



“So Many Forms of Loss” Incarceration-Related Cumulative Grief

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The present study introduces incarceration-related cumulative grief, a little-studied aspect of the reentry process relevant to forensic social workers who engage with formerly incarcerated people. Analysis presented here interprets findings from 74 interviews with people on parole through the lens of literature on cumulative grief (i.e., the emotional state which results from consecutive traumatic experiences), prisonization, and reentry to articulate the positive, negative, and transformative loss which together comprise the three components of incarceration-related cumulative grief. The first, positive loss, includes behaviors (e.g., substance misuse) or fractious relationships (e.g., intimate partner violence) participants regarded as detrimental to their wellbeing and which their incarceration caused to end. The second, negative loss, encompasses elements participants envisioned prison as removing from their life, such as reputation, time, supportive relationships, trust, and freedom/independence. The third, transformative loss, entails the improved relationships, improved self-worth and self-awareness, and advocacy for others (or self) participants regarded themselves as having gained in the process of experiencing both positive and negative incarceration-related losses.

Keywords: Cumulative Grief, Prison, Reentry

INTRODUCTION

Forensic social workers are well-versed in the myriad forms of loss associated with incarceration, yet many may not have considered how formerly incarcerated people on parole conceptualize prison’s complex role in shaping their lives post-release. This consideration is particularly noteworthy because, as many forensic social work researchers have noted, most people who have served prison time have also experienced poverty, trauma, and other forms of psycho-social prior to their incarceration (Jarldorn, 2020). Forensic social work and public health studies regarding ex-prisoners experiences of identity and systemic inequity emphasize how strongly stigma shapes both (Tran et al., 2018). Many forensic social workers accordingly recommend actively including incarcerated people’s lived experiences in the helping process of social work practice (Duvnjak et al., 2022). Given how a prison sentence so often intervenes in lives already replete with loss and suffering, how can forensic social workers best help formerly incarcerated people cope with the dual challenges of reentry and the long afterlife of a felony conviction?

The present study attempts to answer this question by introducing the concept of incarceration-related cumulative grief, a little-studied aspect of the reentry process relevant to forensic social workers who engage with formerly incarcerated people. Analysis presented here interprets findings from 74 interviews with people on parole through the lens of literature on cumulative grief, defined as the emotional state which results from consecutive traumatic experiences, prisonization, and reentry. Positive, negative, and transformative loss together comprise the three components of incarceration-related cumulative grief. The first, positive loss, includes behaviors (e.g., substance misuse) or fractious relationships (e.g., intimate partner violence) participants regarded as detrimental to their wellbeing and which their incarceration caused to end. The second, negative loss, encompasses elements participants envisioned prison as removing from their life, such as reputation, time, supportive relationships, trust, and freedom/independence. The third, transformative loss, entails the improved relationships, improved self-worth and self-awareness, and advocacy for others (or self) participants regarded themselves as gaining in the process of experiencing both positive and negative incarceration-related losses. Being able to identify cumulative grief and how it variously manifests among individuals can help forensic social workers to adapt services provision to formerly incarcerated clients’ specific needs and help them successfully reintegrate into society.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Over 1.2 million people are incarcerated in the United States (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022), and a majority will release into community after serving their sentences. Forensic social workers who assist formerly incarcerated people with the transition to community are familiar with the complex meanings individuals ascribe to their time in prison. “Going to prison saved my life because I got sober,” a person who struggled with substance use disorder prior to their incarceration might tell a forensic social worker while simultaneously lamenting the lifelong detrimental impact a felony conviction will have on their ability to find work which pays a living wage. Such complexities are inherent to incarceration-related cumulative grief, and the present study unites otherwise disparate bodies of literature on cumulative grief, prisonization, and reentry sets the stage for its analysis.

Cumulative Grief

Cumulative grief, sometimes also described as compounded grief, generally describes bereavement and the associated emotional state which results from consecutive traumatic experiences. Researchers have applied cumulative grief to the study of healthcare providers’ coping mechanisms struggling with bereavement overload (Allie et al., 2018), most recently with respect to what one article termed “the virulence of grief in the pandemic (De Leon Corona et al. 2022). The present study expands understandings of cumulative grief by focusing on formerly incarcerated people’s experiences to explore their experiences of loss resulting from incarceration.

