"All We Want is to be Near Our Husbands": How Latina Prison Wives Navigate Formal and Informal Social Controls

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Abstract:
Across the United States, African Americans and Latinos have been disproportionately impacted by punitive policies, contributing to a racialized mass incarceration (Bobo and Thompson 2010). While literature on secondary prisonization reveals the collateral consequences African American women experience when seeking to maintain contact with their incarcerated partners, research is needed to understand the experiences of Latina prison wives, due to the rising rate of incarceration among Latinos. Drawing on literature from social control theory and secondary prisonization, this study draws upon 25 interviews with Latina prison wives to address the following research questions: (1) What social control mechanisms do prison wives experience within the carceral context during visitations? (2) How and why do prison wives engage in informal social controls across social settings? (3) How do women cope with these control mechanisms? This study finds women, as non-convicted individuals, experience multi-faceted punishment as the enforcement of formal policies within the prison extend beyond the carceral context and influence engagement in informal social controls to avoid losing access to visiting their spouses.

Introduction:

Within California's in-custody population, Latinos have become the fastest growing ethnic group of prisoners comprising 44 percent of inmates as compared to 28 percent of Black inmates (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2020; Lee, Guilamo-Ramos, Munoz-Laboy, Lotz, and Bornheimer 2016). Given the rising rates of incarceration among Latinos and considering 50% of inmates are in committed heterosexual relationships (Comfort et al 2005), it is crucial to understand how spouses experience the collateral consequences of the carceral state's policies within and beyond prison grounds.

Prison institutions utilize formal and informal social controls to regulate inmate's and visitor's behaviors to ensure institutional safety. Social control, which accounts for why people conform to laws and norms, despite some of the rewards garnered from participation in deviance and crime (Kubrin, Stucky, and Krohn 2008), provides a framework for understanding how control mechanisms are imposed and enforced in an institution and beyond prison grounds. While formal controls consist of rewards and punishments that incentivize particular actions among organization's members, informal social control can be assessed by an organization's ability to influence its members' thoughts and actions to strengthen the organization's culture (Oselin 2014).

To access their incarcerated partners, women experience a phenomenon called "secondary prisonization," whereby they are subjected to the prison's formal social controls including regulation of conduct, physical appearance, and sexual relations (Comfort 2008). The prison's formal social controls also subject women, as non-convicted individuals, to undergo background checks, random body inspections, and drug examinations to be granted access to visit. Like inmates, women learn to follow the prison's rules by being processed and surveilled while on prison grounds (Comfort 2008; Fishman 1988; Dixey and Woodall 2012).

In addition to the formal social controls prison wives routinely undergo as they attempt to visit their partners, scholars know far less about their experiences with informal social controls. A few studies revealed women whose husbands were convicted for the first time entered visiting rooms suspecting long-term prison wives committed crimes and brought contraband into prison grounds (Fishman 1988). Similarly, Codd's (2003) findings demonstrated participants drew upon women's partners' convictions to analyze whether they created relationships with other wives as inmates' statuses in prison are often transferred to their partners. However, this small body of work does not investigate how women engage in informal social control practices, which includes policing visitors outfits while waiting to be processed, as a response to fearing their visitation privileges will be terminated. Although women may engage in these actions to protect their access to visits, they ultimately help sustain the prison's formal social controls.

To address this gap in the literature, I will analyze how women experience formal social controls and practice informal social controls across two social settings: within the carceral context and outside of them. This research draws on 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with Latina prison wives across California to answer the following research questions: (1) What social control mechanisms do prison wives experience within the carceral context during visitations? (2) How and why do prison wives engage in informal social controls across social settings? (3) How do women cope with these control mechanisms?

Methods:

To collect original data, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 Latinas via Zoom and in-person. I recruited respondents from participants' networks, through snowball sampling and through two Facebook California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) family support groups. Since I have personally experienced the incarceration of family members, I began recruitment through my personal social networks to invite potential participants. I also simultaneously recruited through two CDCR online family support groups, by joining the Facebook groups and contacted the moderators for permission to post recruitment flyers. Upon receipt of approval, I posted the recruitment flier along with a brief description of myself and the project. Participants had to identify as female, Latina, California residents, be legally married to incarcerated men, and be over the age of 18.

