

Article

A Shared Sorrow: Conceptualizing Mass Carceral Grief

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Abstract

The communities that develop in prison are often small, insular, and central to the experience of incarceration. In these carceral communities, the deaths of individuals—especially those integral to these groups—can echo heavily within a housing unit, and even an entire institution, resulting in a collective experience of grief. While grief is experienced universally, it manifests in unique ways in the carceral context. The shared sorrow, loss, and sadness characterizing the experiences of those left behind are central to this form of mourning, and among imprisoned communities, grief is experienced uniquely. This paper draws on semi-structured interviews with 58 men imprisoned during the COVID-19 pandemic in an institution where over a dozen men died in a relatively short time. Their experiences suggest that, while grieving in prison is often complicated and may be repressed by both the individual and the carceral institution, bereavement may take a different form when experienced collectively and broadly within the carceral context. We develop the concept of *mass carceral grief* to explain this phenomenon. While unique in many ways, the lessons on carceral grief from this public health crisis can inform our broader understanding of how loss impacts those incarcerated.



Academic Editor: Justin Donald Strong

Received: 3 July 2025

Revised: 15 September 2025

Accepted: 23 September 2025

Published: 26 September 2025

Citation: Horowitz, Veronica L., Sirat Kaur, Synøve N. Andersen, and Jordan M. Hyatt. 2025. A Shared Sorrow: Conceptualizing Mass Carceral Grief. *Social Sciences* 14: 577. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14100577>

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Keywords: prison deaths; grief in prison; incarceration; mass carceral grief

1. Introduction

Incarceration renders the suffering and experiences of those affected largely unseen by mainstream society. This is true for much of the misery experienced by those in prison, and perhaps especially true for both death and grief that transpire behind prison walls. The concept of disenfranchised grief, developed and articulated by Doka (1989, p. xv) as “loss that cannot be openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned,” provides a strong foundation for understanding the nuances of grieving during imprisonment. Subsequent scholarship on bereavement in prisons (Masterton 2014) and families of those in prison (Pocinki 2023) has drawn heavily on the concept of disenfranchised grief to highlight the complexities and difficulties that the prison environment poses for those experiencing loss and bereavement.

The dramatic rise in deaths of the prison population during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sugie et al. 2023) revealed the presence of another form of incarceration-related loss and grief that imprisoned persons endure: mass carceral grief. We develop this concept because preexisting conceptions of in-prison bereavement and disenfranchised grief fail to fully

capture the unique nature of how mourning and loss are experienced by surviving members of the incarcerated community. Moreover, while mass carceral grief in some ways resembles the collective grief that follows from other mass casualty events, such as natural disasters and school shootings, the constraints of the prison environment make it conceptually and analytically distinct (Dyregrov et al. 2015; Wagoner and de Luna 2021; Afyonoğlu and Pak Güre 2024). Mass carceral grief conceptually aims to capture the nature of collective sorrow, loss, coping strategies, and sadness expressed by incarcerated men that is uniquely tied to the prison environment and the nature of carceral communities, in this case, brought forth by the powerful externalities of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Grief in the context of incarceration, or carceral grief, has been inconsistently conceptualized in the literature. For instance, McLean et al. (2024) argue that the conceptualization of grief in the frameworks of both ambiguous loss (King and Delgado 2020; Levkovich and Ne’emani 2022; King et al. 2024) and disenfranchised grief (Hames and Pedreira 2003; Jones and Beck 2007; Pocinki 2023) lacks conceptual and theoretical clarity. The authors recommend using language that better captures both the non-traditional elements of loss and the ongoing nature of loss in the carceral setting. Following this, our proposed definition of mass carceral grief encapsulates the non-traditional nature of deaths in prisons and the resulting compounding effects from these deaths. The use of the word “mass” showcases the large-scale and collective nature of this grief, with dozens of men mourning the same deaths simultaneously.

Our findings first illustrate the broad phenomenon of mass grief that emerged in the study site prison, characterized by many deaths occurring within a short period. We then turn to three themes that emerged in our narratives, illustrative of the phenomenon of *mass carceral grief*. These include recognizing one’s mortality and a fear of prison death, defending the dead, and finally, mourning and coping with grief in the prison context. While these themes have parallels to experiences of grief on the outside, the prison context shapes how grief is “lived.” Our findings make contributions to the fields of prison studies, grief, and speak to individual responses to carceral death.

2. Review of Literature

We begin by briefly summarizing existing research on collective grief as it is experienced in various contexts outside of prisons. We then provide an overview of death and its hidden nature within the context of prisons in the United States. Next, we discuss disenfranchised grief as a conceptual tool to help explain the complexities of grieving in prisons. Following that, we include a short discussion of the social systems and friendships that develop within communities of incarcerated individuals. Finally, we focus on the context and setting of our study, which explores collective grief as it was experienced in prisons during the 2020 pandemic.

2.1. Collective Grief in Mass Tragedy Events

Death has a lasting psychological and physiological impact on people, especially after tragic incidents such as terrorist attacks, school shootings, torture, natural disasters, and political warfare (Dyregrov et al. 2015; Wagoner and de Luna 2021; Afyonoğlu and Pak Güre 2024). Such deaths and losses have been shown to result in collective grief, where the expression of sorrow depends on the tragedy (Durbin 2003).

Current research focuses on the historical practice of memorializing (Durbin 2003; Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2007; Wagoner and de Luna 2021). Erecting monuments and building memorials have historically been ways to honor those who died in battles, shipwrecks, fires, and other natural disasters (Durbin 2003). Through monuments and memorials, memorializing honors and commemorates the dead, leaving a blueprint for

future generations to understand the impact of those deaths. They serve as monuments of mourning (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2007). For example, roadside memorials, such as crosses, candles, and flowers, mark sites where traffic accidents occur due to drunk driving or poor roadside conditions (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2007). Margry and Sánchez-Carretero (2007) also emphasize the performative aspect of memorializing, where temporary or permanent memorial sites become platforms for conveying a specific message about a tragedy rather than mere offerings to the deceased. It reflects the collective experience of mass tragedies (Glasgow et al. 2014). When feelings of helplessness, fear, and horror arise, the collective experience of grief and mourning also evolves.

Social media facilitates open discussions about mass tragedies. It builds solidarity through digital acts of remembrance (Afyonoğlu and Pak Güre 2024; Glasgow et al. 2014). For example, after the earthquake in Turkey, people used social media to express their grief publicly and shared condolence messages as part of online post-traumatic recovery (Afyonoğlu and Pak Güre 2024). Literature explores collective grief in mass tragedy events, emphasizing social solidarity both online and offline through actions that unite people in mourning. Feelings of hope, resilience, and unity emerge through interconnectedness during the memorialization of mass tragedies (Afyonoğlu and Pak Güre 2024).