Most studies to date on grief in prison have focused on bereavement, with Wilson (2023) finding associations between the intense effect of stress after bereavement (i.e., grief overload) can result in a heightened recidivism risk. Hunt (2021) found incarcerated individuals experience a ‘catalogue of losses’ before and during their incarceration which can lead to disenfranchised grief, defined as suppressed feelings of grief, anger, and sorrow resulting from losses rarely acknowledged by society due to the stigma surrounding incarceration. Researchers have also explored the detrimental effects incarcerated individuals suffer when excluded from grief rituals following the loss of a loved one as part of what Wilson and colleagues (2022) term institutional thoughtlessness, which harms those forced to follow standard institutional protocols while simultaneously dealing with bereavement in prison. Slim (2023) analyzed deaths in prison and found that the bereavement process is diminished for inmates because their behavior and reactions after experiencing a death may be deemed as ‘misconduct’ or suicidal behavior, resulting in sanctions.

Age is also important to consider when examining grief, as experiences may differ depending on a person’s life experiences and emotional maturity. Maschi and colleagues (2015a; 2015b) surveyed incarcerated middle-aged adults to determine coping mechanisms and the influences on their health after trauma. They found five dimensions of coping— physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual— have a protective effect on the well-being of participants, with social and spiritual being the most effective. A study conducted on delinquent adolescent males regarding the impacts of trauma and grief on the brain found that frontal lobe differences distinct from a control group, indicating trauma and grief physically alters the brain (Lansing et al., 2016). Lansing and colleagues (2023) additionally examined health disparities among delinquent adolescent females, finding the girls had higher amounts of stressor reactivity reactions, grief symptoms, and adversity-driven maladaptive coping mechanisms. These studies are extremely important yet do not address prison as a grief-inducing institution in its own right, a subject best-explored through the lens of literature on prisonization and prison social climate.

Prisonization

Prisonization, a socialization process through which an individual's way of life, views, and values change when forced into a structured environment that differs greatly from the outside world, was first identified midcentury (Clemmer, 1940). While dated, this work on how social order manifests and is regulated within prison’s structured environment paved the way for the much more sophisticated contemporary literature on prison social climate, which encompasses the perceived security and safety of the institution, quality of life, physical environment, and well-being of those who live or work in the institution (Bosma et al., 2020). Six primary areas influence prison social climate: safety and order, interpersonal relationships maintained with people in the free world, interpersonal relationships with incarcerated peers and staff, the physical status of a facility, meaningful activities, and autonomy (Boone, 2016). Educational and other meaningful opportunities provided to prisoners and prison staff likewise impact the prison social climate by providing incarcerated individuals with resources that benefit them during incarceration and upon release while also decreasing the amount of downtime they have, which can promote happiness and positive behavior, also benefitting the prison staff (Hall & Chong, 2018). A positive prison social climate is normative in humane institutional environments where staff and incarcerated people respect and envision one another as future neighbors and incarcerated individuals receive rehabilitative opportunities to make better choices post-release (Gonzales et al., 2021).

Fundamentally, a positive prison social climate can lessen the feeling of cumulative grief in prison and upon release by providing incarcerated individuals with opportunities to constructively spend their prison sentence by developing skills to will benefit them upon release. For most people, however, acclimating to prison is traumatic. For example, a newly incarcerated person with no criminal history who previously worked as an attorney and is now serving their sentence in a minimum-security institution is likely to experience difficulties with prisonization even in a relatively mild and positive prison social climate because of their limited previous experience with incarceration. Conversely, a person who has never been formally employed

due to lifelong struggles with substance misuse and other persistent mental health challenges who is returning to prison on new criminal charges is likely to experience a different set of difficulties with prisonization because they are already familiar with institutional life. Both experience cumulative grief, but in different ways. The initial individual is likely grieving the loss of status, respect, and financial independence because of their criminal conviction. The second individual is likely grieving the overall trajectory of their life due to their substance misuse and mental health challenges. Going to prison results in cumulative grief for many but the types an individual experiences are unique based on their previous experiences before incarceration, which provides great insight into how to support them in their individual paths through and out of prison. Prisonization and prison social climate fundamentally shape how an individual experiences both prison and, consequently, incarceration-related cumulative grief.

Early criminologists emphasized prisonization as an involuntary process which forces a person to adapt to incarceration by finding a way to fit into the prison social environment (Clemmer, 1940), and used two models to explain the processes of prisonization: deprivation and importation. The deprivation model regarded prisonization as a way for incarcerated individuals to develop subcultures to alleviate the five pains of imprisonment: loss of freedom, autonomy, security, desirable goods and services, and heterosexual relationships (Sykes, 1958). The importation model conversely regarded prison culture as a combination of cultural norms incarcerated people followed in the free world and prison institutional culture (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). Contemporary research directly builds on this earlier research by making connections between prison social climate and reentry outcomes (Auty & Liebling, 2019). For example, researchers have found that incarcerated individuals who lack structured activities that promote mental stimulation experience a range of negative emotions, such as distrust, insecurity, and being on edge in addition to greater chances of inmate misconduct (Bosma et al., 2020; McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2021). Martin (2018) found that the mundane tasks and strict environment in prison and the challenges of finding housing, gaining employment, and rebuilding relationships with increased freedom upon release coupled with the rapid social transitions of entering and leaving prison can create difficulties for reentry.

