“In and Out of Crisis”: Life Course Criminalization for Jefas in the Barrio

Katherine L. Maldonado-Fabela

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Abstract

Scholars have documented how violence, criminalization, and other forms of control impact the life trajectories of criminalized women. Less research exists on the ways that processes of criminalization affect the health of mothers across the life course. This study examines how the legal constructions of criminalized labels such as gang affiliation, are a process of long-term violence and threat of violence and second, how short and long-term criminalization affects family health—what I refer to as life course criminalization. This qualitative study is based on photo elicitation life history testimonios with 13 gang affiliated, system-impacted Chicana/Latina mothers from South Central Los Angeles, California and connects life course theory with feminist abolitionist decolonial perspectives. It documents how crises perpetuated by multi-institutional violence and other forms of violence influence relations between legal, social, and health related experiences for system-impacted mothers and their families. Through their testimonios they show the intergenerational mechanisms that connect the body’s health, family surveillance, and criminalization processes to survival, and spiritual resistance.

I want to warn you that I do not believe in a beginning, middle, and end of history. I do not ascribe to a linear temporality as the only means for speaking and writing history. I do know fragments coexist, and I want to assign some order to these things, these fragments.

–Emma Perez (1999: xix).

Introduction

The life trajectories of system-impacted mothers (jefas) affect the intergenerational reality of children, entire families, and communities. Motherhood is an experience that can transform the life of poor criminalized mothers such as gang-affiliated people, formerly incarcerated people, substance users, and sex workers, and these are not mutually exclusive (Díaz-Cotto 2006; Vigil 2008). Transformation is dependent on the social–political
structures that influence how mothers respond in periods of crisis while living within carcerality. Scholars have documented how criminalization as a form of social control impacts on the life trajectories of women and youth of color (Escobar 2016; Rios 2011). Here, multiple institutional and familial connections appear to justify criminalization in everyday life as well as larger political structures, laws, and policies (Elliot and Reid 2019; Paik 2021). Ideologically and materially, the groups that constitute a social construction of criminality, such as gang-affiliated barrios (neighborhoods) and people, become a target of criminalization, but we know very little about how poor Chicana and Latina mothers experience this targeting. The conditions mothers navigate that manifest through crisis are constantly changing, and mothers must shift their responses to survive. To date, few studies consider how stigmatized mothers, like gang-affiliated mothers, experience criminalization over the life course and how the criminalization affects their health and well-being. Like Emma Perez (quoted above), I acknowledge that fragments coexist in the lives of system-impacted women who are gang-affiliated and position those fragments and tensions as dimensions of liberation struggle. I argue that our analysis of criminalized mothers and families must be in motion—to fully grasp what deeply rooted colonial ideologies do in the multiple selves that evolve, the intergenerational survival, and the processes of life course criminalization experienced.

This article examines the concept of life course criminalization: the multiple processes that involve state, interpersonal and intrapersonal forms of violence, threats, and trauma that produce long-term consequences and resistances. Life course criminalization adapts to the ever-evolving forms of informal and formal social control and accounts for the multiple structural, economic, and interpersonal social experiences that shape how mothers navigate and resist the consequences of criminalization. This perspective moves away from a sole focus on individual behavior and toward a focus on social location, proximity to “crime,” and the carceral state. It involves analysis of the mechanisms that push for bodies to carry the weight of a paradigm that marks certain marginalized people as criminal, unfit, and undeserving of care and quality health. As Lisa Cacho (2012) noted, the framing of gang members as undeserving people not only devalues their lived experiences but also validates the historical and contemporary practices that isolate, create divisions, and criminalize poor communities of color. This “process of dehumanization is a fundamental aspect of colonialism;” it exploits bodies and land through the use of violence and governing everyday life (Brown and Barganier 2018: p. 62). Gang-affiliated mothers show there is not one meaning that can capture how trails of violence continue through time and generations because life course criminalization requires multiple social institutions to work collectively, even though they each have different responses to families’ crises. Testimonies reveal that the labeling of “gang members” is much more than policing the stigma associated with it because it is interrelated with institutions that sometimes only women and children are simultaneously connected with, such as the criminal legal, child welfare, public social service, and school systems. Life course criminalization shows how processes of criminalization intensify carcerality with institutional interaction, how it affects health, and
produce intergenerational impacts. At the core of this is the cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) to negotiate how to surpass the risks associated with barrio life, and violence more broadly.