Social engagement in society, including conversations with the community, local gatherings, organizing community healing events such as picnics, and utilizing local businesses as avenues for assistance after tragic deaths, helps the surviving individuals (Hawdon and Ryan 2011). Hawdon and Ryan (2011) argue that understanding complex grief experiences involves relations in the public sphere; for example, public memorials acknowledge tragedy as a collective loss rather than an isolated one. However, in the context of incarceration, access to social media, public spheres, or public memorials after death is limited due to the carceral system, which is characterized by strict rules and mechanisms that restrict incarcerated individuals' ability to engage with the outside world.

2.2. Death, Invisibility, and Incarceration

One in six people in American prisons are currently serving life sentences (Nellis and Barry 2025). Many are aware of death in incarceration due to life sentencing laws and the nature of an aging prison population (Nellis and Barry 2025). At the same time, understanding how incarcerated individuals experience the impending reality of death is a complex issue. For instance, Girling and Seal (2016) identify several (sometimes contradictory) themes that shape understandings of death in punishment, including hopelessness, pains of death, life, and death as symbols of punitiveness, loss of liberty, miscarriage of justice, mass death, and shared vulnerability to death. Interestingly, this complexity is invisibilized due to both the structural and the legal separation between the individuals experiencing it and society at large (Tomczak and Mulgrew 2023). For instance, while death investigations in society are determined in five ways (natural, accident, suicide, homicide, and undetermined), death investigations in prison are determined in only three (homicide, suicide, and the total death count) (Tomczak and Mulgrew 2023). Even though incarcerated individuals die from the same illnesses and injuries as the general public, there is reduced visibility of their deaths.

Burles et al. (2016) define 'good death' as the one with social support, positive relations with family, opportunities to reconcile relationships, and awareness and acceptance of death. However, by this definition, those who are incarcerated are stripped of a 'good death' while they continue to experience increased fear around death. There is a fear of isolation and a longing for social connection (Ferszt 2002; Petreca 2021), while poor mental health support and poor access to medical services often exist in prisons (U.S. Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General 2024). This escalates the mortal-

ity toll and creates an institutional gap to remedy the fear of death and foster connections. Harner et al.'s (2011) study on incarcerated women's grief in prisons highlights such grief as halted in time, neither progressing nor concluding, internalized with no place to grieve, and deeply isolated. Didier (2022) attributes isolation to the loss of collective memory, which occurs when marginalized lives are blindsided. The invisibility and marginalization of the incarcerated population reflect a broader biopolitical tool of mass incarceration, reinforcing social inequality and distancing them from the American economic, social, and political structures (e.g., Pettit 2012; Burles et al. 2016; Didier 2022; Sykes et al. 2025). The current study also builds upon morality and emphasizes the lost experiences of those who die in prisons.

Media reinforcement of stereotypes and incomplete representation of risks within carceral settings further dehumanizes the incarcerated population, strips these stories of emotional depth, and creates a disconnect that prevents the public from empathizing with their health struggles and overall human experience of life and death (Schneeweis and Foss 2023). Their deaths are identified as non-natural and violent, which leaves a policy-level epistemological blind spot in understanding the landscape of prison deaths (Tomczak and Mulgrew 2023). The experiences of the incarcerated population are often produced and reproduced through the lenses of vilification and negation. The specter of the violent prison death is especially pronounced in media representations of large-scale violent events at prisons, such as riots, which garner significant attention (Colvin 1982; Mahan and Lawrence 1996; Thompson 2017), despite the grief responses of survivors remaining largely hidden. Additionally, due to their label of 'ungrievable' and 'violent', these deaths remain unnoticed and unacknowledged.

During COVID-19, grief within and outside the prisons looked different. In terms of scale, a review of mortality data from 48 Departments of Corrections showed that the total mortality of incarcerated people increased by 77% in 2020 relative to 2019, corresponding to a 3.4 times mortality increase in the general population (Sugie et al. 2023). The qualitative experience was also different. In the general population, deaths were experienced at a distance—through hospital windows, video calls, phone calls, or news (Selman et al. 2021). Families were often unable to receive accurate information, say goodbye, and attend funerals, leading to guilt, anger, and helplessness (Scheinfeld et al. 2021; Hernández-Fernández and Meneses-Falcón 2023). This resulted in an epidemic of grief because traditional rituals were replaced with virtual memorials and isolated sorrow (Petry et al. 2021). Inside prisons, these were not only mirrored but *amplified* due to confinement and quarantine rules, where grief was rendered isolated and invisible (Albuquerque et al. 2021).

2.3. Disenfranchised Grief in Prisons

Disenfranchised grief can occur in any community or group and exists outside the societal rules recognized for mourning (Doka 1989). These rules dictate who has the right to grieve, and they shape the sense of loss and emotional responses of survivors. This type of grief occurs when a loss is not openly acknowledged, seen, mourned, or socially supported (Doka 1989). Disenfranchised grief manifests in three ways: the griever is not recognized, the loss is not recognized, or both. Doka (1989) emphasizes that the unavailability of informal and formal support for those experiencing disenfranchised grief negatively impacts their psychological, social, and physiological health. The incarcerated population is highly susceptible to grief due to the higher likelihood of experiencing death both within and outside carceral walls (see Couloute and Kopf 2018; Daza et al. 2020; Petreca 2021). The proximity to death in carceral settings, exacerbated by health risks and chronic stress, can lead to depression, anxiety, self-harm, and poor self-rated health (Daza et al. 2020).

When grief is disenfranchised, those experiencing loss often have heightened feelings of helplessness, shame, social isolation, invisibility, and abandonment (Attig 2004). This results in compounded loss and renders the mourning process unseen. The process of grieving requires not only acknowledgment of loss but also an active response to it. The active response is a 'constructive' aspect of grieving that, when disenfranchised, discourages mourners from expressing their grief, eventually leaving it invalidated (Attig 2004). Kaur-Aujla et al. (2022) explain that the loss experienced during COVID-19 was non-traditional and idiographic, where the gap between the acknowledgment of loss and restoration post-grief remains persistent. The authors also elaborate that while memorializing grief is a human and socially accepted tradition after loss, COVID-19 sequestered and overcrowded hospitals and funeral homes on top of lockdown restrictions, which led to chronic sorrow from witnessing mass death. These effects are even more pronounced for incarcerated individuals, as confinement in prisons and jails further restricts opportunities for social and cultural mourning.

Though disenfranchised grief has been explored in various contexts such as foster care (Doka 2017), physician burnout (Lathrop 2017), sex offender partners (Bailey 2018), deaths after police contact (Baker et al. 2021), pet loss, romantic breakup, having psychological disorder (Cesur-Soysal and Ari 2024), as well as widowhood (Barros-Lane et al. 2025); there is a dearth of literature studying disenfranchised grief among incarcerated individuals. However, research shows that because deaths in imprisonment are invisible, the grief that stems from these deaths is also invisible and, as a result, can be disenfranchised (Daza et al. 2020; Fahmy et al. 2024; Sim 2023). The dismissal of these deaths simply because they are prisoners supports a rhetoric that their deaths are ungrievable (Sim 2023). These particular losses are often only recognized by those within prisons, including staff and other incarcerated people, and their loved ones. A sympathetic exchange from peers within the prison walls and friends and family outside helps those in prison process the grief of the death of someone close (Fahmy et al. 2024). This social support, albeit limited, helps them in processing and mitigating grief.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a global mass death phenomenon (Han et al. 2021). As Han et al. (2021) observe, the COVID-19 pandemic death toll was often explained and made real through the language of statistics and used instrumentally to develop mitigation strategies. Mass death, which refers to a large-scale loss of life within a short time, is often politically disregarded and subjected to contested narratives in the process of its memorialization (Han et al. 2021). The mass death within the carceral institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic remains an under-researched topic yet demands praxis and reform (Ahlin et al. 2022; Sugie et al. 2023). Historically, however, the mass death experiences of marginalized communities have been politically obscured, leaving a gap in the literature for inquiry on their social visibility (Han et al. 2021; Sim 2023). This failure to recognize the carceral experience of pandemic-related death continues to hinder the understanding of grief within these settings.