Researchers have also explored secondary prisonization, a concept initially introduced by Comfort (2003) in her ethnographic study of women’s experiences of the prison rules, regulations, and processes involved in visiting a person in prison. Individuals who visit loved ones in prison deal with an extension of strict rules and regulations they must abide by to participate in visitation, causing them to experience negative circumstances and consequences such as restrictions on clothing and physical appearance, lack of communication from the facility about the visitation process and regulations, and increased financial burdens relating to traveling to the facility (Comfort, 2003). Families experience financial and time-related burdens, stress from the rules and regulations, and strained familial interactions as part of secondary prisonization (Bopp et al. 2022). Children of incarcerated mothers likewise experience secondary prisonization through institutional regulations and rules with the regulation of emotions and the disciplining of their bodies during visitation (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018). Kotova (2020) found that the families of people who are in prison deal with stigmatization because of who they are, often poor, working-class women of color, in addition to who they are linked to. This means that they deal with courtesy stigma, the idea that individuals experience negative treatment or loss of opportunity through association, in combination with stigmas relating to their own identities because of having a loved one in prison (Kotova, 2020). Such courtesy stigma contributes directly to incarceration-related cumulative grief.

Reentry

Forensic social workers tasked with providing services to formerly incarcerated people in community witness firsthand the multiple challenges associated with the reentry process. All of these challenges are interlocking and interdependent. For example, the challenge of locating and keeping housing (Bowman & Ely 2020) is typically directly related to the challenge of finding and keeping employment (Stone et al., 2018). Individual, familial, and community expectations regarding financial and other forms of independence may also be very difficult for formerly incarcerated people to meet precisely because of challenges in obtaining

work, housing, and mental health services. Difficulties accessing transportation and a lack of rural programming to address criminogenic needs only compound these challenges (Zajac et al., 2014; Wodahl, 2006).

Meeting these challenges requires overcoming the considerable stigma of a felony conviction (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; LeBel, 2012). Widespread public knowledge of their crimes in rural areas with very low crime rates, such as the state where this study was carried out, may only serve to heighten such stigma (Dewey et al. 2019). Managing such stigma may exacerbate challenges formerly incarcerated people face in accessing substance use and mental health treatment services, even in rural areas with high rates of drug use and overdose-related mortality (Schalkoff et al., 2019). Nationwide, rural substance users are much less likely to be able to access opioid treatment relative to their urban peers (Amiri, 2021). Rural people are also more likely to avoid mental health treatment, even when it is available, due to rural culture’s general mistrust of state authority and high value associated with stoicism (Cheesmond et al., 2019). For all these reasons and more, forensic social workers have an important role to play in helping formerly incarcerated people navigate the reentry process

METHODS

Participants and Study Site

The present study utilized 74 verbatim transcripts of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted by the second author with people on parole regarding their experiences before, during, and after prison in Wyoming. As the least populous state, the entirety of Wyoming’s prison system comprised just 2,400 incarcerated individuals at the time of the interviews, a number smaller than many urban county jails. The second author spent approximately three days in each location to interview parole officers about their jobs and speak with people on parole about their experiences prior to, during, and after their release from prison. All people on parole received a flyer from their parole officer with her contact information, including her personal cell phone number, and contacted her independently to either meet in person or speak by phone although, following cultural norms in the Mountain West, most preferred to talk face-to-face due to what they regarded as the seriousness of the subject matter.

The second author used a community-based participatory approach in designing the interview guide in consultation with currently and formerly incarcerated people and Wyoming Department of Corrections staff. The guide featured three primary sections on life before, during, and after prison to maximize participants’ abilities to direct the course of the interview per their own preferences and concerns, and gender infused all aspects of these discussions. The first section, which discussed life prior to incarceration, asked participants about their hometown, a typical day, how they made choices about who to interact with, who they avoided, their aspirations for the future, means of financial support, education and training, and anything they would change about the past. The second, which focused on life in prison, asked participants to describe a typical day in prison, what they had in common with their peers in prison, who they sought out (or avoided) for advice, classes and programs they completed (as well as those they wish they could have completed), and how they would change the institution if they became the warden. The third, life outside, asked participants to describe a typical day around the time of the interview, how they made choices about where to live and who to spend their time with, their job and relationships with others, any concerns about their likelihood of returning to prison, social perceptions of incarceration, and their thoughts on how the second author should share the results of the study.

