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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Matched or Marked? Criminal Stigma and Romantic Consequences

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Criminology, Law and Society

by

LaBreonna Stori-Turner Bland

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Valerie Jenness, Chair
Professor Bryan Sykes
Professor Naomi Sugie

2023

DEDICATION

To

My ancestors who preceded me but still guide me. My beautiful nieces and nephews, I hope you're inspired to follow your own path, each and every one of you are my "Why."

Rest in peace and love Valerie Dean, Kiley Jr., Midonyis Dontaye and Lionel Troy III.

I LIVE YOU.

And to The Love of My Life Darrell Drake Jr., thank you for your constant support, unwavering love, and being a safe place.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
VITA	vi
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	ix
CHAPTER 1: Introduction	1
Review of Literature	4
Impact of Criminal Justice Contact	4
Stigma and Labeling	7
Romantic Interactions and Relationships	12
Criminal Stigma and Romantic Interactions and Relationships	15
CHAPTER 2: Understanding (In)consistency in Romantic Decision-Making	24
Review of Literature	26
Methods	33
Results	40
Conclusion	45
Appendix	48
CHAPTER 3: Violence as a Signifier in the Relationship Market	53
Review of Literature	55
Methods	63
Results	68
Conclusion	73
Appendix	76
CHAPTER 4: What Matters to Me and Why	82
Review of Literature	84
Methods	88
Results	93
The Environment of Urban Space for Black People	93
The Pursuit of Opportunity and Stability and Avoidance of Precarity	99
The Prospect of Violence as an Actual and Potential Threat to Stability	103
Abstract Connections and Particular Concerns: Parenthood, Disclosure, Recidivism and Caretaking, and Redemption	108
Discussion	122
Appendix	126
CHAPTER 5: Conclusion	128

Summary of Results and Implications	128
Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research	134
REFERENCES	136

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Sample Respondents	48
Table 2: Relationship Between Seeking Casual Sexual Dating Arrangements and Criminal Justice Contact	49
Table 3: Relationship Between Respondent Inconsistency Towards Casual Sexual Dating Arrangements and Romantic Prospects with Prior Criminal Justice Contact	50
Table 4: Relationship Between Respondent Inconsistency Towards Committed Cohabiting and Romantic Prospects with Prior Criminal Justice Contact	51
Table 5: Relationship Between Respondent Inconsistency Across Casual Sexual Dating Arrangements and Committed Cohabiting Relationships Overall and Romantic Prospects with Prior Criminal Justice Contact	52
Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for Sample Respondents	75
Table 7: Relationship Between Seeking Casual Sexual Dating Arrangements and Prior Violent Criminal Justice Contact	76
Table 8: Relationship Between Respondent Characteristics and Willingness to Engage in Casual Sex with Romantic Prospects Who Have Prior Non-Violent Criminal Justice Contact	77
Table 9: Relationship Between Respondent Characteristics and Willingness to Engage in Casual Sex with Romantic Prospects Who Have Prior Violent Criminal Justice Contact	78
Table 10: Relationship Between Respondent Characteristics and Willingness to Cohabitate with Romantic Prospects Who Have Prior Non-Violent Criminal Justice Contact	79
Table 11: Relationship Between Respondent Characteristics and Willingness to Cohabitate with Romantic Prospects Who Have Prior Violent Criminal Justice Contact	80
Table 12: Demographic Characteristics of Focus Groups	126
Table 13: Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees	127

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Finally, to the little Black girls with the big names, "Do it for the Stori."

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Matched or Marked? Criminal Stigma and Romantic Consequences

by

LaBreonna Stori-Turner Bland

Doctor of Philosophy in Criminology, Law and Society

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Valerie Jenness, Chair

With the expansive criminal justice system reaching over 70 million people, the oft-researched collateral consequences of system contact robustly demonstrate uneven outcomes for impacted persons in education, housing, health, income attainment and civic involvement among other things. A voluminous body of literature has shown that criminal justice involvement can lead to stigmatization in an array of institutional arenas anchoring social life. Recently, research has focused on how stigma operates in romantic relationships, but less so with a specific focus on criminal justice involved persons seeking casual sexual dating encounters and committed cohabitating relationships. Using original survey data and qualitative focus groups and in-depth interviews, this dissertation advances our understanding of the collateral consequences of system contact by focusing analytic attention on: 1) how criminal stigma impacts daters' decision-making about prospects for dating, sexual engagement, cohabitating, and the like; 2) violence as a signifier that is arguably amplified for daters who are making decisions about dating prospects, and 3) what matters to daters and how, within a larger set of concerns, criminal histories matter (or not). Daters' decision-making reveals patterns of inconsistency in concern about the presence of a history of criminal legal system contact when considering committed cohabitation. Specifically, older, minority, and parent daters are less likely to exhibit inconsistent reactions

towards prospects with criminal system contact. A criminal history that contains violence evokes concern and acts as a deterrent to considerations of more serious commitments, such as cohabitation; however, it is not a universal mark of stigma when it comes to causal encounters. Finally, as data from focus groups and interviews lay bare, for some daters criminal justice contact is an everyday, normal experience while for others, such contact is extraordinary; these and other differences are moderated by race. Related, some daters look for stability in relationships and may be deterred by violent histories that can inject chaos and precarity into their lives. As parents, daters' perspectives may shift when a partner with criminal legal system contact are perceived to be a role model for their children and can provide financial support. Other daters express concerns about recidivism and fears surrounding taking personal responsibility for ensuring their partner refrains from future criminal behavior. Finally, many daters opt to extend grace and redemption to individuals who have criminal histories, but that extension stops short of viewing them as suitable partners for more serious relationships such as cohabitation. These and other findings reported in this dissertation extend understandings of the collateral consequences of criminal justice contact, where operations of criminal stigma can influence who is able to attain romantic connection and on what terms, and suggests that romantic relationships and criminal stigma warrant further attention and research.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Mass incarceration in the U.S. has been accompanied by the development of a wide range of scholarship detailing the collateral consequences of criminal justice system contact. Considerable attention has focused on individuals exiting the criminal justice system bearing the permanent, highly stigmatizing label of “formerly incarcerated,” and its ramifications on reintegration, including access to employment, higher education, housing, community acceptance, and familial relationships (Pager, 2003; Herbert et al., 2015; Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015; Stojkovic, 2017; Hood & Gaston, 2022). Unfavorable outcomes spring from and reveal the stigmatization that flows from criminal justice contact. Even arrests that do not lead to convictions produce negative consequences for persons who experience contact with the criminal justice system (Nagin & Paternoster, 1991). The stigma of criminal justice contact may then stem from *any* criminal justice contact, not incarceration alone. Moreover, the impacts of such stigma may be expansive, seeping into areas of personal and social life that are less visible outside researchers, or difficult to assess and measure with available data.

Stigmatization here operates as a societal process wherein individuals are set apart from the prevailing general population with a “mark,” and are consequently viewed as deviant and devalued (Goffman, 1963). “Criminal stigma” resulting from criminal justice system contact happens broadly on a societal level, as well as within communities and families, where its negative impacts have been documented by researchers. Less understood, however, is the impact of this stigma on intimate, romantic relationships, despite the central roles such relationships play in the lives of many individuals. This is especially the case for non-marital relationships, as the existing sociological and psychological work primarily focuses on marriages, despite changing norms that have rendered this institution less common among many groups. The

smattering of research that does exist on this topic has little to say about how criminal justice contact, through criminal stigma, influences the perceived romantic suitability of affected individuals and their resulting experiences seeking romantic and intimate relationships.

As a common social practice, the dating “market” is comprised of individuals pursuing different kinds of encounters and relationships. Many conceptualize such relationships along a continuum that has casual sexual interactions on one end, and enduring, committed intimate relationships on the other. Typically, dating partners make decisions about how and whether to proceed with integrating partners and relationships more deeply in their lives over time, navigating various romantic touchpoints along the way. Scholarship has shown that the frequency of individuals engaging in casual sexual relationships within a year is nearly equal to those engaging in serious romantic relationships (Jonason et al., 2015). Certainly, the romantic continuum features sex, relationships, commitments, cohabitation, and sometimes breakdowns of those encounters and partnerships. Relationships, therefore, are multi-factorial and multi-dimensional, presenting challenges for researchers who seek to study this important realm of human sociality.

Seeking some form of intimate companionship is a nearly universal desire and action, and it is a common practice across most societies for individuals to form (or desire to form) long-term bonds (Fisher, 1992). While of obvious importance to individuals, romantic encounters and relationships do not occur in a vacuum devoid of the influence of the social world. Relationship science scholars have opined that “like other great forces in nature--such as gravity, electricity, and the four winds--a relationship itself is invisible; its existence can be discerned only by observing its effects” (Berscheid, 1999, p. 261). Considering the substantial weight of the criminal justice system, which reaches a conservatively estimated 73 million people through

felonious arrests and includes an additional 13 million misdemeanor cases filed annually in the United States (Clark, 2017; Gross, 2019), it follows that many existing and potential romantic relationships are or will be impacted by mass-incarceration and broader criminal justice system involvement. How criminal stigma may push or pull daters towards a touchpoint in light of the criminal justice systems' expansiveness, if at all, is a question ripe for research.

To date, attention to non-marital romantic relationships in the collateral consequence literature has primarily focused on *incarcerated* or *immediately re-entering* partners (Comfort, 2007; Comfort et al., 2005). There are a handful of studies that examine criminal stigma and its impact on romantic suitability. A recent study examining the impact of parole disclosure for women in online dating found that “criminal stigma” was more damaging for Black and Latina women but not for white women and in fact, made white women more attractive (Evans, 2019). In a similar study where the focus was on parole disclosure for men, results indicated that parole disclosure reduced matches for Black males, had no effect on matching odds for Latino males, and increased matches for White males (Evans & Vega, 2020). Other studies have examined how stigmatization works by crime type. These studies found that the criminal stigma of sexual offenses was heightened in comparison to non-violent and property offenses (Beijers et al., 2016; Zoutewelle-Terovan et al., 2015). While these findings provide evidence of a causal relationship between criminal stigma and potential dating outcomes, there is a need for more qualitative research to further unpack the relationship between the mark of a criminal history and that mark's influence on individuals' sexual and romantic livelihoods.

Where, how, and why criminal justice contact reigns as a deal breaker, or otherwise influences one's sexual and romantic interactions or, by extension, one's perceived suitability for companionship are largely unknown. This study examines the impact of criminal justice contact

on the realm of non-marital romantic relationships in order to begin to reveal who is afforded—or not afforded—access to intimacy and romance and the attending benefit of companionship. By analyzing how the mark of a criminal record is accepted or rejected across a range of romantic touchpoints as individuals progress through casual sexual dating towards committed cohabitating relationships, and/or experience the dissolution of intimate or romantic arrangements, it focuses on the how criminal justice system involvement affects whether intimate and romantic arrangements fade or flourish. Through revealing how “criminal stigma” may shape intimate and romantic arrangements in the contemporary dating market, this study significantly broadens our conceptualization of the collateral consequences of the US criminal justice system.

Review of Literature

This project draws from and contributes to the growing literature on the collateral consequences of criminal justice system contact, the process of stigma and labeling, and intimate and personal relationship literatures, which its analyses bring together. To contextualize how criminal justice contact can impact intimate and romantic arrangements, I briefly review the expansion of the criminal justice system and current research on collateral consequences. Sociological literature on stigma is then used to underline how crime, incarceration, and romantic relationships interact as a series of social processes. The literatures reviewed here are then elaborated upon in subsequent chapters in accordance with their respective foci.

Impact of Criminal Justice Contact

The unprecedented growth in the incarcerated population and expansive reach of criminal justice contact has been extensively studied (see Beckett, 2018 for review). Nationwide, there are almost 4 million people are on probation or parole while over 1.5 million individuals are incarcerated in a state or federal prison or local jail (Kluckow & Zeng, 2022). Social research has

interrogated some of the collateral consequences of criminal justice contact, including the “invisible punishments” that follow official system contact, beyond the direct experience of being incarcerated (Travis, 2002). Post-incarceration reintegration research has explored the barriers formerly incarcerated people face upon re-entry (Harding et al., 2013; Stojkovic, 2017). The collateral consequences of penal sanctions are associated with a range of negative outcomes, including: unfavorable physical and mental consequences for both people who are formerly incarcerated and their families (Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015), curtailed civic involvement (Manza & Uggen, 2006; Sugie 2015; Pettit & Sykes, 2015; Weaver et al., 2014), institutional avoidance (Brayne 2014; Haskins & Jacobsen 2017), increased material vulnerability (Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011; Sykes & Pettit, 2015), greater reliance on public assistance (Sugie 2012; Sykes & Pettit, 2015), residential instability (Harding et al., 2013; Herbert et al., 2015), and poor educational and health outcomes for children of incarcerated parents (Geller et al., 2012; Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017). These unfavorable outcomes reflect the stigmatization that accompanies essentially any criminal justice system contact.

Still, the reach of the criminal justice system and understanding of the punishments beyond incarceration are understated. Criminal justice contact (i.e., arrests that may not lead to a conviction) is just as expansive as incarceration. The FBI reports that over 10 million people were arrested in 2019 alone (Crime in the United States, 2019). FBI statistics indicate that more than 73 million persons have an arrest for a felony (Clark, 2017). Yet in most jurisdictions, the largest arrest categories are for misdemeanors, infractions, or violations (Kohler-Hausmann, 2013). While there is no definitive national data on the number or type of misdemeanor cases, legal scholars estimate that misdemeanors comprise approximately 80 percent of all arrests and 13 million cases filed each year (Gross, 2019).

Kohler-Hausmann (2013) argues that “misdemeanor justice” employs penal techniques such as “marking” through criminal justice record keeping, procedural burdens, and mandated performance to regulate significant populations without conviction or sentencing. Critics have characterized the imposition of legal financial obligations (LFOs) in this system of “misdemeanor justice” as courts placing defendant’s freedom on “lay-away” and thereby extending control over significant populations (Patillo & Kirk, 2001). Indeed, when poor defendants cannot pay, they face compounding penalties ranging from additional fees and fines to incarceration (Patillo & Kirk, 2001; Friedman et al., 2022). A separate study found that court debt charged to indigent defendants yielded few benefits to the government and neither caused nor deterred new crime. However, the study found that fines and fees contributed to a criminalization of low-income defendants, placing them at risk of ongoing court involvement through new warrants and debt collection (Pager et al., 2022).

“Marking” through criminal justice record-keeping may burden an individual with inescapable classification that has far-reaching consequences for their social outcomes. Notably, while an arrest does not necessarily equate with a conviction, its consequences can reverberate through an individual’s life (Nagin and Paternoster, 1991). A now classic study found that criminal records essentially close doors to employment opportunities (Pager, 2003), for instance. Confirming that employers’ use this information as “a screening mechanism,” the study reveals that in 50 % of cases, employers were unwilling to consider equally qualified applicants on the basis of their criminal record (Pager, 2003, p. 956). More recently, scholarship has extended this examination to assess how credentials obtained in prison affect employer callbacks. The study revealed that applicants with prison credentials have higher probabilities of receiving callbacks than formerly incarcerated men without credentials. Notwithstanding credentials, the study found

that criminal stigma was still a prominent force in determining employment outcomes, with applicants without incarceration histories having more success than applicants with prison credentials (Lindsay, 2022).

Individuals who report criminal justice contact of any type, including mere arrest, exhibit lower overall occupational attainment scores in young adulthood (Nur & Monaghan, 2022). Criminal justice contact increases police surveillance, lowering the threshold for the individual's re-arrest. (Lieberman et al., 2014). Further, police contact, not just arrest, can increase the risk of future police contact (Crutchfield et al., 2009). Sarah Lageson (2022) has assessed the harm digital criminal records can impose when nearly every interaction with the legal system becomes a permanent data point in individuals' criminal records and "sorts, classifies, marks, and punishes people in areas of life beyond the criminal justice system" (p. 68). Acquiring a criminal record has been equated to a "civil death" for its diminishment of an individual's opportunities to vote, serve on a jury, and access student loans, subsidized housing, and public benefits (Brown, 2011; Delgado, 2012; Ewald & Uggen, 2012; Geffen & Letze, 2004; Holzer et al., 2003, 2004; Jacobs, 2015; Travis et al., 2014). Employers and non-employers alike have instant, ready, and low-cost access to criminal records made available in an expanding for-profit industry of commercial background check companies that collect and compile criminal records into electronic, searchable databases of millions of computerized criminal history records—regardless of their accuracy (Lageson, 2020).

Stigma and Labeling

Stigma is a "mark" or "stain" of ill-repute that is applied to a person or group of people. It has been theorized as consisting of five interrelated components: labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). Goffman (1963) declared that

stigma can be seen as “a mark” setting an individual apart from others, such that it is “deeply discrediting” and reduces the marked person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). Goffman’s conceptualization of stigma emphasized the relationship created or implied by the “mark” as being essential, not the mark itself. Indeed, he states, “The term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself” (p. 3). Stigmatization, therefore, reflects and constructs relationships of power.

Similarly, labeling theory takes the perspective that deviance is socially constructed, in that it arises out of social interactions, is labeled as such by dominant groups, and subsequently attaches to some individuals and not to others (Grattet, 2011). First, there is a social selection of human differences that distinguish which dissimilarities will matter socially, the salience of which fluctuates and is context dependent. Racial categories such as “Black” or “White,” as well as gendered categories like “male” and “female” (or “man” and “woman”), for example, are particularly prominent. These differences, once labeled as such, become taken-for-granted labels, carrying weight *because they are taken for granted*. Likewise, having formal contact with the criminal justice system, and subsequently being deemed a “felon,” “criminal,” “convict,” “ex-con,” or even “formerly incarcerated person,” is a distinctive label that often demarcates a significant social difference. While efforts to use destigmatizing language (e.g., “people who are incarcerated”) abound in some circles, the crux of the matter is that individuals are signalized socially as having formal system contact (LeBel, 2012; Pager, 2007; Taylor, et al. 2018; Uggen, et al. 2014). Further, the application of a criminal label does not elucidate the type of offenses

committed nor the structural forces in place that may serve to benefit from punishing various behaviors. Essentially, the label affixed can be without validity even as the category of persons it signifies can be taken for granted and imbued with meanings that devalue the person across many political, economic, cultural, and social contexts.

Second, the labeled differences are linked to a set of characteristics deemed undesirable, which reflect and reproduce stereotypes. Social psychology research has shown that stereotypes aid our cognitive processes on a preconscious level, as the brain uses categories to make split-second decisions (Gladwell, 2005; Link & Phelan, 2001). The criminal label is linked in popular and professional discourse to certain negative characteristics such as lazy, immoral, untrustworthy, delinquent, etc. (Lebel, 2012). When the label of criminal is applied to an individual, associated characteristics may be attached and attributed to the individual as a consequence of the label. These stereotypes can structure social interactions, especially when we hold preconceived notions about the character of individuals based on socially constructed and affixed labels. For example, persons who disclose or are discovered to have experienced criminal justice system contact may be regarded negatively by others due to stereotypes; accordingly, people may avoid social relationships with impacted individuals.

Third, the label functions as an “othering,” where those who are labeled are effectively deemed distinctly different from the dominant group (i.e., those doing the labeling). The separation of “us” and “them” becomes the rationale for believing that those who are effectively labeled are fundamentally different from those that make the attribution (i.e., what Goffman called “the normals”). People who are stigmatized are viewed as *being* the label as opposed to *having* the label (Link & Phelan, 2001). Individuals with criminal histories are thereby viewed as *being* criminals (rather than, say, people who committed criminal acts for which criminal

sanctions were levied). The label of criminal essentially becomes a part of their identity, at least as this identity is constructed and perceived by others, which can lead to consequential outcomes for their lives.

Fourth, as someone is negatively labeled, the immediate—and often durable--consequence is loss of social status. Link and Phelan (2001) discuss how status loss originates from the label and subsequent stereotyping, which in turn becomes the *basis of discrimination* that often leads to observable disparities in treatment. Criminological literature has long established the deleterious effects of criminal justice contact in exacerbating social inequalities along many intersecting dimensions (see Wakefield & Uggen, 2010).

Finally, Link and Phelan (2001) contend that “it takes power to stigmatize” (p. 375). Powerless or disempowered groups (and people within these groups) lack the social, economic, and political power to imbue their cognitions in such a way that they can spread perceptions with “serious discriminatory consequences” (p. 376). The power differences between those who are stigmatized and those who affix and confirm stigma are not always seen as problematic; but, without power, there is no stigma. Link and Phelan (2001) argue that power in stigma-related processes can be understood by considering that while members of the stigmatized group undergo the same process in thinking about out-group individuals, they do not have the social, economic, and political power to spread their perceptions in substantially damaging ways. For instance, the label “sex offender” is one that elicits strong reactions precisely because it equates to an individual or group of persons being labeled a “sexual predator.” Individuals with convictions for sexual offenses may view their neighbors as biased and exclusionary, and even treat them negatively because of their perceptions (Williams, 2018); however, with the power differences stacked against individuals bearing the sexual predator label, such cognitions are not

likely to spread in ways that would substantially damage the neighbors. Stigma is dependent on power.

In summary, through the process of labeling and thus the “marking” of an individual (or entire group of individuals), people are placed in a socially recognized category that is distinguished as “other.” The label effectively links an individual to a set of “undesirable characteristics which form a stereotype” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 369) and reduces their status in the eyes of those applying the label. Stigma then is attached to “labels” that are inextricably linked to stereotypes that are implicitly used to make split-second decisions. The result is predictable: people who are negatively labeled necessarily experience status loss and sometimes also experience discrimination leading to unequal outcomes. Seen in this way, labeling theory offers a theoretical framework for further examination of the collateral consequences of criminal justice contact in light of the designation of “ex-con,” “felon,” “criminal,” or “formerly incarcerated,” some of the labels applied to individuals who have had formal system-contact.

A significant consequence of negative labeling and the imposition of stigma is social exclusion from conventional opportunities (Lebel, 2012). “Criminal stigma” has been linked to range issues beyond incarceration in a variety of institutional domains. For example, housing access is found to severely decrease when an individual has prior criminal justice contact in their history (Evans, 2016; Evans & Porter, 2015; Evans et al., 2018). Likewise, as mentioned above, employment stigma literature reports negative effects on job prospects for individuals with criminal convictions (Pager, 2007; Pager et al., 2009; Uggen et al., 2014). In an assessment of perceived stigma among people who are incarcerated, Winnick and Bodkin (2008) found the majority of medium-security prisoners responded that most people stigmatize formerly incarcerated individuals. The experience of having formal system contact can elicit differential

treatment and, as a result, individuals may have difficulty moving beyond assumptions that lead to overt or implicit discrimination stemming from stereotypes. Most relevant here, social relationships are susceptible to negative effects as a result of criminal justice system contact. Moreover, research has examined how associations with targets of primary stigma can result in experiencing *courtesy stigma* - when an individual experiences stigma as a result of mere association with a 'deviant' individual (Goffman, 1963). For instance, family members may find themselves harassed or ostracized (Farkas & Miller, 2008; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). Individuals experiencing courtesy stigma may suffer from adverse physical, emotional and/or mental health outcomes as a consequence not limited to increased stress, loneliness, and depression (Angermeyer et al., 2003; Russell, 2020). This kind of labelling may also inhibit someone's ability to make and/or maintain social connections when others may be hesitant to associate with someone carrying that stigma. This, of course, can have far-reaching ramifications on intimate and romantic relationships.

Romantic Interactions and Relationships

Social-behavioral scholars have long understood human relationships through the theories that focus on the immediate forces that influence who we choose to couple with. Across disciplines, the literature reveals that the pairing of partners is far from random (Buss, 1985; Schwartz, 2013). The dominant theories explaining partnering dynamics fall under assortative mating. *Assortative mating* refers to the tendency for two partners to be matched systematically on one or more characteristics, most commonly examined in the form of similarity or complementarity (Vandenberg, 1972). Individuals assortatively match in numerous ways, for instance, into employment, social friend groups, or romantic relationships. These theories posit different hypotheses about whether individuals in the marriage market prefer more similarity,

substitutes, or balance (Schwartz, 2013). Becker (1974) posited that positive assorting occurs when people choose partners who are similar to themselves in attributes like race, education, and religion. In contrast, negative assortative mating occurs where individuals match on dissimilar traits, which are substitutes. These dissimilarities can be understood as gains to the other partner. Assortative mating fundamentally shapes the characteristics of populations. It can explain how people are organized into families, determine parental characteristics, and shape access and distribution of resources across families and households. Demographers and sociologists posit that employment/earnings, education, and race/ethnicity are leading factors known to shape partner preferences (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004; Hou & Myles 2008; Kalmijn, 1991; Kalmijn, 1998; Kalmijn & Flap, 2001; Levinger & Rands, 1985).

