

“One More Thing on my Mental List”: Cognitive Labor During Family Member Incarceration

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Abstract

Cognitive labor, disproportionately undertaken by women, is central to household functioning and is likely a critical aspect of managing the fallout of family member incarceration. We use 279 interviews with mothers and romantic partners of incarcerated men to describe the scope and process of cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration. First, we show that the tasks stemming from family member incarceration involve the four stages of cognitive labor (anticipating needs, identifying options, making decisions, and monitoring results). Second, the uncertainty of the criminal legal system means family members spend extensive time in the first two stages. Third, constraints of the decision-making stage both stall and redirect cognitive labor. Fourth, family members undertake cognitive labor regardless of their relative's incarceration history. These findings show that the cognitive labor process unfolds distinctly and is more burdensome for disadvantaged groups, who are disproportionately routed through institutions that reorient family life to demand intensive cognitive labor.

Keywords cognitive labor, gender inequality, family, incarceration

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Family member incarceration, a stressor endured by nearly half of all U.S. adults, is a transformative experience with enduring consequences (Adams 2018; Enns et al. 2019). Research documents the wide-ranging and reinforcing repercussions, especially for women, who are both most exposed to family member incarceration and most likely to shoulder its emotional, financial, and social burdens (DeLorme 2025; Enns et al. 2019; Page, Piehowski, and Soss 2019; Umamaheswar 2024).

Though the burdens of vicarious criminal legal contact are considerable, and disproportionately shouldered by women, research has yet to explicitly and systematically explore the cognitive labor that emerges during family member incarceration. Cognitive labor is a theoretical framework that delineates four stages of largely invisible mental work—anticipating needs, identifying options, making decisions, and monitoring results—essential for managing daily life, much of which is shouldered by women (Daming 2019; Petts and Carlson 2023; Weeks and Ruppanner 2025; also see Hochschild 1989). Family member incarceration generates countless tasks to manage including caregiving for children left behind (Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt 2012), interfacing with criminal legal system actors (Deckard 2025; Page et al. 2019), maintaining contact with the incarcerated person (Comfort 2008), and providing instrumental support during confinement and reentry (Christensen, Turney, and Jang 2025; Miller 2021). The navigation of these tasks requires substantial cognitive effort (Comfort 2016; Miller 2021). People—predominantly women who shoulder both the burden of family member incarceration and the responsibility of cognitive labor—engage in this labor by anticipating the exigencies of their incarcerated family members, identifying options for meeting these needs, making decisions based on these options, and monitoring results of these decisions.

Family member incarceration likely creates considerable cognitive labor via new tasks and the reorganization of existing tasks. Institutional features of the criminal legal system highlight how the scope and process of cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration diverge from cognitive labor identified in prior research, which efficiently and sequentially moves through stages of everyday household tasks within relatively advantaged families (Daming 2019). Advancing this past work, we argue that there are theoretical reasons to anticipate that cognitive labor unfolds distinctly among families with fewer resources, particularly as they navigate outside institutions such as the criminal legal system. The uncertainty stemming from the criminal legal system increases household and extra-household tasks (and corresponding cognitive labor), as people must quickly react to anticipate their family member's many emergent needs and identify options to meet those needs (Kohler-Hausmann 2018). Relatedly, the precarious and vulnerable position of people enduring family member incarceration, both prior to and resulting from the incarceration, suggests that family members likely endure constraints to their decision-making (Kirk and Wakefield 2018). Cognitive labor may be especially pronounced among those enduring a relative's first-time incarceration, as they learn to navigate the criminal legal system.

In this paper, we use 279 interviews from the Jail and Family Life Study, a longitudinal in-depth interview study of incarcerated men and their family members, to describe the scope and process of cognitive labor demanded of mothers and romantic partners of incarcerated men. Our findings show that cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration is reactionary, with people acting quickly to meet demands; simultaneously expansive and constrained, with the criminal legal system generating both needs and obstacles; and recursive, with constraints to decision-making facilitating new cognitive labor. These findings suggest that prior research on the consequences of family member incarceration, by mostly centering the tasks of managing confinement's aftermath and not explicitly examining the cognitive processes underlying the completion (or non-completion) of these tasks, underestimates the toll of family member incarceration. Examining cognitive labor in the wake of incarceration draws analytic attention to the plans that family members make that are stalled, redirected, or foreclosed, as well as decisions to withdraw support. The omission of cognitive labor—especially

given its disproportionate burden on women—from prior research on family member incarceration likely underestimates the gendered inequalities in the consequences of family member incarceration.

The findings simultaneously suggest that prior research on cognitive labor may not fully account for the unfolding of cognitive labor in precarious families, partly because precarious families have greater exposure to institutions that generate cognitive labor burdens and their ability to enact their plans is constrained. More broadly, we theorize that institutions—in this case, the criminal legal system—can generate challenging cognitive labor demands that extend beyond couples (to intergenerational relationships), households (to people not living together), domestic labor (to the provision of familial support more generally), and highly educated populations (to economically vulnerable groups).

Background

Cognitive labor as a theoretical framework

Cognitive labor, a theoretical framework developed to understand the gendered division of household labor, is the invisible work people—mostly women—do to make households function (Daminger 2019). Cognitive labor is theorized to be an essential element of household life that involves four stages, all of which represent a qualitatively different type of mental work: anticipating household needs, identifying options to meet those needs, choosing an appropriate option, and monitoring the execution and results (Daminger 2019). All households require housework (e.g., cleaning, caregiving, scheduling appointments), and cognitive labor is the invisible labor behind these tasks. Cognitive labor is extensive, falls disproportionately on women, and is often invisible, exacerbating gender inequality (Daminger 2019; Reich-Stiebert, Froehlich, and Voltmer 2023). Indeed, studies of household labor that exclude cognitive labor likely substantially underestimate the gender inequalities in household labor. Following prior research (Daminger 2019), we distinguish cognitive labor from emotional and physical labor in that cognitive labor primarily involves mental (and not physical) tasks that stem from anticipating a need or making a decision.

Recent research, which shows how highly educated married couples navigate cognitive labor to complete household tasks, draws foundational attention to this theoretical framework by describing the stages and consequences of cognitive labor (Daminger 2019; also see Hochschild 1989). Complementary research documents the cognitive labor associated with more specific forms of household management, including decision-making around school choice (Brown 2022a), getting pregnant (Brown 2022b), managing parental illegality (Delgado 2022), foodwork (Fielding-Singh and Cooper 2023), and complex childrearing labor (Randles 2021). Some of this research extends cognitive labor to populations beyond highly educated married couples to include working- and middle-class parents (Brown 2022a), poor mothers (Randles 2021), parents not romantically involved (Luthra and Haux 2022), and children of undocumented immigrants (Delgado 2022). This research sheds light on the invisible work that people—mostly women—do to manage households, highlighting the gendered inequality in household labor (Daminger 2019; Dean, Churchill, and Ruppaner 2022; Ocobock 2025; Reich-Stiebert et al. 2023).

