"IT'S LIKE MISSION IMPOSSIBLE": BREAKING THE BARRIERS OF COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT WITH INCARCERATED FAMILY MEMBERS

by

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Communication Studies and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date Approved: February 16, 2022

ABSTRACT

The United States houses more prisoners than any other nation, with nearly 2.3 million individuals currently serving time in prison (BBC, 2020). Social support and positive interpersonal family relationships are paramount to individuals who are incarcerated, as effective and socially supportive communication can improve emotional well-being, alleviate stress and depressive symptoms, and decrease rates of recidivism (Cochran, 2014; MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011). However, there are countless barriers, many of which are imposed by the correctional facility itself, that prevent incarcerated individuals from receiving adequate and/or useful social support from their families.

Utilizing a feminist research lens and grounded theory, I conducted an in-depth exploration of social support provision with individuals who have a family member who is, or who has been, incarcerated in order to learn more about their sense-making processes for providing (or declining to provide) social support. Of special interest are the barriers to communication experienced by support providers. In addition, I sought to determine if providers are ever less than fully authentic in their support provision, as well as learning more about how and/or why they may manipulate information to protect their incarcerated family member, due to their vulnerabilities and unique circumstances.

Data for this study was collected via qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Other issues that are explored in this project include the types of support family members typically provide to their incarcerated family members, as well as family members' perceptions of: (a) how incarceration challenges their interpersonal relationships, (b) the effects of being a support provider to an incarcerated individual, and (c) their incarcerated family member's responsibility for their incarceration.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

An estimated 45% of Americans have a family member who is incarcerated (Gifford, 2019). Additionally, the United States incarcerates people at a rate 5-10 times higher than other countries and has an incarceration rate that is five times the world average (Equal Justice Initiative, 2019; Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). The United States reached their peak of mass incarceration around 2007; however, the decline in crime rates has decreased much faster than the rate of incarceration, which is likely due to "the penal system's response to crime and arrest…in particular the share of arrests that result in imprisonment has continued to climb" (Beckett & Beach, 2021, p. 2). Prison Policy Initiative's annual report (2020) notes that 70% of arrests in the United States end in a prison/jail sentence. According to the United States Department of Justice (2020), incarceration refers to "the population of inmates confined in a prison or jail." The high incarceration rate in the United States, coupled with the fact that nearly 1 in 2 Americans have, or have had, an incarcerated family member (FWD.us, 2018) illuminates the need to study the communicative interactions between incarcerated individuals and their family members. Undoubtedly, incarceration creates unique and challenging instances of communication, both for those who face incarceration, as well as their family members. Moreover, Hook and Geist-Martin (2018) suggest that there is limited research regarding social support among individuals who are incarcerated. Thus, the present study also sought to investigate the complex process of support provision with individuals who have a family member who is, or who has been, incarcerated.

Incarceration disrupts interpersonal relationships and creates a multifaceted set of circumstances that can be difficult to manage. For example, inmates may have limited, scheduled, and/or restrictive access to means of communication, such as telephones, computer

kiosks, or electronic tablets. Further, in many institutions, individuals must have funding (Cadue, 2017) to even have access to such devices, and in-person visits may be challenging and/or nonexistent. There are also mental aspects of incarceration (e.g., stress, isolation, past traumas) that may make individuals withdraw from family and friends on the outside and/or resist family attempts to keep in touch. This can create a problematic circumstance, as family members cannot initiate phone communication themselves and must also rely on inmates to put them on a visitation list before that process can be completed. The inmate must be the one to phone out, meaning that if family members want to initiate communication, they can only do so via written correspondence. However, in most circumstances, much of the communicative burden is on family members to do the bulk of relational maintenance to keep family ties strong and resilient during the period of incarceration.

Relational maintenance refers to behaviors and attempts to not only keep a relationship in existence, but also efforts to keep it in a “specified state or condition” or in “repair” (Dindia, 2003, p. 4). Importantly, Dindia (2003) also notes that relational maintenance occurs even in relationships that are not deemed satisfactory, and that attempts to maintain the relationship can be performed through both overt expression of positive emotions, as well as the suppression of volatile or negative emotions. Support provision is not a simple task, and the interpersonal disconnect created by incarceration is not easy to minimize, no matter how great the effort. With regard to this study, relational maintenance efforts were investigated by asking family members to describe the state of their relationship, both prior to and during incarceration, as well as asking them to identify some of the challenges they have experienced while providing support to a family member who is, or who has been, incarcerated. In addition, family members may feel an

obligation to communicate with incarcerated family members, as well as obligations to express certain emotions or dispositions within their communication, such as happiness or positivity.

In addition to trying to maintain a relationship with an individual who is incarcerated, family members also carry the burden of likely being the most important source of social support for that person, as well as being their connection to the outside world. Duwe (2018) suggests that, although inmates have access to peers within the institution, oftentimes such relationships are complicated, given that the individuals that surround them have potentially been involved with criminal behavior and are likely antisocial. Family members who are responsible for providing social support are in a challenging situation that has disrupted their normal state of being, and it is quite likely that they themselves could be in need of social support. Giving and receiving social support is a part of everyday life, and individuals regularly experience both roles; however, much research suggests that being in a constant state of support provision can become a negative experience for the individual doing the bulk of the supporting (Albrecht & Adelman, 1985; Rodakowski, Skidmore, Rogers, & Schulz, 2012; Rook, 1984; Wittenberg-Lyles et al., 2014). Whereas a large amount of social support research focuses on the social support burden (and burnout) for caregivers of severely or chronically ill patients, I thought it would be useful to investigate if parallels could be drawn between those caregivers and the experiences of family members of individuals who are incarcerated. In both situations, the balance of support provision tips more heavily toward the support provider, who may not be receiving as much support for a situation that is also difficult for them. The present study allows for these similarities and comparisons to be studied more in depth.

Challenges to Social Support

For individuals in vulnerable emotional and social situations, such as incarceration, seeking and receiving support can be an intricate and complicated process. Albrecht and Adelman (1985) note that anxieties about disclosing information to a support provider, coupled with not knowing how they may react, can prevent an individual from reaching out. In the case of an incarcerated individual, there may be emotions such as embarrassment, shame, sadness, and/or anger that further complicate the support-seeking process. Additionally, if the offense was against and/or directly affected the family member, the support relationship might be especially challenging. Another instance might be that the individual who reaches out to provide support, visit, and/or connect with their incarcerated family member might not be the incarcerated individual's first choice; and thus, the support seeker (i.e., the incarcerated individual) may be hesitant to bring up certain issues. For example, perhaps the individual's parents chose not to engage with their family member during the period of incarceration, but a cousin or sibling might have been willing to get involved. The relationship between an inmate and a cousin or sibling might be very different in terms of what topics they may be willing to discuss with different categories of family members (and less familiar individuals might be a more unpredictable source of support). The present study investigates many different familial relationships (e.g., spouse, sibling, cousin, and unmarried partner), as understanding how different familial relationships deal with these issues and provide social support is crucial to understanding how support functions in circumstances involving an incarcerated individual.

In the same way, identifying the type of support that participants give to their incarcerated family members is useful. Cutrona, Hessling, and Suhr (1997) propose five categories of social support: (a) esteem – bolstering confidence, (b) informational – offering

solutions to the stressor, (c) network – reinforcing an existing group bond or connecting the seeker to a group, (d) tangible – providing physical goods or services, and (e) emotional – showing love, concern, or empathy. It is productive to investigate the types of support that individuals give to their incarcerated family members by asking them to provide examples of support messages they have used and sorting them based on the above categories. For example, in a study of the familial social support of recently released prisoners, Naser and Visher (2006) found that the most common type of social support utilized was informational support, often used to help prisoners find employment and/or financial assistance. These researchers also found that family members often provided high levels of emotional support and are generally quite supportive of their family members. The present study adds to this literature by studying the types of support provided *during* the incarceration process.

Research suggests that incarcerated individuals may resist supportive attempts by family members, even though they are at a time and place when they most need social support. Moreover, it is possible that incarcerated individuals do not feel worthy of support and therefore are reluctant to ask for it (Kao et al., 2014). These complexities can also be due to the stress incarceration places on an individual, both mentally and physically; and thus, social withdrawal and distancing may be used as coping mechanisms. Managing such dismissals can be difficult and discouraging for the family member putting in the effort. In addition, support refusals can be difficult to overcome and can make it hard for an individual to want to give social support to a family member who most needs it. Indeed, support provision to incarcerated family members can be exhausting for the support provider, despite the fact that research suggests that incarcerated individuals have lower rates of recidivism and tend to have smoother transitions back into the world if social and family ties are maintained during their time of incarceration (Cochran, 2014).

Coyne, Ellard, and Smith (1990) note that, in close personal relationships, individuals may be more willing to deal with the "burdens" of being a support provider and continue to be willing and available for their loved ones (even if it is taxing and/or challenging).

It is also important to note that the seeking and provision of support is always a delicate balancing act. For support providers, being overeager or "too-intensively" (Coyne et al., 1990, p. 146) attempting to provide social support can be overwhelming to the support receiver. In the same way, for support seekers, rejection or criticism of support attempts may reduce the motivation of support providers to continue to make attempts to help. This study also explored the motivations and sense-making processes behind the type of support that providers choose to offer to their incarcerated family member. Specifically, whether or not support providers are always honest or genuine with their support efforts, or if there are times when they feel they cannot be completely honest and must pad and/or cushion their support (to the point of deception) to be more palatable for the receiver, is also of interest (see McDaniel, 2017).

Whereas the study of effects of incarceration on families remains a relatively understudied phenomenon (Hook & Geist-Martin, 2018), even less research has examined the social support efforts between incarcerated individuals and their non-incarcerated family members. Importantly, however, there is previous research that has focused on effects of social support between incarcerated individuals and prison employees (Hook & Geist-Martin, 2018), support for prisoners following release (Naser & Visher, 2006), and even the importance of visitation and maintaining supportive family connection during the period of incarceration (Cochran, 2014; Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Monahan, Goldweber, & Cauffman, 2011; Pettus-Davis, Eggleston-Doherty, & Drymon, 2017). However, at the time of this writing, there have not been any known studies focusing specifically on how individuals provide support to a family member

who is, or who has been, incarcerated. In addition, there is a lack of research focusing on how interpersonal and institutional barriers affect both communication and support, as well as how the perceived level of responsibility of the person incarcerated influences the social support provision process. In addition to studying these ideas, the present study focuses on better understanding: (a) how and why family members of incarcerated individuals choose to provide or withhold support, (b) the nature of the support efforts (e.g., genuine and/or deceptive), (c) the sense-making processes they undergo when choosing how to most effectively offer social support, as well as (d) how being a support provider affects the individual and their interpersonal relationships.

Clearly, social support and interpersonal family relationships have an overlap that is worthy of study. Social support is essential to those facing incarceration, as sufficient amounts of it influence well-being, institutional behavior, positive mental health, maintenance of familial relationships, and recidivism rates (Cochran, 2014; Hook & Geist-Martin, 2018; Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Monahan et al., 2011; Pettus-Davis et al., 2011). Thus, the support process is a circular, multifaceted, and ongoing process in which all the factors (i.e., communication, social support, provider behavior, receiver behavior, and the relationship between the provider and the receiver) weave together to influence both the current circumstances and the eventual outcomes of the situation, whether positive or negative.

In such vulnerable times for both the provider and receiver, it is important to examine the sense-making processes that providers use to support their incarcerated family members, as well as what factors may affect or influence the type of support they give. The subsequent chapter (i.e., Chapter 2) provides a more in-depth look at the relevant literature surrounding incarceration, communication challenges as a result of incarceration, most notably social support

and the role of social support providers. Chapter 3 outlines the methods and procedures utilized in this study, as well as a demographic profile of the study participants. Chapter 4 provides results and interpretations regarding the study, and Chapter 5 features the discussion and implications of this research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, the connection between incarcerated individuals and social support is further examined. I also present some of the challenges to both receiving and providing support, the impact of incarceration on family units, compassion fatigue, as well as an argument for why social support is crucial for incarcerated individuals. Further, I describe some of the unique barriers that incarcerated individuals experience with regard to effective social support and contact with family members.

Mass Incarceration in the United States

The American justice system incarcerates more individuals per capita than any other country (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). The United States Department of Justice (2020) refers to the "imprisonment rate" as "the number or prisoners under state or federal jurisdiction sentenced to more than one year, per 100,000 U.S. residents." In 2020, the imprisonment rate for the United States was 698, and a staggering 20% of people being held in prison have not been sentenced (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). The current 2021 imprisonment rate is estimated to have increased to 737 prisoners per capita (i.e., per 100,000 people), or roughly 2.3 million prisoners (BBC, 2021). Furthermore, an alarmingly disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic males are incarcerated, as compared to white males and female inmates, who make up about 9% of incarcerated people (BBC, 2021; Ulmer, Painter-Davis, & Tinik, 2016). Much of the general public consensus regarding these statistics is an awareness of the problematic carceral state of the United States. However, the United States is seemingly unable or unwilling to produce viable means of ending mass incarceration, or to prioritize efforts toward rehabilitation rather than incarceration.

Social Support and Incarceration

Social support plays a large role in the lives of incarcerated individuals, for many different reasons. Kao et al. (2014) note that a large proportion of incarcerated individuals have also faced previous trauma in their lives and, as a result, during the incarceration process, they may be more likely to ignore attempts by family members and/or attempts by fellow incarcerated individuals to provide social support. Many of the participants in this study were able to identify a significant event, or series of events, that caused or influenced the individual to become incarcerated. This can lead to a host of repercussions, as an incarcerated individual's perceived level of how much they believe they deserve social support can also influence subsequent support-seeking and support-providing behaviors. Thus, for most individuals, feeling deserving of social support is important to effectively receive and actively seek it from others (Coyne et al., 1990). Hemming et al. (2020) note that prisoners commonly have difficulty expressing their feelings, have flat affect, and tend to center on anger or negative emotions. Further, Hemming et al. (2020) contend that inmates are often reluctant to express feelings with peers, at the risk or fear of appearing weak and/or vulnerable. The suppression of emotion caused by the institution can significantly impact social support processes, which are crucial to positive post-incarceration outcomes. Incarceration scholars (e.g., Kao et al., 2014; Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Monahan et al. 2011) have suggested that familial social support while incarcerated allows for better social adjustment, improved institutional behavior, and an easier transition back into society, with reduced rates of recidivism.

For the current study, understanding how social support functions in more typical and everyday interpersonal relationships is key to providing a framework of comparison, given that

this dissertation research examines interpersonal social support in particularly unique and vulnerable circumstances. The literature on social support, provider effects, and outcomes of social support is rich and well-documented (for a review, see MacGeorge et al., 2011). Indeed, effective social support is imperative for healthy interpersonal relationships to thrive and survive. MacGeorge et al. (2011) define social support as "verbal and nonverbal behaviors intended to provide or seek help" (p. 323). Importantly, MacGeorge et al. (2011) indicate that social support involves an "intentional response" (p. 323). In other words, social support (even when nonverbally communicated) involves a deliberate choice to attend to the person and their needs in order to help to minimize their distress.

Receiving social support enhances feelings of belonging and emotional well-being, assists in buffering stressors, and can also aid in coping (Coyne & Downey, 1991; Floyd & Ray, 2017; Liu, Li, & Cai, 2015; Wright, 2016). Similarly, the act of providing social support to others communicates care and concern (Burleson 1994; House, Umberson, & Landis 1988; Ray et al., 2019; Sarason & Sarason, 2009). When individuals face experiences that are especially challenging or distressing, social support from those around them is crucial. Social support (or even the *perception* that one is socially supported) during especially trying times can ease feelings of loneliness, aid in coping, improve physical health and cognitive function, and lessen feelings of distress (Blair & Holmberg, 2008; Hobfoll, 2009; Kelly et al., 2017; MacGeorge et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2004). In addition, some research (e.g., Floyd & Ray, 2017) suggests that most individuals naturally expect their friends and family members to provide support to them during their times of need. Thus, it may be that individuals facing the challenging circumstances of incarceration may presume that their friends and family will provide support to them, and thus may not feel the need to seek it outwardly (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017).

Provision and Reception of Social Support

Being incarcerated has a host of negative effects on those experiencing it, both for the incarcerated individual, as well as their family members and friends dealing with the situation on the outside. Incarceration, while also being physically taxing, can cause damage to both emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships (Kao et al., 2014). Incarceration research suggests these feelings remain constant regardless of stage of life, whether adulthood (Cochran, 2014) or juvenile ages (Monahan et al., 2011). Loper and Tuerk (2011) also suggest that high levels of stress while incarcerated may lead to poor mental health. Importantly, due to the poor conditions of many institutions, Willmott and van Olphen (2005) argue that "people often leave jail or prison sicker – both physically and mentally – than when they entered" (p. 40). For example, Loper and Tuerk (2011) conducted a study of the experiences of incarcerated mothers and the implementation of a healthy communication curriculum, and found that when support levels (or perceived support levels) are high, individuals can develop better communication patterns (especially to those on the outside), improve their emotional well-being, and for incarcerated mothers, an increased level of alliance with the caretakers of their children. Other research (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017) has found that social support networks, for those who are incarcerated, give individuals a sense of predictability, purpose, and belonging. Thus, it is clear that incarceration takes a toll on both the physical and emotional health of an individual, and while social support is not a panacea in these situations, for many inmates, having a solid support system on the outside can alleviate many of the negative symptoms faced by those who are incarcerated.

As previously noted, the process of providing and receiving social support can be complex, especially when the burden of provision falls to one side, or the support receiver rejects support efforts. Pettus-Davis et al. (2017) shed further light on this idea, and refer to it as a "mismatch" of support exchange. Pettus-Davis et al. (2017) note that:

> social support may not be actualized if the recipient is unwilling or unskilled at seeking or accepting social support, or if the provider is unwilling or incapable of providing support…in addition, the recipient's perception of the relevance of the support plays an important role in determining from whom an individual might seek help. (p. 1334)

A mismatch of any type can disrupt the exchange of effective social support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). This idea is in conversation consistent with Kao et al.'s (2014) argument that a past history of trauma is associated with lower levels of perceived social support and higher levels of loneliness and isolation.

Furthermore, in Loper and Tuerk's (2011) study, it was found that when incarcerated mothers who had previous histories of substance abuse or other traumas were given training in effective communication skills, they were more likely to have improved emotional well-being, reduced stress, increased letter writing, and better relationships with people on the outside. Clearly, social support is a two-sided phenomenon and requires a delicate balance of both individuals to make the exchange beneficial for all involved. However, based on this body of research, it appears that when individuals are mentally and emotionally healthier while incarcerated, their capacity to seek and receive communication and social support increases. Based on the circumstances presented by incarceration, a mismatch of social support may be a large barrier to making these support exchanges as meaningful as possible (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017; Priem & Solomon, 2015).

Social support provision, in conjunction with many other new or added responsibilities brought about by a relative's incarceration, can create a burden for family members. As a result, being a social support provider can become overwhelming or fatigue inducing. When individuals provide social support in large or mass quantities, Albrecht and Adelman (1985) suggest that they may experience negative outcomes, such as the "drainage of resources, social contagion, or uncertainty" (p. 248). Thus, individuals facing exhaustion from being a support provider in these circumstances are a special case, as it is possible that they may feel a level of obligation to continue to provide support because of the vulnerable position of their incarcerated family members. Moreover, Pettus-Davis et al. (2017) acknowledge that being a social support provider to someone who is incarcerated is emotionally taxing and hard on families, as they may become overwhelmed, conflicted, and/or distressed; and, as a result, relationships are often strained.

In regard to incarceration, provider fatigue can have intense repercussions for the family member who is dependent on their family to provide social support. Pettus-Davis et al. (2017) suggest that poor or low levels of social support experienced by an incarcerated individual is one of the biggest risk factors for recidivism. Further, Pettus-Davis et al. (2017) note that incarceration disrupts family networks, social ties, and support systems; and consequently, social support can deteriorate and/or atrophy from going dormant during the incarceration period. However, it is paramount that incarcerated individuals receive support, even if it is difficult for providers. Further, it is important to note that not all incarcerated individuals depend solely (or at all) on their families for support and may rely on friends to make up their support system; but, in a general sense, incarcerated individuals tend to perceive higher levels of support from their families, as opposed to friends (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017). Further, research suggests that non-family support is volatile, inconsistent, and unpredictable (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017).

The idea that incarcerated individuals need support, and typically depend on their families to provide it, can become especially problematic if the inmate has a longer sentence. With sentences that last for many years, providing consistent and effective social support may be difficult on the provider, both in terms of provider fatigue and the financial means necessary to maintain consistent support. However, the incarceration literature suggests that consistency in support (whether by phone, mail, etc., but especially in-person visitation) is vital, as many inmates receive an influx of support at the start of their sentence, but support often tapers off as the sentence progresses (Cochran, 2014; Monahan et al. 2011). The incarcerated individuals and family members in the current study are a special case, as in-person visitation has been shut down nationwide since March 2020, due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Family Communication During Incarceration

Familial relationships have unique characteristics as compared to other relationship types (e.g., friends, coworkers, or acquaintances) during times of stress. As Catherall (1998) notes, when an individual experiences a stressor, such as incarceration, family members are typically the ones who care most about the individual and are more willing to put themselves through emotional trauma in order to help the individual as much as possible. However, familial relationships are also likely to deteriorate and/or suffer as a result of a family member's incarceration, especially when institutional barriers disrupt normal patterns of communication or visitation (DeHart, Shapiro, & Clone, 2018). For this research, the idea of family relationships, in particular, was a focus, as there may be some feelings of obligation or loyalty to family members that causes them to feel a strong need to provide support to, or be there for, incarcerated family members. This is not to say that inmates do not have support from friendships; however, the

influence of the role of family member on how individuals chose to show support to their incarcerated family member was of special interest for this dissertation research.

Incarceration has adverse effects on both sides of a family relationship. Incarceration often uproots the lives of family members and causes emotional issues within the relationships. For example, Sobol (2018) found that families of incarcerated individuals often face new living situations, new financial constraints, and a greater likelihood of experiencing divorce or emotional health concerns (e.g., depression and/or anxiety). For inmates, there is less consistent interaction with family and lower levels of social support as a result, because their inmate peers are not always a reliable source of support, camaraderie, or comfort (Duwe, 2018). These feelings of relational turmoil and instability can lead to what is called *family burnout*, where family members become emotionally exhausted, unable to work with each other, and their commitment level to one another lessens (Figley, 1998). This is especially likely to happen in situations where the inmate's sentence is longer, as there is a prolonged exposure to the stressor.

Another issue experienced by family members working to support their incarcerated family member is emotional contagion. Emotional contagion occurs when the support provider starts to take on the emotions of the support seeker as a result of being exposed to the support provider's emotional reactions to the stressor (Figley, 1998). For example, if an inmate calls their family member to tell them about how prison staff treated them, the family member might take on the feelings of hurt or frustration, even though they did not directly experience the event. For the support provider, this may make communicative interactions with the inmate anxiety invoking, and they may start to dread communication with the family member. In addition to this, family members cannot call the inmate – the inmate must be the one to call them and thus,

tension can build because the support provider has no control over when the communication takes place, where they might be (e.g., work or another public setting), and if they are available.