To protect confidentiality of the participants, I assigned an ID number and a pseudonym to each participant prior to beginning the interview and saved them in a protected computer folder. Before the interview, participants were asked to provide verbal consent rather than written consent to keep identifying information to a minimum and add another layer of confidentiality. In-person interviews occurred at a location and time convenient to participants. If participants preferred a Zoom interview, I created a new password-protected Zoom link for each participant. The interviews lasted between an hour and two-and-a-half hours. Interview topics included wives' experiences in visitation, the inspection process, and in-person and online interactions with other prison wives. Women were reminded their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. I also provided mental health resources should this study cause any emotional strain. Once the interview ended, I provided participants $25 to compensate them for their time.

Findings:

Existing research finds women who visit their incarcerated spouses experience formal social controls to gain admittance into prison for visitation, a process referred to as secondary

prisonization (Comfort 2008). Building on this notion, I examine how women experience formal and informal social controls across two social contexts: on and off prison grounds, including online platforms. My findings reveal women experience multi-faceted punishment through the formal policies and practices enforced at the prison and informal social controls enforced by other visitors. For the former, women are subjected to random background checks, are denied access due to traffic violations, may be required to undergo drug examinations and dress inspections, and feel pressured to abide by racialized codes of conduct established by the prison. In turn, women become concerned with the possibility of getting denied for visits, which may encourage them to impose informal social controls on other prison wives. They do so through a variety of behaviors, including policing other women's clothing during processing, monitoring women's interactions on support groups, and enforcing racialized norms when off prison grounds. Although women impose informal social controls onto other prison wives for a specific purpose—to continue to gain visitation access to their spouses—their actions ultimately help sustain the prison's formal regulations and objectives of controlling inmates' as well as visitors' behaviors.

My findings build on current empirical research that documents the collateral consequences of having an incarcerated partner, namely being subject to regulation while on prison grounds (Comfort 2008; Comfort et al 2005; Castle 2023; Boppre, Dehart, Shapiro 2022). The study's findings expand this body of work by showcasing how the formal social control mechanisms imposed by the carceral state affects women, who are non-convicted individuals, beyond prison grounds through informal social controls. As a result of fearing the possibility of losing contact with their partners, women potentially internalize the formal prison rules and reinforce them across community spaces to ensure contact with their spouses. The prison's practices exacerbate women's emotional hardships by subjecting them to scrutiny and rigid rules that generate feelings of uncertainty, stress, and fear. As a result, the carceral state's disciplinary norms and practices expand beyond the prison walls, regulating the behavior of visitors, who are non-convicted individuals, to maintain control.

Discussion:
The current findings inform state policies on the criminal justice system and prison practices by demonstrating how existing formal social controls constrain women's ability to visit incarcerated men, which can lead to higher rates of recidivism. Between 2017 and 2018, California released 35,447 individuals and 44.6 percent were reconvicted within three years of their release date (CDCR 2023). Within this cohort, 45.9 percent of those reconvicted were Latino (CDCR 2023). Studies have shown that ongoing familial contact, especially spousal contact, has beneficial effects for formerly incarcerated people: it can lower recidivism, increase employment when individuals can draw on their social networks for job opportunities, and enhance social support, easing the transition back into the community (Bales and Mears 2008; Berg and Huebner 2011; Duwe and Clark 2011). Thus, prisons should remove barriers to prison visits to facilitate family member's access to their incarcerated loved ones. Prison administrators can begin by relocating inmates closer to their home communities to reduce time and costs of traveling to prison grounds. Similarly, prison administrators can encourage familial contact by creating a welcoming, interactive space in visitation where families have access to activities and outdoor spaces to foster positive interactions. For inmates who do not have familial contact, prison administrators can allow organizations to connect with inmates through mentorship programs to develop positive pro-social relationships.