Procedure, Data Collection, and Analysis

The study was approved by the University of Wyoming’s Institutional Review Board. Participants included 28 women and 46 men on parole following their release from prison after serving sentences for

crimes involving drugs (n=39), fraudulent financial transactions (n=13), sex (n=7), violence (n=5), or more than one type of crime. The interview guide did not ask participants about their conviction type, as the study’s focus was on reentry, yet nonetheless all but six disclosed this information in the interview.

Conducting interviews at parole offices was convenient for participants because these offices provided a private office, which otherwise would have been impossible in some of the remote areas to which the second author traveled. Wyoming’s unique geographical and cultural environment leads many of its residents to describe the state as “a small town with long roads” due to its population of less than half a million people dispersed across a rugged mountain landscape. This unique environment directly informed candor during the interviews, as all participants stated their discussions with the second author were an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives directly with the Wyoming Department of Corrections, where the second author held a staff badge due to her work as founder and director of a college in prison program.

The second author received each participant’s permission to record and transcribe the interviews and removed all names and identifying details from the transcripts prior to sharing them with the first author. The first author utilized a grounded, inductive approach to guide the development and subsequent analysis of themes and patterns (Neuendorf, 2017) which emerged from her review of the approximately 1,000 pages of verbatim interview transcripts. After multiple reviews of notes, she took around themes of grief which emerged in her review of the transcripts, the first author used open coding to identify themes across the transcripts, which were used to create a codebook featuring the three key themes which structure the present study. These themes emerged through triangulation with existing literature followed by focused coding to identify and group data pertaining to each theme from the transcript (Charmaz, 2008).

RESULTS

Incarceration-related cumulative grief emerged in our analysis as comprised of three interconnected components of loss, which all centered on the experience of prison: positive, negative, and transformative. Rather than distinguishing between these three forms of loss as discrete from one another, our participants envisioned all three as inextricably entwined with their incarceration, emphasizing the complex emotional and practical dynamics associated with having served a prison sentence. The first, positive loss, encompasses participants’ characterizations of the loss of fractious or violent interpersonal relationships and the grip that substance misuse once had on many of the participants. The second, negative loss, characterizes participant experiences of loss relating to reputation, time, relationships, trust, and freedom or independence. The third, transformative loss, includes what the participants described as gaining through the process of experiencing losses they characterized as either positive or negative, including improved relationships, improved self-worth and self-awareness, and the desire to advocate for themselves or others. Table 1 depicts the frequencies of themes and subthemes, and Table 2 documents disaggregates these theme frequencies by participant gender.

Table 1. Theme and Subtheme Frequencies.

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency (n)	Frequency (%)
Positive loss – loss of problematic relationships	Domestic violence and fractious relationships	30	40.5%
	Substance misuse	18	24.3%
	Negative Loss		
	Reputation	14	18.9%
	Time	25	33.8%

Transformative Loss	Relationships	55	74.3%
	Trust	15	20.3%
	Freedom/independence	8	10.8%
	Improved relationships	13	17.6%
	Improved self-worth and self-awareness	32	43.2%
	Advocacy for others or self	9	12.2%

Table 2. Frequencies of themes and subthemes based on gender.

Theme	Subtheme	Female Frequency (n)	Male Frequency (n)	Unknown Frequency (n)
Positive loss – loss of problematic relationships	Domestic violence and fractious relationships	18 (24.3%)	11 (14.9%)	1 (1.4%)
	Substance misuse	12 (16.2%)	6 (8.1%)	0 (0.0%)
	Negative loss			
Transformative Loss	Reputation	3 (4.1%)	11 (14.9%)	0 (0.0%)
	Time	12 (16.2%)	13 (17.6%)	0 (0.0%)
	Relationships	22 (29.7%)	32 (43.2%)	1 (1.4%)
	Trust	5 (6.8%)	9 (12.2%)	1 (1.4%)
	Freedom/independence	5 (6.8%)	3 (4.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Transformative Loss	Improved relationships	5 (6.8%)	8 (10.8%)	0 (0.0%)
	Improved self-worth and self-awareness	11 (14.9%)	21 (28.4%)	0 (0.0%)
	Advocacy for others or self	2 (2.7%)	7 (9.5%)	0 (0.0%)

Positive Losses

Almost all participants described at least some positive aspects of their time in prison, which may at first seem counterintuitive given the numerous privations and forms of suffering associated with incarceration. Yet many our participants nonetheless readily acknowledged how prison’s initial psychological shock and physical removal from their pre-incarceration life circumstances resulted in the loss of relationships and behaviors they regarded as detrimental to their wellbeing. In all instances, participants attributed this positive loss to prison itself.