As an example, participants in this study mentioned that not knowing what mood the inmate might be in when they call can make them nervous to answer the call. Another participant mentioned that if their inmate calls them and is upset about something, it can ruin their whole day because they cannot do anything to help. Provider emotions like these can be detrimental to the communication and support process, which we know is essential to positive outcomes upon the inmate's release. Further, Jiang and Winfree (2006) suggest that when inmates feel supported and a part of their families while inside the institution, they had greater feelings of self-esteem, less rule violations, and were less likely to take on the "inmate subculture" (p. 34). Thus, learning more about the specific ways that families handle things like anxiety or emotional contagion, work to overcome barriers to communication and support, and maintain positive social ties with their incarcerated loved ones, is critically important to understand for the present study.

Compassion Fatigue

Continuously being the support provider in an interpersonal relationship is a heavy responsibility and does not come without costs (Rook, 1984). Constant support provision may result in decreased life satisfaction, poor mental health, and potentially, social isolation (Rodakowski et al., 2012). Further, such circumstances can lead to unbalanced relationships, as well as learned helplessness from the person dependent on the support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1985). Figley (1998) suggests that getting little reprieve from being a support provider can also lead a family member to distance themselves from the distressed individual or, in contrast,

become entwined and "obsessed" (p. 23) with the problems and feelings of the person they are working to support.

Figley (1998) also suggests that support providers may experience "compassion stress" (p. 21), which involves the feelings of stress or tension that come with being around someone who needs constant social support. Importantly, Figley (1988) then describes a phenomenon that is born out of compassion stress, called "compassion fatigue." Compassion fatigue is defined as "a state of exhaustion and dysfunction – biologically, psychologically, and socially – as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress and all that it evokes" (Figley, 1988, p. 23). Further, Figley (1998) argues that life crises or "life disruptions" (p. 24) can lead to extreme circumstances. For example, if an individual has a family member that has an extreme life disruption (e.g., incarceration), the responsibility can become overwhelming, the support provision may not be sustainable, and burnout may occur. Compassion fatigue forms a crux of the current study, specifically, investigating whether or not feelings of compassion fatigue affect the support that is given to incarcerated family members, and whether or not that support is ever inauthentic or dishonest. The idea of compassion fatigue is integral to this project, as the challenging circumstances, barriers to communication, and likely imbalance of time spent as support provider versus support receiver often leads to some iteration of compassion fatigue or compassion stress.

Communication, Visitation, and Incarceration

Obviously, communication and social networks are stunted or even unavailable during the period of incarceration. The type of crime a person is suspected of committing may also affect their access to communication tools, such as computer or phone time, as the offense typically dictates the level of security in which they are housed. In addition, most institutions

require inmates to have funds put on their account in order to make and/or receive phone calls. If the incarcerated person does not have a job within the institution, the inmate may not earn their own money and must rely on family members to put money "on their books." Thus, interactions between incarcerated individual and their outside social support ties is highly regulated, riddled with institutional rules, and far from private.

The present study was conducted in the Midwest, and a large proportion of the study sample participants have (or had) incarcerated family members in the Midwest; therefore, a case study of current Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC) policies are used to discuss current protocols on inmate communication. Importantly, prison policies vary widely across the state, based on whether the institution is a state or federal prison, for profit prison, or a local county jail. Thus, each institution will have their own specific rules and regulations, and this case study does not apply to all Kansas institutions universally.

The following information regarding policies comes from the Kansas Department of Corrections website, authored by Cadue (2017). These policies refer to incarcerated individuals as "inmates," so that is the term that will be used in the explication of policy. These policies indicate that incarcerated individuals are allowed to use the phone at certain times during the day and during their recreation or yard time, and only during the week. However, inmates are not permitted to call numbers that have not been pre-approved and they are not allowed to receive calls. Interestingly, even in emergencies, such as a family death, inmates are not allowed to be spoken to directly if the emergency happens after hours or on weekends. Instead, the information is eventually relayed to the inmate. The person calling the inmate must have a prepaid account set up and if inmates wish to call a cell phone (as opposed to a land line) they must get approval and authorization (Cadue, 2017). Clearly, this complicated process of making a simple phone

call can be a hassle for both the inmate and the person trying to call them. These rules and regulations create a significant, and likely frustrating, barrier faced by those wishing to express support or connect with incarcerated family members. This also assumes that the phones are available and in working order at any given time. Some families simply may not have the extra money to pay for phone calls, resulting in absent, infrequent, or brief phone conversations.

In Kansas, some inmates are permitted access to electronic kiosks where they may send and receive emails via a service called “JPay,” which operates with a 48-hour lag between sending the message and the individual receiving it (Cadue, 2017). However, even this service requires money to participate. Each email message requires one stamp per page of written text, a stamp for each attachment (including images), and three stamps for a video message, both inbound and outbound. According to the Jpay website (2020), for inmates, a single Jpay stamp costs 35 cents, and for messages going to the inmate, a minimum purchase of a pack of 10 stamps is $3.50. It is important to note that inmates are allowed to view messages without cost, but the sender would still have to pay to send the message. Further, KDOC only allows certain inmates to access these messages in kiosks, and those in segregation or housed in higher security units do not have this type of access.

Indeed, these barriers are intensely problematic, as such inmates may receive even less frequent support, which can do even greater damage to their social ties during incarceration and potentially increase their rates of recidivism when they return to society (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017). Similar to phone calls, emails to incarcerated individuals are subject to review by the institution and must be submitted and approved before messages can be sent or received.

An additional form of communication inmates can have access to is the traditional United States Postal Service (USPS) mail. Inmates are able to send and receive letters, but each must

have both the inmates name and the sender's name on the envelope in a specific layout, or the mail does not get delivered (Cadue, 2017). Inmates can purchase stamps through commissary or canteen, but as of 2015, KDOC lists a single "forever stamp" at $1.20, when on the outside, a forever stamp is 55 cents. This cost discrepancy, coupled with the policy that inmates cannot receive stamps via mail, provides low incentive for inmates to send letters out to their social networks. Furthermore, family members can send money to the inmate to buy postage, but it goes into their canteen account, which can also be used to purchase snacks, clothing, and personal hygiene items. Incarcerated individuals are also limited in the number of stamps they can purchase, and inmates in disciplinary segregation are only allowed to purchase 10 stamps, which is less than half the number of stamps of those in the general population of incarcerated individuals can purchase (25). If a family member wishes to correspond with an inmate via USPS, and cannot send stamps, they must add money to the inmates' canteen account, and thus, there is no way to guarantee the money sent to buy postage will be used in the way intended by the sender.

Certain inmates are able to receive in-person visitation from friends and family, based on a tiered-system of security level. Some higher security inmates are only eligible to receive visits from clergy or legal counsel. KDOC provides several guidelines for all visits. For those eligible for family and friend visitation, inmates can only have a maximum of 20 people on their visitation list, and each of those individuals must be preapproved and pass background checks. Each correctional facility has their own guidelines regarding the visitation process, so one Kansas Correctional Facility handbook will be cited here as a point of reference [i.e., El Dorado Correctional Facility (EDCF) Visitor's Handbook, 2020]. It is important to note that this facility is male only, so the pronouns used in its policies are solely male.

At this particular facility, visitation is available only on Saturdays and Sundays, in two-and-a-half hour blocks (EDCF Visitor's Handbook, 2020). In addition, there are several other policies that have to be followed in order for visitation to happen. For example, visitors must: (a) meet a dress code (with 25 stipulations of what cannot be worn), (b) consent to a search, and (c) produce a valid government source of identification (e.g., a driver's license or passport). Such elaborate conditions create even more layers of barriers or roadblocks that make visiting incarcerated loved ones difficult, stressful, and uncomfortable. Undoubtedly, going through a process like this any time a family member wants to visit could be exhausting and deter them from wanting to visit more frequently (Cochran, 2014).

Interestingly, and seemingly ironically with respect to the 15-page list of regulations and guidelines, the EDCF Visitor's Handbook (2020) notes:

> The Department of Corrections recognizes the importance of visitation in making an offender's period of incarceration less difficult. With those offenders who have families, visiting privileges allow for the maintenance of family ties that may otherwise be lost. An offender's motivation to improve his condition is affected in a positive way when he has regular visits from family and friends. (p. 3)

It is noteworthy for the institution to acknowledge that visitation is integral to a prisoner's family and social ties, but at the same time, make visitation incredibly difficult for those trying to maintain those ties. Research by Cochran (2014), Monahan et al., (2011), Pettus-Davis et al., (2017), as well as Naser and Visher (2006), contend that these barriers to frequent visitation must be broken down and the process must be streamlined in order for inmates to truly uphold their family and other social connections. This is especially true when research indicates that high levels of support and visitation reduce levels of recidivism.

One specification that can be particularly challenging to visitation is that KDOC requires that whoever brings minor children to the visitation must be the child's legal guardian or parent and must also be preapproved. Many institutions also limit visiting children to biological children of inmates, which can especially hurt blended families. Thus, if the child(ren)s' guardian or other parent cannot make visitation days or, for example, happens to work on weekends, the inmate's child(ren) are ineligible for visitation. This stringent policy does not allow for a family friend or aunt or grandparent to take the children to visitation instead; which is incredibly troublesome, as it can severely limit an inmate's interaction with core members of their support network.

Positive Outcomes of Communication and Support

All forms of communication with an incarcerated individual are crucial to positive outcomes, such as inmate well-being, psychological adjustment, and better transition after release (Cochran, 2014). Prisoners who receive consistent visitation throughout their incarceration period are significantly less likely to recidivate (Cochran, 2014). Visitation, like social support, is essential to individuals who are incarcerated. Regardless of age or gender, incarcerated individuals depend on visitation from loved ones to maintain interpersonal relationships and feelings of connection, as well as a sense of well-being. In turn, visitation can have internal effects on the incarcerated individual as well. Cochran (2014) and Monahan et al. (2013) note that frequent visitation can lead to better behavior within the institution, which is, in turn, often rewarded with more opportunities for more frequent or longer periods of visitation. Monahan et al.'s (2014) research suggests that when juveniles were allowed an in-person visit from their parents, they experienced rapid declines in their depressive symptoms. Thus, in-person visitation can be quite powerful. However, when visitation is used as an incentive, and

taken away as a punishment, individuals suffer numerous negative consequences that create a vicious cycle, wherein perceived social support levels may plummet and/or disappear. Importantly, Cochran (2014) notes that this is a major issue, as access to positive visitations with friends and family can improve an individual's behavior and mental health while they are living within the institution. This becomes especially problematic for those individuals in low income families who experience numerous intersections of barriers to visitation (Cochran, 2014; Luther, 2015).

In this study, I asked family members to share with me and describe their experiences with mediated communication (e.g., electronic, mail, phone), and in-person (face-to-face) visitation practices, with a family member who is, or who has been, incarcerated. Unfortunately, current systems and policies make it incredibly difficult for family members to show support to their incarcerated loved ones and this, in turn, makes it difficult for inmates to feel supported and cared for. Thus, it can become a negative cycle, and more must be done to break down barriers and reform current policies that prevent atrophy of familial relationships and social ties during the time of incarceration.

Countless difficulties affect the ability of family members to visit and support their loved ones during their incarceration. For example, visitation may only be on certain days of the week at specific times, and the family member may be incarcerated miles away from any family members. Family members may not have time, funds, and/or resources to make the trip as often as they wish. This study sought to determine more about how the social support process functions in these unique circumstances, and the solutions family members create to overcome barriers to communication with their loved one. In addition, the study investigates how

interpersonal relationships (both with the inmate and outside individuals) change during the period of incarceration, and after, if applicable.

COVID-19 and the Prison System

In January of 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic began to sweep the globe, and impacted nearly everyone in the world in some way, but for incarcerated people and their families, the ramifications have been especially devastating. According to Saloner, Parish, and Ward (2020), "COVID-19 represents a challenge to prisons because of close confinement, limited access to personal protective equipment, and elevated burden of cardiac and respiratory conditions that exacerbate COVID-19 risk among prisoners" (p. 602). Due to the extremely close living quarters in prisons, controlling the spread of COVID-19 once it entered the prisons was virtually impossible. Further, Hawks, Woolhandler, and McCormick (2020) note that "people who are incarcerated will be at higher risk of exposure, as correctional officers and other staff frequently leave the correctional facility and then return" (p. 1041). In the same vein, Simpson and Butler (2020) note that prisons are "incubators of infectious diseases" (p. 1) and, as a result, prisons were tasked with trying contain the spread of a highly contagious, novel disease. Coupled with limited access to personal protective equipment (e.g., masks, gloves, face shields) and social distancing (maintaining 6 feet of space between individuals) being completely unattainable, the prisons were grossly unprepared to handle a pandemic, despite having reviewed their "pandemic plan" in February of 2020, as noted by KDOC's timeline via Burghart (2021). Importantly, Hooks and Sawyer (2020) note that as of the summer of 2020, about 13% of national COVID-19 cases were connected to incarceration. It is important to feature the impact of COVID-19 in prisons, as the data for this study was collected in late 2020, nine months into the pandemic, and very much influenced participant's testimonies in interviews (as they are revealed in Chapter 4).

The response to COVID-19, as evidenced by interviews with participants in this study, varied greatly by institution, even among those in the same state. Unfortunately, many prisons resorted to weeks-long lockdowns, keeping prisoners in their cells or pods for 23 hours a day. Others sent inmates who tested positive to other institutions, or makeshift buildings meant to house large numbers of COVID positive inmates, such as a church building. In some cases, bonds were lowered so that inmates could be released early. Many participants in this study mentioned that their incarcerated loved one was issued one paper or cloth mask and never received a replacement. Data from The Marshall Project shows that 3 in 5 inmates tested positive for COVID, with just over 6,000 total cases in Kansas as of March 2021.

As a consequence, the interpersonal relationships of families and inmates suffered (and still are suffering) immensely. Communication was largely limited and sometimes cut off completely, as inmates were quarantined to their cells for most of the day. Family members were left not knowing if their inmate was sick or healthy, or even if they had been transferred to another location. Many participants mentioned their loved one telling them that they had tested positive, and then not hearing from them for days or weeks, because they were often quarantined away from communication resources, or too sick to write or call. The inconsistency and lack of communication caused great uncertainty and fear in support providers.

Institutions shut down in-person visitation very quickly into the pandemic, leaving family members even more dependent on other means of communication. One concession that most (though not all) institutions implemented was some degree of free communication. Most often, this was two free 10-minute phone calls per week, one free email a week, and less commonly, a free video visit per week. However, not all institutions have the technology to provide inmates with access to email or video visits, and participants reported frequent technology failure. Thus,

the COVID-19 pandemic added yet another layer of difficulties to an already barrier-ridden system, limiting incarcerated individuals' access to consistent support, connection, and communication with their families in an especially vulnerable time.

For this study as a whole, learning more about the barriers to communication and connection faced by those wishing to contact or visit an incarcerated family member, generated tangible and pragmatic suggestions of potentially new policies to improve conditions. Indeed, this study aimed to identify useful approaches and advice for maintaining relationships with incarcerated family members, as well as strategies for overcoming barriers and effectively providing social support. Finally, more information about what support providers go through during this process and how the incarceration affects interpersonal relationships allows for ideas and/or suggestions to be developed regarding how best to support the support providers and their relationships. Based on the review of literature, the following research questions were addressed within this dissertation research:

RQ1: How do family members report showing support for their incarcerated family members?

RQ2: What barriers prevent effective communication of support between family members and their incarcerated loved ones?

RQ3: How (if at all) does incarceration affect support providers and their relationships (both with the incarcerated individual and their outside relationships)?

In the subsequent chapter (i.e., Chapter 3), I outline the methods and procedures utilized in this dissertation research to address the three research questions posed in this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This chapter outlines the methods of data collection for the present study, as well as the procedures accompanying those methods. Given that the fact that socially supportive communication among incarcerated individuals and their families is relatively understudied (Hook & Geist-Martin, 2018), this study was largely exploratory. Thus, the primary proposed means of data collection included semi-structured interviews (Tracy, 2013). A semi-structured interview approach allows for a question protocol to be created and loosely followed, but also allows the researcher the freedom to probe for more information and explore ideas that come up in conversation (but may not have been part of the original protocol). This was especially important for the present study, as participants may have raised issues that were absent from the interview protocol, but are significant to the research questions. All methods and procedures for this study were approved by the university Institutional Review Board (i.e., IRB), prior to the start of data collection (see Appendix A). Importantly, due to COVID-19, the university IRB board suspended all in-person research, and the study had to be conducted by completely virtual means (e.g., phone call, Zoom).

Feminist Research

Throughout the data collection process, a feminist research framework undergirded the methodological process. DeVault (1996) suggests that "*feminist research* involves any empirical study using feminist insight" (p. 31). Further, feminist methods specifically focus on creating a collaborative space between the participant and researcher, each using the other to co-create meaning and reduce the power differential as much as possible and, in turn, empower the participant (Harding & Norberg, 2005; Roulston 2018; Taylor & Rupp, 2005; Trethewey, 2009). My goal, when conducting research, is to prioritize the interviewee and put deliberate efforts into

allowing them to tell their story; and ultimately, using the data I collect to incite real change where possible. Trethewey (2009) suggests that utilizing feminist methods includes the researcher being sensitive of their position and the way their presence affects the research process, as well as using a final report to the organization or institution of study as an avenue for change and/or reform. Furthermore, special care must be taken to be sensitive to unique voices and carefully consider what data ends up in the final report, as well as how it is presented as a reflection of participants (see Ellis, 2007).

I chose methods for this study that I believed would allow for participants to share their voices and stories, but also to use their narratives to suggest findings that may potentially evoke social change regarding communication between individuals who are incarcerated and their family members. Throughout the data collection for this project, I made distinct efforts to recognize and check my privilege, and hope to use my research to not speak *for* others, but instead, to use this project to speak *with* them (Alcoff, 1992). In addition, I planned to focus on my participants' nonverbal body language, as well as hesitations and verbal disfluencies when answering questions to decide when they might need a break, to skip a question, or a check in. DeVault (1990) suggests that, when interviewing, we need to look as much into what is *not* being said or is *almost* said, and lean into those moments for clarification and elaboration, so as to "not leave the unspoken behind" (p. 103).

My Role as the Researcher

My interest in this research stems from two areas: (a) my qualitative feminist standpoint and social justice focus and (b) my interest in the communication of care and support. I felt that qualitative methods would allow participants to share their stories using as much or as little

detail as was comfortable. I fully acknowledge that my role as a white, cis, educated researcher initially put me in a position of power in the interview situation.

I told my participants that I was not an expert in correctional facilities and thus, wanted to learn from their experiences. Out of respect for my participants, before I even proposed this study, I did my best to research how correctional facilities worked, especially in regard to communication policies and understanding how the communication systems worked (or failed to work). I believe this extra research allowed me to be more fluent in prison jargon and use that language in interviews, which I firmly believe helped to build rapport with participants. I realize that research does not compare to the knowledge of having a personal experience with an incarcerated member, and I am not in any way an expert. Knowing this, I did my best to be as informed as I could be, and remained a curious, questioning but respectful researcher, prioritizing participant experiences without including too much of myself in the research.

Oftentimes, I asked participants questions about what things meant or how the system worked. I encouraged them to share stories with me if they felt comfortable because, in many cases, having participants give an example further illustrated experiences they were narrating to me and allowed me better understand exactly what they were describing. I fully acknowledge my privileged role as a researcher, but I immediately attempted to minimize the power differential as much as possible.

Ultimately, I believe that being forced to do the interviews over Zoom or via phone call may have been a positive change in my research plan, as I was initially devastated by the thought of not meeting and interviewing participants in person. However, I think that the distance Zoom provided, as well as both myself and the participant being able to be where we were most comfortable (i.e., at home), made the experience much more relaxed, as opposed to two strangers

meeting somewhere and having a face-to-face conversation. There were some drawbacks to Zoom interviews, mostly by way of technical difficulties, such as internet connection issues, sound issues, and intermittent video connectivity. Further, because in most cases participants were in their homes, distractions such as children or other people in the home were present that might not have been in a one-on-one meeting.

When participants seemed emotional or started to cry (which happened in most of the interviews), I made efforts to check in and see if they wanted to skip a question, take a minute, or come back later to a question. When this happened, I assured participants that their experiences were valuable and I would not be able to do the research without their insights. I also tried my best to watch body language (when possible) and listened for cues that the participant did not want to talk about certain topics and made sure that I did not probe deeply into those experiences. I was transparent about how I would be using the data, and made it clear that they could also share things "off the record" if they desired. When asked, or if it was relevant, I shared that I personally did not have any interactions with the prison system. I feel honored that these participants trusted me (a complete stranger) with their stories, and I hope that this dissertation does their experiences justice.

Grounded Theoretical Data Collection and Analysis

Given that little research has been conducted concerning the social support interactions between incarcerated individuals and their family members, this study took a grounded theoretical approach (Charmaz, 2006; Craig & Tracy, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012). Using grounded theory in an exploratory study allows for the researcher to move back and forth between data analysis and data collection, letting each inform the other. Also, when using this approach, less emphasis is placed on a priori theoretical hypotheses

assigned prior to data collection and more effort is focused on what can reasonably be determined after reviewing the data and participants' explanations of behaviors and realities (Suddaby, 2006). As Suddaby (2006) also notes, a grounded theoretical approach does not always have to end with the emergence of a new theory and, rather, can culminate with a more nuanced and refined understanding and explication of an existing theory. Therefore, the approach with the present study was to examine a social situation via personal interviews and, using an iterative process (Bhattacharya, 2017; Tracy, 2013), make sense of participant realities through:

> an organic process of theory emergence based on how well data fit conceptual categories identified by an observer, by how well the categories explain or predict ongoing interpretations, and by how relevant the categories are to the core issues being observed. (Suddaby, 2006, p. 634)

Further, a grounded theoretical approach allows for both the participant and the researcher to co-construct meaning and realities as they discuss the data in depth together (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012; see also Craig & Tracy, 1995). Much of the leg work of grounded theory relies on the rigor of the analysis (coding) process. As Hesse-Biber (2017) notes, "as one collects the data, one is analyzing the data" (p. 316).

The purpose of grounded theory is to focus more on how the participants explicate their realities and, in turn, interpret these statements based on the relationship between the participant and their worlds (Suddaby, 2006). Exemplary grounded theoretical projects have commitments to both transparency (i.e., of researcher positionality and how the analysis unfolded) and a rigorous analysis processes (Craig & Tracy, 1995). Thus, the constant comparative method was used throughout data collection for this study (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012).

My plan was to implement grounded practical theory similar to D'Enbeau and Kunkel (2013), by using a two-step process. First, I immersed myself in the data with the research questions in mind; and second, I focused on the core problems that were mentioned by my participants (D'Enbeau & Kunkel, 2013). Using constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006), data analysis was ongoing instead of occurring once saturation was reached. For example, I used previous interview transcripts to inform upcoming interviews and identify areas where I could question or probe more to illuminate ideas that may be important to the research questions that have been posed. In addition, at the end of data collection, transcripts can be used (or compared) against themselves (i.e., rather than seeing each as an individual unit) to elevate the analysis process to a higher level of abstraction and thus, to create new and more elaborate codes from more surface level codes that may have emerged early on in the analysis process (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012).