Cognitive labor generated by family member incarceration

Family systems theory, which emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of family members, suggests that those connected to incarcerated people endure fundamental relationship, economic, and health challenges (Cox and Paley 1997; Kirk and Wakefield 2018; Minuchin 1985). Incarceration, and the resultant communication difficulties, alters relationships between incarcerated people and their family members (Turney et al. 2024). Family member incarceration has rippling economic repercussions, both because of the mechanical removal of household

earners from the labor market and because criminal legal contact generates additional expenses (Deckard 2025; Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, and Garfinkel 2011). Family member incarceration also has formidable mental health consequences, as the confinement period provokes substantial worry, sadness, and anticipatory stress for those on the outside (Christensen et al. 2025; Turney et al. 2024).

Therefore, the interconnectedness of family members, coupled with the deleterious repercussions of family member incarceration, likely generates substantial cognitive labor as people are forced to combine the demands of domestic and carceral residences. Family member incarceration engenders considerable household and extra-household tasks for women (Adams 2018). Women with an incarcerated romantic partner, for example, incur many responsibilities in their partner's absence. They navigate the criminal legal system via visiting their family member, sending mail into facilities, putting money on commissary accounts, and attending court dates (Comfort 2008; Turney et al. 2024; Umamaheswar 2024). They navigate requests to bring minor children to visitation, to pay bail, and to relay information about their family member's incarceration to family, friends, and employers (Miller 2021; Page et al. 2019; Western 2018).

These additional tasks created by family member incarceration likely involve appreciable and invisible cognitive labor undertaken by women. Consider visiting an incarcerated family member (Comfort 2008). The following questions might arise: How frequently should I visit? When should I visit? What should I wear to pass through the metal detectors? How can I put funds on their commissary account? Should I bring another family member with me? Does my family member's desire to see their young child supersede concerns about having this child see them confined? What will they want to talk about during our visit? Do they want to know their mother is upset about their incarceration and plans to halt her financial support upon his release? Do they want to know their incarceration has triggered their sister's depression? Family members must identify options, make decisions, and monitor decisions to anticipate these needs. This work is time-intensive (as it occurs continually), invisible (as most work happens solely in one's mind), and occasionally can exercise influence (e.g., choosing to restrict their family member's access to their children) (Damingier 2019).

Though research on family member incarceration does not explicitly center cognitive labor, its existence is illustrated through a close reading. Megan Comfort (2016) finds that managing a family member's jail incarceration is a "20-hour-a-day job." These burdens—such as maintaining contact with an incarcerated family member or attending court dates—are undergirded by cognitive labor. Comfort describes the experiences of Diane, a romantic partner of Antoine, who was recently released from prison. Antoine lost the mental health services he received in prison. Comfort (2016:72) writes, "... [Diane] provided an extremely detailed account of his medical appointments, indicating that she attended all of them, and recounted how she knew what medications Antoine was taking, reminded him to take them, tracked the side effects they produced, and had opinions about medications that had not been prescribed for him that she thought he should be receiving."

Similarly, Reuben Miller, in his accounting of the "afterlife" of incarceration, describes the cognitive labor he endured during his brother's incarceration and release (though he, like Comfort, does not explicitly use terminology of "cognitive labor"). Miller (2021:131) describes his thought process after receiving an unexpected collect call from his brother: "Why was he calling collect? Did we use up the money already? There was a week left until payday, and my bank account was low. Did he forget whatever complicated combination of numbers he needed to enter to make the call? Had I paid the wrong company?" He continues, "After I had spent much too long in my head, the charge was processed" (Miller 2021:137). Miller also describes his brother's pending parole: "It had been nearly a year and he was up for parole. This meant it was time to think of an exit plan. Where would he live? Where would he work? How much would all of this cost?" Miller engages in cognitive labor by anticipating his brother's housing needs. He then considers options for his brother, including living with him, with his former romantic partner, in a friend's

basement, and in a transitional housing facility. He decides among the options, moving his brother into a transitional housing facility, and monitors this decision during visits (Miller 2021).

The cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration likely has some differences in scope and process than cognitive labor identified in prior research on highly educated couples. First, incarceration creates myriad new and redistributed tasks that generate cognitive labor. These tasks frequently go beyond the immediate domestic sphere, as the repercussions of family member incarceration ripple across households and carceral facilities (Deleme 2025; Miller 2021; Turanovic et al. 2012). Nearly all new and redistributed tasks require cognitive labor. Second, uncertainty inherent in the criminal legal system likely demands cognitive labor. People can spend weeks, months, or even years in jail awaiting case adjudication and endure considerable ambiguity surrounding the timing and conditions of release (Walker 2022). This uncertainty may expand the number of needs to anticipate and options to identify. For example, mothers and romantic partners often simultaneously prepare for their family member's immediate release and their long prison sentence (Turney et al. 2024). Finally, incarcerated individuals and their family members endure considerable vulnerabilities, including those that both predate and stem from incarceration (Kirk and Wakefield 2018), which may shape cognitive labor. Vulnerabilities limit family members' choices, meaning that cognitive labor—especially the most powerful decision-making stage—may be constrained.

In sum, systematically attending to the cognitive labor demands of family member incarceration provides a more comprehensive understanding of the burdens of incarceration described in existing research (Adams 2018). First, examining the cognitive labor demands created by family member incarceration draws attention to the less visible planning, evaluating, and decision-making work that undergirds highly visible tasks, such as visitation, caregiving for children, or providing commissary payments. Second, it underscores how withdrawn support—which could appear as a non-existent consequence of family member incarceration, particularly in survey research—also requires substantial cognitive labor. Third, and relatedly, it acknowledges the work that people engage in to support incarcerated family members, even when these plans fail to come to fruition. Accounting for these waylaid, stalled, and rerouted plans to support their incarcerated family member—in addition to the plans that family members ultimately do execute—expands our understanding of the consequences of family member incarceration. Finally, though our sample of women precludes a rigorous examination of the gendered nature of cognitive labor identified in other research (e.g., Daminger 2019; Ocobock 2025; Petts and Carlson 2023), our research suggests that prior work on the consequences of family member incarceration—given its omission of cognitive labor—likely underestimates its gendered inequalities.

Variation in cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration

The scope and process of cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration likely varies across social contexts such as their family member's incarceration history. Those connected to people incarcerated for the first time, compared to those enduring repeated and cyclical confinements of their family member, may engage in extensive and laborious cognitive labor as they learn to navigate the criminal legal system (Umamaheswar 2024). These family members may spend considerable time anticipating needs and identifying options as they navigate tasks for the first time. Those who remain connected to people enduring cyclical incarceration may become accustomed to tasks that must be accomplished during incarceration, which may reduce the cognitive labor burdens.

Data and methods

Data

We use data from the Jail and Family Life Study to examine cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration. The larger study, designed to understand the repercussions of incarceration on families and children, comprises 123 incarcerated men and their family members including

their mothers, the mothers and caregivers of their children (“romantic partners” for ease),¹ and their children. Men, recruited and interviewed in three jails across Southern California, were eligible for study participation if they had been incarcerated for at least two months, had at least one minor child, and had seen this child the month prior to recruitment. We recruited men through various educational programs offered within the jails, where we made announcements about the study, answered questions, and invited volunteers to participate. Given deeply entrenched power dynamics inherent in conducting research with incarcerated people (Barragan et al. 2023; Gibson-Light and Seim 2020), we clearly communicated that study participation was entirely voluntary, participation would not positively or negatively influence their legal case, and that we could not provide any legal advice. We also clearly communicated that, should their family member(s) choose to participate, we could not share any information about the contents of the interview—or even that it took place—between family members (for a complete discussion of participant recruitment, see Turney 2020).