2.4. Social Systems Within Incarcerated Communities

The social context within carceral settings is characterized by involuntary membership, as individuals enter their boundaries without prior knowledge of other participants. This context is also fluid, with individuals often being moved between facilities (Schaefer et al. 2017). As a result, the social systems remain informal and are bound to change as individual relationships develop, mature, and falter. Some individuals may remain in the same facility for their entire sentence or their life, while others may stay for just a couple of years. Hence, the social systems within the carceral system are complex and have been a topic of research for a long time largely following Sykes' (1958) seminal work that highlighted the

development of unique prison social systems in which incarcerated persons formed their own communities and cultures that develop within correctional facilities (see [Irwin and Cressey 1962](#); [Shrivastava 1973](#); [Kreager et al. 2016](#); [Schaefer et al. 2017](#); [Fahmy et al. 2024](#); [Hashimi and Schaefer 2024](#)).

During incarceration, [Bronson \(2008\)](#) argues that, like society at large, incarcerated individuals create self-identities that allow them to engage with the social subculture, forming and maintaining friendships. [Shrivastava \(1973\)](#) examined friendship patterns in prison and found that approximately 85% of the incarcerated population form friendship ties in prison. These ties often serve as protective mechanisms to shield against potential violence or as offensive mechanisms to intimidate others. They also help individuals navigate their sentences, offering support beyond family ties. [Machado et al. \(2024\)](#) report a negative correlation between perceived social support and depressive symptoms and anxiety. Additionally, older individuals in these settings exert positive social influence and serve as stabilizing forces. Over time, individuals may start prioritizing peace over violence, and their social support can operate on trust and respect ([Kreager et al. 2016](#); [Kreager et al. 2017](#)). These social ties also help individuals support one another, develop skills for successful community reentry, and remain engaged with organized activities such as religious activities ([Kreager et al. 2016](#)). However, these connections are dependent on factors such as the type of prison, its demographic composition, physical structure, and the role of the correctional officers. Even though violent and hostile interactions exist, friendships within the system can facilitate care, affection, and trust, reducing vulnerabilities in isolation and becoming a source for sharing hopes and fears ([Karp 2010](#)).

The social systems that incarcerated individuals forge during their time help in navigating the institutional challenges. In their analysis of prison survival themes, [Liebling \(2011\)](#) finds that social interactions in prison are most successful when rooted in respect, care, and fairness. In environments where life is meaningless, restricted, and demoralizing, contact with others helps incarcerated individuals find meaning and hope ([Liebling 2011](#)). While the liberty of freedom is stripped away in carceral settings ([Sykes 1958](#); [Horowitz et al. 2025](#)), the social structure, in whatever form, may help ease the pains of imprisonment ([Hampton 2012](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, disrupted these social systems, exacerbating social and emotional deprivation and causing deep distress and isolation for incarcerated individuals ([Craig et al. 2023](#); [Reisdorf 2024](#)). Travel restrictions and lockdown measures intensified the fear for one's life and uncertainty surrounding the well-being of other residents, especially older residents. The lack of communication with loved ones intensified concerns for survival ([Horowitz et al. 2025](#)). [Liebling \(1999\)](#) notes that death in prison often generates existential and moral uncertainty among incarcerated individuals—a dynamic that was intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic through the indeterminate nature, scale, and speed of deaths in prison. Incarcerated individuals' lived experiences are idiosyncratic and distinct from other isolated communities, such as those in nursing homes or foster care. Amidst COVID-19, experiencing mass death, institutional failures, limited social contact, and the disenfranchisement of grief further compounded the inherent challenges of the carceral life.

Following the argument of the invisibility of deaths within imprisonment, which the COVID-19 pandemic worsened, alongside shrinking the social systems within prison walls, we assert that it is important to understand how incarcerated individuals dealt with mass deaths and the resulting disenfranchised grief.

3. The Present Study

3.1. Setting and Context: The Pandemic in Prison

The COVID-19 crisis was a public health emergency for many incarcerated populations, given the inability to socially distance, lack of sanitation and hygiene, shared spaces, poor ventilation, and limited access to healthcare (Strodel et al. 2021; Charles et al. 2022; Maruna et al. 2022; Novisky et al. 2023; Kerrison and Hyatt 2023). Many correctional systems also failed to provide uninhibited access to hand sanitizers, soaps, tissues, and disinfectants, which were essential to prevent the spread of the virus (Novisky et al. 2021). It might come as no surprise, then, that prisons emerged as epicenters of COVID-19 infection and death, with 39 of the 50 largest COVID-19 outbreaks in U. S. in 2020 happening inside prisons (Wang et al. 2020).

Foreshadowing being put into solitary confinement and fear of apprehension also took an additional toll on the incarcerated individuals' mental health (Liu et al. 2022; Vuolo et al. 2023). Dolovich (2020) reports that, due to solitary confinement being seen as inhumane and degrading, many people were hesitant to report being symptomatic out of fear of being sent to the "hole" (p. 13). Didier (2022) presents evidence that while quarantine and lockdown restrictions were beneficial for the general population, they had the opposite effect on the incarcerated population because of a heightened risk of being infected. The inability to access up-to-date information about COVID-19, limited access to preventative measures, inconsistencies in implementation of the COVID-19 protocols, and elongated wait times to receive medical access for the incarcerated patients with serious health issues also increased distress and fear among the incarcerated populations (Arscott et al. 2023). Left isolated, incarcerated individuals' experiences and stories during the COVID-19 pandemic remain underexplored in social sciences research (but see Novisky et al. 2021; Craig et al. 2023; Bardelli et al. 2025).

3.2. Data and Methods

The present study relies on in-depth interviews conducted with 58 incarcerated men housed in a state-level correctional facility within a highly populated Northeastern state in which total mortality in prison from both natural and unnatural causes increased due to the pandemic (Sugie et al. 2023). All study participants were incarcerated for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of their interview. These interviews were conducted shortly after the vaccine was widely administered to a large portion of the incarcerated population, following trends in prisons in the state (Horowitz et al. 2025). All interviews were conducted in person in a secluded corner of the day room of an unusually empty unit between February and April 2022. The duration of these interviews ranged from 29 min to 166 min, with an average of 75 min. The administrative data for each interviewee was pulled from the Department of Corrections (DOC) Records and included data on the individual's race, age, commitment offense, and time served. All participants were classified as male by the agency. Given the extent to which masculinity has been known to characterize men's prisons, the gender of our sample is likely to play an important role in how mass carceral grief was experienced (Hendry 2009; Ricciardelli et al. 2015).