Participants

Participants for this study were required to meet three eligibility requirements: (a) they had to be at least 18 years of age; (b) they had to have a family member that was currently, or has previously been, incarcerated; and (c) they must have communicated at least once with that family member during the time they were incarcerated. For the purposes of this research, letters, emails, in-person visits, and phone calls all qualified as communication with the incarcerated individual. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a variety of ages, relationship types, and periods of incarceration were welcome, as the focus was truly on how communication and social support take place in close interpersonal relationships. As a result, I was able to collect a very diverse array of participant experiences.

Participants were recruited for the study in multiple ways. First, I was able to recruit through the use of a research pool within the university Department of Communication Studies. Second, social media and other online forums were used to recruit participants (see Appendix B). I posted the study information to my personal Facebook and Instagram accounts, and many people shared it on their own pages. I also messaged the administrators of a prison families Facebook group, told them about my study, and asked for consent to post in the group. The administrators granted me permission and access to the group, where I posted one time about the study. Third, at the end of the virtual interviews, I let participants know that the study was open to anyone who communicated with a family member, and if they had anyone they thought might be interested to please pass my information along to them.

Participant compensation. Participants who completed an in-person interview received a digitally delivered $15 Amazon gift card on the day of the meeting. Participants from the research pool who completed an interview had the option to receive the $15 Amazon gift card or 15 points of extra credit in their Communication Studies course. Funding for the participant Amazon gift cards was provided by the Institute for Policy and Social Research (IPSR) at the University of Kansas, where I was a Doctoral Fellow.

Interview Procedures

The study calls (both for the research pool and for social media platforms) asked for interested participants to email me to set up an interview appointment; however, many people also messaged me on social media messaging systems. In the initial email, I told them a bit more about the study and what it entailed and asked them to let me know what day and time would work for them, as well as if they preferred a phone call or Zoom meeting if they wanted to continue on with participation. If the participant emailed back, I provided them with the IRB-

approved consent form (see Appendix C), a link to the pre-interview demographic survey (see Appendix D), and a Zoom link (if necessary).

At the start of the interview, I introduced myself and the study, and walked the participant through the consent form, taking special care to focus on the privacy portion of the document. Because this was sensitive data, I was sure to explain how I would handle the data after the interview, what it would be used for, and the process of data de-identification and the use of pseudonyms. I let each participant know that there may be times when I would use direct quotes in my write-up of my results for this project, but that they would have an assigned “fake” name (a pseudonym) attached to them, and that their privacy was my top priority. I did not start recording the interviews until I had the participant’s consent and explained that I used the audio to make a transcript of the interview. All participants consented to being audio recorded.

I also carefully explained the interview process, as well as the fact that all interview questions were voluntary, and they were free to withdraw at any time and their data would be erased and not used in the research. I told the participants they were free to share as much or as little detail as they wanted, and that they were in control, and I was there to learn from them. The interview began as soon as I was sure I had answered all questions the participant had and received their oral consent to participate. All participants completed their interview in its entirety.

Pre-Interview Survey

Prior to the start of the interview, participants were emailed a link to complete a short survey via Qualtrics to collect demographic and baseline information regarding the participant’s experience. In addition, there were 6 scale questions that gauged the participant’s feelings of closeness to their family, both prior to and during the incarceration, feelings of support, and

finally, their feelings of the incarcerated individuals' level of responsibility for their incarceration.

This brief survey provided me with some background information on the participant's interpersonal relationship coming into the interview. I also hoped it would encourage the participant to start to consider some of the central ideas, so they would not feel blindsided about interview topics. I believe this was a beneficial choice, as several participants mentioned that they had been thinking about the questions prior to the interview, and a few had even talked about the topics to their incarcerated loved one and received their feedback. I believe the survey served to prime the individual before the interview, and helped ease them into the interview so the process was hopefully less intimidating. All but one participant completed the pre-interview survey.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, interviewing was selected as the dominant means of data collection (see Hesse-Biber, 2017). Siedman (2006) notes that interviewing allows for the participant and researcher to create meaning together and provides a natural way for participants to recount their narratives. Further, interviewing is "deeply satisfying to researchers who are interested in others' stories," and allows for the researcher to see context regarding individuals' behaviors and actions (Siedman, 2006, p. 14).

Initially, my goal for data collection was to continue interviewing participants until I believed saturation had been reached. Charmaz (2006) suggests that when using grounded theory, saturation does not refer to the lack of new information, but rather, when "gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of core theoretical

categories" (p. 113). Thus, as I continued on with the interview process, I found that each person had a deeply unique experience, both with their loved one and the institution.

My group of participants was diverse, coming from all areas of the United States, and resulted in testimonies from all different ages, states, levels of security, lengths of sentences, etc. I do not feel that I ever would have reached total "saturation" as scholars typically describe it with this sample, because of the individual experiences participants reported. However, as I got deeper in the process, I began to see the common threads that connected participants' experiences to each other. If I had focused on saturation as the lack of new information, I would have never been done interviewing. Thus, with the goal of this study being to understand more about individuals' experiences and narratives, interviewing was indeed the best fit methodologically for this study.

However, I believe qualitative scholars need to think more critically about how we define and look for saturation in our research. Because we often collect people's stories, which are undoubtedly unique and diverse, looking for a lack of new information in a set of data (as a more traditional perspective on saturation; Manning & Kunkel, 2014) is not always an effective signal to stop data collection. This argument appears to be in conversation with Saunders et al. (2018) assertion that saturation should not be universally applied, and instead, may depend on the framework of a research study and likely serves different purposes for different kinds of research.

A semi-structured interview process was the primary means of data collection driving this study. As I noted above, semi-structured interviews allowed me to use a question protocol to guide the interview, but it also allowed for deviation from the guide when necessary (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Manning & Kunkel, 2014). In addition, I believe this design allowed for the

interview to become more conversational and less like an interrogation of the participant. I told my participants to think of the meeting as more of "a conversation" than an interview, and tried my best to maintain a two-way dialogue, while also prioritizing the participant sharing their experiences. The same protocol of interview questions was used as a guide for each interview, but if other interesting, on-topic, ideas came up in the interview, I was able to probe those ideas for more information. In addition, one of the final questions on the interview protocol asked participants if they had anything to add or if they felt I had missed any topics as the researcher. Thus, the interview protocol underwent many small changes and adjustments as interviews went on, and Appendix E is the final version. Interviews were projected to last between 60-90 minutes. If the interview went over 90 minutes, I made sure to check in with the participant to see if they wanted to end or continue talking. Additionally, after each interview, participants were provided with a debriefing form that that listed local and national resources for emotional and mental health and well-being (see Appendix G). Due to COVID-19, all interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom or phone call.

Data Analysis

The data collection for this project was not linear. Instead, it was a multi-layered and iterative process, requiring me as the researcher to move in and out of the data (Bhattacharya, 2017; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Lucas & D'Enbeau, 2013). An integrative data analysis approach allows for the researcher to move between the data, literature, and existing theories, while simultaneously systematizing the data set (Tracy, 2013). Thus, data analysis for this project involved several steps.

The first set of data for analysis was the pre-interview survey. A profile about each of the participant's demographics was able to be constructed, and the scale questions were inputted into

a Microsoft Excel document where descriptive statistics were conducted (e.g., average age, ethnicity, location, closeness of relationship (see Appendix G).

Participant Profile

The data for this study was collected via virtual Zoom interviews or phone calls with 37 individuals. Eleven interviews were done over the phone and 26 were conducted over Zoom meetings. In total, there were 30 female participants, and 7 male participants, with an average age of 39 (range: 19-86). Participants were from 10 different states, with family inmates in 15 different states. Importantly, for one inmate, I was able to interview 3 family members, which is why some statistics reflect 35 incarcerated individuals rather than 37. For the incarcerated individuals, 19 were currently in prison, and 14 had been released, and 2 were deceased (both serving life; one perished in prison, one was freed on compassionate release and died at home). Three inmates were female and 32 were male. Thirty-two of the participants identified as white, 5 identified as Hispanic/Latinx, and 2 identified as Black or African American. One participant did not disclose their ethnicity. In total, 2,137 minutes of interview audio were recorded, resulting in an average interview length of 58 minutes (range: 22-101). When single spaced, the transcriptions totaled 1,051 pages.

Thirty-six out of 37 participants completed the scaled questions. On a scale of 1-5 (1: Not Close at All; 5: Very Close), participants' average answer was 4 in regard to how close they felt to their family member prior to incarceration (Q1) and how close they felt to their family member now (Q2). Three participants answered "Does not apply" to the latter question, as they did not know their loved one prior to their incarceration. On average, when asked how close they were to their immediate family (Q3), the sample scored 4.6/5, indicating that, for the most part, this sample was well connected to family members outside the relationship with the incarcerated

invidual. The second half of the scale questions utilized a 1-5 scale of agreement (1: Strongly Disagree; 5: Strongly Agree). Family members reported an average score of 4/5 when asked about how much they agreed with the statement “My family member is responsible for their incarceration” (Q4). Similarly, the group averaged 4.2/5 when asked “I am always honest with my family member” (Q5), and finally an average score of 4.3/5 was recorded to the question “I fully support my incarcerated family member” (Q6).

Interview data. Following each interview, I made time to write an informal memo, focusing on how I felt the interview went, notable quotes, ideas that needed to be looked into further, as well as any thoughts that I felt were important to answer the research questions posited in this study (Saldaña, 2019a). These memos often influenced a slight revision of the interview protocol. Most often, my memos were handwritten in a journal and were created as soon as possible after each interview. These memos were not used as part of the data set, but instead served as guides and reminders for me as the researcher. The memos were especially helpful as I moved from data collection to data analysis and had specific notes about what each participant discussed, as well as a record of the common threads I had started to see emerging during the collection of interviews. As previously mentioned, data collection continued until I felt the version of saturation I identified for this study had been reached (Tracy, 2013). Interview transcripts, once de-identified (i.e., removing all potentially personal and identifying information) were shared with my advisor, and are also stored on flash drives in secure locations.

Interview transcripts were analyzed via several passes of the data. First, because many of the interviews took place via Zoom, I was able to download an auto-generated, rough transcript of the interview a few hours after it occurred. These transcripts were very inaccurate and required heavy cleaning and editing. As a result, I was able to revisit the audio of each interview

as I cleaned it. For most phone interviews, I opted to transcribe from scratch. I spent countless hours listening to the interviews and reading them back as I made sure the transcripts were accurate. I was able to send 9 audio files to Rev.com for professional transcription service, but when I received the files back, I still listened to the recording all the way through and edited the professional transcript as needed.

Ellingson (2017) argues that this process allows for full immersion and familiarization with the data because the researcher can hear the data directly from the original source again. Transcripts were read over multiple times, as I wrote memos during transcription about common themes emerging. Additionally, as I was transcribing (or cleaning up a transcript auto-generated by Zoom), I was able to make note of broad, overarching ideas that were shared across participants' experiences, so I was able to see how common an idea was for the group of participants as a whole. At the conclusion of data collection and data transcription (the process took approximately 7 weeks), I felt completely immersed and very familiar with the transcripts, and I was able to start fully analyzing the data.

Transcripts were initially analyzed using first cycle coding methods, or open coding (Saldaña, 2016; Tracy, 2013). I considered the creation and finalization of each transcript as my first analytic pass, because I was both listening to and reading the transcript of each interview. After the first pass, I had several memos about broad themes I was observing, and a rudimentary initial codebook comprised of mostly in-vivo codes. These first few data passes were focused on noticing patterns, repetitive phrases, and unique ideas that were analyzed more in-depth to guide the interpretative process (Saldaña, 2016).

Tracy (2013) suggests that first cycle codes should require little interpretation; thus, the only true codes that will be extracted in the first passes of a data set will be in-vivo codes. These

in-vivo codes give voice to the participant and were used later as exemplars for the final codebook (see Appendix H). The goal of the first cycle of coding was to begin identifying initial connections, but no assertions were made. Before moving on to second cycle coding, I made sure to memo about any hunches or ideas about what was being discovered in the data early on (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Saldaña, 2016).

After open coding, second cycle axial coding commenced. During this process, the focus was on synthesizing the codebook and making more sense of it as a whole. For this second pass, I purchased and used NVivo software to import and code each interview individually. However, the software also allowed me to see commonalities in coding across the interviews. Line-by-line coding and constant comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used during this process to build themes and ideas from the data set in order to solidify the codebook. I started to think about the bigger picture the data was painting and how the codes and ideas fit together by investigating, synthesizing, and critically considering the data via multiple passes. During this process, each transcript was coded initially and returned to, as the codebook developed and more codes were added. The codebook, descriptions, and exemplars were then organized electronically. When I completed the open coding process, I was able to look at the codebook, and the research questions and work through the data to determine how the codes could be collapsed into groups of themes. Once I identified these broader themes, I was able to focus on how the themes answered the research questions driving the study. I did much of this second level, axial analysis through writing memos, drawing charts, and making outlines, as I needed to visually “see” how the data fit together.

Chapter Summary

The method and procedures outlined in this chapter served as the foundation for this dissertation study. Through the use of in-depth interviews, the current research sought to address the research questions, but to also provide theoretical and practical implications that could potentially bridge academia with public policy concerning prisoner care and prison reform. As an feminist, interpretivist, and qualitative researcher, I am fully aware that the methods used in this study shifted and adapted in order to best gather and collect the unique lived experiences of participants in the study. The subsequent chapter features the results and interpretations of the data for this study.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The findings for the present study offer an inside perspective on the process of providing support to an incarcerated family member. Participants in this study described how they interact with, and provide support to, their loved ones; barriers that complicate their support provision; the difficulties associated with being a support provider; and how the correctional facility makes communication and connection with a loved one challenging. One of the biggest findings of this study was that communication serves as a critical "lifeline" that connects outside family members to their loved one inside, and when that communication is cut off or limited (either by the facility or outside factors, such as finances), the relationship can suffer and stress is put on both the support provider and the incarcerated inmate. Further, findings indicate that although reform is necessary on the part of the institution and their policies, barriers to communication and support are not limited to solely those imposed by the facility. However, most barriers could be eased by a revision in policies. As mentioned in Chapter 2, maintaining positive family ties while a person is incarcerated can lead to better emotional and mental health while incarcerated, but can also help facilitate more positive outcomes when the individual is released. As a result, prioritizing these relationships and making it easier to maintain them should be of utmost importance to correctional facilities.

The timing of this research is especially important to note. Data for this study was collected in November and December of 2020, meaning that in-person visitation at correctional facilities across the country had been shut down and communication-limiting COVID-19 procedures had been implemented for at least eight to nine months at the point of data collection. Participants were particularly exhausted and frustrated by the system and were facing more barriers than ever before. Thus, this was a very significant time period to collect data for a study

on overcoming barriers to provide support, but it also affected participants' views of the prison system and the communication process between incarcerated individuals and their family members. Those that had a loved one currently in the system had not seen them in person for months and were facing the most difficult communication constraints they had ever encountered, so it is important to keep the situation specifics and context in mind when considering participant narratives.

The following section outlines the research questions for this study, which center around: (a) the role of communication in relationships with incarcerated family members and how support is provided (RQ1), (b) the types of barriers that impede support (RQ2), and (c) the effects of being a support provider to an incarcerated individual (RQ3). While fully immersed in the data, I was able to provide thorough answers to the research questions guiding the study. Therefore, the following section is organized in terms of how the participants' experiences speak to each research question specifically. All participant and other names used have been changed to protect participant confidentiality. Participants' exact words appear in italics, with very limited edits made to them for syntax. Ellipses (…) occur when not all of a participant's quote is used but later words or phrases have to do with the same thought. Words or phrases in brackets [x] were added by me to provide context or clarity to what the individual is discussing and are not the participants' own words. To add context about their experiences, Appendix F was created and offers a useful table of demographic data, including the participant's: gender identity, age, and relationship to their incarcerated loved one.

Research Question One: Social Support and Incarceration

Research question one asked: "How do family members report showing support for their incarcerated family members?" For this study, support was viewed under the lens of Cutrona et

al.'s (1997) outline of five types of support: tangible, informational, emotional, esteem, and network. For the present study, emotional and esteem support were combined because of their conceptual and practical similarity. Participants reported providing support to their incarcerated loved ones in many different ways, but all four of the support types were featured prominently in the interviews. Additionally, I make an argument to extend Cutrona et al.'s (1997) typology to include the act of communication as support – like a lifeline to the outside for the incarcerated. Each type of support is discussed below.

Tangible support. The first type of support, tangible, was brought up most frequently when participants described how they support their incarcerated loved one. In these situations, tangible support often took the form of financial support, either to buy commissary items (e.g., food, clothing, entertainment items) or to garner access to communication needs (e.g., phone time or digital email "stamps"). Here are a few examples of how participants operationalized tangible support for their loved one:

"We were constantly putting money in there [on his books] so he could call us or he could get food or whatever. Because if he didn't like what they are serving or something…It was a way to support him." (Rachel)

"So food and books and reading material and even like drawing [materials] and stuff like that. That shows so much support." (Alice)

"And honestly, putting money [on] for commissary. As long as you can trust them not to use it for drugs and stuff. Because the food that they have and not knowing when they're getting their next meal is not fun." (Megan)

One of the issues with tangible support in this situation is that it often translates to providing financial assistance, which several participants mentioned as a struggle. Outside of an

incarceration situation, tangible support would also include services or favors done for the person more directly (e.g., providing meals or transportation) which can be difficult to accomplish when someone is in a correctional facility. Thus, instead, family members can provide funds that allow the inmate to choose their form of support, in a way. Inmates can use financial help to buy food, toiletries, clothing, or use the phone or the computer kiosk for electronic communication. However, as previously mentioned, institutions charge high amounts of funds for phone calls and electronic messages, and commissary item prices are also inflated, so money does not go as far as one might anticipate. Interestingly, some participants mentioned that there are additional fees associated with sending money to loved ones:

"So if you put $100, it's going to cost you $117. If you're out of state, it's going to cost you $134 to add $100. So it'll cost $34 in taxes." (Lisa)

"In order for me to send $20, they're going to charge $3.95. If I send $30, they're going to charge $6.95." (Lucia)

"It irritates me the costliness even of putting money on an account, if I put $150 on one of the guys' accounts and it costs me 8.70 [in tax], just to put it on, there. And when we do phone calls, when we put a 100 dollars on that account, there's $18 in tax." (Joan)

Overall, tangible support seemed to be one of the most important ways for support providers to communicate care to their loved ones; however, it also caused stress and frustration, especially when finances for participants were already tight. Some family members provided tangible support in more interpersonal ways, such as volunteering to take the inmate into their homes when they were released from prison, or caring for their children while they were in prison. Jessa, for example, went as far as formally adopting her incarcerated brother's son. Fay and Gentry share their experiences:

"I've told my grandson that when he does get out, that I will gladly be his home plan and help him in that way…I support him because he deserves it, and I support him because I know that if he gets out and I give him a place to stay and try to help him, that will also alleviate a lot of my daughter's [also incarcerated] concerns. So it's a trickle-down effect kind of." (Fay)

"Yeah, so he [my brother] *came to live with us when he got out with my husband and I and my son, because my parents don't have anything to do with him anymore."* (Gentry)

These forms of tangible support communicate both care and commitment to the inmate. Taking in someone's child, or offering to be the safe place for them to get back on their feet following incarceration, is self-sacrificial and risky, but is a major asset for the inmate who will need stability when they are released. For example, Gentry mentioned that, when her brother was discharged from prison, he opted to stay with her, where he started using drugs within days of his release. Gentry had to make the tough call to ask him to leave for the safety of her family and her young son. She talked in detail about the struggle of wanting to be there for her brother and support him, but also protect her own family (a prime example of "tough love").

Informational support. The second most common form of support provided to inmates was informational support. Participants mentioned that while incarcerated, inmates are not able to do much for themselves and often needed assistance from family members for things like legal help, research for a hobby or special interest, or more recently, help in securing COVID-19 government stimulus checks. The participants shared their ways of providing informational support:

"I'll email him and say, 'Is there anything I can do for you?' He had me the other day look up his credit to make sure nobody's using it or anything like that. He's had me lately trying

to find out what happened to his stimulus check that they had them all apply for, those kinds of things. I just always ask him what I can do for him, things like that." (Alicia)

"Even the stimulus checks we got last year, if my parents hadn't done his taxes and had a personal bank account that that stuff went to, I don't think he would have gotten either of those." (Jessa)

"He asked me to write…send copies of lyrics to songs [so] that he could sing them. And I also sent him a book about, you know, how to teach yourself to play the guitar. And that was a really good thing for him, therapy wise." (Clark)

Informational support was another way to show care for inmates, by aiding in tasks unable to be accomplished by an individual from prison. Participants often mentioned this being a support option that was able to communicate that they supported the individual, but that was less often perceived as financially taxing. Clark talked about how doing things that may seem trivial (like sending TV schedules or song lyrics) can mean so much to an incarcerated person, and for Clark, this was a way to show his son that he still cares for him.

Network support. Network support was another way that participants mentioned showing support for their loved ones. For example, inmates cannot communicate with other inmates while they are incarcerated or on parole, so many family members, like Alicia, mentioned writing to or talking with their inmate's friends who had been released so they could keep the inmate up to date on their friends' statuses and lives. Joan, Christine, and Megan all told me about how they talk to or write to some of their sons' friends who are incarcerated with them that do not have family support because they have realized how much that support means to someone who is doing time. Participants also enacted network support by preparing connections and support systems in anticipation of their release, connecting inmates to other people to

communicate with, and/or facilitating conversations on the inmates behalf. The following are some examples of participants' enactments of network support:

"And so, I feel like it's up to me, as his wife, to make sure I have all those supports in place when he gets back, to make sure I still have a church for us to go to and an NA group for us to go to, and have jobs lined up for people who are willing to hire an ex-con." (Beverly)

"So I just said, 'Hey guys, this is a really difficult time for Dennis right now. If anybody would like to send him cards and encouragement, I'd appreciate that, and so would he.' And so people were sending him support cards, and all this kind of stuff. And I think that that's an important thing to do…I have reached out to his friend circles." (Janet)

"My dad has done a lot of research for him, my dad writes a lot of the men he has met along the way, and even helps them to communicate with one another a little bit, because they're not allowed to communicate with one another directly. So, he's been able to help in that way and encouraging some of the other prisoners as well." (Renee)

Whereas inmates[1] are not completely helpless, they do have very limited access to social networks outside of those created in prison. Something as simple as not having a phone number or not knowing an address can prevent communication from occurring. Keeping inmates connected with encouraging social ties reinforces the relationships that are crucial for positive post-incarceration outcomes. Patty mentioned that she sends a newsletter of sorts out to a list of people who are interested in her son's well-being and this acts as a prayer chain for him. Eric mentioned how his brother writes to so many people that he sent out Christmas cards last year. To accomplish this, however, inmates often need a willing participant like Patty or Eric on the outside to help facilitate these relationships and/or provide necessary information to keep

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[1] In the following chapters, I use the word inmate to describe incarcerated individuals. Nearly all of my participants used this word to refer to their loved one, and I aim to stay true to participant voices. Because they did not deem the word offensive or derogatory, I decided to implement its usage in the following chapters.

inmates close to important ties and organizations. Several participants talked about how they did not know how inmates without people advocating for them out the outside were able to persist during their incarceration period.