Social exchange theory, another theoretical perspective, holds that in relationships, there are rewards and costs that occur between partners (Regan, 2017). Social exchange theory views rewards as anything an individual regards as valuable, whether it's concrete and tangible or abstract and intangible. The theory views costs as things a partner considers to be unrewarding and/or that involve a loss in opportunity, time, effort, or compromise (Hatfield & Rapson, 2012; Regan, 2017). What one considers a reward or cost can differ among people. While a relationship may provide one partner with many concrete benefits that they value, such as sex, financial security, and children, the relationship may also provide the other individual with a variety of less tangible rewards, including love, emotional support, and the fulfillment of life goals involving family and household stability. Where one person may hold the affection and emotional support provided by a steady partner rewarding, another might hold such support as costly or unimportant. Relationships are naturally dynamic, and within partnerships the nature of rewards and costs shifts over time (Felmlee, 2001; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2008). Romantic

partners engage in a continual process of evaluation where everyone assesses each other's gains and losses. The evaluations individuals make in this continual process influence the relationship development (Regan, 2017). Certainly, a particular event, behavior, or occurrence may become less rewarding and/or more costly as it occurs repeatedly or as the relationship progresses (Regan, 2017).

Another framework under which relationship development and outcomes is understood is interdependence. According to this theory, two partners in a relationship are interdependent with respect to the outcomes of their behavior; the thoughts, feelings, and actions of one person influence his or her own outcomes as well as those of their partner (Murray & Holmes, 2011). Interdependence models recognize that romantic encounters and relationships are dynamic - a highly satisfying relationship may ultimately prove unstable, while a deeply unsatisfying one can endure for a lifetime (Regan, 2017). Interdependence models propose that relationship outcomes are affected not only by what happens between the partners but also by external forces that can serve to cement or weaken the partners' bond (Murray & Holmes, 2011; Regan, 2017). For example, a criminal history may impact whether a romantic encounter such as casual sex progresses towards a relationship, cohabitation, or dissipates altogether. Evident from the literature, even after decades of theoretical insights and empirical research across fields, there are nuances to partner preference and selection that remain unpacked, including in relation to the impacts of criminal justice system involvement.

But how do we first define romantic relationships? Defining the various intimate arrangements in the realm of romance is challenging. While casual sexual arrangements are more readily defined, the concept of intimate "relationships" can be difficult to conceptualize. Relationship science scholarship has provided some insight. Four criteria distinguish intimate

relationships from other types of social relationships: interdependence, personal, closeness, and potential to be sexually intimate. (Bradbury, 2019). More specifically, an intimate relationship involves bidirectional interdependence where partners' behaviors affect each other. This mutual influence means each partner has the capacity to affect each other's thoughts, feelings, choices, and behaviors, and this can extend over time with later exchanges increasingly gaining meaning from earlier ones. An intimate relationship is personal, where partners treat each other as special and unique, rather than as members of a generic category, and close in the sense that there is strong, frequent, and diverse forms of mutual influence. Finally, an intimate relationship is, or has the potential to be, sexual (Bradbury, 2019). Accordingly, an intimate relationship is characterized by "strong, sustained, mutual influence over a broad range of interactions, with the possibility of sexual involvement" (Bradbury, 2019, p. 205).¹

Criminal Stigma and Romantic Interactions and Relationships

Criminological and sociological research centering romantic relationships and entanglements have largely concerned themselves with the "marriage effect," where marriage serves as a protective factor against future offending (Bersani & DiPietro, 2016; Farrington & West, 1995; Horney et al., 1995; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson et al., 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1995; Van Schellen et al., 2012; Warr, 1998). In addition to examining the relationship between marriage and offending, research has considered the impact incarceration has on the breakdown of marriages. Lopoo and Western (2005) show that the probability of marital dissolution is three times higher for incarcerated men compared to non-incarcerated men. More

¹Relationships are not discussed with any assumptions of monogamy. A survey of adults found that one-fifth of respondents said they would try some form of non-monogamy at some point in their lifetime. Haupt, M.L., Gesselman, A.N., Moors, A.C., Fisher, H.E., & Garcia, J.R. (2017). Prevalence of experiences with consensual non-monogamous relationships: Findings from two national samples of single americans, *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 43:5, 424-440.; <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/style/polyamory-nonmonogamy-relationships.html>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/25/fashion/dating-experts-explain-polyamory-and-open-relationships.html>

recently, Massoglia et al., (2011) found that while exposure to incarceration has no effect on marriage dissolution after the duration of incarceration is taken into account, spending substantial time away from a spouse leads to a higher risk of divorce. To date, research on the crime-reducing effect of marriage and consequence of incarceration on marriage leaves little doubt that penal sanctions can have a deleterious effect on marital unions (Apel, 2016).

Contemporary romantic relationships have become increasingly less traditional in how they look. Many adults are delaying marriage or foregoing marital unions altogether, and others are opting to cohabitate. Cohabitation and long-term partnerships have increased in the last four decades (Horowitz et al., 2019). More, the ratio of unmarried couple households to 100 married household increased from 1 to 11 in the last forty years (Gottlieb & Sugie, 2019). Consistent with contemporary trends, research on the relationships that cohabitation and non-marital partnerships share with crime and/or incarceration has increased. Gottlieb and Sugie (2019) recently found that stable partnerships that have lasted a year or longer tend to be associated with significant declines in offending. This line of research underscores the important protective role of stable romantic relationships in terms of offending. The changing relationship trends suggest a shift in social meanings of traditional institutions such as marriage (Banks, 2011; Gottlieb & Sugie, 2019). The prevailing focus on the relationship between marriage, incarceration, and offending in criminological and sociological research however leaves open a host of unanswered questions concerning the pursuit, formation, maintenance and overall nature of contemporary romantic relationships in this sphere and social outcomes. Here, the concept of collateral consequences is too narrowly focused on marriage effects, failing to consider other romantic arrangements as stable relationships.

The contours of “criminal stigma” and its impact on non-marital romantic relationships is a fairly uncharted terrain, even as relationships with incarcerated people present certain challenges (Grinstead et al., 2001; Harman et al., 2007; Turney, 2015) and have greater chances of dissolution (Apel et al., 2010; Lopoo & Western, 2005). Attention to non-marital romantic relationships in the collateral consequence literature has primarily focused on *incarcerated* or *immediately re-entering* partners (Comfort et al., 2005; 2007; Grinstead, et al., 2001; Harman et al., 2007).

Some studies on women in romantic relationships with incarcerated men illustrates how these women “do time” alongside their incarcerated partners (Comfort, 2007). Other studies have explored “courtesy stigma” where romantic partners may also experience stigma and come to bear a deviant or predatory label themselves (Plogher et al., 2016). Law-abiding citizens experience stigmatization through their relationship with the partner bearing the criminal stigma (Goffman, 1963). This collateral stigma can deny loved ones of the primary stigma target sympathy and impose blame for being othered, even by courtesy (Hannem, 2012, 2019). Those in relationships where partners experience primary and courtesy criminal stigma may see their relationship deteriorate under the strain of dual stigmatization (Russell, 2020). For example, loved ones may disapprove of their involvement with a partner who is incarcerated, or view them as being responsible for their partner’s actions, thus leading to disdain (Hunter & Nixon, 2001). A recent study interrogated the potential ‘courtesy stigma’ that partners of incarcerated men may face and how such stigma is managed, revealing techniques that allowed partners to retain agency, such as avoiding interactions with friends and family or focusing on the benefits of their relationships (DeShay et al., 2021). Nested within this limited focus on romantic relationships with incarcerated partners, much of the scholarship centers on incarcerated male partners, even

as women who are incarcerated constitute one of the fastest growing criminal justice populations. Women's incarceration has seen a higher growth rate than men's over the last four decades, doubling the pace of men (Kajstura, 2019; Sawyer, 2018).

Considering the nearly 700,000 formerly incarcerated individuals released annually (Evans, 2019) and potentially entering the dating market, understanding how the mark of a criminal record impacts their encounters is timely. Some Netherlands-based studies have begun the exploration of this topic of how criminal history may impact relationship outcomes. Using an experimental vignette where respondents advised their peers on cohabitating with a partner who has criminal history, one such study found that crime type matters, as sex offenses were more negatively perceived than non-violent offenses (Beijers et al., 2016). Sex offenses committed against children were also more problematic for participants than sex offenses against peers. Also reported in this work, individuals were equally willing to advise cohabitation with prior non-sexual violent and property offenders, but they exhibited heightened stigma towards people convicted of sexual offenses (Beijers et al., 2016). Zoutewelle-Terovan et al.'s (2015) study suggests that a continued streak of offending behavior leading to criminal contact increasingly hinders romantic prospects. The researchers found that the probability of daters with a criminal history securing a romantic or cohabiting relationship for daters decreases with each prior offense committed, and that a history of violent (including sexual) offenses appears to be more detrimental to relationship prospects than lower-level offenses (Zoutewelle-Terovan et al., 2015).

More recently, Evans (2019) explored suitability in light of possessing a criminal history with an innovative experimental study focused on the impact of parole disclosure for women in online dating. This study focused solely on initial contact using test profiles of heterosexual women, with manipulated parole disclosure and race, across 18 dating applications. By

measuring “matches” as an indicator of contact (and selection), the findings, perhaps counterintuitively, revealed that “criminal stigma” was more damaging for Black women and Latinas but not White women. Interestingly, White women were less attractive when there was no disclosure of criminal history while racial/ethnic minority women were more attractive under conditions of no disclosure (Evans 2019).

Replicating the study but focusing on men disclosing parole, Evans and Vega (2020) found that parole disclosure reduced matches for Black males, increased matches for White males, and had no effect on matching odds for Latino males. That criminal stigma can reduce Black men’s chance of matching while benefiting white male matching evokes the image of the “bad boy” archetype being attached to White men on parole. While these findings provide evidence of a causal relationship between system contact and online dating outcomes, there is a need for more quantitative and qualitative research to further unpack the relationship between the mark of a criminal record and how that mark shapes individuals’ romantic lives.

Taken as a whole, this literature raises a question about the contours of criminal and courtesy stigma for individuals who have experienced criminal justice contact and for their prospective romantic matches. For example, one might predict that we would observe the blanket power of criminal stigma in the dating lives of individuals who have experienced criminal justice contact. On the other hand, Evans’s (2019; 2020) work reveals how the mark of a criminal record evokes different responses based on race/ethnicity. The Netherlands studies suggest that females with multiple offenses in their history are not as attractive as males with multiple offenses in their history (Zoutewelle-Terovan et al., 2015), while violent males were less attractive than violent females (Beijers et al., 2016). Therefore, one might expect that criminal stigma further demotes the status of people of color and those who have more serious criminal histories marked

by violence. Further, this punitive perspective may hold for daters who seek more exclusive, committed relationships, as daters could be more open to casual sexual affairs with individuals who have experienced formal criminal justice contact, but less willing to move beyond those casual sexual encounters towards committed cohabitating partnerships to avoid courtesy stigma. Additionally, one might expect that daters are more considerate of context and concern may lie with the narrative behind the criminal justice contact. Particularly, individuals with a criminal history that contains violent offenses may be viewed less favorably than individuals who have a criminal history of non-violent offenses. Moreover, one might expect that both criminal and courtesy stigma becomes more prominent in dating when relationships progress to more serious milestones such as meeting a partner's friends and families. Daters may use caution in integrating system-impacted partners in their life and navigate the difficulty of disclosing criminal histories by managing impressions of their partners within their friendships and familial relationships.

To put these dating dynamics in a larger context, it is useful to think about the mark of a criminal record as a source of punishment in and of itself. Victor Rios conceives of punishment as “the process by which individuals come to feel stigmatized, outcast, shamed, defeated, or hopeless as a result of negative interactions and sanctions imposed by individuals who represent institutions of social control” (p. xv). This study illuminates how criminal justice contact can further punish individuals in pursuit of romantic entanglements, thereby broadening the concept of collateral consequences. The intimate sphere is a site of “privileged institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development” (Monterrosa, 2021, p. 425). As such, focusing on romantic intimacy is then a social justice project, shedding light on

that intimate sphere, and illuminating who has access to romantic relationships and the benefits of intimacy that those relationships may provide (Monterrosa, 2021).

Chapter Outline

Whereas extant scholarship has illuminated the criminal justice system's considerable impact on educational attainments, income and employment, mental and physical health, access to social support, and familial or martial relationships, this study broadens the concept of collateral consequences of criminal stigma to include an empirical focus on intimate and romantic pursuits and arrangements. Chapter two builds on the few existing experimental studies, utilizing survey data to examine the decision-making patterns of daters, which reveals how daters may emerge as inconsistent in their acceptance or rejection of others with criminal contact across contemplations of casual sexual dating encounters and entering committed cohabitated relationships. First, the chapter briefly reviews certain themes in stigmatization, labeling, and dating decision-making pulling from relationship science and the assortative mating literature. Second, the chapter highlights where daters emerge as inconsistent in their acceptance or rejection of romantic prospects with criminal histories and what may predict their inconsistency as they move from casual sexual encounters to more committed cohabitating relationships.

Chapter three extends the inquiry into criminal stigma and suitability for romance by focusing on violence as a signifier and potential source of stigma. The chapter explores who is deterred by violent criminal histories when they emerge in romantic prospects. First, the chapter situates violence and its coverage in romantic relationships and connections to stigma. Next, the chapter discusses how intimate partner violence is conceived and positioned in relation to romantic relationships: this analysis is important to include because of discussions of violence in

relationships evokes the phenomenon of IPV. Chapter three then augments the prior chapter's empirical examination of criminal stigma and (in)consistency surrounding decision-making related to the dating market by examining how survey respondents orient to decision-making when violence is part of the picture.

Chapter four draws on in-depth interviews and focus groups with daters to contextualize their attitudes towards and perceptions of prospective partners with criminal histories. The chapter departs from the quantitative data to provides a qualitative exploration of how people think about and orient to the stigma born of criminal justice contact as they assess the suitability of others as prospects for romantic, sexual, and cohabitating relationships. In adding layers of context, the chapter further examines how daters understand and navigate: (1) the spaces they inhabit in the context of their daily lives, which can constrain and enable zones of romance and shape the pool of available partners; (2) the instrumentality of stability, and the importance of avoiding precarity in pursuit of an ideal of stability; (3) the real and imagined injection of violence in intimate relationships; (4) the role of parental status in general and parenthood in particular as a consideration that can shift romantic perspectives; (5) the expressed need for transparency in terms of assessing the likelihood of future offending behavior and how daters are expected to support impacted partners; and (7) the importance of redemption and second chances romantically.

I end by summarizing the findings presented in previous chapters and reflecting on broad conclusions about my findings and directions for future research. In chapter five, I argue that criminal justice contact is “more of the same” for some daters. For others, the reach of the criminal justice system is an extraordinary event. Romantic relationships do not occur in a vacuum and there are likely an array of forces that influence the initiation, progression,

maintenance, and dissolution of sexual, romantic, and/or committed relationships. Taking the desire for companionship as more or less universal, how stigma configures into our romantic sphere will shed a more expansive picture of not only the criminal justice system but also its intimate influences on one of the most common social practices in the world.

Chapter 2

Understanding (In)consistency in Romantic Decision-Making

Introduction

With greater attention to the more muted impacts of the expansive criminal justice system, scholars across multiple fields have examined the collateral consequences of system contact. Still, both the reach of the criminal justice system and understandings of the punishments beyond incarceration are generally understated, particularly concerning criminal justice contact that may not necessarily lead to a conviction, which can be as consequential for people's lives as incarceration. As essentially any contact with the criminal justice system can "mark" those involved—from arrest and incarceration to community supervision—unfavorable outcomes that derive from and reflect stigmatization associated with system contact can be myriad and wide-reaching across different aspects of a person's life across long periods of time.

Whereas stigmatization literature has extensively focused on disparate outcomes in health, housing, employment, education, civic involvement, marriage, and just recently, cohabitation, the consideration of how criminal contact impacts the contemporary dating market is almost non-existent. Taking that couples increasingly tend to engage less in marriage and more in long-term relationships and cohabitation as a given, this chapter centers *the relationship market in the context of the mark of criminal contact*. Focusing on the contemporary relationship market provides a nuanced exploration of how criminal contact, and the impacts of its markings on matching, can shape the most basic need humans share – the need for companionship.

Few scholars have explored this complex area beyond an initial experimental study. Marshalling the results of these studies as well as literatures on relationship science, this chapter utilizes new survey data to address an important question: For whom does criminal justice

contact matter most in the relationship market? And relatedly, for those whom criminal justice contact matters, when in the course of potential relationships might it exert significant impact?

To address this question, I begin by reviewing select themes in stigma, labeling, and relationship science to show what this literature can help us understand about relationship market dynamics, as well as key questions it points to but leaves unanswered concerning the operations of stigma in this arena. In doing so, I identify promising sites of inquiry into criminal justice system contact in the dating market, along which my subsequent empirical research and analysis will focus. Next, I describe the methods I use to gather data pertinent to analyzing for whom criminal justice contact of a potential match matter most in the dating market. In the section that follows, I present findings related to how daters consider the criminal history of others in decision-making about dating, with a focus on how consistent or inconsistent their responses are across proposed relationship scenarios differing in the extent of integration of the match in the daters' life. This analysis includes close attention to demographic characteristics that previous research suggests may be meaningful to shaping these dynamics. Finally, I draw an empirical distinction within the sample that reveals how some daters emerge as inconsistent—that, is where respondents may show changing decisions regarding the presence of criminal history when considering casual sexual dating and subsequently where criminal history severity changes or dating milestone progresses towards living together --in their acceptance or rejection of others with criminal contact across contemplations of casual sexual dating encounters and entering committed cohabitated relationships. Here, I present several logistic regression models that address these variables as they indicate how decision-making in the face the criminal history may shift, and where.

The results presented in this chapter reveal that, in general, one-quarter (25.6%) of the sample expressed inconsistent reactions towards potential casual sexual dating with daters who have had criminal justice contact. Additionally, over one-quarter (26.8%) of respondents demonstrated an inconsistency of concern when considering cohabitating with potential partners who have experienced criminal justice contact. The analyses further reveal that almost 30% (29.6%) of the sample expressed inconsistent concern about criminal contact as they moved from considerations of casual sexual encounters to committed cohabitation arrangements. Taking the consistency of concern as a point of analytic departure, there are no significant predictors of consistency of concern where casual sexual dating alone is concerned, but as daters consider the prospect of cohabitation, then age, parental status (i.e., having children or not), and race emerged as predictors of whether daters are more or less likely to exhibit inconsistent reactions to potential romantic partners with a history of criminal contact. Importantly, this chapter's empirical focus on the preferences and behaviors of daters as they consider relationships with people experiencing system involvement channels attention toward a wider population of match-seekers rather than focusing scrutiny on those marked by system contact. In doing so, it illuminates how romantic decision-making can be influenced by criminal history and in addition, how respondents characteristics may signal a likely variation across the continuum. Ultimately, this study therefore offers (in)consistency in daters' responses as a tool for analyzing and illustrating how criminal contact in someone's past can impact their current romantic prospects.

Review of Literature

As the literature review discusses in Chapter 1, research on stigma and labelling, romantic and intimate relationships, and the impacts of criminal stigma offer important baseline insights into the topic of this study. The reach of the criminal justice system has been extensively

explored (see Beckett, 2018 for review). Beyond arrests, incarcerations, or community-supervision, individuals exit the criminal justice system with the permanent, highly stigmatized labels (i.e., “formerly incarcerated”) and the potential ramifications for successful reintegration, including access to employment, higher education, housing, community acceptance, and successful familial relationships (Pager, 2003; Herbert et al., 2015; Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015; Stojkovic, 2017; Hood & Gaston, 2022; Lindsay, 2022). “Marking” through criminal justice record-keeping may burden an individual with inescapable classification that has far-reaching consequences for their social outcomes and disparities between social groups.

Stigma is a “mark” or “stain” of ill-repute that is applied to a person or group of people (Link & Phelan, 2001). Goffman (1963) explained that stigma can be seen as “a mark” setting an individual apart from others, such that it is “deeply discrediting” and reduces the marked person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). Goffman’s conceptualization of stigma emphasized the relationship between an attribute and the audience in a position to imbue the attribute with meaning; the meaning making associated with the attribute essential, not the attribute itself. Thus, the attribute itself is only stigmatizing when it is infused with and related to negative, discrediting, and or discriminatory meanings.

Through the process of labeling and thus the “marking” of an individual (or entire group of individuals), people are placed in a socially recognized category that is distinguished as “other.” The label effectively links an individual to a set of “undesirable characteristics which form a stereotype” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 369) and reduces their status in the eyes of those applying the label. Stigma then is attached to “labels” that are inextricably linked to stereotypes. The labels themselves may be used to inform more deliberative decision-making or may be used implicitly to make split-second (or comparatively immediate) decisions. The result is

predictable: people who are negatively labeled necessarily experience status loss and sometimes also experience discrimination leading to unequal outcomes. These unfavorable outcomes may extend to romantic arrangements and relationships as well.

Naturally, relationships are dynamic, and within those partnerships the nature of rewards and costs shifts over time (Felmlee, 2001; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2008). Over time, romantic partners engage in a continual process of evaluation where everyone assesses each other's gains and losses. The evaluations individuals make in this continual process influence the relationship development (Regan, 2017). For example, after making initial contact, each person evaluates the immediate outcomes of that interaction and makes a prediction about the outcomes of future interactions. If these evaluations and predictions are positive (e.g., they enjoyed the conversation; believe they have much in common) then the individuals are likely to continue down the path to romantic involvement. If the evaluations and predictions are negative (e.g., they didn't feel heard; believe they have little in common) then the two are unlikely to maintain anything beyond a superficial relationship; they may even cease to interact altogether.

Certainly, a particular event, behavior, or occurrence may become less rewarding and/or more costly as it occurs repeatedly or as the relationship progresses (Regan, 2017). For instance, two individuals may get caught up in the thrill of a new romantic partner and might find intercourse to be highly rewarding and not at all costly. However, over time, as the individuals become more familiar with one another and the novelty of their desire decreases, they may come to view the sexual relationship as less rewarding and social issues like criminal stigma might impair moving the relationship further. Adding to this, literature on decision-making in dating helps illuminate more nuanced dynamics of why and how daters make choices about who to date and what the progression of their relationship will look like.

Decision-Making in Dating

Public opinion researchers have also shed light on adult dating and relationship preferences and confirmed some of the theoretical insights discussed above while challenging the existing empirical picture. In a recent survey of U.S. adults, single individuals generally reported they were open to dating someone with from a different background or who possesses different traits (Brown 2020). For example, most survey respondents say they would seriously date someone who makes significantly more or significantly less money than them (Brown, 2020). Further, a large majority say they would consider a relationship with someone of a different religion or race or ethnicity.

In contrast, prior research using speed dating experiments, which studies actual decisions, as opposed to ideal hypothetical decisions, have found symmetry in racial preferences across gender lines with both men and women largely reporting same-race preferences (Fisman et al., 2008, Hitsch et al., 2010, Kurzban & Weeden, 2005). Further, Robnett and Feliciano (2011) found that, among internet daters, Blacks were the only minority group in which the women were more excluded than the men. Although Black women were the least likely to be open to interracial dating, they were, nonetheless, far more open to outdating white, Latino, and Asian men than those men were to date them. Lenton and Francesconi (2010) used multilevel modeling to exam the decision-making of speed daters and found that of when faced with an abundance of choices, daters paid less attention to more time-consuming characteristics that require extensive evaluation--like occupational status and educational attainment--and more attention to characteristics that are quickly and easily assessed, such as height or weight.

The findings presented here add to the daters' decision-making literature, diverging from assessing how others navigate an abundance of options, and instead focusing on what

characteristics distinguish daters who follow consistent decision-making as opposed to those who reveal inconsistent patterns. Taken together, romantic partner preferences and selection warrant more attention and exploration. Even after decades of theoretical insights and empirical research across fields, there are nuances to partner preference and selection that should be unpacked.

Criminal Stigma

Winnick and Bodkin (2008) found the majority of medium security prisoners responded, based on their own experiences, that most people stigmatize formerly incarcerated individuals. The experience of having formal system contact can elicit differential treatment and, as a result, individuals may have difficulty moving beyond assumptions that lead to overt or implicit discrimination stemming from stereotypes. For example, access to housing is found to severely decrease when an individual has prior criminal justice contact in their history (Evans, 2016; Evans & Porter, 2015; Evans et al., 2018).