Table 1 above shows the demographic breakdown of participants. Regarding race, the majority (N = 38) of participants were Black, and the remaining (N = 20) were White. In terms of ethnicity, while several men described themselves as Hispanic during their interviews, we did not systematically ask about race or ethnicity during our interviews, and the DOC did not, at the time, employ this as a primary classification. Participants had served a mean of 15.7 years in prison, ranging from 1.5 to 46 years, on the sentences for which they were currently imprisoned. The majority were incarcerated for crimes

of violence, including murder (N = 26) and other violent felonies (N = 11), followed by property offenses (N = 8), with a few incarcerated for drug, sex, or other crimes.

Table 1. Sample characteristics of incarcerated men (N = 58).

Participant Characteristics	N (Mean)	Range
Offense Type		
Drug	3	—
Murder	26	—
Other	6	—
Property	8	—
Sex	4	—
Violence	11	—
Race		
Black	38	—
White	20	—
Age	(46.6 years)	26–68 years
Sentence length		
LWOP	19	
Years	(21.9 years)	3–62
Time served to date	(15.7 years)	1.5–46 years

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3.3. Ethics, Limitations, and Positionality

Following the IRB-approved protocol, informed consent was obtained by Horowitz before each interview. Horowitz has experience in qualitative interviewing and led¹ all the semi-structured interviews used in this study. To protect the confidentiality of our participants, pseudonyms reflecting common male names are used. Last-name pseudonyms are also used when specific prison staff are referenced in statements.

Horowitz' position as a relatively young White woman conducting research in a men's prison likely shaped the research in several ways. First, her gender likely increased the number of interested volunteers for the study. Her gender also likely had an impact on the emotions these men were comfortable expressing during their interviews, specifically in discussing fear, sadness, and other emotions associated with vulnerability. However, at the same time, Horowitz' gender may have reduced the comfort felt by respondents in discussing specific topics, for instance, anger at romantic partners and the deprivation of sexual relationships and intimate contact during incarceration.

A related concern is that the interview data used here were collected in a prison. While this allowed access to a population that is notoriously difficult for researchers to access, individuals currently incarcerated, especially those with life without parole sentences, the location of these interviews may have left some participants uncomfortable sharing anything potentially stigmatizing or damaging to their custody with the researchers. While we did attempt to ensure privacy by conducting the interviews in a semi-private area of the dayroom of a prison unit, all interactions were visible on camera surveillance, and therefore, complete privacy was not possible. However, given the data we collected, including personal and critical reactions to the staff and institution, we believe our data suggests that at least many of our interviewees did feel comfortable speaking in this setting.

While not shared with the participants, Horowitz' direct experience in the carceral system also likely shaped this study as it facilitated her attention, concern, and genuine interest during interviews. In addition, her lived experience informed the language she used when conducting interviews and the questions and probes used in the semi-structured interview guide. Due to her genuine care for the well-being of her participants, Horowitz' positionality also may have increased the potential for confirmation bias in interviewees'

responses. To reduce this, the study used a two-pronged strategy. First, the interviewer allowed each respondent to answer open-ended questions such as “What was it like to lose someone you cared about during the pandemic?” without interruption, even when the participants’ responses seemed to stray from the question. Second, the interviewer consistently offered active listening cues during responses, regardless of the nature of the response being given.

3.4. Analytic Strategy

All interviews were collected using an MP3 recorder with a sound clarity setting due to the loud environment in which they were conducted. These interviews were then transcribed and imported into NVivo for organization, phased coding, and analysis. The interviewer used an interview guide developed independently of the practical and theoretical foci. Three phases of coding were conducted for this paper. The first phase of the coding process followed the open coding procedures as described by [Strauss \(1987\)](#). In Phase 1, coding was largely descriptive and focused on categorizing the experience of incarceration from the perspective of those experiencing it firsthand. In Phase 2, a coding schema was developed, finalized, and implemented. The codebook generated included broad codes, thematic codes, and subcodes.

In keeping with conventions in qualitative research, all 58 interviews and their coding schemas were reviewed twice by researchers to enhance validity and verify accuracy ([Deterding and Waters 2021](#); [O’Connor and Joffe 2020](#)). One code from this schema, “lost someone in prison,” was the primary focus of this study. In phase 3 of the coding process, this code, which included any dialog in which a participant discussed the death of another incarcerated person, was examined in greater depth and broken down into subcodes, as shown in Table 2. The findings below present the pertinent subcodes that emerged from these discussions, informing the concept and components of how *mass carceral grief*, a new manifestation of disenfranchised grief, was experienced subjectively by those who observed and bereaved the lives of the many men who died in a medium-security men’s prison during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2. Major Themes and Subcodes.

Name	Description	Individual Transcripts N (%)	Total References
Mass Grief		38 (66%)	61
Many deaths at once	Losing so many people at the same time	35 (60%)	51
Sudden, No Goodbye	So sudden, never got to say goodbye	17 (29%)	18
Own Mortality/Prison Death		25 (43%)	37
Close to freedom	The person who died was close to release	2 (3%)	3
Own Mortality	Being more aware of own mortality	15 (26%)	23
So much time	So much of the deceased’s life was in prison	16 (28%)	18
Defending the Dead		36 (62%)	58
Close to person who died	They were a friend/mentor/comrade	32 (55%)	49
Figure in community	They were a prominent figure in the prison community	14 (24%)	19
Good person	The deceased was such a good person	12 (21%)	18
Helped me	The deceased helped the participant	10 (17%)	11
Through so much	Person went through so much only to die	3 (5%)	3
Mourning and Coping		24 (41%)	31
Coping strategy	Any discussion of coping with grief	13 (22%)	18
Mural or Memorial	Any discussion of the mural or memorial	18 (31%)	19

4. Findings

As shown in Table 2, we organize our findings into two overarching themes, each of which includes several subcodes. The theme we first presented, mass grief, was highly salient in our interviews and is a preliminary concept that serves as a foundation upon which our subsequent analysis builds. We identify and define mass grief as a phenomenon that consists of two components. (1) A large number of deaths occurring in a short time, and (2) these deaths being mourned collectively by a mass of individuals simultaneously. In the context of incarceration, mass grief is transformed into our second findings section, *mass carceral grief*, which, as our data illustrates, is a unique phenomenon despite sharing components of both disenfranchised and collective grief. We rely on the narratives of those with lived experience to understand the components of mass carceral grief and accordingly organize our subsequent findings around three major themes. (1) Awareness of one's own mortality and prison death. (2) Defending the character of the dead. (3) Mourning mass disenfranchised grief. We discuss each in turn below.