Fractious Romantic Relationships

40.5% of participants reported experiencing the loss of a relationship they regarded as problematic or fractious because it was characterized by domestic violence, divorce, or infidelity. Many participants shared the belief that being in prison not only removed them from a negative relationship, but also provided them with a good reason to remain separated post-release because they were court-ordered to do so either as co-defendants or through a protection order in domestic violence cases. For example, Brenda explained how her

encounters with police prior to her incarceration led her “to safety” through a reduced prison sentence because: “the cops caught me and told me that if I told on him [by serving as a witness for the state] and all the people he dealt with, they would let me go. That I’d go to safety.” Brenda characterized her relationship with her romantic partner and co-defendant prior to incarceration for a drug offense as one of constant fear, which prompted her to pay her partner each week with the hope this financial incentive would prevent his violent abusive outbursts. In turn, the stress of this constant fear and worry led to her substance misuse. Ultimately, Brenda describes her incarceration as an escape from abuse.

Samantha, who is also a domestic violence survivor, said of her partner, “the whole reason I got back into drugs and was drinking because of his abusiveness.” Many female participants mentioned substance misuse to cope with the domestic violence occurring within their homes before they were sentenced to prison. Women participants often characterized their substance misuse as directly resulting from their fractious or domestic violence relationship, rather than being more intrinsically rooted. The individuals who used substances as a distraction to escape the realities of their lives described this behavior as a direct pathway to prison, which is substantiated by the high number of our participants who served prison sentences for drug offenses. Yet, as noted by nearly half of study participants, many escaped what they regarded as negative relationships once incarcerated. Fractious relationships and substance abuse were often reinforced by one another, although the present study disaggregates them for analytical purposes because they manifested differently for participants who did not characterize their relationships as violent or otherwise troubled.

Substance Misuse

24.3% of participants disclosed that they had substance misuse issues which were resolved during their time in prison, either through structured treatment, self-reflection on the relationship between substance misuse and the events which led them to prison, or some combination of both. Many women participants experienced substance misuse because of a tumultuous relationship, domestic violence, or being exposed to substances through their partner. Karen disclosed that “At that point, it wasn’t about love anymore, it was about winning” when discussing her relationship with her husband who was cheating on her with this ex-wife. To gain his love and loyalty back, she began to do drugs with and for him. She turned to substances in an attempt to win her husband back which ended up being a win-lose situation. Going to prison for her drug use meant she was able to escape her unfaithful husband and substance misuse.

Linda regarded drugs as having ruined her relationships with other people and severely compromising her health, noting how at the time of her arrest she only weighed 95 pounds and routinely faced her partner’s abuse. After her first release from prison, Linda relapsed following difficulties she experienced in coping with a family member’s death and subsequently returned to prison on a new drug-related charge. Linda credited this second stay in prison with both her long-term sobriety and ending her domestic violence relationship. Many women participants shared similar stories which embedded substance misuse within domestic violence relationships. For example, Francis explained how she was using substances with her husband when she entered into an intimate relationship with the man who sold them drugs and moved in with him, causing her substance drug misuse issues to further spiral, resulting in her incarceration and subsequent significant life changes.

In sharp contrast to women study participants who tended to characterize their substance misuse as rooted in troubled or violent relationships, male study participants typically characterized their substance misuse as either an independent decision or exposure to substance misuse at a young age. For example, Lionel described wanting to change his relationship with his mother because, “I got introduced to drugs because she was selling them out of the house, and I was a kid. I started smoking weed with her and then smoked meth when I was 9.” He regarded his adult issues with substance misuse as a direct result of his previous exposure to illegal substances in his home from a young, impressionable age, and blamed the lack of parental guidance he had on his mother.

Antonio likewise described his exposure to alcohol at a young age as the cause of his struggles with substance misuse. “I’ve been a drug addict since I was 13, an alcoholic since I was 3, 4, 5,” he explained, “my family promoted me to drink. When I was able to walk, they’d want me to fetch beers for them, and being a kid you’d see adults do it, and I’d learn to open them and drink as much as I could. I was 4 the first time I was drunk. I just started off on the wrong track right off the bat.” Like Lionel and Antonio, many other male participants who were convicted of drug crimes or disclosed substance misuse in their interviews shared the sentiment that their substance misuse resulted from their childhood, rather than the adult intimate relationships to which women attributed the cause of their substance misuse. In all these instances, however, participants regarded prison as intervening in their substance misuse, ultimately leading to a positive loss despite the experience of cumulative grief collectively experienced through incarceration.