Romantically, there's scant research on criminal stigma *in the context of criminal justice contact*, with the overwhelming literature examining incarceration or immediate re-entry and marriage (Apel, 2016; Bersani & DiPietro, 2016; Farrington & West, 1995; Horney et al., 1995; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Lopoo & Western, 2005; Massoglia et al., 2011; Sampson et al., 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1995; van Schellen et al., 2012; Warr, 1998). Evans (2019) began to address this question with an innovative experimental study focused on the impact of parole disclosure for women in online dating. This study focused solely on initial contact using test profiles of heterosexual women, with manipulated parole disclosure and race, across 18 dating applications. By measuring “matches” as an indicator of contact (and selection), the findings, perhaps counterintuitively, revealed that “criminal stigma” was more damaging for Black women and

Latinas but not white women. Interestingly, white women were less attractive when there was no disclosure of criminal history while racial/ethnic minority women were more attractive under conditions of no disclosure (Evans, 2019).

Replicating the study but focusing on men disclosing parole, Evans and Vega (2020) found that parole disclosure reduced matches for Black males, increased matches for white males, and had no effect on matching odds for Latino males. That criminal stigma can reduce Black men's chance of matching while benefiting white men in the matching process evokes the image of the "bad boy" archetype (i.e., being attached to white men on parole). While these findings provide evidence of a causal relationship between criminal justice system contact and online dating outcomes, there is a need for more comprehensive research to further unpack the relationship between the mark of criminal contact and how that mark may play out in an individuals' romantic lives.

As daters navigate sexual relationships and embark on committed cohabitating relationships, their partner's history may present challenges that reduce their suitability in the eyes of the dater when the idea of commitment and living together emerges. Sometimes sexual relationships are embedded in romantic relationships and sometimes they are not. Perhaps, when daters are only engaging in casual sexual activity, the presence of prior criminal justice contact is less important to daters when deciding whether a potential partner is suitable. In contrast, when daters are considering shared living with a romantic partner, marked by commitment and mutual participation in one another's life, prior criminal justice contact might have more of a deterring effect. More, when that prior contact is imbued with violence, daters' decision-making process around moving from casual to cohabitation relations may be marked by more inconsistent reactions. Understanding these decision-making patterns and where there may be inconsistency

further contextualizes how criminal stigma may shape romantic prospects for the segments of society marked by criminal justice contact.

This chapter builds on the few existing studies described above by taking a closer look at criminal contact as perceived by respondents navigating the relationship market. Using survey data, the chapter highlights which respondents emerge as inconsistent in their embrace or rejection of potential romantic interests who have experienced criminal contact and examines what predicts inconsistency. Thus, this chapter's foci are on understanding individuals' inconsistency (and by comparison consistency) in romantic decision-making as it relates to criminal contact in the dating market and attendant decision-making. This (in)consistency is important to foreground, I argue, because it can reveal inflection points that occur over the course of unfolding relationships, allowing us insights into what kinds romantic and intimate relationships are impacted by criminal stigma, when (in the relational trajectory), and to what effects.

Based on the aforementioned literature, the following research questions are posed:

- (1) While relationship trends mark a shift in how couples connect and commit, the overall search for companionship for many today is still rooted in seeking relationships marked by commitment and longevity. Therefore, I ask: are respondents with prior criminal justice contact more likely to seek committed, cohabitating relationships over casual dating arrangements?
- (2) Casual sexual dating may be a low-stakes romantic touchpoint where daters are less likely to be concerned with their partners' prior criminal history. Additionally, assortative mating may not feature heavily in selection of sex partners. Therefore, I ask: is there is a relationship between criminal justice contact concern surrounding

- engaging in casual encounters with someone who has prior contact? Additionally, what is the consistence of this concern?
- (3) Committed cohabitation presents a deeper merging of one's life with another's and, in that respect, presents a higher stakes romantic/relationship touchpoint. Here, demographic and social factors, such as age, race/ethnicity, and education, may impact how a dater views romantic prospects with prior criminal contact. Therefore, I ask: is there a relationship between criminal justice contact and concern surrounding living with a partner who has prior criminal justice contact? Additionally, what is the consistence of this concern?
- (4) As daters consider the shift from casual sexual encounters to moving and sharing a home with a partner with prior criminal justice contact, they may be less inclined to remain entrenched in their decision-making as a whole. Therefore, I ask: is there a relationship between prior criminal justice contact and respondent dater's inconsistency (if any) in progressing from casual sexual dating arrangements towards committed cohabitating relationships?

Methods

Study Design

The broader goal of the study is to examine how criminal justice contact shapes romantic relationships and encounters. The study is comprised of three levels of data: survey data, focus group data, and interview data. The quantitative survey, which is the focus of the next two chapters, is a central part of a larger effort to understand how criminal justice contact (“criminal stigma”) influences romantic preferences, encounters, and relationships.

Using convenience sampling, initial participants were recruited from the Principal Investigator's (PI's) social media networks, specifically Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Recruitment sites were selected given the sensitive nature of the research questions, including those that capture criminal stigma and romantic arrangements and relationships. Snowball sampling afforded recruiting through familiarity and ensured that participants were comfortable expressing their romantic preferences and where applicable, their prior criminal justice involvement. The PI's network spanned across California and Michigan. The PI's network connections were large across social media sites; Facebook (4,953 friends)², Instagram (1,152 followers), and LinkedIn (503 connections). Recruitment flyers featuring the survey link were distributed across each social media platform twice a week to encourage friends, followers, and others to participate in the survey and to further promote the research.

Survey Data Collection

The survey was designed by the PI to understand for whom the stigma of criminal justice contact mattered most and in what contexts.³ It includes 42 questions that address key themes, including: self-perceived physical and social desirability, preferred characteristics in potential partners, and openness to partners who have prior system contact. Moreover, the survey addresses respondents' own prior criminal contact, including nonviolent and violent contact. Finally, the survey addresses daters' willingness to integrate potential impacted partners into their lives via an introduction to networks in which they are most commonly embedded, including close co-workers and acquaintances, close friends, and close family. This last element

² Facebook allows user accounts to have up to 5,000 friends maximum, indicating the PI's vast social media network. <https://www.facebook.com/help/mobile-touch/187491537967631>

was added to examine consistency of responses across potential timelines of relationships that move beyond casual romantic or sexual encounters.

The PI selected to distribute the survey to residents of states in which the bulk of the PI's respondents lived; it remained open from April 2022 to October 2022. Using a self-designed survey instrument constructed on Qualtrics, the study was open to participants who 1) were 18-years-old or older, 2) reside in the state of Michigan or California, and 3) were actively dating for purposes of establishing a romantic connection or currently in romantic relationship. The participants were required to respond to a screening question before completing the survey. Those falling outside of the eligibility requirements were screened out from the survey. Participants were first presented with the eligibility criteria and, if eligible, consented to participate as per IRB approved guidelines. Following informed consent, eligible participants were able to proceed to take the survey. There was no direct compensation to participants for completing the survey. The study protocol received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Irvine (IRB Protocol #20206155). A total of 279 surveys were started, of which 265 responses were submitted as complete. Of these 265 surveys, seven were discarded for reporting "Prefer Not to Respond" for every survey question and thirteen were discarded for skipping through every question presented. Five surveys were dropped for respondents failing to meet the survey criteria (e.g., under the age of 18-years-old or did not reside in the geographic area of interest). The final sample is comprised of the remaining 240 survey respondents.

Key Measures

Independent Variables

A key independent variable is whether respondents have had any prior direct criminal justice contact in their lifetime. *Prior history* with criminal justice contact is assessed by self-reports of whether participants experienced contact with the criminal justice system, and if so, what kind of contact: “Have you ever experienced the following? (Check all that apply): arrested but not charged nor convicted, arrested and charged, but not convicted; arrested, charged, and convicted; arrested, charged, convicted, and served time in jail or prison; arrested, charged, convicted, and placed on probation or tether, etc.; or N/A I have never had any criminal justice contact.” The responses are collapsed and recoded with a value of zero indicating having no such prior criminal justice contact and one indicating prior criminal contact (to conserve power and avoid multicollinearity issues).

To understand for whom criminal stigma matters most, standard demographic variables were constructed. *Age* is measured in quinquennia (following those in the 18-24-year-old age group). *Gender* is a binary variable, where a zero indicates a woman and one indicates a man. Gender identity was clarified with a sex and gender question therefore, it is clear respondents interpreted this question as a measure of their current gender identity. With an eye towards the increasing prevalence of consensual non-monogamous relationships, current *relationship status* was also accounted for, and measured as a binary variable, where zero indicates being in a committed relationship, engagement, or marriage and one indicates a respondent is single at the time of the survey. *Parental status* is also measured as a binary variable, where a zero indicates having no children and one indicates having children. *Race* is a three-level variable indicating whether the participant identified as white, Black or Other. Because of the nature of the snowball sample, the sample sizes of individuals from other racial groups (e.g., Hispanic, Asian, mixed-race, etc.) are too small for meaningful analysis and were consequently collapsed into “Other.”

Education is measured as either attaining some high school education, a college education (including Associate's to Master's degrees) and a professional degree. *Income attainment* is measured as a binary variable, where a zero indicates an income over \$50,000 and one indicates an income under \$50,000. *Political* was beliefs assessed by self-reports of political affiliation with response options including, Independent, Republican, Democrat, and Green Party. To conserve power among the sample, political affiliation was recoded as a binary variable where respondents were identified as liberal (Democrat or Green Party) or not (Independent or Republican). *Religiosity* matters in assortative mating theories, underscoring that individuals use religion to filter and select mates (Hitsch, 2010). In the current study then, *religious* was collapsed into a binary variable, where a zero indicates no religious beliefs and a one indicates whether the person indicated a religious identity (i.e., they responded that they are Christian, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Spiritual, Hindu, or Buddhist).

Dependent Variables

Seeking casual sexual dating arrangements is measured by how individuals respond to: "At this time in your life, which of the following best describes the type of relationship you are seeking: Hook-ups; Friends with benefits; Causal, on-going romantic/sexual relationship; Serious, romantic/sexual relationship; Serious, romantic/sexual relationship that results or leads to marriage; Serious, romantic/sexual relationship that is long term but does not lead to marriage?" The responses were collapsed and a value of zero indicates a search for less committed interactions marked by causal sex or dating, while a value of one indicates seeking cohabitating relationships marked by commitment and longevity. Respondents were then asked to self-report their willingness to have casual sexual encounters with prospects who have prior criminal justice contact with the query, "Imagine you met someone and in the course of dating

the individual revealed that they had a criminal conviction in their history. How willing are you to: (1) Have a consensual sexual affair with someone who has a non-violent, criminal history?’ and (2) ‘Have a consensual sexual affair with someone who has a violent, criminal history?’” Thereafter, respondents reported their willingness to enter a committed cohabitating relationship with others who have a history of prior criminal justice contact via, “Next, imagine already being romantically involved (with a mutual commitment and exclusivity) with someone that has a criminal conviction in their history. (1) Would you be willing to: Enter a cohabitating relationship (e.g. living together) with someone with a non-violent, criminal history?’ and (2) ‘Enter a cohabitating relationship (e.g. living together) with someone with a violent, criminal history?’”

Exploratory analyses of the sample data revealed a pattern of inconsistency in reactions towards potential partners with criminal contact—that is, approximately one-quarter of respondents were inconsistent (e.g., embracing prospects criminal histories where casual sex is the foci but rejecting prospects with criminal histories where cohabitation is considered). Consequently, three new variables were constructed to capture patterns of reactions to potential sexual/romantic/cohabitating mates with prior criminal contact: (1) *(in)consistency across casual sexual dating* arrangements with partners who have a nonviolent criminal contact versus violent criminal contact, (2) *(in)consistency across cohabitation* with partners who have a nonviolent criminal contact versus violent criminal contact, and (3) *(in)consistency overall* across casual sexual arrangements and cohabitating relationships.

Consistency in concern towards casual sexual dating encounters was constructed from survey responses regarding willingness to have casual sex or date others with prior nonviolent or violent criminal contact. Respondents who expressed similar willingness (or unwillingness) were

recoded as “consistent.” Respondents who differed in their willingness (or unwillingness) to engage in casual sexual dating with others who have prior nonviolent or violent criminal contact, were recoded as “inconsistent.” Consistency in concern towards committed cohabitating relationships was constructed in comparable fashion. Survey respondents who expressed similar willingness (or unwillingness) to cohabit with a partner who had prior nonviolent versus violent criminal contact were recoded as “consistent.” Sample daters who differed in their willingness (or unwillingness) to cohabit with potential partners with prior non-violent versus violent contact were coded as “inconsistent.” Using these two sexual activity and cohabitation consistency variables, the overall consistency across casual sexual dating and cohabitation was then constructed where respondents who matched across the relationship touchpoints were coded as “consistent” while those who did not match were coded as “inconsistent.”

Analytic Plan

The survey data provided by these respondents were analyzed to determine: (1) whether the respondents hold more stigmatizing views towards individuals with criminal contact in their past, and if so, (2) what patterns of inconsistency reveal about respondents and (3) whether such views are influenced by demographical characteristics. Because the dependent variable is binary, logistic regression models were conducted to assess the odds that sociodemographic variables are associated with dating market preferences (overall and in general consistency). Precisely, within each of these tables, four logistic regression models were conducted. The baseline model assesses the relationship between prior criminal justice contact and respondents’: seeking of casual sexual dating arrangements (Table 2), inconsistent reactions towards casual sexual dating encounters (Table 3), inconsistent reactions towards committed cohabitating relationships (Table 4), and inconsistency *across* casual sexual dating arrangements *and*

committed cohabitating relationships overall with ~~criminally contact~~ romantic prospects with prior criminal justice contact (Table 5). The second model incorporates political affiliation and religiosity into the model, building off the baseline. In the third model, respondents' socioeconomic variables are added into the examination of inconsistent reactions towards casual dating encounters with criminally contacted partners. Building off the third model, the fourth and final model incorporates respondents' demographic variables.

Results

As reported in Table 1, descriptive data show that just over 20% of the remaining 240 respondents report having experienced direct criminal justice contact. The average age of the sample is 32.6-years-old ranging from 18-63 years of age ($SD = 8.66$). About 15% of the daters are 18-24-years-old (15.42%) and 25-30-years-old (16%). A quarter of the sample is 31-34-years-old (25%), and over 40% are 35-years-old or older. Over two-thirds of the sample are women (68%) with the remaining one-third (32%) comprising men. Single individuals comprise over 40% of the sample and parents comprise less than half (42%) of the sample. A plurality of respondents are white (39%) and Black (39%), while approximately 20% are of other racial groups. Additionally, the sample is segmented by educational attainment: less than 15% have some high-school education, almost two-thirds (60%) have a college education, and over one-quarter (27%) have a professional degree. Also as reported in Table 1, the sample features more modest income attainment, with over one-half of respondents indicating they earn less than \$50,000. Additionally,, respondents are more liberal politically and religious than not.

Table 1 reports patterns of decision-making for the total sample. As shown, less than one-third of the sample daters are seeking casual sex. Table 1 furthermore reveals that respondents are markedly inconsistent across considerations of sexual or cohabitation relationships. About

25% of the sample exhibited an inconsistency in reactions towards casual sexual dating encounters with others who have prior criminal contact. Over 26% of daters display an inconsistency in concern about potential partners with criminal history.

Research Question 1: What is the Relationship Between Criminal Justice Contact and Seeking Casual Sexual Connections?

The first research question asks whether there is a relationship between experiencing criminal justice contact and seeking casual sexual arrangements. In Table 2, the statistical association of criminal contact stigma on the search for less committal romantic arrangements are highlighted across important individual characteristics. Analyses show that people with criminal justice contact are significantly less likely to seek casual sex alone. When respondents' political affiliation and religiosity are added to the model, people with criminal justice contact remain significantly less likely to seek casual sex. When socio-economic and demographic are added, however, the relationship between seeking casual sex and having direct prior contact disappears. Similarly, as associations of the impact respondents' socio-economic and demographics have on their desires while navigating the relationship market, single people are much more likely to seek casual sex. Accordingly, Table 2 provides insight into the first research question, showing respondents with prior criminal justice contact are more likely to be seeking committed, cohabitating relationships over casual dating arrangement alone, but single people, perhaps expectedly, are much more likely to seek casual encounters compared to more committed arrangements.

Research Question 2: Inconsistent Decision-Making when Considering Casual Sexual Dating with Romantic Prospects having Prior Criminal Contact

The second research question asks if there is a relationship between criminal justice contact and respondent daters' inconsistency across casual sexual dating arrangements (Table 3). First, a bivariate association was conducted examining the relationship between inconsistency in reactions towards having casual sexual dating encounters with potential partners who have prior non-violent and violent criminal justice contact and respondents having a prior direct experience with criminal contact themselves. In other words, does a dater's own history of impact (or not) with the criminal justice system impact their views on dating someone with system contact? As Model 1 in Table 3 shows, the baseline bivariate analysis did not yield any significant relationship. Next, political affiliation and religiosity were included to consider the relationship between inconsistent reactions towards casual encounters and criminal contact, and as Model 2 in Table 3 shows, there are no significant relationships. The third step model in Table 3 saw the addition of socio-economic variables where a professional education was significant indicating that respondent daters with a professional degree were more likely to express inconsistent reactions to casual sexual arrangements compared to respondent daters with a high school education. In other words, they appeared more sensitive to criminal histories than daters with less education. Finally, demographic variables were added into the analysis in Model 4, and it shows that having a professional education remained as trending towards significance. These findings suggest that, at the very least, a professional education increased the likelihood that a respondent dater would exhibit inconsistent reactions towards potential partners with criminal justice contact. There were no other significant relationships identified in Table 3, indicating no realized relationship between inconsistency towards casual arrangements and criminal justice contact.

Research Question 3: Inconsistent Decision-Making when Considering Committed Cohabitation with Romantic Partners who have Prior Criminal Contact

The third research question asks if there is a relationship between criminal justice contact and respondent dater's inconsistency across committed cohabitating relationships that may lead to marriage (Table 4). First, a bivariate association was conducted examining the relationship between inconsistency in reactions towards having such cohabitating relationships with potential partners who have prior non-violent and violent criminal justice contact and respondents having a prior direct experience with criminal contact themselves. As Model 1 in Table 4 shows, the baseline bivariate analysis did not yield a significant relationship. Next, political affiliation and religiosity were included when considering the relationship between inconsistent reactions towards cohabitating relationships and criminal contact and as Model 2 in Table 4 shows, there are no significant relationships present. The third step, reported in Model 3 in Table 4, reveals the addition of socio-economic variables does not produce significant relationships. Finally, demographic variables were added into the analysis in Model 4, and as Table 4 shows having prior criminal justice contact, age, being a parent, emerged as trending towards a significant relationship.

In Model 4, Table 4, respondents with prior criminal justice contact have a significant relationship with being less likely to express inconsistency towards reactions to living with someone who has prior criminal justice contact. In other words, they are more consistent in cohabitating decisions where potential partners are impacted by the criminal justice system compared to daters without any impact. Respondent daters 25-29-years-old, 30-34-years-old and those over 35-years-old are significantly less likely to express consistency in patterns towards cohabitating with partners who have experience criminal justice contact (see Table 4). Moreover, parental status saw a significant increase in expressing inconsistency compared to non-parents. Finally, both Black respondents and those of Other racial groups are significantly

less likely to show inconsistent reactions towards potential cohabitation with partners who have prior criminal justice contact.

Research Question 4: Inconsistent Decision-Making when Considering Casual Sexual Dating and Committed Cohabitation with Romantic Partners who have Prior Criminal Contact

Overall

The final research question asks if there is a relationship *overall* between criminal justice contact and respondent dater's inconsistency in progressing from casual sexual dating arrangements towards committed cohabitating relationships (Table 5). A bivariate association examining the relationship between the overall inconsistency in reactions towards the move from casual encounters to cohabitation with potential partners who have prior non-violent and violent criminal justice contact and respondents having a prior direct experience with criminal contact themselves did not yield any significant relationship. Next, as Model 2 in Table 5 demonstrates, there is also no significant relationship found when political affiliation and religiosity are included. The third model in Table 5 reveals that the addition of socio-economic variables yields no significant relationships. Finally, demographic variables added into the analysis in Model 4 in Table 5 reveals that, compared to individuals 18-24-years-old, older daters (e.g., aged 25-34-years-old) are significantly less likely to be inconsistent in their reactions towards partners with criminal contact as they move from considerations of casual sex to cohabitation. Furthermore, respondent daters who are 35-years-old or older, trended in a comparable direction. Single respondents, perhaps intuitively, emerge as significantly more likely to express inconsistent reactions towards criminal justice contact as they move from casual sex to cohabitation. Respondent daters who are parents also trend toward a significant relationship indicating greater odds of inconsistent reactions towards potential partners with criminal system contact. Finally,

sample daters of other racial groups are significantly less likely to express inconsistent beliefs towards the progression from casual sex to cohabitation with potential partners.

Conclusion

As the analyses presented here reveal, criminal histories have some association with romantic connections. Generally, individuals are looking for more committed romantic relationships compared to casual sexual connections. Daters who have direct experience with criminal justice contact are no different in their quests for companionship. Expectedly, single daters are more likely to seek casual sexual arrangements and when relationship status is included, the significance of a dater's own prior criminal contact disappears.

As respondent daters consider casual sexual dating arrangements with potential partners who have prior criminal justice contact, the results reveal a significance correspondence with professional education. Generally, where casual sex is concerned, respondent daters did not indicate a noteworthy pattern in their reactions towards romantic prospects with a criminal history. As considerations of cohabiting with a partner who has criminal justice contact is put into focus, age, having children, and race are significant predictors of inconsistent reactions surrounding criminal contact. Specifically, compared to 18–24-year-olds, older daters (i.e., over the age of 24-years-old) are less likely to demonstrate a pattern of inconsistent reactions when considering daters with criminal histories. Parents in the sample are more likely to exhibit inconsistent reactions towards others who have prior contact when considering cohabitation. In addition, Black respondents are less likely to express inconsistent reactions towards cohabitating with a potential partner with a criminal history. Comparably, daters from Other racial groups are also less likely to express inconsistent reactions towards cohabitating with a potential partner with a criminal history. Notably, respondent daters' own prior experiences with criminal contact

approached significance in regard to expressing less inconsistency when all variables were added, indicating that an individual's own prior experience may play an important role in committed cohabitating relationships.

Looking across romantic touchpoints from casual sex to cohabitation shores up the importance of age, relationship status, and race in earlier analyses. Compared to 18-24-year-olds, respondents of age 25–29, 30–34, and over 35 are less likely to demonstrate inconsistent reactions, as they progress from casual to cohabitation with potential partners who have prior criminal contact. Single daters are more likely to express inconsistent reactions towards others with prior contact as they move from casual to cohabitation. More, daters from Other racial group are less likely to exhibit inconsistent reactions as they moved from casual arrangements towards the idea of living with someone who has prior criminal contact.

That older daters are less likely to hold inconsistent reactions towards potential partner with criminal histories, compared to 18–24-year-olds, is interesting when one considers that the age at which one first marries has recently increased. The estimated median age of first marriage, the traditional but shifting goal of daters in the relationship market, was 30.4 for men and 28.6 for women in early 2021, up from ages 23.7 and 20.5, respectively, in 1947 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Perhaps as individuals age, decision-making becomes less nuanced when considerations of romantic mates are at issue. Said another way, older daters may simply become less stringent in their standards compared to younger daters due to the availability of suitable prospects. Or perhaps older daters are less likely to exhibit inconsistent reactions towards others with criminal histories lies in the fact that older individuals may be more likely to know others with a criminal history. Another explanation may lie with the fact that older daters may have more knowledge about the ramifications of the criminal justice system and its attendant impact

on families and communities. In contrast, older daters may be less inconsistent but consistently averse to being in a relationship with someone with a record. Parents in the sample indicate a trend of expressing inconsistent reactions towards romantic prospects with a criminal history. This finding raises other questions that may be explored in more qualitative studies where parents can provide more in-depth insight into romantic decision-making patterns when confronted with prospects who have system contact.

Overall, the findings presented in this chapter advance the research on criminal stigma as it relates to dating and relationships. The findings here suggest that the presence of criminal contact in someone's past can impact their current romantic prospects. While political affiliation, religiosity, and socio-economic characteristics show little impact, demographic variables like age and race suggest that romantic decision-making warrants further attention and research. Most importantly, the chapter offers a new concept as a key consideration in the relationship market: the consistency or inconsistency of concern surrounding criminal justice contact. The following chapter then takes up the endeavor of exploring one of the features concerning decision-making—namely, where violence is involved in the mark of a criminal history.

