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"I don't want them investigating shit and taking my kids": Controlling Images and Chicanas' Decarceral Motherwork in Police Encounters

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ABSTRACT

While research has begun to document the criminalization of Latinas, few studies have examined their direct interactions with law enforcement. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the ideological discourses that shape Latina mothers' carceral encounters and the maternal strategies they employ to protect their children from carceral state intervention and violence. Drawing on life-history interviews with 32 system-involved Mexican American ("Chicana") mothers, this study finds that respondents' carceral encounters are profoundly influenced by law enforcement's perception of them as criminal gang members. The "Chicana gang banger" controlling image criminalizes Chicanas' racialized, gendered, sexualized, and maternal identities, thereby legitimizing heightened and aggressive policing practices targeted at these women. To safeguard their children under increased surveillance and scrutiny, participants engaged in a form of mothering that Gurusami (2019) calls "decarceral motherwork." Extending this framework, I identify two context-specific subtypes of decarceral maternal labor—anti-carceral compliance and fighting back—that respondents used to mitigate carceral threats to their mothering roles. I argue that Chicanas' decarceral motherwork not only addresses the immediate and long-term needs of their children but also challenges prevailing stereotypes of maternal unfitness by demonstrating Chicana mothers' radical love and unwavering commitment to protect their children no matter the cost.

Motherhood is not a protected status for those situated at the axes of multiple systems of oppression (Chavez 2004; Collins 2000; Elliott and Reid 2019; Gutiérrez 2008; Roberts 2002). System-involved[1] mothers of color are particularly vulnerable to criminalizing logics that construct them as maternally unfit. This construction is sustained by racist, heterosexist controlling narratives perpetuated by institutional actors that justify extensive carceral state surveillance, intervention, and violence.

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Key words: Chicanas; Decarceral motherwork; criminalization; controlling images; cholas.

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Navigating motherhood under the "gaze of the carceral state" then necessitates resilient and resistant parenting strategies aimed at safeguarding children's safety and well-being while mitigating the impact of state intervention.

Gurusami (2019:139) introduced "decarceral motherwork" to capture the "creative and ingenious... gender-racialized anti-carceral" maternal labor formerly incarcerated Black mothers perform in response to the everyday policing of Black motherhood. This research, and Black feminist scholarship more broadly, captures how system-involved Black mothers labor to protect their children under state restriction, surveillance, and stigma, challenging stereotypes of maternal negligence in the process (Banks 2022; Garcia-Hallett 2022; Gurusami 2019; Mitchell and Davis 2019; Williams, Spencer, and Wilson 2021). While these insights lay a critical foundation for understanding the criminalization of racialized motherhood, they simultaneously expose a notable gap in research on system-involved Latina mothers, who, given the pervasiveness of carcerality, parent under comparable carceral conditions. Although recent studies have begun to explore Latina criminalization (Garcia-Hallett 2022; Lerma 2023; Maldonado-Fabela 2022; Salinas and Santos 2023), the carceral encounters[2] of Latina mothers, for whom motherhood likewise does not afford a shield against criminalization—it may, rather, be the very crux of it—remain underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by extending the decarceral motherwork framework to system-involved Mexican American, or "Chicana,"[3] mothers using the interpretive lens of "Chicana motherwork"—a Chicana feminist tradition that understands caregiving as collective resistance to intersecting forms of oppression (Caballero et al. 2019). While aligned with decarceral motherwork, Chicana motherwork accounts for mothering practices shaped by distinct controlling images and enduring legacies of colonial racialized-gendered violence. By bridging these frameworks, this study responds to Gurusami's (2019) call to investigate the varied expressions of decarceral motherwork that emerge across different reentry contexts and among populations differently positioned within the matrix of domination. It is guided by these questions: How do controlling images shape system-involved Mexican American mothers' interactions with the police? What maternal strategies do they employ to protect their children from carceral state violence during such encounters?

Drawing on life-history interviews with 32 formerly incarcerated and system-impacted Chicana mothers, I find that respondents' carceral encounters are profoundly shaped by law enforcement's perception of them as criminal gang members. Although the "gang banger" trope is not exclusive to Chicanas, as it is widely applied to Latino and Black men, the "Chicana gang banger" is a distinct manifestation that criminalizes these women by targeting their particular intersecting racialized, gendered, sexualized, classed, and maternal identities for punitive treatment. Chicanas are widely imagined as inherently criminal, predisposed to violence and aggression, prone to substance abuse, and dangerously subservient to their Latino male counterparts. This exaggerated misrepresentation of "chola" femininity starkly contrasts with mainstream white middle-class motherhood ideals, providing law enforcement ideological justification to view and treat Chicana mothers as criminally unfit, thus legitimizing heightened and aggressive policing practices that differ from those directed at their Latino and Black male counterparts. It is in this context that Chicana mothers engage in decarceral motherwork to minimize their children's exposure to the carceral state, preserve child custody, and mitigate harm to the family unit.

Building upon Gurusami's framework, I identify two specific subtypes of *crisis motherwork*—a form of decarceral motherwork unfolding under the threat of child separation—that respondents used to navigate and resist criminalization and safeguard their families from carceral state intervention. "Anti-carceral compliance" involves promptly adhering to police demands, regardless of actual wrongdoing, to avoid escalation and minimize collateral damage. This approach is driven not by reverence for law enforcement but by a commitment to protect children, even at the risk of deeper personal carceral exposure. "Fighting back" is a reactive and proactive stance against persistent carceral threats to Chicana mothers. It aims to prevent the loss of child custody while also challenging the structural forces that criminalize Chicana motherhood and destabilize Chicanx families. I argue that Chicanas' decarceral motherwork not only addresses the immediate and long-term needs of their children but also challenges prevailing stereotypes of maternal unfitness by demonstrating Chicana mothers' radical love and commitment to protecting their children no matter the cost. In this way, Chicanas'

decarceral motherwork positions them within a legacy of system-involved mothers of color who are redefining "good" mothering "beyond the white imaginary" (Banks 2022:450).

CONTROLLING IMAGES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF "BAD" MOTHERS

The dominant ideology of motherhood is based on a white, middle-class, heterosexual standard valorizing the "intensive mothering" model, which is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays 1996:8). This normative framework dictates that biological mothers prioritize their children's needs above their own by devoting extraordinary amounts of time, energy, attention, and money to their children (Hays 1996; McMahon 1995). Mothers who violate these standards, including mothers of color (Collins 2000; Roberts 2002), poor mothers (Elliott and Reid 2019), gang-affiliated mothers (Maldonado-Fabela 2022), substance-abusing mothers (Baker and Carson 1999), and system-involved mothers (Garcia-Hallett 2022; Gurusami 2019; Mitchell and Davis 2019; Williams, Spencer, and Wilson 2021) are labeled by state agents as "bad" and deemed unfit (Garcia 2016).