Negative Losses

Our participants experienced multiple forms of negative losses in the form of reputation, time with loved ones, trust in self and others, and, of course, freedom and independence. As part of cumulative grief, these negative losses took place in conjunction with the positive losses and collectively informed our participants’ experiences of incarceration.

Reputation

18.9% of participants disclosed they had experienced a loss of their reputation and or their families’ reputation due to their criminal record. Those convicted of sex crimes felt this loss especially keenly and noted they were treated differently by family and community members whose interactions with them appeared clouded by fear and shame. Andrew, a convicted sex offender, recounted how his parole requirements forbid him from living in the same home as his wife and children, a requirement he felt completely ignored how hard he worked in prison. Similarly, Richard, who was convicted on drug charges, described the intense stigma he and his peers experienced,

“There’s certain families in town where most of the town identifies them as criminals. You may not be a criminal in that family, but your brothers are, your father is, your grandma was. In small communities, it’s not big enough to hide sometimes because everybody knows it.”

Negative losses in the form of reputation impacted relationships in the community and in families due to lingering fear and anger, alongside trust issues and the breakdown of relationships. This reputational loss also generated reentry struggles due to stigma, with our participants experiencing struggles with community reintegration due to negative perceptions of them as a “drug addict” or a “liar and a thief.”

Time

33.8% of participants mention missing out on time and the ability to be present with their loved ones. For example, Miley’s daughter was only 8 years old when she was sentenced and turned 16 years old before her release. She discloses that her daughter was later diagnosed with a mental illness, which she feels the loss of time directly caused. Other participants who experienced the loss of time mention not being present for their children during a time they will never be able to get back, during which family members or the foster care system cared for their children, leaving a void where our participants wished they instead had positive memories.

Bob, who spent most of his life in and out of prison, explored how he lost time with loved ones who passed away while he was incarcerated. His brother suffered a non-fatal stroke while Bob was in prison and suffered life-altering disabilities, prompting Bob to feel enormous guilt over not being able to spend time with his brother. Their mother was diagnosed with dementia while he was incarcerated and was placed in a facility where she could get help. After his most recent release, he went to see his mother, but she did not remember

who Bob was, which made him wish he could go back and change his path so that he would not have lost time with his family. Bob soberly poignantly explained how: “Life goes on without us while we are locked up,” emphasizing the loss of time individuals experience because of incarceration.

Relationships

74.3% explained how, even post-release, incarceration created a rift which distanced and excluded loved ones, who were unwilling to forgive past poor choices and a criminal record. This negative loss of social support networks made navigating reentry even more challenging, as Ned explained,

“People don’t have anything, they don’t have anything on the streets [post-release], like they don’t have family they don’t have like lots of things that keep them from wanting to go back in [to prison]... you need that support system you need that care to like you need someone other than yourself like yourself first and foremost but you need something else that’s going to drive you to stay out [of prison].”

A majority of participants struggled with maintaining relationships in prison, which made it impossible to attend family events and celebrations and presented challenges for staying in contact with loved ones. Gina mentioned how while she was incarcerated, she had a grandchild who was born and she was unable to meet her after release, even though she was over a year old. She mentioned that she struggled a lot due to the lack of meaningful contact that she was able to be in with her family while she was incarcerated. Milo explained that he had no support system and that his relationship with his family was struggling because the length of his prison sentence made it difficult to maintain meaningful relationships with his family, who he believed thought they gained nothing from communicating with him.

A few participants mentioned the sense of grief which accompanied losing close relationships with those who formed their “prison family.” George told the interviewer he felt lonely and struggled to reintegrate due to prohibitions on contact with people who were still incarcerated. He mentioned that he was so used to being around them that once he was released, he began to struggle. Isolation quickly sunk in, and George soon realized that he was no longer with his support system. Brenden mentioned that the people he was incarcerated with were caring and made prison a comfortable and positive environment where he quickly developed familial-like relationships which he immediately lost post-release because of parole rules barring contact between people on parole and prisoners. Taken together, the loss of relationships dramatically deepened the cumulative grief our participants expressed.

Trust

20.3% of participants felt they lost both the trust of, and trust, in their loved ones and in themselves. Belinda recounted how her husband began an intimate relationship with her best friend, with whom he began spending a great deal of time after Belinda was incarcerated. Belinda shared how she begged her parole board to not force her back to his house, but they denied her request because it was her only option for a safe, stable residence in her isolated rural community. For Belinda, the inner turmoil she experienced because of losing the trust in her husband and her best friend made her lose her entire support system in ways which made her feel as if she was facing the reentry process alone.