Appendix

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Sample Respondents (Percentages)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	N
Prior Criminal Justice Contact	21.25%		0	1	240
Age	32.60	8.66	18	63	240
18-24-years-old	15.42%		0	1	
25-30-years-old	16.25%		0	1	
31-34-years-old	25.00%		0	1	
35+ years-old	43.33%		0	1	
Male	32.18%		0	1	202
Single	41.51%		0	1	159
Parent	42.48%		0	1	153
Race/Ethnicity					153
White	39.22%		0	1	
Black	39.87%		0	1	
Other Race/Ethnicity (“Other”)	20.92%		0	1	
Education					
High-School Education	12.42%		0	1	153
College Education	60.13%		0	1	
Professional Degree	27.45%		0	1	
Income less than \$50,000	53.57%		0	1	140
Liberal Political Affiliations	53.59%		0	1	153
Religious	66.67%		0	1	153
Seeking Casual Sex	28.00%		0	1	175
Inconsistent Concerns re: Casual Sex	25.66%		0	1	152
Inconsistent Concerns re: Cohabitation	26.80%		0	1	
Inconsistent Concerns Overall	29.61%		0	1	

Note: SD = standard deviation

Table 2

Logistic Regression: Relationship Between Seeking Casual Sexual Dating Arrangements and Criminal Justice Contact

Variables	Model 1: Baseline	Model 2: M1 + Politics + Religion	Model 3: M2 + Socioeconomic	Model 4: M3 + Demographics
Prior CJ Contact	0.748* (0.358)	0.870* (0.383)	0.555 (0.429)	0.399 (0.557)
Liberal		0.0805 (0.371)	0.0796 (0.387)	0.382 (0.472)
Religious		-0.434 (0.386)	-0.433 (0.407)	-0.740 (0.554)
College Edu.			-0.273 (0.644)	-0.423 (0.739)
Professional Edu.			-0.595 (0.771)	-0.630 (1.080)
Income < \$50,000			0.102 (0.417)	-0.0292 (0.549)
25-29-years-old				-0.847 (0.937)
30-34-years-old				0.208 (0.999)
Older than 35-years				-0.259 (1.059)
Male				0.792+ (0.462)
Single				2.356*** (0.518)
Parent				0.176 (0.623)
Black				-0.188 (0.804)
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")				-0.507 (0.773)
Constant	-1.187*** (0.213)	-1.001* (0.393)	-0.609 (0.843)	-1.697 (1.410)
Observations	175	153	140	125

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Omitted categories: No Prior CJ Contact; Conservative; Not Religious; High-School Education; Income > \$50,000; 18-24-years-old; Female; Committed; No Children; White

Table 3

Logistic Regression - Relationship Between Respondent Inconsistency Towards Casual Sexual Dating Arrangements and Romantic Prospects with Prior Criminal Justice Contact

Variables	Model 1: Baseline	Model 2: M1 + Politics + Religion	Model 3: M2 + Socioeconomic	Model 4: M3 + Demographics
Prior CJ Contact	-0.304 (0.420)	-0.333 (0.440)	-0.388 (0.496)	-0.263 (0.615)
Liberal		0.403 (0.391)	0.265 (0.419)	0.0747 (0.481)
Religious		0.669 (0.442)	0.693 (0.465)	0.428 (0.524)
College Edu.			1.427 (1.063)	1.625 (1.113)
Professional Edu.			1.838+ (1.089)	2.216+ (1.171)
Income < \$50,000			-0.207 (0.417)	-0.148 (0.514)
25-29-years-old				-0.250 (0.707)
30-34-years-old				-0.820 (0.719)
Older than 35- years				-0.423 (0.763)
Male				-0.365 (0.503)
Single				-0.306 (0.466)
Parent				0.149 (0.606)
Black				0.336 (0.552)
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")				-0.341 (0.623)
Constant	-0.977*** (0.219)	-1.690*** (0.449)	-2.994* (1.165)	-2.437+ (1.418)
Observations	152	151	139	125

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Omitted categories: No Prior CJ Contact; Conservative; Not Religious; High-School Education; Income > \$50,000; 18-24-years-old; Female; Committed; No Children; White

Table 4

Logistic Regression: Relationship Between Respondent Inconsistency Towards Committed Cohabiting and Romantic Prospects with Prior Criminal Justice Contact

Variables	Model 1: Baseline	Model 2: M1 + Politics + Religion	Model 3: M2 + Socioeconomic	Model 4: M3 + Demographics
Prior CJ Contact	0.559 (0.386)	0.555 (0.387)	0.517 (0.399)	0.978+ (0.563)
Liberal		-0.391 (0.373)	-0.464 (0.390)	-0.432 (0.470)
Religious		0.0603 (0.396)	0.0303 (0.400)	0.249 (0.445)
College Edu.			0.521 (0.650)	-0.0402 (0.950)
Professional Edu.			0.0775 (0.735)	0.102 (0.985)
Income < \$50,000			0.0204 (0.404)	0.0227 (0.516)
25-29-years-old				-2.203* (0.891)
30-34-years-old				-1.702* (0.803)
Older than 35- years				-2.007* (0.938)
Male				-0.199 (0.538)
Single				0.644 (0.459)
Parent				1.151+ (0.663)
Black				-1.775** (0.647)
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")				-1.011+ (0.598)
Constant	-1.188*** (0.229)	-1.019** (0.389)	-1.276+ (0.746)	0.380 (1.377)
Observations	153	152	140	125

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Omitted categories: No Prior CJ Contact; Conservative; Not Religious; High-School Education; Income > \$50,000; 18-24-years-old; Female; Committed; No Children; White

Table 5

Logistic Regression: Relationship Between Respondent Inconsistency Across Casual Sexual Dating Arrangements and Committed Cohabiting Relationships Overall and Romantic Prospects with Prior Criminal Justice Contact

Variables	Model 1: Baseline	Model 2: M1 + Politics + Religion	Model 3: M2 + Socioeconomic	Model 4: M3 + Demographics
Prior CJ Contact	-0.407 (0.405)	-0.425 (0.414)	-0.446 (0.438)	-0.393 (0.515)
Liberal		0.582 (0.374)	0.345 (0.395)	0.537 (0.445)
Religious		0.314 (0.398)	0.280 (0.401)	0.130 (0.517)
College Edu.			0.483 (0.732)	0.414 (0.818)
Professional Edu.			0.538 (0.785)	1.092 (1.011)
Income < \$50,000			0.0691 (0.402)	0.180 (0.557)
25-29-years-old				-2.425* (1.014)
30-34-years-old				-1.872* (0.886)
Older than 35- years				-1.676+ (0.881)
Male				-0.0667 (0.495)
Single				1.262** (0.463)
Parent				1.040+ (0.607)
Black				-0.701 (0.608)
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")				-2.760*** (0.780)
Constant	-0.750*** (0.209)	-1.312** (0.417)	-1.652* (0.822)	-0.739 (1.253)
Observations	152	151	139	125

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Omitted categories: No Prior CJ Contact; Conservative; Not Religious; High-School Education; Income > \$50,000; 18-24-years-old; Female; Committed; No Children; White

Chapter 3

Violence as a Signifier in the Relationship Market

Introduction

The contemporary relationship market includes daters interested in a range of interactions and commitments, from casual sexual affairs to cohabitating relationships that may or may not lead to marriage. Within this market and range of types of relationships, individuals are faced with making decisions when considering (real and potential) romantic partners and their partners' histories. A dater's history can—and does—include an array of facts that shape perceptions of their suitability, including the presence of a criminal history marked by violence. This, in essence, presents the possibility of dual sources of stigma – the criminal justice contact itself and the marker of violence attached to that criminal contact. Building on the prior chapter, which reported empirical findings related to daters' inconsistency in concern surrounding potential matches who have criminal histories, this chapter extends the inquiry by focusing on the distinct condition of violence as a potential source of stigma attached to the mark of criminal stigma.

Violence in romantic relationships is oft researched in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). IPV is more common, nationally and globally, and starts early (García-Moreno & Pallitto, 2014). The occurrence of IPV has been shown to lead to adverse physical, emotional, and social outcomes such as injury, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, concern for safety, fear, needing help from law enforcement, and missing work are common impacts reported for direct victims and bystanders, such as children or other loved ones (Leemis et al., 2022; Niolon et al., 2017; Peterson et al., 2018). As considerations of romance emerge, daters may be

deterred by prior criminal contact that stems from violent offenses with an eye towards avoiding potential victimization.

The empirical analyses presented in this chapter reveal that a criminal history that contains violence evokes concern and acts as a deterrent to engagement with potential partners as people navigate the relationship market and consider more serious commitments; but it is not a universal mark of stigma across the continuum of romantic touchpoints for daters. For example, when casual sexual dating arrangements are the focus, daters are not significantly deterred by the idea of a casually engaging with a potential partner with violent history. When daters are considering cohabitation however, older daters are more accepting of the presence of a violent past compared to younger daters. Perhaps counter-intuitively, however, daters who themselves have a criminal history (violent or non-violent) are less accepting of the idea of living with a partner who has a violent criminal history. As this chapter reveals, some of these and other results are, on the one hand, expected; but, on the other hand, they are paradoxical to what prior research has revealed. This research, therefore, provides an essential first step toward producing more nuanced conceptualization of who is most likely to experience collateral consequences in the realm of romantic relationships following criminal justice system contact, including for violence-related offenses.

Before turning to the findings, I first situate the analysis in relevant literature. In addition to previously discussed scholarship on topics such as criminal stigma and theories of mate selection, which are further discussed here in relation to violence as a variable of interest, the literature on intimate partner violence provides essential context. Thereafter, I review the data and method of analysis, showing how the study discussed in chapter two was modified and analyzed to produce insights specifically related to disaggregating violent from non-violent

histories of system contact. Following the presentation of the results, a brief discussion sets the stage for contextualizing the relationship market and the nuances that are embedded in how individuals navigate the relationship market while taking into consideration histories of criminal justice contact involving violent crimes.

Review of Literature

Criminal justice contact has a repelling effect on individuals, ranging from barring people from employment and education to adverse social relationships, and some of this research has specifically integrated attention to violent (versus non-violent) histories. Criminologists, sociologists, psychologists, and public health scholars and others have unpacked how traffic stops, arrests, criminal charges, incarceration, and reentry cyclically create unequal outcomes for system impacted individuals (Brayne 2014; Haskins & Jacobsen 2017; Herbert et al., 2015; Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015; Schneider et al., 2022). These unfavorable outcomes almost certainly derive from and reflect the stigmatization that accompanies criminal justice contact, which can be amplified when violent crimes are involved. To varying degrees, this literature reveals how contact with the criminal justice systems results in increased marginalization, especially in the form of blocked opportunities. As Ispa-Landa and Loeffler (2016: 390) succinctly explain, “The hyper-visibility of the criminal record today, coupled with the restricted employment opportunities that now face CJS-marked individuals, suggests that the previously identified strategies through which individuals could overcome the negative consequences associated with past criminal justice contact may no longer be as available.” Sometimes these kinds of findings are explained with reference to stigma.

The stigma literature, as we have seen, is vast and presents various formulations of how to think about “othering.” One such formulation, frequently emerging in the scholarship is that

stigma may be understood as a state of devaluation based on an individual's association with some socially undesired "mark," "condition," or "status" (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001; Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). A significant consequence of negative labeling and the imposition of stigma is social exclusion from conventional opportunities in an array of public and private institutions. Research on stigma and criminal contact ("criminal stigma") has shown the unequal outcomes in employment prospects (Lindsay, 2021), housing (Furst & Evans, 2017; Evans et al., 2018), and college admissions (Custer, 2016) among other things. It follows then that individuals who have experienced "criminal contact" might encounter blocked opportunities and attendant uneven outcomes in social relationships, especially if the stigma is compounded by other markers that evoke stigma and rejection, such as the mark of a violence history.

Individuals seeking potential romantic partners often require the potential partner to meet a set of minimum qualifications, below which a person will not be deemed desirable and thus constitute a match (Levy et al., 2020). Individuals within the market for romantic relationships, however, have preferences that may be more salient during early stages of the relationship continuum (Bedow & Hames, 2019) and, as the previous chapter of this dissertation reveals, they may have inconsistent preferences. For instance, while someone with a history of criminal contact may still meet individuals' suitability standards, when that criminal history is marked by violence, daters may be less inclined to find that person suitable for any romantic encounters and relationships. Still, when considering potential romantic connections – suitability matters and what factors into these considerations can—and do—vary.

Assortative mating approaches to explaining variation along these lines suggests that individuals enter relationships with others who share characteristics and preferences (Schwartz, 2013). This line of research has consistently found that couples tend to be matched on

characteristics, such as race, education, and age (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004; Hou & Myles 2008; Houts et al., 1996; Kalmijn, 1991; Kalmijn, 1998; Kalmijn & Flap, 2001; Levinger & Rands, 1985; Mare, 1991; Rosenfeld, 2008; Schwartz & Mare, 2005). In addition, individuals have been shown to seek compatible class background, cultural, economic and occupational status in romantic relationships (Kalmijn & Flap, 2001). While mate selection models have primarily been applied to marriage, they also apply to the search for other types of romantic partners, in particular non-marital romantic partners (Sahib & Gu, 2002). Assortative mating theory suggests that people who engage in behavior traditionally considered delinquent are likely to meet, date, and subsequently couple with others who are similarly situated (Moffitt et al., 2001; Vanyukov et al., 1996; Yamaguchi & Kandel, 1993). Notably, this approach has not interrogated the role of violence as a biographical consideration that is infused with meaning and thus might shape selection and, more particularly, it has not addressed violence as a consideration in the context of criminal justice contact.

The bulk of research on criminal stigma focuses on incarceration and marital relationships (Bersani & DiPietro, 2016; Van Schellen et al., 2012). To date, research on the crime-reducing effect of marriage and consequence of incarceration on marriage leaves little doubt that penal sanctions can have a deleterious effect on marital unions (Apel, 2016). If this predominant focus on marriage was sufficient when marriage was the dominant form of intimate relationship (van Schellen et al., 2011; Sampson et al., 2006), this is no longer the case. Contemporary romantic relationships have become less traditional in terms of how they unfold and take shape, especially with demographic patterns associated with cohabitating and long-term partnerships (Horowitz et al., 2019), and thus new research is needed that takes such patterns into

account. This is especially true as decisions to pursue marriage are delayed, if not completely dispensed with.

Previous chapters have given statistics quantifying declining rates of marriage. As marriage becomes less of the norm and perhaps more of the exception, social inquiry must follow into how romantic relationships that may not lead to marriage are impacted by criminal stigma. There is gradual growth in research that focuses on criminal stigma and romance but very little of that scholarship focuses on how elements of criminal histories (and thereby criminal stigma) impact romantic prospects. Some recent research has centered prospects in the online dating context. Evans (2019) measured criminal stigma using parole disclosure and found that among female daters, Black and Latina women on parole faced more adverse reactions romantically compared to white women. More, Evans and Vega (2020) discovered that parole was more damaging for Black men and more rehabilitating for white men in terms of romantic prospects. These findings are but another extension of how criminal stigma may be experienced in racially disparate ways. While Evans' series of audits reaffirmed the unequal outcomes that accompany contact with the criminal system, we still have much to understand in terms of key elements of criminal history, including the presence of violence. After all, as Jackman (2002) observed, violence is a concept that has been generically defined and inconsistently measured and understood but is nevertheless present in our individual and collective experiences and beyond the narrow conceptualization of physical harm. Further, in the U.S., adults overestimate the occurrence of violence nationally, but tend to perceive less crime locally (Gramlich, 2020) suggesting violence is a salient but perhaps imprecisely understood phenomenon.

In the prior chapter, analyses suggested some individuals exhibit an inconsistency in decision-making when it comes to criminal histories. Particularly, the models indicated that age,

having children, and race were strong predictors of someone's lack of uniformity in reactions towards romantic prospects with criminal histories. Compared to younger members of the sample, daters over the age of 24-years-old were less likely to demonstrate a pattern of inconsistent reactions when considering daters with criminal histories. Further, parents in the sample were more likely to exhibit inconsistent preferences towards others who have prior contact when considering cohabitation. In addition, people of color were less likely to express inconsistent preferences towards cohabitating with a potential partner with a criminal history. These and other findings clearly demonstrate that criminal histories are associated with partner preferences, however, it is unclear how histories of violence shape romantic partner preferences in dating markets.

There is only a smattering of prior research on how violence impacts romantic suitability, and very little of it is situated in the context of criminal justice contact. Nonetheless, analyses that center current relationships can yield some insights. Beijers et al., (2016) used an experimental vignette where respondents advised a peer on living with someone with a criminal history. The findings suggest that crime type matters when considering cohabitation. In particular, Beijers et al., (2016) found that sex offenses negatively impacted cohabitation advising more than non-violent offenses. Sex offenses committed against children were also more problematic for participants than sex offenses against peers. Also reported in this work, individuals were equally willing to advise cohabitation with prior violent and property offenders, but they exhibited heightened stigma towards people convicted of sexual offenses (Beijers et al., 2016). Meanwhile Zoutewelle-Terovan et al. (2015) demonstrated that the probability of a romantic or cohabiting relationship for daters with criminal histories decreases with each prior offense committed, and this relationship is stronger for females. Likewise, they found that a

history of violent (or sexual) offenses appears to be more detrimental to relationship prospects than lower-level offenses (Zoutewelle-Terovan et al., 2015). Finally, violent male offenders were perceived as less attractive than violent female offenders (Beijers et al., 2016) by members of the opposite sex. These studies establish that stigmatization depends upon the nature of the offense as well as the gender identities of those involved in some cases where histories of violence are more damaging to (or more prohibitive of) relationships.

Intimate partner violence (IPV), abuse or aggression that occurs in a romantic relationship between current or former spouses and dating partners has been studied extensively (Bueso-Izquierdo et al., 2016; Sardinha et al., 2022). The complex issue of intimate partner violence more specifically refers to any violent behavior within an intimate relationship. It includes physical aggression (e.g., slapping, hitting, kicking or beating), sexual force, psychological abuse (e.g., intimidation, constant belittling or humiliation) or any other controlling behavior by a current or former partner or spouse (Bueso-Izquierdo et al., 2016). IPV can start early, according to the Center for Disease Control's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) 16 million women and 11 million men who reported experiencing contact sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime said that they first experienced these forms of violence before the age of 18 (Leemis et al., 2022). IPV is prevalent and not gender-specific, but certainly gendered. About 41% of women and 26% of men in the United States experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner and reported an intimate partner violence-related impact during their lifetime (Leemis et al., 2022).

The resulting impact of IPV victimization has been posited to entail injury, fearfulness, post-traumatic stress disorder, use of victim services, contraction of sexually transmitted

diseases, etc. (García-Moreno & Pallitto, 2013; Truman & Morgan, 2014). Indeed, all injuries to IPV victims are not physical, 21-61% of IPV victims lose gainful employment due to abuse (Rothman et al., 2007). For decades, the scholarship on IPV, ranging from biology to social science, has theorized and measure IPV, while also positing interventions (Sardinha et al., 2022).

Researchers of IPV have often embraced a longstanding position that IPV was unique among forms of violence in its relationship to the criminal justice system for many reasons—including whether people involved in IPV are also involved in other criminal offending and victimization (Tanskanen & Kivivuori, 2021). Therefore, theory and research largely occurred in separate spheres from the theory and research on crime and collateral consequences. Since the late-1980, criminologists and sociologists have been central to this research. Moffit et al. (2000) examined the relation between partner abuse and general criminal offending and found that many, but not all, partner abusers also engaged in violence against other people who they were not intimately involved with. Recent work has shored up these findings among young adults. Verbruggen et al. (2022) found that compared with non-offenders, individuals involved in general offending were significantly more likely to report perpetrating psychological and physical IPV.

The nexus between IPV (and violence more generally) and criminal justice system contact evokes questions about how daters who encounter a romantic prospect with a history of criminal offending, especially such that is marked by violence, might consider a violence history in decisions about mate/romantic/relationship selection. Indeed, it follows that they would take great pause at pursuing any romantic encounter – if not deterred altogether. Certainly, a criminal history on its face may signal to individuals that they are encountering someone who is untrustworthy, immature, inclined to misbehave, lack responsibility, or lack material security. Just as well, daters with violent criminal histories might ratchet up that the concerns for

individuals in the relationship market, signaling aggression, danger, or a general propensity for exhibiting violence towards a partner and therefore are unwilling to consider such daters as romantic prospects.

At the same time, it is also the case that criminal histories are amassed disparately for various segments of society. A myriad of research has shown that people of color, Black and Latinx people are more likely to experience stops, searches, arrests, charges, pre-trial detention, and incarceration (Kovera, 2019). The overwhelming disproportionate treatment people of color experience within the criminal justice system is also seen in use of lethal and non-lethal force (Goff et al., 2016). Even more, there's a racial disparity seen among innocence in criminal justice population. Gross, et al., (2017) found that innocent Black people are 3.5 times more likely than innocent white people to be convicted of sexual assault, 7 times more likely to be convicted of murder, and 12 times more likely to be convicted of drug crimes, As such, people of color may have a more nuanced perspective of daters who have prior contact considering the prevalence of system contact among these communities.

This chapter augments the prior chapter's empirical examination of criminal stigma and (in)consistency surrounding decision-making related to the dating market by examining how survey respondents orient to decision-making when violence is part of the picture. Using survey data, the chapter addresses for whom a history of violence is a romantic relationship deterrent when it emerges in prospective daters. Based on the aforementioned literature review, the following research questions are posed:

- (1) As the empirical analyses presented in chapter two demonstrated, daters with prior criminal contact were more likely to seek committed cohabitating relationships compared to casual sexual dating arrangements. In line with these findings, I ask: are

- respondents with prior violent criminal justice contact are more likely to seek committed, cohabitating relationships over casual dating arrangements?
- (2) While casual sexual arrangements are less likely to evoke hesitancy when one (or both) partner(s) have prior criminal contact, the marker of violence may deter daters from considering a potential partner for less committed encounters. Therefore, I ask what, if any, relationship exists between respondent characteristics and their willingness to engage in casual sexual dating with others who have a prior violent criminal justice contact in their history?
- (3) As respondent daters consider committed cohabitating relationships, the presence of a prior violent offense that led to criminal contact may present daters with apprehensions over personal safety that impact their evaluation of a potential partner. Therefore, I ask whether there is a relationship between daters' characteristics and their willingness to live with a partner who has prior criminal justice contact arising from a violent offense.

Methods

Study Design

The broader goal of the study is to examine how criminal justice contact shapes romantic relationships and encounters, and here the focus is on violence as pivot point in these considerations. The larger study involves three levels of data - survey data, focus group data, and interview data. The survey data is used in this chapter much as it was used in the previous chapter; that is, to understand how criminal justice contact ("criminal stigma") influences romantic prospects, encounters, and relationships. To collect these data, I employed a convenience sampling using my personal social media networks, specifically Facebook,

Instagram, and LinkedIn. The network connections were large across each social media sites; Facebook (4,953 friends)⁴, Instagram (1,152 followers), and LinkedIn (503 connections). Recruitment flyers featuring the survey link were distributed across each social media platform twice a week to encourage friends, followers, and others to participate in the survey and to further promote the research. This study protocol received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Irvine (IRB Protocol #20206155).

Survey Data Collection

The survey was designed to understand for whom the stigma of criminal justice contact mattered most and in what contexts. As detailed in Chapter 2, the survey addresses respondents' own prior criminal contact, including nonviolent and violent contact. Most relevant for the current focus, survey participants were asked to self-report their choices when considering the prospect of casual sexual dating encounters and cohabitation with potential partners who have a past criminal contact arising from a (1) nonviolent and (2) violent offense. The survey distribution mirrored that described in Chapter 2; circulated in two states following criteria that respondents be at least 18 years of age, reside in California or Michigan and actively seeking romantic connections in the preceding 18-months before the onset of Covid-19 pandemic. As noted in Chapter 2, while a total of 279 surveys were started, 265 responses were submitted as complete. Of the remaining 265 surveys, seven were discarded for reporting "Prefer Not to Respond" for every survey question and thirteen were discarded for skipping through every question presented. Five surveys were dropped for respondents failing to meet the survey criteria (e.g., under the age of 18-years-old or did not reside in the geographic area of interest). The final sample comprises the remaining 240 survey respondents.

⁴ Facebook allows user accounts to have up to 5,000 friends maximum, indicating the PI's vast social media network. <https://www.facebook.com/help/mobile-touch/187491537967631>

Key Measures

Independent Variables

An important independent variable is whether respondents have had any prior direct criminal justice contact in their lifetime. *Prior history* with criminal justice contact is assessed by self-reports of whether participants experienced a range of contact with the criminal justice system ranging from arrests to incarcerations. Survey respondents were asked: Have you ever experienced the following? (Check all that apply): arrested but not charged nor convicted, arrested, and charged, but not convicted; arrested, charged, and convicted; arrested, charged, convicted, and served time in jail or prison; arrested, charged, convicted, and placed on probation or tether, etc.; or N/A I have never had any criminal justice contact. To conserve power and circumvent issues with multicollinearity, the responses were collapsed and recoded with a value of zero indicating having no such prior criminal justice contact and one indicating prior criminal contact. To understand whether, and if so, how stigma associated with the presence of a violent criminal history shapes romantic encounters, survey respondents were asked to indicate certain socioeconomic and demographic characteristics.