Although "any woman who is not white, middle-class, married, and heterosexual" may be considered a "bad mom" (Baker and Carson 1999:348), stigma intensifies for formerly incarcerated mothers of color who are perceived as failing to uphold hegemonic ideals of motherhood that emphasize innocence and virtuousness. Formerly incarcerated mothers have been pejoratively labeled "maternal outcasts" (Mitchell and Davis 2019), "throwaway moms" (Allen, Flaherty, and Ely 2010), and "maternally unorthodox" (McMahon 1995). Research indicates that they are more disparaged than formerly incarcerated fathers (Chesney-Lind 2002), having "doubly failed" as women and mothers (Gámez 2019:80) in a way that makes them invisible as caretakers and hypervisible as "criminals" (Garcia-Hallett 2022). As (Garcia Hallett 2022:15) writes, "Society views incarcerated and formerly incarcerated mothers as criminals first and mothers second, if they're even recognized and respected as mothers at all."

Social service agencies and the criminal legal system impose socially constructed ideas about what constitutes good mothering and implement harsh penalties against women who do not conform to these socially prescribed roles (Garcia 2016). Derogatory narratives that stigmatize, criminalize, and dehumanize mothers who have been labeled "bad" are (re)produced through what Collins (2000) calls "controlling images," or negative caricatures "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (p. 69). Controlling images are not merely stereotypes—they provide ideological justification for the domination of subordinated groups. For example, controlling images of Black motherhood, such as the Matriarch and Welfare Queen, construct Black mothers as neglectful and unfit by emphasizing perceived traits of heightened aggression, sexuality, and criminality (Banks 2022; Collins 2000; Garcia-Hallett 2022; Gurusami 2019). While research applying a controlling image framework to Latinas is more limited, institutional actors also deploy stereotypes of them to rationalize and normalize unjust treatment (García 2022; Garcia-Hallett 2022; López 2024).

Controlling Images of Latinas/Chicanas

Latinas, particularly those of Mexican descent, have long been stigmatized as "reproductive threats to society," portrayed as possessing pathological and dangerously high levels of fertility that threaten white reproductive dominance (Chavez 2004). This portrayal is rooted in the "hyper-breeder" controlling image, originally applied to Black women during slavery, which constructs Mexican-origin women as "prolific" and "problematic" "baby machines" who reject birth control and whose reproductive capacities are likened to those of animals (i.e., "women who breed like rabbits") (Gutiérrez 2008:127). The hyper-breeder discourse criminalizes Latina motherhood, framing these women as "conniving criminals who use trickery" to access state resources that, as outsiders, they do not rightfully deserve (López and Chesney-Lind 2014:529). The consequences of this image are evident in the ongoing history of coerced sterilization of Mexican-origin women that continues in U.S. prisons and ICE detention centers to this day (Arce 2021).

While the hyper-breeder indiscriminately criminalizes the fertility of all Latinas, irrespective of legal status, much of the scholarly research on controlling images of Latina motherhood has focused on migrant mothers, whose perceived deviance stems from their assumed "illegality" as non-citizens (Escobar 2016). Within this discourse, Mexican-migrant mothers are paradoxically vilified as social threats, while also being idealized as dedicated, self-sacrificing "super mothers" (Andrade 1982). The controlling image of *la santa* reinforces this idealization, depicting them as pious, devoted, and nurturing figures who embody the purity of the Virgen de Guadalupe (García 2022). This image aligns with *marianismo*—an ideology prescribing appropriate Latina femininity and sexuality through traits such as modesty, virginity, selflessness, and submissiveness. While *la santa* is not inherently criminalizing, it operates as a regulatory ideal that constrains Latina motherhood to an impossible standard, rendering those who fail to embody it—particularly U.S.-born Latinas/Chicanas—especially vulnerable to criminalization.

In contrast, U.S.-born Latinas/Chicanas—while sharing cultural ties to their ethnic and migrant communities—face distinctly criminalizing stereotypes. These "more Americanized" Latinas are often perceived as more aggressive, sexual, criminal, and prone to gang involvement and substance abuse than their migrant counterparts (García 2012; López and Chesney-Lind 2014). These stereotypes are particularly acute in institutional settings, including the education system (Bettie 2003; García 2012), welfare system (Maldonado-Fabela 2021), foster care system (Restrepo 2019), child protective services (Maldonado-Fabela 2022), and the juvenile justice system (López and Chesney-Lind 2014; Pasko and López 2018). Latina girls, for example, are frequently labeled as "thieves, cholas, and lowlives" and described as both "inappropriately aggressive" and "dangerously submissive" while also "perpetually at-risk for pregnancy"—a contradiction that reinforces their perceived deviance (Bettie 2003; Clonan-Roy 2018; García 2012; López and Chesney-Lind 2014; Pasko and López 2018; Rolón-Dow 2004). Such labeling legitimizes punitive institutional responses, including heightened suspicion, surveillance, and incarceration (Clonan-Roy 2018; López 2024; López and Chesney-Lind 2014; Pasko and López 2018). In the juvenile justice system, this manifests as the "Latina Penalty," where juvenile justice decision-makers enlist stereotypes of Latinas to impose disproportionately severe sentences (Pasko and López 2018). Upon release, young Latinas face continued stigmatization by their probation officers, who label them as "criers, liars, and manipulators" (Gaarder, Rodriguez, and Zatz 2004). This characterization perpetuates the cycle of institutional criminalization and violence that disproportionately affects U.S.-born Latinas.

The controlling image I call the "Chicana gang banger" is uniquely associated with Chicanas and is closely linked to chola femininity—an especially criminalized display of racialized femininity. Emerging from a working-class Chicanx subculture, cholas subvert white, heteronormative, middle-class beauty standards through bold makeup, distinctive clothing, and jewelry—an aesthetic that blends femininity and toughness (Díaz-Cotto 2006; Moore 1991). Chola culture provides "homegirls" an empowering space to express and assert respect, belonging, and cultural pride while escaping violence, oppression, and rigid gender roles (Díaz-Cotto 2006; Salinas and Santos 2023). Media and pop cultural portrayals of cholas, however, reduce them to violent, hyper-sexualized gang members who are pathologically criminal, drug-addicted, and subordinate to male gang affiliates.

Although cholas may or may not be gang-affiliated, they are almost always conflated with gang membership—a state-imposed construction that legitimizes racialized and gendered social control, punishment, and violence (Martinez 2023). When compounded with other marginalized identities—such as being poor, a woman, and a person of color—the gang label becomes a pretext for enhanced policing and punishment targeting Chicanas (Lerma 2023; Maldonado-Fabela 2022). For Chicana mothers, the repercussions are especially detrimental. Institutionalized perceptions of gang membership position gang-affiliated Chicana mothers at the nexus of the criminal legal and child welfare systems. (Maldonado-Fabela 2018 and Maldonado-Fabela 2021) demonstrates how chola mothers are hyper-criminalized through aggressive policing and persistent scrutiny from child welfare agencies, a phenomenon she frames as an expansion of Rios's "youth control complex" into the system of family policing. This broadened system of surveillance and control undermines maternal agency and legitimacy (Maldonado-Fabela 2022). Thus, the "Chicana gang banger" is not merely a stereotype of criminality; like the hyper-breeder and *la santa*, it is also a mechanism of maternal policing.

