

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Even though we’re married, I’m single”: The meaning of jail incarceration in romantic relationships

Kristin Turney¹  | Katelyn Rose Malae¹ |
MacKenzie A. Christensen¹ | Sarah Halpern-Meekin²

¹University of California, Irvine

²University of Wisconsin, Madison

Correspondence

Kristin Turney University of California,
Irvine

Email: kristin.turney@uci.edu

Funding for the Jail and Family Life Study was provided by the National Science Foundation (SES-1542474) and the William T. Grant Foundation. Britni Adams, Maryanne Alderson, Nadine Alsaadi, Natalie Averruz, Isha Bhallamudi, Belen Barocio, Elisabet Barrios, Jaymesha Carter, Emma Conner, Adrienne Credo, Patricia Delacruz, Ann Fefferman, Nicholas Freeman, Marilyn Garcia, Gabriela Gonzalez, Rebecca Goodsell, Jessica Kizer, Jesse Garcia, Arevik Gyurjyan, Christopher Hoffman, Payton Huse, Daniela Kaiser, Alma Leon-Oseguera, Amy Gong Liu, Crysabelle Lopez, Setarah Mahmoudi, Estefani Marin, Analicia Mejia Mesinas, Carmel Mitchell, Angie Belen Monreal, Jasmine Morales, Janet Muniz, Katherine Navarro, Hannah Neatherlin, Tiffany Park, Elizabeth Partida, Alexandra Russo, Juan

Abstract

Jail incarceration substantially transforms romantic relationships, and incarceration may alter the commitment between partners, thereby undermining or strengthening relationships. In this article, we use in-depth interviews with 85 women connected to incarcerated men (as current or former romantic partners) to explore how women articulate relationship changes that stem from their partner’s jail incarceration, a common but understudied form of contact with the criminal legal system. We identify three interrelated and mutually reinforcing processes, which are shaped by and shape a partner’s commitment to the relationship. First, incarceration produces liminality in the status of the relationship. Second, incarceration fosters women’s sense of independence from their incarcerated partners. Third, incarceration creates space for partners to reevaluate how they prioritize the relationship in their lives. Jail incarceration intervenes in romantic relationships

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2023 The Authors. *Criminology* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Society of Criminology

Sandoval, Steven Schmidt, Archibaldo Silva, Desirae Sotto, Breauna Spencer, Ashley Torres, Luis Vaca-Corona, Alexis Velez, Cara Vermaak, Kanoelani Villanueva, Lacey Wood, and Jessica Zhu all provided excellent research assistance.

Funding information

National Science Foundation, Directorate for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences; William T. Grant Foundation; William T. Grant Foundation

at different points during each relationship, and accordingly, women experience heterogeneity in processes of liminality, independence, and reprioritization. These processes contribute to differential relationship experiences, with some relationships deteriorating during incarceration, others strengthening, and others neither deteriorating nor strengthening. By systematically uncovering these processes linking jail incarceration to romantic relationships, we advance an understanding of how the criminal legal system can shape relationship commitment processes and inequalities among families.

KEYWORDS

criminal legal system, families, incarceration, punishment

1 | INTRODUCTION

Incarceration, an experience rooted in structural inequalities that removes individuals from their homes and detains them in jails and prisons, has rippling repercussions throughout families and communities (Arditti, 2012; Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Condry, 2013; Jardine, 2019; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Many individuals—including almost one fifth of adult women in the United States—endure the incarceration of a romantic partner or co-parent (Enns et al., 2019). Incarceration creates challenges for romantic relationships (Condry & Minson, 2021), destabilizing and shattering relationships and, among couples who stay together despite the confinement of one partner, reducing relationship quality, particularly after release (Comfort, 2008; Massoglia et al., 2011; Siennick et al., 2014; Turney, 2015a, 2015b; Western, 2006; Widdowson et al., 2020).

Research has suggested the deleterious repercussions of incarceration for romantic relationships may result from communication challenges and economic insecurity endured by both incarcerated people and their partners (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2008; Durante et al., 2022; McKay et al., 2018; Western, 2006). The pathways linking partner incarceration to romantic relationships, however, are likely more complex, especially when considering that incarceration intervenes at different points during romantic relationships (Massoglia et al., 2011). That is, a stressful event, such as incarceration, coming early in a relationship or within a weakly committed relationship may be experienced much differently than one occurring within a long-lasting or deeply committed relationship (Hadden et al., 2014). Relatedly, research has suggested substantial variability in how romantic relationships respond to incarceration (Turney, 2015b; Turney & Halpern-Meehin, 2021; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Among couples who maintain their romantic relationship throughout a carceral spell, relationship quality improves during incarceration but declines after release (Comfort, 2008; Turney, 2015a).

Developing our understanding of how the criminal legal system—and particularly the complexity associated with jail incarceration—shapes family life is critical for the field of criminology. Jail incarceration is a form of criminal legal contact more frequently experienced than prison incarceration and one commonly a precursor to prison incarceration (Comfort, 2016; Turney &

Conner, 2019). Almost six times as many people experience jail incarceration annually than prison incarceration (Turney & Conner, 2019; Walker, 2022). Jail incarceration—and the corresponding sudden removal from one’s home and the uncertainty about one’s release date, given that most people incarcerated in jail are awaiting adjudication of their case and have not been convicted of any crime (Scott-Hayward & Fradella, 2019)—has considerable potential to alter romantic relationships. We use data from the Jail and Family Life Study, a longitudinal qualitative study of fathers in jail and those connected to them (including 85 current and former romantic partners), to examine how women articulate changes in their relationship stemming from jail incarceration. The focus on jail incarceration complements most research that has focused on prison incarceration (Comfort, 2008; Massoglia et al., 2011) or that has not distinguished between jail and prison incarceration (Turney, 2015a, 2015b; though see Comfort, 2016; Wildeman et al., 2010), highlighting how jail incarceration impairs family relationships and elucidating the importance of studying this aspect of the criminal legal system.¹

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Prevalence of Romantic Partner Incarceration

The expansion of the criminal legal system during the past 50 years means that jail incarceration is a common experience. Almost 11 million individuals churn through local jails annually in the United States, often for weeks or months at a time and often without a conviction (Sawyer & Wagner, 2022). Incarcerated individuals are removed from their homes and isolated from their loved ones, yet they are simultaneously connected to the families to which most eventually return home (Arditti, 2012; Miller, 2021; Turney, 2015b).

Given the high prevalence of incarceration, particularly the large numbers of people who churn through local jails, experiencing family member incarceration is common. Almost half (45 percent) of all U.S. adults have an immediate family member who has spent time in jail or prison (Enns et al., 2019). More specifically, nearly one fifth (19 percent) of adult women have a current or former romantic partner who has spent time behind bars, meaning that women are commonly navigating romantic relationships in the shadow of the criminal legal system (Enns et al., 2019). Although no demographic groups are immune to romantic partner incarceration, this stressor is more commonly endured among minoritized and poor people (Enns et al., 2019). Those enduring jail incarceration are especially likely to have socioeconomic and other disadvantages (Turney & Conner, 2019); among other reasons, those with more resources are better able to afford bail and legal counsel (and therefore avoid pretrial detention entirely), meaning those with fewer resources are more likely to experience jail incarceration compared with their higher income counterparts. Therefore, romantic partner jail incarceration is an especially pervasive stressor among families navigating related adversities such as systemic racism, economic instability, substance abuse, and under-resourced neighborhoods (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). For couples, therefore, the stressors of jail incarceration are coming in an already challenging context.

¹The sample includes men incarcerated in jail at the time of the interview, but some men had previously been incarcerated in prison and some were sentenced to prison after baseline.

2.2 | Psychological Theories of Relationships

Punishment scholars have primarily focused on the communication challenges and economic hardship stemming from incarceration and how romantic relationships can facilitate desistance from criminal activity. Psychological theories about relationships, though, also provide a useful framework for understanding the harms that incarceration can pose for romantic unions that can, in turn, facilitate desistance (Condry & Minson, 2021; Wallace & Wang, 2020). Theoretically, incarceration may shape the commitment (or lack thereof) between partners (Schoebi et al., 2012). A distinction exists between commitment arising from dedication, or feeling connected and loyal to one's partner, and commitment arising from constraint, or factors that make leaving one's partner more difficult, such as shared children or a shared lease (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley et al., 2010). Constraint commitment keeps couples together even when they might otherwise separate as it reduces choice (i.e., makes it harder to break up), whereas dedication commitment keeps couples together if they choose to do so (i.e., makes it easier to stay together).

Applying this psychological theory of commitment to those experiencing romantic partner incarceration allows us to observe how a force external to relationships—in this case, jail incarceration—affects dyadic commitment within relationships. We expect that incarceration eases constraint commitment as partners are no longer bound together by sharing a home, income, or daily activities. With less constraint commitment, and with primarily dedication commitment, relationships are on shakier ground (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley et al., 2010). Indeed, research on long-distance relationships has found that, despite having higher dedication commitment than their proximate counterparts, long-distance couples are just as likely to dissolve their relationships (Kelmer et al., 2013). In addition, dedication commitment is easier to maintain if and when partners engage in threat mitigation strategies, defined as behaviors and cognitions partners engage to maintain (although not necessarily enhance) their relationship (Ogolsky et al., 2017). Therefore, for couples experiencing chaotic relationships, incarceration may be a threat mitigation strategy; that is, if relationships are beset with substance abuse issues, engagement in criminal activities, or risky social networks, incarceration may curb these relationship-threatening issues. Incarceration as a threat mitigation strategy may be particularly likely for jail, versus prison, incarceration, because it can offer a shorter term, more temporary break in the relationship—potentially like a brief push of a reset button.