Emotional and esteem support. Nearly all of the participants interviewed for this study communicated with their incarcerated loved one on an almost daily basis in some way or another (i.e., mail, email, phone) during their incarceration. Of course, this meant providing support that boosted the esteem of the inmates and their emotional well-being, especially during difficult days. However, the esteem support described by study participants was rarely what is commonly thought of as esteem support (i.e., positive comments about physical appearance or compliments). In the context of this study, however, much of the esteem support focused on praising the inmate for making good choices and letting them know their family was proud of them. Consider the following examples:

“Grant was so discouraged and he called me to tell me about it. And he said, Mom, I just see so much of myself the way I used to be. And he said, it just makes me sad. So I told him I was proud of him. He's come a long way.” (Patty)

“He had no family. And so he was just in and out…and was like, ‘I have nothing to lose.’ Until we got back in touch. Now he's a different person. Like, when I see him doing good, I'm like, I'm so proud of you.” (Samantha)

Moreover, emotional support appeared to be much more common than esteem support, and some of the most basic forms of emotional support were based on simply breaking monotony in the inmate’s day. Participants often shared about their own day or other stories from the outside to help get the inmate’s mind off of their current living circumstances. In many situations, emotional support meant just simply “being there” (Rawlins, 2009; Werking, 1997)

for the inmate and encouraging them to get through their days, as seen in these words from participants:

"*We didn't really talk about prison a lot. She asked about like what was going on with me and how my grandma was, how my pets were. It was kind of mostly surface level things. And I think that's what she needed because she didn't have a lot of access to anything else."* (Cassidy)

"And so I'm always telling him, you know, like I'm here for you, whatever you need, you know, please talk to me, call me. You know, all of that because I want him to know that he does have support, even if it's only one person. You know that I am there to support him. So I did. I definitely tried to let him know when he was in there." (Rachel)

"You're trying to hurry. And you think of something and you knew your time was getting close and you're like talking as fast as you can and get everything in. Usually it was...you try to…include them as much as you can to make him feel like he was a part of stuff." (Jerri)

Participants often discussed the importance of conveying emotional support as often as possible, but mentioned the difficulty timed or recorded phone calls can place on interactions. They often had to decide what information was most important (e.g., needs or messages to be passed along) and that was prioritized in phone calls, often leaving minimal time for more leisurely or comforting conversation. Participants informed me that inmates can be reluctant to discuss their struggles or daily challenges on a line that is constantly monitored by prison staff, as it can get themselves or others in trouble. Many participants shared with me that their inmate liked to keep the conversation focused on what they were doing on the outside, rather than sharing what was happening within the facility walls. As a result, it was important for family members to share even things that felt mundane to them just to keep the inmate updated and feeling included in their family life.

Communication as support. The importance of communication was a prominent and recurring theme in every interview of this study. Towards the end of each interview, I asked participants to explain their ideas for the best ways to provide support to incarcerated individuals. The overwhelming majority of participants mentioned that *communication* is the number one way to support inmates. With incarcerated individuals, the act of communication in itself is a form of support. In a world where many forms of free communication exist on the outside, those who wish to communicate with incarcerated loved ones must practically and emotionally pay to do so, and the costs are not minimal. Family members have to pay with both their time and money in order to communicate their support to their incarcerated loved ones. In this unique circumstance, communication in and of itself IS a form of support. As Patty said, *"Communication is vital, it is absolutely vital."* Whether it be by phone, email, or letters to participants, communication was key to maintaining relationships, and families were left with no other way to sustain their relationships than to communicate as often as possible, in as many ways as was accessible. Gina summed it up well by saying her best advice to inmate families is: *"don't stop communicating!"*

As was previously mentioned, for the participants in this study, the act of communication (e.g., picking up the phone, sending a letter) functioned as support and caring for the inmate. For example, Danielle talked about how she had a lot of anger for her mom for getting herself in prison, and sometimes she would not say anything during phone calls, but she would pick up the phone and listen to her mom talk, which she described as a supportive act. Participants mentioned how listening, and focusing on being a source of positivity for their inmate, were large parts of their role as support provider, as evidenced in these participants' words:

"I'd say being ready to listen, making time for that inmate. Communicating with them that even though they are where they are still important to you and that's both in word and deed. Making time, allowing them to be the one driving the conversation, not using that time to point out how their actions have affected you. Keeping the conversation about them." (Eric)

"I showed support through like…believing them and listening to what they had to say even though that might not always be the truth. I would say listening to them and listening to what they have to say, listening to their truth…their story. Um, but I don't know, I just, I know that it's very, very lonely for them, like all like our lives still continue to go on. Even though all they probably do is sit there and think about it for a majority of the time. So the best way [to show support] would be would be listen to them, talk to them, help them forget, help them move past it." (Danielle)

Participants also mentioned the importance of staying positive as a priority in the limited amount of communication that they get with the inmate. For example, inmates may only get to talk with a loved one for ten minutes out of an entire day. During the interviews, participants expressed how they perceived it to be their responsibility to keep those interactions a positive part of the inmate's day, and not bring them down with their own bad day or negative feelings. Participants described this process:

"I just tried to keep it as positive as I could. It was a lot of probably the same stuff like, 'Yeah, work is going good, Cora is getting so big, I look forward to talking to you next, And here's my phone number in case you lost the last letter…' Like they [the conversations] were pretty much the same, just keeping it very positive. I always tried to at least end our phone calls on a positive note." (Rachel)

"You feel guilty when that phone hangs up, because you're like 'Okay this person's in there. They don't have their family or anybody else, you know, you're like, really their person'…or if I was complaining about my day I kind of felt bad. Like he would never say anything but you feel bad because you don't want to be the person to drag that person down because they're already in a shitty place. You want to be the positive person for them." (Samantha)

For inmates, having someone on the outside to communicate with is important for their emotional and psychological well-being. Communication with the outside provides an important outlet where inmates can express themselves and/or share emotions. As Samantha mentioned, it is challenging for the inmates to express and/or share emotions within the correctional facility. Some participants noted that sharing or discussing emotions with other inmates is rare because they may be perceived as weak, which could make them feel like a target. Inmates must also be careful about what they share about their lives inside because other inmates can overhear their conversations, and all conversations are recorded and monitored by correctional facility staff.

Interpersonal prison relationships are completely dependent on effective communication, and unique in that there are not a lot of outside factors influencing the relationship. In a similar way, while you may communicate several times a day with your incarcerated loved one, it is not the same as living with them and having regular conversations. When one partner is incarcerated, every minute of opportunity for communication should be spent in a meaningful way, which can also put pressure on a relationship. One participant, Lisa, summed up what it is like to be in a romantic relationship with an inmate:

"You just talk and talk and you know them better than anyone else. You know them when they say hello what kind of mood they're in, if they're grouchy, if they're sad because it's almost

like being blind and only being able to hear and picking up, it's like another sense in just knowing somebody. Because if I was to get in a relationship with somebody out here, then you have all these other things involved. You have sex and money and all these other things will be involved."

Beverly also gave some input on making the most of communication amidst financial constraints: *"We're living on my salary now. So I said, 'You have to learn how to write letters. You have to learn how to put pen and paper together. You've got to learn how to write. We can't afford anything else. You've got to figure out how to write.' And so, we have kind of rekindled our relationship through letter writing."*

Chantal shared her reasoning for working to maintain her relationship with her husband. Her advice for others in her situation is to *"try and keep them as updated as you can. That's why I send my husband eight to ten e-mails [a day]. I don't want him to get out of prison and have no idea what's going on with his kids or society. So, it takes frequent, detailed communication in order to not distance or separate from the reality, or be left behind."*

As the researcher, I wanted to know more specifically about how care and support was communicated, and what actual words were exchanged during the support process. During the interview, I asked participants if they felt that they explicitly told their loved ones that they supported them, or if they felt their support was more unspoken, and many participants explained how complicated the support process can be, especially when balancing complex emotions and feelings of caring:

"I don't think I ever outwardly said it. No. I think it was hard to say that because I didn't really know. Like I didn't know why she was in prison or if she actually deserved to be there or not. And so it was hard to be like, Yeah, I support you." (Cassidy)

"Yes, it's definitely spoken and it's almost like when he's having those bad days, I try to say stay positive think positive thoughts and kind of like, I know it sucks but you know there's nothing we can do right now is what I tell him. I like to think that situations can always be worse." (Shelly)

"It's not uncommon, I guess for me, saying like: 'You're working really hard, and you know you need to do what's right, even if you feel like other people aren't'… I try to tell him stuff like that every once in a while, but most of my support is probably nonverbal." (Jessa)

Some of examples Jessa described of nonverbal support included legally adopting her brother's son, and paying for communication with him. Because of this idea of the act of communication as support in close relationships, I argue for an extension to Cutrona et al.'s (1997) five support typology to include the intentional act of communication as a type of support, on its own. Many participants described the physical act of picking up a phone to answer the call, listening to inmates talk, or sending a letter as acts of support. Such ideas are hard to classify as one of the types outlined by Cutrona and colleagues (1997) and therefore I believe that communication acts as a "lifeline" and thus qualifies as its own unique support type.

Communication as a lifeline. Communication with an incarcerated loved one functions as more than just relationship maintenance. Participants in this study also mentioned how daily, or at least consistent, communication with their loved one was how they knew their inmate was okay. In interviews, participants frequently voiced frustrations with correctional officers (CO's) and prison administrative staff for being vague or unwilling to share information about an inmate's status. For example, when the inmate is sick, the prison is on lockdown, or the inmate is in isolation, communication is limited even more than in typical circumstances. The horrifying circumstances of COVID-19 especially challenged communication as a safety and health lifeline,

as it was restricted and in-person visitation was non-existent. During interviews, people mentioned their dependence on communication for reassurance. Participants shared the way communication functioned as a lifeline in their relationships:

"You would never guess that phone calls are almost like a lifeline. And when they don't call, the first automatic thing is 'I hope he's okay.' It can be consistent at times, like for a week he would call at like 10:00 in the morning and I could get used to that but in the same sense, if he didn't call me one day at 10:00, I'd be like 'Oh my gosh, think worst case scenario…he's in trouble.' So I was kind of trying to like train myself not to almost get my hopes up just as long as he does call me." (Shelly)

"Face to face, like you can you can you can see that they're doing okay. You can see that they haven't been in…and this sounds crazy…but when he was in Texas. It was…'Oh, you haven't been beat up today. You know, you didn't get into a fight today. Your face is cleared up, the bruises are yellowing,' you know, it's, it's, kind of, it's kind of like that like mentally." (Alice)

"Our family and every inmate family is in a constant state of crisis because if the phone doesn't ring, if they don't call when they're supposed to, you panic. If they call when they're not supposed to, you panic. 'What's wrong?' And there's always this level of tension that just never goes away." (Janet)

Medical issues were another big concern for participants with loved ones with medical conditions or who required daily medications. For many, their inmate is dependent on daily mental health medications, and while they are incarcerated, the medications are often not administered on any consistent basis. Many people talked about the inconsistencies of the medical unit of the facility often changing medications or dosages without good reason or explanation, and the frustration that both they and the inmate felt at the lack of control in the

situation. In the following exemplars, participants mentioned how phone calls, video visits, and in-person visitation functioned as check-ins to ensure their loved one was taking their medications and/or receiving necessary medical care:

"So the information that she was providing us wasn't the most reliable at all times. And so we questioned a lot of but she was saying, and there was no way for us to figure out if she was getting the medication. You could kind of tell on the phone, like in her voice and inflections, but not really. So that made it really difficult also….Like I know in the letters she sent me she mentioned a lot of things about food and how it was good and how things that weren't bad, but when I saw her, it was clear that she wasn't eating nearly need like a human should eat. So there was definitely a disconnect between like things that she was saying and like actually seeing her in person." (Cassidy)

"We had a recent situation where the medical department ran out of his meds. And some of the meds were controlling his anxiety and he…went he went bonkers on me…they either didn't plan right, or they ran out of the meds and couldn't get them soon enough. So I was getting phone calls several times a day from my hostile son because of that." (Clark)

Participants also mentioned communication being vital when inmates were experiencing difficult times. In most correctional facilities, when an inmate is placed in isolation (also known as "the shu" or "the hole"), they are removed from most forms of communication, except for postal mail. Even when an inmate goes to isolation for their own safety (PC'd, or Protective Custody) and not for breaking rules, they are not given the same daily access to phones or tablets. Equally problematic is when communication privileges are revoked as a form of punishment. If the prison gets locked down, inmates are kept in their cells for the majority of the day, so they cannot access the phones or email kiosks. When inmates are sick, in lockdown, or in

isolation and lose access to communication, the prison does not communicate to families to let them know. Thus, families have to be reliant on a lack of communication to alert them to a problem. Here, participants describe truly using communication as a "lifeline":

"When COVID first hit and I didn't hear from him for over a week, I found out he was in the hole. But they wouldn't tell me nothin'. They wouldn't even tell me he was in the hole. The last lockdown was nothing COVID related, it was 3 weeks I wasn't able to talk to him – any sort of communication…no phone, no email, no nothing. It's nerve-wracking." (Megan)

"I do [write letters] pretty regularly, especially if he goes to the hole. I send him a letter every day. I send him mail every single day if he goes to the hole." (Alicia)

"When he was in the hole, there was about a week where I didn't know that I could write him. So I didn't write him, and I've experienced this myself, too. You'll be waiting at the door when you're locked up in your cell and you're watching the guards pass out mail and the guards come to you, but they don't give you your mail and just that feeling of like, 'Dang, like nobody cares about me' type deal. It could definitely mess somebody up." (Shelly, [previously incarcerated])

Summary of research question one: Research question one centered on the process support providers undergo as they work to maintain communication and connection with their incarcerated loved one. In addition, I was able to analyze their descriptions of support and code them as Cutrona et al.'s (1997) support types. I also argued for an extension to Cutrona and colleagues (1997) support typology to include an additional category of support type, "communication as support." This is because participants described actions such as listening and simply picking up a phone call as supportive acts, as well as the fact that simply the act of communication with an inmate costs money, and is a conscious choice. Finally, the imperative

role communication plays in relationships and well-being was highlighted by positioning communication as a lifeline connecting inmates to their families and the outside world, and providing an alert system if things were not normal. Of course, with any complex situation, there are inevitably barriers to connecting with, and providing support to, an incarcerated individual.

Research Question Two: Barriers to Effective Social Support Provision

One of the biggest goals of this research project was to identify what barriers affected the communication of care and support to loved ones who have a family member who is, or who has been, incarcerated (RQ2), as well as how family members worked to overcome the barriers. The research focus was on both (a) barriers imposed by the institution, as well as (b) personal barriers outside the institution that made connection difficult. However, the barriers identified by family members were overwhelmingly those established by the correctional facility itself. Again, it is important to note in this section that not all correctional facility policies are the same, and participants were reporting on all types of institutions, from small county jails, up to high security federal prisons. It is not my intention to say that all the barriers I highlight here affect every person with an incarcerated loved one; however, these were some of the most commonly noted difficulties shared with me. I think it is also important to mention that each person I interviewed was willing to work past the barriers to communicate with their loved ones, which shows a high level of commitment and dedication, but also a very specific, privileged sample that had the ability to overcome these obstacles.

Institutional barriers. The barriers experienced by support providers were vast, but the most commonly cited sources of frustration centered around communication technology failures, such as the phones, email kiosks, apps, and mail. Within a correctional facility, there are often lines to use the phone or kiosk, and there is a good chance that one or the other is broken in some

way. Of course, it costs to use both resources. Phone calls are usually limited to 10-15 minutes, and some places have a limit on how often each person can use the phone, although some facilities allow for longer or more frequent calls. Family members can send email messages to an inmates' pod kiosk or tablet (if their facility has tablets) through an app like JPay, Securus, or PeliPost, but the application is often not functioning correctly (according to my participants). Other institutional barriers included: institutional stonewalling (where the institution withholds or blocks the sharing of information) and the various hassles involved with meeting the incarcerated family member in a face-to-face setting.

Communication complications. Technology failure is common in any setting, not just in correctional facilities, but as many participants mentioned, the facilities are not in any hurry to remedy the problem, and when things like phones are broken, they often remain that way for long periods of time. In Lucia's case, this meant her boyfriend's "pod" of 600 men had to share the 2 phones that were operational. Lisa also explained that she read the phone company's handbook and discovered that some facilities are able to fine the phone company if the phones do not work, so the facility actually makes money from the phones being broken. There are also countless challenges to communication that make communication and support complicated. Some of the barriers shared in this section may not seem like a big deal on a surface level, but when a relationship is solely dependent on communication, and that communication functions as a lifeline, it is imperative that these communication resources be fully functional at all times. Participants shared their experiences:

"You only get normally 300 minutes a month. So, 300 minutes does not go very far. Your phone calls are limited to 10 minutes, so you can't do a lot in 10 minutes. Someone who's got a girlfriend gets the same 300 minutes my husband does, having six kids." (Chantal)

"We get two free phone calls a week and three free video visits a week. But most of the time, one or the other doesn't work. And then when you call them, sometimes they'll reschedule him, but mine didn't work yesterday because their system was down. And I called them to reschedule today and they were like, 'Sorry.' So we just missed out. And they only had one kiosk for 251 men to use during a three-hour time period so that was limited." (Lisa)

"You hear, 'You have one minute left.' And I realized like, 'Ooh, I didn't put money on his account for the phone.' So like there's an app, Securus, so usually I'll just go on there and like reload it, but sometimes, if the app isn't working, then we're not able to talk and like he'll try calling back but if he doesn't have any money on his account, then he can't get through." (Mollie)

In addition to these limitations, some participants mentioned barriers that seemed like minor issues, but actually had serious implications for communication. For Hannah, who mostly communicated with her father through letters, the lag time between letters was hard to navigate at times. Hannah's father would write very emotional letters to her when he was having intense depressive episodes, and she would not get the letter for about a week, making her feel helpless that her father was feeling that way several days ago and she had just found out about it. For Lisa, the keyboard at the email system in her partner's pod had all the letter labels worn off. This might not seem like a big deal to someone who is familiar with a keyboard; however, Lisa's partner has been incarcerated for over 20 years and, as she pointed out, he never learned to type before being incarcerated. Consequently, it would be nearly impossible for her partner to email her anything of substance within his limited time at the kiosk. Megan mentioned that her son is extremely tall, and sitting to email at the kiosk is uncomfortable to him because it is so low to the ground. Both Gina and Christine mentioned the noise level being difficult to deal with, as well as

the line of people waiting for their chance to use the phone. In fact, several participants mentioned that the phone lines can get rowdy and noisy, and inmates often yell at others to get off the phone. These are examples of barriers that people who are not support providers to incarcerated individuals may not even consider, but pose significant barriers to those directly experiencing them.

Informational stonewalling. Another obstacle and source of frustration was from attempts to communicate with the prison directly. As I mentioned before, if prisoners get cut off from communication for any reason, unless they have died, the prison does not alert the family. Participants mentioned the frustration of trying to contact the correctional facility for information and either getting no answer or having the employees be very rude to them. As Megan said, *"it's like mission impossible."* Several participants said that they have to call time and time again until they *"annoy someone enough"* that they give information on the status of the prison or inmate. Moreover, even when staff did share that an inmate was sick or on lockdown, they did not give any additional information about how long the inmate would be away from communication, so family members were left in the dark. Below are some of the experiences of participants:

"That was a Saturday that he died and the prison refused to tell me anything, I had zero. I listened to my husband die on the phone until someone hung the phone up. I could hear them giving him chest compressions. Some of those people laughed at me at [facility] when I called and said, 'I need to know if my husband is alive.' One of them said, 'If he had died, we would have called you by now. We'd have let you know by now if he was dead.' And I didn't get an answer until 9:00 AM on Monday morning when I finally got ahold of his caseworker." (Beverly)

"I've not heard from him in a little over a week, so I don't know if he's done something to lose his privileges or if he's sick. And every number that I try, I end up getting a recording and I leave a voicemail, and of course I never get a call back. I would almost guess with certainty that DOC would prefer that there were no communication between inmates and family. They just don't want to fool with it." (Fay)

"I didn't know what was going on, like we had no idea what's going on. And I was like, 'Can you just give us an update of how he's like doing? Like do we need to emergency come visit him?' And they were just like, 'Don't worry about it. He's fine.' And then he literally passed away five days later." (Hannah)

These are just a few of the instances participants shared with me about interacting with prison staff. According to participants, it can be extremely infuriating, because typically, when a family member is trying to get information, they have something to be concerned about, and it is a vulnerable time. When inmates are removed from communication resources such as the phone, the only way they can send news to their families is through postal mail, which can take several days to reach them. This process circles back to the idea of communication being a "lifeline." It is actually the lack of communication that sends up a red flag that something is wrong and warrants a check in.

The barriers of in-person visitation were particularly difficult, and participants went into great detail talking about the struggles of the process. During the interviews, I asked participants about their most preferred way of communicating with their loved one. The majority of participants said that in-person visitation was by far their favorite because they got to see their person face to face, hug them, and spend a few hours with them. However, correctional facilities

have countless rules surrounding visitation that can make it nerve-wracking and uncomfortable for visitors. The process to even be admitted to the visiting room can also be intimidating.

Visitation can also be difficult for support providers based on factors such as travel and lodging expenses, getting time off work, and having necessary paperwork on file and approved. At most facilities, you must submit an ID card or Driver's License in order to be approved for visitation, meaning that individuals without government issued ID are unable to visit. Something that stood out to me in these discussions was the vividness of the descriptions participants provided. They recalled smells, feelings, passing thoughts, what was said to them, and how they were treated. In-person visitation is a big deal for maintaining relationships, and the institution does little to make it less stressful for families. Family members endure a lot to visit their loved ones for short periods of time, and if I picked up anything from my participants, it was that the process needs to be made more bearable.

