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

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

in

Sociology

by

Elvira De La Torre

September 2023

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Sharon S. Oselin, Chairperson
Dr. Randol Contreras
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2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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

by

Elvira De La Torre

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Sociology
University of California, Riverside, September 2023
Dr. Sharon S. Oselin, Chairperson

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 multifaceted 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.

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Introduction

The United States has enacted and enforced punitive policies, such as the War on Drugs, mandatory minimum sentencing, three-strike rules and enhancements to combat crime. However, these policies have been inconsistently applied and targeted towards African American and Latino communities, contributing to a racialized mass incarceration where people of color make up the majority of the population (Bobo and Thompson 2010; Fornili 2018; Walker, Senger, Villarruel, Arboleda 2004). Although scholars have extensively researched how such policies contributed to the disproportionate rate of incarceration of African Americans (Cox 2020; Fornili 2018; Bobo and Thompson 2010; Tucker 2010), Latino's experiences have been understudied. 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 Latinxs, it is important to understand how family members, and specifically spouses, experience the collateral consequences of the carceral state's policies within and beyond prison grounds. According to Comfort and her colleagues (2005), 50 percent of incarcerated men are in committed heterosexual relationships. 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 accordingly 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?

Inside and Out: Social Controls Connected to Carceral Contact

Social control theories account 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). With the purpose of regulating people's behaviors, social controls are implemented across varied contexts in both formal and informal ways. Within organizations, formal controls consist of rewards and punishments that incentivize particular behaviors among organization's members (Oselin 2014). The effectiveness of an organization to enforce control mechanisms depends upon the implementation of their goals, the power imposed, the member's dependency for resources, and the structure of informal social systems (Millham, Bullock, and Cherrett 1972). When a person is less dependent on an organization for their varied needs— expressive (i.e. affection and security), instrumental (i.e. feeling accomplished), and organizational (i.e. housing and food)— increased coercive sanctions and institutional controls maintain order among members (Millham, Bullock, and Cherrett 1972). Informal controls can be assessed by an organization's ability to influence its members' thoughts and actions to strengthen the organization's culture, and ultimately shape interactions within such contexts (Oselin 2014). Thus, organizations have structural processes of socialization to prevent deviance by enforcing and regulating behaviors of its members.

One organization that relies heavily upon both formal and informal social control mechanisms to achieve obedience is the criminal justice system. In the case of prisons, the purpose of formal social control mechanisms is to provide inmates with rules and schedules that structure their daily lives to maintain order (Thomas 1977). Such formal control is practiced through the physical confinement of inmates, limited access to heterosexual contact, minimal communication with friends and family, and constant surveillance by prison staff (Thomas 1977). Informal controls also operate to regulate inmates by being expected to participate in prison programs and be submissive to prison staff to gain rewards, privileges, and access to resources (Thomas 1977; Millham, Bullock, and Cherrett 1972). The level of inmates' dependency upon the prison for resources varies by an individual's social class, education level, personal traits, and length of conviction (Millham, Bullock, and Cherrett 1972). Accordingly, inmates who heavily depend upon the prison for emotional, physical, and domestic resources require less control while inmates whose needs are met with outside resources require higher levels of coercive control to prevent disorder. Prison organizations demonstrate how power, organizational goals, and member involvement interact with each other to regulate and enforce behavioral norms. One way this regulation is carried out for incarcerated individuals is through racial segregation.

Despite the Supreme Court case *Johnson v. California et al* ruling racial segregation within prisons is unconstitutional, prison administrators utilize housing forms requesting inmate's ethnicity, gang affiliation, and interactions with other races to determine where to house inmates (Goodman 2008; Trammell 2011). As inmates enter

reception centers awaiting to be transferred to a prison, they undergo racialization, defined “as the institutionalization of racial categories in a politically organized system,” by only being allowed to identify with one monolithic race (Walker 2016:1055; Omi and Winant 1994). Goodman (2012; 2008) argues prisons become sites of racial construction as prison administrators, correctional officers, and inmates engage in a “negotiated settlement” by working together to determine the appropriate racial classification an inmate aligns with, including Black, White, Hispanic, or Other. Prison administrators also consider the inmate's home community and social networks to determine their affiliation with gangs, resulting in race being conflated with gang association (Lopez-Aguado 2018). Once Latino inmates are segregated from other racial categories, they are also segregated by regions including *Nortenos* from Northern California, *Surenos* from Southern California, and *Bulldogs* from Fresno, California (Lopez-Aguado 2018; Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo 2021). If inmates choose to be classified by their multi-racial identity, ethnicity, or religion, guards compare their physical traits, language spoken, and their name to the prison’s racial demographics to assign a classification (Furst 2017). Once inmates receive one of four classifications, they are assigned a bed according to their race to reduce violence between gangs, maintain order, and on the basis inmates prefer to be segregated (Goodman 2008; Walker 2016).