Furthermore, part of what creates positive ties and, therefore, commitment is having an “idealized” view of one's partner (Rusbult et al., 2001). Indeed, research on long-distance relationships has found that one way these couples maintain their ties is by maintaining idealized views of one another (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). It might be easier to maintain idealized or illusory beliefs about their partners when couples have limited incarceration experience. These idealized views may be more easily maintained during the incarceration period since partners are in less close contact and, therefore, less likely to get disconfirming evidence of these illusions. Alternatively, couples who have experienced cyclical incarcerations may have a more difficult time constructing or maintaining such positive illusions. These partners may see the incarcerated partner's refusal to stop engaging in activities that risk incarceration as a sign that they will not set aside what they want to do for the good of the relationship, and a resistance to sacrifice signifies lower dedication (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Therefore, couples' relationship trajectories during an incarceration spell may look different depending on their incarceration experiences.

Men and women may understand dedication and constraint commitment in similar ways (Owen et al., 2011). When asymmetric commitment in different-sex relationships does arise, however, in which one partner is more dedicated than the other, women tend to be more committed

than men (Rhoades et al., 2006, 2010). In addition, constraint commitment is more strongly predictive of not breaking up for women than for men (Rhoades et al., 2012). With constraint commitments easing for women when their partners are incarcerated, a key protective factor against relationship dissolution may be removed. Furthermore, commitment theory suggests we also attend to marital status as indications exist that even though the transition to parenthood is not differentially associated with a change in commitment for married versus cohabiting women, cohabiting fathers report more of a drop in dedication and a rise in constraint than do married fathers during the transition to parenthood (Dush et al., 2014).

Although existing research is useful in theorizing how incarceration might shape romantic relationship trajectories, it has limitations. First, most research in this area is based on samples of predominantly White respondents, often drawn from college student populations (Ogolsky et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies of long-distance relationships—of which we could argue incarcerated partnerships are an example—find that partners engage in ways of thinking, planning, and talking together before the separation that helps to set the stage for successfully maintaining the relationship while apart. In contrast with other periods of distance in relationships, including prison incarceration, jail incarceration may be a unique experience because often a clear prospective period does not exist (as jail stays are often unplanned), neither does a clear sense of the separation being temporary (as jail stays involve considerable uncertainty about release; Walker, 2022). Likewise, even though creating a vision for the relationship's future is one way couples navigate immediate stressors (Stanley et al., 2010), this approach may be less accessible to couples enduring jail incarceration because their future is more opaque.

2.3 | Linking Partner Incarceration and Romantic Relationships

The criminal legal system, a state-sponsored institution that ostensibly exists for rehabilitative purposes, can transform and fracture relationships between those confined behind bars and their romantic partners (Comfort, 2016; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Incarceration removes individuals from households, destabilizing relationships with the same individuals who provide support during the confinement period and who can enable reductions in criminal activity and recidivism during reentry (Andersen et al., 2015; Paat & Hope, 2015; Wallace & Wang, 2020). Jail incarceration can be especially challenging for romantic relationships. Jail incarceration is often a sudden experience. Jail incarceration, and the pretrial period when people await adjudication of their case (usually via a plea bargain or trial), also involves considerable uncertainty about aspects of the future, including one's release date, whether one will serve time in prison, and the corresponding housing and economic consequences of a conviction (Walker, 2022). This uncertainty can create challenges to sustaining romantic relationships (Comfort, 2008; Kotova, 2019; Miller, 2021; Walker, 2022).

One common explanation for how incarceration unravels romantic relationships is through the resultant compromised communication. Incarceration dramatically alters the type, frequency, and content of communication with loved ones (Mowen & Visher, 2016). Phone calls with incarcerated people, which those confined can make but not receive, are costly, require family members to engage with specific companies, and are limited in duration (Comfort, 2008). Letters are a slow communication method that requires literacy skills. Visitation can be short in duration, particularly for those incarcerated in jails; can require time-consuming and expensive travel depending on the location of one's carceral facility; and is increasingly being replaced by video visitation (Rubenstein et al., 2021). Those who visit carceral facilities, despite not being arrested themselves, commonly endure "secondary prisonization" during visits (Comfort, 2008). All forms of

communication are subject to surveillance by correctional officers, and accordingly, incarcerated individuals and their loved ones have no expectation of privacy (Comfort, 2008). These extensive communication challenges can fracture romantic relationships beyond repair (Durante et al., 2022; Kanter et al., 2022).

Another commonly posited explanation for how incarceration unravels romantic relationships is the economic hardship and instability that accompany a partner's confinement (Siennick et al., 2014; Turney, 2015a; Widdowson et al., 2020). Incarcerated people have few opportunities to earn income during their confinement, and any earnings are meager. After release, the stigma of a criminal record makes finding employment difficult (Pager, 2003). Romantic partners of currently and formerly incarcerated people can strive to compensate for these stark reductions in family income by securing additional employment, but many still struggle financially (Bruns, 2019). Simultaneously, entanglement in the criminal legal system is costly. Incarcerated people accumulate legal fees, fines, and child support debt (Haney, 2018; Harris, 2016), and these financial responsibilities often fall on their family members (Page et al., 2019). Family members can also spend hundreds of dollars monthly for phone calls, for transportation associated with visitation, and to provide food and hygiene products to their incarcerated loved ones (Arditti, 2012). Given that economic hardship is commonly linked to poor relationship quality and relationship instability (Williams et al., 2015), such hardships may erode relationships among couples enduring incarceration. Quantitative research investigating the mechanisms linking incarceration to romantic relationships, however, has found that economic hardship explains none of this association, suggesting other factors are at play (Turney, 2015b; Widdowson et al., 2020).

Indeed, research has consistently found that incarceration frays romantic relationships. Incarceration increases the likelihood of union dissolution, even after accounting for characteristics correlated with incarceration such as poverty, violence, and substance abuse (Apel, 2016; Massoglia et al., 2011; Siennick et al., 2014; Turney, 2015b; Widdowson et al., 2020). Couples enduring incarceration are more likely than others to be in on-again/off-again relationships with one another and are more likely to move on to new partners (Turney & Halpern-Meekin, 2021; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Incarceration also undermines relationship quality, even among couples who stay together throughout incarceration, with partners of the incarcerated reporting less supportiveness and more conflict than their counterparts not enduring a partner's incarceration (Siennick et al., 2014; Turney, 2015a).

Although research has found that incarceration frays romantic relationships, on average, evidence also exists that incarceration does not universally lead to dissolution, relationship instability, and poor relationship quality. The association between incarceration and union dissolution is concentrated among couples living together before incarceration (Turney, 2015b) and among Black people compared with White or Hispanic people (Widdowson et al., 2020; also see Turney & Halpern-Meekin, 2021). Other research has found that incarceration has no meaningful repercussions for union dissolution after accounting for relationship duration (Massoglia et al., 2011), suggesting the shared history accompanying lengthier relationships can support couples in withstanding the strain of incarceration.

In addition, qualitative research has highlighted variation in how couples respond to incarceration-related strain. Couples experience considerable challenges before the carceral period, with engagement in criminal behavior straining relationships (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Couples also experience challenges during the carceral period, with incarceration creating communication difficulties and feelings of growing apart (Durante et al., 2022; McKay et al., 2018). Yet some qualitative research has also highlighted how couples exhibit resilience during the incarceration period and adapt to maintain their relationships. For example, partners often refrain

from sharing stressful experiences with one another to maintain a positive attitude during their infrequent communication (Comfort et al., 2018). Incarceration can also provide incarcerated partners the ability to reflect on their relationships and, ultimately, seek redemption (Tasca et al., 2016). More research is needed to understand why incarceration results in weakened relationships for some but not for others.

2.4 | Present Study

Incarceration substantially transforms romantic relationships, and incarceration may shape the commitment (or absence of commitment) between partners. In this article, we use in-depth interviews with 85 women connected to incarcerated men (either as current or former romantic partners) to describe how women articulate relationship changes that stem from their partners' jail incarcerations. We attend to the processes that contribute to constraint and dedication commitment during the incarceration period. Because we observe relationships wherein an external force—jail incarceration—is intervening to limit constraint commitment, we can see whether these same processes are activated for couples experiencing commitment uncertainty caused, in part, by institutional rather than personal volition. We also attend to the relationship conditions before incarceration to understand how antecedent circumstances shape partners' responses of dedication commitment once incarceration occurs, especially because jail incarceration spells are likely to occur unexpectedly. In the absence of constraint commitments, those in the poorest quality relationships may end them during incarceration. Alternatively, if the incarceration itself mitigates threats to the relationship (e.g., stops criminal behavior or substance abuse), couples in poor quality relationships may respond most positively to incarceration in terms of their dedication commitment. Our study elucidates romantic relationship processes after jail incarceration and, in doing so, uses incarceration—an event for which couples cannot necessarily plan before their separation—as a lens for understanding psychological theories of commitment. This approach extends existing research on commitment by focusing on a population more diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status than is common in this field. Finally, our study focuses our attention on how the criminal legal system—via the widespread use of jail incarceration—shapes the experiences and trajectories of intimate relationships in the United States.

3 | DATA AND METHOD

3.1 | Data

We examine how romantic relationships unfold during incarceration using data from the Jail and Family Life Study, a longitudinal in-depth interview study of incarcerated fathers and their family members. A research team of trained graduate students first recruited 123 fathers from across three jails in Southern California.² Men were eligible for study participation if they met the following inclusion criteria: They 1) had been in jail for at least 2 months, thus, excluding especially short jail stays to minimize variation in experiences; 2) had at least one minor child; and 3) saw at least one of their children in the month before incarceration,

²The incarceration rate in California is similar to the incarceration rate nationally (Walmsley, 2013).

thereby excluding fathers who were disconnected from their children (given these children are less affected by their father's incarceration [Geller et al., 2012]). We asked men to provide names and contact information for their family members, including mothers of their children, and we interviewed these family members with their consent.³ Men and their family members were interviewed twice. Baseline interviews with men and their family members occurred during incarceration.⁴ Follow-up interviews occurred, ideally, two months after men's release (or, for those not released from jail or sentenced to prison, approximately 1 year after baseline).