Challenges of in-person visitation. I have chosen to share longer quotations from participants in the following section, because I think it is incredibly valuable to share as much detail as possible about the process visitors must undergo just to be able to see their family members. The barriers experienced during in-person visitation are at the heart of this study, because support providers experience multiple barriers at once, and more directly, because they are physically at the correctional facility. We need to be familiar with what family members go through to be an effective support system. The following are abridged excerpts of the experiences four of the participants shared with me, although nearly all participants had very similar stories of difficulties encountered at visitation:

"We would wait hours in line to go see him. No matter like where he was staying, we would wait hours in line, and like if you didn't have the right paperwork, then you have to be sent

home. And then like if my mom was wearing like an underwire bra, she couldn't go in. So then she had a like buy like specific bras to like to go there…It was like a lot of like timing factor that you had a really kind of like measure out the right way. Then you're like, going up the stairs, like one step at a time. And then you finally get inside. And it's, if it was summertime, it was like sweaty and like it smelled gross. I remember feeling like it was like…it felt bad like to be in there. It felt like there were no windows, if they were, they were like all the way at the top of like the ceilings at the walls. But it just, it felt…you felt like sticky or like gross being in there." (Bernie)

"In order for me to visit, I have to take an entire day off of work so that costs me at least $150 just taking the day off of work. And then not to mention, while I'm there, I can take $30 in quarters and that's supposed to feed all of us, whoever's there visiting…I have to organize everything with his daughters who are active in sports and things like that. It's so hard to get a time also where we can all go. But then like for taking his girls, I had to have a notarized paper from their mother saying that it was okay for me to travel with them and that it was okay for me to take them into the jail. And I had to have copies of their birth certificates and stuff. And then they search you, they touch you down. It's just uncomfortable to go. And then you're, I don't mean this to sound shitty, but I'm there to see my person but I'm not sure what all those other people that are in prison are there for. And so you go to visit and you're in a room with all these other people, everybody's staring at you. It is just scary. You can't hold hands. You can't kiss, you can't touch each other." (Lucia)

"They literally had me bawling one day. I was so furious mad at [facility] because I had three little kids. And I was like, literally 8+ months pregnant with my son and I had lugged my daughters up that huge flight of stairs. And went through all the crap and was signing everybody

in and getting everything situated, and then they decided that Morgan's pants had…she had some windbreaker type, sweatpants on. And they were like, 'She can't wear those.' They just have all these rules all the time, and it's just all dependent on the guard that you got that day. It was just nerve-wracking. I literally just lost my shit that day, like, are you kidding me?' My dad always said that he felt like that at [facility], they tried to make your experience as shitty as possible so that you wouldn't come back to visit. That's what he felt like they tried to make the visitor's experience terrible so they didn't have to fool with us, you know, and that's what it felt like." (Jerri)

The amount of barriers experienced by family members was vast, and most were experienced before they got to see their family member. However, the majority of participants in the study mentioned that they would do just about anything to get to spend the in-person time with their loved one, even though, as Patty said, *"There is certainly no welcome desk or greeting committee!"* Alicia explained that her boyfriend's facility opened briefly for visitation during COVID and she had to find someone to drive her several hours to the facility, she and her boyfriend both had to wear masks and sit two tables away from each other and abstain from touching, but she would repeat the process again in a heartbeat, because in-person visitation means that much to their relationship.

The emotional toll of visitation was another aspect that added an extra layer to an already demanding process. Participants even mentioned that there were times during visitation where they were made to feel like a criminal themselves:

"Everything seems like if you do something wrong at any point like that could be it. Like they could completely turn me away and I would have no…I could throw a fit but like…they'll just like ban you. Like you like you really feel like you can't do anything. Like I just have to

accept everything that you're telling me…They don't understand this the first time I'm seeing my dad in 20 years and they're going to like get on me for like hugging him." (Hannah)

"From like a visitor perspective, it's like, from that moment forward, you're basically treated as an inmate yourself." (Cassidy)

"Yeah, it was just very crazy…I think you could hold hands across the table, or something, and I was sitting on my foot at one point, in my chair but I had my foot underneath me. They came and they were like, 'You need to take your foot down.' Well, okay. But all they do…is…they're like walking around watching you." (Jessa)

When I asked participants to walk me through the visitation process they were quick to describe the complete array of emotions (all experienced in a single day) as "exhausting." From elation at seeing their person, to deep sadness upon leaving, after a day of visitation and minding the rules, participants felt completely drained. Many participants indicated that visitation is the hardest part to manage, and in some ways, they feel guilty when they have to leave their loved one at the facility (post-visitation). However, they shared that there is also a sense of renewal and joy at getting to spend time with their loved one. Even when visitation was especially tumultuous, the majority of participants wholeheartedly indicated that all the trouble they go through to visit in person is absolutely worth the time and effort. Participants shared some of the emotions experienced during visitation with me:

"I always loved being able to see him and have like more in depth conversations and they're always a really sad thing at the end too…I'm just leaving them behind…like I get to leave. I get to like exit this like terrible environment that like I couldn't even stand to be on for six hours and they have to stay there forever." (Hannah)

"Like I said, it's super uncomfortable but I always feel that I always leave there feeling that…this is going to sound dumb, but that my love is renewed, or like dang, that's why I love him. You just feel that connection that you can't get over the phone…it's not the same and you just need that type of interaction. And then it's really hard as well though when you go to say goodbye, that's always hard. But the visit's always worth it." (Lucia)

"It's a basic, you know, hugging and, you know, loving and being you know you haven't seen him in six months, so…It's difficult. We're glad to see him he's glad to see us. And then during the course of the three and a half hours…it sort of degenerates into a session where he says, 'I'm not happy this is happening and this is happening' and 'it's…it's very stressful.' I end up you know, crying all the way home because of what we went through." (Clark)

Personal barriers. In addition to barriers imposed by the correctional facility, support providers face additional, more personal barriers that prevent consistent communication. The largest of these is financial barriers, as communication is expensive to maintain. Finances could also be seen as an institutional barrier, as the price for phones calls and emails is exorbitant; however, for many families, the choice to pay to communicate or provide commissary goods becomes a personal decision. When a partner or spouse gets incarcerated, many families experience a blow to the household income and finances become tight. If the inmate is lucky enough to have a job in the facility, they are able to earn some income and pay for some of the communication or commissary themselves, which takes some pressure off family members on the outside. Other personal barriers include perceived inmate accountability, balance, and humanity.

Financial issues. Oftentimes, families have to "budget" their communication with their incarcerated loved ones to keep themselves afloat at home. This is an incredibly difficult

decision; however, one of the only good things to come from the COVID-19 pandemic is the provision of free phone and email time for inmates. It is not much (an average of two, 10 minute phone calls and one free email a week), but for people who usually have to pay for every minute spent talking to their loved ones, it is a start. During their conversations with me, participants shared the way financial situations and the cost of communication have created tension at home, as well as a barrier to support provision:

"So usually we spend around $850 a month on the phone. It seems like a lot, but whenever you are trying to handle business, but when you're really planning on coming home and working towards coming home, there's a lot of business that you have to do. So if you just talk for one hour a day, that's $300 right there for a month, if you just talk for one hour a day." (Lisa)

"I keep enough money in his account so he can feel free to call me whenever he wants and usually…and now this is the guy that didn't used to communicate with us at all…I mean, as a little as possible…he didn't want us in his life. Now he calls me four times a day, which is one of the reasons that I'm still working. Because I should be retired, I'm 73." (Patty)

"Your kids go from seeing them every single day to seeing them twice a week…that's hard on the kids so if I did want to have an extra call it's $12 and 50 cents. Well, he was the breadwinner…I'm not…I was a stay at home mom and I was trying to find a job. So the money that I did have leftover, I had to pay other things. So my kids had to go without seeing their dad and you know that's hard. That's hard on them." (Alice)

A number of participants also mentioned that their loved ones would sometimes forgo needs in favor of paying for communication with their loved ones. Janet told a story about how her husband's tennis shoes were very worn out, but he had put off buying new ones to put all

money towards phone time and, eventually, the worn out shoes caused him to have an accident that severely injured his shoulder and ultimately forced him to have surgery. Similarly, Fay mentioned how much she enjoyed getting to have video visits with her daughter:

"We just can't afford to do more than once a month with those. When they don't have a lot of money on their books, it's like…I feel bad because I know every time that she schedules the video visit with me, that's just something that she can't buy on canteen then. And I live on my social security, so I can't send much, but I send all that I can."

Of course, there are less expensive communication options, such as sending mail or email messages; however, the delivery time lag of those messages can be tough, as Hannah previously mentioned. Shelly also mentioned that electronic messages can get easily misconstrued because you cannot hear the tone of voice people are using. When I asked participants what their preferred mode of communication was, most of them said in-person visitation, and since that was not an option currently, the phone, because it allowed for them to hear their loved one's voice and know they were safe and okay.

Inmate accountability. Another unexpected barrier to communication and support is whether or not the inmate takes accountability for themselves and/or the actions that landed them in a correctional facility. Similarly, individuals explained that it was easier to provide support if the inmate did not ask them for things. Participants talked about how communication with, and providing support to, the loved one was easier when they held themselves responsible and accepted their sentence, or worked to improve themselves during their incarceration time. Consider the following exemplars:

"I feel like Martin's grown a lot and that helps us to be really positive. As he would say he's really made a turn around. He said one thing that had helped him a lot is that early on, he

had admitted to the things that he had done and thus, when we would talk on the phone, he didn't feel like he had to be guarded about what he said, that he could just openly talk with us and talk with us about what was maybe coming up." (Joan)

"I think that was [a] line that as a family, we had to draw, both individually and corporately with him was we care about you, but we're not going to be a part of you're not going to be in any way supportive of how you're living…And when his behavior and all that started to it just made it so much easier to bring him back in or open the open those relationships, open your heart back up for him when he's now taking part in your relationship with him." (Eric)

"This whole process has really been a refining fire in my brother's life. It has really opened his eyes to the bad choices that he has made, and really, to be honest, I would say he's had a conversion. He's really a changed man. And so, because of that, it has really built our relationship, made it much closer. And we talk much more honestly with one another." (Renee)

It appeared to be the case that the ease of being a support provider was at least somewhat dependent on what inmates made of their time in prison. Jessa talked about how before her brother acknowledged and accepted his role in his incarceration, she did not speak with him as much because his attitude made it difficult. Hannah, who was estranged from her father for decades, was able to find out that he had remorse for his crimes, and that encouraged her to reconnect with him and rekindle their relationship. Patty shared similar sentiments about her son's "transformation." Some participants talked about how they held their inmate accountable and reminded them that it was their own actions that had led to their current circumstances:

"He was the one who chose meth over his two daughters. And so he put himself in that situation. And I don't know that I saw it that way. At the time, I honestly don't really remember. But now being older, being 22 years old and going through all the things that I did, and still

going through all the things that I am because of it. I know him, and it is 100% his fault for what he did." (Madison)

"And that's when I excused myself from the situation. Because I said, 'It is your choice…you chose not to take the medication that helps you…you chose not to do these things so…I will not help you out of this situation at all. Right now, this was you, this is on you. You figure this out. I can make sure that you're seeing your doctor. I can make sure that you're getting your needs met while you're in there, but I cannot get you out.'" (Alice)

"There were times where he would be he would want to feel sorry for himself. And I would never buy into that and if he would start that…I would say, 'Hey, you know, there's nothing that we can do about it.' He would want us to do things and he would start feeling sorry for himself and you know, I would just say, 'You know your choices are what got you here. So you just have to wait it out.'" (Christine)

Importantly, even when inmates were difficult to communicate with, the support providers in this study were resilient and persistent in making attempts to be supportive and communicate care and love to their family members.

Balance. Another personal barrier that came up frequently in the data set was balance. Participants talked about how they knew the person was in jail because they had done something bad, but at the same time, they are still a member of the family. The philosophy of many of the participants in this study was that the inmate was a good person who did a bad thing and, as a result, is facing the consequences for their actions. A great example of this tension was a story provided by Lucia:

"I don't send him a lot of money because I am a single mom and I don't have a lot of money to spend on that. And I probably could send him more than I do, but I also don't feel jail

should be a big party. I feel, you're there, you're being punished. I don't want to say he should have to suffer but I don't think that they should get all the perks…They'll get days where they can buy pizza. You can buy one pizza for your inmate and it's like $30 for one pizza. Well, first of all, I'm not going to do that because that's outrageous. And second of all, you put yourself in that position. I'm not going to take $30 away from my grocery money to make sure that you get a pizza."

Many family members struggled with the tension of how much to support (especially financially) and how much to advocate for their loved one. They acknowledged that prison is a punishment and place to "do your time," but that not all inmates deserve the same degree of punishment. In many of these conversations, participants talked about the vilification that inmates receive, and reinforce the truth that not everyone who is in prison has committed an atrocious crime. Even if the participant acknowledged that the incarceration was due to their loved one's actions being wrong, many offered reasoning and/or rationale for the necessity of the crime. Participants shared more about the conflicted feelings of balance and blame:

"Everybody has…has done stuff that they're not proud of right? Everybody has hurt people to varying degrees. If I'm allowed to make mistakes and be forgiven, like that's my that's my responsibility is to be able to forgive people too and there's a difference, obviously between forgiveness and enabling." (Eric)

"Sometimes it's hard to know what my role is and what's appropriate to intervene, because obviously he has done things that have gotten him in a situation he didn't like, and I get that. And so it's a struggle to know, what are prisoners owed? I've given that a lot of thought. What do I think they ought to get?" (Joan)

"I think it's important to realize that while it's easy to say this person is bad because they did a bad thing. I think it's also important to recognize that like, what makes someone a bad person? And is that a static judgment? Like, just because someone did something that's, you know, illegal or goes against societal rules, does that make them suddenly a villain?" (Bernie)

Humanity. There was also a subtheme of humanity under the umbrella of personal barriers. Many participants described the sometimes blurry line of understanding that inmates are incarcerated to pay penance for their crimes, but at the same time, they deserve to be treated as humans. I learned from my interviews that, in many correctional facilities, basic toiletries such as a toothbrush, toothpaste, or deodorant are not provided to inmates, and instead, must be purchased via commissary. Many stories centered on correctional facility guards or employees simply "not caring" about inmates. During COVID-19, the treatment of prisoners was especially tough to hear about, as they were often isolated together in small spaces and locked up for most of the day. Some inmates were locked in rooms alone for days at a time if they tested positive for the virus. Beverly's husband was assaulted and had his ribs broken because he was experiencing COVID symptoms and wanted to report them, but the men in his pod did not want to be quarantined. Many stories were shared with me about the way inmates were treated by the institution and staff, and how incarcerated loves ones should be treated more humanely:

"If you're in a cage, you probably are going to act like an animal. No matter what the person's done, they're still human. People make mistakes. I mean, even though there are probably people that won't change, but that doesn't mean they're not human. Maybe they will spend the rest of their lives in jail, but they still need humans to love them." (Christine)

"It's like they don't consider that the inmates are human beings. They treat them worse than animals." (Patty)

"Yeah, they dehumanize them and treat them like crap, like absolute dirt. He was in minimum security so nobody had done anything like super awful…well you know like little things. Not that crime's okay, but just the way they treat them is pretty bad." (Samantha)

Finally, participants reiterated time and time again that there was still love in their hearts for their loved ones, regardless of their crimes. However, I think it is important to note here that most participants did indicate that their level of support or involvement with the inmate would change based on their perceived severity of crime they committed (e.g., sex crimes or murder). Love is an important extension of the idea of humanity theme, because love and support play such a crucial role in an inmate's life when they are released, but can also lift their spirits during their sentence and keep them going. Participants explained their feelings of love:

"But at the end of the day, I love him and I want him to take this chance to...I don't know, fix himself, I guess. And I feel like the only way that somebody that's in prison is ever going to have a fighting chance is if they have a support system." (Lucia)

"I mean, we never stopped loving him even at his worst. Love covers a multitude of things. And yeah, love them, communicate with them. That is the way to healing." (Patty)

"Well, first you've got to show that you care and you love them regardless of what they did." (Carolyn)

Summary of research question two: Research question two emphasized the different types of barriers that disrupt the communication and support provision for families. Support providers experience both institutional and personal barriers that create challenges. Despite these barriers, support providers strive to maintain relationships with their incarcerated family members and do their best to stay connected with them. In this study, support providers balanced listening to and loving their inmates, while at the same time holding them accountable for their

actions and reminding them of their role in their incarceration. When participants' loved ones focused on bettering themselves in prison, or had a change in attitude or mindset, participants indicated that they were able to communicate more freely, openly, humanely, and thus to also provide support to them more easily.

Research Question Three: Impacts of Incarceration and Relationships

Research question three asked about how incarceration affects family systems broadly. The interview guide focused on the effects on the provider and their interpersonal relationship with the inmate and their outside family members, as well as how these relationships change as a result of a member of the family serving time in a correctional facility. Within a system of close-knit family members, if one person becomes incarcerated, the whole family experiences the effects. The outside family members can also experience some of the negative effects of support provision discussed in Chapter 2, such as emotional contagion, compassion fatigue, stress, and/or burnout. During interviews, I asked participants how their relationship with their loved one was prior to their incarceration and how it has changed since their incarceration. Additionally, for those whose loved one had been released, I asked about how the relationship has been since their loved one has been out. The following section outlines the three major subthemes detailing the effects that participants described as relevant to their status as the support provider of an incarcerated family member: (a) prison as a positive, (b) effects on the support provider, and (c) effects on the relationship.

Prison as a positive. Most participants were able to identify a sort of event, or series of events, which I refer to as the "triggering event," that led the person to be incarcerated. For many of the family members I talked with, prison was what actually saved the loved one from hurting themselves and others, or helped them stop a dangerous spiral. Some participants even explained

how when their loved one was spiraling, or out of control, there were times when they had thoughts that it would be a relief if the person was dead, because of the constant concern, worrying, and efforts to keep them on track were exhausting. Of course, none of the participants actually wished the loved one had died, but that was how they verbalized the constant feelings of fear and stress experienced when a loved one is out of control. Participants talked about how it sounded strange or counterintuitive, but prison was actually a good thing for the incarcerated individual and, in some instances, a relief for the family members:

"And that's hard to admit, you know, but because I knew where he was and I knew that he wasn't, you know, laying in a gutter somewhere. And so there was a lot of relief [while he was incarcerated]." (Gentry)

"There were rocky times, he was on drugs. So, yeah. He held down a job – he did that. So I mean…He's kind of thankful for the incarceration because it got him clean and he wants to be on the right path when he gets out." (Nikki)

"And him being incarcerated is probably the only reason that we ended up working it out you know? If he wouldn't have gone to prison. I don't know what happened. He sobered up and got away from those people and got himself together. I think that even though it was really hard and it was terrible, it was necessary and it improved our life. We're both doing better than we ever did before, you know, but it took a really big bump in the road to get there." (Samantha)

Whereas incarceration definitely has its negative effects on both inmates and families, in some cases, it provided stability and structure to an individual who was going down a bad path. Bernie mentioned that, for her, it might ease some of her emotional turmoil to know that her estranged brother was dead, rather than feeling the uncertainty of his condition and location. Many of the mothers of inmates in this study told me about how the incarceration was what their

son needed to wake up and straighten out their lives. Thus, while prison does challenge relationships, there are times when time in a correctional facility can be a necessary evil and an avenue for change.

Effects on the support provider. Having a family member who is incarcerated is stressful on its own, but trying to maintain connection, support, and communication with a loved one, through institutional and personal barriers that prevent effective support provision, is an added layer of strain and stress on supporters. I asked participants to tell me about what it is (or was) like to be a support provider for their incarcerated loved one, and if having that role ever takes a toll on them. Participants reported feeling alone often and that they did not always have a support system that fully understood what they were going through. Many shared that they do not get tired of being there for their inmate, but the system and the barriers can wear them down and cause incredible stress and anxiety. As evidenced by the participants in this study, being a support provider can be a very emotional responsibility:

"You love them and you will do anything for them. But there are days when it's overwhelming and tiring and you just think, 'I wish I wasn't carrying every single thing on my shoulders.' And sometimes they [inmates] *get resentful because there's nothing we can do."* (Janet)

"Sometimes I guess it just feels like he's got needs that are hard to meet, but yeah. So, it's a little bit hard to, oh, what's the word, separate his anxiety from my anxiety. When he's really agitated, I can take on some of that." (Joan)

"We go through a lot of what they go through. I'm not saying that we have it as bad as they do because we don't, but emotionally and mentally, we feel pretty close to how they feel. We feel like we're in prison too." (Fay)

The participants also talked at length about all the emotions they experience as support providers. A few of the participants noted how they may be having a great day, but their inmate calls and is having a bad day or is stressed, they can start to take on and feel that anxiety. In the same way, they talked about how if they miss their loved one's call, they feel extreme guilt. Both Fay and Lisa mentioned that they feel tethered to their phones, sometimes feeling scared to even take a shower for fear of missing a call. Participants reported often feeling conflicted in their feelings and having to learn to navigate their "new normal" and feeling unsure about how they are supposed to act and/or feel. For example, sometimes they feel anger at their family member for the situation they are in, but also feel a sense of familial loyalty to them and wanting to be as supportive as possible. Participants described the range of emotions they encounter as providers:

"It's like I tell my husband, 'I don't know how to feel about this whole experience.' On one hand, I'm always grateful for experiences that open my eyes. On the other hand, sometimes I tell him, 'I hate you for the experience we're having.'" (Chantal)

"I remember constantly being worried about what was going on because I had no idea what anything about the prison system was like. I didn't know anybody that had been to jail. I didn't know if the stereotypes were like real. Like if she was actually going to get like sexually assaulted while she was in there. I didn't know if she was going to get beat up. I had no idea. So I remember constantly being worried about that. But I was so angry that I didn't really care to ask." (Danielle)

"Oh…mixed emotions. I mean, he really knows how to break my heart. But I'm also very proud of him for everything he's overcome and I'm also still a little bit shocked and angry that it took getting it like such a horrible situation for anything to change, so I'm all over the place." (Rachel)

Support providers want to be sources of positivity and support, but also realize that their life on the outside needs to continue. There were a lot of feelings of guilt associated with being on the outside and continuing a normal life or doing regular, daily activities without the presence of their incarcerated family members. Navigating guilt for being on the outside, while also working to maintain their relationship with their incarcerated loved one goes back to the idea of balance discussed earlier. Participants acknowledged that the family member is incarcerated for a reason, and they are being punished, but it can be hard to continue on without them without feeling guilty:

"Sometimes you feel guilty, trying to have a normal father/daughter relationship with them or a parent relationship with them and that you feel like you always have to be supportive and every opportunity that you get to communicate with them should be a positive happy experience because you have such little communication with them." (Hannah)

"I just, I know that it's very, very lonely for them, like all like our lives still continue to go on. Even though all they probably do is sit there and think about it for a majority of the time. So the best way [to support them] *would be would be listen to them, talk to them, help them forget, help them move past it."* (Christine)

"There's definitely been some times where I feel like I need to be positive just because he's been in that situation for 24 years and it's just like, all right, you know, my problems seem trivial. I feel bad, you know, like talking about like my problems because you're in there type of thing…You know, it's like we have to live our lives out here." (Mollie)

Along with these feelings of guilt, support providers felt an obligation to be positive when communicating with their family members, even if they were having a rough day, because the amount of time they get to talk with their loved one is so limited. In the same vein, some

participants talked about feeling pressure to buy or do things for their incarcerated loved one because of their quality of life in the facility. There was quite a bit of discussion about feeling like being a source of positivity for the inmate was a big part of the support provider role, because they were not experiencing the hardships of incarceration that their loved one was enduring. Participants also explained feelings of pressure to act certain ways that came along with being the primary support giver to their loved one, especially if their loved one has no one else that supports or communicates with them:

"There is a certain like…obligation…he's from [state] originally and he has no family here, anything like that. And so if, if I'm not there when he gets out, then he's homeless and I don't wish that upon my worst enemy. You know, and so yeah I do feel like there's a certain obligation, like I have to be there. Or else he'll be… he'll be alone. If something were to happen to him. I think there'd be a lot of guilt. Like I could have prevented it. I could have done something to prevent it…So yeah, I definitely always felt like I had to be super positive when talking to him." (Alice)

"When he's having those bad days, I try to say stay positive think positive thoughts and kind of like, 'I know it sucks but you know there's nothing we can do right now,' is what I tell him. I like to think that situations can always be worse. I'll try to remind him like, 'Hey, listen, you could have 20 years, you could be doing life. You have six years, so that's like something to be so grateful for.'" (Shelly)

"I try to change the subject if he's going negative…And sometimes even, I have to actually say, 'Cole, can you…is there something good that happened? I'd like to hear something good. Did you make a friend?'…And he resists when he gets into the negative lows…he resists, you know?" (Clark)

Similarly, when I asked participants about honesty and if they were ever deceptive or inauthentic with their support and communication, most of them talked about consciously editing their conversations in certain ways (see McDaniel, 2017). Sometimes, the participants seemed like they were not being completely honest about how they were feeling or about the stressors they were experiencing because it did not seem fair to complain about their own lives in comparison to the inmate's. For many of the families, honesty and openness were highly valued in their communication, but even so, there were some things they did not share with the inmate. I received mixed responses to this question, as many participants asserted that they are 100% honest with their loved one and tell the truth all the time. However, even participants who mentioned complete honesty also talked about toeing a line of deception. As participants described it, they said they would never straight up lie to their loved one, but they did occasionally withhold information.