Zach, who was convicted of a sex crime, was rejected by his family, who felt they could not trust him and were unsafe in his presence. Losing his wife and any involvement in his children’s lives made him lose trust in humanity by compounding his traumatizing experiences in prison. Luke similarly described how prisonization made him snap at his daughter when she took food from his plate, a strict prison prohibition despite his wife’s admonishment that he is no longer subject to the rules he was in prison. Dealing with the mental turmoil of rebuilding trust was difficult for Luke and his peers, as they learned in prison to never trust those around him.

Freedom/Independence

10.8% of participants described experiencing a loss of freedom and independence post-release because their criminal records impeded their abilities to be self-sufficient and required them to rely on loved ones for help and support. Fiona explains that she had to be paroled out to her ex-husband’s house because she could not afford to be on her own yet. She mentions that the other women she knows have been forced parole out to family members’ homes like her because of their inability to be self-sufficient. Many of the participants mention having to return to homes where their relationships were fractured, which influenced their reentry journey, which created additional demands for money and resources on already strained relationships.

Transformative Loss

Incarceration-related cumulative grief involves positive and negative losses as well as a critical third form of loss: transformative loss, which entails the improved relationships, improved self-worth and self-awareness, and advocacy for others (or self) participants regarded themselves as having gained in the process of experiencing both positive and negative incarceration-related losses. Our participants depicted transformative loss as the most nuanced aspect of cumulative grief because it entailed acknowledgment of how the positive and negative losses comprising the experience of incarceration combined to help them envision new ways of being and/or relating to the world around them.

Improved Relationships

17.6% of participants believed they experienced improved relationships due to incarceration because they were able to become a better version of themselves and foster better relationships with loved ones. For example, Joe explained, “if I wouldn’t have gotten in trouble and I wouldn’t have gone to prison it wouldn’t have stopped I would’ve destroyed any microfiber of anything left between my family and I.” Like Joe, some of our participants described prison as preventing them from further damaging their relationships and even helping them to repair their relationships with loved ones. Tim mentioned that he was able to learn better communication and parenting skills through prison programs on topics he had never considered prior to his incarceration. Some participants mentioned a pivotal moment in prison, such as Jimmy, who felt motivated to become a better parent after a prison teacher asked him what he was willing to do for his children.

Bruce explained how going to prison forced him to get sober through support groups where he learned communication skills which helped him to regain custody of his son and improved other family relationships. Ultimately, Bruce’s time in prison allowed for reparation of the father-son bond that was damaged prior to his incarceration. Frank similarly noted how, “Our poor choices affect more than just us, right? I’ve been lucky to have a lot of supportive family.” While his behavior damaged relationships prior to his incarceration, his time in prison was a motivating factor for him to work on himself and repair his relationships.

Improved Self-Worth and Self-Awareness

43.2% of participants felt an improved sense of self-worth and self-awareness as a direct result of experiences they had in prison. For example, Niall explained how he learned to rely on his parole officer for support after realizing that relying on others was not a sign of maturity and self-awareness rather than weakness. Other participants described the importance of recognizing their self-worth and having self-confidence, while recognizing the need for others’ support to make significant life changes.

For example, Hank recounted how becoming involved with Narcotics Anonymous during prison allowed him to realize drugs were not worth losing time with his children, which caused him to reevaluate his values and practice self-awareness. Like many of our participants, Hank claimed that prison saved his life.

Vern mentions that he took every class or program offered while he was incarcerated so he could reach his goal of being a better person, which allowed him to develop connections with his caseworkers and peers, which in turn bolstered his self-worth.

Advocacy for Others or Self

12.2% of participants believed prison pushed them to become an advocate because of what they learned while incarcerated. Nathaniel disclosed how post-release, his old friends were attempting to rekindle their relationships, which revolved around substance misuse and other lawbreaking behaviors. He learned in prison that he needed to advocate for himself or else he would slip into his old habits and by saying no, he advocated for himself and his new life. “I was finally ready to face every issue,” Nathaniel explained “just ready to change and become a better man because I knew all the stuff they were teaching [in prison] but I never applied it [until I was released].”

Eric, whose wife began a new intimate relationship while he was in prison, learned after his release that her new partner was abusive. He put aside his resentment regarding her choices and helped her learn to advocate for herself so she could leave the abusive relationship. She attempted to rekindle her relationship with Eric, but he quickly had a change of mindset as he reflected on the importance of boundaries he had learned in prison, which allowed him to be both an advocate for her and for himself in setting boundaries around their relationship.

DISCUSSION

The present study introduces incarceration-related cumulative grief, which was pervasive among the formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in this project. The present study offers a contribution to existing literature on cumulative grief examining formerly incarcerated people’s experiences of loss beyond bereavement. Given that incarceration is itself a form of civil death due to the loss of rights and status accompanying it, understanding the role of cumulative grief related to incarceration can help forensic social workers in their mandate to assist formerly incarcerated people. The present study found that people who have been to prison deal with three main loss categories: positive loss, negative loss, and transformative loss.