The analytic sample for this article includes the 85 current or prior romantic partners we interviewed (all of whom shared a child with an incarcerated father; all partners participated in the baseline interview, and 70 of them participated in the follow-up interview).⁵ We include both current and former partners, in part, because previous research has indicated that incarceration and relationship churning co-occur (Turney & Halpern-Meekin, 2021). This approach allows for the possibility that relationship statuses fluctuate over time, even for those who report not being together at study recruitment. We focus on women's narratives to complement other research on the experiences of incarcerated men (e.g., Granot & Einat, 2022) as partners often have distinct perceptions of the relationship's events and their meaning (Bernard, 1982).⁶ We draw on interviews that occurred during partner incarceration (which includes all baseline interviews and some follow-up interviews as many fathers had been released before the follow-up), allowing us to observe women in similar situations (as jail incarceration is unique in the multiplicity of events that can follow [e.g., release with or without conviction, ongoing jail term, and sentenced to prison]).

Interviews with women took place between July 2015 and October 2017 (with baseline interviews occurring between July 2015 and July 2017 and follow-up interviews occurring between January 2016 and October 2017). We conducted interviews at a location of the respondents' choosing, most frequently at their home but sometimes at a park, coffee shop, or fast-food restaurant. A handful of women (including five at baseline and two at follow-up) were incarcerated themselves and interviewed in jail. We conducted a few interviews by phone (nine at baseline and eight at follow-up, mostly among women residing outside of Southern California). We also conducted a few interviews in Spanish (including five at baseline and four at follow-up), with the remainder conducted in English.

We began the baseline interview by asking women to tell us the story of their lives, and we then addressed the following topics in both baseline and follow-up interviews: 1) child well-being, 2) partner incarceration, 3) relationship with partner, 4) parenting, 5) health and social support, 6)

³ We focus exclusively on different-sex couples as this approach is consistent with most research on this topic, a point we return to in the Discussion.

⁴ We attempted to interview all women while their partner was incarcerated, but occasionally men were released from jail before we could schedule the interview with their partners.

⁵ We examined descriptive characteristics of men whose (current or former) romantic partners did and did not participate in the study. These two groups are similar across demographic characteristics and experiences with the criminal justice system. As expected, differences in relationship status exist, with 43 percent of those with corresponding partner interviews and 65 percent of those without corresponding partner interviews reporting not being in a romantic relationship with their partner at baseline. We return to implications of this in the Discussion.

⁶ To the extent possible, we focus on romantic relationships and not co-parenting relationships. Although romantic and co-parenting relationships commonly operate in concert (Townsend, 2002), our preliminary analyses suggested that romantic and co-parenting relationships operate separately among these couples.

economic well-being, 7) incarceration-related stigma, 8) family background, and 9) orientations toward the future. We worked to establish temporality of events in all interviews. At baseline interviews, we asked women questions about their romantic relationship before and during their partner's confinement, probing for changes that occurred over time. At follow-up interviews, we asked women to describe changes since the baseline interview. We asked similar, mostly open-ended questions of all women, but we varied the wording and timing of the questions to make the interviews flow as much as possible like a conversation. Baseline and follow-up interviews with women lasted an average of 140 minutes and 119 minutes, respectively. We gave women a \$50 Visa gift card for each interview. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. We refer to participants by their chosen pseudonyms.

3.2 | Analytic Strategy

Analysis occurred in three primary stages. First, under the guidance of the first author, a team of graduate students conducted deductive coding of all (baseline and follow-up) interview transcripts in Dedoose. This deductive approach involved coding interviews into topics primarily based on questions in the interview guide. The deductive coding involved 71 separate codes such as "Incarceration Effects," "Mental Health and Emotions," and "Stigma." We coded transcripts together until we reached consensus on how to apply all codes, ensuring consistency across coders. For subsequent transcripts, one person conducted initial coding and another person carefully reviewed that coding. The coders worked to resolve discrepancies, and when discrepancies occasionally remained, we erred on the side of inclusivity by applying the code.

Second, we read transcripts and field notes for each participant to create analytic memos that describe each romantic relationship. We used these memos to categorize respondents into four emergent groups (described below) that reflected changes in the romantic relationship resulting from incarceration (focusing specifically on comparing mothers' reports of the relationship before and during the incarceration).

Third, we engaged in extensive flexible coding and analytic memoing (Deterding & Waters, 2021). We conducted inductive coding of baseline and follow-up interviews using excerpts from the larger deductive "Incarceration Effects" code (1,319 and 855 single-spaced pages of text at baseline and follow-up, respectively). This inductive coding was informed by both existing research (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) and emergent themes from the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), yielding codes such as liminality, criminal legal contact, and trust. We coded approximately one third of transcripts together, with the remaining two thirds of transcripts coded by one author and quality-checked by a second author to ensure intercoder consistency. We discussed discrepancies to ensure agreement (and modified coding accordingly).

3.3 | Sample Description

Table 1 summarizes characteristics of the sample. At baseline, approximately half of women were in a romantic relationship with the incarcerated father (and another quarter were in romantic relationships with new partners). Most women in the sample identify as women of color, with approximately three fifths (62 percent) identifying as Latina. White women comprise approximately one fifth (22 percent) of the sample; another 7 percent identified as multiracial, 4 percent identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2 percent identified as Black or

TABLE 1 Descriptive Characteristics of Analytic Sample

| Variable | Mean or <i>n</i> | % |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-----|
| Age | 31 | |
| Number of children | 2 | |
| Race/Ethnicity | | |
| Latina | 53 | 62% |
| White | 19 | 22% |
| Black | 2 | 2% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 3 | 4% |
| Multiracial/multiethnic | 6 | 7% |
| Unknown | 2 | 2% |
| Educational Attainment | | |
| Less than high school diploma | 8 | 9% |
| High school diploma or GED | 24 | 28% |
| More than high school diploma | 42 | 49% |
| Unknown | 11 | 13% |
| Relationship with Partner | | |
| No relationship | 44 | 52% |
| Romantic relationship | 28 | 33% |
| Married | 13 | 15% |
| In a relationship with new partner | 21 | 26% |
| Employed | 63 | 81% |
| Ever incarcerated | 33 | 40% |
| Partner incarcerated previously | 76 | 89% |
| <i>N</i> | 85 | |

Note: All descriptives are reported by women during their baseline interview. Percentages for binary variables based on the interviews with nonmissing data.

African American.⁷ On average, women were 31 years old and had two children. Approximately half (49 percent) had education beyond high school. Two fifths (40 percent) had an incarceration history. Most were connected to men who had been previously incarcerated (either before or during the relationship). Only 11 percent of their partners were experiencing their first incarceration, which highlights the cyclical role incarceration can play in relationships.

4 | FINDINGS

Our analysis reveals many women navigating their partner's jail incarceration experienced considerable transformations to their romantic relationships. Women commonly identified communication challenges and economic hardship emanating from their partner's incarceration, as

⁷Nationally, Black people are greatly overrepresented in the carceral system. In our sample, the large number of Latina women and small number of Black women is consistent with the demographic composition of the county in which interviews occurred.

expected given existing research (Comfort, 2008; McKay et al., 2018; Western, 2006). Communication challenges and economic insecurity, though, operate through three specific and interrelated relationship processes that subsequently shape relationships. We find that women understand incarceration as 1) generating considerable liminality in the relationship, 2) fostering both welcome and unwelcome independence from a partner, and 3) creating space for both partners to reevaluate how they prioritize the relationship in their lives (with some amplifying and others downgrading the priority of the relationship). The first theme, liminality, may emerge partly from the uncertainty and instability stemming from jail incarceration, in particular, as we explain below. The other two themes, independence and prioritization, may emerge from the suddenness of jail incarceration but also from any meaningful time away from an incarcerated romantic partner, not necessarily just those enduring jail incarceration. Below, we present and analyze these three relationship processes. Then, we examine how these mutually reinforcing themes emerge across the interviews and lead to four types of relationship trajectories: *Pushed Apart*, *Continually Strained*, *Ongoing Disconnection*, and *Forward Together*. This examination helps to shed light on how the common experience of a partner's incarceration in jail can give rise to different relationship experiences and outcomes across couples. Our analyses are limited to women enduring their romantic partner's jail incarceration, and accordingly, we cannot fully evaluate how unique to jail—versus prison—incarceration these experiences might be; this limitation is especially evident because some women had a romantic partner who was previously imprisoned (or had a romantic partner who would go on to experience prison incarceration).

4.1 | How Jail Incarceration Generates Relationship Liminality

Women commonly described their partner's jail incarceration, particularly the corresponding uncertainty about their partner's release date, as fostering liminality in their union. Partners of incarcerated people are in a liminal space, "neither betwixt nor between," simultaneously partners but unable to participate fully in the partnership (Turner, 1969, p. 95; Turney, 2015b). Liminality in romantic relationships is characterized by ambiguity regarding relationship status, confusion regarding their own or their partner's commitment, and uncertainty regarding the relationship's future. Women in relationships with incarcerated men, including those in committed and tenuous relationships, reported that both they and their partners are unsure of their roles. Women, especially those connected to men awaiting adjudication of their case (common given our focus on jail incarceration), frequently reported uncertainty about the timing of their partner's release and how the relationship would unfold after his release. Women also reported their incarcerated partners could not participate in fulfilling responsibilities and daily activities, which generated relationship liminality. The relationship felt almost hypothetical. This liminality is connected to women's independence and their opportunity to reevaluate their relationship commitment (discussed below).