Building on this research, the present study shows that actual gang involvement is not a requisite for Chicana mothers' criminalization. Instead, carceral presumptions predicated on their intersecting marginalized identities cast them as gang members—whether they are or not—and thus, by extension, unfit mothers. Participants described being criminalized by law enforcement officers who deploy controlling images like the Chicana gang banger to justify punitive actions. This image, then, transcends the policing of gang members; it operates as a broader tool to delegitimize and destabilize Chicana motherhood altogether.

Although scholars have examined how controlling images shape Latinas' institutional encounters across several sectors, little attention has been paid to law enforcement's role in producing and enforcing these images. This is a critical oversight, given that Chicanas are disproportionately policed (Díaz-Cotto 2006; Lerma 2023) and that law enforcement wields extraordinary discretionary power in determining who enters the criminal legal system. Research shows that police often invoke racist and misogynistic tropes of Latinas and Latine culture more broadly to systematically dismiss Latinas' domestic violence claims, attributing such incidents to the supposed normalcy of violence in the Latine community (Rivera 1994). Deepening this discussion, I find that law enforcement does not simply dismiss Chicana victimization—they actively criminalize it by deploying the Chicana gang banger image to legitimize maternal incarceration and family separation.

Motherwork under the Gaze of the State

Motherwork captures the unpaid and often unrecognized reproductive labor that goes into nurturing children's (biological or otherwise) emotional, physical, and spiritual needs (Garcia-Hallett 2022). For mothers of color, this racialized gendered labor transcends traditional caretaking, encompassing the survival and empowerment of children, family, and self, amidst intersecting systems of domination. Collins (2000) conceptualizes Black women's motherwork as a transformative political act through which they instill resilience and resistance in their children against race, class, and gender oppression while challenging dominant ideals of motherhood. Building on Collins, Chicana feminist scholars (Caballero et al. 2019) introduced "Chicana M(other)work" to theorize the collective, activist-oriented caregiving practices that Chicana mothers undertake to ensure cultural continuity, community survival, and the intergenerational transmission of resistance. By centering Chicana experiences, Chicana motherwork emphasizes mothering as resistance to institutional marginalization and violence.

System-involved mothers of color face a complex set of challenges as their motherwork is subject to scrutiny and control of multiple institutions that impose unique threats and modes of policing, violence, and trauma. Ferraro and Moe (2003) describe this as "mothering under the gaze of the state"—a condition that disrupts child reunification efforts and increases the risk of re-incarceration. The motherwork of system-involved women is criminalized through institutionalized perceptions of maternal unfitness. Garcia-Hallett (2022:12) explains, "Across various social institutions, mothers of color are criminalized for their motherwork; that is, they are turned into 'criminals' by some socially constructed definition of crime tied to their mothering." This social construction then legitimizes continuous state intervention in the parenting of marginalized mothers (Gurusami 2019).

Despite these constraints, system-involved mothers of color develop innovative and resilient parenting strategies to shield their children from carceral state violence. Gurusami (2019) conceptualizes this maternal labor through a typology of decarceral motherwork. *Collective motherwork* is rooted in a long-standing tradition within the Black community involving a communal exchange of information, resources, and childcare, and is used in this case to prevent or mitigate state intervention. *Hypervigilant motherwork* involves proactive efforts to shield children from state surveillance, neighborhood violence, and potential abuse via proximity and watchfulness. Lastly, *crisis motherwork* is reactive and involves responding to immediate threats that could result in child custody loss or impede reunification. Taken together, decarceral motherwork resists carceral state encroachment while actively destabilizing controlling narratives that criminalize Black mothers (Banks 2022; Garcia-Hallett 2022; Gurusami 2019; Mitchell and Davis 2019; Williams et al. 2021).

Though it originates in a legacy of Black women's radical resistance, decarceral motherwork is similarly mobilized by Latinas. Indeed, the Chicana mothers in this study engaged in all three types of decarceral motherwork identified by Gurusami (2019). This adaption is understandable,

as the criminalization of Latina motherhood stems from a historical convergence that is informed by the criminalization of Black motherhood—mediated by gendered and racialized carceral logics historically situated in anti-Blackness that now extend to control the reproduction of all women of color (Escobar 2016)—and a distinct historical legacy of anti-Mexican policies and practices in the U.S. that led to state-sanctioned violence, dispossession, mass deportation, hyper-criminalization, and coerced sterilization that targeted Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

Decarceral motherwork offers a critical theoretical framework for analyzing the parenting strategies system-involved Chicana mothers employ to protect their children under carceral threat. When interpreted through the lens of Chicana motherwork and applied to the context of police encounters, two additional subcategories of crisis motherwork become visible—anti-carceral compliance and fighting back. These strategies emerge in response to the unique criminalizing logics embedded in the Chicana gang banger controlling image and intensify when mothers' ability to parent is under direct threat by law enforcement. These strategies not only underscore the resilience and ingenuity system-involved Chicana mothers exhibit while contending with criminalization and intense state scrutiny but also illuminate how they resist and subvert stigmatizing labels imposed by carceral state actors.

DATA AND METHODS

Data consist of life-history interviews with 32 formerly incarcerated and system-impacted Mexican American mothers living in California's Central Valley. Interviews were conducted from spring 2018 through summer 2022 as part of a larger study that examined how system-involved Chicanas navigate and contest policing and punishment. For recruitment, I used a snowball sample, cultivating multiple key contacts to avoid in-network bias. Next, I circulated electronic recruitment flyers across various social media platforms and email listservs. Initial contact with potential respondents involved a prescreening to verify eligibility and an overview of the study's goals and procedures.

All participants self-identified as U.S.-born Mexican American women. Their ages ranged from 20 to 35 years old, with a mean age of 30. Education levels vary widely, from 9th grade to a bachelor's degree. About a third of the sample (n = 9) were unemployed and/or unable to work outside the home. Among those employed outside the home, most worked in the fast-food industry or in the healthcare field as medical and dental assistants. Women reported having between one and six children, with an average of two to three children. A range of custody arrangements was present, but most mothers held primary or joint custody of at least one of their children. Mothers without custody remained in close contact and/or were actively seeking to regain custodial rights through the family court system.

Of the 32 participants, 26 are formerly incarcerated and six are system-impacted. Including mothers with direct and indirect experience with incarceration is informed by research suggesting that criminalization is not dependent on having a criminal record (Lerma 2023; Rios 2011). Although this study primarily focuses on formerly incarcerated mothers who reported more frequent interactions with law enforcement, the inclusion of system-impacted mothers provides corroborating evidence of the hyper-policing of Chicana mothers and the negative stereotypes that permeate their police encounters.