Along with being assigned a racial classification, inmates must also abide by the racial politics constructed by race-based gangs. Race-based gangs in California prisons formed as a result of shifting racial demographics among prisoners. During the 1950s, “La Eme,” also known as the Mexican Mafia and *Surenos*, was one of the first race-based

gangs that emerged to protect Los Angeles Chicano inmates against White prisoners, who during that time were the majority of inmates (Weide 2022; Lopez-Aguado 2018; Hunt et al 1993). Today, La Eme has become the most powerful gang in California prisons. La Eme has established a hierarchical structure among inmates, including generals, captains, and soldiers, they control general population prison yards, and reinforce racial politics, including *Surenos* being unable to interact with Black inmates (Hunt et al 1993; Weide 2020). Upon entry, inmates are given an informal orientation of the racial politics by a high-status inmate within their race-based gang to ensure they abide by racialized norms and behaviors including who they can interact with, the times available to watch television, tables they are allowed to sit on, and which showers they can use (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo 2021; Goodman 2014; Walker 2016). Prisoners interpret racialized norms as safety precautions to prevent conflicts among racial groups and monitor one another to ensure they are abiding by such norms (Goodman 2012). If an inmate is caught breaking a rule, they can be transferred to another housing unit, or beaten up by a shot caller or a line of inmates from their racial group (Walker 2016). However, if there is a conflict among inmates from different race-based gangs, place-based gangs unite with the potential of creating an interracial conflict that can possibly spread throughout the prison (Walker 2016). To receive the prison gang's protection, inmates must engage in tests of loyalty, including violence, that are assigned by gang leaders known as shot callers (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo 2021). Within the Mexican Mafia, *sureno* members, also known as foot soldiers, engage in physical fights to gain control over facilities including telephones, basketball courts, and workout areas (Weide 2020). While literature

demonstrates inmates' behaviors and interactions are affected by the racial classifications enforced at the macro-and micro-level, scholars have far less understanding on how formal and informal controls extend beyond prison grounds onto inmate's family members, specifically their spouses, who seek to maintain relationships with incarcerated people.

Secondary Prisonization: Spouses of Incarcerated Men Face Social Controls

Some research establishes the ways in which family members seeking to maintain relationships with incarcerated individuals are subject to formal social controls to gain admittance to prison grounds (Comfort 2008; Comfort et al 2005; Castle 2023; Boppre, Dehart, Shapiro 2022). Comfort (2008:15) refers to this process as “secondary prisonization,” whereby women who visit incarcerated men must adjust their schedules to attend visits, change their wardrobes to reflect the prison's dress code, and alter their behaviors to comply with the prison's regulations. From the perspective of prison staff, visits are viewed as a huge logistical operation that demands careful surveillance and control of both prisoners and their visitors to maintain institutional safety (Dixey and Woodall 2012; Comfort 2008; Fishman 1998). In turn, correctional officers conduct thorough identity and security checks by utilizing visitors' identification to verify they are approved visitors, their attire is non-provocative, and they enter prison grounds without unauthorized items (Comfort 2008).

Among the formal regulations experienced, dress inspections involve heightened concern for women seeking to gain admittance into institutional grounds. Since visitation is the only space where women can spend time with their partners, they seek to wear

clothing that represents their personal style. But in doing so, many women are often cited for multiple dress code violations throughout their visit (Comfort 2008; Comfort et al 2005). Although the CDCR has general rules for visitations— including no low-cut tops, sleeveless shirts, or above-the-knee bottoms— correctional officers (COs) have the ability to impose the prison’s rules at their discretion and according to their personal biases (Castle 2023; Boppre, Dehart, Shapiro 2022). Similarly, women with curvier bodies experience hypersexualization since they are unable to find loose-fitting clothing that is considered appropriate for visiting (Castle 2023; Comfort 2005). Comfort (2008) argues the prison’s moral dress code forces women to develop a carceral identity by buying conservative clothing to obtain access to prison, avoid being hypersexualized, and prevent being asked to change clothing (Castle 2023; Christian 2005; Boppre, Dehart, Shapiro 2022). When undergoing processing, Castle (2023) also found Black women were asked to undergo a strip-search more often than White women, a procedure that requires visitors to take off their clothing in front of two officers due to being suspected of having contraband on prison grounds. Although women are not convicted people and have the right to refuse being strip-searched, they acquiesce in hopes to see their partners. In turn, women become hyper-aware of the unstated prison norms and learn how to predict and avoid possible problems (Castle 2023). Women, as non-convicted individuals, experience the formal social controls of the carceral state as a collateral consequence of having an incarcerated partner.

Similar to incarcerated men, prison wives also experience informal social control mechanisms on prison grounds. Within the carceral context, informal controls among

visitors serve to perpetuate the organization's regulations and shape visitors' behaviors to maintain obedience. Fishman (1998), for instance, found new prison wives (i.e., women whose husbands were incarcerated for the first time) suspected long-term prison wives engaged in crimes and brought contraband into prison grounds. New prison wives also felt they were forced to share a space in visitation with women who made the prison culture the focus of their life and easily adopted the cultural norms (Fishman 1988). As a result, some prison wives avoided creating friendships with other women due to their constant partying lifestyle and viewed them as dependent upon their husbands (Fishman 1988). Women's ability to interact with other visitors is also impacted by their partner's crimes as they often share their husband's status within prison. If a woman's partner was convicted of a sex offense, for instance, they were viewed by other visitors as "lepers," and tied to negative stereotypes (Codd 2003). Drawing on these findings, coercive organizations, like prisons, have the power to affect women's decisions regarding who they interact with on prison grounds. However, more research is needed to understand if prison wives perpetuate the institution's norms by informally policing other visitors' behaviors to avoid jeopardizing their visiting privileges beyond prison grounds.