Women commonly described simultaneous connection and disconnection from their romantic partners. Women—even those with the symbolic and legal commitment of marriage—described infrequent, surveilled, and sometimes strained communication during the incarceration period, economic insecurity resulting from their partner's confinement, and the burden of additional household responsibilities. The jail environment did not allow for private communication, a shared set of roles and responsibilities, and affirmation via activities of daily living and conversation (in contrast to the prison environment, which often does allow private communication). Thus, they described these challenges as fostering relationship liminality. We heard this from Marissa, a 22-year-old Latina, who married her partner Manny during his jail incarceration while they awaited adjudication of his case and details regarding his release date. She described their

3-year relationship as strong partly because of their frequent communication (with them engaging in twice daily phone calls and her visiting him 3 days per week, the latter of which would be more difficult if Manny was incarcerated at a prison far from home). Nevertheless, she evoked the liminality in their relationship as they faced uncertainty about whether and when Manny would be released from jail. “We were kind of at a standstill. We’ve just been dealing with Manny being gone, having to just go through life, I guess, without him. Raising his son, raising my daughter as a single mom. Because that’s what it is. Even though we’re married, I’m single,” she said. She characterized their relationship as “long distance,” a feeling that may be especially painful because she lived just 13 miles from the jail where he was housed. She said, “I have a man that loves me and wants to be with me, and we can’t be together. And every day, it’s really sad.”

Other women also described how they were simultaneously partnered and unpartnered, depicting liminality in these relationships. Marilyn, a 25-year-old White woman, articulated how she felt torn about maintaining her relationship. On the one hand, Marilyn and Donnie were in a romantic relationship. They had been together for 9 years (albeit in an on-again/off-again relationship) and had envisioned future goals they wanted to work toward. They reinforced these plans on twice weekly phone calls during his incarceration time in jail, initially trying to hold onto their future together, both when he was in jail awaiting adjudication of his case and when he was eventually sentenced to prison. On the other hand, Marilyn described how Donnie’s long sentence made it difficult to truly share a life together and how she occasionally spent time with a different man (whom Donnie did not know about). She felt deep uncertainty about both relationships. She cared about Donnie, but the chasm his incarceration created between them often felt too wide to cross. She said, “Sometimes it feels like we are together, but I mean we can’t really be together when he’s across the country in prison. . . . We’ve been together forever, have two kids together, we want to work things out and be together, but at the same time I’m skeptical.” By creating physical distance and a future that lay too far out to contemplate, incarceration induces liminality in relationships like Marilyn’s; without the constraint commitment of a shared life, Marilyn contemplated her dedication to her relationship. We hear how the many miles of physical distance—“across the country”—and a lengthy sentence may be moving Marilyn through the liminal stage she experienced during Donnie’s time in jail toward a more decisive end to their relationship (at least for the time being). Prison incarceration, in comparison with jail incarceration, may push some couples out of this liminal period (and the corresponding obstacles to being together) by providing a push toward closure.

Similarly, Aileen, a 23-year-old Latina, described how the carceral system created ambiguity in her relationship with Fernando. The couple had been together for 7 years before Fernando was most recently incarcerated, and they shared one daughter. She told us she and Fernando were not in a romantic relationship, given the communication and intimacy challenges during his incarceration, but she hoped to rekindle their romantic relationship when he was released (although they were still awaiting details of his release date when we interviewed her, an uncertainty that likely exacerbated feelings of liminality). “We know that we wanna be together when he gets out, but . . . it’s too much of a commitment for me to tell him that we’ll be together right now,” she said, speaking to the limits of her dedication to their union. Aileen was open to a future relationship with Fernando, which made their relationship status ambiguous in an ongoing way. The couple had neither commitment nor closure. Therefore, like many other women we interviewed, the incarceration of both Marilyn’s and Aileen’s partners created a liminal space where they were simultaneously navigating being in a relationship with these partners and moving on from them. The liminality of the relationship raises questions about dedication commitment. Unlike with constraint commitment, dedication commitment relies on a decision to choose that partnership

(Stanley & Markman, 1992), and that decision feels more challenging to make when the contours of the relationship are ambiguous.

Many of the women's partners, like most people in jail, had not been convicted of any offense and were instead awaiting case adjudication. This waiting period created substantial uncertainty about whether and for how long the relationship would have to endure this incarceration period. This uncertainty induced liminality as women did not know when, whether, and how their partner might emerge on the other side of this experience. Marissa, introduced above, explained the disconnection she felt from her partner Manny. She said, "I'm not there walking the halls with him. Like, is he gonna be okay? Like, am I gonna be okay? Like, is something gonna happen? I'm gonna get a call one day and, you know, I'm not going to have him anymore." She saw the uncertainty about the adjudication as creating uncertainty about their relationship, both for herself and for Manny. She told us how Manny was frustrated he could not economically provide for his family, communicate with her as frequently as he would like, or hug their 10-month-old son. She saw these frustrations bubbling up when Manny questioned her willingness to stay in the relationship. "In his head he thinks that I'm gonna leave him. He thinks, like, one day I am gonna wake up and gonna be like, you know what, I can't do this anymore. Or you know he gets frustrated because he can't touch me," she said. Both partners felt blocked from occupying the roles and responsibilities accompanying their couple identity, inducing liminality.

4.2 | How Jail Incarceration Fosters Independence

The liminality arising from jail incarceration is connected to a burgeoning sense of independence among women. Women commonly recounted how, in the wake of their partner's incarceration, they were responsible for household tasks previously managed by their partners. These additional responsibilities speak to how incarceration erases factors that had formerly reinforced constraint commitment. Some women embraced the independence accompanying these additional tasks, whereas others struggled under the weight of newfound responsibilities. Regardless of the welcomed or unwelcomed nature of these responsibilities, their partner's absence created an occasion for women to both recognize and enhance their ability to be independent from their romantic partner. This change in how they viewed themselves and the partnership ultimately led them to reevaluate the role of this relationship in their lives. That is, women enduring their partner's jail incarceration contemplated their dedication as constraint commitments eased.

Nearly all women identified increased responsibilities in the wake of their partner's jail incarceration, and the suddenness of jail incarceration (compared with prison incarceration) means that they had less ability to plan to take on these new responsibilities. Women commonly recounted how their partner's incarceration made them their family's sole breadwinner, how they were suddenly in charge of managing their family's finances, and how they were now solely responsible for household labor and childcare, which is consistent with findings from other research on the consequences of partner incarceration for women (Bruns, 2019). Women also commonly recounted the additional responsibilities incurred by their partner's incarceration (including attending court dates [a responsibility unique to jail incarceration], paying off fines and fees, and facilitating their children's visits to the facility). Even women in tenuous or no romantic relationships with their partners described increased childrearing responsibilities as most parents engaged in a co-parenting relationship before incarceration and most partners provided at least some financial support. Many women—even those who received substantial emotional, instrumental, or financial support from others during their partner's incarceration—reported dif-

difficulties in navigating life without their children's fathers. For example, Edith, a 31-year-old Latina who had been romantically involved with Andres for 13 years, described challenges created by Andres' incarceration, particularly with respect to childrearing. She told us about the difficulties in parenting her young and active children alone, and she described managing her children's complex emotions about their father's incarceration. The often unexpected and sudden nature of jail incarceration may be a particular shock as family systems and individuals' emotions do not have time to get prepared for this change. She said, "I never in my life wanted to be a single mom, and unfortunately, because of what happened, I'm doing it right now. It's not permanent, God willing, but it's hard. It's very hard being apart from him because we've always been together." In her words, we hear both hope and uncertainty—"God willing"—that this time will soon come to an end. Although not what she desired, Edith's independence grew while Andres was in jail awaiting adjudication.

Even though many women described these heightened responsibilities as burdensome, women—even those who expressed serious challenges in doing things alone—also often described their increased independence as constructive. Some women articulated feelings of freedom that accompanied being able to spend money without negotiating or consulting with their partner. Others described their independence from their partner, coupled with their ability to take on these added responsibilities, as providing a positive example for their children (while allowing them to shield their children from the repercussions of their father's incarceration). Some said that stepping into these new roles facilitated personal growth. For example, Claire, a 33-year-old Filipina, described how her partner Brian's incarceration fostered her sense of independence. Brian's incarceration contributed to substantial economic challenges that left Claire and her two children homeless. She successfully secured housing for her family and found solace in overcoming this hardship. She said, "We've grown to not be around [each other]. I now know I can do it without him. Before I felt like I needed him, but now I don't think so, but that's more for my personal growth than our relationship." Therefore, for women like Claire, the extra responsibilities—sometimes after years of relying on their partner for support—were accompanied by a sense of independence, capability, and self-confidence, which had implications for their romantic relationships. This independence is one way partner incarceration reduced constraint commitments in relationships, leaving women to evaluate their relationships based on their feelings of attachment and dedication.

As women stepped into these new roles (Comfort, 2008), they commonly described how their partner's incarceration created an independent space for them to make wanted changes to their lives, especially regarding their health. Some women described the considerable time and energy they spent worrying about their partner (e.g., who he was spending time with and whether he was using drugs) before his incarceration, and that his incarceration liberated them from some of these worries. Gabby, a 30-year-old Latina, is someone who described feeling more independent during her partner's incarceration, and she described using this extra bandwidth to make positive changes in her life. Before her partner Paul's incarceration, she said, she was not employed and was using drugs. She described his incarceration—and the time away from him it provided—as giving her the independence to "do me" and "get stuff right on my end." She said, "Well, the fact that he's in jail just pushes me harder to do the things that I need to do. When he's not in jail, I tend to want to find him, and look for him, and try to see where he's at, and I worry about him. The fact that he's in jail keeps me focused on doing the things that I'm doing." She found a job and got sober within a month of Paul's incarceration. "I really hope, and I pray, like, he comes out and he can just jump on board with me," she said. As they gained independence during a partner's incarceration (or throughout cyclical incarceration spells, a common experience for those incarcerated in jails),

women like Gabby who had embraced that change questioned what their partner's release would mean for the newfound control they had in their lives (and the uncertainty around release dates heightened these emotions as change was difficult to anticipate). This questioning sometimes gave rise to relationship liminality as women wondered what the future meant for their newfound independence.