Age is measured in quinquennia (following those in the 18-24-year-old age group). *Gender* is a binary variable where a zero indicates a woman and one indicates a man. *Current relationship status* is also measured as a binary where zero indicates being in a committed relationship, engagement, or marriage and one indicates a respondent is single at the time of the survey. *Parental status* is also measured as a binary variable where a zero indicates having no children and one indicates having children. *Race* is a three-level variable indicating whether the participant identified as White, Black or Other racial groups. By the very nature of snowball

sampling, the sample sizes of individuals from Other racial groups (e.g., Hispanic, Asian, mixed-race, etc.) are too small for meaningful analysis and were consequently collapsed into “Other.”

Education is measured as either some high school education, a college education, or a professional degree. *Income* attainment is measured as a binary where a zero indicates an income over \$50,000 and one indicates an income under \$50,000. *Political* affiliations are recoded as a binary variable where respondents were identified as liberal (Democrat or Green Party) or not (Independent or Republican). Whether a dater was *religious* is also recoded into a binary variable where a zero indicates no religious beliefs and a one indicates whether the person indicated a religious identity (i.e., they responded that they are Christian, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Spiritual, Hindu, and Buddhist).

Dependent Variables

Seeking casual sexual dating arrangements is measured by how individuals responded to the following: “At this time in your life, which of the following best describes the type of relationship you are seeking: Hook-ups; Friends with benefits; Causal, on-going romantic/sexual relationship; Serious, romantic/sexual relationship; Serious, romantic/sexual relationship that results or leads to marriage; Serious, romantic/sexual relationship that is long term but does not lead to marriage?” A value of zero indicates a search for less committed interactions marked by causal sex or dating while a value of one indicates seeking cohabitating relationships marked by commitment and longevity. *Willingness to engage/progress* is recoded from a Likert scale with a value of zero indicating unwillingness and a value of one indicating a respondent dater’s willingness. Measures of respondent dater’s willingness to engage is assessed at *willingness to engage in causal sexual dating encounters* with a romantic prospect who has a non-violent offense and violent offense by asking respondents, “Imagine you met someone and in the course

of dating the individual revealed that they had a criminal conviction in their history. How willing are you to: (1) Have a consensual sexual affair with someone who has a non-violent, criminal history? (2) Have a consensual sexual affair with someone who has a violent, criminal history?” Casual sexual dating encounters are characterized as romantic interactions lacking any mutual exclusivity. *Willingness to progress to committed cohabitation relationships* with a romantic prospect who has a non-violent offense versus violent offense was measured by asking: “Next, imagine already being romantically involved (with a mutual commitment and exclusivity) with someone that has a criminal conviction in their history. (1) Would you be willing to: Enter a cohabitating relationship (e.g., living together) someone with a non-violent, criminal history? and (2) Enter a cohabitating relationship (e.g., living together) someone with a violent, criminal history?” A committed cohabitating relationship is characterized as one with a mutual exclusivity and/or nontraditional enduring partnership. The focus on casual sex and committed cohabitation is due in large part to the shift in contemporary romantic relationship trends with long-term cohabitating relationships on the rise and adults delaying, if not foregoing marriage entirely (Gottlieb & Sugie, 2019; Horowitz et al., 2019). Therefore, committed cohabitating relationships that *may* lead to marriage presents a more appropriate touchpoint in the relationship continuum.

Analytic Plan

The survey data provided by these respondents were analyzed to determine: (1) whether the respondents hold more stigmatizing views towards individuals with non-violent versus violent criminal contact in their past, and if so, (2) whether such views are influenced by demographic characteristics. Logistic regression models were run to address the aforementioned research questions. Within each of these tables, four logistic regression models were conducted. The first model (i.e., the baseline model) assesses the relationship between prior criminal justice

contact and respondents': seeking casual sexual dating arrangements (Table 7), willingness to consider casual sex with potential partners who have prior non-violent criminal justice contact (Table 8) versus violent criminal justice contact in their personal history (Table 9), and willingness to live with a partner who has a history of criminal contact arising from non-violent incidents (Table 10) versus willingness to live with a partner who has a history of criminal contact arising from violent incident (Table 11). The second model builds off the previous model by adding in political affiliations and religiosity as predictors followed by an incorporation of socioeconomic variables in the third model. In the final models, respondents' demographics are included in the examination of their association on respondent willingness to engage and/or progress with potential partners who have prior criminal contact stemming from violent offenses.

Results

As shown in Table 6, less than 10% of the sample report a prior criminal justice contact stemming from a violent offense. Less than one-third of sample daters are seeking casual sex. Further, over 80% of respondents would be willing to have casual sex with a dater who has a history of non-violent criminal justice contact while just over two-thirds (66%) of respondents indicated a willingness to have casual sex with someone who has a history of violent criminal justice contact. Over three-quarters (76%) of respondents would live with someone who has a history of criminal justice contact stemming from non-violent while only one-half (51%) stated they would be willing to live with someone who has a history of contact that stems from violence.

The average age of the sample is 32.6-years-old ranging from 18-63 years of age ($SD = 8.66$). About 15% of the daters are 18-24-years old (15.42%) and 25-30-years-old (16%). A quarter of the sample is 31-34-years-old (25%), and over 40% are 35-years-old or older. Over

two-thirds of the sample are women (68%) with the remaining one-third (32%) comprising men. Single individuals comprise over 40% of the sample and parents comprise less than half (42%) of the sample. A plurality of respondents are White (39%) and Black (39%), while approximately 20% are of Other racial groups. Additionally, the sample is one marked with education; less than 15% have some high-school education, almost two-thirds (60%) have a college education, and over one-quarter (27%) have a professional degree. More than half of the sample report earning less than \$50,000. Respondents are more liberal politically and religious than not (see Table 6).

Research Question 1: What is the Relationship Between Violent Criminal Justice Contact and Seeking Casual Sexual Connections?

The first research question asks whether there is a relationship between experiencing violent criminal justice contact and seeking casual sexual arrangements compared to more committed cohabitating arrangements. In Table 7, the association of violent criminal stigma on the search for less committal romantic arrangements are highlighted across salient individual characteristics. Analyses show that prior criminal contact stemming from a violent offense is not significantly associated with daters' search for romance. As Table 7, Models 2 and 3 show, as political affiliation, religiosity, and socio-economic are added, no significant relationships emerge. In the full model, respondent demographics are incorporated. When associating the impact specific demographic variables have on respondent's desires navigating the relationship market, males are less likely to seek casual sex while single people are more likely to seek casual sex. Accordingly, Table 7 provides insight into the first research question: respondents with prior violent criminal justice contact are not significantly different than daters with no prior contact or

non-violent contact in their quest for romance. However, single people, perhaps expectedly, are much more likely to seek casual encounters compared to more committed arrangements.

Research Question 2: What is the Relationship Between Potential Partners with Violent Criminal Justice Contact and Daters' Willingness to Engage in Casual Sexual Dating?

The second research question asks if there is a relationship between criminal justice contact arising from a prior violent offense and daters' willingness to have casual sexual dating relationships with someone who has such contact. Two models were constructed to compare daters' willingness to engage in casual encounters with romantic prospects who have a non-violent prior contact (Table 8) and those with a violent prior contact (Table 9).

As the baseline model (Model 1) in Table 8 shows, a bivariate association examining the relationship between willingness to have casual sex with someone who has a non-violent prior contact and respondents having a prior direct experience with criminal contact themselves did not yield a significant relationship. Next, political affiliation and religiosity are included and as Model 2 in Table 8 shows, there are no significant relationships. The third model in Table 8 includes the addition of socio-economic variables, revealing where a college education is marginally significant, indicating that respondent daters with a college degree are more likely to express willingness to engage in casual sexual arrangements with others who have a history of non-violent system contact compared to respondent daters with a high school education. Finally, as demographic predictors are added into the model, no significant relationships emerge (see Model 4 in Table 8). These findings suggest that, at the very least, possessing a college education increases the likelihood that a respondent dater would exhibit willingness to casually see a potential partner with prior criminal contact stemming from a non-violent offense.

Table 9 then examines the association between prior violent criminal justice contact and respondent's preferences towards considering casual sex. As Model 1 in Table 9 shows, there is no significant relationship seen among daters who themselves have experienced criminal contact. As respondents' political affiliation and religiosity are considered as predictors, there are no significant relationships observed. More, as Model 3, in Table 9 indicates, the addition of socio-economic variables did not yield any significant relationships. Similarly, as demographic variables are incorporated, no significant relationships emerge among daters considering casual sexual dating encounters with others who have violent criminal justice contact in their history. These findings suggest that when contemplating casual sexual dating encounters, the marker of violence is not a deterrent for sample daters.

Research Question 3: What is the Relationship Between Potential Partners with Violent Criminal Justice Contact and Daters' Willingness to Progress to a Committed Cohabiting Relationship?

The final research question asks if there is a relationship between violent criminal justice contact and a respondent daters' willingness to cohabitate with someone who has such contact. Two models were constructed to compare daters' willingness to live with romantic prospects who have a non-violent prior contact (Table 10) and those with a violent prior contact (Table 11).

In Table 10, the first model (i.e., baseline model) assesses the relationship between prior criminal justice contact and respondents' willingness to live with a partner who has a history of criminal contact arising from non-violent incidents. As Model 1 in Table 10 shows, no significant relationship emerges at the baseline. Next, Model 2 in Table 10 likewise shows no significant relationships as religiosity and political affiliation are incorporated in considering

whether respondents would be willing to live with another who has a criminal contact stemming from a non-violent offense. Similarly, as socio-economic variables are added into the models, no significant relationships emerge. As demographics are incorporated into the full model, age emerges as a marginally significant predictor with daters aged 31-34-years old indicating more willingness to cohabitate with a partner who a prior non-violent contact compared to younger dates aged 18-24-years-old. Lastly, male daters are marginally significantly less likely to indicate a willingness to live with a partner who has a prior criminal justice contact that arose from a non-violent offense compared to women daters. These findings suggest that older daters are more open to cohabitation with someone who has a non-violent history while male daters less open to the idea of living with another who has a prior history of criminal justice contact stemming from non-violent offenses.

Finally, Table 11 reports on the association between prior violent criminal justice contact and respondent's willingness to consider progressing towards a cohabitating relationship with a potential partner. The first bivariate association indicates that having a prior history of criminal justice is marginally significant to an unwillingness to cohabitate with someone who has a prior history stemming from a violent offense(s). Likewise, when political affiliation and religiosity are incorporated into the model, respondents with a history of criminal justice contact stemming from violent offenses are less likely to express greater willingness to living with a partner who has a prior violent criminal justice contact compared to conservative daters. Similarly, as socioeconomic variables are added, having any prior criminal justice contact is marginally significant with a respondents' unwillingness to cohabitate with a partner who has a violent offense in their history compared to individuals who have never experienced criminal justice contact. As demographic variables are incorporated, the relationship seen between a respondent's

own prior history and their hesitancy towards living with someone who has a violent prior history disappears. As Model 4 in Table 11 demonstrates, individuals aged 25-30 and 31-34-years-old are significantly more likely to express a willingness to cohabitate with a partner who has a history of criminal contact stemming from a violent offense compared to younger daters aged 18-24-years-old.

These findings suggest, perhaps intuitively, that cohabitation is a more high-stakes touchpoint for daters compared to casual sexual encounters, as more significant relationships emanate in the cohabitation models. Indeed, as considerations of living with a partner who has a prior violent contact in their history emerge, whether respondents had direct prior criminal contact and age of the respondents become salient factors until demographic backgrounds are factored into the final model. In opposition to assortative mating theories that partners ‘match’ on certain factors, daters who themselves had prior experienced criminal justice contact were less likely to express a willingness to progress towards a committed cohabitating relationship with someone who had a violent criminal history. Finally, compared to younger daters aged 18-24-years-old, respondents aged 25-30 and 31-34-years-old are significantly more likely to indicate a willingness to consider living with a partner who has a violent criminal history.

Conclusion

The analyses presented in this chapter reveal that violent criminal histories have some impact on romantic prospects in excess of impacts emanating from non-violent system contact. Generally, education, age, and having direct experience with criminal justice contract show associations with respondents’ reactions to non-violent vs. violent histories. In this context, violence is a repelling signifier for daters who are high school educated, younger, and/or have prior criminal justice contact in their past themselves. Compared to high-school educated daters,

individuals with a college education are more likely to indicate a willingness to live with someone who has violent system contact. More, daters who have a criminal history were less likely to express a willingness to live with someone who had a violent criminal history compared to daters without a criminal history. Finally, compared to younger respondents, older daters, aged 25-30-years-old and 31-34-years-old, are more likely to indicate a willingness to live with a partner who has a prior violent offense that led to criminal contact in their history.

Some of the aforementioned findings are intuitive. For instance younger people, aged 18-24-years-old were less willing to cohabitate with partners who have a history marked with violence compared to older daters aged 25-34-years old. These findings map onto recent findings where younger people are far more likely to report being victimized than older people (Morgan & Truman, 2020). Moreover, racial predictors are expected considering the disproportionate criminal contact that minorities face compared to non-minorities. Other findings were perhaps counter-intuitive, such as daters with a criminal history signaling less willingness to cohabitate with someone who has a violent criminal history compared to daters who have no prior criminal justice contact.

The preceding chapters make abundantly clear that the relationship market is both structured and dynamic. What matters to one individual can differ vastly from what matters to another. How suitability is configured when violent criminal histories are the foci remains an important consideration for understanding how criminal stigma impacts romantic prospects. Moreover, the way in which these histories configure into the lives of other daters deserves scholarly attention. Still, research on the nuances and contextual factors at play would benefit current and future research. The next chapter does precisely that – contextualizes the findings surrounding concern for criminal contact in general and violence as a signifier.

Appendix

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Sample Respondents (Percentages)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	N
Seeking Casual Sex	28.00%		0	1	175
Prior Violent Criminal Justice Contact	9.58%		0	1	240
Casual Sex re: Non-Violent	82.24%		0	1	152
Casual Sex re: Violent	66.44%		0	1	149
Cohabitation re: Non-Violent	75.82%		0	1	153
Cohabitation re: Violent	50.67%		0	1	150
Age	32.60	8.66	18	63	240
18-24-years-old	15.42%		0	1	
25-30-years-old	16.25%		0	1	
31-34-years-old	25.00%		0	1	
Older than 35-years	43.33%		0	1	
Male	32.18%		0	1	202
Single	41.51%		0	1	159
Parent	42.48%		0	1	153
Race/Ethnicity					153
White	39.22%		0	1	
Black	39.87%		0	1	
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")	20.92%		0	1	
Education					153
High-School Education	12.42%		0	1	
College Education	60.13%		0	1	
Professional Degree	27.45%		0	1	
Income less than \$50,000	53.57%		0	1	140
Liberal Political Affiliations	53.59%		0	1	153
Religious	66.67%		0	1	153

Note: SD = standard deviation

Table 7

Logistic Regression: Relationship Between Seeking Casual Sexual Dating Arrangements and Prior Violent Criminal Justice Contact

Variables	Model 1: Baseline	Model 2: M1 + Politics + Religion	Model 3: M2 + Socioeconomic	Model 4: M3 + Demographics
Prior Violent CJ Contact	0.367	0.453	0.230	0.0613
	(0.476)	(0.514)	(0.553)	(0.688)
Liberal		0.120	0.108	0.416
		(0.366)	(0.387)	(0.461)
Religious		-0.411	-0.433	-0.767
		(0.381)	(0.409)	(0.578)
College Edu.			-0.397	-0.491
			(0.611)	(0.706)
Professional Edu.			-0.829	-0.724
			(0.725)	(1.050)
Income < \$50,000			0.0602	-0.0197
			(0.417)	(0.568)
25-30-years-old				-0.829
				(0.941)
31-34-years-old				0.251
				(0.997)
Older than 35-years				-0.192
				(1.072)
Male				0.805+
				(0.458)
Single				2.338***
				(0.514)
Parent				0.231
				(0.632)
Black				-0.140
				(0.828)
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")				-0.504
				(0.788)
Constant	-0.996***	-0.801*	-0.317	-1.615
	(0.183)	(0.375)	(0.773)	(1.376)
Observations	175	153	140	125

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Omitted categories: No Prior CJ Contact; Conservative; Not Religious; High-School Education; Income > \$50,000; 18-24-years-old; Female; Committed; No Children; White

Table 8

Logistic Regression: Relationship Between Respondent Characteristics and Willingness to Engage in Casual Sex with Romantic Prospects Who Have Prior Non-Violent Criminal Justice Contact

Variables	Model 1: Baseline	Model 2: M1 + Politics + Religion	Model 3: M2 + Socioeconomic	Model 4: M3 + Demographics
Prior CJ Contact	0.259 (0.481)	0.255 (0.479)	0.134 (0.495)	0.168 (0.600)
Liberal		0.480 (0.429)	0.293 (0.444)	0.476 (0.535)
Religious		0.0378 (0.451)	0.0384 (0.480)	0.403 (0.591)
College Edu.			1.179+ (0.628)	1.196 (0.853)
Professional Edu.			0.432 (0.798)	0.0193 (1.054)
Income < \$50,000			0.290 (0.509)	-0.203 (0.647)
25-30-years-old				-0.955 (0.916)
31-34-years-old				-0.00166 (0.969)
Older than 35- years				-1.145 (0.997)
Male				0.506 (0.546)
Single				-0.395 (0.521)
Parent				-1.109 (0.737)
Black				0.929 (0.775)
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")				-0.185 (0.759)
Constant	2.262*** (0.333)	1.997** (0.668)	0.997 (1.194)	1.227 (1.388)
Observations	152	151	139	125

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Omitted categories: No Prior CJ Contact; Conservative; Not Religious; High-School Education; Income > \$50,000; 18-24-years-old; Female; Committed; No Children; White

Table 9

Logistic Regression: Relationship Between Respondent Characteristics and Willingness to Engage in Casual Sex with Romantic Prospects Who Have Prior Violent Criminal Justice Contact

Variables	Model 1: Baseline	Model 2: M1 + Politics + Religion	Model 3: M2 + Socioeconomic	Model 4: M3 + Demographics
Prior CJ Contact	0.573 (0.404)	0.568 (0.413)	0.588 (0.457)	0.262 (0.523)
Liberal		-0.103 (0.357)	-0.185 (0.382)	-0.130 (0.437)
Religious		-0.258 (0.384)	-0.269 (0.420)	-0.127 (0.452)
College Edu.			0.496 (0.652)	0.290 (0.686)
Professional Edu.			-0.342 (0.718)	-0.842 (0.831)
Income < \$50,000			0.303 (0.401)	0.137 (0.494)
25-30-years-old				0.614 (0.693)
31-34-years-old				0.593 (0.711)
Older than 35-years				0.113 (0.756)
Male				0.460 (0.450)
Single				-0.150 (0.423)
Parent				-0.623 (0.541)
Black				0.354 (0.535)
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")				0.0316 (0.610)
Constant	0.526** (0.203)	0.775* (0.378)	0.475 (0.834)	0.409 (1.156)
Observations	149	148	137	123

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Omitted categories: No Prior CJ Contact; Conservative; Not Religious; High-School Education; Income > \$50,000; 18-24-years-old; Female; Committed; No Children; White

Table 10

Logistic Regression: Relationship Between Respondent Characteristics and Willingness to Cohabitate with Romantic Prospects Who Have Prior Non-Violent Criminal Justice Contact

Variables	Model 1: Baseline	Model 2: M1 + Politics + Religion	Model 3: M2 + Socioeconomic	Model 4: M3 + Demographics
Prior CJ Contact	0.376 (0.433)	0.396 (0.432)	0.681 (0.471)	0.623 (0.544)
Liberal		0.371 (0.383)	0.189 (0.406)	0.234 (0.481)
Religious		-0.218 (0.413)	-0.350 (0.446)	0.0360 (0.522)
College Edu.			0.601 (0.656)	0.367 (0.752)
Professional Edu.			0.504 (0.764)	-0.145 (0.960)
Income < \$50,000			0.0221 (0.438)	0.396 (0.571)
25-30-years-old				1.011 (0.772)
31-34-years-old				1.552+ (0.847)
Older than 35-years				0.312 (0.869)
Male				0.820+ (0.497)
Single				-0.768 (0.478)
Parent				-1.016 (0.662)
Black				-0.388 (0.617)
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")				-0.955 (0.660)
Constant	1.037*** (0.221)	0.982** (0.406)	0.624 (0.868)	0.573 (1.307)
Observations	153	152	140	125

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Omitted categories: No Prior CJ Contact; Conservative; Not Religious; High-School Education; Income > \$50,000; 18-24-years-old; Female; Committed; No Children; White

Table 11

Logistic Regression: Relationship Between Respondent Characteristics and Willingness to Cohabitate with Romantic Prospects Who Have Prior Violent Criminal Justice Contact

Variables	Model 1: Baseline	Model 2: M1 + Politics + Religion	Model 3: M2 + Socioeconomic	Model 4: M3 + Demographics
Prior CJ Contact	0.692+	0.655+	0.700+	0.781
	(0.372)	(0.370)	(0.404)	(0.485)
Liberal		0.283	0.285	0.134
		(0.339)	(0.356)	(0.399)
Religious		0.182	0.0103	-0.0872
		(0.360)	(0.383)	(0.452)
College Edu.			0.0470	0.201
			(0.626)	(0.695)
Professional Edu.			-0.000924	-0.0257
			(0.717)	(0.833)
Income < \$50,000			0.361	0.353
			(0.372)	(0.461)
25-30-years-old				1.278+
				(0.756)
31-34-years-old				1.228+
				(0.688)
Older than 35-years				1.058
				(0.718)
Male				0.472
				(0.436)
Single				-0.666
				(0.423)
Parent				-0.703
				(0.501)
Black				0.677
				(0.506)
Other Race/Ethnicity ("Other")				0.498
				(0.595)
Constant	-0.169	-0.420	-0.586	-1.442
	(0.195)	(0.376)	(0.797)	(1.099)
Observations	150	149	138	124

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Omitted categories: No Prior CJ Contact; Conservative; Not Religious; High-School Education; Income > \$50,000; 18-24-years-old; Female; Committed; No Children; White

Chapter 4

What Matters to Me and Why

Introduction

The U.S. criminal justice system can be all encompassing (See Beckett, 2018 for review), impacting millions of people and the communities in which they reside, as well as institutions that anchor society. The criminal justice system has been scrutinized for its negative effects on individuals' employment, housing, education, and physical health among other things; and more recently, as discussed in previous chapters, researchers have recognized that criminal justice system contact may exert important impacts on romance, dating, cohabitating, and marriage. As research amasses on the wide reach of the criminal justice system, how the system's expansive nature shapes the most intimate relationships remains an especially fertile area of inquiry.

In particular, work designed to understand how criminal stigma shapes decision-making related to romantic relationships is gradually growing (Evans, 2019; Evans & Vega 2020). For example, prior explorations of criminal stigma and romance focus on how married couples navigate a present incarceration or re-entry or on how offending impacts a relationship dissolution (Apel, 2016). The growing research centered on romantic prospects and criminal histories, including research presented in earlier chapters of this dissertation work, has largely utilized quantitative methods of analyses. Such research plays important roles in aggregating extensive data sets, illuminating broad trends, and identifying phenomena deserving of closer analysis. As mass-incarceration is itself a phenomenon of numbers—very large numbers—quantitative methods offer crucial tools for studying even highly personal and individualistic situations, such as the intimate and romantic relationships. Seeking greater insights into human subjectivity, however, this chapter, however, departs from the previous chapters and other work

that relies on quantitative data to provide a qualitative exploration of how people think about and orient to stigma born of criminal justice system contact as they assess the suitability of others as prospects for romantic, sexual, cohabitation, and committed partner relationships. Using interview and focus group data, the analysis presented in this chapter adds layers of contextualization to patterns identified in previous chapters, such as inconsistency in daters' responses to system contact of potential matches and differences in the way criminal stigma impacts romantic relationships in the context of violent versus non-violent histories. In particular, it qualitatively examines how daters understand and navigate: (1) the spaces they inhabit in the context of their daily lives, which can constrain and enable zones of romance, especially in terms of the shape the pool of available partners; (2) the implicitly and explicitly stated ideal of stability, in contrast to precarity, and all that is perceived to flow from it; (3) the real and imagined injection of violence in relationships as both a general and particular concern; (4) the role of parental status in general and parenthood in particular as related to romantic perspectives, (5) the expressed need for transparency in terms of assessing the likelihood of future offending behavior juxtaposed with a waning willingness of non-involved partners to maintain some responsibility for their partners' experiences with the system, and (7) the importance of redemption and second chances where suitable. These considerations, my research shows, loom large in the meaning making and attendant decision-making associated with the formation of romantic, sexual, and cohabitating partnership. As such, they elucidate ways in which collateral consequences of criminal justice system involvement in romantic relationships are highly mediated by complexities of individuals and specific relationship circumstances, yet also potentially pervasive in the sense of their capability to exerting impact along myriad dimensions and across multiple temporal stages of relationships.