While not the focus of the interview, participants disclosed the extent of their carceral histories on a self-administered survey completed before the interview. Formerly incarcerated mothers, often subject to intense state surveillance, usually struggled to identify the exact number of times they had been arrested and gave estimates instead. Over half (57 percent) reported being arrested at least 10 times, with several indicating 15 or more arrests. System-impacted mothers also had difficulty quantifying their non-traffic-related police encounters; however, most estimated between five and seven encounters, and one mother reported up to 20. Participants' demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews lasted 1.5 to 3 hours, followed an open-ended, semi-structured format, and took place in person, on Zoom, and by phone call, depending on what suited the participant best. I enlisted the aid of an interview guide to help direct rather than define the boundaries of the conversations. Respondents were asked about their interactions with law enforcement, how they believed the police perceived them, and their strategies for managing carceral encounters when their children were

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Name	Carceral Status	Age	Number of Children	Education
Mousie	Formerly Incarcerated	31	4	GED
Ximena	Formerly Incarcerated	28	2	GED
Alicia	Formerly Incarcerated	32	3	10th grade
Lizette	Formerly Incarcerated	30	4	11th grade
Nina	Formerly Incarcerated	29	6	9th grade
Ramona	Formerly Incarcerated	35	4	High school diploma
Lupe	Formerly Incarcerated	35	3	AA
Carmen	Formerly Incarcerated	35	2	High school diploma
Gabriella	Formerly Incarcerated	32	3	Some college
Yolanda	Formerly Incarcerated	26	1	AS
Alejandra	Formerly Incarcerated	35	5	GED
Elena	Formerly Incarcerated	33	2	AA
Mayra	Formerly Incarcerated	25	3	11th grade
Sonia	Formerly Incarcerated	32	1	BA
Luz	Formerly Incarcerated	35	3	Vocational school
Xochitl	Formerly Incarcerated	32	1	BA
Anita	Formerly Incarcerated	30	3	AA
Letty	Formerly Incarcerated	35	3	Some college
Luna	Formerly Incarcerated	34	2	Some college
Iliana	Formerly Incarcerated	35	4	AA
Norma	Formerly Incarcerated	35	2	AA
Valentina	Formerly Incarcerated	25	2	GED
Maricela	Formerly Incarcerated	32	2	AA
Marisa	Formerly Incarcerated	22	1	High school diploma
Tiny	Formerly Incarcerated	30	2	AA
Susana	Formerly Incarcerated	32	3	High school diploma
Lola	System-Impacted	35	4	Some college
Adriana	System-Impacted	25	3	AA
Rosario	System-Impacted	35	4	AA
Desiree	System-Impacted	20	1	GED
Reina	System-Impacted	28	2	High school diploma
Rosa	System-Impacted	27	1	AA

present. Interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. All names are pseudonyms. Respondents received a $25 VISA gift card for their time and contribution to this study.

Data were analyzed using the qualitative software program NVivo. Analysis followed an "abductive" approach, oscillating between inductive and deductive methods (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). The first step was "open coding," in which interview transcripts were coded line-by-line with descriptive codes to gain a general sense of the data. Second, I applied more focused codes to capture themes and identify patterns and processes that emerged from the initial coding phase. During this stage, controlling images of Chicana motherhood and maternal strategies employed in carceral crises were identified. Finally, during "selective coding," related codes were consolidated into one overarching controlling image (the Chicana gang banger) and two predominant mothering strategies (anti-carceral compliance and fighting back).

Researcher Positionality

As a system-impacted Chicana mother from the Central Valley, I share many commonalities with study participants, which, at times, worked in my favor. My shared background and openness about my experiences with family, addiction, and the carceral system often facilitated trust and lessened the impact of perceived differences and status hierarchies. Nonetheless, I occupy a complex insider/outsider positionality. While my experiences as a heavily tattooed Brown woman married to a Latino man who has been documented as a gang member by the state result in above-average contact with law

enforcement, my experiences of motherhood markedly differ from those of many study participants. I do not face a continuous threat from the state to remove my child, nor am I perpetually "mothering in times of crisis." While these distinctions are crucial to recognize, I do not believe they impeded my ability to cultivate trust and engage in open and honest conversations with study participants.

FINDINGS

Below, I first examine how stereotypical depictions of the Chicana gang banger are deployed by law enforcement as ideological grounds for excessive policing and punishment. I argue that Chicana mothers consequently find themselves in situations where their maternal roles are threatened by the state, compelling them to undertake decarceral motherwork. The last two sections explore decarceral strategies system-involved Chicana mothers employ within contexts where they are already prejudicially labeled as "bad mothers" by carceral state agents. These strategies—anti-carceral compliance and fighting back—fall under the broader category of "crisis motherwork" and aim to prevent child separation and other carceral harms while responding to and resisting controlling images that denigrate and criminalize Chicana motherhood.

Carceral Encounters and the "Chicana Gang Banger"

The controlling image of the Chicana gang banger, visualized as a distorted mischaracterization of a chola, is a particularly harmful and pervasive caricature that universally marginalizes system-involved Mexican American mothers, irrespective of actual gang involvement. Nearly all respondents, regardless of carceral or gang status, reported encountering some variant of this image when interacting with the police. Luna, a 35-year-old formerly incarcerated mother of two, was arrested following a "welfare check," during which she was subjected to verbal, physical, and sexual violence in front of her young son. Despite not being in a gang, Luna recalled, "[The police] were calling me a 'fucking bitch' and a 'fucking gang member.'" When an officer attempted to enter her son's room and close the door, Luna "flipped the fuck out" and tried to intervene, explaining, "I don't know what the fuck he could be doing to my son." At that point, another officer picked Luna up and slammed her onto her coffee table. When Luna threatened to file a complaint, a third officer threatened to "call CPS right now." She was then subject to an invasive search conducted by a male officer despite her requests for a female officer. Luna stated, "[He] was putting his hands up my shirt. I was like, 'You're not supposed to fucking search me!' . . . [He then stuck] his hand down my pants... and called me a 'sexy gangster bitch.'"

Luna's account reveals the precarious and, at times, extreme, conditions under which system-involved Chicana mothers operate to protect their children. Fortunately, prior to her arrest, Luna had the foresight to text her friend, "Come get my kid!" This rapid mobilization of her supportive network to intervene before the state could is a form of collective motherwork that demonstrates Chicana mothers' creative resilience during times of crisis. However, this narrative further exposes the racist, sexist, and gendered labels employed by state agents, which not only increase Chicana mothers' vulnerability to state interference, thereby jeopardizing their mothering roles, but also sanction the racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence they endure at the hands of the state.

Criminalization through assumed gang involvement was a common experience reported by participants. Law enforcement often misinterpreted physical markers, especially tattoos, to be indicators of gang involvement. Ximena noted how her tattoos influence police perceptions of her: "I'm a stereotype right away. Stereo-fuckin-type because I'm tatted up. I'm Mexican, obviously... [The police] look at me and probably think, 'Oh, she's a troublemaker, a chola gang banger.'" Similarly, Iliana, discussing her tattoos, shared, "The police think I'm stupid and just a horrible mother, a gang member, [and] a criminal." While tattoos serve as a form of self-expression and personal empowerment, enabling Chicanas to subvert cultural and societal gender expectations (Santos 2009), they are frequently associated with deviance when displayed on Brown bodies.