4.3 | How Jail Incarceration Shifts Priorities

Finally, women frequently described how a partner's jail incarceration led to a shift in priorities and values, for themselves, their partner, or both parties. Incarceration created an opening for some women to reprioritize their commitment to their partner, and some women reported their partners were doing the same. In contrast, as their constraints eased, other women chose to prioritize aspects of their lives beyond their romantic relationships. Jail incarceration creates an absence of constraint commitments, with some partners making a clear choice to be dedicated to the union while others experience a decline in dedication commitment (this may also happen with prison incarceration, although our data do not allow for a systematic analysis of the differences between jail and prison incarceration, a point we return to the Discussion).

Women described their own shifts in priorities during their partner's incarceration, with some reporting that their partner's incarceration gave them the ability to prioritize themselves more than their relationship. Some women saw in their newfound independence, and its associated confidence, the possibility of prioritizing themselves and their children, without the distractions of the relationship. Some women developed clarity that, despite promises to the contrary, their partners were not ready to give up activities that led to incarceration, prompting some to move on (for more on these types of experiences, see Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Janet had just such an experience. A 32-year-old Latina, Janet told us that she accepted it was unlikely her partner Guy would make changes to his life after release, which allowed her to feel like she could move on from the relationship. Other women connected their reprioritization directly to the liminality and independence stemming from their partner's incarceration. Marilyn, a 25-year-old White woman, who earlier told us about the liminality in her relationship with Donnie, said, "I'm not going to put my whole life on hold for him." Jadalynn, a 31-year-old who identified as White and Latina, said, "I knew I deserved a lot better. And so, I guess that did make me realize when he went to prison, that I was beyond him. . . . It did make me stronger to get him away, to notice enough that that's not what my life should have been." Paulie, a 26-year-old Latina, similarly described her introspection during her partner Ben's incarceration. She said, "I think that I have just really wanted peace for a very long time and now that he is in [jail] I feel like I can do a lot of self-reflecting, and I feel like I can see from a different perspective. I don't have all these drama events clouding my vision." As incarceration separated them from their partners physically, and liminality and independence introduced an emotional distance, some women began to shift their priorities, with their relationships becoming less important to them.

In contrast, other women talked about how their partner's incarceration allowed them to prioritize their relationships with their partner more than previously. For example, Julia, a 31-year-old White woman, described her partner John's incarceration as challenging, especially because of their constrained communication, but she ultimately saw it as a period of uncertainty that allowed for considerable reflection about their relationship. During her follow-up interview, after John's release, Julia recalled her feelings during his incarceration: "We're a family and that's what I wanted was my family back together. And I thought about that every day [while he was in jail],

I just want my family back together.” Similarly, Shelley, a 26-year-old Latina, described how her relationship was stronger now that “he realized how much I do care for him in there than before.” She also said, “I just think it really helped us to grow and know what we really want in life. I think we do wanna be with each other, and I think both of us want to be committed.” Because incarceration forced them to have time apart, partners were able to step away from the relationship, reflect, and recommit—or not—to a future together. With constraints eased, they could make a choice to be dedicated to each other.

Finally, as Shelley did, women described how they believed that their partner’s incarceration prompted him to focus on their relationship. Confinement gave their partners an opportunity to reflect on themselves and their relationships, they said, enabling them to recognize the successful aspects of their relationships and encouraging them to not take their relationships for granted (Benson et al., 2011). Women saw their partners developing dedication commitment. For example, Marissa described Manny’s time behind bars as “really horrible” and said, “I think going to jail has opened up his eyes to a lot of things. . . . And he regrets the time that we wasted, like before.” She said that his new prioritization of their relationship strengthened their bond. Other women talked about how incarceration, in addition to providing time for men to reflect on their roles as partners, gave them the chance to reflect on their roles as fathers. Monica, a 26-year-old Latina, recounted her partner Jason engaging in this kind of reflection. During his incarceration, Monica said, he began to spend more time caring for his emotional and physical well-being, committing himself to being “the best dad he can be for the baby.” Monica’s belief in Jason’s renewed commitment to fatherhood helped her renew her commitment to their relationship. She said, “I think it helped him realize he’s an important person in our life and in this world for us, you know. We rely on him a lot. Income, emotionally, physically here with us.” Women did not need to see a change in their partner to reprioritize their relationship, with some simply holding onto hope of change. When men affirmed or elevated their relationship commitment, feelings of liminality induced by the incarceration period were eased; that is, displays of dedication commitment mitigated feelings of liminality.

4.4 | Jail Incarceration in the Course of Relationships

Incarceration intervenes in romantic relationships at different points, with incarceration intervening at the beginning of their commitment to one another for some, coming after some relationships had already endured a multitude of fractures, and striking some unions repeatedly. The ways the jail incarceration experience intersects with the relationship means that women experience liminality, independence, and reprioritization at different points in the relationship, contributing to disparate relationship experiences. That is, women do not respond uniformly to their partner’s incarceration, with incarceration destroying some relationships, encouraging dedication commitment among other couples, and not dramatically altering ties in other relationships. We find that women typically fall into one of four categories: *Pushed Apart*, *Continually Strained*, *Ongoing Disconnection*, and *Forward Together*.⁸ Below we describe these categories and characteristics of relationships that can explain differences between categories.

⁸ Importantly, the features of the four groups are not necessarily permanent characteristics of these relationships. Instead, these groupings are ways that individuals and relationships respond to a partner’s incarceration. For example, it could be that couples we observe in the *Continually Strained* or *Ongoing Disconnection* groups experienced prior incarceration spells that pushed them apart. That is, couples could pass through one or more of these experiences with repeated periods of incarceration across the course of their relationship.

4.4.1 | Pushed apart

The *Pushed Apart* group ($n = 25$) included women who, on balance, experienced a decline in their relationship resulting from their partner's jail incarceration, including less emotional connection, more relationship dissatisfaction, lack of physical intimacy, and/or relationship dissolution. As incarceration eased constraint commitment, it also eroded dedication commitment. These women described how liminality, independence, and reprioritization together fractured their relationships. The liminality surrounding their partners' incarcerations raised questions about the continuing role of their partners in their lives. They took on additional responsibilities that increased their independence. This growing independence reduced their constraints, allowing women to prioritize aspects of their lives beyond their romantic relationships and weakening their dedication commitment. Importantly, reduced constraint commitments did not entirely erode women's dedication. They were often not yet ready to give up on the relationships, hopeful their partners would change after release and that incarceration itself would serve as a form of threat mitigation.

Sally, a 23-year-old Latina who shared two children with J Cup, was in the *Pushed Apart* group. She and J Cup were together for 3 years before his most recent incarceration. She described being unhappy in the relationship partly because of his substance use and their preexisting communication and trust issues that were exacerbated by his incarceration. She wanted to try to make it work, but she also said she could not see them staying together long term. Her ambiguity about their relationship was also reflected in the uncertainty she saw in how J Cup envisioned their future together. She said, "I mean, there's still hope. I mean, I hope he gets out and gets better. But now that he's in jail, I don't even know how he feels about me because it's been so long." Her hopes for their future together felt less likely to be realized the more time passed with them apart.

During J Cup's time in jail, Sally felt herself disconnecting, simultaneously becoming more independent from him and deprioritizing their relationship. "Every time he goes in, it's bad. I cry over it," she said. On the other hand, his incarceration also allowed her to focus on herself. "Once he's gone, I have all this free time. ... It's not all about him anymore," she explained in a positive manner. She described how, when J Cup was incarcerated for the first time during their relationship, she prioritized contact with him by writing letters daily, but she no longer does so. As she witnessed J Cup cycle in and out of jail, she realized he was not investing in their relationship, which led her to also change her priorities; she began to focus her energies on regaining custody of her children. She said, "I accepted that he's not really mine, I can't control him, and all I can do is help and take care of me. Yeah, I guess that shows in me not writing so much and everything. It used to be an everyday thing. ... I don't care no more." In this way, incarceration created an opportunity for women like Sally to gain independence from their partners and to shift their priorities, focusing on their own needs and those of their children. The incarceration spell allowed women to reevaluate their commitment to their partners, enabling them to turn away from the relationship if ongoing or further commitment no longer felt wise.

4.4.2 | Continually strained

The *Continually Strained* ($n = 17$) group reported their relationships were mostly impervious to their partner's jail incarceration in part because their relationships were strained before his

incarceration. Their “normal” was unstable to begin with, making the spell of incarceration less of a shock to the family system. Their relationships had been in a liminal state before this spell of incarceration. These feelings of relationship liminality continued during their partners’ confinements (and the corresponding uncertainty of jail incarceration). Many of these women had partners who endured cyclical incarcerations, and therefore, these women had long existed in a state of relationship uncertainty and tumult. They also knew what additional responsibilities they would need to take on as they navigated this latest period, having done so before. This spell of their partners’ incarcerations was part of an ongoing pattern, as opposed to a disruption to their previous relationships. The relationships in the *Continually Strained* group tended to be low in both constraint and dedication commitment, yet women were not fully ready to give up on them yet. Many held on to hope their partners would engage in threat mitigation activities—including prioritizing their families after release, getting sober, and refraining from criminal behavior—that would strengthen their relationships.

Amy, a 52-year-old White woman, described her partner Gary as absent from their relationship for years, even before his most recent incarceration, forcing her to build a life for herself and her two children that did not revolve around him. She explained how, before this incarceration, she had panic attacks as she waited for him to call or come home, worried what might happen to him given his history of drug use and living on the streets during their marriage. “Two or three days, I’d be waiting for him to call me,” she recalled. Considering this, she said, his being detained was not a big change because she was used to “doing it alone.” Like many women, Amy described a strong desire for her partner to shift his priorities to focus more on their relationship and children. Because she had seen that he had emerged from prior jail spells only to return to his old ways, she did not have high hopes that this time would be any different. “I wish he was a functioning human being again, working, enjoying his life, getting his ego back, and getting his self-esteem back. But, even when he had a job last time, he was abusing [alcohol].” Amy wanted to mend her children’s relationship with their father so they could “be a family again,” but she did not realistically expect this to happen. Women in this group had long lived with liminal relationships, often operating independently, necessitated by the men’s household disengagement and repeated incarceration spells. Despite having little expectation that their partners would soon reprioritize their relationships, women still held onto hope that things would change. This desire kept women in strained relationships with their partners; for them, this spell of incarceration was part of a longer, ongoing storm to weather.