4.1. Mass Grief

It is common for incarcerated persons to experience the death of a loved one during their confinement (Jones and Beck 2007), and deaths in prison occur disproportionately (Massoglia and Pridemore 2015). However, the pandemic created an atypical situation in which many deaths occurred in the same prison in a short period (Maruna et al. 2022). This resulted in the experience of *mass grief* among the incarcerated, with many men mourning the loss of many others who died in a short timeframe. Over a dozen men incarcerated in this prison died within a short period of only a few months. In their interviews, it was clear that the surviving men were acutely aware of these deaths. As James, a Black man in his early 60s who had served about 5 years in prison, noted in his interview:

Yes. There were about 13 people here who died, and out of the 13, I knew, let me see, about five of them. Little under half. I knew them and we talked, and we conversed.

Likewise, to illustrate the scale of the deaths he was mourning during his interview, Michael, a White man who was around 70 years old and had been in prison for over 7 years, stated:

I'll give you another situation. I was in the Senior Center on the second lockdown when it started getting real bad, and we were playing cards, four guys. All three guys tested positive and two of them died . . .

While sickness spreading quickly in prisons is common (Nijhawan 2016; Novisky et al. 2021; Novisky et al. 2023; Strodel et al. 2021), the scale of the deaths was shocking to the surviving incarcerated men, many of whom shared feelings of being completely taken aback at the speed at which such a large number of deaths occurred. John, a Black man around 60, who had been in prison for over 3 decades, describes how quickly so many men went from being sick to dying:

When it first came into the institution, I don't know of anyone who knew that it was going to be as devastating or as harmful as it was. When we first started getting some of the cases, we thought individuals just got sick and it felt like a cold, it looked like a cold. Then individuals started dying. . . Six of the individuals, long terms, all of them lifers, that we have spent over the last 15, 20 years away, all of them died. All of them had underlying conditions, but they all died. It was horrible.

As Michael's quote above notes, it was not only the scale of the number of deaths, but also the speed at which they occurred, that left such a profound impact on survivors.

When reflecting on losing people they considered themselves close to, participants would often emphasize this speed. Robert, a White man around 60 years of age who had been incarcerated for more than 30 years, showcases this in his following statement:

They shut down the library. They shut down the schools. They shut down everything. No movement. “Everybody, stay in your cell. Don’t move.” So no we’re like, “Oh, this must be serious.” Then people started dying in the jails. I’m like, “I just saw him. Now he’s gone.”

Many men expressed this feeling of seeing someone one day and then learning of their death soon after. David, a Black man about 40 years old who had been incarcerated for around 6 years, shared a similar feeling of shock when a man he spent time with regularly died within 24 h:

... That’s how it changed me. To be honest. That hurt me so, it was a crutch, somebody I be with everyday, he pass away. It’s just like, that was a big shocker because I just seen him that day, and I was talking to him. The next morning, somebody came to my cell, said, “They took [resident’s name] away ... I’m like, “no!” I came out for my 15, 20 min, went to the cell, and he wasn’t in there. The same night a guard came through, he passed away. I couldn’t believe it. I’m like, *he was just with me. I just was talking to him.*

The shock and disbelief, perhaps unsurprisingly, is a well-established phase of the grieving process (Bonanno and Kaltman 2001), which was shared by many men. Another powerful example of this was given by William, a Black man around 60 years old who had served over 30 years in prison:

One of the guys that came down here with me, [pseudonym], he had been down 50 some years, and I think he was 76 years old. He spoke to me that week. I’m laying in the bed. When Sergeant *Smith* came to talk to me, he said, “[name] didn’t make it.” “What do you mean?” “He just died.” ... It just goes to show you how we can be here today and gone tomorrow. He died.

William’s point about being “here today and gone tomorrow” is also illustrative of a component of mass grief that will be discussed in greater detail below—that watching so many men die forced many men to contend with their mortality.

4.2. Mass Carceral Grief

The prison environment influenced how men reacted to the widespread grief they experienced in unique, carceral ways. While the experience of grieving in prison is in many respects similar to grieving in free society, we use the phrase “carceral” to draw attention to the ways that the prison environment and culture constrained, restricted, and/or altered the manifestations of grief. This part of our findings is divided into three subsections. The first, unsurprisingly, shows that witnessing many men die in a short period prompted reflection on their mortality. The second, related to the stigma of incarceration, led to a strong focus on defending the dead. The third reveals that mourning and grieving were heavily shaped by and constrained by the culture and structural features of the prison environment.

4.3. Own Mortality and Prison Death

In the narratives of the incarcerated men in our study, another important component of *mass carceral grief* developed from seeing other imprisoned men pass away during their sentences. Bearing witness to these deaths made them ponder the temporality of their own lives and reflect on how awful dying while still in prison would be. Anthony, a Black man around 40 who had served over 20 years in prison, explained how the deaths of three incarcerated men made him contemplate the impact he would make on the world:

One [man died] from my last jail and two here. It's difficult to know that life is so fragile that you really think you got more time than you do. Then when you're gone, you literally are just memories . . .

Joseph, a Black man around 60, who had spent over half of his life in prison, empathized with the men who died alone out at the hospital during their imprisonment, emphasizing the cold isolation of this type of death:

[exhales] One of the worst things, being a lifer, that you really don't want to experience, one of your biggest fears is dying in this institution, dying in jail, dying behind bars. When we see stuff like that, not hearing about, but actually seeing, and then it's guys that you know, you feel for them, you feel for their family, there's nothing that we can do. . . . You don't wish this on nobody. They died alone because, out in the hospital . . . You're like, these are people that you know, people that you're doing this time with, that you done got to be close with, and they died alone. They died with people that they don't even know. You look at all that, and you feel about that, and then it hits home.

For Joseph, it was not merely the fear of death that haunted him, but the specific fear of a prison death, and as such, a death that entails dying alone. In deaths like the one Joseph describes, a person who had served so much time in prison had their life sentence become a sudden death sentence. Moreover, as Joseph describes it, such an isolated and lonely prison death is the antithesis of a "good death" (Burles et al. 2016). Further, consideration of one's mortality and its impact on their surviving, nonincarcerated family members was a sentiment echoed by Thomas, a Black man around 40 who had been in prison for about a decade, who reflected on how easily it could have been his family grieving. At the same time, he considered how the humanity of incarcerated men is often overlooked in life, but also in death:

I could have been him. He could have been me. My family would've been dealing with the same pain that I'm certain his is. This was an older gentleman who fought for his freedom but somehow lost his life in the pursuit of that. His untimely death has definitely impacted me within the last two months because I seen him sick. When he left . . . he never returned. A very important question to ask is, if someone doesn't seem to matter while they're alive, why should they seem to matter when they are deceased? What many people tend to overlook when it comes to the incarcerated is, we are all imprisoned humans that were judged solely off of the worst moments in our lives . . .