The repercussions of law enforcement conflating tattooed Chicanas with criminal gang activity are significant, authorizing arbitrary stops and searches. Ximena, who has been falsely documented as a gang member and is frequently stopped by the police while her children are present, expressed her frustration: "I don't think people should be fucked with for no reason like when I get pulled over and searched, especially when I have my kids in the car... That's not okay for my kids to be in the car and

some shit like that happens." While Ximena wishes to limit her children's carceral exposure, being labeled a gang member by the police significantly impedes her ability to do so.

Law enforcement's perception of respondents as gang-affiliated was often influenced by their heterosexual relationships with Latino men, who are also presumed to be criminal gang members (Lerma 2023). "Mousie," a 31-year-old formerly incarcerated mother of four, is routinely questioned by the police about her "gang member boyfriends" and is assumed to be complicit in their alleged criminal activity. Consequently, she has been labeled by police as "trouble" and "up to no good," leading to constant police surveillance. Societal depictions of Chicanas as loyal "ride or die" partners frame them as "bad" mothers for purportedly being willing to do anything for their men, regardless of the consequences.

Motherhood, or at least the protections extended to white mothers, does not mitigate the effects of criminalization through men; in fact, it can exacerbate it, particularly when law enforcement assumes Chicanas prioritize their relationships with men over the welfare of their children. Lola, a system-impacted mother, was eight months pregnant when she was arrested alongside her partner over a bench warrant stemming from a minor traffic violation. Despite pleading with the officer and emphasizing her advanced pregnancy and "clean record," he responded, "I don't care. You need to go [to jail], and so does your boyfriend," implying their late-night outing was drug-related. In reality, Lola was simply picking up the father of her children from his swing shift job. She perceived the officer's actions as punitive—a way to "teach [her] a lesson" for violating hegemonic mothering norms by "being Mexican, pregnant, [and] out late with a man," presumably engaged in his illicit activities.

Law enforcement's assumptions that respondents were unfit to care for their children due to alleged drug abuse were also common. Upon returning home from work one day, Rosario, a 35-year-old nurse, discovered her young daughters sitting in the back of a police van. Porterville Police had raided her home based on suspicions of drug activity. Rudy, Rosario's undocumented husband, who was growing three small marijuana plants on the family's property, ran from the police out of fear of deportation. In the police report submitted to CPS, Rudy was designated a drug cultivator and distributor, while Rosario was identified as a "drug addict." Stunned by this unfounded characterization, Rosario recalled, "Why would you say I was on drugs? All I have done is work my ass off for my family. Why would you even put that in the report?"

During her interrogation by law enforcement and a CPS official, Rosario was repeatedly questioned about her and her husband's alleged ties to a Mexican drug cartel. "They acted like he was running this big ol' [drug] trafficking thing," she stated. Lola recollected the agonizing experience of being separated from her children:

> The girls were in the next room. I could see them through a window, but I couldn't get to them [crying]... I couldn't hold them. I couldn't touch them. I couldn't do anything... There's so many stories you hear and think, "She's probably on drugs. She's just lying." And then it happens to you, and you're like, "How many cases have they lied about?" But a lot of families get torn apart because of one lie. That's what happened to me.

Rosario's ordeal underscores the profound impact of being mislabeled a "drug addict" by state authorities—a designation that can lead to family separation and long-term trauma. Another mother, Carmen, for example, has remained clean for five years but has yet to regain custody of her children, explaining, "Every court date, I think they read my case and are like, 'Fuck this girl. She's a little dope fiend too, just like all these other Mexican cholas from Fresno.'"

Moreover, law enforcement's perception of participants as aggressive served as a pretext not only to dismiss domestic violence claims but also to criminalize them by involving CPS as a means of "protecting" children from their allegedly "violent" mothers. During a child custody visitation, the father of Maricela's child became abusive towards her. Despite being the victim in the situation, Maricela was labeled the aggressor. As she asserted, "He called the cops and said I was the aggressor when he was the one hitting me. [The police] believed him because I'm just a 'chola tweaker.'" Being labeled a gang member and drug addict undermined Maricela's credibility, rendering her more vulnerable to being misjudged. Frustrated by the reversal of roles, Maricela was subsequently

arrested when her visible distress was misinterpreted by law enforcement as non-compliance. Maricela expressed, "I just got upset... Every time he put hands on me, I never called the cops because it's against our code to snitch. Now, he's still putting hands on me, and he calls the cops, and he's the victim?!" Criminalizing her victimization by framing her as violently unstable and criminally unfit, law enforcement involved CPS, and Maricela's ex-boyfriend was eventually granted full custody of their daughter.

Maricela's experience not only highlights the criminalization of Chicana mothers but also reveals the impossible choices they face when navigating state and interpersonal violence. While avoiding police involvement to prevent being labeled a "snitch" may be seen as endangering children by keeping abusers in the home, system-involved mothers know that calling the police often escalates harm and can result in child removal, as Maricela experienced. To manage this precarious balance between self-protection and family preservation, marginalized mothers often adopt "selective visibility" (Fong 2019), concealing vulnerabilities like domestic violence that could trigger further state intervention. As will be discussed, Chicana mothers engage in nuanced decision-making to resist carceral forces and express maternal love, often choosing the lesser evil to minimize harm.

Although system-involved Chicanas disproportionately experience interpersonal violence, they are rarely recognized as victims by law enforcement due to their perceived deviation from the ideal victim archetype (Salinas 2024). Law enforcement's characterization of respondents as violent and aggressive denies these women access to the state's protection against gender-based violence and can even rationalize state-sanctioned violence toward them. For instance, one night, a man broke into Ramona's house and sexually assaulted her toddler daughter. Ramona recounted, "I heard a voice, [so] I went to my kids' rooms to check on them. When I walked into my three-year-old daughter's room, I saw a man jacking off." Ramona's presence scared the man, who then tried to run away. Ramona forced him back into her house and severely beat him. Though Ramona believed she was protecting her daughter from a child predator, when police arrived, she was placed under arrest. Ramona claimed, "He was viewed as the victim, and the cops treated me like a dog. They had no mercy whatsoever." This lack of compassion escalated to physical violence when the arresting officer broke Ramona's wrist while handcuffing her.

Ramona was subsequently convicted on kidnapping and torture charges and sentenced to nearly eight years in prison. The presiding judge in her case branded her a "menace to society." Her portrayal as the perpetrator rather than a victim of violence criminalized her maternal efforts to shield her child from harm. Ramona's experience uncovers a disturbing irony: even when respondents' maternal labor centered on the safety and well-being of their children—directly challenging stereotypes of maternal negligence—they were still paradoxically perceived as violent and maternally unfit.