4.4.3 | Ongoing disconnection

The *Ongoing Disconnection* ($n = 30$) group also reported their relationships were immune to their partner’s jail incarcerations, with this group differing from the *Continually Strained* group because they were not in a romantic relationship before the incarceration.⁹ These women commonly offered retrospective accounts of how the liminality, independence, and reprioritization ultimately led to their relationship dissolution. Like women in the *Continually Strained* group, they had lived separate lives from their partners, operating independently, prioritizing themselves and their children as the liminality of their relationship grew. In essence, they were like

⁹ We include the latter group because ties between partners do not end when the relationship does; first, they may still be connected as co-parents, and second, they may be in a churning relationship, in which we are meeting them during an “off-again” cycle (Turney & Halpern-Meekin, 2021).

Continually Strained women who had given up hope that their partners would change and saw their relationships end. Those in the *Ongoing Disconnection* group had reconciled themselves to the idea that the relationship could not be rescued any time soon and had moved on. Therefore, even though retrospective accounts of their relationship often revealed that eased constraint commitments led women to prioritize other aspects of their lives and reevaluate their romantic relationship, their partner's most proximate incarceration neither eased constraint commitments nor weakened dedication commitments.

Nina, a 39-year-old Latina, described no longer experiencing uncertainty about the status of her relationship with Victor. Months before his arrest, Nina severed communication with her former partner after they lost custody of their son due to their substance abuse problems. Despite Nina's best effort to regain her sobriety, her partner's unwillingness to change became a roadblock in their custody case. "During that process, he was getting high. He wasn't going to [do his] drug test. He was still hanging around his friends. He wasn't doing anything, anything." Nina decided that she would no longer wait for Victor to reprioritize their family. She explained, "Finally, I just got tired of it. I'm like, you know what, dude? I don't need you. I'm just gonna do it on my own, so I did it on my own. I'm still doing it on my own." Because women like Nina were already looking at their romantic relationships with their former partners in the rear-view mirror, they did not feel like the men's latest spells of incarceration changed much for them.

4.4.4 | Forward together

The *Forward Together* ($n = 13$) group included women who reported, on balance, enhancements to their relationship during their partner's incarceration. They reported that incarceration served to mitigate relationship threats by changing their partners' behaviors, improving their communication, and facilitating feelings of relationship stability. Without constraint commitments, they made an overt choice to become more dedicated to the union. These women discussed how liminality, independence, and reprioritization together altered their relationships. Women in this group, most of whom reported tenuous or conflictual relationships before their partner's incarceration, recounted how their partner's incarceration created a newfound sense of stability through increased communication and knowledge of their partner's whereabouts. Therefore, unlike the *Pushed Apart* group (who often expressed more commitment and stability before the incarceration), this group's comparatively unstable starting point facilitated relative relationship improvements. That is, because of where in the relationship's course incarceration intervened, couples' responses varied. Those in the *Forward Together* group described how considerable liminality existed before the incarceration and, therefore, the incarceration did not additionally impair their commitment to their partner. As women saw their partner's behavior changing and dedication commitment to the family growing, they grew more hopeful about the relationship. The incarceration, therefore, offered women and their partners an opportunity to make a choice—rather than feeling stuck in a path-dependent mode—that facilitated a positive disruption of their previous negative relationship patterns. These women also expressed independence and shifting priorities, with women *choosing* to reinvest in their relationship with their partner. Because this increased commitment was borne of dedication, as opposed to constraint, women wanted to deepen their relationship ties.

Leslie, a 34-year-old who identified as White and Latina, described her partner Jorge's incarceration as improving their communication. She described their relationship before he went to jail as tumultuous. "There were probably a million things we would argue about," she said, and

proceeded to tell us about how Jorge was disengaged from her and her children. She said, “He wouldn’t come home at night, or not pick up his phone, yeah, not participate in our lives.” Their relationship was in a liminal state before his incarceration. His incarceration provided more clarity and connection in the relationship than before. Like many women, Leslie described increased responsibilities during her partner’s incarceration (e.g., getting oil changes, budgeting). She also described getting to choose how to spend her time (e.g., taking her son to visit his grandma). But Leslie and Jorge’s relationship also became calmer while he was incarcerated. Unlike before, she now knew where he was every night. Women in the *Forward Together* group commonly experienced liminal relationships with their partners before their confinement and continued to experience liminality during their incarceration, yet incarceration increased relationship stability in this group.

4.4.5 | Explaining differences across groups

The four groups varied in terms of their constraint and dedication commitment and the extent to which incarceration mitigated or exacerbated threats to the relationship, as described above. Other observed group differences were found in terms of demographic characteristics, marital status, relationship length, incarceration history, and the stigmatizing nature of incarceration, all of which could shape partners’ responses to an incarceration spell. We present some of these differences in table 2 (although we caution the reader that these small samples and qualitative approach preclude an analysis of statistically significant group differences). The *Forward Together* group looks most different from the other three groups, both in its positive relationship response to incarceration and its characteristics. Women in the *Forward Together* group were often married (46 percent of them, compared with 12 percent in the *Pushed Apart* group, 6 percent in the *Continually Strained* group, and 17 percent in the *Ongoing Disconnection* group). Marriage is a form of dedication commitment uncommon among women in the other groups (and a form of constraint commitment, given the legal processes involved in ending a marriage). They overwhelmingly report unstable relationships before a father’s incarceration. They have typically been in a relationship with their partners for less time than women in the other groups. These couples are more likely than other couples to be enduring a first incarceration spell and do not report stigma arising from their partner’s incarceration. Because those in the *Forward Together* group were more likely than those in other groups to be experiencing incarceration for the first time, to be in unstable relationships before the father’s incarceration, and to have shown their dedication to their relationship by marrying, they were positioned to see incarceration as mitigating threats to their relationship, offering an opportunity for reflection. Women in this group also reported less educational attainment than did those in the other groups. Other group differences exist, too. Women in the *Continually Strained* group are less likely than those in other groups to identify as Latina and more likely to identify as White. Those in the *Continually Strained* and *Ongoing Disconnection* groups were older than the other groups, had been in their relationships for longer periods of time, and were likely to have weathered their partner’s previous incarcerations. These characteristics influence women’s dedication commitment as cyclical incarcerations lead them to disinvest from relationships.

TABLE 2 Descriptive Characteristics, By Relationship Category

| Variable | Pushed Apart | | Forward Together | | Continually Strained | | Ongoing Disconnection | |
|------------------------------------|--------------|-----|------------------|-----|----------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
| | Mean or n | % | Mean or n | % | Mean or n | % | Mean or n | % |
| Age | 29 | | 26 | | 32 | | 33 | |
| Number of children | 2 | | 2 | | 2 | | 2 | |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | | | | | |
| Latina | 15 | 60% | 9 | 69% | 9 | 53% | 20 | 67% |
| White | 5 | 20% | 1 | 8% | 6 | 35% | 7 | 23% |
| Black | 1 | 4% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 3% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 2 | 8% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 6% | 0 | 0% |
| Multiracial/multiethnic | 1 | 4% | 2 | 15% | 1 | 6% | 2 | 7% |
| Unknown | 1 | 4% | 1 | 8% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| Educational Attainment | | | | | | | | |
| Less than high school diploma | 1 | 4% | 2 | 15% | 2 | 12% | 3 | 10% |
| High school diploma or GED | 6 | 24% | 6 | 46% | 4 | 24% | 8 | 27% |
| More than high school diploma | 15 | 60% | 3 | 23% | 10 | 59% | 14 | 47% |
| Unknown | 3 | 12% | 2 | 15% | 1 | 6% | 5 | 17% |
| Relationship with Partner | | | | | | | | |
| No relationship | 9 | 36% | 0 | 0% | 8 | 47% | 27 | 90% |
| Romantic relationship | 13 | 52% | 7 | 54% | 7 | 41% | 0 | 0% |
| Married | 3 | 12% | 6 | 46% | 2 | 12% | 3 | 10% |
| In a relationship with new partner | 4 | 17% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 6% | 16 | 53% |
| Employed | 15 | 60% | 8 | 89% | 13 | 81% | 27 | 96% |
| Ever incarcerated | 14 | 58% | 5 | 38% | 6 | 38% | 8 | 28% |
| Partner incarcerated previously | 24 | 96% | 9 | 67% | 16 | 94% | 27 | 90% |
| Relationship duration (years) | 6 | | 5 | | 8 | | 10 | |
| Stigma stemming from incarceration | 11 | 44% | 1 | 8% | 8 | 47% | 3 | 10% |
| <i>N</i> | 25 | | 13 | | 17 | | 30 | |

Note: All descriptives are reported by women during their baseline interview. Percentages for binary variables based on the interviews with nonmissing data.

5 | DISCUSSION

Deep inequity exists in whose lives are touched by the reach of the carceral system (Arditti, 2012; Braman, 2004; Condry, 2013; Jardine, 2019; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Jail incarceration, experienced by nearly six times as many people as prison incarceration annually, is a particularly important site of inequality as many individuals—and, therefore, couples—endure jail incarceration simply because they cannot afford bail (Turney & Conner, 2019). In this study, we use in-depth interview data from 85 women who share children with incarcerated men to explore how jail incarceration shapes the lives of both those inside and outside the jail walls, deeply affecting the qualities and stability of romantic relationships. We find, in line with prior research, that jail incarceration alters these relationships in multifaceted ways, with incarceration destroying some relationships, strengthening other relationships, and not altering still

other relationships (e.g., Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008, 2016; Massoglia et al., 2011; Siennick et al., 2014; Western, 2006; Widdowson et al., 2020). We show how external institutions can limit constraint commitment, thereby increasing the salience of dedication commitment in partners' determination about the future of the relationship (Schoebi et al., 2012). This finding is especially important given that romantic relationships facilitate desistance from criminal activity after release, so undermining these ties may work at cross-purposes with preventing future recidivism and breaking cyclical jail incarceration (Wallace & Wang, 2020).