During their baseline interview, which occurred in custody, we asked men to provide names and contact information for their family members and permission to contact these family members. Men could choose whether to share contact information for their family members, and, if they did, how much information to share (e.g., names, phone numbers, addresses). Nearly all men provided contact information for their family members (and we suspect that those unwilling or unable to share this information did not volunteer for study participation). We typically contacted family members to inquire about study participation within days of their family member’s baseline interview (though interviews often took weeks to occur). This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at University of California, Irvine. Importantly, IRB approval and compliance with IRB requirements does not exhaust researchers’ ethical obligations, particularly given the profound power asymmetries and constraints on autonomy in carceral settings (Barragan et al. 2023).

This analysis draws on 279 interviews from 103 families (including 69 baseline and 54 follow-up interviews with mothers and 85 baseline and 71 follow-up interviews with romantic partners).² We conducted baseline interviews with mothers and romantic partners as soon as possible after their family member’s in-custody interview and follow-up interviews about two months after their family member’s release (or about one year after baseline if their family member was still incarcerated). Interviews occurred at a location of the participant’s choosing (most often their home but also commonly at restaurants or parks). The interview guide was designed to understand the consequences of incarceration for families and, among other things, included questions about relationships, economic well-being, and health. Importantly, the interview guide did not explicitly include questions about cognitive labor; instead, all discussions of cognitive labor emerged during the interviews, a hallmark of qualitative research (Tavory 2020). Interviews lasted, on average, between two and three hours. We conducted most interviews in English but a non-negligible number (interviews with 35 mothers and seven romantic partners) in Spanish. We paid mothers and romantic partners \$50 for each interview. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Methods

To analyze these transcripts, we relied on flexible coding and memoing (per Deterding and Waters 2021). We followed an abductive analytic approach, which involves coding for themes derived from past research while allowing new insights—or “observational surprises”—to emerge inductively from the data that are explored through subsequent rounds of coding (Timmermans and Tavory 2012:169). The analysis proceeded across three stages.

First, under the direction of the study PI, a team of trained graduate students conducted deductive coding of all interview transcripts, “indexing” interviews onto themes that usually corresponded to the interview questions (Deterding and Waters 2021). We coded several transcripts together, with the goal of facilitating inter-coder consistency. We worked together to resolve discrepancies, achieve consensus on code application, and finalize the codebook. Each transcript was then coded by one person and reviewed by another person (working together to resolve

discrepancies and bringing unresolved discrepancies to the larger team). In this paper, we use interview excerpts that correspond to “Incarceration Effects.” These codes include all discussions of how any prior or current incarceration affected the participant or anyone else. During this first round of coding, the research team identified respondents’ cognitive labor as an emerging theme, motivating additional analysis.

Second, using these deductive excerpts, the authors of this paper conducted another round of coding to identify excerpts that described cognitive labor. We defined cognitive labor as anticipating needs, identifying options, making decisions, and monitoring results, following prior research (Daminger 2019). We distinguished cognitive labor from emotional and physical labor, also following prior research (Daminger 2019), and note that cognitive and emotional labor can overlap (for example, when someone does the “thinking” work to regulate their own or others’ emotions). We coded for cognitive labor that participants report about themselves and others (though they primarily reported on their own cognitive labor). We again initially coded transcripts as a group to facilitate inter-coder consistency, coding transcripts from four families together and resolving discrepancies as a team. Each transcript was subsequently coded by one person. A second coder reviewed about one-fourth of the transcripts, but, as this secondary coding revealed few discrepancies between coders, remaining transcripts were coded by one person.

Third, we used these excerpts, along with the full context of the interview transcript, to conduct extensive memo writing of cognitive labor endured by family members. We first wrote respondent-level memos that provided a detailed accounting of the scope and process of cognitive labor for each family, describing the types of cognitive labor that mothers and romantic partners engaged in and how this process unfolded. These memos allowed us to identify our key themes and their implications for cognitive labor: new and redistributed household tasks, uncertainty, and constraints. We next wrote analytic memos describing these key themes, and we wrote additional memos that explored variation in these themes across key axes of difference (e.g., first-time incarceration versus cyclical incarceration).

Reflexivity statement

Understanding the role of the research team is critical (Reich 2021).³ Four of the five authors—who engaged in the inductive coding and memo writing—identify as women, and one author identifies as a man. Two authors identify as non-Hispanic white, one identifies as South Asian, one as Chinese-American, and one as mixed race (non-Hispanic white and Southeast Asian). Two of the five authors have personal experience with family member incarceration. We acknowledge that these and other identities—including our socioeconomic backgrounds and parenthood status—may have shaped our analysis and interpretations. Throughout the research process, we engaged in several reflexivity practices to enhance rigor and transparency. This included ensuring consistency across coders, documenting our analytic decisions carefully, and meeting regularly to discuss what we were learning from the interviews. We worked to privilege participants’ voices by staying close to their words (rather than imposing our assumptions), actively searching for disconfirming evidence, and continually interrogating whose voices we are amplifying or marginalizing.

Sample description

Table 1 describes the analytic sample at baseline. On average, romantic partners of incarcerated men are 31 years old and have two children. Mothers of incarcerated men are, on average, 55 years old and had four children. About two thirds (62 percent) of romantic partners and three quarters (77 percent) of mothers identify as Latina. About one fourth (24 percent) of romantic partners and two thirds of mothers (69 percent) were born outside of the United States. Most participants are poor (25 percent of romantic partners and 16 percent of mothers) or working poor (54 percent and 45 percent, respectively). Many romantic partners are still romantically involved with the incarcerated man, as more than one fifth (22 percent) are in married or cohabiting relationships and one fourth (26 percent) are in non-residential romantic relationships. More than half (57 percent) of mothers are in marital or cohabiting relationships. Most participants (75 percent of

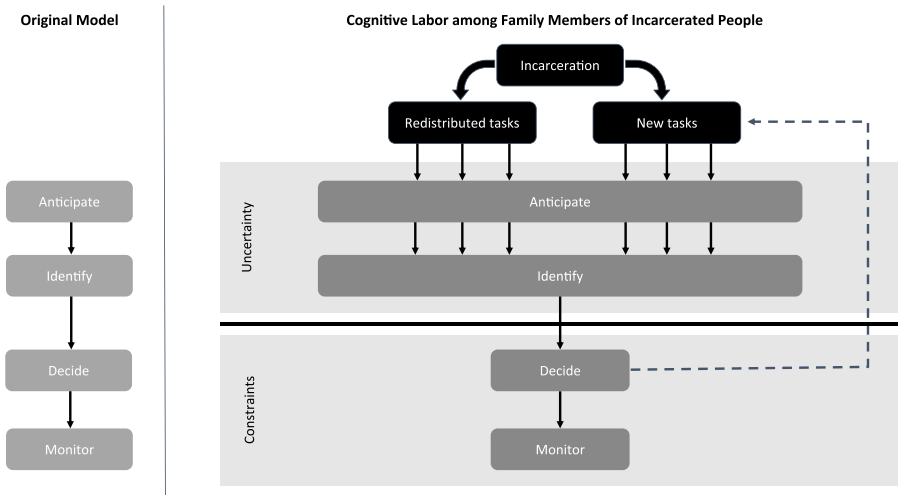


Figure 1 Notes: The left side is the original model of cognitive labor, adapted from Daminger (2019). The right side outlines the four stages of cognitive labor that emerge from family member incarceration. We show that incarceration leads to both redistributed tasks and new tasks, both of which start the process of cognitive labor. The uncertainty of the criminal legal system means that women spend considerable time in the first two stages of cognitive labor (anticipating needs and identifying options) and less time in the last two stages (making decisions and monitoring results). Due to constraints in the decision-making phase, cognitive labor is often recursive, generating new tasks or otherwise prompting women to restart this process.

romantic partners and 74 percent of mothers) were connected to men who had been incarcerated four or more times. Their partner’s current incarceration was commonly less than six months (40 percent and 36 percent, respectively).