Thomas' statement powerfully conveyed the feeling that prison itself had a dehumanizing effect, rendering the lives of those who are incarcerated invisible or unconsidered by others. Another resident, Paul, a Black man around 60 years of age and who had been incarcerated for over 30 years, reflected on how dealing with the fear of death in conjunction with internalizing that fear caused him severe stress:

. . . All we knew was that the pandemic once you get it, there's a possibility you may die from it. Very stressful. I'm not saying I'm this macho tough type guy, but I've been through a lot in my life. To have to deal with that and you're basically on your own. You're dealing with it on your own. Very stressful, scary. Scary is one of the biggest things, I have to say.

Becoming increasingly aware of their mortality was a theme expressed by residents of various sentence lengths with a range of years served, but it seemed especially pronounced to those who had served long periods of their life sentences. For these men, the fear of dying while in prison may have been a constant carceral concern, but the experience of mass grief brought it to the surface, making it a feature of *mass carceral grief*.

4.4. Defending the Dead

The stigma of incarceration is a well-established social phenomenon (Keene et al. 2018; Moran 2012; Tomczak and Mulgrew 2023). In our interviews, many participants, in their grief, seemed to reflect on and push back against this stigma in their narratives of the positive qualities of the deceased and the struggles the deceased had overcome while in prison. It became clear that many of the men who passed were leaders in the institution. It was also evident that the men who died had close and meaningful relationships and mentorships with those who survived that were forged over decades. For instance, as Richard, a Black man around 30, who had been incarcerated for over a dozen years, explained:

... When you know them. Most of them was old, but you still developed relationships with them. They the ones you look to. They'd been in jail 30, 40 years straight without going home. They know the ins and out of being in jail. Some of them you look up to, some you don't, but for the most part, COVID came, and for lack of a better word, it wiped a lot of the old people out. Yes.

In a free society, a person would generally only spend decades of their life living with other men if they chose to. However, Richard's excerpt above showcases how the experience of being imprisoned leads men to live together for decades by imposition rather than desire. In such a context, Richard explains, relationships are inevitably formed. Joseph, a Black man almost 60 years old who had been in prison for over 3 decades, emphasized how the combination of physical and emotional proximity in the prison environment led to heavy, reflective, empathetic, and haunting grief when many of his good friends died:

... These guys that I'm around every day. When you see it, then you hear about them passing away, their face never leaves you because they good friends of your own. It's just a bad thing. You don't wish this on nobody. They died alone because, out in the hospital. ... can't no family visit, and you think about all that. You're like, these are people that you know, people that you're doing this time with, that you done got to be close with, and they died alone.

The connection that surviving men felt with their incarcerated friends who died was profound, and sometimes these relationships and connections surpassed the feelings they had for their family members outside of the institution. Thomas, a Black man, around 40, who had been in prison for almost 10 years, poignantly made this point when he said:

... it's quite a few other people that passed away too, [Name], [Name], [Name], [Name], more, so many people that passed away and I was like, "Damn, man" ... I lost my aunt while I was in prison. I lost probably like five people. When I lost my aunt, I didn't feel what I felt when I seen these men pass away. I was like, "Damn, although it's my aunt and she's been my aunt since was I was born," but I develop such more of a connection with these men here, seeing these people ... talking to them and just it's like we were in the struggle together.

This was common, with participants recounting how meaningful their relationships had been with those who died, suggesting that the experience of forced cohabitation in the small space of the prison may magnify the social bonds that develop within. In recounting their grief, participants routinely seemed to emphasize the humanity, normalcy, and/or intimacy of their friendships in their shared lives together in prison. Christopher, a White man around 50 who had been imprisoned for over 25 years, shared that some of the men who died were real friends, the type of friends with whom he shared meals and confided, not merely acquaintances or superficial friendships:

... These are friend-friends. Not just somebody to salute in passing. These are people that we sit, we eat together. We talked when I was feeling low, I had them as my confidantes. I could talk a little.

While pseudo-familial relationships are often referenced in characterizing women's prisons (Aranda-Hughes et al. 2021; Comfort 2008; Dillavou et al. 2022), in some cases, men described having somewhat similar relationships with some of the older, more influential incarcerated men who had died. For instance, Charles, a Black man about 25 years old who had been incarcerated for almost 5 years, expressed that one man who died was "like a grandfather" to him:

He had been in jail 50 years, 50. Can you imagine? He was just somebody that would just come in, encourage me to keep doing what I'm doing and be there for me when I felt like I was falling short. He was just very encouraging. I looked up to him because like I say he was like a grandfather. I never met any of my grandfathers. Like I said, my father is gone. I looked up to some of these men. He was among the first that passed away . . .

As the quotes above showcase, many of those who died had served decades of their lives incarcerated and were leaders within the institution who helped younger, newer residents acclimate to prison life, a uniquely carceral form of mentoring and guidance. During their interviews, when talking about those who died, men frequently gave examples of how they had been given guidance and support by those who died. These statements seemed aimed at humanizing, honoring, and memorializing the deceased—a possible coping strategy for dealing with such sudden loss. For instance, Matthew, a Black man of about 30 years of age and imprisoned for about 5 years, explained:

He [the man who died] was a Black Panther. We talked almost every day. I really hate the system and I was in rebellion. I was in oppressive conditions and he understood me. He was giving me a lot of advice and he really helped me stay out of trouble, on the right path. Help me read and study, to understand why I was angry and how to properly direct it. To do good with it, not just to be angry and upset, but actually, to do something about it. When he passed away, it was rough on me.

Anthony, a Black man around 40, who had been incarcerated for over 20 years, similarly talked about how his friend, [name] had helped not only him but also others who were imprisoned try to gain their freedom.

[Name] died. He died from COVID complications. It's crazy because he was one of the people that was instrumental in helping me fight, in the law library is where he worked at. You get a lot of admiration for a person that continues to fight for other people's freedom . . .

Anthony's reflections also highlight how the prison context shaped what garners admiration in the constrained space of the prison. Mark, a Black man around 40 who had been incarcerated for almost a decade, shared his experience of being mentored by one of the deceased when he first arrived in prison. As Mark put it:

. . . One of them, I was real close with. When I first got here, I was still fighting my case and I really didn't give a fuck about anything. I was ready to fight at all times and he used to calm me down. He used to talk to me and try to calm me down. He said I reminded me of him when he was young.

Another participant, Paul, shared a somewhat similar story of being mentored by one of the older men who died early on in his incarceration. As Paul, a Black man around 60 years old who had been in prison for close to four decades, shared:

. . . He was our varsity basketball coach. When I played varsity basketball, he took an interest in me. He helped mold me as a basketball player. Plus, he was the older person that I looked up to. He was one of the first people . . .

The importance of “old heads” as high in the social order of prison hierarchy and their role in shaping prison culture and mentoring younger persons, adding stability in prisons, is established in past research (Kreager et al. 2017), and in death, it holds that this is how such men were remembered. These quotes contend the narrative that stigmatizes the deaths of incarcerated individuals, defend and remember their memory, and honor their morality.