To begin with, we find that many relationships, even those with tenuous connections before incarceration, are touched by the carceral experience. We find that jail incarceration simultaneously produces relationship liminality, fosters women's sense of independence from their incarcerated partners, and allows women to reevaluate their prioritization of their relationships. We find that jail incarceration, a precursor to prison incarceration for most people who receive a prison sentence, is a particularly challenging time for couples given its suddenness, the uncertainty surrounding the adjudication of one's case (including whether one will receive a conviction, the length of one's sentence, and where one will serve the sentence), and its often cyclical nature. We suspect that the context of jail incarceration particularly cultivates relationship liminality (and, given its suddenness, independence), but we cannot definitively state whether these processes are unique to jail incarceration. We do not have comparable data from women enduring prison incarceration of their partners, and furthermore, many women in the study have partners who were previously incarcerated in prison. Future research should compare how these processes differentially play out during jail and prison incarceration. It would be helpful to understand whether characteristics of jail incarceration (including shorter durations and closer geographic distance from home) make it easier to maintain relationships or create additional burdens for nonincarcerated partners. Future research may also consider aspects of jail incarceration that women did not often raise in our interviews, including how romantic partners navigate (or do not navigate) plea deals with their partners or how they support their romantic partners during court appearances. Asking directly about these and other aspects of the confinement experience could further distinguish between jail and prison incarceration's repercussions for romantic relationships and, more generally, shed light on processes linking incarceration to family life.

We find that the experience of incarceration intervenes within the course of relationships to produce diverging experiences. We also find that some relationships are undermined by a partner's incarceration, via incarceration-induced liminality, new independent responsibilities, and the corresponding de-prioritization of romantic relationships; dedication in these relationships wanes without constraint commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley et al., 2010). Other women, though, described how liminality, independence, and reprioritization aligned to create a different experience. Some recounted how a partner's incarceration spell is a form of threat mitigation (Ogolsky et al., 2017), disrupting negative behavior patterns and offering an opportunity to reset the relationship. Women in these relationships experienced increased dedication commitment. Others, particularly those in relationships already buffeted by previous disappointments as men emerged unchanged from prior jail stints, described the current incarceration spell as a continuation, rather than a disruption, of their relationship; in this way, incarceration neither undermined nor boosted their union. These findings are consistent with psychological theories of commitment uncertainty, which posits that as partners become less secure in their commitment to the relationship, their behaviors and ways of thinking about the relationship will change. This change includes an erosion of a sense of couple identity, a questioning of the prioritization of the relationship in their lives, and a greater focus on themselves as individuals (Owen et al., 2014).

We find these three key processes resulting from incarceration—liminality, independence, and reprioritization—work together to produce these relationship experiences as women navigate any changing roles and communication patterns that their partners' incarcerations bring, and as their partners' removal from the outside world creates a distance or liminality that offers an opportunity for reprioritization (either of newfound commitments to oneself and one's children or of reinvestment in the relationship). Previous research has outlined the financial and communication challenges that can accompany a partner's incarceration (McKay et al., 2018; Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011; Western, 2006), and our research compliments this work by detailing how these challenges translate into changes in relationship status via these additional processes. Expensive phone calls or lost income do not automatically translate into breakups. Rather, these challenges activate the processes we outline here, which open the possibilities for increased commitment or relationship dissolution. That we find that women who have previously navigated this experience also discuss these processes as having played out in their relationships reinforces that these are not just the current reflections of women amid having their relationships disrupted by the carceral system. Instead, the way forces external to the relationship—in this case, state-sponsored jail incarceration—can shape partners' constraint and dedication commitments is revealed (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Other institutions—such as the military, occupations that take people far from their families, or jobs that claim large portions of people's time—may produce similar challenges to relationships (Kelmer et al., 2013).

5.1 | Directions for Future Research

This study includes opportunities for future research in addition to those suggested above. For example, the Jail and Family Life Study excludes women without children, women whose incarcerated partners chose not to participate, and women who themselves chose not to participate. Our analyses of this last form of nonparticipation show that women who did not participate were more likely to be separated from their incarcerated partner at baseline (but that no other meaningful observed differences existed between women who did and did not participate); we expect many of these women would fall into the *Ongoing Disconnection* group. We also only consider the perspectives of women, and the perspectives of incarcerated men may differ from those provided by their current and former partners. Understanding couple-level concordance and discordance in perceptions of how the carceral system shapes romantic relationships, especially given research on the hollow “jail talk” among incarcerated men (Umamaheswar, 2022), is another direction for research. Furthermore, we only learn about the experiences of parents in different-sex partnerships, and future research should explore the experiences of those in same-sex partnerships.

These findings also have implications for the development of survey instruments designed to understand the repercussions of incarceration for individuals and families. Future population-based surveys should include questions about liminality, as well as questions that measure partners' feelings of independence and prioritization of romantic relationships, so that researchers can examine the generalizability of these findings—testing whether couples experiencing partner incarceration compared with couples not experiencing partner incarceration are more likely to report liminality in the relationship, independence, and reprioritization and testing how these processes influence one another and lead to relationship satisfaction and stability. Surveys should also endeavor to ask about experiences with prior partners being incarcerated to trace how these shape relationships with current partners. Similarly, surveys should also include measures of rela-

tionships status that capture complexities in these relationships, ideally collected at frequent time intervals that allow for fine-grained temporal data as people go through the process of involvement with the criminal legal system (for example, see a discussion of on-again/off-again relationships in Turney & Halpern-Meekin, 2021).

Finally, the goal of this qualitative research is to understand the meaning and variability of experiences and not to develop generalizable conclusions. Our findings may differ across locations or demographic groups. For example, although our predominantly Latina sample provides a unique look at the repercussions of the criminal legal system for this group, our findings might be different if our sample included more Black women as the unequal reach of the carceral system means they are far more likely than other women to experience partner incarceration (Enns et al., 2019), structural racism undergirds the experiences these couples have with the criminal legal system and beyond (Alexander, 2020), and patterns of relationship formation, dissolution, and quality vary across race/ethnicity (Raley et al., 2015). Research has shown that the association between incarceration and union dissolution is largest among Black couples (Widdowson et al., 2020; also see Turney & Halpern-Meekin, 2021) and that women who commonly experience family member incarceration may respond less negatively to their romantic partner's incarceration (Derzon, 2018), suggesting potentially different processes across racial and ethnic groups. Our analysis of demographic and relationship characteristics across our four categories of relationship types suggest some group differences (for example, women in the *Continually Strained* group are less likely than others to identify as Latina), pointing to a potential for survey research to more rigorously examine variation in responses to incarceration and to the need for research on commitment to incorporate demographically and socioeconomically diverse samples.

6 | CONCLUSION

Scholars have made great strides in using observational data to strengthen causal inference regarding the link between incarceration and romantic relationships (Massoglia et al., 2011; Turney, 2015a, 2015b; Turney & Halpern-Meekin, 2021). Relationships with incarcerated partners are complicated, however. The incarceration period of interest is often one piece of a complicated relationship history and criminal legal history, and jail incarceration likely presents unique challenges. In this article, we used psychological theories of commitment to examine how incarceration experiences facilitate relationship stability and instability. As a result, we see both how relationships are battered by the carceral system and the resilience some show as they cope with these challenges, depending in part on when in the relationship's course the spell of incarceration occurs. A partner's incarceration eases commitment constraint and brings a liminal relationship status, independent responsibilities for their households, and the reconsideration of priorities, and these mutually reinforcing processes are activated to translate the power of the carceral system into the microlevel experiences of people's daily lives. These findings suggest that short jail sentences are consequential for romantic relationships, and accordingly, the focus on jail incarceration has critical relevance to the field of criminology. The findings highlight how aspects of jail incarceration—particularly the often sudden nature of jail incarceration and the uncertainty surrounding pretrial detention—can foster liminality in romantic relationships that, in conjunction with the increased independence and a reconsideration of priorities, can alter the trajectories of romantic relationships. Therefore, despite criminal legal reform efforts to reduce sentence length, the suddenness and uncertainty imposed by even brief jail spells may still have harm-

ful consequences for family life that exacerbate existing inequalities. This issue raises questions regarding how bail reform policies, which may make it less likely that people experience pretrial detention, could affect family ties. Our findings show how the criminal legal system, situated in deep structural inequalities, can profoundly alter the social relationships consistently linked to desistance from criminal activity after release, thus, facilitating a cyclical connection between incarceration and romantic relationship experiences. This insight underscores the interplay of micro- and macro-level systems in producing family life experiences—and inequities therein—for couples and their children.