Building Support

Although women experience formal and informal social controls that seek to alter their behavior in accordance with prison rules, women's interactions are not always structured by such controls. Prison wives also create community spaces and build support with other women visiting incarcerated inmates as they often experience courtesy stigma, defined as stigma by associating with someone with flawed characteristics (Goffman

1965). Women turn to support groups or people who share similar identities to buffer the negative effects of the carceral system. Within the carceral context, visitor centers became ideal spaces for family members to foster informal relationships with others who experience similar circumstances. In one study, family members who routinely visited the prison on Wednesday afternoons created the “Wednesday Club,” a group that provided each other with support to alleviate the hardships of imprisonment and establish friendships outside of visitation (Foster 2019). Christian (2005) also found women visiting incarcerated men created spaces of community outside of prison grounds by gathering before visitation to get ready, sharing locations of where they could buy items for prisoners, and sharing the costs of motel rooms. Women’s collective experience of having a family member incarcerated allowed them to offer emotional support by wishing each other luck, providing each other rides to prison, and sharing their concerns about news obtained during visits (Christian 2005; Castle 2023). These informal networks also allowed visitors to share important information (i.e. new dress code regulations) and updates on the institutions they visited (i.e. lockdowns) to combat the lack of available information on the CDCR websites (Castle 2023). Family members drew upon one another to reduce their feelings of isolation and develop community spaces by providing resources and support to one another.

In addition to in-person interactions, family members also draw on online support groups to gather advice and information, such as Prison Talk Online and Facebook. Peterson and their colleagues (2013) found many participants had family members who were unsupportive of having a relationship with an incarcerated person and the online

community allowed people to express their emotions without being judged. In fact, the most requested advice on Prison Talk Online was personal, regarding how to cope with judgment from family members and how to navigate a new reality with their incarcerated partners (Hink, Hink, Smith, and Withers 2019). At times, women sought information about what transpired at prisons from others when it was unavailable from official websites. Facebook support groups allowed visitors to obtain information on what was occurring since women from different yards received phone calls from their husbands notifying them of changes, such as lockdowns (Castle 2023). These online platforms facilitated the creation of reciprocal relationships by women sharing their own experiences and also inviting people to share their own stories and struggles with the group (Hink, Hink, Smith, and Withers 2019; Peterson, Cohen, and Smith 2013). Although existing research showcases how members of online support groups provide reciprocal guidance, additional studies are important to understand the extent to which formal organizational norms extend beyond the prison grounds to affect visitors' behavior outside of the carceral context, including online.

As a coercive organization, the carceral system depends upon formal and informal social controls to maintain obedience among inmates and visitors. While formal prison regulations dictate how inmates and visitors must behave while on prison grounds, informal social controls have the potential to reinforce prison guidelines during off-site interactions. Although researchers have demonstrated how women with incarcerated partners experience and manage formal social controls while being processed (Comfort 2008; Castle 2023; Boppre, Dehart, Shapiro 2022; Comfort et al 2005; Dixey and

Woodall 2012; Fishman 1998), it is unclear if women also experience and impose informal controls onto one another in and outside of prisons. Such understanding can shed light on the permeability of social controls as they move beyond the prison walls to shape interactions among individuals in outside contexts. To address this research gap, this study aims 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?

Research Design and Methods

This study examines how Latinas with incarcerated husbands experience formal and informal controls in and beyond carceral contexts. I exclusively focus on Latinas in this project since participants from prior research on prison visitations are predominantly comprised of Black and White women (Comfort 2008; Peterson, Cohen, Smith 2013; Boppre, Dehart, Shapiro 2022; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005; Black 2010; Daniel and Barrett 1981). The lack of examination of Latina prison wives is problematic given that Hispanics comprise 44.4 percent of California's in-custody population compared to Black (28.3 percent) and White (20.7 percent) populations (CDCR 2020).

To collect original data, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 Latinas. After receiving my university's institutional review board's approval, I conducted these interviews via Zoom and in-person between July and August 2022. 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, spaces where individuals gain support, advice, and guidance on how to navigate the criminal justice system. While one support group had 180 members, the second group had over 1,400 members at the time the interviews were conducted. All my participants except for two, were members of CDCR support groups. Each support group is private and monitored by four administrators who identify as having incarcerated family members. To recruit participants online, I began 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. Out of the 25 interviews, 23 were conducted over Zoom due to participants' location ranging from San Jose, Sacramento,

and San Diego, California. I also provided participants the option of turning off their video camera or changing their Zoom name to ensure confidentiality.

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. The interviews were audio recorded, with the participants' verbal consent, on my password-protected iPhone and Macbook Pro. The interviews were transferred to a secured, locked computer only accessible to me and uploaded onto an encrypted Google Drive. Once the interview ended, I provided participants \$25 through Zelle or Apple Pay to compensate them for their time.

Although I am not a prison wife, I was able to build rapport with participants by being vulnerable and sharing my own experiences undergoing inspections to gain access to visiting my brother-in-law. Reyes (2020) argues every researcher has an ethnographic toolkit that contains invisible traits (such as social capital, education, citizenship) and visible traits (such as gender, race/ethnicity, appearance) that allows researchers to build rapport with their participants. Despite conducting interviews, I found the ethnographic toolkit allowed me to draw upon my visible traits (gender and ethnicity) and invisible traits (having an incarcerated family member), to build rapport with participants by sharing my experiences in visitation, sharing rides to prison with multiple women, and dress inspections. As a Latina, I also drew on my cultural background and language to understand how women experience stigma from their families and communities by being

in relationships with incarcerated men. This “outsider within” (Collins 1986) status provided me with the ability to understand and be empathic to women’s experiences, their relationships with their family, and how society perceives them. By acknowledging my positionality and being reflective, my ethnographic toolkit allowed me to build strong rapport with participants and create an environment in which they felt comfortable to share their experiences.