Findings

Our analysis shows that the criminal legal system reorients family life to demand substantial cognitive labor. Mothers and romantic partners anticipate their incarcerated family member’s needs, which are frequently extensive and sudden. They identify options for meeting these needs, often simultaneously planning for multiple scenarios given the uncertainty inherent in the criminal legal system. They decide between options and monitor the results of their decisions. Importantly, family members often endure constraints—some of which stem from their precarious and vulnerable positions—that reduce their decision-making power, stall cognitive labor (leaving the original need unmet), and require additional cognitive labor (by generating new tasks). Cognitive labor is sustained regardless of their family member’s prior incarceration. Though mothers and romantic partners of incarcerated men move through the stages of cognitive labor identified in prior research, how these family members experience this process is quite distinct. We find cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration is reactionary, simultaneously expansive (in terms of its breadth and prolonged nature) and constrained, and recursive (see Fig. 1).⁴

Cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration

Family members of incarcerated men conduct substantial cognitive labor as they engage in tasks to support their incarcerated family member and other family members (Fig. 1). We show how incarceration creates new tasks for family members to manage quickly, both during the incarceration and after release, and how incarceration demands a redistribution of existing tasks. We build on prior research by describing the stages of cognitive labor necessitated by these tasks.⁵

Table 1 Descriptive characteristics of analytic sample.

	Romantic partners		Mothers	
	Mean (S.D.) or N	%	Mean (S.D.) or N	%
Age	31 (8)		55 (9)	
Number of children	2 (1)		4 (2)	
Race/ethnicity				
Latina	53	62%	53	77%
White	19	22%	12	17%
Black	2	2%	2	3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	4%	1	1%
Multiracial/multiethnic	6	7%	1	1%
Unknown	2	2%	0	0%
Educational attainment				
Less than high school diploma	8	9%	13	19%
High school diploma or GED	24	28%	8	12%
More than high school	42	49%	17	25%
Unknown	11	13%	31	45%
Social class ^a				
Poor	21	25%	11	16%
Working poor	46	54%	31	45%
Working class	12	14%	16	23%
Middle class	5	6%	7	10%
Unknown	1	1%	4	6%
Relationship status ^b				
Married or cohabiting	19	22%	39	57%
Romantic relationship	22	26%	5	7%
No relationship	44	52%	21	30%
Unknown	0	0%	4	6%
Born outside of United States ^c	18	24%	44	69%
Ever incarcerated ^c	33	40%	14	22%
Frequency of loved one's incarceration				
One time	8	9%	8	12%
Two to three times	13	15%	10	14%
Four or more times	64	75%	51	74%
Duration of loved one's current incarceration				
Less than six months	34	40%	25	36%
Six months to less than one year	26	31%	19	28%
More than one year	16	19%	18	26%
Unknown	9	11%	7	10%
N	85		69	

Note: All descriptives are reported by women during their baseline interview. ^aPoor respondents were unemployed; working poor respondents were employed but reported erratic hours, low pay, and few benefits; working-class respondents worked full-time in positions with some benefits; middle-class respondents worked full-time in professional or white-collar careers. ^bValues refer to relationship status with the incarcerated man (for romantic partners) and anyone (for mothers). ^cRespondents with missing values not included in denominator.

Cognitive labor stemming from new tasks

First, cognitive labor emerges from new tasks demanded by family member incarceration, with family members quickly reacting—often with little time to plan or execute—to needs of their incarcerated family member. Family members engage in cognitive labor during the incarceration period as they manage new financial responsibilities, maintain contact with the incarcerated person, interact with the criminal legal system, regulate the emotional needs of their family members and themselves, and manage social relationships. Cognitive labor is also required after release, as many family members conduct cognitive labor to help their family member find and sustain employment, maintain relationships with their children and other kin, and abide by their release terms.⁶

Jasmine, age 32, provides an account of a participant who engages in extensive cognitive labor stemming from her husband's incarceration, working her way through the four stages to respond to her family's needs.⁷ Jasmine's husband had been incarcerated once previously, for two weeks, and he was four months into his current jail stay when we met her. Jasmine tells us that his incarceration created new tasks that required expeditious engagement. This includes maintaining contact with him (visitation, phone calls, letters), managing his case, and navigating disclosure of his incarceration to their three children. Jasmine, like many others we spoke to, describes cognitive labor demanded by these tasks. Consider the cognitive labor she engages in prior to visitation. Her husband is allowed one 30-minute visit with a maximum of two visitors on Fridays through Sundays, restrictions Jasmine must creatively work around. Jasmine anticipates her husband's desire to see his family. She identifies visitation options, including the timing (noting an early morning visit will ensure arrival before her husband's sister) and if she should bring one of their children. She decides between these options and monitors her decisions, describing how her decision to bring their children changed several times. She did not bring them during her husband's first incarceration, but she initially made a different decision this time around: "I didn't take them there because it was just for two weeks. And I thought it'd be bad for them. But this time, it was for longer. I thought it would be pretty bad for him not to see them, as well as them not seeing their dad."⁸ Jasmine paid close attention to her children during and after visits, a form of monitoring that ultimately resulted in a different decision: "During the first months . . . they wanted to hug him. And you know they can't be touched or anything. So when we came back, [my daughter] would get sad and go straight to bed." This observation, and the worry that contact between her husband and daughter would lead to punishment by correctional staff, led Jasmine to a different outcome moving forward: "she doesn't understand . . . so I don't take her. Because I don't want them to punish him or to take visits away from him. That's why I don't take the little girl there." Jasmine's narrative, like the narratives of many others, shows considerable cognitive labor behind the task of visitation.