ORCID

Kristin Turney  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4642-3490>

REFERENCES

- Alexander, M. (2020). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.
- Andersen, S. H., Andersen, L. H., & Skov, P. E. (2015). Effect of marriage and spousal criminality on recidivism. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(2), 496–509.
- Apel, R. (2016). The effects of jail and prison confinement on cohabitation and marriage. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 665(1), 103–126.
- Arditti, J. A. (2012). *Parental incarceration and the family*. NYU Press.
- Benson, M. L., Alarid, L. F., Burton, V. S., & Cullen, F. T. (2011). Reintegration or stigmatization? Offenders' expectations of community re-entry. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 39(5), 385–393.
- Bernard, J. (1982). *The future of marriage*. Yale University Press.
- Braman, D. (2004). *Doing time on the outside: Incarceration and family life in urban America*. University of Michigan Press.
- Bruns, A. (2019). The third shift: Multiple job holding and the incarceration of women's partners. *Social Science Research*, 80(5), 202–215.
- Comfort, M. (2008). *Doing time together: Love and family in the shadow of the prison*. University of Chicago Press.
- Comfort, M. (2016). "A twenty-hour-a-day job": The impact of frequent low-level criminal justice involvement on family life. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 665(1), 63–79.
- Comfort, M., Krieger, K. E., Landwehr, J., McKay, T., Lindquist, C. H., Feinberg, R., ... Bir, A. (2018). Partnership after prison: Couple relationships during reentry. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 57(2), 188–205.
- Condry, R. (2013). *Families shamed: The consequences of crime for relatives of serious offenders*. Willan.
- Condry, R., & Minson, S. (2021). Conceptualizing the effects of imprisonment on families: Collateral consequences, secondary punishment, or symbiotic harms? *Theoretical Criminology*, 25(4), 540–558.
- Deterding, N. M., & Waters, M. C. (2021). Flexible coding of in-depth interviews: A twenty-first-century approach. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 50(2), 708–739.
- Derzon, K. M. (2018). *Collateral consequences: How increased incarceration rates transform parenting and partnership in low-income Boston neighborhoods* [Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University].
- Durante, K. A., Phillips Meertins, J. R., & Tadros, E. (2022). Institutional relational maintenance barriers and perceptions of relationship quality among women with incarcerated partners. *Crime & Delinquency*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287221113304>
- Dush, C. K., Rhoades, G. K., Sandberg-Thoma, S. E., & Schoppe-Sullivan, S. J. (2014). Commitment across the transition to parenthood among married and cohabiting couples. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 3(2), 126–136.
- Edin, K., & Kefalas, M. (2005). *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage*. University of California Press.
- Enns, P. K., Yi, Y., Comfort, M., Goldman, A. W., Lee, H., Muller, C., ... Wildeman, C. (2019). What percentage of Americans have ever had a family member incarcerated? Evidence from the family history of incarceration survey (FamHIS). *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 5, 1–5.
- Geller, A., Cooper, C. E., Garfinkel, I., Schwartz-Soicher, O., & Mincy, R. B. (2012). Beyond absenteeism: Father incarceration and child development. *Demography*, 49(1), 49–76.

- Granot, N., & Einat, T. (2022). "The course of love never did run smooth": Ex-inmates' attitudes toward heterosexual romantic relationships. *The Prison Journal*, 102(3), 325–346.
- Hadden, B. W., Smith, C. V., & Webster, G. D. (2014). Relationship duration moderates associations between attachment and relationship quality: Meta-analytic support for the temporal adult romantic attachment model. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 18(1), 42–58.
- Haney, L. (2018). Incarcerated fatherhood: The entanglements of child support debt and mass imprisonment. *American Journal of Sociology*, 124(1), 1–48.
- Harris, A. (2016). *A pound of flesh: Monetary sanctions as punishment for the poor*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Jardine, C. (2019). *Families, imprisonment and legitimacy: The cost of custodial penalties*. Routledge.
- Kanter, J. B., Lavner, J. A., Lannin, D. G., Hilgard, J., & Monk, J. K. (2022). Does couple communication predict later relationship quality and dissolution? A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 84(2), 533–551.
- Kelmer, G., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S., & Markman, H. J. (2013). Relationship quality, commitment, and stability in long-distance relationships. *Family Process*, 52(2), 257–270.
- Kotova, A. (2019). "Time... lost time": Exploring how partners of long-term prisoners experience the temporal pains of imprisonment. *Time & Society*, 28(2), 478–498.
- Massoglia, M., Remster, B., & King, R. D. (2011). Stigma or separation? Understanding the incarceration-divorce relationship. *Social Forces*, 90(1), 133–155.
- McKay, T., Comfort, M., Grove, L., Bir, A., & Lindquist, C. (2018). Whose punishment, whose crime? Understanding parenting and partnership in a time of mass incarceration. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 57(2), 69–82.
- Miller, R. J. (2021). *Halfway home: Race, punishment, and the afterlife of mass incarceration*. Little, Brown.
- Mowen, T. J., & Visser, C. A. (2016). Changing the ties that bind: How incarceration impacts family relationships. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 15(2), 503–528.
- Ogolsky, B. G., Monk, J. K., Rice, T. M., Theisen, J. C., & Maniotes, C. R. (2017). Relationship maintenance: A review of research on romantic relationships. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 9(3), 275–306.
- Owen, J., Rhoades, G., Shuck, B., Fincham, F. D., Stanley, S., Markman, H., & Knopp, K. (2014). Commitment uncertainty: A theoretical overview. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 3(4), 207–219.
- Owen, J., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2011). The Revised Commitment Inventory: Psychometrics and use with unmarried couples. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(6), 820–841.
- Paat, Y. F., & Hope, T. L. (2015). Relationship dynamics, gender, and criminal offending in fragile families. *Journal of Family Violence*, 30(2), 227–241.
- Page, J., Piehowski, V., & Soss, J. (2019). A debt of care: Commercial bail and the gendered logic of criminal justice predation. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 5(1), 150–172.
- Pager, D. (2003). The mark of a criminal record. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108(5), 937–975.
- Raley, R. K., Sweeney, M. M., & Wondra, D. (2015). The growing racial and ethnic divide in U.S. marriage patterns. *Future of Children*, 25(2), 89–109.
- Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Pre-engagement cohabitation and gender asymmetry in marital commitment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(4), 553–560.
- Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2010). Should I stay or should I go? Predicting dating relationship stability from four aspects of commitment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24(5), 543–550.
- Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2012). A longitudinal investigation of commitment dynamics in cohabiting relationships. *Journal of Family Issues*, 33(3), 369–390.
- Rubenstein, B. Y., Toman, E. L., & Cochran, J. C. (2021). Socioeconomic barriers to child contact with incarcerated parents. *Justice Quarterly*, 38(4), 725–751.
- Rusbult, C. E., Olsen, N., Davis, J. L., & Hannon, P. A. (2001). Commitment and relationship maintenance mechanisms. In J. Harvey and A. Wenzel (Eds.), *Close romantic relationships* (pp. 95–122). Psychology Press.
- Sawyer, W., & Wagner, P. (2022). *Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2022*. Prison Policy Initiative.
- Schoebi, D., Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2012). Stability and change in the first 10 years of marriage: Does commitment confer benefits beyond the effects of satisfaction? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(4), 729–742.
- Schwartz-Soicher, O., Geller, A., & Garfinkel, I. (2011). The effect of paternal incarceration on material hardship. *Social Service Review*, 85(3), 447–473.
- Scott-Hayward, C. S., & Fradella, H. F. (2019). *Punishing poverty: How bail and pretrial detention fuel inequalities in the criminal justice system*. University of California Press.

- Siennick, S. E., Stewart, E. A., & Staff, J. (2014). Explaining the association between incarceration and divorce. *Criminology*, 52(3), 371–398.
- Stafford, L., & Merolla, A. J. (2007). Idealization, reunions, and stability in long-distance dating relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 24(1), 37–54.
- Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (1992). Assessing commitment in personal relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54(3), 595–608.
- Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Whitton, S. W. (2010). Commitment: Functions, formation, and the securing of romantic attachment. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 2(4), 243–257.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Tasca, M., Mulvey, P., & Rodriguez, N. (2016). Families coming together in prison: An examination of visitation encounters. *Punishment & Society*, 18(4), 459–478.
- Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory*, 30(3), 167–186.
- Townsend, N. W. (2002). *The package deal: Marriage, work, and fatherhood in men's lives*. Temple University Press.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine.
- Turney, K. (2015a). Hopelessly devoted? Relationship quality during and after incarceration. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(2), 480–495.
- Turney, K. (2015b). Liminal men: Incarceration and relationship dissolution. *Social Problems*, 62(4), 499–528.
- Turney, K., & Conner, E. (2019). Jail incarceration: A common and consequential form of criminal justice contact. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 2, 265–290.
- Turney, K., & Halpern-Meekin, S. (2021). Incarceration and family instability: Considering relationship churning. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 83(5), 1287–1309.
- Turney, K., & Wildeman, C. (2013). Redefining relationships: Explaining the countervailing consequences of paternal incarceration for parenting. *American Sociological Review*, 78(6), 949–979.
- Umamaheswar, J. (2022). Shadow and light: Online narratives of relationship dissolution among former partners of incarcerated men. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(3), 607–622.
- Wakefield, S., & Uggen, C. (2010). Incarceration and stratification. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 387–406.
- Walker, M. L. (2022). *Indefinite: Doing time in jail*. Oxford University Press.
- Wallace, D., & Wang, X. (2020). Does in-prison physical and mental health impact recidivism? *SSM-Population Health*, 11, 100569.
- Walmsley, Roy. 2013. *World prison population list*. London: International Centre for Prison Studies.
- Western, B. (2006). *Punishment and inequality in America*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Widdowson, A. O., Jacobsen, W. C., Siennick, S. E., & Warren, P. Y. (2020). Together despite the odds: Explaining racial and ethnic heterogeneity in union dissolution after incarceration. *Criminology*, 58(1), 129–155.
- Wildeman, C., & Western, B. (2010). Incarceration in fragile families. *The Future of Children*, 20(2), 157–177.
- Williams, D. T., Cheadle, J. E., & Goosby, B. J. (2015). Hard times and heart break: Linking economic hardship and relationship distress. *Journal of Family Issues*, 36(7), 924–950.

How to cite this article: Turney, K., Malae, K. R., Christensen, M. A., & Halpern-Meekin, S. (2023). “Even though we’re married, I’m single”: The meaning of jail incarceration in romantic relationships. *Criminology*, 1–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12349>

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kristin Turney is a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of California Irvine. She investigates the role of stressors—especially those stemming from criminal legal contact—in creating, maintaining, and exacerbating inequalities in health and well-being.

Katelyn Rose Malae is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California Irvine. She examines dating app use among young adults, with particular attention to how digital technologies shape gendered patterns of sexual communication and consent.

MacKenzie A. Christensen is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California Irvine. She examines the role of digital technologies in shaping gendered life-course transitions.

Sarah Halpern-Meekin is a professor in the School of Human Ecology and the La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. She examines family relationships and family finances and the role of U.S. government policy in those areas.