceration. Yet, quantitative surveys rarely collect information about siblings (Wakefield et al. 2024). We urge researchers to incorporate survey questions about sibling structure (e.g., number of siblings, age, birth order, and gender) and sibling characteristics (e.g., relationship quality and support provisions) to better understand the consequences of family incarceration with population-based data. Second, our qualitative findings point to the extensive labor that non-incarcerated siblings do in the shadow of the criminal legal system. Our findings highlight the importance of developing family-centered interventions that include increased and targeted resources for non-incarcerated siblings.

6.1 | Limitations

Taken together, our findings illuminate the heterogeneous ways incarcerated brothers experience support provisions from non-incarcerated siblings, but they should be interpreted in light of several features. Importantly, this study draws primarily from the perspective of support receivers, incarcerated brothers, and their mothers, as the study did not explicitly recruit non-incarcerated siblings. These interviews with incarcerated brothers and their mothers provide rich narrative information about the expectations and familial pressures that cultivate provisions of support from non-incarcerated siblings. However, given the importance of sibling relationships over the life course (McHale et al. 2012), future research should systematically interview non-incarcerated siblings and incarcerated brothers (and sisters). Dyadic sibling interviews with incarcerated and non-incarcerated siblings could uncover additional dimensions of sibling incarceration-related support such as processes of reciprocity and within-family variation in support. Similarly, our analysis includes only men with children, which potentially structures the dynamics of sibling support that incarcerated brother's experience. Non-incarcerated siblings may be more willing to support their incarcerated brother as a way of supporting both his children and their own children (as these incarcerated brothers have roles as uncles, too). Future research should examine the role of children in structuring adult sibling relationships and support in the shadow of the carceral system. Lastly, although this study finds no substantial changes in sibling support over time, more meaningful changes may be observed over a longer follow-up period. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs with longer follow-up periods to better assess how sibling support changes over time.

Moreover, future research should consider how sibling characteristics such as age, birth order, and gender shape sibling support during incarceration. There are good reasons why age may shape sibling support during incarceration. Non-incarcerated siblings in the transition to young adulthood may reduce sibling support as they undergo significant role transitions such as leaving the home, completing college, marriage, and child-rearing (McHale et al. 2012). However, because sibling social support tends to increase with age, incarcerated brothers may experience substantial increases in sibling support in later adulthood, especially after the passing of parents (Conger and Little 2010). Birth order may also shape sibling support. Normative birth order expectations may place undue pressure on older siblings rather than younger siblings to provide incarceration support (Marín 2024). Finally, future research should explore the gendered experiences of sibling support during incarceration. Our analysis focuses on the experiences of incarcerated brothers, given the concentration of incarceration among men (Mueller 2023), but siblings may have different experiences with incarcerated sisters. Relatedly, the gender of the non-incarcerated sibling may matter. Sibling support during incarceration is likely a gendered process where sisters disproportionately shoulder the burden of providing high levels of support (instrumental, emotional, financial) to brothers during incarceration (Clone and DeHart 2014; Tadros et al. 2019). By contrast, given gender expectations, brothers may be expected to only engage in discrete forms of support during incarceration (e.g., financial), but may shoulder additional responsibilities upon release such as keeping brothers company and helping them secure employment (McHale et al. 2012; Naser and Visher 2006).

6.2 | Conclusions

Siblings are central sources of support that can augment familial resources during a brother's incarceration. We find that provisions of incarceration-related support from non-incarcerated siblings are shaped by cultural expectations of family, familial pressures (primarily from mothers), protective mechanisms, and the cyclical nature of incarceration. Some incarcerated brothers frame sibling support during incarceration as intrinsic because of the life-long and non-cancellable bond of sibling relationships, despite the understood stress these expectations produce. Other incarcerated brothers interpret sibling support during incarceration as mediated by their mothers, and still other incarcerated brothers experience the absence of sibling support as a self-protective mechanism stemming from cyclical incarceration. By documenting the range of incarceration-related support experienced by brothers, we shed light on the support experienced in the often-forgotten family relationships that represent more than one-quarter of U.S. adult experiences.

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