The Chicana gang banger image stigmatizes Chicana mothers as unable or unwilling to act in their children's best interest, thereby (according to carceral logic) legitimizing intense carceral surveillance that compromises their mothering roles. This depiction was particularly damaging to mothers who embrace chola femininity. Mayra, reflecting on her interactions with the carceral system, shared, "I feel judged because of the way I look, especially [by the] police, CPS, and [family] court... They just assume I can't be a good mom because I'm a chola. And that is not the case; it's just what they decided about me." For Mayra, being a chola does not preclude her from being a good mother. However, the conflation of cholas with criminality undermines chola mothers' parenting capabilities. This stigma has deeply impacted Mayra and her family. Following what she considers an "unjust" arrest and prolonged incarceration, Mayra lost custody of her three children—a loss she attributes to societal biases against mothers who deviate from the white, middle-class ideal. As she lamented, "Because of our 'justice' system, I lost a lot of time with my kids. I blame them... if I could change anything, it would be the discrimination and judgment; for them to be more open-minded."

Anti-Carceral Compliance

Anti-carceral compliance is a form of crisis motherwork that involves obeying police demands to end carceral encounters as quickly as possible and with the least amount of collateral damage. System-involved mothers used this deterrence-based strategy in moments of crisis to avoid state intervention, prevent child custody loss, and shield their children from the trauma of witnessing a parent's arrest.

Though it may appear submissive, anti-carceral compliance is not rooted in deference to law enforcement but in strategic, survival-based maternal labor. It is anti-carceral because it reflects a profound motherly love and commitment to protecting children from carceral state violence, regardless of the personal cost. In doing so, Chicana mothers directly challenge the Chicana gang banger image that casts them as aggressive, volatile, and unfit. Although this strategy mitigates immediate threats to the family unit, it sometimes results in long-term repercussions for system-involved mothers who find themselves further entrenched within the carceral system. Nonetheless, these mothers' willingness to prioritize their children's needs and safety defies constructions of Chicanas as unfit mothers who do not care for the well-being of their children.

As a type of crisis motherwork, anti-carceral compliance often took extreme forms. For instance, Mousie confessed to a crime that she did not commit to prevent CPS involvement. Recalling her last arrest, she stated:

> I lied to the cops, telling them I sold something when I didn't even sell it. I had nothing to do with it... I just wanted to take the wrap because I didn't want the cops on my fuckin' yard, talking to my kids. I don't want them investigating shit and taking my kids. So, I was like, "I'll do whatever it takes to get them off my fucking yard." I just went [with the police]. And, yeah, my kids had to watch me get arrested.

In this situation, compliance was not an admission of guilt since Mousie had not broken the law. Instead, it was a tactical move to protect her children from the traumatic consequences of carceral interactions. Mousie and her children know firsthand the potential harm the state can cause to their family. During a previous raid, Mousie and her toddler son were held at gunpoint while police searched their home for drugs. Despite not finding any, Mousie's son was taken by CPS and briefly placed in foster care. Anti-carceral compliance, therefore, functioned as a proactive measure, enabling Mousie to prevent another unwarranted child separation.

Interfering with the law so that children would not become involved in the system was a necessary aspect of childrearing (Brown and Bloom 2009). While Mousie experienced deeper carceral entrenchment, she sacrificed her freedom to minimize damage to her children. A temporary separation was justified if that meant that her children would not be removed by the state. According to Gurusami (2019), temporary separation is not always avoidable in times of crisis. However, decarceral motherwork often involves choosing "between the lesser of two evils" (p. 135). For Mousie, it was less damaging for her to be removed from the home than it would have been for her children. Thus, decarceral motherwork, while designed to meet the immediate needs of children, may inadvertently expose mothers to negative consequences, placing them in deeper conflict with the state and rendering them *more* vulnerable to criminalization (Gurusami 2019). However, as Mitchell and Davis (2019:430) contend, it is this willingness to "sacrifice personal freedom to ensure the well-being of one's children [that] exemplifies the essence of motherhood."

While formerly incarcerated Chicana mothers like Mousie were disproportionately vulnerable to state surveillance and interference in their mothering, system-impacted Chicana mothers similarly grappled with heightened suspicion and scrutiny and likewise found anti-carceral compliance to be a useful and necessary strategy. During the several-hours-long interrogation following the police raid on her home, Rosario cooperated fully with law enforcement and CPS, even volunteering for a drug screening. Despite passing a urine and hair follicle analysis, police informed Rosario that her children would not be released into her custody until her husband, Rudy, turned himself in. "I was going to do anything to get them back," Rosario explained. "So here I am in my nursing uniform still, looking for him everywhere." The next morning, Rosario found Rudy and pleaded, "You need to turn yourself in because they have my kids, and they won't let them go until you [do]." Rudy agreed and surrendered himself. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison. Upon release, he was deported to Mexico.

Rosario's actions went beyond compliance with standard police procedures; she was effectively co-opted as an instrument of the state in its efforts to detain her husband. However, her decisions were not driven by allegiance to the state but by deep devotion to her children. Confronted with the unimaginable choice between her children's safety and her husband's freedom, she chose her children.

This move directly contradicts law enforcement's view of Chicana mothers as prioritizing men over their children. That Rosario was called upon to do the labor of the state that oppresses her bears witness to the lengths that some system-involved mothers will go to protect their children.

As Mousie and Rosario illustrate, anti-carceral compliance was not just a tool to reduce the risk of children being taken away by the state, it also functioned to alleviate emotional harm inflicted on children. Crisis motherwork manifests as emotional labor when aimed at easing distressed children's anxieties related to the potential separation from their mothers (Gurusami 2019). Within the context of extreme precarity, limited resources, and constraints imposed by the carceral state, expressions of love were vital and "one of the few guarantees they could give to their children" (Gurusami 2019:139). By adhering to law enforcement, system-involved Chicana mothers could address the immediate physical and emotional needs of their children while simultaneously demonstrating their profound love for them.

Moreover, compliance helped relieve the emotional toll of carceral interactions on the mothers themselves. Being arrested in front of their children was described as a deeply painful experience, tinged with guilt, even in the absence of wrongdoing. Respondents conveyed an overpowering sense of helplessness, as an arrest severely restricted their capacity to shield their children from harm. The following exchange between Nina and Lizette illustrates this emotional burden:

> *Nina:* The worst thing is getting arrested in front of your kids... My kids were crying. I was like, "Oh my God." I'm crying, like "What the fuck do I do?" I'm glad my mom was there, so CPS didn't come.
>
> *Lizette:* [When] my kids were there, [the police] already had me in the back of a police car, and [my kids] were like, "Bye, mom." I cried... It's like you don't want your kids to see... it makes me feel like shit.
>
> *Nina:* I just want to get it over with fast.
>
> *Lizette:* Me too.

Like Mousie, Nina and Lizette expressed a shared desire to quickly end their police encounters. Their narratives emphasize that anti-carceral compliance was not prompted by respect for authorities but was a strategic response to manage the emotional distress experienced by their children and themselves.