The loss of relationships was the most frequently experienced loss mentioned by participants, echoing research findings by others indicating that being removed from the outside world and placed in the prison environment impacts relationships and makes them more difficult to maintain (Comfort, 2003; Boppre et al., 2022; Aiello & McCorkel, 2018). Individuals who have been to prison experience multiple traumatic life experiences simultaneously that collectively result in three forms of cumulative grief. Previous literature supports the present finding that individuals deal with prisonization and the prison social climate which can create a negative environment and emotions (Bosma et al., 2022; McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2021) which may result in traumatic experiences leading to cumulative grief. Being exposed to prisonization and a negative prison social climate can worsen the impacts of dealing with cumulative grief if there is increased downtime and a lack of mental stimulation, which combined can negatively impact reentry (Bosma et al., 2022; McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2021).

Cumulative grief can also have negative effects on reentry success, as previous studies found that if individuals are not provided with the proper tools to deal with the loss and grief that come with prison, they can be overcome by trauma and stress (Wilson, 2023; Hunt, 2021; Visser, 2020), leading to cumulative grief. The existing literature on cumulative grief in prison is limited but the few existing studies support the present study’s findings. Our participants experienced multiple simultaneous losses because of incarceration that are unique to the environment they are in which is similar to Hunt’s (2021) idea of catalogue losses and disenfranchised grief (Visser, 2020). In addition, we found that some participants mentioned reverting to criminal behavior upon their release(s) before the interviews, which we can assume is because of the inability to properly cope with the cumulative grief they experience. This is supported by Wilson’s (2023) theory of

Prisoners’ Grief Overload which states that the overload of emotions associated with bereavement can lead to recidivism.

Studies of grief in prison have focused largely on the bereavement process because of the difficulties individuals who are incarcerated experience with respect to how their physical removal makes it challenging to cope with death (Slim, 2023; Wilson et al., 2022). The present study finds that cumulative grief is in fact much more expansive for formerly incarcerated people and includes more holistic forms of loss that are unrelated to death and the bereavement process. Understanding the three forms of losses—positive, negative, and transformative— that individuals experience while incarcerated can assist forensic social workers, and other correctional practitioners, in formulating evidence-based practices.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Understanding how incarceration impacts people both during and after their time in prison is important for forensic social workers. Knowing the possible types of loss an individual may deal with allows forensic social workers to tailor their services and treatment methods to clients based on the categories of loss identified in the present study. For example, creating an instrument or set of criteria that uses a strength-based approach to effectively identify whether an individual is experiencing cumulative grief would allow forensic social workers to readily target areas that may need to be addressed upon intake, ensuring that assessment and treatment are more effective for the incarcerated individual. This may help with future reentry success, as individuals have been able to properly work through cumulative grief before release while simultaneously promoting a positive mindset that ensures focus on their strengths that can be applied in their life upon release.

Results from the present study also suggest that peer-support specialist programs become an integral part of incarcerated individuals’ lives during incarceration and upon release. This would provide individuals with one-on-one support from a peer who has likely experienced cumulative grief and the trauma related to it. Providing a peer-support specialist to incarcerated individuals and individuals on parole shows that they can successfully experience and navigate cumulative grief. Individuals who experience cumulative grief may feel that their trauma is not identified and reinforced by the rest of society because of its nonconventionality, but by providing peer support they will be seen and understood in their experiences. Their trauma is acknowledged and validated by peer support specialists, promoting successful reentry. We suggest that this program be overseen by forensic social workers as they can provide resources and treatment plans ensuring that the program is successful for both parties and they embody the knowledge of the integral parts of cumulative grief that peer support specialists do not.

Additional research is necessary to fully understand incarceration-related cumulative grief as a multifaceted phenomenon which continues to impact people long after their release from prison. To enact any real and meaningful change, there needs to be a wealth of information and studies further supporting our findings of cumulative grief and its various manifestation during and after incarceration.

The present study found that incarcerated individuals experience a more nuanced form of grief than identified in previous literature through three distinct types of loss which together constitute cumulative grief: positive, negative, and transformative loss. While forensic social workers who provide services in correctional settings are well-versed in the myriad forms of loss associated with incarceration, the authors argue incarceration-related cumulative grief requires specific treatment. Understanding how cumulative grief manifests among formerly incarcerated individuals allows forensic social workers to effectively identify, diagnose, and adapt treatment methods to clients’ specific needs. This ensures that individuals who are released from prison are able to cope with the cumulative grief they experienced while achieving successful reintegration into society.

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