Theresa, age 34, provides another illustrative example of cognitive labor stemming from her romantic partner's incarceration. Theresa describes cognitive labor underlying maintaining communication with her partner. She anticipates the competing needs of her partner and their 8-year-old son: Her partner, who is serving three years of a six-year sentence, would welcome their visit and is always "relieved" to see them, but she and her son "despised going" to visitation. "We went just because we had to, not necessarily because we wanted to. . . . He's part of our family. I really hated, [my son] hated to go. So he pretty much cried and screamed the entire drive, then wouldn't want to get out of the car, then would complain until his dad got there." She identifies options and makes decisions, choosing times when she expects a relatively short wait and bringing her son despite his desire to stay home. Theresa makes different decisions about phone calls and writing letters (forgoing these forms of communication given their expense and her competing responsibilities). At times, she feels exhausted by juggling the cognitive tasks in her husband's absence. She explains, "I always had so many things I needed to do in a day . . . it's like one more thing on my mental list of things to do, and it just gets tiring." Theresa also describes cognitive labor expended on finding a private attorney. She anticipates a private attorney would

help her partner's case and identifies options, a process she describes as follows: "It was really frustrating. Lawyers don't advertise online or anything like that. . . . I had to take time off work to go interview attorneys and figure out who I wanted to hire." She decides, settling on an attorney her brother had used, and monitors this decision by attending court dates for eight months to ensure the attorney worked to get the best deal. "I just went to make sure the lawyers showed up, really, because nothing really ever happened." Hiring this attorney leads Theresa to additional tasks—opening a credit card to pay for the attorney and navigating child care and time off work to attend court dates—that require additional cognitive labor, highlighting the recursive nature of this process. Theresa's narrative shows that tasks commonly understood as the consequences of incarceration (such as visitation and hiring an attorney [Comfort 2008; Western 2018]) require substantial—and mostly invisible—cognitive labor.

Cognitive labor is also embedded in new tasks mothers and romantic partners swiftly engage in to support family members after release, with family members similarly anticipating needs, identifying options, deciding between options, and monitoring results. Betje, a 56-year-old mother whose son had been incarcerated several times, describes cognitive labor associated with his release. Betje anticipates her son will immediately need housing, employment, and transportation (including a car, car insurance, and identification). Betje also anticipates he will immediately need support staying sober. Betje identifies options for these needs, finding him options for housing (her house, a sober living facility, or a rehabilitation program), a job (working as a car mechanic or going back to school to learn another skill), and staying sober (identifying recovery meetings and keeping him away from friends she deems negative influences). Not all the options identified by Betje were feasible, though. For example, though she eventually secured him placement in a rehab program, she engaged in considerable cognitive effort as she struggled to find somewhere that would accept him: "I was calling a lot of different places. I called for six months. They'd ask you if you have insurance and all of that. I gave them his information, but they would not take care of him." This cognitive labor involved in managing her son's release follows the extensive cognitive labor she did during his incarceration (such as searching for a private attorney, which she ultimately could not afford). Therefore, for Betje and others enduring family member incarceration, the cognitive labor of the confinement period is accompanied by additional cognitive labor after release.

Cognitive labor stemming from redistributed tasks

Second, cognitive labor emerges from redistributed tasks as mothers and romantic partners navigate life in the wake of their family member's household absence. Tasks previously conducted by the incarcerated person—including household labor, financial responsibilities, and caring for children—are expeditiously redistributed to others. Jasmine, introduced earlier, describes cognitive labor stemming from redistributed tasks in her husband's absence. Jasmine's husband engaged in substantial caregiving for their children prior to his incarceration, leaving her to patch together child care during his confinement. Jasmine anticipates this need and identifies options, ultimately asking her father for help on the weekends and her mother for help with day-to-day tasks while she picks up extra shifts: "She cooked for them, she fed them, sometimes she bathed them . . . my mom helped me a lot, she looks after them." Jasmine shoulders the additional tasks along with the cognitive effort needed to manage these tasks, the combination of which she describes as taking a toll: "Sometimes I get very stressed. I get stressed, or sometimes with the kids as well, I get frustrated. I'd like to do so many things, but at the same time, I can't." Therefore, for Jasmine and others, family member incarceration necessitates a redistribution of household tasks that generate cognitive labor.

How uncertainty of criminal legal system shapes cognitive labor

We show how uncertainty of the criminal legal system expands the scope and complicates cognitive labor, often prompting family members to plan for multiple outcomes and facilitating additional cognitive labor (and recursive iterations of tasks). This uncertainty pushes families to

spend substantial time and energy in the first two cognitive labor stages (Fig. 1). The criminal legal system includes uncertainty about adjudication of their family member's case, communication with their family member, and how their family member will reintegrate after release, further expanding the scope and protracted nature of cognitive labor.

Uncertainty about their family member's case expands cognitive labor stemming from incarceration, particularly the stages of anticipating needs and identifying options. People in jail are commonly held in pre-trial detention. This means that family members endure ambiguity and unpredictability about when and how the case will be adjudicated, which creates additional tasks to manage and requires family members to simultaneously plan for multiple outcomes. They simultaneously plan for their family member's release (which often occurs suddenly, amplifying challenges to planning and executing) and lengthy prison sentence. Rosa, 60 years old, tells us about how uncertainty surrounding her son's adjudication demands cognitive labor. She worries about her son's future, telling us: "I sometimes catch myself thinking and thinking of what might happen when it comes to the court dates . . . What are they going to say? What are they going to decide? That is what stresses me more right now. I don't know what is going to happen. And I just keep myself thinking about what is going to happen . . . Are going to give him more time? If they are going to let him out? I don't know."⁹ Therefore, for participants like Rosa, the uncertainty surrounding case adjudication generates cognitive labor that unfolds in multiple directions (in her case, sudden release and continued confinement) and contributes to emotional burden.

Uncertainty surrounding communication (e.g., visitation wait time, timing of phone calls) is another way the criminal legal system expands the first two cognitive labor stages. Consider 59-year-old Nancy, who describes difficulty planning visits to her incarcerated romantic partner given the uncertainty and unpredictability about how visitation will unfold. She describes "you can wait five minutes for them or you can wait five hours for them to come down." Lily, 54 years old, also engages in cognitive labor surrounding visitation, given the ambiguity about whether her son would receive a prison sentence. She anticipates needs surrounding a prison sentence and describes her thought process regarding where he would be placed: "If he gets close, we can go like twice a month, or even three times a month. . . . If he goes to Donovan State Prison, it's only two hours and 25 minutes . . . I just pray that he gets close, not where it's a five- to six-hour drive." For family members like Nancy and Lily, the uncertainty about communication expands the cognitive labor they expend to manage tasks stemming from incarceration.

Finally, uncertainty surrounding the contours of a family member's release expands the first two cognitive labor stages. Nancy provides another example of how uncertainty stemming from the criminal legal system—in this case, whether her partner will be reincarcerated—generates additional cognitive labor. Nancy was living with her son and his family when we interviewed her, but she spends considerable time anticipating her living situation when her partner is released. She describes her current living situation as crowded and wants to find a place where she and her partner can live alone. The reality of his cyclical incarceration means she must find a place she can afford should he become reincarcerated. She says, "Do we go get a place of our own? I always have to think about, if we get a place, I always have to in the back of my mind think, I have to be able to do this on my own." Therefore, ambiguity about reincarceration leads Nancy to simultaneously anticipate multiple housing options, conscripting her to plan for different outcomes.

How constraints shape cognitive labor

We find the decision-making stage of cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration is constrained by two primary sources: (1) economic, geographic, time, linguistic, and legal obstacles that impede decision-making and (2) other actors—including their incarcerated family member—making the decision (Fig. 1). These constraints reduce decision-making power, stall cognitive labor (ensuring the original task is invisible or incomplete), and demand additional cognitive labor (by generating new tasks, facilitating a recursive process).