Among my interviewees, 21 out of 25 identified as Mexican American, which can be attributed to California having a large history of Mexican migration (Gratton and Merchant 2015; Henderson 2011). As seen in Table 1, participants' ages ranged from 25 to 56 years, with a mean age of 37. Husbands’ conviction and years-in-prison were collected to understand the prison’s level of security and the visitation protocols.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Name	Age	Ethnic Identification	Husband's Conviction	Husband's Sentence (Years)	Husband's Years in Prison
Silvia	28	Mexican	Robbery	12	10
Ana	47	Mexican	Robbery	25 to life	21
Olga	33	Mexican	First Degree Murder	27 to life	16
Sophia	30	Mexican	Attempted Murder	23	7
Illiana	42	Mexican	Armed Robbery	20	16
Melanie	42	Mexican	Attempted Murder	125 to life	22
Megan	31	Cuban, Colombian, Ecuadorian, and White	Attempted Murder	87	7
Angelica	25	Mexican	Armed Robbery	5	1
Araceli	42	Mexican and White	Attempted Murder	25 to life	15
Carolina	31	Guatemalan	Voluntary Manslaughter	22	12
Catalina	46	Mexican	Murder	25 to life	24
Mia	34	Mexican	Murder	25 to life	19
Krystal	35	Mexican	Robbery	27	6
Veronica	41	Mexican	First Degree Murder	25 to life	8

Name	Age	Ethnic Identification	Husband's Conviction	Husband's Sentence (Years)	Husband's Years in Prison
Dayana	41	Mexican	Great Bodily Injury, Being Under the Influence, Evading the Police	19	4
Melissa	56	Mexican	Murder	25 to life	23
Faviola	47	Mexican	Armed Robbery and Home Invasion	25 to life	23
Gabriela	32	Latina, unfamiliar	Prefer Not to Disclose	In trial	2
Hilda	39	Mexican	Second Degree Murder	60 to life	12
Mariana	39	Mexican	Murder	33	23
Jazmine	34	Mexican and Filipina	Attempted Murder	85 to life	17
Johanna	37	Mexican	Armed Robbery and Attempted Murder	36	12
Leticia	29	Salvadoran	Murder and Attempted Murder	125 to life	12
Guadalupe	34	Mexican	Attempted Murder	17	13
Maya	31	Mexican	Murder and	40 to life	15

Name	Age	Ethnic Identification	Husband's Conviction	Husband's Sentence (Years)	Husband's Years in Prison
			Attempted Murder		

After transcription, interviews were entered into Atlas.ti, a qualitative software program, to conduct deductive and inductive coding. I began coding using a deductive approach where I drew from past literature to identify formal social control themes, such as preparing for prison visits, the prison's dress codes, and processing. I subsequently enacted inductive coding by analyzing the data for new themes, such as informal visitation etiquettes and blurred boundaries between formal and informal social control. Once the initial coding was conducted, I used the same technique to perform a second round of coding focused on identifying how women experience and practice formal and informal social control across two social settings.

Prison Rules: Moving Beyond the Carceral Setting

“They always fuck with the girls with big asses and big titties”

Prison wives experience formal social control across social settings – inside and outside the carceral contexts. Inside the prison, women were subjected to institutional controls including documentation to become an approved visitor, a cleared background check, compliance with policies constraining behavior on site, and random inspections by prison staff. Compliance with prison regulations is a necessary but insufficient condition given guards have discretion to deny or grant one's access to the facility, creating uncertainty among prison wives while undergoing processing.

Prior to receiving approval for visits, inmates must add women to their visiting list by sending them a visitor questionnaire. The visiting questionnaire obtains personal information, including any convictions or arrests, which can be used to deny access to visits by enabling CDCR to conduct a background check for clearance (CDCR 2023). If a

background check reveals any interactions with law enforcement (including traffic violations) that are not disclosed by the visitor, visitation is denied. Once women were approved for visits and had routinely attended prison visits, prison administrators requested updated information any time they were on the premises. While prior literature has found that visitors undergo identity checks before admission (Comfort 2008), my research finds that additional checks were common after admission and during visits. These additional checks acted as mechanisms through which visitations could be denied.

Multiple women were denied visits due to minor infractions with the legal system. For example, when Illiana, a 42-year-old Mexican American, first applied to visit her partner, she was denied due to not disclosing a traffic violation: “I’m as clean as a whistle...I’ve never been to jail...It asked if you have ever been detained, convicted...and I answered no. However, I did receive at one time a bench warrant for a traffic ticket...I was denied and placed on a six month hold.” Illiana was able to visit her husband only after submitting three applications and contacting the prison’s warden for reapproval. Likewise, prior to entering an overnight visit, Faviola was asked to update her residential address. After Faviola spent three days and two nights with her husband and was leaving her long yearned family visit, a correctional officer informed her that her visitation privileges were terminated due to a traffic violation for driving while talking on the phone. This was a shock to Faviola since she had been consistently visiting for over twenty years in numerous prisons. While updating one’s address is a routine practice, the information she provided was utilized to conduct a background check that uncovered an unpaid traffic ticket leading to her visits being terminated. Both women experienced

multi-faceted punishment: they were unable to visit their partners, required to resolve pending traffic violations, and be reapproved for visits by providing the prison with evidence the traffic violation was resolved. While women were not convicted of any criminal charges, their unpaid traffic tickets resulted in additional scrutiny making it more difficult to gain access to their spouses.