4.5. Mourning and Coping with Grief in Prison

In their interviews, men described how difficult it was to deal with the grief they experienced when their friends, the men who had mentored them and spent decades of their lives close to one another, died. Several cited a lack of formal support in dealing with their grief from the institution, even as the facility struggled to respond to the public health crisis. Other men discussed the carceral-specific memorializing that emerged to honor the dead. In both cases, these unique constraints—both structural and cultural—of mourning and coping with grief in the carceral environment constitute the final feature of *mass carceral grief*. For instance, Donald, a Black man around 60 who had been incarcerated for over 30 years, recalled:

Mr. [name], he was another one. He’d been in jail since I got here. I got here in [year] and he came like five or so years later, and I had known him for a very long time. I know him and a few others. I kind of remember how I felt, I felt abandoned by the psych department and everybody else because nobody called.

The absence of institutional support for individual bereavement was echoed by many and seemed to be especially pronounced among those who self-disclosed their preexisting mental health issues. While difficulty accessing support for bereavement is most certainly not unique to the prison context, the inability of an incarcerated person to seek out such services if they are not provided by the institution is a carceral feature that has long been observed as one of the “pains” of imprisonment (the deprivation of goods and services) (Sykes 1958). Moreover, according to Michael, a White man who was around 70 and had been in prison for over 7 years, the fact that these deaths were not properly addressed by the prison’s psych department worsened his trauma:

Yes. I was close to five of them. I think 15 had died. Yes. You try to tell that to people. I went to the psych department here, because I have PTSD, and I think that even made it worse. It just wasn’t addressed right. It wasn’t addressed right at all. I think they should have more people on hand, because I think on the outside, when that happens, people do have more avenues to go to, but we didn’t.

Another manifestation of coping with mass carceral grief was a form of dissociation, “becoming numb,” as Mark, a Black man in his 40s who had been incarcerated for almost a decade, put it.

After a while, you’re becoming numb because you really can’t do nothing. I’m a man, so I’m not going to call my family and complain to them about prison when they got bills and everything that they got to pay, and I’m supposed to be helping them. It’s hard for a real man to complain, but you just got to sit in your cell and fight through it.

Embedded in Mark’s statement above was a form of toxic masculinity in which a real man would not complain but instead would sit in his cell and fight through the grief he was feeling in isolation. This masculine ideal of being a real man may have further exacerbated the extent to which Mark’s grief was disenfranchised. Mark’s statement also highlights how the heavy restrictions of incarceration limited his potential responses, as he, like most of the population who were incarcerated during the height of the pandemic, remained

restricted in their cells (Horowitz et al. 2025; Ahlin et al. 2022; Craig et al. 2023; Santikarma and Wagner 2024). Similarly, Andrew, another Black man over 60 years old, who had served over 30 years in prison, discussed how he had to hold his emotions internally due to the prison environment:

I just felt bad and didn't know whether I was next or not. Here, nothing affects you. You can't allow anything to stay on your mind or to alter how you feel, how you think because of the crushing. It's not hard to lose your mind in here. It's not. If you don't shake stuff off . . . It's not cruel. It's just that I can't think about it because bad news just doesn't affect me. You can't think about it. You can't cry about it. You can't let it get to you because again, you could take it out on someone else.

Andrew's quote above also shows another component of the *mass carceral grief* experience discussed in the previous section, which made men acutely aware of their mortality. In addition to feeling the need to internalize emotions and as extant research indicates (Maddrell and Sidaway 2012; Mroz and Bluck 2019; Kastenbaum and Moreman 2024), memorializing the deceased can help provide comfort and closure to those grieving. The ability to grieve during the COVID-19 pandemic was complicated for many, with stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders around the world interfering with common rituals and practices (Myers and Donley 2024; Santikarma and Wagner 2024). Such was also the case in prison, but despite heavy constraints on their liberty and expression, through the interviews, it became clear that the men who died were indeed memorialized by the institution (and men within it) through two primary carceral mechanisms: (1) the "inmate" channel and (2) a large mural. Both forms of memorializing were unique to the prison context in their heavy salience (being broadcast on the television channel through which the prison communicated pertinent information to the incarcerated population/visible as a giant mural in what is essentially the equivalent of a living room to incarcerated persons) and the complete carceral control over who and what was memorialized, when, and for how long). Both memorialization mechanisms were frequently referenced by men during their interviews. For instance, James, a 60+ year old Black man who had been incarcerated for over 5 years, talked about the memorials of a couple of very well-known and well-liked men who died, being shown on the "inmate channel":

We have televisions that have access to cable, but there's also two channels, two movie channels, and then a few music channels that are controlled by the facility. We had a couple because the guys were so well known and were pretty much institutional, institutions here within the facility that had been here since they had opened, that were very popular, well known. They had little memorials on the TV, 5, 10-min memorials where different pictures and things, and rest in peace and background music.

Anthony, a Black man in his 40s who had been incarcerated for over 20 years, shared that it was difficult to see these televised memorials, even after having learned about the deaths of two men he cared for.

The last two people I found out by seeing it on TV, I heard about it verbally, but then I saw it on television. They did memorializing and pictures of them and showing the different events that they were in, that they had recordings of them, showed them like that. That was difficult.

Steven, a Black man around 30 who had served nearly 10 years in prison, likewise recalled watching the institution recount the lives of men who had died on the prison television channel. As he described it:

They got a channel on a TV, the prison channel. They, I don't want to promote it, but they choose [what] to remember him by. They had pictures of him or video stuff that went on throughout the jail that happened, they video tape everything, so there might be a memorial about him. It said prayers, pray for the family, that type of stuff. They had that on, all of them had that.

While the television memorials were the primary way that men discussed the memorialization of those who died, several men also discussed a mural. This mural had been painted on the wall of one of the units from which several men had passed away. It was a large mural of the men who died on the wall of the unit. The mural was painted by Christopher, a White man around 50, who had been in prison for over 25 years. Christopher described painting the mural as his way of coping with the grief he had experienced:

Christopher: I paint, I don't know if you guys got to see that mural I did . . .

Interviewer: Yes, I did see that.

Christopher: They've painted over it since then, but that was my way to cope. It hit that hard.

Other men who resided in that unit also reflected on the mural in discussing how they learned their friends had died. For instance, Donald, a Black man around 60 who had been incarcerated for over 3 decades, said:

Then they did a mural of all the guys that died, but it was on the wall in our block. That wall was full. It was a wall that was about this big and it was really, it was full of all the other people, and I knew every one of them.

An interesting note about the mural is that it was up for a time, but then it was abruptly removed. The institutional motivations around both allowing the mural to be put up in the first place and suddenly painting over it without explanation remained unclear to participants, irrespective of the motivating policy change. At the time of our interview with Joshua, a Black man in his 40s who had been in prison for a little over 2 years, the mural had recently been removed, as he explained:

They, just took the mural off on our block, but there was a mural of some . . . out of the 17 individuals that I know of, there was a mural, maybe like five or six guys that was on there.

When participants were questioned about the reason for the mural being removed, nobody knew the reason. Michael, a White man about 60 years old, who had been in prison for over seven years, speculated:

I don't know. I looked up there one day and it was just like the whole wall was white. The pictures were gone. Maybe for some people, it was difficult, right? It was difficult for me, but that was still, to me, it was a memorial.