Review of Literature

Criminal Stigma

In the United State, almost two million people are incarcerated while four million are under some sort of supervision (e.g., probation or parole) (Kluckow & Zeng, 2022). Furthermore, in 2019, over 10 million people were arrested (Crime in the United States, 2019). Numbers like these, coupled with a voluminous literature that interrogates the consequences of these dramatic statistics, tell a story: the reach of the criminal justice system is expansive and its unprecedented growth has led to an array of negative consequences for individuals who experience criminal justice contact and as a result experience various forms of stigmatization.

Much has been written about the stigma of a criminal record or incarceration history, ranging from the micro-level treatments of a spoiled identity to the structural forms of labeling (Goffman, 1963; Stone, 2016). Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualize stigma as the interplay of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination, also noting that stigma is enacted in a power structure whereby the individuals who hold the most enact stigma towards the marginalized group: in terms of this dissertation's research, examples of these respective groups might include daters with no prior history of criminal justice contact and daters with a history of prior criminal justice contact. Stigmatization has real effects on individuals' access to opportunities and life outcomes (Middlemass, 2017; Pager, 2003; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). Criminal justice contact has categorical consequences on economic, financial, social, and cultural realms—and increasingly public digital criminalization patterns can amplify and expand these consequences (Lindsay, 2022; Quillian et al., 2020; Smith, 2019). While research on impacts on system-involved individuals' personal lives is ongoing, my research and others shows effects on their status on the romantic marketplace (Comfort, 2003; Lageson, 2017).

Romantic encounters and relationships vary in their origin, duration, and level of commitment. Relationship science has devoted a burgeoning catalog of scholarship to understand not only who we are attracted to and why (Schwartz, 2013), but also what propels us from casual, less committed encounters to long-term enduring relationships that may or may not result in cohabitation and/or marriage. Moreover, relationship trends have undergone a shift with an increase in cohabitation and long-term partnerships (Horowitz, Graf, & Livingston, 2019).

The stain of criminal stigma on romantic relationships has been shown to essentially transmit to the respective partner who may have no direct criminal justice contact, otherwise considered ‘courtesy stigma’ (Goffman, 1963). A recent study that interrogated the potential ‘courtesy stigma’ that partners of incarcerated men face, and how such stigma is managed, revealed techniques that allowed partners to retain a sense of autonomy over their romantic life and decision-making, such as avoiding interactions with friends and family or focusing on the benefits of their relationships (DeShay et al., 2021). Significantly, criminal stigma is racialized in romantic prospects (Evans, 2019; Evans & Vega, 2020). The research on courtesy stigma is of particular significance in the context of this study because the demonstrated transmission of criminal stigma to other people may well influence how daters approach or experience relationships with those marked by system involvement. While there is evidence of a causal relationship between system contact and online dating outcomes, there is clearly a need for more qualitative research to further unpack how criminal histories are perceived and navigated and, therefore, how criminal stigma, including courtesy varieties, shapes individuals’ romantic lives.

The previously presented quantitative findings invite further examination of the nuances of criminal justice contact on romantic encounters and relationships. For example, evidence based in previous chapters raises the possibility that daters may have different standards for

different romantic touchpoints, but does not allow us further insight into when or why. For instance, when romantic encounters are casual in nature, do daters tend to place less value on disclosing a prior criminal history? Does if, when, and how a potential or current dating discloses a history of system involvement matter for daters? More, are there age differences in how criminal stigma shapes romantic prospects and encounters? Do younger daters may privilege concerns over others differently than older daters? Further, does the presence of children complicate how potential prospects with criminal histories are factored into daters' lives? Qualitative answers to such questions, which arise from analysis of survey data discussed in previous chapters, may offer crucial information about how criminal stigma operates in romantic and intimate interpersonal relationships across a variety of real-world situations. Additionally, the qualitative context may shed more light on how our environments are shaping our pool of available partners such that people of color are more inclined to romantically connect with others who have criminal histories than non-minorities. Furthermore, repeating past behavior that led to criminal justice contact may push or pull daters in romantic relationships. Finally, the nuances of violence or recidivism may complicate how daters consider potential prospects.

In consideration of the brief literature review, this chapter explores participant attitudes and beliefs towards the presence of prior criminal histories. Using semi-structured interviews and focus group data, the chapter adds depth to the quantitative analyses that focus on romantic prospects and criminal stigma. By beginning to chart an understanding of how attitudes towards criminal histories impact perceptions of romantic suitability, this chapter (1) reveals how environments map zones of romance and the accompanying level of exposure to romantic prospects with prior criminal justice contact, (2) unpacks how daters avoid precarity through seeking various markers of stability, (3) explores how violence may present a threat to daters'

quest for stability, (4) provides a foundational understanding to how parents may shift their perspective on romance or make concessions in the name of their children, (5) speaks to how participants regard a sense of agency where disclosure was concerned, (6) illuminates how fears of recidivism may be connected to issues of caretaking roles non-involved partners sometimes play in relationships and (7) deepens the discussion of redemption in romantic relationships and bridges the gap between the abstract idea of redemption and extending that redemption to potential romantic partners.

Methods

Study Purpose and Research Question

This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of daters' perspectives and experiences with romantic encounters in situations in which a potential partner has criminal justice contact and attendant stigma. A qualitative analysis of focus group data and in-depth interviews augments and elaborates on the quantitative findings presented in previous chapters. Focus group data provides rich information in diverse cultural settings and brings out discussions that may not arise in individual interviews (Culley et al., 2007; Kidd & Parshall, 2000) while interview data has the distinct advantage of allowing for more depth in descriptions of experiences and events, as well as disclosures that might not take place in a group setting.

Drawing on both types of qualitative data, I provide an in-depth examination of how criminal justice contact can impact the progression of romantic arrangements and entanglements. By analyzing participants' experiences and perceptions of romantic partners with criminal contact, this study reveals how daters assess the suitability of a potential partner. I also expand the literature on romantic relationships and stigmatization by exploring what participants proffer

as foundational values that matter for determining partner suitability, which sheds light on how criminal contact may indicate a diverge in values for whom and about what.

Participants and Procedures

Focus group and interview recruitment and data collection were ongoing from April 2022 to May 2023. Sample daters were first alerted to the opportunity to participate in focus groups and interviews after completing the survey utilized in earlier chapters. Interested parties were invited to contact the Project Investigator (“P.I.”). Given challenges and vulnerabilities for individuals who have experienced criminal justice contact, in addition to recruiting through the survey, participants were recruited using a snowball sampling strategy that relied on their social media presence and social contacts, and greater networks embedded within their respective communities.

Upon making contact with the P.I., participants were then encouraged to reach out to their personal networks for further dissemination of the study information via text message, email, and/or social media. Snowball sampling is well-suited for hard-to-reach populations such as people who are formerly incarcerated who may be reluctant to participate in social science research. Further, the project requires inquiring about potentially sensitive topics (i.e., sexual affairs, dating, criminal history, etc.) that potential participants may be more willing to discuss in the context of a study if they are referred by someone in their personal network whom they trust. All participants were screened to meet the straightforward study eligibility criteria: 18 years or older and a resident of either the State of Michigan or California. Participants were asked to consent to audio recording for purposes of later transcription and were assigned pseudonyms.

Eight focus groups were conducted with 40 daters living within the State of Michigan. Focus group participants ranged in age from 18 to 57, with an average of 33.18 years of age. In

total, there were 25 women (63%), 15 men (38 %) in the focus groups. The focus group participants were overwhelmingly Black, comprising 70% of sample participants. While two groups (Focus Groups 4 and 6) included only women, most included a mixture of participants with respect to gender and age. Due to the nature of snowball recruitment, focus group composition comprised primarily of participants with shared history, familial connections, or mutual friends. The focus groups were rife with familiarity and a relaxed humor that made discussions of difficult and personal perspectives and experiences more relaxed and therefore fruitful.

With ongoing impacts from the Coronavirus pandemic, focus groups were constrained by the need to maintain social distance and thus held in private rooms or pre-arranged outdoor venues that allowed for maximum privacy. Each focus group was held with a mandate of masking in a local union hall, private dining area, or if requested, outside at a local park to mitigate the use of face masks. Further, due to the pandemic restrictions, the focus group size was limited to a maximum of 8 participants. Due to these P.I.-imposed safety constraints, the focus group sizes varied from three to six (Guest et al., 2016). Table 1 shows the demographics of focus group participants.

As the P.I., I created a focus group guide to structure the discussion while allowing for spontaneous detours. At the outset of each focus group, participants were asked to discuss their general concerns when it comes to romantic relationships. As the conversation opened up and participants were dialoguing, the questions turned to considerations of romantic encounters and relationships with individuals who have varied levels of criminal justice contact. For instance, participants were asked to discuss what criminal behaviors would automatically exclude a potential partner from romantic consideration for everything from casual sex to cohabitating

relationships that may lead to marriage. When participants posed their own questions, I allowed the conversation to shift without interruption, and then redirected back to questions that were in the scope of the study. The focus group conversations ranged in duration from 46:11 minutes to 2:56:37 minutes.

Twenty semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with daters living within the State of Michigan. Each interview took place in a private setting selected by the interviewees. Interviewees were recruited in multiple ways, initially following the completion of the survey featured in earlier chapters. Participants were also recruited at focus groups and using the P.I.'s social media networks, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Interview participants ranged in age from 23 to 49, with 11 women (55%), 9 men (45%) interviewed. Of those interviewed: Twelve identified as Black (60%), six identified as White (30%). The sample included nine participants with children (45%). Interview durations ranged from 36:17 to 2:34:15 minutes; on average the in-depth interviews lasted for one hour. Table 13 shows the demographics of the interview participants.

The interviews were structured around an interview guide that began with me asking the participants to detail any “red flags” or warning signs they look for when interacting with potential romantic partners. As the conversation shifted from a broad discussion of romantic relationships, the issue of criminal justice contact was introduced, and interviewees were then asked a series of questions such as “How often is it that you encounter romantic prospects with any criminal history?” and “Are there any deal breakers in terms of criminal labeled behavior that would lead you to reject someone who has a criminal history?” The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure participants’ authentic voices were captured.

Analytic Strategy

At the close of each interview or focus group, I completed field notes and memos to identify emerging themes. I analyzed and coded all interviews within Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, using standard procedures for analyzing interview and focus group data. I employed a flexible coding scheme, initially using index codes to capture parts of interviews and focus groups related to the research questions, allowing for more focused subsequent rounds of coding and familiarization with the data (Deterding & Waters, 2021). At this initial stage, participants' narratives were assigned a code in the margins of each group transcript, based on categories such as participants' evaluations of daters at various moments of romantic progression, general attitudes towards criminal contact, and specific suitability expectations and experiences with criminal contact, which were then grouped and retitled. For example, the circumstances in which participants would decline to progress with a romantic encounter because of criminal contact were compared across various interactions along the relationship continuum: casual sexual affairs, casual dating without a mutual commitment, a committed relationship, and engagement and beyond. Then, I focused coding on whether, when, and how topics emerging in focus group diverged or mirrored those that arose in interviews and triangulated those data sources. Using a combination of focus groups and interviews improved the richness of the data and allowed for a more comprehensive view of how individuals may differ in a group versus individual context where romantic relationships and criminal stigma are concerned; thus, adding a level of richness to the phenomena discussed through triangulation of the data (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). This process of combining small group conversations with structured interviews, I think, captured elements of the ways romantic encounters are often mediated by social conversations with others (e.g., friends, families, coworkers) as well as more individual and personalized venues for reflection.

Next, the data analysis software was used to highlight these index codes and view the broader contexts in which they were embedded, while applying descriptive or open codes to these focused transcript sections. This process involved using the interview and focus group guides as an a priori index coding device to capture sections of transcripts where participants discussed concerns about relationships, attractive qualities and traits, anxieties around histories of criminal contact, mitigating circumstances to experiences of criminal contact, and consequences of criminal contact.

Results

The Environment of Urban Space for Black People

To situate and unpack the ways in which the individuals in this study think about criminal histories, first one must understand the environments in which they live. Some respondents lived in urban metropolitan areas, like Detroit, Michigan, whereas others reside in the surrounding suburbs, like Troy, Michigan, and reported different levels of exposure to potential partners who have criminal justice contact. These patterns suggest what I call a *racialization of urban space* where daters are constrained to potential partners as a consequence of their urban environments, and these constraints can be seen across racial lines both in and outside of urban areas. For instance, Detroit has a population of roughly 620,000. The city of Detroit is fairly economically deprived, with a household median income shy of \$35,000 and almost one-third (32%) of its citizens living below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau 2022). The vast majority of the city's residents are Black (78%) or White (13%) (United States Census Bureau 2022). Detroit is also known for its crime headlines; in fact, in 2019, the city's violent crime rate (516.9) was almost 1.5 times the national average (366.7) (Crime in the United States, 2019). Compared to the city of Detroit, Troy, Michigan, a suburb approximately 20 miles away has a population of

over 87,000 and boasts a household median income over \$100,000 with just 5% of residents living under the poverty line (United States Census Bureau 2022). Troy is also demographically different, with the majority of residents being White (68%) or Asian (26%). More, the violent crime rate in Troy was recently reported to be 1.21 per 100,000 residents.

Flint, Michigan, smaller than Detroit with a population of under 80,000, has a household median income of roughly \$32,000 (United States Census Bureau 2022). Black individuals comprise over one-half (57%) of the Flint population and White people make up over one-third (35%). Like Detroit, Flint's 2019 violent crime rate (579.7) far outpaces the national rate (366.7) (Crime in the United States, 2019). Saginaw, Michigan, albeit smaller than both Detroit and Flint, is similarly situated in some respects. Saginaw's population is approximately 43,000 with Black residents making up 45% while White individuals make up approximately 42% of the city's residents. In stark contrast, Midland, Michigan, a smaller town north Saginaw/Flint areas boasts a crime rate of 142.3, well below the national average in 2019 (Crime in the United States, 2019). Midland has a population of just roughly 45,000 residents. Almost 90% of Midland residents are White. The median household income is over \$67,000 and over 10% of residents are below the poverty line (Crime in the United States, 2019).

Where individuals reside, this research underscores, shapes their options of what constitutes a suitable partner, from which they make assessments and selections in the dating market. Some respondents identified how the nature of their neighborhoods meant they were more likely to encounter people who had a criminal history than not. Interestingly, primarily Black respondents reported a common pattern of encountering potential partners with a criminal history and thus criminal justice system contact. Karina, a 42-year-old Black woman from

Saginaw who has a husband serving his second prison sentence in their 7-year marriage and hails from an inner-city area, describes her exposure:

Well, my contact with people who been locked up, it's been just the type of society I was around, you know what I'm saying? Even from my father, you know. It's just more our culture really, you know what I'm saying. Like it was nothing I could do about it. You know, that's just the life that that I was brought up in and around. Whether it was family or not, a neighborhood, a school, you know what I'm saying? That was just what I seen when I walked out the door, in my home, or when I go to my friend's house, or I go to a family member house, when I got to relationships, you know what I'm saying - this type of lifestyle they live, you know, even though some of them may not have went to jail when I was with them, they may have been to jail or prison before.

Hallie a 34-year-old single Black woman from Flint recounts, *"All of my boyfriends have had some criminal contact. I've never dated a man who didn't honestly."* These responses reflect that daters in urban areas navigating the relationship continuum might consider it as normal that this endeavor will necessarily include coming into contact with potential partners who have system contact. Katie, a 28-year-old mother commented on being with someone who has a troubled past, *"I feel like it's just like, troubled men are just it's like, a dime a dozen. You know, very few because people still get to this point without some trouble in their past."* Karina's statement, which was echoed by others in the focus groups and interviews, reflects the pervasive nature of the criminal justice system. Certainly, the criminal justice system has been estimated to reach 73 million people for felonious arrests, while 13 million misdemeanor cases are filed annually in the United States (Clark, 2017; Gross, 2019). More, within the U.S., almost four million people are on probation or parole while almost two million individuals are incarcerated

in a state or federal prison or local jails (Kluckow & Zeng, 2022). Thus, a general assumption that the porous nature of the criminal justice system naturally would touch and concern one's intimate and romantic life makes statistical sense in these contexts.

Respondents expressed how the living environment contextualizes their romantic relationship trajectories. Karina, who has been married seven years, during which time her husband has been home for a total of two years, discusses her husband's past and upbringing:

I always wanted them to get a job and leave the hustle alone, but knowing where they came from, I understood. I always feel that you can have hope and people could change. Especially him. But he was raising his brothers and sisters by himself. He made a lot of sacrifices for his family. Like what was he supposed to do, his mom left him out there. He had to figure it out and he was surrounded by family that was on drugs, in a neighborhood that [was] where they were selling drugs, and given no real direction. At the time all you know is in this second, I got to survive, we're not about to be put in a home, none of us got to be separated, we in this together. It's what he had to deal with, like really.

Other sample daters discussed the normative pressures others may face in their neighborhoods.

Aaliyah, a 25-year-old Black woman from Detroit describes her experience:

I feel like a lot of the people that I grew up with, you know, a good amount of them are going to have some type of contact. Yeah. Like, I feel like where we grew up, it wasn't the roughest parts, but I feel like, I don't know, some of them do have chips on their shoulders and something to prove. And it's funny, I was thinking about this the other day, where I grew up, it's like a lot of people I went to school with who went that way – they could have really avoided this...but we grew up around that.

Men in the sample reported similar conditions. Tobias, 36-year-old Black man from Flint who is in an on-again-off-again relationship with his partner who was on the run for theft and tax crimes, explains, “*Growing up it was more common to meet people who have a history [that includes criminal justice system contact], because I didn’t have a choice. We were really in the jungle, and it just was what it was. Now I distance myself from all that.*”⁵ Likewise, Tim, a 30-year-old Black gay man from Detroit, responded to inquiries of whether it was common to encounter daters with a criminal history thusly: “*It’s probably a lot more than men who don’t have any criminal history... I mean, I deal with a lot of Black men, and we tend to have those kinds of histories.*”

As respondents detailed their prior experiences and attitudes, reflexivity sometimes manifested. As Karina, a Saginaw resident, explained, “*Honestly, that's what I grew up around. Honestly, no man I’ve been with actually had a legit job, they were all hustlers.*” Hallie, a single mother who returned to Flint to keep her children close to their father who was formerly incarcerated comments, reported: “*Damn, I never even thought about it, but it’s just a result of shit...growing up around here, I’ve only been with dudes with records. But I have one myself, shit, so who am I to judge?*”

In contrasts to the voices presented thus far, non-Black respondents who grew up in or are living in different environments, reported some exposure to criminal histories but these contacts were, on the whole, relatively few and far between. Billie (Focus Group 5), a 33-year-old white woman from Troy could only recall, “*Other than like, MIPs [Minor in Possession], DUIs [Driving under the Influence] or something like possession of weed, I don’t really know of*

⁵ Women's involvement in all aspects of the criminal justice system increased dramatically. As an example, since 1990, the number of female defendants convicted of felonies in state courts has grown at more than twice the rate of increase for male defendants. Additionally, women’s incarceration has grown at twice the pace of men’s incarceration in recent decades and has disproportionately been located in local jails (Kajstura & Sawyer, 2023).

anyone with the wild stuff in their history.” Ruth, a White, 35-year-old married woman from Midland, Michigan whose father was a correctional officer in a maximum-security prison for 20 years shared this:

So, I haven't had that kind of encounter with anyone romantically, but it's Midland you know? (laughs) But also the amount of pressure that was put on me from my dad because of what he did and who he was...he would have been like "I hate this person. It makes me look bad at my job.”

Similarly, Katie, a 28-year-old White woman also from Midland says, *“I mean, I see driving with suspended licenses and maybe a few DUIs, but it's such a small town, honestly it's not common really.”* Likewise, Cynthia, a Korean American woman from Troy commented, *“Beyond like DUIs, I've never romantically encountered someone with anything more serious.”*

Research has made clear that minorities are no stranger to the criminal justice system, people of color are dramatically overrepresented in the nation's prisons and jails. These racial disparities are particularly stark for Black Americans, who make up 38% of the incarcerated population despite representing only 12% of U.S residents (Kajstura & Sawyer, 2023). This is consequential for the larger contexts in which people who participated in this research exist and make sense of their dating options; the experiences they report are shaped by a keen awareness of the pool of available partners with varying degrees of criminal justice contact. Having an understanding of the context of racialized urban spaces and how these spaces are the context with which daters navigate a pool of available partner who may or may not have criminal justice contact provides a framing for understanding the instrumentality of stability and concerns about its opposite, precarity, in daters worldviews and decision-making processes.

The Pursuit of Opportunity and Stability and Avoidance of Precarity

A consistent and profound theme emerging from both the interview and focus group data is the salience of an instrumental consideration related to the pursuit of stability and opportunity and the avoidance of precarity. Participants raised concerns about potential partners (and sometimes actual prior partners) with a history of criminal justice contact the centered on the threat of involvement hindering their personal goals, especially goals related to income, employment, and even children. Participants reasoned that by proxy of their partner's potential inabilities to secure access to certain opportunities, their personal access to the same opportunities would be diminished. Avoiding the precarity of instability sustained by poor earning power or employment prospects particularly mattered for younger people.

Younger participants discussed criminal contact as largely a deterrent to romantic connections in these terms. Simone (Focus Group 6), a single 23-year-old, described ending a casual dating relationship with someone who was arrested and subsequently sentenced to eight years in prison, *"He was super sweet to me, a good dude. But he's locked up that's why we're not talking anymore. He doesn't have my number and I don't have a way to get it to him so it works out."* Zen (Focus Group 6), a single 18-year-old who just graduated high-school, was adamant that criminal contact was a non-starter, *"Having no criminal history is the only acceptable thing to me. Because like, you can't get a good job with one and I don't want to be nobody who can't match me or can't get a job."* Younger respondents spoke about stability as a key marker of a relationship and what expressed concerns about what criminal justice contact of a partner might mean for their own stability. Bianca (Focus Group 6), 23-year-old, single explained,

Me personally, no, and the only reason why I would say that is when it comes to stability and having a good job. You're not going to get a job all the time having a record and I'm not going to be the person to settle for that. Not that it makes you a bad person or nothing

you know, because everybody makes mistakes. But it's a lot of people that can't get a good job because they have felonies you know -no matter if its fraud or whatever drugs, guns, whatever it is like you can't get a good job if you got a felony so I'm not going to limit myself to be with you.

Similarly, younger respondents expressed concern about how a potential partner may reacclimate to conditions that, in turn, frustrate accessing opportunities. Naomi (Focus Group 8), a single 24-year-old has casually dated men who have had heavy contact with the criminal justice system commented, explained it this way:

When they get out, it's hard for them to get back into a groove...institutionalized type shit. No thank you. And they likely can't even get a job if they did something like armed robbery. Maybe they can be a greeter at Walmart.

For younger daters like Naomi, there is an expressed apprehension and attendant rigidity related to dating people with a criminal justice record because of the assessed associated financial pitfalls that one might face.⁶

Younger respondents were more entrenched in their attitudes towards potential partners with criminal justice contact, in general, compared to older daters in the sample. When a focus group turned to the consequences of coupling with someone who has criminal justice contact, Yara (Focus Group 8), another 18-year-old said: *"If I met someone and they told me they were facing time, I'm out. I got a life to live. Really, you shouldn't be talking to me."* Elaborating, Yara

⁶ Classic and contemporary research has shown that criminal justice contact indeed diminishes employment opportunities. Pager's classical investigation found that employers use criminal records as a method of screening applicants and that in half of the cases, employers were unwilling to consider equally qualified applicants on the basis of their criminal record. Lindsay's (2022) contemporary extension of Pager focused on credentials obtained in prison aimed at successful reentry and reintegration similarly found that criminal stigma was still a prominent force in determining employment outcomes with applicants without incarceration histories having more success than applicants with prison credentials (Lindsay, 2022).

(Focus Group 8), commented: “What am I going to do with someone looking at 30 years, I want to have kids someday.” She elaborated:

You can't get anything from me if you broke, like I'm not dealing with nobody that's broke, you got to have something to do with your life. Also I want you to have ambition like you got to have ambition. Okay, I really should just say ambition like I don't like how guys always talking about they want to be a gangbangers, like you don't want to start a business?