Many people enduring family member incarceration have diminished decision-making power because of obstacles that stall their cognitive labor.¹⁰ For instance, Jasmine (introduced earlier)

describes how the cognitive labor stemming from her husband's incarceration is thwarted by financial and time constraints. Jasmine anticipates that a private immigration attorney could yield the best outcome for her undocumented husband. She identifies attorneys (and schedules free consultations), but her financial constraints prohibit her from making a decision—and she instead decides to hire no one. Similarly, Jasmine relays how balancing new childcare and work obligations during her partner's incarceration makes certain parenting tasks difficult. She anticipates her daughters' desire for continuing guitar lessons and identifies options for lessons, but realizes her time constraints make lessons unattainable, which stalls her cognitive labor and leaves her unable to execute her original plan to support her daughters. She tells us, “[My husband] used to take them to guitar lessons after school, and they liked it. Now, I don't have time to take them there. I'd like them to be involved in something so that they could get distracted or experience different things, but I don't have the time right now.” Betje (introduced earlier) also describes stalled cognitive labor in the decision-making phase. She anticipates that her incarcerated son wants to see her and identifies prospective visitation times, but ultimately decides she has too many scheduling constraints to visit. She says, “You can't always be visiting because they take a while to let you in, and there's a lot to do. I only get two days off of work. During that time, my husband was in the hospital and I had to be with him. There wasn't enough time.” Family members—like Jasmine, Betje, and others—show that cognitive labor occurs even when the task is invisible or incomplete. They anticipate needs and identify options but experience constraints in the decision-making phase (leaving needs unmet).

Constraints in the decision-making phase can also generate additional tasks and corresponding cognitive labor. Consider 63-year-old Claudia, whose son spent nine months in jail before being released to a sober living home. Claudia anticipates that her son needs a vehicle to get to work. She tells us, “He can't lose his job. He has such a bad record, but he got a good job.”¹¹ She identifies various options for buying him a car—including accessing her retirement savings—but gets stuck in the decision-making phase. She learns she cannot access her retirement funds for seven years. She cannot convince her daughter to loan him her truck. She investigates receiving a credit card cash advance but does not have enough accessible funds given other emergency expenses. These barriers stall the task and simultaneously create additional cognitive labor as she works with her other children to coordinate his transportation. Nonetheless, Claudia works creatively to execute an alternative, patchwork plan to support her son—she enlists a family member. She recalls: “I called my oldest son, and I said, ‘son, I need a ride.’ He said, ‘where are you going?’ I said, ‘no, it's not for me. It's for your brother. He has to be at the probation office at 4.” Claudia, like others navigating family member incarceration, engages in cognitive labor to address incomplete and invisible tasks, generating a recursive cognitive labor cycle.

People enduring family member incarceration also lack decision-making power when others make decisions for them. Mothers and romantic partners describe anticipating needs and identifying options to support their incarcerated family member, but many are ultimately frustrated by the realization that someone else holds the decision-making power. For example, people commonly expended cognitive labor to choose rehabilitation programs only to learn their family members did not want sobriety or that they received prison sentences. Family members also commonly expended cognitive labor to decide when and how to disclose their relative's incarceration only to find the disclosure already made. Genevieve, 29 years old and no longer in a relationship with her partner, describes considerable cognitive labor surrounding the disclosure of her former partner's incarceration to their children. She did not plan on disclosing the incarceration, anticipating this information would provide more harm than good. She says, “There's no reason for them to know where he is. I had originally told them that their dad was working, you know, further away. So kind of keep them oblivious to what was going on.” Despite her decision, Genevieve tells us their paternal grandmother disclosed this information “pretty much within the month of him being in there,” inciting her to anticipate her children's emotional responses to the disclosure. “It's irritating,” Genevieve tells us, reacting to her former partner's mother's decision. “I understand he's your son, but you're messing with my son and his emotions . . . They're too young

to know any of this.” Therefore, like other participants, Genevieve lacks decision-making power, despite expending cognitive labor, and must undertake additional cognitive labor to manage the unforeseen consequences of others’ choices.

The role of cyclical incarceration in cognitive labor

We find family member incarceration generates substantial cognitive labor regardless of their relative’s prior incarceration. First, we find that first-time incarceration is accompanied by cognitive labor, as family members engage in extensive cognitive work to navigate the criminal legal system. Second, though we anticipated that families enduring cyclical incarceration would report less cognitive labor than others, we find cognitive labor associated with cyclical incarceration, as the demands necessitated by repeated incarceration and re-entry pile up. Third, because cyclical incarceration generally demands substantial cognitive labor, cyclical incarceration can incite incarcerated family members to withdraw their support of incarcerated relatives, which can simultaneously reduce and expand cognitive labor because decisions to withdraw support often necessitate cognitive labor.

To begin with, mothers and romantic partners enduring their family member’s first incarceration report considerable cognitive labor as they navigate tasks for the first time. These tasks generate substantial cognitive labor, as one learns about the criminal legal system, anticipates potential needs, and identifies options to meet these needs for the first time. Consider 21-year-old Jade, whose romantic partner had been in jail—his first incarceration—for five months. Jade, who relied on her partner for financial support prior to his incarceration, describes how his incarceration created myriad new tasks, including paying his debts, funding his commissary account, and enabling her phone to accept his calls. She also became responsible for all household expenses upon his incarceration. She describes the cognitive work required in planning how to distribute her bi-monthly paychecks to cover new and existing expenses (e.g., forgoing lunch so her children can eat). She tells us, “I’m always without money. I have to find a way to buy the diapers, and the wipes, and my things, and then to pay the rent. It’s very, very hard.” Jade goes on to say, “[My partner] says not to think about it, but it’s hard to not think about it.” Therefore, while Jade’s partner abdicates responsibility for some of this cognitive labor, perhaps given his general lack of agency while confined, Jade cannot escape it. Cognitive labor is pronounced for Jade and others enduring family member incarceration for the first time.

Those enduring cyclical family member incarceration similarly report cognitive labor given the high demands of incarceration and reentry. Family members may acclimate to certain tasks (e.g., visiting, providing commissary funds), but cyclical incarceration induces new tasks that necessitate cognitive labor. Consider 63-year-old Sharon, whose son has spent 25 years cycling through the criminal legal system. Each incarceration brings new cognitive labor. Each time her son is incarcerated, Sharon decides whether and how to disclose his incarceration to his children, decides whether to bail him out (and how to pay for that), keeps watch over his confinement (e.g., ensures he receives anti-anxiety medication during incarceration, encourages him to attend educational programming), and plans for his release. She relays how she prepares him for his upcoming release by making him handouts, encouraging him to set goals, and emboldening him to think about his housing and employment plans. She says, “I’ve gone through and done all this research. And it wracks your brain. There’s a lot to it.” Sharon’s cognitive labor continues upon his release, as she manages his probation. She says, “He was late a couple times. Last week, I called him and I was like [son], weren’t you supposed to go to your probation? . . . This was a week later. And so I had called [his probation officer] and she said, ‘If he doesn’t get here within this week, I’m gonna go ahead and put a warrant out.’” Similarly, 45-year-old Marion describes the new cognitive labor that accompanies her son’s incarcerations. Marion’s 19-year-old son has cycled through incarceration spells for the past six years. She tells us about the cognitive challenges she must master each time her son is in a new facility, including how to receive his phone calls and how to send him money. She says, “We just talked to him on the phone three times, because we didn’t know how to send him money. They said we had to use the card, but he never got the

money.”¹² Her son was eventually deported to Mexico, generating tasks that required additional cognitive labor (including helping him find housing, connecting him with family members in the country, and sending him money). For participants like Sharon and Marion, who have family members enduring repeated incarceration, the cognitive labor is often as intense as those enduring first-time incarceration.