Once women receive approval for visits, they become “processed” individuals who transition from being free bodies to imprisoned bodies while on prison grounds by having to abide by the prison’s formal regulations (Comfort 2008). While existing literature demonstrates that women cannot bring unauthorized items onto prison grounds and are subjected to random body searches (Comfort 2008; Castle 2023; Boppre, Dehart, Shapiro 2022), my participants were also tested for drug substances by COs. Women were required to press a button that turned either green signaling entry, or red, which triggered greater scrutiny. When red, women’s hands were swabbed with a napkin which was then placed in a machine to test for drug residues. If the machine detected any drug residues, the women were only allowed to attend behind-the-glass visits after agreeing to be strip-searched by prison officers. A handful of women described the process as invasive, a source of fear and anxiety. Although Ana, a 47-year-old Mexican American, does not consume any illicit drugs, she did not pass the test and faced the dilemma of either agreeing to a strip-search or only being allowed to visit her husband behind a window divider: “They would swipe your hands with a swab and then put it on this reader to see if you had any remnants of any sort of drugs. I had to go through that once or twice maybe cause the thing went off for God knows what reason ‘cause I don’t do

drugs...” Similarly, Silvia, a 28-year-old Mexican American, recalled fearing the possibility of touching items in public spaces that could ultimately produce a red light:

Even though you know you’re not guilty, you're like what if I accidentally touched something at the liquor store, what if I accidentally touched something on my way here, and what if I get triggered? What if they end my visitation, and now, you’re on a black list or something? So even though I know I wasn’t guilty, I would hit that button and I felt like my heart was beating...

Although my participants said that this button-pressing procedure is no longer implemented, women continue to feel anxiety, stress, and worry about the possibility of being denied visitation.

Among the processing procedures, dress inspections were the highest concern for participants (Comfort 2008; Castle 2023; Christian 2005; Boppre, Dehart, Shapiro 2022). COs inspected women’s clothing to ensure it did not resemble inmate or guard attire. Their clothing had to be “conservative” and not contain or conceal metal or weapons that would trigger metal detectors. Although the CDCR website lists rules for acceptable clothing for visitors, the inconsistency of rule enforcement and discretion by prison guards kept women on edge. While one CO would allow clothing that was more form fitting, another would require that visitor to change. When women became aware which officer was conducting the processing, they anticipated how harshly dress inspections were going to be and whether they would be required to change clothes. Depending on their body shape, certain women had greater difficulty meeting clothing expectations than others. Similar to Castle’s (2023) findings, women with curvier bodies were asked to change anywhere from two to four times during their visit, which cut into precious time

spent with their husbands. Silvia shared her frustration with this practice, a penalty she attributed to her body shape:

...at that prison I [never]...got through immediately...They would constantly mess with me...I was a big girl...So it was hard for me to find outfits where they didn't fit tight in a particular area...One time when I got in, the cop goes I saw you got here earlier and it's like 10 o'clock now. What happened?' I'm like it's cause I had to go change, and he goes, Yeah, they always fuck with the girls with big asses and big titties...

Given the inconsistency of dress code implementation, certain women wore clothes that were one to two sizes larger, such as graphic tees and sweatpants, to avoid multiple dress changes. While this practice could expedite their visitation entry, it also infringed on their ability to wear clothing they felt was attractive and flattering. This supports findings from existing literature that reveal the inconsistency of dress codes leave women feeling anxious and insecure, resulting in the development of a carceral identity by prohibiting women from developing a fashion style (Castle 2023; Comfort 2008). Thinking about and complying with clothing restrictions was an additional hurdle women had to overcome to gain access to visit their husbands.

As a response to the formal social controls experienced while on prison grounds, the wives imposed informal social controls on one another across social settings to protect their visitation rights. Prison wives view visiting their husbands as a privilege and they hope to maintain it by avoiding any interactions jeopardizing their access. In turn, some women informally imposed the institution's norms onto other visitors to prevent visitation denials.

Often, women who drive far distances to see their husbands seek to reduce costs by joining carpools, sharing hotel rooms, pitching in for gas, and taking turns driving.

Although Fishman (1988) found women who entered prison grounds for the first time suspected long-term prison wives of committing crimes, participants in my study reinforced the prison's formal rules regardless of how long women had been visiting. Prior to entering prison grounds, women reminded passengers to leave all drug substances in hotel rooms since cars are subjected to searches at all times. Women recognize that other visitors have much to lose if a passenger was found in possession of any illegal items. When a prison wife was caught bringing contraband into the premises, the entire carpool party was scrutinized and forced to undergo a strip-search to visit and avoid being charged with a criminal conviction. This happened to Mia, a 34-year old Mexican American, who had joined a carpool with two other women to visit their partners in the state prison, Corcoran. While undergoing processing, one of the carpool visitors was caught attempting to bring heroin onto the premises. Although Mia was unaware of this visitor's intentions, she was told by prison staff she could still visit her husband but only after undergoing a strip-search. She agreed to demonstrate her innocence and be allowed to see her husband without realizing the distress it would cause her: "It was a horrible experience. They ended up strip-searching us, our car not even allowing us to have our visit...I've been to jail ...it was worse than going to jail...it's violating...and I did it because I wanted to get my visit..." Many women understood their ability to fully prevent these physical violations due to others was limited, resulting in most prison wives avoiding carpooling altogether.