Victoria (Focus Group 8), 18-years-old expressed, “I'd feel like I'm settling. Maybe if that person is the last option on earth, then I'll do it. But really, I'll keep looking. I know it's obviously better out there. I don't care how long I got to wait.” Naomi (Focus Group 8), 24, put it succinctly, “You got to put your life on hold a lot when they have criminal issues and why would I do that at this point in my life?”

Tellingly, dialogue between the younger respondents in Focus Group 6 revealed different attitudes in the 18-year-old compared to the 23-year-old respondents, when discussing potential partners who may have theft-related contact in their history,

PI: “So what about something like robbery?”

Zen, 18: “Oooh, no goodbye!”

Simone, 23: “Well...they didn't rob me! (group laughs)”

Bianca, 23: “It depends on if you robbed a person. It depends on if you robbed a bank, or did you rob a person?”

Zen, 18: “What type of people are you?! (group laughs)”

Bianca, 23: “Listen, Life is hard. (laughs)”

Simone, 23: *“Girl come talk to us when you can buy a drink at the bar or have a baby, it’s hard out here shit (laughs).”*

One might anticipate that younger respondents would express more understanding of potential partner having a history of criminal contact given that more than half of the nation’s jail population comprised of ages 18-34 (Minton & Zeng, 2021). Yet younger respondents expressed more ingrained attitudes about criminal justice contact in general, rejecting potential mates with a history. The respondents’ articulations reveal that these daters view criminal histories as threats to stability and link such histories with certain markers of instability that threaten later opportunity structures, such as housing, employment, and income. But conversations such as the one excerpted above also suggest that for some people, this heuristic might change relatively quickly in some settings (“it’s hard out here”), as people encounter more system-involved people as they progress through early adulthood.

In comparison, older daters in the sample conveyed a more open-mind stance, while still expressing hesitation towards more serious romantic relationships with others who have criminal histories. Alexis (Focus Group 7), a 39-year-old single mother of two who is currently casual dating, explains that what matters to her is stability:

Stability is big to me but like in the form of reachable goals. Because a lot of motherfuckers got aspirations and goals but if your shit is so far out in left field, that it’s going to be like two decades getting there. I’m almost forty-plus. I can’t do it. Like no old ass rappers over here (group laughs).

Tai, a 48-year-old self-described ‘retired drug dealer’ who recently moved from New York to Michigan, discusses what concerns him when considering a potential partner with a criminal history,

Just stability, like stability...and that's it, that goes into emotions, knowing yourself, it's more than finances, you see? I got that. Just everything like, you know what I mean? You need to know who you are before you get here to me. If you're trying to figure out yourself as you're trying to figure it out with me, we're both going to be confused.

Some respondents discussed their adolescent and young adult life experiences and how their attitudes, especially regarding stability versus precarity, are informed by those experiences. Sasha (Focus Group 3), a 42-year-old who shares a 24-year-old daughter with a man who served time, discussed the eventual dissolution of their relationship as he began his incarceration 22 years ago,

I was kind of weaning off of him anyways because he just I mean, you're young and you don't always pick the right person you know (laughs). As you start to get older you realize more what you want to do and who you want to be with, and for me that wasn't just the rowdiness and street stuff like that. No thanks.

Clearly, daters consider access to certain opportunities, such as employment, higher incomes, or even emotional balance in calculations around dating. As they do so, they imbue a consideration with a marker of the sought-after stability.

The Prospect of Violence as an Actual and Potential Threat to Stability

Notably, an important—and in some ways related—consideration participants discussed in broader conversations outlining the value of stability is the threat of violence as revealed via a history of criminal justice. The threat of violence was a profound consideration for many respondents in the focus groups and interviews. In one sense, consideration of the meaning of a potential or actual partner's history of violence raised concerns about the injection of disruption and chaos through more violence, and thus the loss of stability. For some respondents,

relationships in the past were brought to an end because a violent history introduced an element of danger. For instance, Sasha's (Focus Group 3), who is in a six-year relationship with her daughter's father that marked with violence, explained how violence caused her retreat. She details her wishes to get out of the relationship as she faced threats of violence,

He went to jail, and I was so glad I prayed that man out of my life. I'm like 'Jesus, please take him away, now don't kill him though!' because he was in the streets, like he was just in the streets, like with the fighting and shooting and stuff like that. Like I was in my apartment, and we were having to sleep on the floor and told don't walk by the windows. I'm just like 'What are you doing?!' and I knew that I'm not about this life. I don't I'm not about this. No ma'am I'm not about this.

In present day, Sasha (Focus Group 3), expressed that where criminal justice contact is concerned, violence was deal breaker for her:

A no go for me is anything violent, I don't have time to figure out who was the aggressor or none of that, it's just a no for me! (laughs) If you went away for some type of violence it's a no, if you went away for some type of molestation it's a no, if you went away for some type of murder, like you know you killed somebody, no! Like what happened?!

For others, the prospect of romantic encounters and relationships with individuals who have violent criminal histories was a deterrent because such incidents were against people rather than qualifying as victimless crimes. Mia, who was in a relationship with someone for six years who had multiple instances of criminal justice contacts due to drug addiction, commented: *"I think if it was drug charges, I'd be less concerned but like sexual assault, domestic violence, or like, multiple drunk driving incidents, like that's putting other people at risk too and I can't do*

that." Similarly, some focus group respondents like Brittany and Nala, expressed similar attitudes:

Brittany: Any bodily violence to other people. Rape, molestation of other people is a no for me.

Nala: That shit is a deal breaker. I don't want no parts of you.

Similarly, Carter, a 36 -year-old single father who recently ended his 10-year relationship with the mother of his son, explained that self-defense is not context dependent for him, *"Still, I don't care if it's self-defense or you just murdered somebody, if you murder somebody, you murdered somebody."*

A particularistic threat of victimization was raised frequently by respondents when considering a potential partner who has prior criminal justice contact marked by violence. Daters viewed an individual's history of criminal justice contact as evidence of their propensity to do harm. Max, a 39-year-old white man who prior to the interview had not been on a date in almost a year despite actively using dating apps, commented,:

PI: "So are you open at all to women with any history of violence like armed robbery, simple assault, or even domestic violence?"

Max: "Probably not."

PI: "What would be your concern?"

Max: "Well if there's violence, a violent history, there's probably some kind of anger in their history. They can't control their emotions. I'm guessing somehow. And also, I don't want to get beat up. (laughs)...but seriously, I don't. So yeah, I'm definitely going to be looking for a way to get out of any date with a woman who tells me that."

Echoing concerns about intimate partner violence, Brittany (Focus Group 1), who lost her brother to violence this year, comments,

If you got a brother and he was going to go on date with someone that you know killed their husband, even in self-defense, would you really hook her up with your brother? Now I might hook her up with somebody else but not my brother! We really don't know what really happened. She a killer, she can kill him too! (laughter).

For Chloe, a 32-year-old woman who has been single for a decade and occasionally dates, a history marked with violence was a deal breaker for any serious relationship. She explains this in light of her childhood:

If it [their criminal history] was violent, I wouldn't give them that second chance in terms of a relationship...for me I just see my whole childhood. I wouldn't want who is going to get angry and beat me up. I'm good. Yeah, I'm good. And the way my anger is set up, I might lie back and kill you in your sleep. I just had to put up with so much for so long. If I ever had the opportunity to defend myself. I think I would really defend myself.

Mia, a single 28-year-old domestic violence advocate, describes it this way: "Something like domestic violence and theft are deal breakers, like you might be in my house. I guess I don't want anyone who steals, so like a thief. Or hurting animals or me, like get the hell out of here."

These and other study participants refer to a concern with the threat of being a bystander victim of violence because of being with someone who has such a history; this threat, for them, is a deterrent for even the most casual types of involvement. As Brittany (Focus Group 1), who had a prior relationship where she was susceptible to being a victim of violent crime due to then-

boyfriend's violent actions, succinctly explained: *"Violent crime is really off the table. I mean someone could have shot someone and then come lay with me and now I'm a target."*⁷

In sharp contrast, for some participants, a history of violent criminal justice contact could be contextualized in ways that militate against threats of future violence. Oakley, who has a prior domestic violence charge from an encounter with an ex-girlfriend he discovered was unfaithful, describes his attitude towards potential romantic mates with a history of criminal justice contact stemming from domestic violence incidents:

PI: Do you equate a woman had a domestic violence case or armed robbery case in her history with her morality? Like her morals or ethics? Are you like making that connection?

Oakley: I wouldn't not deal with her because of something like a domestic because you can be baited into a domestic. Hell, you can actually leave a domestic situation and still get a charge. I know from experience...Domestic violence can be just a reaction.

When pressed about what factors would make a history marked with violence acceptable, sample daters expressed age and time since incidents as positive contextualizing information. Chloe, who identifies as pansexual, described her thinking this way:

So maybe if it happened when they were like really young, and they've grown up yeah, maybe when they were like a teenager and being young and stupid. So, before their frontal cortexes are even developed. But if they're out here, like a full-grown adult, like beating people up and stuff like we're grown, right? Yeah, no, it's called getting control your emotions, okay?

⁷ Interestingly these fears of victimization do not comport with national reports, the rate of victimization has fallen. Absent counts of simple assault, the rate of victimization in the country has dropped 15% from 2018 to 2019 in the country. Furthermore, there was no statistically significant change from the rate of domestic violence reported from 2018 to 2019 (Morgan & Truman, 2020).

Likewise, Mia, a single, 28-year-old domestic violence advocate, commented:

Yeah, time. If they did something violent like a length of time ago, like a long length of time, then maybe. I was like just looking back at like, Facebook memories for like, five to six years ago. I'm like, I'm different now, who says others aren't?

The aforementioned responses reveal a fear of violence and victimization at the hands of an intimate partner who has a history of violent criminal justice contact, but also suggest a limited understanding of the scope of intimate partner violence (IPV).⁸ Within these fears, daters were not expressing fear for just themselves, they were also afraid for their children, of repeated criminal offending, and lack of transparency. Additionally, participants varied in their attitudes toward extending second chances.

Abstract Connections and Particular Concerns: Parenthood, Disclosure, Recidivism and Caretaking, and Redemption

Quite often, both in the focus groups and interviews, dater's comments revealed connections around *abstract ideas that map onto particular concerns*. This refers to statements about values and beliefs that were not aligned with the daily doings of their lives; that is, respondents express abstract commitments and, at the same time, real time assessments and attendant decision-making, real and imagined. This often manifested when talking about children, disclosing one's past criminal history, recidivating back to criminal offending, and extending second chances to prospective partners who have a history of criminal justice contact. Thus, it is useful to further examine these topics.

⁸ Much of IPV research has made clear that violence is not solely physical despite focus group and interview participants concerns. Indeed, IPV can take many forms beyond physical aggression or harm; physical aggression (e.g., slapping, hitting, kicking), any sexual force, psychological abuse (e.g., intimidation, humiliation, etc.) or any other controlling behavior by a current or former partner or spouse is widely considered as violence against another (Bueso-Izquierdo et al., 2016). Nevertheless, criminal histories featuring violence were met with much more caution, with some daters expressing outright rejecting attitudes whereas other daters indicating a willing to consider the context of events that frame an individual's criminal history.

Parental Concerns. For participants with children, romantic relationships and encounters with individuals with a history of criminal contact were complicated. For some daters, their partner's crime involvement was tolerable for various reasons, including filling parental presence and income gaps for single parents. Luna (Focus Group 3), a 43-year-old mom of two who had a long-term relationship with someone who had multiple incarcerations for drug distribution, explains her initial attraction to his treatment of her then young son,

I didn't realize he was bringing in dope money. But just being younger and mainly, he treated my son in the way that I've deemed good. My son's father was not very present then. You know, I rolled with it at the time.

Luna's relationship did not thrive nor did her partner's fatherly influence. She details how her ex-partner's subsequent releases impacted her household with her son:

Every time. I'd have to like figure stuff out when he came home. He gets out and wants to be man of the house. Well, he tried to be but I'm the man of the house and then my son is the man of the house. You can't be if you're not consistent. It was getting on my damn nerves. Like, yeah okay now you need my car. You know, now you got to go do the night shift in my car to re-up and make money, then here come your friends, and the blunt smoking you know. Now you on tether. It was aggravating for me and my son, every time.

Likewise, Nala, a single mother who had her first daughter while in high school, expressed similar concern about going down the wrong path: *"I'll be honest, clearly, I was going down the wrong path back then. It was a struggle. That's really not a deal breaker, shit at that point you know back then my lifestyle, like it was just a hustle you know shit at least you got something. And frankly these men had that something, shit that money and they didn't mind sharing it....and I had daughters to care for. So, I was with it at first.*

Other respondents similarly citing parenthood to explain the dissolution of a prior relationship with someone who had criminal justice contact. Sasha (Focus Group 3), who left a six-year relationship with her daughter's father and high school sweetheart shortly after his incarceration, discussed how having her daughter in danger was an initial, but not final alarm,

Yeah, when we start sleeping on the goddamn floor because he had people looking for him, I was like, oh my god, my baby, I got my baby here like, what the fuck am I doing here? Like I don't want a man like this, where my daughter is sleeping on the floor because these people might come and shoot up the place, like no sir.

Sasha also discussed how her daughter's reaction to the incarceration was the motivating force to dissolve the relationship:

I took my daughter to the prison and that definitely turned me off. I never went again. I only went to see him one time and I took her with me...and you know just to see her in there was just awful. And she was little - but one day we were watching like this lock up show, I was watching, now I didn't think she was watching it now she's only like four - the show came home and it was a prison - like they had the wires and the gates - she started crying for her daddy. She knew the place. I said, oh no. I'm done.

For parent daters who had not engaged romantically with anyone who had prior criminal justice contact, their perceived attitudes were still shaped by their children. Bianca (Focus Group 6), a 23-year-old mother of one, commented on how becoming a parent shifted her perspective on potentially being with someone who has a criminal history,

I don't know. I guess I have matured more since I've had him. I just look at everything so differently. Like life in general, like, like, I appreciate it more...he made me mature more and want to actually do more stuff, because sometimes I want to do nothing, but I get up

for him, I try not to look at it like a burden though. And having him, I can't afford to fuck up and choose the wrong person. If you can't get a quality job, you can't build a solid foundation with us, for him. It's like, it's not just me. Shit, if was just me (laughs) maybe, but I got him now so yeah, no.

Respondents expressed concern about their children being exposed to others with serious criminal histories. As Brittany (Focus Group 1) succinctly explained:, *“It does make a difference you have children because you think about their safety and their needs.”* Similarly, as Pete, a father of one who was in a new relationship at the time of the focus group, dialogued with David, a married father of one, saying during Focus Group 1:

Pete: *“You got to show me you’re trustworthy and safe before I introduce you to my son. No exceptions. My girl didn’t meet my son until we had been together for almost a year.”*

David: *“I just would be worried about showing my kids that's the type of people I like and having them build their standards on what I taught them. I'd be a little worried about that. I don't want my son to see me bringing this woman in with this long track record and then he go get a woman with a longer track record and I'm like, "what are you doing?!"”⁹*

One might expect parents to express fears of their children being removed from their home if there are extensive issues with criminal contact. Instead, no such fears were raised among parents

⁹ Parental hesitation makes sense as research has commonly found that parental criminal justice contact, specifically incarceration, can lead to a host of antisocial behaviors. In fact, a meta-analysis of 40 studies on the children of incarcerated parents found that antisocial behaviors, including mental health issues and drug use were present more consistently than any other factors. Building upon the meta-analysis, another study examined the presence of multiple adverse childhood experiences children may face, including incarceration and found that the exposure to multiple adverse childhood experiences throughout development may put children at risk for severe depression and other issues that persist into adulthood, including substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and suicide attempts (Martin, 2017).

and Luna (Focus Group 3) posited a counterfactual: *"I never thought about my child taken away from me, not one time."*

Considerations Related to Full Disclosure. Many respondents raised the concept of full disclosure in situations where an individual's criminal history and dating are concerned. Daters' expressed desire to know if their romantic counterpart has some criminal justice contact is largely tied to their autonomy and ability to make informed decisions about who they romantically interact with. In other words, criminal justice system contact is salient enough for people to feel like they have a right to know about it in the context of dating. Although disclosure is vital to respondents across the board, exactly *when* daters needed to know about a potential mate's past varied.

Some daters in the sample were more adamant that they should know a partner's history immediately upon meeting. In Focus Group 6, the following discussion about disclosure took place:

Simone (23-year-old who began casually seeing someone before they were incarcerated):
"I need to know right away, as soon as we start talking. Like, 'Hey my name is Jerry but I went to jail for manslaughter in my past.'"

Naomi (24-year-old): *"Right, what if they have a history of sexual assault or like child molestation?"*

Zen (18-year-old): *"Yeah because I wouldn't want anything even casual with someone who is on the sex offenders list, like to fight their girl, or I got to worry about retaliation."*

A portion of respondents were more flexible in their disclosure requirements. As the exchange between Focus Group 1 participants Nala, a single 42 year old woman who recently re-

entered the dating scene after her youngest daughter graduated high-school, and Rachel, a 33-year old mom of two, and Brittany, 39, a married mother of two and her husband David, 43:

Nala: *"I mean it don't got to be the first date where you tell me you have some shit in your past."*

Rachel: *"Yeah because I might not even like you."*

Nala: *"Yeah, then ain't really no need to even get personal."*

Brittany: *"By the third date, I need to know!"*

Nala: *"By the third date if you ain't said nothing, you're trying to hide it."*

David: *"Second date for me because if I had a record or anything I would, if I thought it was some potential there yeah, I'd bring it up then so I expect the same."*

Even when others were even more relaxed in their disclosure requirements, they had time thresholds for when a partner with a history of criminal contact should be forthcoming. Megan (Focus Group 4), a 30-year-old woman in a new relationship, proclaimed: *"I think you should say something when you're actually getting serious, like actually committed."* For some respondents, transparency regarding the presence of a criminal history was linked to judgments of one's honesty and character. Below an exchange between Focus Group 3 reveals how "honesty" looms large:

Sasha: *"Nobody's perfect. Be honest about what you did,*

Luna: *"Yeah, let me know what I'm getting myself into."*

Sasha: *"You got a choice too!"*

Luna: *"Like don't omit the truth and don't hide the truth because I might not want to fuck with it and you don't have the right to put me in that situation."*

Sasha: *"Give me a choice in the matter. Exactly."*

One dater linked an individual's disclosure as a signal that their criminal history is just that, history. In Focus Group 1, David, a 43-year-old married man comments on daters failing to be forthcoming with their criminal history: *"I feel like telling the truth about it, mean that you're truly over it."*

Lack of immediate disclosure did not always spell doom for romance for a few daters. Karina's husband did not immediately disclose his history of criminal justice contact when they were in the beginning stages of their relationship. As she explained it:

I still didn't know anything about his past incarcerations until we started really getting to know one another and going on dates and stuff. But he was open and honest about everything as we got to know one another, and I appreciated that.

Likewise, Luna (Focus Group 3) reported a delay in disclosure related to her four-year relationship with someone who had multiple instances of criminal justice contact for drug distribution:

He told me that he was doing something else for a living and he was doing that something else but it wasn't bringing in the kind of cash he was bringing home...that dope money. For me, on my end, he was definitely a provider and a protector when he was home and I liked that and he would sell to like the corporate guys, a little bit of class about himself so he was showing me some different things that I wasn't used to...a different kind of lifestyle...small-minded me at the time.

These statements reflect a strong need for transparency and this makes sense, as for decades, psychologists and sociologists alike have held self-disclosure to be an important component of relationship construction (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Prager, 1995; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Concerns Surrounding Recidivism and Unequal Caretaking. A notable concern raised in the focus groups and interviews alike was the possibility of a potential partner with a history of criminal justice contact re-engaging in behaviors that resulted in prior criminal justice involvement. With these concerns of recidivism front and center, daters also took issue with their personal caretaking role in the relationship. Particularly, daters were exasperated with how caretaking manifested in their household.

Participants discussed the cyclical impacts of romantically coupling with someone who has repeated criminal justice contact. Luna's (Focus Group 3) description of a former relationship with a partner who repeatedly cycled through periods of incarceration is telling:

He sold drugs, keep in mind in my household. Okay, so whenever he would get locked up, then I would have to take care of everything, all the bills....and sell in the rest of the dope. Then you want me to come visit you when I'm already working third shift. You know, I dropped out of school so many times. And it was just like ridiculous like oh now when you get out you got to re-up the stash and start over. But now you got to sell this dope for this other guy for free. So now you're out and about, driving my car. It was just a mess and something I didn't need to go through, but I did. But it began to be a turnoff - like dude you need go.

Likewise, Aaliyah who ended an on-again/off-again relationship due to repeated incidents with the criminal justice system discussed how she felt navigating that cyclical relationship in the face of recidivism:

Yeah, so we kept in contact for a really long time. And then I just realized, like, "You know what, the path you're going on is just not the same path I'm going on. Like we was rocking for a little bit but you know now I'm looking at going to law school and I got, like

I can't be dealing with this. Especially if you're not leaving it. Like okay, sure. If you were doing it for a little bit and you were putting it behind, you that's different but if you're doing it for a little bit and you're not stopping and now I'm going to law school...like no. So, I told him like yeah this is a wrap... and I think my life would have been just keeping him out of trouble, honestly. Like, that's the thing, I feel like he used to always say, like, I was good influence on him, you know, like, maybe he didn't have it elsewhere. So, I feel like that kind of becomes, I don't want to use the word burden. But like, you know, like, being that person that is like the good influence to him...it's a lot. To be the person telling him, "You don't have to do this." And always encouraging him to do other things and making sure he's not out here, you know, cutting corners and I don't have time for that.

As a final example, Sasha (Focus Group 3), who left her child's father after he was incarcerated a second time, details the emotional weight of their relationship:

I was already done before he went to prison, but I mean it was almost like I felt bad for him...but he definitely told me, "Well if I don't have you and my daughter, I don't know what I'd be out here doing." All I could think was, 'Yeah? Well, me either!'" Like please put that on me. So now and you know guys can be, very manipulative. And so, I just had that burden like man, what if I break up with him and he you know, like, do something to himself or he get into trouble or he just be out here in the streets because he don't got us. So, when he went to prison, it was like a weight off my shoulder. It was like a huge weight, not even just from a relationship just on like, I'm not your Momma. I don't want to keep you out of trouble and guide you shit I'm trying to guide myself (laughs)! I never wanted that kind of life with a guy. I just wanted quiet, normal.

Related, some daters linked recidivism with a criminal justice involved person's level of judgment and their own susceptibility to that influence. Mia, a domestic violence advocate pursuing social work who ended a six-year relationship with her boyfriend in her early 20s after multiple instances of criminal justice contact due to drug use and possession, explains her issue with what she dubbed 'habitual offenders:

The constant in and out of trouble to me shows like a lack of good judgment. So like, when I met him he was on probation or parole for distributing lean and Adderall. Yeah. Always drug related stuff. But like now, two of the girls he's dated after me are dead from heroin overdoses, and they started using with him. So, I just look back on that like that could have been me.

An outlier, Karina, whose husband was incarcerated twice during their seven-year marriage, discussed how he recidivated and was subsequently incarcerated shortly after their relationship began:

Well, we met in January. I believe that was sometime in the summer, when he caught a case. It was a few months down the line like six months into us talking, and his house was actually raided. I got a call while leaving a community college class and at that point we weren't all the way committed. So, I was just like, 'I like this man, I got feelings for him, and I realized I had fell for him

Karina's husband is now serving time in a federal prison after recidivating again for possessing a firearm, he is slated to be released in 2028.¹⁰

¹⁰ Virtually all arrestees and prisoners eventually experience reentry (Wallace, 2020). Notably however, the body of research on desistance from "problem behavior" suggests that doing so results from a process involving an individual decision or motivating event (such as an accumulation of negative consequences), lifestyle changes, not limited to new social networks and new social roles (marriage, having a child, legitimate work), and social support (Laub & Sampson 2001; Visser & Travis, 2003).

Redemption. Finally, a notable abstract idea that was expressed in both interviews and focus groups was the concept of redemption¹¹ through “second chances.” From the point of view of some respondents, redemption here is attainable for certain potential partners. As Brittany (Focus Group 1) concludes, *“For most crimes I mean, not all because it’s some crimes you cannot come back from. But for most crimes, everybody deserves a chance to redeem yourself.”* The idea of criminal histories can raise much hesitation when romantic prospects have such histories marked by multiple points of criminal justice contact, violent incidents, or are just saddled with the enduring consequences of criminal justice contact, but some respondents discussed that there were still possible paths forward romantically. Some respondents even saw their partner’s history as a non-issue (now). Karina, who described her husband as a “habitual offender” stated:

You know, when you growing up you be thinking, “Okay, I’m gonna get out the struggle, move out the hood. I’m going to come out of this and meet a man, a businessman. Like I’m gonna to marry a man who wears those white collared shirts goes to work in some office everyday. But it was nothing like that. It don’t have to be that way...not for me anyway. But from day one, he stood by my side, he took me in when I was going through my darkest times.