In the majority of these instances, participants talked about how the reason they were withholding information, or skating around a truth, especially with bad news, because there was nothing the inmate could do about the situation and it would upset them. However, many of the things they withheld were trivial in nature. It was common for support providers to mention that their withholding of information was often more altruistic in nature or "protective" of the inmate, because if they shared a problem or bad news, the inmate would have nothing to do but ruminate on the situation, and they did not want the inmate to feel bad about something they did not have control over. Consider the following examples:

"I don't want to complain about anything. I don't want to leave them with a less than positive feeling after we've talked or written. My daughter and I promised, swore to each other, that we wouldn't hold anything back. If anything was going on, we would keep no secrets. So I

have an appointment to go see a cardiologist tomorrow, and I told her about it because I've been having some heart problems. So I told her about it, but I fibbed a little bit and said, 'It's just my yearly checkup. I may cry after the phone call, but I'm positive and happy during the phone call." (Fay)

"We have so much going on that there's no point in filling his head with all the bad that we have…that we were dealing with the fire and everything else. Now if it's something else he needs to know, yes. But something that is going to upset him because we're going through a hard time…I don't really say a lot." (Megan)

"The only time I withhold information is about something that might make him feel like he couldn't do something. For instance, I was sent flowers by a friend for my birthday, and I have not told him that, because I don't want him to feel bad that he couldn't do that. So, I just never mentioned it, because I don't want him to ever feel like he's less than something, or not a good boyfriend for not being able to do that kind of stuff." (Alicia)

In contrast, some participants offered explanations why they chose to be 100% honest with their incarcerated loved ones, even when it was hard. A couple of the participants really put this idea into perspective, because they mentioned that they would not want to deliver bad news or anything negative to a loved one at any time, even if they were not incarcerated. Thus, though the incarceration and location of the inmate can make a support provider deliberate about whether or not to share information; ultimately, these individuals chose to share everything:

"So yeah, I have had a number of cancer scares. Thankfully none of them have come to fruition, but biopsies and procedures and stuff like that. And it's scary. And do I want to have to tell Dennis these things? No, but I also wouldn't want to tell him that if we were sitting in the living room together either. So no, we pretty much don't keep things from each other." (Janet)

"Be completely open and honest about what's going on the outside so that they can have a full picture in their head. You know, because if they find like the truth is going to come out like one way or another. So if they find out later on that you or someone withheld the truth about, you know, something that they would possibly care about. It's really detrimental to the relationship." (Mollie)

Eric, who works in a prison, shared a really interesting perspective on deciding whether or not to disclose information with inmates:

"One thing that has an influence on me from my job is when I hear guys talk about like…'Yeah, my family said that they didn't tell me about this thing because they didn't want me to worry about it, or they didn't want me to get upset.' But then like they find out later and they're upset because they weren't told earlier told before. So the idea that because he's in prison, he can't handle something…I don't allow myself to use that as an excuse not to share something. I try to think about myself in his position right? It would upset me, no matter where I was. Ultimately, why does that what does that location [prison] make so much difference?"

The decision on whether to be honest with your loved one who is incarcerated, even when it is difficult or potentially upsetting, can be a tough call to make. While it is true that inmates are typically in a grim situation and under stress, this does not necessarily mean that they cannot handle information. The family members who know the inmate most intimately have to make this decision to the best of their abilities. Based on discussions with participants in this study, it appears that, for the most part, support providers are honest in their communication with loved ones about what they deem to be important topics, but for less pressing topics, there is some level of editing or withholding.

Effects on interpersonal relationships. Incarceration took a toll on not only the relationship between the inmate and their primary support provider, but it also took a toll on the provider's relationships with their other family members and, in some cases, friends. I think it is important to mention that for the most part, the people I interviewed considered themselves to be the primary (or even sole) support provider for the inmate, and as such the incarceration likely affected their interpersonal relationship more so than it does for a more distant provider. The majority of the interviewees were very close to the inmate by way of relationship: sibling, mother/father, or spouse/partner. The incarceration strengthened some relationships, and put a strain on others. In some situations, the degree of strength or strain varied over time, depending on the circumstances. Moreover the reason for the incarceration also had an impact on relationships.

Having one partner incarcerated very much affected romantic relationships, as the participants described to me. The dynamic of the relationships changed but, in some ways, the relationship grew stronger as the couple relied heavily on effective communication. However, the participants also described a lot of tension in trying to support all the needs of the inmate, but also picking up the slack at home and balancing responsibilities elsewhere:

"Our relationship now is...Now we're both struggling and fighting for our lives. So, it's just different. There was a lot of comfort and fun things, and compatible things, and now it's more trying to help each other stay the course, do what's right. So, I would say more trying to be a rock of friends versus husband and wife, because there is no real fantasy-land, husband-and-wife relationship in prison." (Chantal)

"And so I think our relationship has kind of started to crumble…because he thinks I should be able to do more, but he doesn't understand the struggle that it is trying to talk to these

people [prison staff]. You have to make a choice between your kids or this…and if it was just me, I'd fight to the death but I've also got two little kids that need me to. And I can't keep splitting myself up like this." (Alice)

"I'm like, I don't have time to play games, or figure out, you know, your sobriety. You either want to be sober or you don't. You either want to do good or you don't. And that's kind of where I was with him and I kind of pretty much said that if this happens again and you don't want to choose better for your life, I'm not going to stick around. I mean, as tough as that sounds." (Shelly)

For participants with siblings or parents who were, or who had been, incarcerated, the feelings were often similar to those with incarcerated romantic partners but, in some cases, there appeared to be more negative emotions associated with the inmate. This may be because when siblings or parents are incarcerated, there is much more family history and/or obligation involved, versus a romantic partner who the participant may not have known as long. Participants reported a lot of anger or frustration at being in the situation because of the person, but the family ties bind strongly and thus keeps them putting in the effort:

"I think, from the moment he started disappearing is when I started to get a negative connotation towards him. I've always resented him. I always have been angry towards him. Now, even more so. And then him going to prison, just like if it was a friend, it would be different because that's something you can exclude from your life, but a father is a lot harder to do." (Madison)

"It's just the system that's making it difficult and exacerbating things that are just normal things that other parents and children go through, you know?…But yeah, I felt like there was always like there were so many ways that we couldn't be a father and daughter, because he was

incarcerated. So, I mean, we still were, but like, and because we had had so many years of not being connected, so it just more felt like he was my friend…someone I could talk to, someone I could confide in." (Hannah)

In contrast, for participants whose incarcerated loved one was spiraling out of control, or who did not have a close relationship prior to their incarceration, the incarceration actually brought them closer because they talked and interacted more often than before. Consider the following examples:

"I think we got closer because we kind of like fell out of touch for a bit and then he didn't really have an option to change his phone number. And he said that, like most of his friends didn't even write him or his girlfriend didn't write him, so he was kind of like forced to talk to his family." (Zara)

"I think we were definitely in kind of on rocky waters before she was incarcerated. There was obviously a lot of stuff leading up to her incarceration that kind of tested the relationship…And then I think we actually got a little bit closer when she was incarcerated, just because I was able to talk to her without her husband just trying to block my communication with her essentially. We had more to talk about I think when she was in prison, so we talked more." (Cassidy)

"I think definitely the fact that he was my brother affected a lot of the ways that I chose to interact with him. The fact that he was my brother, and that he was my family was what made me always give him the benefit of the doubt and was always willing to visit him and willing to listen and write letters and read his letters." (Bernie)

During the interviews, I also asked participants about how their relationships were with people other than the inmate. In some instances, participants felt caught in the middle, or like

"the messenger" and, as such, reported distancing themselves from some of their own support system to protect them from some of the emotional turmoil. For others, relationships with their families got stronger, as they pulled together to support the inmate, or the families were supportive of the support provider and the inmate's romantic relationship:

"My relationship with his mother was strengthened…I actually got really close to her…she didn't have much money, she was in debt and stuff. So, I actually gave her some money to help her communicate with him for a little. And then I let her communicate with him to my account while I was down there once." (Gina)

"My family members don't like him and they think I'm wasting my time. But my relationship with his family, I think it has strengthened our relationship but because they don't do anything for him, absolutely nothing. They know that I am his provider and if they want to know an update on him, they call me. If they need to tell him something, they call me to pass the information along because they don't have any communication with him because they can't afford to." (Molly)

"I think that his struggles really brought out, or brought to light, some of the dysfunction in the communication within my family and for some people it triggered them to start getting healthier emotionally, and so I think I think in a lot of ways we've all had to mature and grow and in our own personal lives. I think that all of us are in better places now, in part, as a result of how chaotic, it was for him." (Eric)

For other participants, the incarceration put a strain on outside relationships. Many people explained how they felt judged by their connection to an incarcerated individual. Other participants talked about their immediate families not supporting the romantic relationship, or in some cases, the continuation of support of an inmate who had burned many bridges with their

family. In many cases, participants made choices to connect with incarcerated family members and provide support (both tangible and via communication), even when other family members had written them off. For example, Gentry, whose twin brother was incarcerated, continued to stay in contact with her brother, even though her parents had decided to cut off communication with him. Other participants shared some of their experiences:

“It's hurt my relationships. My parents…think I should just leave, but it's just not that simple. It's not as simple as that and they don't understand that. So I think that's really put a strain on the relationship with my parents and my sister.” (Alice)

“Because I was the one communicating with him, they would always ask me questions. You know, like what's going on. How's he doing. Um, so I definitely felt caught in the middle of that of those relationships...And then if I put money on his books, my, you know, my mom would always be upset because we knew he was going to go use it for drugs or whatever.” (Gentry)

“With other family, it's definitely been strained…in their opinion, I could do so much better so on and so forth. Me and my mom have fallen out, my daughters both of them and my son and even my ex-husband. But now everybody's just like whatever because it's been so long and because they see, they had to realize who I am and I'm not just going to run out and hook up with some gangster thug.” (Lisa)

Summary of research question three. Research question three illustrated the challenges of being a support provider to someone who is incarcerated. There were instances when prison provided an avenue for positive relational change, as some participants discussed becoming closer with their family member during their incarceration. Participants also shared the hardships of being a support provider and feeling like there was a lot of pressure to be a source of positivity and encouragement for the incarcerated individual. Finally, results for research question three

highlight the impact of incarceration on interpersonal relationships—between spouses, siblings, and parents and their children. Participants also shared how their outside relationships with their families or the inmate's family have been affected by the incarceration. Not one participant remarked that the incarceration did not affect their relationship to the inmate in some way or another, no matter how close or distant the relationship. In many ways, the results of this dissertation research feature the more unspoken side of incarceration research, as the experiences, tensions, and conflicted feelings of the support provider are not always highlighted. Incarceration affects relationships from all angles and the burden is often on the support provider to figure out how to manage and maintain the connection.

Overall Summary of Results

The experiences participants shared as part of this dissertation research very clearly illustrate the answers to the research questions guiding this study. For research question one, regarding types and forms of support, providers noted certain types of support that they perceived were most useful for their incarcerated family member, including the idea and importance of communication as support and a "lifeline." For research question two, focusing on the barriers that make communication difficult, participants talked in depth about both institutional and personal barriers that make the provision of support to an incarcerated individual even more challenging. Finally, with research question three, participants described the experience of being a support provider and how the incarceration has affected their interpersonal relationships, both with the inmate and outside relationships.

Participants' responses illuminated many of the issues with the prison system, and make a case for a revision in many prison policies, as well as the need for additional programming and rehabilitation programs within the system. COVID-19 protocols also highlighted very specific

constraints that challenge communication and social support systems, and underscores the role of communication as a “lifeline.” Chapter 5 features the theoretical and practical implications of this study, as well as limitations and directions for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study focused on gaining more understanding about the process of support and communication among families with an incarcerated member. Specifically, the family members shared their insight on how they showed support, their motivation behind using certain types of support, and finally, the aspects of being a support provider that are especially challenging. The timing of this study was critical, as the COVID-19 pandemic had greatly affected the families of incarcerated individuals, as they were without in-person visitation and, at the same time, facing greater restrictions on communication. By doing this research, I was able to capture the stories of participants with an incarcerated family member who were particularly frustrated and discouraged by numerous communication barriers placed between themselves and their loved ones. It is important to note that *not* all of the facility-imposed communication barriers were new due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Difficulties in communication with an incarcerated individual by way of finances and access have always existed and been a challenge for families to overcome. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and its novelty created a system of constantly changing rules and policies (without communication to inmate families) that made inmate's access to communication resources (mail, electronic kiosks, phones) unpredictable and anxiety-inducing for support providers.

Communication is vital between incarcerated individuals and their family members, and any factor that adds stress or complications to communication can have dire effects on the interpersonal relationships of those involved. Research has suggested that when family members who are incarcerated maintain social connections with their loved ones, they have more positive experiences and behavior within the correctional facility, but also have decreased rates of recidivism upon their release (Cochran; 2014; Loper & Tuerk, 2011; Monahan et al., 2011;

Pettus-Davis et al., 2011). Thus, findings from this study highlight the shortcomings of correctional facilities in their communication and visitation policies, and reinforce the idea that these policies are in dire need of reform. If correctional facilities can make it easier for families to support their incarcerated loved ones, they increase the chances of maintaining family ties during incarceration and, as a result, give inmates the best chance possible of positive post-incarceration outcomes.

Brief Summary of Results

The participants in this study provided in-depth insight to help to address the three research questions guiding this study by explaining their experiences with the prison system. The first research question asked how family members show their support to incarcerated loved ones. The participants clearly illustrated the support types featured in Cutrona et al.'s (1997) support typology (i.e., tangible, esteem, emotional, network, and informational), and that each support type was utilized in some way. This indicated that being a support provider is dynamic and that varying types and amounts of support are needed at different times and, in most instances, it was up to the support provider to deduce what type of support might be most useful at the time. Research question one also illuminated the supreme importance of communication in inmate and family relationships, as it functioned like a "lifeline." Consistent communication allowed the families a way to know that their loved one was alive and well, but in contrast, also informed them that something may be wrong (e.g., their loved one was not getting their medications or had been assaulted). Further, the absence of communication was an alert for family members that the inmate did not have access to communication, which could indicate that the inmate was sick or in isolation (or worse).

Research question two concentrated on identifying the institutional and personal barriers and challenges that support providers encounter when working to maintain connection and support to their incarcerated loved ones. The correctional facilities charge an exorbitant rate for inmates to communicate with people on the outside. However, because many facilities do not give inmates the opportunity to have a job, or if inmates do have a job, the wage is not enough to cover any significant amount of communication, the burden falls to family members to pay for communication. There were some participants whose family members had industry jobs where they were paid a living wage, and those inmates often also had more unrestricted access to phones, but in a majority of the situations, participants in this study paid for all communication with the inmate. The cost of communication, as well as the cost of providing inmates with items that they need, such as clothing or toiletries, was one of the most frequently cited barriers to support and communication among providers in this study.

There were countless other obstacles that the correctional facility imposed on family members that made the support process difficult. Participants talked in detail about trying to get information from the prison and being given vague and unhelpful information, if they were able to talk to someone at all. In-person visitation featured its own collection of barriers, and more than one participant remarked that it felt like the facilities intentionally made visitation stressful and intimidating to discourage them from coming back. Research question two also highlighted the need for humanity in correctional facilities, both in how they treat inmates and how they treat family members during in-person visitation. Participants mentioned having a hard time finding a balance between how much to support or advocate for how their loved one was treated while incarcerated, while at the same time realizing they are in prison for a reason and should not necessarily have every comfort available.

Research question three honed in on the experiences of the support provider and the impact the incarceration has had on themselves and their interpersonal relationships, both with the inmate and with their outside friends and family. Learning more about what support providers go through and how they decide to support and communicate (or not) was extremely valuable to this study. Many participants mentioned that no one had ever asked how the incarceration affected them, and so I believe this is an area that needs more attention and research.

It is clear from this dissertation research that, support providers do not get enough credit for all that they do to maintain their relationships with inmates and, as a result, those relationships are often very one-sided. A few participants mentioned that their relationship with their inmate spouse has changed greatly. For example, Chantal mentioned that her husband feels more like her child right now. Likewise, Beverly mentioned that, from her point of view, she gives and gives, with very little return on her support investment. Janet likened the experience to caring for a terminally ill spouse. Support providers are most often in the role of support provider, rather than receiver, which can occasionally lead to some burnout and fatigue (Figley, 1998; Hochschild, 2003), which begs the question, who is there to support the support providers when they need support?

As mentioned previously, support providers do much more than meets the eye. They do more than just answer the phone when their loved one calls. They schedule their day around when they might expect a phone call, they work extra hours or put off retirement so they have funds to pay for communication, and/or they drive multiple hours for a one day visit with their loved one. They also deal with an almost constant roller coaster of emotion caused by the uncertainty of having a loved one in the unpredictable criminal justice system.

On a more communicative level, support providers are able to anticipate or decipher what type of support or encouragement their inmate might need, based solely off their tone of voice on the phone that day. They provide positivity to inmates who are struggling. They learn how to communicate very effectively in short time periods and share information about their day-to-day lives that allows inmates to still feel like part of a family. Alice summed it up beautifully when she mentioned that she may only get to talk to her husband for 15 minutes a day, but she focuses on making that the best 15 minutes of his day. Support providers do not always get social support in return for their provision, but they continue to provide it, so as to prioritize and maintain their relationships. The support process is a cyclical in nature, as the more time and investment families put into their inmate during the incarceration, the better chance the inmate has when they are released. Support providers are doing incredibly important work, despite the barrage of barriers they face. The findings of this dissertation research offer some compelling theoretical and practical contributions.

Theoretical Contributions

The results from this research suggest contributions to both a communication privacy management (CPM) perspective and a relational dialectics theory (RDT) perspective. The following sections highlight key theoretical connections and suggestions for extensions of these two communication theories.

Communication privacy management theory. Several attributes of this study specifically address tenets and assumptions of Petronio’s (1991) communication privacy management theory (CPM). This theory focuses on how individuals “control the flow” of information (i.e., what gets shared and to whom). Petronio (2010) explains that sharing information almost always involves a dialectical tension that necessitates untangling by

communicators in order to find the ideal line between connection with close family members and living as an autonomous self. It is especially interesting to look at the experiences of participants in this study, as there is no such thing as private communication within the walls of a correctional facility. Those individuals who regularly communicate with loved ones have to constantly make choices about what information to share and what information to keep private.

The participants in this study felt a host of tensions regarding how to make the best use of their extremely limited and controlled communication with their loved ones (limited by both time and financial constraints). On one hand, there was a desire to be honest with the incarcerated individual about what was truly going on the outside, but there was also a desire to use the brief allotted phone or email communication to always be a positive a source of encouragement for the incarcerated individual. Complicating matters even more, all communication is monitored and/or recorded by correctional facility staff, which adds another complex layer to the privacy and disclosure of information. There was also the process of deciding what parts of the incarcerated individual's experience would be shared widely among extended family and friends, as well as and what information would be kept private. Under CPM, when information is shared, both participants in the conversation now "own" the information and can decide how it is disseminated (Petronio, 2010).

Participants discussed in detail their sense-making process of how they navigated what information to share, and what information to keep private. An idea that came up repeatedly was the worth or value of the information sharing, which CPM would consider the perceived "cost" of the disclosure. Several family members mentioned that sharing certain information might ruin an inmate's day, and knowing that the inmate would get upset because they had no control over it, could just make it even more difficult. For example, Alice explained, *"If I'm stressed out with*

what's going on, or whatever, and I come on and I show any sign of stress, then it stresses him out more which stresses me out more and it's just a never ending cycle on those phone calls, you know? So I definitely always felt like I had to be super positive when talking to him."

Participants talked frequently about knowing that their loved one was in a tense place, enduring stressful things, and not wanting to add to that difficulty, and in doing so, would edit their conversations with regard to what they chose to disclose or withhold. Clark mentioned *"I think that's one of the most frustrating things for him is that he, he's there, he's in an undesirable location with…scary things going on and he is not sure that we all realize how much stress he's under and I'd like to say, you know, we're under stress here, too."* Shelly also mentioned not sharing things like being unsure how the rent was going to be paid that month, but choosing not to share it because it was better for her partner to think everything was okay for his family on the outside.

In the same way, participants explained how their incarcerated loved one was selective about what information they would share about life on the inside, and what they might withhold for their family's sake. Alicia mentioned, *"He doesn't want me to know what it's like in there, and he doesn't want to take up our phone time to tell me that kind of stuff…he just doesn't want me to know what it's like in there."* Many participants had similar experiences to Alicia and her partner, mentioning that their inmate was very reluctant to share detail about their experiences and instead focused on wanting to learn information about the outside. Under CPM, this situation would be referred to as a disproportionate boundary, as one of the communicators is sharing less than another (Petronio & Durham, 2015), and this can potentially be a source of relational turmoil. However, most of the family members in this study were understanding of why their

loved one did not want to share details about their experiences and was instead focused on outside life.

The tenets of CPM mesh well with this study, as privacy is always a concern as individuals communicate with incarcerated loved ones. All information shared in communicative instances is inherently not private due to the both the public communication settings set up by the prison (e.g., phones and kiosks are out in the open and next to each other; conversations can be easily overheard) and the facility's constant monitoring of all communication. Therefore, privacy concerns regarding personal information are always at stake because there is no "private" mode for communicating and it can be difficult to control information dissemination. A few participants mentioned coming up with coded language to communicate certain terms or ideas with their loved ones that are able to pass by without being flagged. However, deciding what information to disclose (and what not to disclose) goes further than understanding that the communication is monitored.