As these accounts underscore, in times of crisis, anti-carceral compliance was often made possible through collective motherwork. Nina's mother cared for her children when she was arrested, Mousie's grandparents stepped in during her incarceration, and Rosario's entire family volunteered to temporarily take custody of her children while she searched for her husband. The presence of a readily available network capable of assuming childcare responsibilities rendered anti-carceral compliance a more feasible option, assuaging concerns of state intervention. However, not all mothers had a supportive network. When concerned neighbors called the police to conduct a welfare check on Desiree, whose boyfriend was frequently abusive, she was also arrested. Police accused Desiree of willingly exposing her son to abuse. As a former foster youth with no family to turn to, CPS took custody of her infant son. Sometimes, decarceral motherwork is not a viable option (Banks 2022). Thus, anti-carceral compliance was not always a reliable safeguard, particularly for mothers who lacked a robust support network.

System-involved Chicana mothers also modeled anti-carceral compliance as an intergenerational survival strategy, teaching their children how to navigate police encounters in ways that avoided criminalization and bodily harm. Letty expressed concerns about her teenage daughter facing unwarranted aggression during a recent police encounter:

> [My daughter] and I got pulled over in the [7/11] parking lot [by] a white female officer. She started yelling at my daughter. I looked at [my daughter], and [said], "Just shut up, just shut up"... but the cop still threatened to pull her out [of] the car and arrest her. I was like, "Wait a minute! My daughter's

> not even doing anything. She's a child!" The cop was real quick to jump down my daughter's throat. [She said], "Don't be talking to me like that! You're disrespecting me!" And I was like, "What the hell?" That one scared me because she had the authority and could abuse it. I didn't want her to yank my daughter out [and] get aggressive with her. That's what worries me.

Letty instructed her daughter to stay quiet during this tense and volatile encounter to prevent further escalation. Although Letty knew there was often little one could do to de-escalate potentially violent carceral encounters, she taught her daughter anti-carceral compliance as a strategy to avoid criminalization or worse. This Chicana decarceral motherwork embodies a form of protective caregiving in which mothers prepare their children to navigate carceral threats.

While compliance is driven by maternal love and the imperative to protect children, another reason why mothers opt to comply is because resistance to the carceral state is criminalized and triggers harsh punishment for mothers and their families. Non-compliance opens one's home life to heightened surveillance and stricter scrutiny—the very things Mousie, Rosario, Nina, Lizette, and Letty attempted to avoid. However, in times of crisis, fighting back may be a mother's only option to protect her children.

Fighting Back

Fighting back is characterized by resistance and defiance against the carceral state. This strategy emerges in times of crisis in response to ongoing threats faced by system-involved mothers and is typically employed when compliance is no longer feasible. Fighting back encompasses both reactive and proactive measures, as mothers not only attempt to stave off immediate threats but also seek to dismantle interlocking systems of domination that criminalize Chicana motherhood and disrupt their families and communities. Operating simultaneously at the personal and systemic levels, fighting back functions as both a survival strategy and a collective response to carceral state violence (Caballero et al. 2019). Community activism is an important—but not the only—form of fighting back that, like anti-carceral compliance, contradicts stereotypical views of Chicana mothers as uncaring and uninvolved, as well as passive and long-suffering. In this section, I return to Luna to illustrate how fighting back evolved from a last-ditch effort to retain custody to a broader collective movement aimed at liberation from carceral forces.

Following her arrest, Luna made an informal complaint to the police sergeant, telling him, "I don't want to write anything down. I'm not here to get anybody in trouble. I just want you to know what [the arresting officer] did to me. He left marks on me, [and] he traumatized my son." Police responded with intensified surveillance and harassment, frequently appearing at Luna's home and workplace. Luna explained, "They were trying to mess with me or retaliate against me, and I didn't even make a formal complaint. I was just asking to be left the hell alone."

Fearing that increased police surveillance could lead to another arrest and child custody loss, Luna expressed, "I was hella scared. Anything could happen to me, and they could take [my son]." She eventually reached her breaking point, stating, "I just got tired of [law enforcement's] shit... I didn't know what to do, and nobody would help me because I didn't have no money." Frustrated with the lack of institutional support and inadequate legal avenues available due to financial constraints, Luna's turning point came when she was connected with a local activist group. Reflecting on this moment, she stated, "That's what set it off because in that moment, I was like, 'Man, fuck you guys. You guys ain't going to mess with me no more.'"

Empowered by this newfound support, Luna began attending city council meetings with her baby daughter and speaking about her experiences of police harassment and violence: "With my baby on my hip, I'm going and speaking in public. Shit, I've never done that before in my life." Luna also became involved in community watch patrols, showing up to police stops and livestreaming interactions on Facebook. This form of virtual counter-surveillance served as both a protective and long-term accountability measure (Gonzalez and Deckard 2024) and eventually earned her the nickname "the curbside lawyer" from law enforcement. Similarly, Luna assumed a leadership role in her small, rural community, organizing initiatives to raise awareness of carceral injustices and educating residents about their rights when interacting with law enforcement.

As research has amply documented, fighting back is not without consequence (Arnold 1990; Chesney-Lind 2002; Díaz-Cotto 2006; Richie 1996). Luna's activism increased her visibility to law enforcement and subjected her family to continual targeting. She revealed that her efforts seemed to catalyze another police investigation, and her teenage son became the focus of unwarranted attention and discipline from his school's "resource" officers. When a police officer told Luna's son that he had "an eye on [him]" at a city council meeting, she decided to remove him from public school, explaining:

> That really fucked me up as a mom... He was being targeted at school because of the work that I was doing... My son don't be out here doing drugs, running the streets... I homeschool my kids now. They're not in public education... I believe the education system [is] where it starts.

Marginalized mothers like Luna recognize that mere compliance and simply "doing the right thing" are not enough to prevent their children from being criminalized (Elliott and Reid 2019). They thus resort to physically limiting their children's movement and exposure to the police to reduce that risk. To safeguard her son's physical and emotional well-being, Luna eliminated contact with criminalizing institutions. This strategy combines fighting back with hypervigilant mothering, underscoring her commitment to her child's safety while simultaneously contesting stereotypes that depict Chicana/Latina mothers as disengaged from their children's education.

While crisis motherwork is typically conceived of as a reactive maternal strategy employed when other strategies no longer work (Gurusami 2019), Luna's case demonstrates that resistance through fighting back against the carceral system can be both reactive and proactive. Luna's maternal labor was born out of necessity—she risked losing custody of her children if she did not fight back. Over time, however, this labor evolved into fighting for social justice, with decarceral motherwork central to her activism. After securing custody of her children, Luna shifted her focus to eradicating the system that tears families apart in the first place. This dual approach exemplifies Ward's (2007) classification of "resisting for survival," which is aimed at short-term solutions, and "resistance for liberation," which seeks to dismantle systems of oppression.

Luna's experiences are not unusual. After her release from prison, Iliana struggled to regain custody of her child while balancing school, parole requirements, and the demands of the family court system. Recognizing a lack of support for women in her college's program for formerly incarcerated students, she started a support group for formerly incarcerated student mothers. What began as a space to share advice and resources gradually evolved into a site of protest, where the mothers organized student-led demonstrations against police violence. Similarly, Xochitl's activism led her to launch a police accountability initiative and co-found a program to empower system-involved girls of color. She plans to attend law school and hopes to establish an organization that provides Central Valley residents with legal support. These acts reflect the spirit of Chicanas' decarceral motherwork, where mothering itself becomes a collective, insurgent practice. Through fighting back, participant mothers safeguarded the immediate needs of their children while cultivating community-based strategies to challenge the systems that control and criminalize their communities.