Most longitudinal research on gangs has focused on risk factors, violent behavior, and victimization (Moore 1994; Valdez 2007). More attention has been given to the ways that labels, such as “gang member,” perpetuate abuse through racialized gang enforcement and social control (Brotherton 2015; Duran 2009) and the ways that life course analysis of gang violence contextualizes criminalization (Contreras 2013). A focus on women, especially mothers, has not been prioritized, even as they serve as the caretakers and the backbone of entire barrios, during and after their own active gang involvement and within forces of carceralty. There is a limited understanding of the ways that gang-affiliated mothers experience criminalization and violence post gang involvement. This study is not about individual criminals, but rather criminalized people who raise children with the hope of interrupting cycles of violence, drugs, incarceration, and death. I connect critical life course perspectives that bridge health and long-term effects of criminalization. I examine patterns of criminalization rather than crime and center the relation of the physical body to the state. Here, I examine the body to show how laws and moralities are imposed upon them through centuries (Cruz 2001; Foucault 1978), and how bodies change with carceral logics. Since the biopolitical forms of governmentality neglect and leave people labeled as undeserving to die (Foucault 1991; Rodgers 2006), we must deepen the understanding of the processes that allow this. In this article, I focus on gang-affiliated mothers’ criminalization through the intersecting structural violence of the criminal legal system, and branches of social welfare system, and the child welfare system. I examine how the label of a gang member intersects with other stigmatizing labels (e.g., poor, domestic violence victim), and how these intersecting labels affect health.

To capture how criminalization and violence are experienced by gang-affiliated people, I rely on life history interviews based on photo elicitation, collected over the course of six months in South Central Los Angeles (LA), US. As a city at the forefront of studies on gangs, South Central LA is a strategic site for understanding the interplay between carceral control, gangs, violence, motherhood, mental health, and legal and social relations. I respond to the following questions: First, how do formerly gang-involved Chicana mothers experience institutional violence after exiting the gang? Second, in what ways does institutional violence affect how their mothering is viewed and practiced? Using the photo elicitation testimonios of 13 gang-affiliated mothers, I provide one of the first studies of how mothers’ gang affiliation and other social locations operate to perpetuate life course criminalization. Through the photo elicitation testimonios of mothers, this article unpacks the ways that life course criminalization is a debilitating force working against the health of mothers, and ultimately their children and communities. While this analysis focuses on life histories collected during 6 months of 2018, it also builds on my six years of working with gang-affiliated people, and over 15 years of the consciousness developed within my own barrio life and gang network. Building on life course theories (Montes de Oca et al. 2011; Sampson and Laub 1990) that argue for a dynamic perspective and allow for variation in how cycles of violence are navigated, testimonies reveal the mechanisms that not only impacts the criminalized bodies of mothers but also the children, social networks, and communities they are part of. Life course criminalization expands on the existing life

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2 “Post-involvement” is problematized because although street life may cease or some may be in and out of gang involvement, the constant struggle against the state and poverty is one that pushes forces against entire gang affiliated networks.
course perspective by showing first, how the legal constructions of criminalized labels are a process of long-term violence and threat of violence and second, how short- and long-term criminalization affects family health. In the following sections I review studies on system-impacted women and gangs and studies on the ways women experience criminalization and violence.