While on prison grounds, women waiting in lines also reinforced the prison's dress code by policing each other's outfits and providing clothing recommendations prior

to beginning processing. This was more likely to occur between seasoned and novice visitors, since first time visitors were unaware of the clothing regulations. To avoid delayed processing and reduced visiting time for themselves, women would tell other visitors if their outfits might draw unwanted scrutiny from guards. Women's recommendations to change were primarily based upon clothing that was either tight fitting, revealing, or resembled prisoners' or guards' clothing. While waiting to be processed, Jazmine, a 34-year-old Mexican-Filipina, was told by another visitor that her clothing was unacceptable since it reflected COs' uniforms. She explained: "One time this lady's like...they're not gonna let you wear that. She's like, 'Do you have something to change into? And I was like, 'What? What do you mean?' They're like...'You can't wear that because that resembles the guards.'"

Megan, on the other hand, visits her husband in Pleasant Valley State Prison two to three times a month and is familiar with the clothing regulations. She recalled past conversations she had with other women while in line where she advised them to wear professional attire, such as clothing used in office or religious spaces, to avoid being asked to change. Her motivation was twofold – to avoid sexual excitement of other male inmates and maximize time spent with her spouse:

You're not here to go provoke other men...Because some women do go in very showing cleavage very tight knit-clothes...We're here for one thing and it's to see our spouses. You're causing the line to stop...Be aware of the rules...So you're not holding up everybody else from seeing their loved one...Dress the way they're asking you and you won't have a problem...

Megan's informal advice imposed informal social controls onto other prison wives, encouraging them to modify their behavior and thus, reinforcing the prison's dress code attire.

Informal social controls were also practiced and enforced on social media platforms, including Facebook support groups. All but two participants engaged and actively posted on Facebook support pages to connect with prison wives and family members of incarcerated people. Since the pandemic affected wives' ability to spend in-person time with their husbands, many opted into only attending one-hour online video visits. During online visits, women are prohibited from recording or taking photos; if this rule is violated, women are subject to the termination of their visit and possibly their visiting rights. When women uploaded images of their video visits on Facebook support groups, members commented that their visitation rights could be terminated if someone reported their posts to prison officials. Some women also reminded group members of the possibility of guards joining Facebook to surveil women's interactions, a practice that is likely to instill fear and encourage rule compliance among participants. Leticia, a 29-year-old Salvadoran, recalls seeing women regularly post pictures of their video visits and members giving them "hell for posting that." She elaborated on the posted content: "You don't really know if there might be like COs on those pages and just letting them know, like, you shouldn't be doing that. You don't know who's on here. You don't know if that might affect you or your husband negatively." Leticia not only was aware of the consequences women can potentially experience by violating the prison's regulations for

video visits should they post them on social media, but she also considered how her husband could be impacted by her behaviors outside of a prison visit.

Interactions between prison wives outside of the carceral context often consisted of enacting informal social controls typically aligned with the formal prison policies. Although their motivations to protect spousal visitations are understandable, these practices ultimately extend and sustain the formal carceral controls beyond the prison walls.

Racial Politics in Prison

“Who has the toughest husband?”

Prison institutions employ racial classifications—such as Black, White, Hispanic, and Other Race—to enforce segregation and maintain social control (Goodman 2008; Walker 2016). Racial politics inform inmates’ behaviors by establishing who they can interact with and the resources available to them (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo 2021; Goodman 2014; Walker 2016). The present study found that institutionally established racial classifications served as formal controls that determined how people interacted with others while incarcerated. However, the prison’s racial politics also extended beyond the prison grounds and had repercussions for prison wives. Women were pressured to abide by these controls across contexts due to fearing their husbands would receive repercussions for interacting with people from different racial classifications. As a result of interacting with the criminal justice system, women began to categorize themselves according to their husband’s prison-assigned racial classification and abide by the racial norms practiced by inmates and prison staff.

Along with prison administration and correctional officers, inmates believed racial segregation served to prevent conflicts between race-based gangs (Weide 2022; Hunt et al 1993; Goodman 2012; Walker 2016). In turn, 12 Latina prison wives acknowledged their husband's previous or current engagement in the prison's racial politics was a survival tool since race-based gangs were able to protect their partners in case a problem arised. Similar to Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo's findings (2021), inmates who performed tasks for their designated gang for protection gained additional charges and time added to their sentence. Johanna, a 37-year-old Mexican American, has been visiting her husband for 12 years, and of those years, her husband had three of "clean time," time served without receiving behavioral write-ups. Johanna's husband is a *Sureño* gang member, one that acts as a "soldier," performing tasks as directed by gang leaders. "The ones that have to get their hands dirty are the soldiers...they're the ones that cause all the bloodshed. And if you have men like my husband...it's gonna be a dangerous environment." Sophia also recognizes prison wives must be understanding of the prison's racial politics since: "being a Southsider comes with a lot...they have jobs and obligations to do in there and sometimes they have to do things they don't want to do." Both women refer to the hierarchy of power that is enforced in racial groups where soldiers are required to join fights, bring contraband into prison, and solve any issues. Inmates in higher ranks, or shot callers, do not engage in the "dirty work" performed by soldiers. As a result, soldiers are given multiple behavioral infractions, causing wives to have more contact with the criminal justice system and for an indefinite amount of time.