Finally, though cyclical incarceration most commonly generates substantial cognitive labor, it can occasionally result in family members becoming accustomed to tasks or pulling back their support, which reduces some cognitive labor while simultaneously creating cognitive labor surrounding the very decision to withdraw support. Consider 74-year-old Elizabeth, whose son has cycled in and out of jail for many years. Elizabeth substantially supported her son over the years, formally adopting his children and loaning him money. She and her husband have recently pulled back support: “You smarten up and you think, you know, they’re not gonna make it. . . . You have a life to live on your own.” Though Elizabeth has reduced her support and therefore engages in less incarceration-related cognitive labor than previously, her son’s criminal legal involvement still occupies meaningful mental space. “I always have my little antenna up. With all the things we’ve been through with him, I’ll always have one ear cocked up. When you’ve been through a lot of stuff, you learn what the signs are, what to look for. And I’m still doing that, but I don’t have to as much.” Therefore, for some family members like Elizabeth, decisions to pull back support can reduce cognitive labor (but not entirely, as even decisions to pull back support demand cognitive effort).

Discussion

The indelible rise of the carceral state over the past half century means many families navigate the criminal legal system (Enns et al. 2019). Incarceration has deleterious consequences that proliferate to non-incarcerated family members, especially women, with family member incarceration straining relationships, facilitating economic hardship, and generating distress and worry (Comfort 2008; Deckard 2025; Schwartz-Soicher et al. 2011). Women commonly navigate the consequences of family member incarceration by supporting their confined relatives during the carceral period and after release (e.g., Christensen et al. 2025; Comfort 2008; Condry and Minson 2021; Delorme 2025; Page et al. 2019; Turanovic et al. 2012; Western 2018). However, despite the gendered nature of cognitive labor and the gendered consequences of family member incarceration, the cognitive labor required to support incarcerated family members has remained mostly overlooked, reinforcing research documenting the invisibility of cognitive labor (Daminger 2019; Ocobock 2025).

Building on the theoretical framework of cognitive labor (Daminger 2019), we use in-depth interview data to demonstrate how the institution of the criminal legal system demands cognitive labor among already vulnerable romantic partners and mothers of incarcerated men. First, aligned with family systems theory that highlights the interconnectedness of family members (Cox and Paley 1997), we show family members engage in reactive cognitive labor while managing new emergent tasks and redistributing existing tasks. Second, we show the uncertainty inherent in the criminal legal system makes cognitive labor—particularly the first two stages—especially expansive, as family members often simultaneously plan for multiple scenarios. Third, we show the decision-making stage of cognitive labor, the stage typically accompanied by power (Daminger 2019), is constrained, either because family members face obstacles or because another party makes the decision. This decreases decision-making power, stalls cognitive labor (leaving original needs unmet), and demands additional cognitive labor (by generating tasks required to implement alternative plans). Fourth, we show people engage in cognitive labor regardless of their family member’s prior incarceration. Taken together, findings demonstrate that cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration is reactionary, simultaneously expansive and constrained, and recursive.

Our analyses build upon research on the consequences of family member incarceration by showing that prior research, which acknowledges but does not explicitly or systematically examine

cognitive labor (Comfort 2016; Miller 2021), underestimates the consequences of family member incarceration. Cognitive labor is a compounding—and mostly invisible—burden of family member incarceration. Family member incarceration creates new tasks and redistributes existing tasks, as shown in prior research (Miller 2021; Page et al. 2019; Turanovic et al. 2012; Umamaheswar 2024), and we show these visible undertakings are accompanied by invisible cognitive labor. We describe how family members anticipate needs of their confined relatives, identify options to meet these needs, decide between options, and monitor results. We also show how cognitive labor exists for invisible or incomplete tasks. Family members sometimes decide to skip visitation, forego hiring an attorney, or refrain from providing housing upon reentry, for instance; yet, these tasks nonetheless demand cognitive labor. Therefore, not accounting for cognitive labor means existing research underestimates the scope of incarceration's consequences, as these invisible and incomplete tasks require effort unlikely to appear in survey research commonly used to quantify the consequences of family member incarceration.

Furthermore, our analyses advance the theoretical framework of cognitive labor by showing how cognitive labor operates under conditions of uncertainty and constraint, conditions relatively common among disadvantaged groups. We find cognitive labor among those enduring family member incarceration—a vulnerable and marginalized population—is reactionary, simultaneously expansive and constrained, and recursive, unlike the relatively efficient and smooth progression of cognitive labor shown among highly educated couples (Daminger 2019). Those enduring family member incarceration spend substantial time in the first two cognitive labor stages, as uncertainty characteristic of the criminal legal system necessitates family members anticipate multiple needs and identify multiple options. They also spend relatively little time in the last two cognitive labor stages given decision-making constraints, highlighting powerlessness stemming from vicarious criminal legal contact (Kohler-Hausmann 2018). Though respondents in our sample experienced similar stages of cognitive labor (albeit latter stages to a lesser degree), their cognitive labor *process* was quite distinct and marked by uncertainty, frustration, and recursiveness. Our sample includes only those enduring family member incarceration, but future research could more explicitly compare those enduring family member incarceration, those in precarious positions not enduring family member incarceration, and those neither enduring family member incarceration nor precarity.

More generally, our findings show that cognitive labor extends beyond the population originally used to develop the theoretical framework: middle- and upper-middle-class couples (Daminger 2019). We show at least four extensions. First, we show that cognitive labor operates beyond couples to intergenerational relationships, as both romantic partners and mothers navigate the mental load created by incarceration. Second, we show that cognitive labor is not limited to co-residence, as women perform this work when not residing with their family member and when their family member resides in a carceral facility. Some women, many of whom share children with incarcerated men but had not been in a romantic relationship with them for years, continue to engage in cognitive labor. Third, we show that cognitive labor extends beyond traditional domestic tasks to encompass carceral labor and familial support (e.g., making decisions about disclosing the incarceration to their shared child). Fourth, our findings show that economically vulnerable populations shoulder substantial cognitive labor, often under constraints that limit their ability to complete all stages of the cognitive labor process.

The framework we offer for understanding cognitive labor stemming from the institution of the criminal legal system can be applied to different contexts and populations. Other institutions—such as the child welfare system, housing providers, or immigration detention—may generate challenging cognitive labor demands that ripple across families in ways like the cognitive labor stemming from the criminal legal system. For instance, research finds that residential moves among tenants with Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) are largely reactive, rushed, and out of their direct control (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020). We would predict that these conditions, combined with the uncertainties of the private rental market, would magnify cognitive labor demands among

HCV tenants, while simultaneously stalling and redirecting their residential plans. Future research should investigate this possibility.