Karina later details how she viewed her now husband after his arrest and incarceration during their dating period:

¹¹ Rooted in the religious idea of forgiving past sins, here redemption is defined as being ‘released’ from the mark of crime (Blumstein & Nakamura, 2009). To be ‘released’, the criminal justice involved person is considered free of any ill-repute and not any more subject to socially adverse outcomes than their non-criminal justice involved counterparts.

Like, it was crazy. Because my feelings were so deep. Like, I see potential in him. I loved how everything I had known about him before, everything I noticed that from January to that moment, it was all good to me...even though I knew about his lifestyle.

For others, first-hand experience with the criminal justice system shifted their perspective on others who become entangled in the same system. After having a direct experience, some participants acknowledged that they would be more inclined to at least consider a romantic prospect with a history of criminal contact now having felt the reach of the system. Jane, a 33-year-old White woman who has had four DUIs and spent \$10,000 on lawyers to avoid serving more jail time, reflected on her prior fears of others with criminal justice contact after her own experiences:

I think with my experience in the justice system, it's definitely made me you know, like when I was younger, I was afraid of people who had been to jail for anything beyond weed use. I mean, but going through the justice system and being treated the way I've been treated and going to fucking jail and just like going through some shit with police officers and all this kind of stuff. It just made me feel you know, because it's like so many people might get these charges I beat but the justice system is fucked up. So just because somebody has a fucking felony, I'm never going to judge you just for that. Like I need to know like, the situation, what actually happened, you know, like, I'm never going to judge someone just by you going to jail or prison. Before I'd been to jail before and had these encounters with police, I think I was more scared of that kind of thing. That if I'd met someone who had a criminal record probably would have scared me but now, I'm going to ask, 'Alright, what happened?'

Similarly, Zach (Focus Group 2), a 35-year-old man who ended a relationship with the mother of his twin daughters after she refused to obtain gainful employment stated,

So everybody deserves a second chance. So, depending on like I said, unless there's anything with kids, then complete no chance, but other than that - everybody deserves a second chance. Everybody deserves to have their story told. Growing up in Saginaw you can't get a job. I mean me, I was telling someone the other day, I couldn't find a job to save my life at 19...and that's coming from the honor society, top 10 in school and shit. All right, listen, I couldn't work at Walmart, Burger King, fucking nowhere. So I sold drugs, I had to be able to provide, but that was then. So you know, you gotta know somebody's situation. So they probably went through something back then. Just understand them and see what they was going through. See where their mind is now.

Other daters were able to extend redemption to people with criminal histories in general, but not to their suitability as a mate. As Sherry, a 41-year-old married woman discussed,

I might not be a fan of your redemption, but I'm gonna be real and say everybody is redeemable. And when I say a fan, that means okay, you done raped these little kids and now you're in prison getting raped yourself, now you try to petition to get out. I think the grace of God is sufficient for you. But I'm not a fan that you'd be getting out. Now personally, I don't think you need another chance to harm somebody, but they are redeemable...in the eyes of God anyway.

Overall, it is clear that respondents shared an underlying attitude towards romantic relationships, of a serious nature at least: the more egregious a person's past, the more context daters need in decision-making. More, as daters consider the more serious touchpoints such as living together or introducing children into the mix, the context is all the more important as daters must grapple

with how a partner's past reconfigures the future. Sasha (Focus Group 3) encapsulates this perspective: *"Who you choose to spend your life with will take your life on paths that you did not want to go, like that is so important, like the mate that you have."*

Others with experiential knowledge beg to differ still. For example, Karina discusses it this way:

Knowing where they're coming from, I understand that shit can change how you need to live, you what I'm saying, and I'm not judgmental. I have a wonderful husband and I wouldn't trade him for anything I do believe that he will change someday and I don't care how long it's going to take. I'm going to be by his side. I'm with him all the way. I'm never going to give up on him and I was willing to take these risks with him.

Craig (Focus Group 1), a 42-year-old Black clergy member who is active in the urban Southeast Michigan youth communities after an early adulthood period of incarceration stated,

If I wanted people to understand one thing about a person that's been the prison or jail, man I mean just has a record and romantic relationships? I want them to understand this: A person has been to prison because they broke a law, a law that was created by somebody for some reason. When the person created the law, it had nothing to do with my personality traits, who I am as a person, and all these things. (group nods their head in agreement). So I want people to know that this person that has been to prison or may have been to prison, I mean...it's really not a direct correlation on their romantic perspectives demonstrations. They can love you like Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her straight out the joint because of how he was raised by his Granny. He was in a joint because he sold drugs. He sold drugs because of different factors. He didn't just wake up in the morning say "I want to be a cocaine dealer." You understand what

I'm saying? So he became a cocaine dealer for a reason but it didn't make him an asshole necessarily. A nigga that don't know how to love a woman necessarily, somebody that don't love their family. I know so many drug dealers that are good people!

Discussion

This chapter builds off the preceding chapters by contextualizing how criminal stigma impacts romantic relationships using rich focus group and interview data. It reveals how the nature of daters' environments framed their expressions and experiences with romantic prospects who have histories of criminal justice contact. In the urban areas of Michigan, like Detroit and Flint, it was common for Black respondents to point towards their natural exposure to individuals who have criminal histories. In contrast, non-Black daters in suburban and/or rural areas of the state like Troy or Midland were typically removed from that exposure (excluding DUIs). Within those environments, daters often worried about stability and avoiding precarity. For younger daters in particular, a potential partner can signal stability by having conventional access to employment, income attainment, and housing, among other things that research shows are impacted by criminal stigma. Younger participants equated a criminal history with a concerning barrier to these opportunity structures and was largely a deterrent to any romantic onset or progression. In this way, younger daters' view of potential partners suggests they consider relationships to be more interdependent, where one partner's outcomes influence and impact their counterparts (Murray & Holmes, 2011; Regan, 2017). More, perhaps these excerpts reflect the reality for youngest generation that two incomes is increasingly essential in affording basic living.

While older daters were not apathetic to the presence of criminal histories, they were not completely deterred from becoming involved with people who have a history of criminal justice

system contact because of concerns about access to opportunity structures. For older daters, stability is internal and signaled by emotional maturity. Moreover, older daters were reflexive about their past, and their commentary suggests less worries about financial backing and more so about the costs of showing up mentally and logistically to carry the labor of a relationship and additional labor that system contact can produce. In fact, older respondents pointed to their old ways of thinking about financial security with criminal involved partners and current ways of centering a prospects mentality and emotional stability. Finally, these daters' responses suggested a more independent reliance on oneself compared to younger daters' more interdependent approach.

Respondents also equated violent criminal justice contact as an indication of a prospect's propensity for future violence, or possibilities of exposing others to bystander violence. This concern for violence was intimately intertwined with a fear of victimization. Intriguingly, daters discussed violence only in terms of physical violence, suggesting a narrower conception of violence and how violence can be enacted. Or perhaps psychological abuse is never really prosecuted and therefore respondents might have understood the terms of the discussion. Still, some daters expressed an open mind to prior violent criminal contact where self-defense was concerned.

Finally, respondents expressed a range of positions and attitudes on romantically engaging with others who have criminal records, and in mapping the abstract onto the particulars, three final themes emerged that were not captured by models presented in the previous chapters: (a) Disclosure, (b) Recidivism and Caretaking, and (c) Redemption. Respondents were adamant about the necessity of being forthcoming about any serious criminal justice contact. The desired timing of disclosure varied from immediately to three dates to when

a mutual exclusive commitment was on the table, but respondents viewed such transparency as a marker of honesty in a potential partner. Moreover, being fully informed allows daters to retain agency in deciding how to proceed romantically. Some respondents expressed issues with cyclical criminal justice contact that disrupted the home dynamic after periods of incarceration. Respondents further highlighted how, as partners, they would assume a caretaking role of keeping their respective partner out of the clutches of the criminal justice contact. Last, respondents raised the idea that everyone deserves a second chance, especially if their history is outdated or if they experienced what might be termed structural hardships in earlier years.

Until recently, society had a ‘natural’ redemption process at work in the sense that a person who committed a crime could ‘prove’ to be ‘redeemed’ in the eyes of the criminal justice system by leading a life as a productive member of society. In recent years, the opportunity for redemption has been reconsidered with the increasing demand for background checks and growing number of criminal records with which technology has made more easily accessible (Lageson, 2017; 2020). Even more, access to dating opportunities have been shadowed with growth of access to criminal background checks (Bhuiyan, 2022; Blakinger, 2021). Criminal background checks reveal the individual’s old criminal record and highlight that fact, which can overshadow a law-abiding life led since. This chapter revealed that while daters believe in redemption in the abstract, on a societal level, many daters were not willing to extend the redemption to potential partners in consideration of suitability for romantic relationships. Some however diverged on redemption, using reflexivity to detail how life outcomes shaped their history, but not necessarily connecting that history to their future outcomes. More, respondents who had their own experience with the criminal justice system were sympathetic to potential partners due to their own experiential knowledge. As further qualitative research explores the

nuances of romantic decision-making and criminal stigma, a more refined contextualization will move the needle toward greater understating of how criminal justice contact shapes perceived suitability for romance, and therefore the collateral consequences of system involvement in the realm of dating.

Appendix

Table 12

Demographic Characteristics of Focus Groups

Group Number	Number of Participants	Men	Race	Women	Race
1	6	3	Black, 37	3	Black, 43
			Black, 42		Black, 43
			Black, 36		Black, 41
2	6	3	Black, 57	3	Black, 41
			Black, 42		Black, 41
			Black, 35		Biracial, 41
3	6	3	White, 32	3	White, 32
			White, 30		Black, 42
			Black, 32		Black, 34
4	5	0		5	Asian, 35
					White, 34
					White, 30
					Black, 31
					Black, 29
5	5	2	Black, 38	2	Black, 31
			Black, 39		Hispanic, 28
6	4	0		4	White, 22
					Black, 18
					Black, 23
					Black, 23
7	5	3	White, 29	2	Black, 36
			Biracial, 33		Black, 32
			Black, 31		
8	5	1	Black, 24	3	Black, 18
					Black, 18
					Asian, 24

Table 13*Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees*

Interview Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Children	Relationship status	CJ Contact
1	Chris	Man	39	Black	2	Single	No
2	Tai	Man	49	Black	0	Single	Yes
3	Sam	Woman	34	White	2	Married	No
4	Max	Man	38	White	0	Single	No
5	Karina	Woman	42	Black	0	Married	Yes
6	Hallie	Woman	35	Black	2	Single	Yes
7	Mia	Woman	23	Bi-Racial	0	Single	No
8	Cynthia	Woman	33	Asian	0	Relationship	No
9	Tim	Man	30	Black	0	Single	No
10	Jane	Woman	34	White	0	Relationship	Yes
11	Ash	Woman	24	Black	0	Single	No
12	Katie	Woman	28	White	1	Relationship	No
13	Tobias	Man	36	Black	6	Relationship	No
14	Felix	Man	37	White	0	Single	Yes
15	Chloe	Woman	28	White	0	Single	No
16	Leo	Man	39	Black	0	Single	No
17	Luna	Woman	43	Black	2	Married	Yes
18	Oakley	Man	40	Black	3	Relationship	Yes
19	Jon	Man	39	Black	2	Married	No
20	Sasha	Woman	42	Black	2	Married	Yes

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Summary of Results and Implications

This study has combined quantitative analysis of survey data with qualitative analysis of individual and focus group interviews to develop new insights into the ways criminal justice system involvement in an age of mass incarceration impacts the realm of romantic and intimate relationships. In doing so, it represents an important step in extending researchers' understandings of the collateral consequences of system involvement as they play out in the dating market, where operations of criminal stigma can influence who is able to attain romantic connection and on what terms. While much research remains to be done in this area, findings of this study make important contributions to criminological and sociological research on stigmatization as well as relationship science.

Stigmatization, Relationships, and Criminal Stigma

Criminal stigmatization has become an oft-researched phenomenon across fields, including public health (Martin et al., 2020), psychology (Moore et al., 2016), sociology (Link & Phelan, 2001), and criminology and law and society (Lageson, 2022). Relationship science has primarily focused on the initial stages of attraction (Regan, 2016), relationship development and dissolution (Barry et al., 2008; Huston, 2009; Kayser & Rao, 2006), and marriage and mate selection (Schwartz, 2013). Criminal stigma in romantic relationships has, to date, primarily focused on how stigmatization impacts partners of incarcerated persons (DeShay et al., 2021), newly released persons (Winnick & Bodkin 2008). Less attention has been devoted to how criminal stigma shapes the suitability of romantic prospects for the point of view of daters. The scant research to date shows that criminal stigma in an online dating context may be racialized, appearing especially harmful to the prospects for Black and Latino daters who have criminal justice contact and, in contrast, helpful for white daters (Evans, 2019; Evans & Vega, 2020). Thus, prior to this work, very little was known about how criminal stigma works beyond online dating to shape how people think about the dating market and orient to acting accordingly. This dissertation offers

an exploration of how criminal stigmatization operates in the context of romantic relationships along a continuum of phases in relationship trajectories.

The purpose of this dissertation is to begin to understand *for whom, where, and how* criminal stigma influences romantic relationships by addressing the following: (1) For whom does criminal justice contact matter most for when considering romantic prospects and (2) How does criminal stigma impact romantic prospects for daters who have been “marked” by the criminal justice system? My broader approach moves beyond the aforementioned audit studies of online dating (Evans, 2019; Evans & Vega, 2020) and purely qualitative narratives of partners of currently incarcerated people (DeShay et al., 2021). Bridging scholarship from criminology, law and society, sociology, psychology, and relationship science, I move beyond the concept of initial matching to considerations of romantic progression from casual sexual affairs to committed cohabitation relationships that may or may not lead to marriage. Moreover, my approach begins to assess how daters’ decision-making patterns may be impacted by the stigma of criminal justice contact and further contextualizes what individuals deem as important to them in romantic partners at varying stages.

In chapter two, I focused on dater’s embrace or rejection of potential romantic prospects who have prior criminal justice contact. Using original survey data, the chapter examines specifically the inconsistency in romantic decision-making as it relates to experiences of criminal justice contact in a dater’s potential partner and it does so in comparison consistency among daters. The results suggest that daters with a history of criminal justice contact are looking for more committed romantic relationships as opposed to casual sexual encounters. As daters navigate casual sexual dating encounters, highly educated daters expressed more inconsistency when considering potential partners who have a history of prior criminal justice contact in partial models. As demographic variables were incorporated into the full model, this relationship disappeared. When respondent daters consider committed cohabitating relationships with partners who have a history of prior criminal justice contact, the full models revealed that whether they had children, their age, race, or own prior history of criminal justice contact were salient factors. Compared to respondent daters who do not have children, daters who are parents were more

likely to express inconsistency in willingness to cohabitate with a partner who has a history of criminal justice contact. Compared to younger daters, daters over the age of 24 were less likely to report inconsistency in terms of how they orient towards partners who have criminal justice contact in their history. Racial differences emerged in the analyses, too. Specifically, people of color were less likely to express a pattern of inconsistency when considering cohabitating partners with a history of criminal justice contact compared to White individuals. Respondents who themselves have experienced criminal justice contact were less likely to exhibit a pattern of inconsistency towards considerations of living with a partner who has a history of criminal contact. Finally, in full models looking at respondent decision-making patterns across considerations of casual sexual dating and committed cohabitation with a partner who has prior criminal justice contact, age, racial group, being single and having children emerged as prominent factors that predict willingness to date someone with criminal stigmas. Compared to respondent daters aged 18-24 years-old, older daters were significantly less likely to be inconsistent in their reactions towards partners with criminal contact as they moved from casual to cohabitation. Also, daters of other racial groups (i.e. Asian, Hispanic/Latino, etc.) were significantly less likely to express inconsistent beliefs towards the progression from casual sex to cohabitation with potential partners compared to White respondent daters. And finally, single respondents and parent daters were significantly more likely to express inconsistent reactions towards criminal justice contact as they move from casual sex to cohabitation.

In chapter three, I advance analyses that focus on respondent daters' willingness or unwillingness to romantically engage with a partner where criminal contact stemmed from a violent offense. Using the same survey data as in chapter two, the third chapter looks at whether violence is an important signifier for respondent daters when considering casual sexual dating and committed cohabitating relationships. Respondents with a history of criminal justice contact that was the consequence of violence indicated they were seeking more committed relationships as opposed to casual sexual dating encounters. Here, respondents with prior violent-based criminal justice contact are not significantly different than daters with no prior contact or non-violent based contact in their quest for romance. When casual sexual dating

arrangements are at issue, having a college education was related to an increased likelihood that a respondent dater showed willingness to have sex with a potential partner with prior criminal contact stemming from a non-violent offense. However, this relationship was only seen when socio-economic variables are incorporated into the model and disappears in the full mode. There were no significant relationships observed when respondent daters considered casual sexual dating with someone who had prior criminal contact due to a violent offense. These findings suggest that when contemplating casual sexual dating encounters, violence was not a deterrent for many sample daters. However, the picture changes when I examined daters' willingness to live with a potential partner who had a history of criminal justice contact stemming from a violent offense. As respondents considered the scenario of living with a partner who has any non-violent-based criminal justice contact in their history, daters in the early 30s, (i.e., aged 31-34-years-old) indicate more willingness to cohabit with an impacted partner. In the full model, male daters were however less likely to indicate a willingness to live with someone who has a non-violent criminal history. As respondents were confronted with the idea of living with a partner who had a violent criminal history, age and their own history of criminal justice contact were prominent factors. In the full model, older respondents aged 25-30 and 31-34-years-old were significantly more likely to indicate a willingness to consider living with a partner who has a violent criminal history compared to daters age 18-24-years-old. More, respondents who have a criminal history were less likely to express a willingness to enter a committed cohabitating relationship with someone who had a violent criminal history, however, this relationship disappeared when demographic variables were added into the full model.

Building from the findings presented in chapters two and three, in chapter four I draw on two rich sources of qualitative data—original interview data and focus group data-- to further unpack how people think about and orient to potential partners who have criminal histories and thus the stain of criminal stigma. This chapter identified and interrogated other relevant factors that emerge when people contemplate the dating market. Prominent themes emerge from the data revealed how daters traverse the romantic terrain, first zeroing in on the zone of romance as shaped by their respective environments.

Reflective of broader trends of racialized law enforcement and social and residential segregation in the U.S., Black daters recounted the normalization of potential partners with criminal histories in their urban spaces. In contrast, non-Black daters detailed how uncommon such interactions are in their suburban or rural spaces. Across conversations, daters discussed how the pool of available prospects for romance was determined in large part by their surroundings. As daters discussed relationships, their emphasis on the value of stability, which they framed as instrumental to avoiding precarity, stood out. Daters stressed how the pursuit and maintenance of stability was a vital consideration that was juxtaposed against the desire to avoid the installation or enhancement of precarity. Younger daters discussed criminal histories in the sense of inviting chaos into their lives and often reported envisioning the stigma of a criminal history as amorphous and ultimately connected to their own personal livelihoods. Here, the conversations suggested that younger daters view relationships more interdependently. Older daters too expressed concern about stability, but their concerns were rooted in their previous experiences with partners who injected chaos into their lives through their criminal justice contact and personal conflicts. The presence of children and the status of parent also shapes romantic decision-making. Specifically, parents were sometimes drawn to partners who were often entangled with the criminal justice system due to the lifestyle they could provide and comfort they brought their children. However, parents were also repelled when violence materialized in the relationships and cited safety concerns for themselves in general and their children in particular as cause for concern when contemplating the presence of a violent past attached to a potential or real partner. Equally important, the salience of responsibilities associated with self-disclosure loomed large. Indeed, daters repeatedly raised transparency about one's past, including a violent past, as non-negotiable, even as they expressed considerable variability in terms of expected timelines for disclosure of a criminal history.

Daters also expressed concerns about potential partners regressing to offending behavior; this in turn evoked comments about the role of caretaking in the relationship. Some discussions of caretaking involved feeling personally responsible for their partners abiding the terms of their probation. Other comments centered on the pressure to keep partners away from the influence of social circles where criminal offending often took place and internalizing this responsibility for someone who should be an

equal in a partnership. This form of caretaking was largely resisted in focus groups and interviews with daters, indicating little desire to assume and maintain responsibility for their partners. Related to considerations of reoffending, daters were largely of the thought that redemption after criminal justice contact was possible and should be extended to most individuals with a criminal history, violent or not. However, redemption was largely conceived in general terms, and not in the realm of redeeming oneself for suitability of romance. Instead, daters offered redemption from a distance. Some harkened back to the idea that a partner can influence life outcomes, so redemption could only go so far, drawing a line when it came to contemplating a willingness to be personally involved with someone who is seemingly redeemed. There was an outlier where a participant viewed her relationship and subsequent marriage as a dream from start to finish, even as her partner cycled in and out of prison multiple times over the course of their relationship and remains incarcerated today.

Stepping back from the particulars of many findings presented in this work, a few insights becomes clear. As daters navigate romance, their decision-making patterns are not linear, but necessarily contorted based on important elements of life such as age or life experiences such as parenting. As daters progress from more casual arrangements to ensuring relationships marked with cohabitation, the embrace or rejection of partners who have criminal histories may be dictated by these important elements of life, but also by the details and context of the impacted person's history. For some daters, criminal justice contact is a normal, everyday experience in their environment and consequently, the pool of available partners is replete with criminal histories. For others, criminal justice contact is almost an extraordinary event, and this difference is highly moderated by race. Violence also shapes the romantic terrain, with some daters seeing violence as a threat of future harm to themselves either by their partner or as a bystander. While many daters opt to extend grace and redemption to individuals who have criminal histories, that extension stops short of viewing them as suitable partners for more serious relationships such as cohabitation. Yet, for a few daters, the idea of redemption is all encompassing. Relationships can be redemptive. As Sarah Lageson notes in a recent interview, "The things that make us safer are things like having a stable family, getting married, being able to buy a house — participating in all these social

institutions that have been around for a long time helps make sure the crime rate doesn't go up. So if you're worried about public safety, the best thing you can do is bring people into relationships" (Blakinger, 2021). Taken together, stigmatization of criminal justice system involvement remains undoubtedly present and nuanced, thus deserving more attention and inquiry, for the sake of understanding the collateral consequences of our criminal justice system and perhaps also for thinking about ways to mitigate these consequences.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings presented in this work are both valuable in and of themselves and they prompt suggestions for future research. Where this study utilized self-reports of criminal offending, the next step would be to seek official records of participants as a means of helping to identify the largest possible representative samples and of supplementing self-reported data. Using official records would certainly bolster any results and reduce the possibility of memory issues and lack of honesty in participant responses. In this study however, the concern for the vulnerability of participants is paramount in an era where criminal records are erroneous, outdated, or even outsourced to private companies to the detriment of those impacted (Lageson, 2020; 2022). Even more, the Covid-19 pandemic placed extreme restrictions on how data was collected. The cross-sectional design and snowball sampling procedures of this study preclude conclusions regarding causality, therefore future longitudinal investigations will be needed. Yet undertaking such a project was not possible given the time constraints I was under.

Due to the time constraints and study design, it is highly possible that other influences on romantic relationships and criminal history were operating that were not accounted for in this work. For instance, with the passage of time, daters' perceptions of potential partners may shift and the stigma of a criminal history may lessen (or intensify), which a longitudinal study might better capture. Recruitment approaches for this population should also be carefully considered. I

used snowball sampling given the nature of the personal questions asked and the need to protect vulnerable participants who might have criminal histories. The use of snowball sampling was in hopes of increasing comfort with the PI and participants, but selection bias issues would not be a surprise and should be accounted for when interpreting results and implications.

As previously mentioned, very little research has been conducted on the suitability for romantic connections and relationships among the ever-increasing population of Americans with criminal justice system involvement, leaving this area of inquiry ripe for the emergence of new research studies. For example, research could focus on the fear of crime and attitudes towards crime among single people actively looking for romance. Additionally, a study could qualitatively explore how specific offense categories shape romantic outcomes, such as petty theft crimes versus crimes that involve bodily harm or even in contrast to white collar crimes—in this study, participants indicated in responses many times that this variable may be of utmost importance. Future longitudinal research could also follow couples where at least one person has a criminal history and examine how direct stigma and courtesy stigma influence the relationship over an extended period of time in terms of satisfaction and whether any breakdowns are related to the presence of criminal stigma.

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