Participants do not want to share upsetting information with inmates, but at the same time, they do not want to be perceived as being dishonest and/or withholding information. This is consistent with CPM's assumption that "when people disclose, they manage a friction; a push and pull" (Petronio & Durham, 2015, p. 337). Thus, it would be interesting for future research to take a more focused look how loved ones and incarcerated individuals decide what information to share and what to withhold as they manage privacy boundaries, and how they manage boundary turbulence, all under the lens of CPM. In line with a CPM, a similar communication theory, Relational dialectics theory, also has implications for the idea that managing and shared information is a nonlinear process.

Relational dialectics theory. The tensions felt by participants that was highlighted in the previous section regarding their privacy boundaries also illuminates implications for Baxter's (1990, 2004) Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT). However, the tension felt by participants in this study went beyond simply deciding how and what information to disclose and what to keep private. Relational dialectics theory (RDT, Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) focuses on how individuals make meaning of competing discourses and highlights that communication is not black and white, but rather, involves processing and working through these tensions in order to communicate effectively in relationships. Often, these tensions involve a push and pull between what we want and what we need. However, in the context of the present study, most often, the relational tensions involved support givers balancing what their loved one wanted and/or needed, and how they as the support giver wanted to (or thought they should) respond. As an example, under RDT, the feeling of tension regarding what information to share with an inmate and what to keep private would likely fall under the relationship dialectic of openness versus closedness (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Within this dissertation study, family members reported tension in a variety of aspects of their life with an incarcerated loved one, which I believe allows for RDT to be extended with additional dialectical tensions. There is a lot of nuance and layers to the experiences of family members experiencing the effects of loved ones who are (or who have been) incarcerated. The strain they felt usually guided how a family member decided to interact with their incarcerated loved one, and often came from a place of reflection, where family members had created a metaphorical line in their minds that gave some outline of how far they would go in terms of finance, support, or communication with a loved one.

One of the most common tensions was knowing that the inmate might have done something wrong to be put in a correctional facility, but that does not mean that they should not be treated like humans. The previously mentioned quote from Christine is a prime example of this feeling: *"No matter what the person's done they are still human, People make mistakes…but that doesn't mean they're not human."* In the context of RDT, I would call this tension responsibility versus humanity, as support providers struggle with finding their role in the situation, and finding the balance between the two ideas.

A second tension described was the support provider deciding how much they should advocate for the inmate from the outside versus how much responsibility should be on the inmate. This could be seen as an extension of the autonomy and connection dialectic (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). Linda illustrated this idea well, as she talked about how her son often wants her to call the prison to get things done for him (e.g., another inmate stole his property), but she tends to only call if his safety or well-being is truly at stake. Participants discussed experiencing strain from these blurred lines as they have to determine their role and decide what they will and will not do in these tough situations. From an RDT perspective, I would label this dialectical tension provider intervention versus inmate autonomy, as support providers try to determine where the "line" is for their involvement in the inmate's correctional facility experiences.

Finally, there was a third common tension across participants' stories in feeling the need to be a support provider to their inmate, and also needing to be an individual, outside the incarceration. Participants talked about how it was sometimes difficult to have their own life outside of their care and support tasks. They discussed scheduling not only their daily lives, but really their entire being around the correctional facility's schedule and the needs of their incarcerated loved one. Participants highlighted the struggle of feeling like their role of support

provider was serious and they needed to be that provider for their loved ones, but also sometimes feeling overwhelmed and not wanting to "have" to be there all the time. There is a lot of pressure on the support provider role in the context of this research, because for many people, if you are not supportive or available, the inmate has no one else. This dialectic could be an extension of Baxter and Braithwaite's (2010) connection versus autonomy dialectic – the desire to feel connected to their incarcerated loved one, while simultaneously feeling like they have their own lives.

In many instances, the participant was the sole supporter for the inmate, as many friends or family had turned their backs or chosen not to be involved. For example, Gentry was the sole support provider for her husband and she explains the strain:

"It's difficult. There were definitely many points where I just wanted to pull away and just not deal with it, but then the guilt. It is stressful, especially if you're the only person [supporting.] I think I would have had someone to lean on it may have been a little easier. That pushed me to be there more, you know, to be more available and really try to answer the phone every time he called and I may not have felt like that I may not have felt that pressure if someone else had been supporting [him]too."

Again, the study participants' experiences are nuanced and complex, because they have been put in a situation involuntarily, and the situation is intense and emotionally draining. In the outside world, we can fairly easily pick and choose what relationships to be in and most are transactional, meaning there is a natural back and forth of providing and receiving social support. The individuals in this situation are put there because of someone else's actions, and if they do not step into the role, someone else (i.e., the inmate) will suffer greatly. There is pressure not only on the relationship between the loved one and the support provider, but often, the support

provider is also responsible for helping maintain other relationships, such as a spouse making sure their kids stay connected to their incarcerated parent, even if the maintenance of that relationship causes a lot of stress to the parent on the outside.

In my view, the theoretical assumptions driving CPM and RDT offer a unique lens through which to better understand the nuanced privacy boundary navigations, tensions, and the push and pull present in support providers' relationships with their incarcerated loved ones. It is especially interesting to examine given the somewhat involuntary nature of the support relationship and the restricted access to both the inmate and communication. There may be some parallels to be drawn to existing literature, especially those focused on medical patients and their caregivers (Faw, 2018; MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011) and military spouses (Merolla, 2010; Sahlstein-Parcell & Baker, 2018) as both involve a support provider potentially being in a situation where support is paramount to the relationship, but at the same time, the communicative partner was put in a more one-sided support provider role that is, at a level, compulsory to relational maintenance. Both military spouses and families with an incarcerated member experience separation from a family member, but one is for a "heroic" reason, and one is more negatively valanced. In the same way, in both CPM and RDT, information may be edited or withheld for the sake of the receiver, as is often the case with this study's population, medical caregivers, and military spouses. Thus, there are many aspects of this study that could be studied in deeper and more focused context that would provide further insight into tenets of both CPM and RDT.

Practical Contributions

The participants in this study provided a wealth of evidence that allow me to make recommendations for policy reform in correctional facilities. These recommendations are not

applicable to all correctional facilities, but encompass prison systems on a general level, so not all recommendations apply to all institutions. It is also important to note that these suggestions are in no way solving the larger and more complex issues that plague the criminal justice system in the United States. Rather, this study focuses solely on improvements that could be made to improve interpersonal communication and relationships between incarcerated individuals and their families, because when inmates have ample support from the outside, they are more like to have more success upon release. This study proposes three amendments to current correctional facility policy that would improve the lives of both inmates and those that support them, and each proposal is written directly from evidence provided by this study's participants: (a) communication is vital, (b) the standardization of correctional facilities and programming, and (c) better programming within and outside prisons.

Communication is vital. Communication is crucial for both inmates and their families and provides a source of stability and connection that is irreplaceable. When participants were asked to provide the best strategies to support inmates, the most frequent response was communication, in some form or another. At the onset of COVID-19, all in-person visitation was cancelled nationwide, and continued for months. At the time of this writing (January 2022), in-person visitation is still inconsistent. Some facilities have let vaccinated individuals in for visitation in conjunction with many other rules. Other facilities have not reinstated in-person visitation. Further, as a multi-year pandemic sees the Omicron variant of the coronavirus continue to ravage the world, it is likely that in-person visitation is at-risk of shutting down completely once again. For many families, the reality was that they were unable to see their inmate in person for a minimum of 14 months, and potentially even longer, depending on restrictions at the facility.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), for over a year (March 2020-May 2021), families have had to rely on phone, video chat, and email to maintain their relationships. For the first time ever, given the pandemic, most but not all prisons allotted some level of free communication provided on a weekly basis. Participants reported different ranges of access, but the most common provision was two free 10-minute phone calls per week, one free video visit (this was much less common), and one free text or free email on one day of the week. This is essentially nothing in terms of what communication can be accomplished within those parameters, but for those who have never been able to afford communication at all, or for those who have to put money on their inmate's books, it was a welcome adaptation. Thus, I strongly recommend that correctional facilities should make these COVID communication concessions permanent. If financially, facilities are able to make these accommodations during COVID, they should be able to maintain the processes post-pandemic.

Inmates should be entitled to some degree of free communication. With access to free communication, inmates would have at least some access to people outside of the institution. This would aid them in maintaining their social ties that are so important to the rehabilitation process. Further, having some free communication would take a bit of stress and burden off of family members who have to pay for communication. As a result, inmates might receive more frequent communication, especially for those whose families that currently cannot afford any communication at all. This would open the doors for many inmates, and ensure that every single incarcerated individual has some degree of access and connection to their outside social networks. I acknowledge that this is likely an optimist's view of how free communication in the prison system could function, and that it would be up to inmates to use their free communication

and use it productively; however, I firmly believe that, regardless, inmates deserve access to free communication.

Additionally, all correctional facilities should implement video visitation for inmates. Few participants in this study had an inmate family member with access to video chats, but those that did, truly enjoyed the visits. There were also instances where, because of the nature of their conviction, even if the facility had video chat capabilities, the inmates were not granted access. Video visits could be a major asset to inmates and give them more consistent access to their families. Video visitation would also lessen the burden on support providers who have to: (a) travel, (b) deal with prison environments, (c) financially plan for visits, and (d) make it possible to meet with their inmate face-to-face on a regular basis, with relatively low barriers.

The literature is clear about how important in-person visitation is for inmates, and while video chats may not be entirely the same, similar results are likely possible. A recent 2021 study by Duwe and McNeeley suggests that video visits cannot replace in-person visitation entirely, but they can be equally effective in reducing recidivism. However, the same study found that video visitation was used very sparingly in the facility that was studied, and the authors suggest that this was likely due to technology failure, incompatible vendor software, and/or the financial cost of a video visit (Duwe & McNeely, 2021). Each of the barriers suggested by Duwe and McNeely (2021) was also a common theme with regard to the barriers identified as complications to communication in the present study. Clearly, there is work to be done in both improving and implementing digital communication channels.

Standardization of correctional facility policies and programming. The second recommendation for policy change involves the standardization of correctional facility communication policies and programming. If this could happen at least at a state level, I argue

that the amount of phone time, free COVID-19 communication, and tablet/kiosk outlets should be standardized. Several participants talked about how, if their inmate was moved to a new location, they either had a new set of rules regarding their access to communication, or the facility used a different set of digital communication applications that the support providers had to learn. The same was true if multiple family members were housed in separate institutions—the family member had to be fluent in the guidelines and resources of two facilities. The amount of variance in just the Kansas prison system in regard to what inmates had access to was shocking. I understand that there are different levels of security and different types of prison, but I do not think just because one prison is maximum security and one is minimum should necessarily influence what communication channels inmates can access. For example, if the free communication program was implemented, it would be ideal to be able to say that, if a person is incarcerated in Kansas, here is what they are guaranteed: (a) two free 10-minute phone calls per week, (b) five free emails a week, and (c) one video visitation per week, no matter what their location or crime. This is of course, barring location-specific exceptions on a prison-to-prison basis, such as lockdowns, isolation, or other emergencies.

In addition, each prison and jail in the state should implement the same application for email and video chats and prioritize keeping it functional. Disruptions in the digital application systems or broken phones or kiosks translate directly to disruptions in communication and connection among families. Having the same amount of communication time and using the same application statewide would streamline the communication process and prevent families from having to learn new systems if their inmate is transferred, and allows the communication line to remain connected and stable.

Better programming within and outside of prisons. The third recommendation for policy change is the need for better programming within prisons and outside them, for inmates and families alike. Participants frequently shared their desires for their loved one to receive mental health services or rehabilitation services during their incarceration. Similarly, many individuals discussed the need for inmates to be able to learn practical life skills (e.g., typing, finance, technology) during their stay, so when inmates are released, the world is not completely foreign for them, especially for those inmates with decades-long stays. Most correctional facility websites boast a range of programming available to inmates, but families reported that the programs either did not exist, or were not otherwise available to their loved one.

I again recognize that this study provides a one-sided account of someone not directly involved with the prison system, but most of the participants seemed to be well-versed in available programs and many had called the prison themselves and tried to get their inmate enrolled in programming to no avail. The recidivism rate in the United States is extremely high, with approximately 50% of inmates being incarcerated again within three years of their release (ODPHP, 2020). Part of the reason for re-incarceration could be due to not enough preparation being done for inmates who are being released back into the world. The California Innocence Project (2021) also suggests that high recidivism rates in the United States are due in part to a national move away from rehabilitation and towards punishment. Participants spoke to me about the programming their loved ones had access to, mentioning that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings were available but not taken seriously, or the provided classes were not teaching any sort of real-world, life skill. For example, Beverly mentioned that her husband took a “stress management” course, but the activities involved things like coloring, rather than practical skills or strategies that most inmates could likely benefit from. It was also

reported that classes or AA/NA meetings were often taken away as punishments, which could reduce consistency and, in turn, overall efficacy.

In this study, nearly every support provider was able to pinpoint a series of behaviors that ultimately lead to their loved one's incarceration. Thus, if we can get inmates legitimate and consistent treatment for their mental health, as well as potential drug and/or alcohol abuse during their incarceration, they should become better prepared to come back into the world and get back on their feet quicker, rather than having to rely on immediately getting into such programs upon their release. Inmates are released back into the world grossly unprepared for the host of stressors that await them. Some of the simplest things that help a person get on their feet (e.g., finding a place to live and a job) have restrictions on renting to or hiring ex-inmates. It is no wonder that people recidivate when we do not prepare them with life skills to increase their chances at success.

In the same way, families need to be prepared to receive inmates post-incarceration to increase chances of positive outcomes. Clearly, family members are deeply affected by their loved one's incarceration. Several participants mentioned to me that there was a period of stress when their inmate came home, or for those waiting, feeling a great deal of anxiety about their loved one's release and hoping things go smoothly. Correctional facilities need to provide programming for family members on the best practices for ensuring inmates have smooth transitions back into the world and how to provide support to a newly released inmate. Currently, family members just have to accept their loved one back into their home with little knowledge of how things will work out. For some of this study's participants, that means welcoming back a child or spouse that they have not lived with in years, even decades, and having no training on how to deal with common situations that may arise. It is abundantly clear that there is much work

to be done by way of programming, rehabilitation, and therapy, as well as its availability to both inmates and their families.

In sum, at a macro-level, if we do what we can to reform policies and reduce the amount of barriers family members mentioned as making communication or support difficult with their incarcerated loved ones, there would likely be more frequent communication between inmates and families. If we are able to introduce new programming that helps both the inmate and their family member adapt to incarceration and improve themselves during their incarceration period, the level of communication and understanding between them might lead to better or more effective communication. As Chantal mentioned:

"You've got to do the time for what you did…If you don't spend that time recognizing you're there because you were wrong, you made bad choices, if you just sit there and wallow on your own hurt and pain, then you never get the point of why you're there – because you hurt people."

As the criminal justice system currently stands, we are not adequately preparing inmates to go back into the world, which results in the high level of recidivism. The three policy suggestions garnered from this dissertation project are directly based on the evidence provided by participants in this study. I believe implementing these small changes can create a cyclical process that results in the United States having better supported inmates that have connection to the outside world, as well as access to programs that will help them heal and better themselves during their incarceration. In the same way, those that support inmates would have reduced burden and pressure, and more capacity to focus their efforts on simply providing love and support.

Limitations and Future Directions

Whereas this study was largely exploratory, there were several limitations. COVID-19, while allowing me to interview families who had not seen their loved one in person for nine or more months and learn more about their reliance on communication, likely skewed the results of the study. The participants in my study were particularly frustrated with the prison system, and barriers were likely more prominent than perhaps they might have been during pre-COVID times. The interviews were very emotional and it was obvious to me that family members were exhausted by, and angry with, the correctional facilities. It would be interesting to repeat this study in a year or two, post-pandemic, to evaluate how access to in-person visitation impacts these relationships.

A second limitation to this study is that the participants who volunteered were all family members invested in supporting and maintaining connection with their incarcerated loved ones. The participants mentioned that their loved ones knew people with no support at all from family or friends and that they suffered as a result. As such, it is important to remember that the individuals who participated in this study were all willing to deal with, and find solutions to, communication with their loved ones. Indeed, the participants in this study are a select group of people. In future research, it would be important to try to connect with individuals with minimal contact with support providers and try to better understand the barriers they face, as well as the feelings they have about family and support.

Finally, a third limitation is that the interviews in this study were one-sided, focusing on only the support provider's perspective. It may be the case that providers described themselves, experiences, or relationships in a more positive light than the inmate might describe. Similarly, any information about what was going on in the facility were filtered through the inmate, then

filtered from the family member to me. The only way to know more about what happens within the facilities is to incorporate inmate voices in the future. In any study of social support, dyadic interviews would be the most valuable to collect. In the future, data on inmates' feelings of support from their outside family members, as well as their interpretation and experience of barriers, would be of highest priority to collect. It would also be interesting to learn whether incarcerated individuals share the same frustrations surrounding communication, as do their supportive family members. Eric, a participant from this study, works in a prison directly with offenders, mentioned an idea that really drives the need to study inmates on this topic as well. Eric described that offenders sometimes express frustration when their family members withhold information from them and they find out the truth later. Eric then added that he knows that inmates withhold information from family members to protect them as well. Indeed, this would be a fascinating area of supportive communication to explore in the future as this path of research expands.

Summary

Social support and communication are intertwined in regard to supporting inmates in correctional facilities. The majority of support for incarcerated individuals comes in the form of social support from friends and especially family members. However, due the unique circumstances presented by correctional facilities, the social support of inmates comes at a literal and tangible cost. Family members must pay for phone calls, emails, video chats, letters, and visitation. There is a great deal of self-sacrifice and stress involved for social support providers to maintain positive social ties and maintain close relationships with those who are incarcerated.

The correctional institution does not make supporting or communicating with inmates easy. There are a host of barriers imposed by the institution that make it difficult to maintain

communication with inmates, and this is exceptionally problematic, as communication *is* support for inmates who depend on it to connect them to the outside world and their loved ones. These barriers, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic barring family members from seeing their incarcerated loved ones in-person, have put support providers under even more emotional turmoil and pressure, as the dependence on communication of all forms was higher than ever before. This study investigated these barriers and the creative ways in which family members worked to overcome them and be the support system their loved ones so desperately need.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Date: September 22, 2020

TO: Courtney McDaniel, (cmcdaniel@ku.edu)

FROM: Alyssa Haase, IRB Administrator (785-864-7385, irb@ku.edu)

RE: **Approval of Initial Study**

As you are aware, due to COVID-19, as of March 23, 2020, the University has halted all non-essential in-person research activities. Moving forward with in-person research activities prior to receiving written confirmation from HRPP indicating it is safe to move forward will result in the project being paused and an investigation being launched.

The IRB reviewed the submission referenced below on 9/22/2020. Approval expires on 9/21/2023.

IRB Action: APPROVED	**Effective date: 9/22/2020**	**Effective date: 9/22/2020**
STUDY DETAILS		
Investigator:	Courtney McDaniel	
IRB ID:	STUDY00146129	
Title of Study:	Complexities of Caring: Social Support Provision Among Family Members of Incarcerated Individuals	
Funding ID:	None	
REVIEW INFORMATION		
Review Type:	Initial Study	
Review Date:	9/22/2020	
Documents Reviewed:	• Consent Forms, • Debrief and Resource Form, • Full Study Protocol, • Full Study Protocol, • KU HRPP Human Research Protocol, • Recruitment Announcements, • Response to Clarifications, • Survey Protocols	
Expedited Category(ies):	• (7)(b) Social science methods • (7)(a) Behavioral research	
Special Determinations:	• Waiver of consent documentation	
Additional Information:		

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT ANNOUNCEMENTS

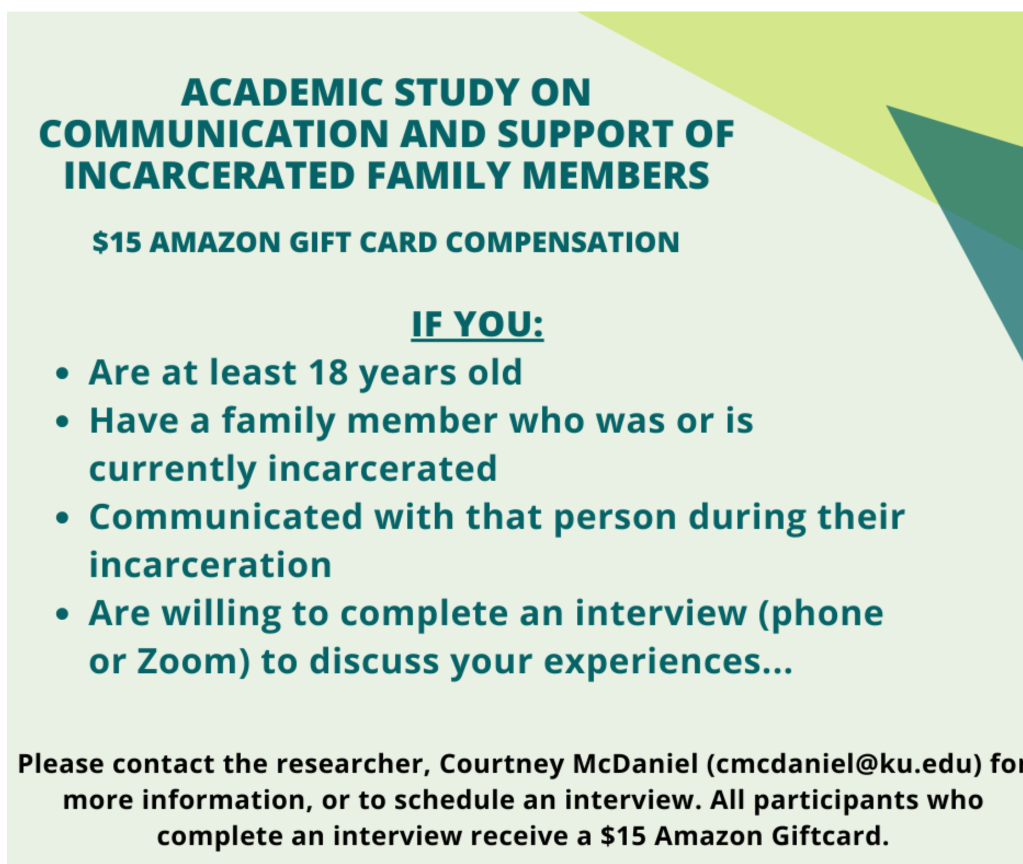
Research Pool Announcement for Blackboard:

Description of Study: This study focuses on the communication between family members when one is currently incarcerated or has been previously. Specifically, this study investigates how family members communicate support to their family members during their incarceration. This information is collected via an interview.

Eligibility: You are eligible to complete this study if:

- You are currently 18 years of age or older.
- You have a family member that is currently or has previously been incarcerated.
- You have communicated at least once with that family member during their incarceration (letters, e-mail, in person visits, and phone calls are all valid sources of communication).
- You are willing to complete a 60-90-minute interview (in-person preferred, but Skype or FaceTime can be utilized as well) about your communication with the incarcerated individual.