DISCUSSION

This study advances understandings of the criminalization of racialized motherhood through controlling images by introducing a distinct controlling image that targets U.S.-born Mexican American women—the "Chicana gang banger." Unlike the idealized "super mother" figure often ascribed to Latina migrant mothers (Andrade 1982; Gutiérrez 2008), the women in this study were routinely perceived by law enforcement as violent, substance-abusing gang members inherently unfit for motherhood. Such portrayals not only criminalize Chicana motherhood but also legitimize intensified police surveillance, exposing them to conditions in which their mothering is continuously undermined and under threat.

Living under such intense carceral scrutiny increased the need for "decarceral motherwork" (Gurusami 2019)—strategies mothers use to protect their children, families, and, in some cases, themselves from carceral state violence. While participants employed all three forms of decarceral motherwork outlined in Gurusami's typology, I identify two context-specific modalities of crisis

motherwork that Chicanas used when their mothering roles were under carceral threat. *Anti-carceral compliance* seeks to de-escalate carceral encounters to prevent state intervention and minimize the trauma of child separation. *Fighting back* arises when compliance is no longer effective or feasible and is aimed at dismantling systems of oppression that harm Latine families. These forms of crisis motherwork offer Chicana mothers the tools to navigate and counteract the daily assaults on their motherhood while simultaneously addressing their children's immediate and long-term needs and challenging dominant portrayals of them as maternally unfit.

Yet, Chicanas' decarceral motherwork is not without its limits and contradictions. Anti-carceral compliance often demands significant personal sacrifice, such as relinquishing one's freedom to preserve child custody (e.g., Mousie) or enduring abuse to avoid police involvement (e.g., Maricela). While this child-centered approach highlights Chicana mothers' love and selflessness, it is paradoxically misinterpreted by law enforcement as confirming stereotypes of maternal incompetence. Similarly, fighting back can escalate state surveillance and punishment (e.g., Luna), prompting mothers to adopt other forms of decarceral motherwork to offset these repercussions. Such strategies, however, are neither universally effective nor equally accessible (e.g., Desiree). By interrogating these limits, this study reveals the complex and contradictory nature of Chicana motherwork under carceral regimes.

To contextualize these strategies, I extend Gurusami's framework by integrating Chicana motherwork (Caballero et al. 2019). This interpretive lens reveals how decarceral motherwork manifests differently among Chicanas due to their specific racialized, gendered, and cultural positioning. Chicanas' decarceral motherwork emerges partly in response to criminalizing logics embedded in the Chicana gang banger image. By synthesizing Chicana and decarceral motherwork, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how Latinas navigate mothering under carceral control, thereby deepening our understanding of how decarceral motherwork is shaped by the matrix of domination.

This study contributes to multiple fields of scholarship, including motherhood studies, critical carceral studies, and the growing field of Latina criminalization. First, this study makes a critical intervention in motherhood studies by foregrounding the maternal strategies of system-involved Chicana mothers navigating state surveillance, criminalization, and structural violence. By extending Gurusami's typology to Chicanas' police encounters, I demonstrate how decarceral motherwork is enacted in real-time, high-stakes carceral encounters, where survival and care must be simultaneously negotiated. Within these moments, anti-carceral compliance and fighting back emerge as specific subcategories of crisis motherwork that Chicana mothers use to protect their children from carceral violence.

Second, this study contributes to critical carceral studies by revealing how maternal criminalization operates through racialized and gendered carceral logics embedded in controlling images. Police deployed the Chicana gang banger to justify surveillance, punishment, and family separation. In this way, the Chicana gang banger is not simply a stereotype; it is a state-sanctioned mechanism of criminalization and carceral violence that operates independently of actual gang involvement. By identifying the unique controlling images shaping Chicanas' carceral experiences, this article expands critical carceral scholarship by theorizing how the carceral state targets racialized motherhood and how resistance is forged through maternal labor (Banks 2022; Garcia-Hallett 2022; Maldonado 2018; Mitchell and Davis 2019; Williams et al. 2021).

Finally, this study advances emerging scholarship on Latina criminalization (see, for example, Garcia-Hallett 2022; Lerma 2023; Maldonado-Fabela 2022; Restrepo 2019; Salinas 2024) by focusing on Chicanas' interactions with the police, revealing how their experiences of street-level criminalization are mediated by carceral actors' negative perceptions of their maternal identities. While previous research has shown that criminalization for system-involved Latinas is often influenced by their interpersonal relationships with Latino men (Lerma 2023), this investigation uncovers a critical nuance: criminalization through men is exacerbated by motherhood and imposes greater consequences for mothers. By examining how Latina/Chicana mothers labor to protect their children amid heightened state surveillance, policing, and punishment, this study offers a more complete understanding of how they experience and navigate criminalization in their everyday lives.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without its limitations, notably the underrepresentation of system-impacted mothers, whose experiences are equally susceptible to criminalization and warrant greater scholarly focus. Future research could specifically highlight the experiences of

system-impacted Latina mothers, examining the complexities of their motherwork in the context of criminalization, as well as similarities and differences in comparison to their incarcerated and formerly incarcerated counterparts. Furthermore, although this study focused on one form of fighting back (i.e., through activism), there is evidence that respondents employed various resistance strategies, including physically fighting back (as in Ramona's case). Such instances were beyond the scope of this paper, but suggest even greater variation in the types of crisis motherwork that should be explored.[4]

The ability of system-involved Chicana mothers to parent their children effectively within the "private sphere" is significantly constrained by a carceral system that infiltrates family life and dispenses its most devastating collateral consequences. The maternal strategies they employ in moments of crisis are necessarily multifaceted, adaptive, resilient, and resistant. However, their efforts extend beyond mere survival; they represent a radical act of defiance against the carceral state and a refusal to be reduced to institutionalized labels of maternal unfitness. Though denied access to hegemonic ideals of motherhood, the selfless love these mothers exhibit is a powerful testament to the devotion they carry for their children. Such motherwork should be celebrated and revered, not criminalized.

ENDNOTES

1. "System-involved" refers to incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and "system-impacted" individuals, or those who have been significantly affected by a loved one's incarceration.
2. "Carceral encounters" refers to interactions between individuals and carceral state agents, such as law enforcement, child welfare, and healthcare officials. Although such encounters can involve a range of carceral state actors, this paper focuses on Latinas' street-level interactions with the police.
3. The term "Chicana," which emerged during the 1960s Chicano Movement as an assertion of ethnic pride, cultural identity, and political consciousness, is often used colloquially to refer to women of Mexican descent living in the U.S. While not all Mexican American women embrace this term, the women in this study do. Therefore, I use "Mexican American" and "Chicana" interchangeably when describing participants, while "Latina" refers more broadly to women of Latin American descent.
4. A sustained analysis of "fighting back" will be pursued in a future publication.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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