Following the formal racial classifications women's husbands received, the related formal controls trickled down and shaped their behaviors across social contexts. In hopes of securing protection for their husbands, prison wives informally upheld racial politics by "putting in work." The obligations of being the wife of a *Sureño* included communicating with other inmates and bringing contraband into prison grounds. The wives felt they were required to either protect their husbands from any repercussions by acting or finding other people to be "mules," visitors who would bring drug substances onto prison grounds. Johanna recalls her husband asking her if she would ever take illicit substances onto prison grounds: "I was like, Nope...Don't even fucking ask, you better meet up with the girl and make her your mule because I'm not gonna do it. He was like, you're okay with that? I said, Yep. I'm fine with that. I don't care." Similarly, off prison grounds, women would communicate with gang members of higher ranks to pass information to their husbands or other prison wives, ensuring jobs would be completed for the gang. By putting in the work, women were able to assist their husbands in completing their required gang duties and ensure their safety in prison.

While the criminal justice system faced a lawsuit for enforcing racial segregation in prison, inmates and their partners' engagement in the prison's racial politics served to uphold the system's goals while also affecting the interactions among prison wives. Not only were women subjected to racialized norms, but they also received the status, financial benefits, and repercussions that their husbands received in prison, causing further segregation between wives. Although some prison wives do not speak about their husband's activities as part of their code of ethics, other prison wives use social media

platforms, such as Facebook and Tiktok, to showcase their husband's status. These wives engaged in a competition of "who had the toughest husband," as Catalina stated, by posting images of their husbands, the thousands of dollars earned, and the luxury gifts they received. Prior to enrolling in prison education programs, Catalina's husband "called the shots" and was in charge of coaching inmates who had just entered the facility. Catalina recalls the gifts her husband bought, including luxury purses and high quality clothing, and the financial stability that came with her husband's position: "I have a couple of Louis Vuitton purses that my husband got me while he was working [as a shot caller] and what am I gonna get from displaying them, other than...how did he buy it? And then it goes back into the prison system and it could affect your husband."

In addition to the benefits of being married to a shot caller, women also experienced repercussions. Women could also be punished alongside their husband if they were caught engaging in infractions by a guard, by their own gang, or engaging a rival gang. Therefore, women were hyper-aware of their surroundings across social settings. Dayana, a 41 year-old Mexican American, recalls how proudly her husband represented his gang and the need for her to protect herself from retaliation. "I'm already watching my back. I'm already watching what I say... being in that prison and feeling like you're in a pool full of sharks... Feeling like there's someone watching your every move...it was scary." Women became weary of the people who approached them, avoided relationships with other prison wives, and refrained from sharing personal information to ensure their husband's as well as their own safety. Women were already vigilant when entering prison grounds, but their participation in the prison's racial politics

created a hyperconsciousness by understanding others' intentions to retaliate for their husband's actions in prison.

If women sought to connect with the prison wife community off prison grounds, they remained within their prison-assigned racial group to avoid any negative consequences for their husbands. Sophia recalls riding with an African American woman to prison grounds on her first visit and being told by her husband to find another person to return home with due to the racial politics. Although she desired support from the prison wife community, she understood if a wife from a different racial group felt disrespected, their husbands would have to solve the issue behind bars: "Because they're in there, we have to follow their rules... So they won't get in trouble because whatever we do on the outside and they find out they'll tell him..." To protect their husbands from being questioned by other inmates and avoid altercations, Latina prison wives communicated with women whose husbands were also *sureños*.

On the other hand, 11 wives interviewed described being able to speak to prison wives from different racial groups because their husbands did not actively participate in the prison's racial politics. However, these wives spoke about being courteous rather than building friendships. Latina prison wives stated they would greet and have small talk with Black women while waiting to be processed or for their husbands to enter the visiting room. Krystal, a 35 year-old Mexican American, sought to build friendships with women regardless of their racial classification. But, she noticed that with Black prison wives the relationship "doesn't really ever evolve, doesn't ever have substance...if they ask a question then that's it, or the husband will talk... They'll be like, just have your husband

send it to my husband...it will never be direct contact...” Latinas wives who sought to develop conversations with Black or White prison wives often felt their relationships never advanced. The institutionalization of racial classifications by prison administrators and correctional officers sought to prevent violence between racial groups, but it also set parameters on whom women could interact with, furthering racial divisions among populations that are disproportionately impacted by the carceral state.

Coping Mechanisms: Building Support and Community

“The Whole World is Already Against Us”

Despite pressures to conform to prison rules inside and outside the prison confines via formal and informal social controls, interactions between prison wives were not exclusively oriented towards compliance. In fact, four wives participated in organizations that provided social support and empowered them to collectively resist or contest pressures to conform to carceral rules. Women built support outside of prison by joining non-profit organizations, such as Essie Justice Group and Ten Toes In, to learn about new initiatives and engage in spaces of healing. These organizations enabled women from different races and ethnicities to interact, build support, and engage in advocacy. Within these transracial community spaces, women drew upon their shared experiences to join collective actions, such as improving inmates’ access to health care, the prison’s implementation of COVID regulations during spike season, and the racial integration of prison yards. As a community of prison wives, women were involved in activism to bring awareness to their experiences and demand equitable resources for their partners.