Social Media:



APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Participant Informed Consent
Provision of Social Support to Incarcerated Family Members
Interview

KEY INFORMATION

- This project is studying processes of social support among individuals who have a family member who is incarcerated. We are interested in hearing about how you provide support to your family member and how the incarceration has affected your interpersonal relationship with them.
- Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time, even if the interview has started. You are not eligible for this study if you have completed the Complexities of Caring online survey.
- Your participation interview will last between 60-90 minutes.
- You will be asked to complete a short online survey prior to your interview, and have a one-on-one virtual interview with the researcher. The interview will be audio recorded.
- Risks for this study are minimal, but may involve emotional discomfort for some questions. You are free to skip any question or end the interview at any time.
- Your participation in this study will allow us to better understand the process support providers go through when they are trying to support a family member who is incarcerated. Knowing more about how incarceration has changed your relationship with your family member, your perceptions of them, and how you support them will allow us to better understand a relatively understudied communicative phenomenon.
- Your alternative to participating in this research study is not to participate or participate in an online survey and you are free to withdraw your consent at any time. If you are in a Communication Studies course, there all alternatives to research you may complete, available on Blackboard.

DETAILED INFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate more in-depth the sense-making process individuals undergo when they provide support to a family member who is incarcerated. This avenue of communication is very understudied, so the study is very exploratory in nature, and focuses on how concepts such as relational closeness, perceived guilt of the incarcerated family member, and barriers that prevent effective communication or support provision will be investigated to better understand how they affect the interpersonal relationships and communication of families. Further, whether the support provider is ever inauthentic or deceptive with their support of their family member is of special interest.

PROCEDURES
You will be asked to complete either an in-person or electronic interview with Courtney McDaniel, a doctoral researcher in the department. The interview will be on-on-one and will take place in a public place agreed upon by both participants. The interview should last no longer than 60-90 minutes of your time. The interview will be audio recorded so the researcher can refer back to it later. You are welcome to ask her to pause or turn off the recorder at any time during the interview or ask that something not be mentioned in the final write up of this research project. The researcher may reach out to you after the study (if you are okay with it) to ask clarifying questions or have you review the results to ensure you were understood correctly and are represented in a way that you feel reflects your participation and ideas. Before the interview date, you will be asked to complete a brief online survey about your feelings and experiences regarding your relationship with your family member.

Your identifiable information will be removed from the data collected during this project, and the de-identified data will be used for future research without additional consent from you. What this means is that you will be provided a pseudonym to protect your identity, and any identifying information you disclose (i.e. names, locations, other proper nouns) will be replaced by pseudonyms. Only the researcher and her advisor will have access to the audio interviews, however, the recording may be sent out to a transcription company to be professionally transcribed. If you would prefer your audio file not be sent to a professional company, please let the researcher know during your interview and she will personally transcribe your interview herself. Audio files will be stored on both the researchers' and her advisor (Dr. Adrianne Kunkel)'s password protected computers as well as online using private storage drives. Audio files will be immediately deleted from the audio recorder, and stored permanently in these secure computer and online drive locations.

RISKS
There are no serious risks to participate in this study, but some questions or extended discussion of a relationship with an incarcerated family member may bring about some emotions, whether positive or negative. Any question in the interview is optional and you are free to stop, take a break, or skip any topics in the interview. A list of community and national resources will be provided to you following your participation should you continue to feel particularly emotional or distressed following the interview.

BENEFITS
Benefits to the subject might be a better understanding of how their support provision process works, and perhaps more awareness to the support process in their interpersonal relationships with their family member. Another benefit might be knowing that this form of communication is very understudied, and the participant would be adding to literature and understanding about this specific type of challenging communication. As this research reaches academic conferences and eventual publication, more individuals will be cognizant of challenges faced regarding social support and people who provide support to incarcerated individuals.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS
If you participate in any portion of an interview (i.e. even if you skip questions or end early) you will receive a digitally delivered Amazon gift card for $15. *Researchers may ask for your social security number in order to comply with federal and state tax and accounting regulations, but you are not obligated to provide it (Approved/Waived by KUCR 9/10/20).*

Additionally, if you are participating in this interview through a Communication Studies course, you will have the choice of the $15 Amazon gift card **OR** extra credit compensation will be awarded in the amount of 15 points in your Communication Studies course.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY
Your name will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher(s) will use a study number or a pseudonym rather than your name. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission.

Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form, you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION
You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION
You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to either of the researchers whose information is at the end of this form.

If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the research team may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION
Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher(s) listed at the end of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:
I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email irb@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By oral consent I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

Researcher Contact Information:
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APPENDIX D: PRE-INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY (Qualtrics)

1. What is your age?______________________________
2. What is your gender identity? ________________________________
3. How would you describe your racial or ethnic identity?

   ____

4. What is your current occupation? If student, write student.

   ____

5. What is your religious identity, if any?

   ____

6. What is your relationship to the individual(s) who is/are incarcerated?

   ____

Please answer the following scale questions by circling your position. (1 = Very close, 5 = Not close at all)

7. How close would you say you are to your incarcerated family member currently?

   1 2 3 4 5

8. How close would you say you were to your family member PRIOR to their incarceration?

   1 2 3 4 5 N/A

9. How close would you say you are to your immediate family?

   1 2 3 4 5

Please answer the following questions based on your level of agreeance with the statement. (1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree)

10. I believe my family member is responsible for their incarceration.

    1 2 3 4 5

11. I fully support my incarcerated family member.

    1 2 3 4 5

12. I am always completely honest in my communication with my incarcerated family member.

    1 2 3 4 5

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

FAMILY MEMBER OF INCARCERATED INDIVIDUAL

***Pre-Interview*:**
Greet individual, go over informed consent and get signature, explain recording process and what will happen with data post interview. Complete pre-interview survey and answer any questions. Get permission to start recorder. Remind them they are free to stop at any time and they do not have to answer any questions they do not feel comfortable discussing. Allow them to choose pseudonym for study.

Introduction:
First, can you tell me a bit about yourself?

Now, can you tell me a bit about the individual(s) in your family that is/are incarcerated?

- How long has the person been incarcerated?
- Who is the relative?
- Where is the person incarcerated?
- How long is the person predicted to be incarcerated?
- How old were you when the person was first incarcerated?
- Are you comfortable telling me about why they are incarcerated or what that process looked like?
- What level of security is the individual housed in/

Through what means do you most regularly communicate with your family member?

- How frequent is your communication?
- Do you prefer one method of communication over another?
- If travel, expenses, etc. were not an issue, how would you most prefer to interact with your family member?
- What types of things can you send to them?
- How often do you get updates?
- Do you ever communicate with the prison on their behalf?

Relationship:
Can you speak a bit your relationship with your incarcerated family member?

- [If applicable] What was your relationship like with this person PRIOR/DURING/AFTER to their incarceration? How does it differ now?

Probes if necessary:

- How often did you see them before they were incarcerated?
- How often do you see them now (if at all)?

Overall, would you say your relationship with this person is positive, negative, or neutral? Why?

When you think of the relationship…what feelings come to mind? Why?

Do you think your role as a family member to this individual has an influence on how you interact with them?

- How might your relationship be different if this person was not a family member?
- How much responsibility do you think your family member has in regard to being in their current situation?
- Did the person's offense influence your willingness to interact with them?

Do you ever feel pressure to say or do certain things?

Do you feel an obligation to this person?

- An obligation to be positive?
- Loyalty?

During the incarceration, was your relationship with other family members strengthened or strained? Do you talk more often? Did they stay the same?

Do other people in your family support this person? Do they do it differently than you do?

Who do you go to for support?

- Do you feel stressed out being a support provider?
- How do you cope with being a support provider?

Social Support:

Have you visited your relative in prison?

- What was that experience like? Is it worth it?
- Did you find the visit to be positive, negative, or more neutral?
- Do you think it was a positive, negative, or neutral for the family member?
- Do you think the person found your visit to be a positive experience?

If you have not visited your relative in prison…

- How do you think not being able to talk in person influences your relationship?
- Do you feel that your current mode of communication is effective and efficient?
- Would you visit them more if you were able to?

Are there any barriers that prevent you from communicating with your relative?

What are some of the biggest challenges in regard to communication?

How has COVID impacted your communication with your family member?

What do most of your conversations with your family member focus on? Can you give me some examples of topics that come up often?

- Do they share stories about life inside? Do you share stories about the outside?
- Do you ever have deep conversations or do things stay surface level?
- Is this different when visiting in person vs. phone/letters?

Would you say you show support to your family member often?
- What types of things do you say/do to show your support to your family member?

Do you ever feel like you don't want to show support to your family member?
- Responsibility for crime…does it influence this?

Do you feel like you are dishonest, inauthentic, or withholding in your communication with your family member?

Do you ever feel like you cannot be completely honest with your family member?
- Why do you think this happens?
- What do you do when you feel this way?

What role do you think social support plays as a whole in your relationship with your family?

Do you think if the incarceration had happened when you were younger/older it would affect how you felt about communication with them?

What do you think is the best way to show support for an incarcerated family member?
- Do you think (in your opinion) people should support incarcerated family members?
- Are there any circumstances where this might not be the case?

If you could give someone who has a newly incarcerated family member any advice, what would you say?

Closing:
We have talked about a lot today. Do you have anything to add in regard to your relationship or social support with your family member?

Do you think I missed any topics or questions that might be valuable to ask future participants?

Would you be willing to allow me to contact you in the future if I have any additional questions or need for clarification?

Do you have any family members that you think would be willing to do an interview with me if I reached out to them?

Post Interview: *Turn off recorder, debrief study and give information sheet with resources and researcher contact info. Ask if there are any questions or comments now that the recorder is off. Remind them that their information will be de-identified and that they should not hesitate to reach out should they have questions or anything to add. Provide a de-brief form with researcher contact information and campus and community resources.*

APPENDIX F: DEBRIEF AND RESOURCE FORM

KU On-Campus Resources

- **Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)**
  - For students with psychological, interpersonal, family problems
  - Individual and group sessions available
  - Discounted rates for students
  - M-F 8:00-5:00
  - 785-864-2277
  - Located in Watkins Memorial Health Center

Lawrence Community Resources

- **Headquarters Counseling Center**
  - Online chat and phone line
  - Available to chat about any problems you may be overpricing
  - 24/7, Free of charge
  - Can also provide more community mental health resources
  - Ongoing counseling available for $10/session
  - 785-841-2345

- **Bert Nash Community Mental Health Center**
  - Mental health professionals
  - Focused and ongoing therapy
  - 24-hour hotline - 785-843-9192
  - Cost dependent on insurance coverage

National Resources

- **The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated**
  - Online library with downloadable materials
  - Facts
  - Lists of national, state, and local programs
  - http://www.nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Hotline:**
  - 1-800-273-8255
  - Free and confidential support for people in distress
  - Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week via phone and online chat.

APPENDIX G: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC TABLE

Participant	Gender Identity	Ethnicity	Age	Occupation	Family Member	Inmate Location	Inmate Status	Interview Length
Bernie	Female	Hispanic/ Latinx	26	GTA	Brother	California	Out	76:35:00
Isabel	Female	Hispanic/ Latinx	19	Student	Father	Kansas	Out	40:03:00
Madison	Female	White	21	Student	Father	Kansas	Out	43:53:00
Lucia	Female	N/A	37	Office Assistant	Boyfriend	Oklahoma City	In	57:13:00
Rachel	Female	White	24	Event Coordinator	Brother	Nebraska	Out	35:59:00
Clark	Male	White	74	Sales	Son	Tennessee	In	77:37:00
Terrance	Male	Black/African American	26	IT Specialist	Cousin	Georgia	In	27:39:00
Alice	Female	White	29	Deputy County Clerk	Husband	Texas	In	55:48:00
Marco	Male	White	23	Real Estate Broker	Grandfather	Kansas	Out	42:13:00
Jerri	Female	White	48	Scopist	Father	North Carolina	Out/ Deceased	81:55:00
Danielle	Female	White	21	Student	Mother	Nebraska	Out	50:58:00
Carolyn	Female	White	86	Retired	Nephew	New York	Out	37:03:00
Cassidy	Female	White	28	GTA	Mother	Wisconsin	Out	51:35:00
Garrett	Male	White	22	Student	Cousin	Kansas	Out	37:13:00
DeShaun	Male	Black/African American	19	Student	Cousin	Kansas	Out	29:20:00
Renee	Female	White	47	Homemaker	Brother	Kansas	In	70:22:00
Zara	Female	Hispanic/ Latinx	29	Student	Cousin	Florida	Out	26:51:00
Hannah	Female	White	31	Policy Associate	Father	Kentucky	Out/ Deceased	64:22:00
Gentry	Female	White	33	Lease and Title Analyst	Brother	Oklahoma	Out	48:48:00
Patty	Female	White	73	Executive Assistant	Son	Kansas	In	101:06:00
Marty	Male	White	57	Professor	Nephew	Arizona	In	81:29:00
Joan	Female	White	66	Homemaker	Son	Kansas	In	90:23:00
Shelly	Female	White	30	Cosmetologist	Husband	Missouri	In	59:21:00
Megan	Female	White	38	Business Owner	Son	Kansas	In	47:59:00
Samantha	Female	White	31	Caregiver	Husband	Missouri	Out	55:13:00
Christine	Female	White	50	Teacher	Son	Kansas	Out	1:04:58
Chantal	Female	White	41	Student	Husband	Arkansas	In	75:07:00
Fay	Female	White	73	Retired	Daughter	Texas	In	69:02:00
Nikki	Female	White	33	CNA	Husband	Missouri	In	22:27
Mollie	Female	Hispanic/ Latinx	35	Self-Employed	Husband	Missouri	In	43:07:00
Beverly	Female	White	49	SPED Teacher	Husband	Missouri	In	82:56:00
Gina	Female	White	25	Bus Monitor	Husband	Missouri	In	47:44:00
Lisa	Female	White	45	IT Support	Partner	Missouri	In	83:14:00
Janet	Female	White	55	Teacher	Husband	Missouri	In	96:01:00
Alicia	Female	White	39	Disabled	Boyfriend	Missouri	In	70:02:00
Jessa	Female	White	32	SAHM	Brother	Kansas	In	68:48:00
Eric	Male	White	33	Corrections Social Worker	Brother	Kansas	In	85:47:00

APPENDIX H: CODEBOOK

Code	Description	Exemplar
Accountability or Reminding of Responsibility	Participant holds the inmate accountable for their actions, or reminds the inmate that they are in control of their situation	I'm like, just because you're in jail, doesn't mean I put you there, and it doesn't mean that it's my fault that you're there, so don't treat don't just don't bite the hand that feeds you like I did not do this to you.
Advice	Participant shares advice for other individuals going through similar situations	Be there for them, talk to them, let them know they are still important to you. Do everything you can to make sure they don't get eaten alive by the system.
Avoidance of Conversation About Prison	Participant discusses how their inmate does not share what is going on in the prison	He doesn't want me to know what it's like in there, and he doesn't want to take up our phone time to tell me that kind of stuff.
Balance	Participant describes needing to find a balance between two concepts	You have to find some balance between including them as much as you can, but also moving on because often those stays are long.
Barrier	Participant describes a barrier that comes between support and communication	I had to find somebody to drive me up there to visit him, give gas money to them and that kind of thing. It was difficult, but I managed.
Barrier Solution	Participant describes ways in which they overcome barriers that hinder communication	And so I would like to I would ask him a question, and I'd be like, call me twice for yes, call me once for know and I just wouldn't pick up.
Blame or Fault	Participant describes who is to blame or at fault for a situation	In my eyes, I believe it's 100% his, he put himself there. He's the one that has to deal with the consequences of it.
Call for Prison Reform or Change	Participant describes faults in the system and mentions the need for change	I just anything I could do, I would do in a heartbeat. There's so much change that needs to happen.
Change or Transformation	Participant describes how the inmate has changed or transformed during their sentence	And I think that he is a changed person and that helped me like feel more comfortable reaching out to him.

Communication as Support	Participant describes that some form of communication in itself functions as support	So, he's getting all sorts of communication from me to make sure he still feels that someone cares about him and loves him and that he's still a part of a family.
Communication Lifeline	Participant describes communication as a way to tell that their loved one is okay	I definitely prefer to hear his voice. It was more reassuring to me, knowing that he was doing okay.
Communication Preferences	Participant describes their preferences for different types of communication	I like to email him because if I just think of something I can jot it down the email off of my phone, off the app and send it to him.
Communication with Prison	Participant describes instances in which they have interacted directly with the prison administration	When my husband brings things to me that are blatant civil rights violations, I usually email the warden.
Consequences of No Support	Participant discusses possible outcomes/actual outcomes of the inmate not having social support	If they don't feel like they've got anybody anymore, they're not going to come out and be good.
Conversation Topics	Participant discusses what types of things come up in conversation with the inmate	And I chose not to talk about the crime. I chose to talk more about what was happening with me and my life rather than what happening with him and his life.
COVID	Participant describes how policies or circumstances have changed due to COVID-19	I keep looking at the situation with COVID. It was a whole new just…dilemma.
Disruption of Family Relationship (Inmate and Family)	Participant describes how the relationship between inmate/family have been affected by the incarceration	But if you, you know, like your kids go from seeing them every single day to seeing them twice a week…that's hard on the kids.
Editing Conversations	Participant describes how they intentionally craft conversations to downplay things	We won't say, "Well, we went to Taco Bell." We'll just say, "We had tacos."
Emotion	Participant describes an emotion they experience as a result of the situation	The sadness about leaving him there gets worse every time I go.

Enabling	Participant discuses enabling the inmate	So, we do send books when it's needed, but again, we don't enable him. He's there to learn a lesson.
Future	Participant describes looking toward the future with the inmate	I get really excited and hopeful for the future, like he can get out, he's not going to be on drugs. He's going to be better.
Good Person, Bad Thing	Participant describes the inmate as a good person who did a bad thing or made bad choices	Most of these men that are sitting in prison are not murderers or child molesters or rapists.
Guilt	Participant describes feelings of guilt	Like he lives in prison. Like I'm going home until like my bed and a house and he's going to a bed in a cell.
Hole	Participant describes how an inmate being in isolation or "The Hole" challenges support and communication	But, I mean, when you're in the hole, you don't get out of your cell.
Honesty	Participant discusses the need for honesty in communication	And so, I feel like Joseph and I are pretty brutally honest with each other, even when we don't like what each other has to say.
Humanity	Participant discusses how inmates are still human or are treated sub-humanly	Like they just do not care if you're in jail. You are not a human anymore.
Inconsistency	Participant describes inconsistencies in policy, sentences, availability of resources, etc.	It's almost like rules, everything changes daily.
Inmate Awareness Responsibility	Participant describes how the inmates awareness or assumption of responsibility affects the relationship	I think the big thing that makes a difference for me in being able to support him is that he believes too.
Innocence	Participant describes how innocence of the inmate impacts the situation	You know, like and also he, he does maintain his innocence. So then, you know, that's another thing.
InVivo codes	Meaningful participant quote	I'm not going to stop calling until you answer. I don't have money, but I do have an attitude.

Issues with Prison Staff	Participant discusses issues they or their inmate have encountered with prison staff	As soon as someone looks at a guard the wrong way, they're all on lockdown.
Life on Pause/Helplessness	Participant discusses how inmate's life is on pause during the incarceration, or how they are unable to do anything about situations	Because I mean I'm out here and he's in there and there's nothing he can really do about it.
Listening	Participant discusses the importance of listening during communication	I can do about the fact that you're there, but I can listen to what you have to say.
Loss of Communication as Punishment	Participant describes how inmate has had forms of communication taken away as a punishment	it was 3 weeks I wasn't able to talk to him—any sort of communication…no phone, no email, no nothing. It's nerve-wracking.
Love	Participant describe their love for the inmate	It's, you love them and you will do anything for them.
Medical Concerns	Participant discusses health concerns the inmate has experienced and how the prison handled it	We had a recent situation where the medical department ran out of his meds.
Money	Participant describes how much something costs or how finance factors into their situation	The amount that they charge to be able to call is not fair.
Obligation/Positivity	Participant describes how they feel an obligation to communicate or an obligation to be positive in communication	So I definitely always felt like I had to be super positive when talking to him.
Outside Advocacy	Participant describes how they have had to find information on their own or describes outside efforts at advocacy	So I said, "Well I'm not afraid to tell somebody," so I did get hold of some lieutenant.
Outside Relationships	Participant describes how the incarceration has affected their outside relationships	But my youngest son basically doesn't have anything to do with me.

Perspective Shift	Participant describes how the incarceration has changed/enlightened their mindset	So I think having experienced this with Martin is what gives me care and concern about others who are there.
Prison as a Relief or Good Thing	Participant discusses how prison saved the inmate or was actually a positive thing or source of relief	We all just wanted him to be arrested.
Provider effects	Participant describes how being the support provider has an effect on them	When I see that it's him that's calling, I automatically start getting tense.
Provider Role	Participant explains what they feel their role is in regard to the incarceration	I am his ambassador.
Provider Self Care or Support	Participant describes how they cope with support fatigue, or describes their support system	Yeah, I've been going to therapy for a year. I've been doing that.
Reasoning	Participant provides reasoning/justification on behalf of the inmates' actions	And so it was not that he took anyone's life or he hurt anyone physically, but he did cause quite a problem for a company.
Rehabilitation or Programming	Participant expresses a desire for there to be more programming in the facility, or expresses a desire for rehabilitation opportunities	I think that more focus within the system needs to be on communication and rehabilitation, those lines need to be opened up more.
Relationships	Participant describes their relationship with the inmate and how it has been affected by the incarceration	I think a lot of those relationships in prison are like, you know, more towards the failing side.
Retaliation	Participant describes how they fear their intervention on inmates behalf may cause retaliation by prison staff	But then, they kind of started picking on my husband because I became that wife that went and told on them all the time.
Support	Participant lists a way in which they provide support to an inmate	I've told my grandson that when he does get out, that I will gladly be his home plan and help him in that way.

Tied to Communication	Participant discusses how they feel tied down by communication attempts	I take my phone and set it where I can reach it if I'm in the shower because I don't want to miss a call. I have missed a call a time or two, and it just ruins my entire day.
Treated Bad by Staff or Like a Criminal	Participants describe interactions with the prison that made them feel like they were the criminal	It's like, from that moment forward, you're basically treated as an inmate yourself.
Treatment of Inmates	Participants describe how inmates have been treated in the facility	And sometimes they don't feed him until 8:00, 9:00, and they give him a bologna sandwich.
Triggering Event	Participant explains what actions/events they feel lead up to the incarceration	He was in the Army, broke his back. Army prescribed opiates, started the cycle of addiction.
Visitation	Participant describes the process of in-person visitation	Oh yeah, I mean, when we visit, you know, I mean, that the hardest part is leaving.
Withholding	Participant describes instances in which they may withhold information from the inmate	So, I just never mentioned it, because I don't want him to ever feel like he's less than something, or not a good boyfriend for not being able to do that kind of stuff.
Worth Trouble	Participant discusses whether the barriers/process of communication/ visitation is worth the trouble	Absolutely. Even if it's just two hours, and I have to sit two tables away from him, I would go back up.