Directions for future research

This study's limitations provide additional opportunities for research. Cognitive labor emerged inductively during our interviews, a hallmark of qualitative research (Tavory 2020). We did not anticipate cognitive labor as a consequence of family member incarceration, and, therefore, did not ask specific questions about this concept (and cognitive labor may be unrecognized by participants themselves), suggesting the dimensions and contexts of cognitive labor are likely underestimated and underexplored. Qualitative research on family member incarceration should further investigate this concept, following cognitive labor associated with specific tasks from start to finish to provide breadth and depth. Similarly, population-based research would be well-suited to measure the prevalence of cognitive labor among those enduring family member incarceration. For example, it would be useful to understand how the prevalence of cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration compares to cognitive labor surrounding other forms of carework and how this cognitive labor is distributed and negotiated across various family members of incarcerated people. Also, given the difficulty of distinguishing between the emotional consequences of cognitive labor and the other emotional consequences of incarceration in our data, population-based research would also be well-suited to systematically examine the consequences of this cognitive labor for mental health, relationships between family members, and other carework responsibilities (Aviv et al. 2024). We suspect that cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration, particularly given the uncertainties of the criminal legal system and the roadblocks endured by many participants, take a devastating psychological toll on family members.

Additionally, features of our sample merit future research opportunities. First, our sample of women precludes an examination of similarities and differences in cognitive labor that men and women do in response to family member incarceration. Given existing research overwhelmingly finds gender inequality in cognitive labor (e.g., Daminger 2019; Ocobock 2025; Petts and Carlson 2023), our focus away from this dimension of cognitive labor is reasonable, but we suspect cognitive labor stemming from family member incarceration is concentrated among women. This would also be consistent with research on the gendered nature of supporting incarcerated family members (Deleme 2025; Page et al. 2019). Second, our sample is predominantly Latina, some of whom are foreign-born, a group underrepresented in research on family member incarceration despite its high exposure to this stressor (Enns et al. 2019). Our findings may differ with a more diverse sample, as gendered norms of familism among Latino populations may increase pressures to support incarcerated family members and, accordingly, increase cognitive labor (Ovink 2014). In particular, foreign-born family members may experience considerable uncertainty stemming from the criminal legal system and additional constraints inherent in their decision-making (Martinez-Aranda 2020), underscoring areas for future research. Third, our sample includes family members connected to men in jail. Though the tasks stemming from incarceration rarely discriminate between jail and prison confinement, there are several possibilities for cognitive labor differences. The uncertainty characteristic of jail incarceration, particularly while awaiting case adjudication (Turney et al. 2024; Walker 2022), may demand different types of cognitive labor than the uncertainty characteristic of prison incarceration (e.g., getting an appeal, navigating long-distance visitation). That said, nearly everyone who experiences prison incarceration also experiences jail incarceration (Turney and Conner 2019), so recognizing the consequences of jail incarceration is critical.

Implications for policy and practice

Beyond the relevance of our findings for future research on both cognitive labor and the criminal legal system, our findings can inform policy and practice. Lowering incarceration rates—particularly the use of jails where uncertainty about the future is especially high and many

incarcerated people have no criminal conviction—could reduce the tasks women incur in response and the corresponding cognitive labor burden. Additionally, as our findings show the uncertainty of the criminal legal system is responsible for high and sometimes recursive cognitive labor burdens, greater transparency, predictability, and institutional support could meaningfully reduce the unnecessary cognitive burdens imposed on families. For example, clearer and more timely information about a family member's release date would reduce unnecessary cognitive labor that families commonly endure (e.g., planning for release that does not materialize). Similarly, supporting overburdened public defenders' offices could help improve communication with clients and reduce the perceived need to find outside legal assistance.

Conclusions

We argue that cognitive labor, theorized as an essential component of household labor that is predominantly undertaken by women, is an understudied consequence of family member incarceration that creates considerable burdens for families. These findings simultaneously expand our knowledge of the consequences of family member incarceration and advance our understanding of how cognitive labor operates across intergenerational relationships, households, and the provision of familial support among an economically vulnerable population. The gendered nature of cognitive labor, coupled with women's disproportionate responsibility of shouldering the burdens of family member incarceration, highlights another way that gender inequality is created and maintained within households. Additionally, given the concentration of family member incarceration among people of color and the poor, these cognitive labor demands likely exacerbate racial/ethnic and socioeconomic inequalities. We focus on how the institution of the criminal legal system generates cognitive labor burdens, but we anticipate these recursive, looping burdens are also an understudied dimension of inequality stemming from other institutions such as the child welfare system, housing providers, and immigration detention.

Endnotes

1. Mothers and caregivers of children were not always romantically involved with incarcerated men at the time of the interviews. Many romantic relationships were fluid, with on-again/off-again dynamics and blurred boundaries between current and former romantic involvement (Turney et al. 2023). We use the language of "romantic partner" for ease of interpretation.
2. Common reasons for not having a family member interview include inability to locate the family member, family member declined participation, and family member is deceased. The larger study includes interviews with minor children (ages 8 to 17), but we exclude children from the analytic sample given that children experience stressors differently from adults (Avison 2010).
3. Discussions of reflexivity while designing the larger Jail and Family Life project and conducting the interviews has been described elsewhere (e.g., Christensen et al. 2025).
4. We examined differences in cognitive labor across mothers and romantic partners. Despite some differences in the tasks demanded of them following their family member's incarceration, mothers and romantic partners consistently described the scope and processes of cognitive labor.
5. There are reasons to expect some cognitive labor domains decrease, especially during the confinement period. The anticipation of some needs, and the subsequent identification of options, is removed from the equation as incarcerated people and their family members have little control over the conditions of confinement. Our analysis reveals that though some mothers and romantic partners report relief during their family member's confinement (Comfort 2008), most report cognitive labor throughout incarceration and reentry (and, occasionally, an increase in decision-making power during his incarceration).
6. Cognitive labor may operate differently among women in current and former romantic relationships with incarcerated men, an analytic point we considered. We find both continuities

and differences in the cognitive labor burdens carried by these two groups of women. Both groups engage in high levels of cognitive labor, though we see some meaningful differences in the types of cognitive labor in which current and former romantic partners engage. We find that women in romantic relationships with incarcerated men describe cognitive labor that is heavily oriented toward managing the immediate demands of the criminal legal system, including tracking court dates, sentence lengths, and release possibilities; coordinating visits and phone calls; and budgeting for commissary and legal fees. Women in former romantic relationships with incarcerated men engage in the cognitive labor stemming from these tasks, though usually to a lesser extent, but engage in considerable cognitive labor to manage the incarceration's aftermath on themselves and, especially, their children. Among both groups of women, processes of cognitive labor are quite similar, with cognitive labor being shaped by uncertainty of the criminal legal system and with considerable constraints in the decision-making phase.

7. We refer to participants by their chosen pseudonym.
8. This interview was translated from Spanish.
9. This interview was translated from Spanish.
10. Daminger (2019) suggests cognitive labor processes may vary by social class. Our analysis of cognitive labor across social class provides some evidence that middle-class families engage in more cognitive labor, especially the decision-making phase, than other families. This supports the idea that families get stuck in the decision-making phase because they lack resources. Given the relatively few middle-class families in our sample, these findings are suggestive.
11. This interview was translated from Spanish.
12. This interview was translated from Spanish.

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