In all, the prison environment combined with the COVID-19 pandemic heavily constrained the methods in which the deceased were memorialized during this period of mass grief, perhaps advancing the extent to which this grief was disenfranchised. However, it is noteworthy that despite the heavy constraints, there seemed to be recognition that it was important to find ways to commemorate the lives lost during the COVID-19 pandemic, manifesting in two distinctly carceral methods of memorializing: the "inmate TV" memorials and the mural.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In all, the scale and pace of death in prison during the COVID-19 pandemic (Novisky et al. 2021, 2023) led to the development of *mass carceral grief* among those

who were bereaved by these deaths while in prison. Mass carceral grief, as this article conceptualizes, occurs when many members of a small, proximate community already subjected to disenfranchised grief by the nature of the carceral context (Doka 1989; Fahmy et al. 2024; Sim 2023) collectively mourn the loss of many of those with whom they lived. As it was experienced by incarcerated men, mass carceral grief manifested as a new form of grief, being but also going beyond disenfranchised grief. While this study focused on men's prisons, there is ample evidence that women in prison have similar experiences with grief (see Aday and Krabill 2016; Ferszt 2002; Harner et al. 2011). These studies show how incarcerated women endure profound and often unacknowledged grief shaped by factors such as institutional neglect and gender-specific factors such as motherhood and trauma histories. Future studies should examine how mass carceral grief develops among incarcerated women and the extent to which gender shapes the way it manifests. Mass carceral grief, as we define it, consisted of three key features: a heightened awareness and distress about one's mortality, defending the character of the dead, and mourning and coping with grief in distinctly carceral ways. That is, we observed, as other scholars have (e.g., Hunt 2021; Sim 2023; Wilson et al. 2022), that the environment of the prison suppressed men's ability to grieve, leading to feelings of unsupported suffering. What is so interesting about the phenomenon of mass carceral grief is that so many men in the same space were grieving the same deaths, yet felt this isolation and the need to suppress and hide their sorrow. This suggests that perhaps norms around a particular form of masculinity in prison (Hendry 2009; De Viggiani 2012) are strong enough to repress potential collective mourning.

Our findings resonate with disenfranchised grief, which describes how losses are not openly acknowledged, socially supported, or publicly mourned (Doka 1989). Death is experienced and dealt with differently in prisons than otherwise. In prison settings, death is often unseen by the public, negated and demoralized, and stripped of dignity, making grief even more difficult to process (Ferszt 2002; Burles et al. 2016; Didier 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, outside prisons, grief was disrupted due to forced isolation, diminished rituals, and impersonal goodbyes (Selman et al. 2021; Scheinfeld et al. 2021). However, within prisons, these disruptions were layered on top of existing invisibility, reduced social support, and institutional neglect. The findings echo Irwin and Cressey's (1962) insight that prisons often serve as a microcosm of society and mirror dominant cultural practices. They also show that the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the institutional constraints of prisons, limiting and fragmenting the expression of grief.

Moreover, it is not surprising that those who died in prisons during the COVID-19 pandemic had been in prison for a long period. This resonates with the Center for Disease Control's report (CDC 2023), which states that individuals over 40 years are on average 120 times more likely to die from COVID-19 compared to those aged 18 to 29 years. Hawryluk (2024) at NPR indicates that long-term and older incarcerated individuals often assume mentoring roles within the prison, and others view them as stabilizing and often redemptive figures. Our study adds to this body of work by highlighting how these sentiments toward long-term incarcerated individuals became even more salient during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our concept of mass carceral grief captures the non-traditional aspect of grief in prisons during the COVID-19 pandemic and the cascading effects of such grief—grief that has not been socially realized. While this paper has now developed and articulated the concept of mass carceral grief as it manifested in a men's medium-security prison in one US state, it also opens the door to many more questions. For instance, due to contrasting gender norms around emotion (Greer 2002; De Viggiani 2012), future studies should explore the experience of mass grief among women or other populations of incarcerated persons (such

as juvenile facilities) where norms around emotional expression may vary. Also worth noting, one aspect of mass grief as we have defined it is the large scale of near-simultaneous death. However, given our findings, it also seems plausible that much of what we observed may likewise occur in an instance where only one incarcerated person dies, presuming that the individual was a role model in the institution, both well-known and well-liked.

Future studies should examine how the loss of such an individual is experienced by their prison community. Similarly, we posit that the concept of mass carceral grief may be useful in understanding how incarcerated persons respond to mass deaths in prisons resulting from other more violent and publicly acknowledged events, such as riots (Colvin 1982; Thompson 2017). Such mass death events may yield similar and/or distinct forms of mass carceral grief, an important direction for future inquiry. Additionally, other types of relatively common prison deaths should be examined in light of our findings. Specifically, future research should explore whether the insights we gain from the components of mass carceral grief can be identified in other relatively common types of death that occur in prison communities, such as prison hospitals, following prison suicide or homicide, and or following execution. Future research could also explore grief and death in specialized prison settings such as hospice, geriatric units, or prison hospitals, where institutional responses to mortality and death may differ.

Although, as noted above, this article is one of several studies to explore the way that grief is experienced by persons in carceral settings (c.f., Couloute and Kopf 2018; Daza et al. 2020; Petreca 2021), it is the first to develop and explore the concept of *mass carceral grief*, a collective experience that like prison death, remains hidden yet warrants further inquiry. By centering the narratives of grieving men, we aim to give voice to the unique experiences of the incarcerated individuals whose existence is stigmatized and nullified in the media. When the voices of incarcerated individuals are amplified, we challenge the systemic approach to their invisibility in prison and in death.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, V.L.H., S.K., J.M.H. and S.N.A.; methodology, V.L.H.; software, V.L.H.; validation, V.L.H., J.M.H. and S.N.A.; formal analysis, V.L.H.; investigation, V.L.H., J.M.H. and S.N.A.; resources, J.M.H. and S.N.A.; data curation, V.L.H.; writing—original draft preparation, V.L.H. and S.K.; writing—review and editing, V.L.H., S.K., J.M.H. and S.N.A.; supervision, J.M.H. and S.N.A.; project administration, J.M.H. and S.N.A.; funding acquisition, J.M.H., S.N.A. and V.L.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Arnold Ventures, The Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy, Norwegian Research Council for Criminology (“NSfK”), and Scandinavian-American Foundation.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Drexel University (Protocol Number: 2008008011, 15 September 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: In order to protect the confidentiality of our participants and in accordance with our IRB, our data is not available.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank Emily Greberman for her invaluable research assistance in conducting the interviews for this project. They also thank the Prison and Incarceration Research workshop series at the Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy, Christopher St. Vil, Isabel Anadon, Shelley Kimelberg, Victoria Piehowski and Lourdes Vera for their feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Note

- ¹ Horowitz conducted 54 out of the 58 interviews, and the remaining four were led by an RA under Horowitz's direct supervision. These interviews were conducted as part of a long-term mixed-methods evaluation.

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