In addition, prison wives participated in and received support from Facebook groups, countering the largely negative effects of distrust that prison rules and politics typically produced among them. As prior research shows, support groups allow women to offer one another encouragement, guidance, and emotional support in both physical and virtual spaces (Foster 2019; Woodall and Kinsella 2018; Christian 2005; Castle 2023; Hink, Hink, Smith, and Withers 2019; Peterson, Cohen, and Smith 2013). After deciding to marry her partner and submitting paperwork in 2020, Illiana's marriage ceremony was canceled and placed on hold for over a year due to the pandemic. She explained how she relied on other women's support during this heart-wrenching time: "The next morning, I FaceTime(d) about four of them. [They] tell me that they love me, they're here for me, he's gonna marry me and...our love's gonna withhold...hearing those things...it's like, they know that feeling." Gabriela, a 32-year-old woman, also relied heavily on other prison wives to relieve her feeling of being overwhelmed while attempting to navigate the carceral system, which was exacerbated by her pregnancy: "I belong to a lot of the groups because...they understand what you're going through...maybe your family doesn't completely understand because they're not in your situation...versus someone who has a husband who's incarcerated." Gabriela now pays it forward by offering other women support, resources, and guidance via online Facebook groups.

In addition to emotional support, women assisted each other with completing paperwork required for visits and marriage ceremonies. Women drew from their previous knowledge and conversations with prison staff to help guide others through this unfamiliar and haunting process. Similar to Christian's (2005) participants who shared

with each other where items for inmates can be purchased, prison wives who had previously attended overnight visits posted on Facebook pictures of items that were approved during processing and shared information on where they could be purchased. Rather than reproaching other visitors for violating prison policies and jeopardizing access, women shared information to be helpful and encouraging. Although Olga, a 33-year-old Mexican American, had been visiting her husband for 16 years, she relied on other prison wives to learn what products were accepted by the prison for overnight family visits when her husband was transferred to a different facility.

...this network of prison wives, the support system we build it's crucial in surviving the journey of being a prison wife because we learn from each other. So when my husband was transferred to Lancaster, it was the other Lancaster prison wives that took me in. This is what we're allowed to do, this is not what we're allowed to do, this is what you're allowed to take into your family visit...It's a circle of empowerment.

Women's collective experiences undergoing processing, navigating the prison system's arbitrary and ever-changing rules, and coping with the socio-emotional challenges of having an incarcerated partner makes social support an important resource for them. On-site and virtual spaces foster a sense of community and provide emotional support and tangible guidance to prison wives, even in the face of prison racial politics and formal carceral controls that spill beyond the prison grounds.

Conclusion and Discussion

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.

The findings of this study have several implications for theory and future research on prison wives and secondary prisonization. First, the 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.

Second, these 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).

Based upon these conclusions, prisons should remove barriers to prison visits to facilitate family member's access to their incarcerated loved ones. For instance, prisons can relocate inmates closer to their home communities to reduce time and costs of traveling to prisons. Existing research and this project's findings demonstrate family

members travel long distances to attend prison visits and depend upon carpooling or public transportation to arrive on prison grounds (Christian 2005; Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005). Cochran and their colleagues (2016) found Latino inmates were on average housed further away from their home communities, as compared to Black and White inmates. However, if Latinos were housed within a 50 mile radius of their home communities, they would have the highest probability of visitations from family members (Cochran et al 2016). Thus, prisons must house inmates closer to their home communities to facilitate access to visit and the creation of strong social bonds.

Similarly, prisons 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. Visiting rooms are often structured with inmates facing correctional officers and visitors around them, leading to interactions heavily based on conversations (Schubert et al 2016). Instead, prisons can adjust the structure of their visiting rooms by allowing families to utilize outdoor spaces to cook and share meals together. When women in this project described their experiences in overnight visits with their husbands, they felt they were in a closed community since they were able to interact with other visitors, or “neighbors,” and correctional officers conducting security checks. By allowing families to interact with one another, prisons can facilitate the creation of community spaces and reduce racial tensions among race-based gangs.

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. Members from organizations can meet with inmates on a

bi-weekly basis to develop relationships that encourage proactive learning and social skills. They can also set further personal goals including career and educational attainments. New policies and practices at the state level (such as in CDCR) and specifically within prisons can help inmates maintain positive social bonds to their family members and facilitate family member's access to visitation.

Since this study focused on Latina prison wives due to the rising rate of incarceration among Latinos in California, it cannot make claims about the experiences of prison wives from other racial and ethnic groups. Similarly, the findings of this research cannot be generalized to prisons across the United States because of its small sample size and California's most prominent race-based gang, La Eme, might not be found within other states. In the future, scholars should examine whether the findings here also apply to prison wives of different racial and ethnic groups. It is also important to analyze whether women in multi-racial relationships receive any repercussions from visitors, as formal social controls segregate inmates based on the prison's racial classifications and influence visitors' interactions. Future research is also needed to understand if the institution's formal implementation of racial politics affects inmates' and their partners' behavior upon release, given this study showed that racial norms originated in prisons are practiced beyond prison grounds during incarceration. Scholars, social workers, and activists can continue to investigate how racial norms are continuously shaped, questioned, and resisted within institutional settings and community spaces. Women's experiences can be used to inform state policies by demonstrating how

prison policies move beyond the carceral context and detrimentally affects non-convicted people who seek to maintain relations with an incarcerated family member.

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