**System-Impacted Women and Gang Affiliation**

Feminist abolitionist scholars (Ritchie 2017) have articulated how the carceral state impacts the social position of Mothers of Color most closely tied to branches of the criminal legal system: foster care (Roberts 2002), formerly incarcerated (Gurusami 2019), immigrant (Abrego and Menjivar 2011; Escobar 2016), and gang-affiliated (Maldonado 2018). The Underground Scholars Initiative across UC campuses has argued that families who are system-impacted due to criminal legal involvement including incarceration “face the most significant disadvantages” (Cerda-Jara et al. 2019). System-impacted Latinas often undergo power dynamics with the carceral state which shapes their experiences of control within the juvenile justice, criminal justice, and immigration systems (Lopez and Pasko 2021). System-impacted Latina mothers who are gang-affiliated and live in poor barrios where contexts of gangs, violence, and drugs are methods of survival, have not been adequately explored in social science research (see Hunt et al. 2011; Valdez 2007).

Research on system-impacted Latinas and Chicanas often center the carceral state’s role with punitive logics, surveillance, and the impacts that labeling Latina women as victims, criminals, and offenders have to them and their communities (Lopez and Pasko 2021). This body of research includes studies on immigration enforcement’s criminalization (Escobar 2016) and deportation threats (Garcia 2018) Latinas with gang, interpersonal and domestic violence experiences (Cepeda et al. 2021; Valdez 2007), and incarcerated or formerly detained girls and women (Flores 2016). Latinas’ experiences are not one dimensional and often navigate overlapping punitive systems at once and over the life course, and intersecting risk factors that impact health such as substance use and victimization. The multiple intersecting fears, threats, and victimization that happen across the life course for system-impacted Latinas requires attention to the ways that poor women not only learn to navigate systems with survival tools such as avoiding contact with punitive institutions (Flores et al. 2021), but also how it impacts their mothering. The connections between being system-impacted in poor barrios through multiple systems, stigmatizing labels (i.e. gang affiliation), legal entanglements, and long-term health and criminalizing effects for themselves and their children requires multidimensional longitudinal analysis.

Women who are affiliated with gangs navigate multiple institutions that impact how they experience carcerality. Gangs as a marker of organized crime is a mechanism of criminalization, and the regimes of mass incarceration, mass deportation and family policing systems are working collectively in their daily lives. Thus, gang-affiliated women are system-impacted as they are dealing with various legal and social systems at once. Sociologists have explored the ways that multi-institutional involvement impact poverty and social inequality through poverty governance, bureaucratic practices, surveillance, and lack of resources (Fong 2020; Paik 2021), but few studies have examined how gang-affiliated women experience carceral abuse and its health effects over time specifically when they are part of system-impacted families and communities. Valdez (2007) using a multilevel approach, explored how young Latinas who are gang-affiliated lived through different
forms of violence and substance use through their relations with male gangs and involvement in street culture. Their relationships with parents, siblings, partners, and friends mark them beyond risk due to the multiple risks they encounter within gang context (Valdez 2007) and the ways they continuously challenge dichotomies of “good” and “bad” girls (Moore 1991). Similarly, drawing from over four decades of research, Vigil (2008) shows how gang-affiliated women play a significant role in gang life, and the way the multiple marginalizations they experience are built from pressures of life (violence, sexual and domestic violence etc.). Vigil notes the importance of the cycle of gang membership because women are often to be blamed as the ones to create the “next generation of gang members” yet, mothers are neglected in gang studies and feminist criminological scholarship more broadly. As we highlight how multiple forms of marginalization and institutional involvement influence how street socialization occurs for young women, we need to assess how criminalization is a force that works to justify the intergenerational traumas experienced for gang-affiliated barrios.

While gangs continue to be an area of research, and of interest to policy makers and interventions, this work continues to lack the perspectives of mothers who are often blamed for intergenerational cycles of trails of violence and the ways that their visions and survival mechanisms sustain system-impacted families and communities they are part of. I extend this research by centering the multidimensional experiences of institutional and other forms of violence and criminalization that happens through the life course of gang-affiliated mothers from South Central (SC), Los Angeles. SC dominates not only much of gang experience and knowledge about its long- and short-term structure and conflicts, scarcity of resources and responses to it, but also the policing and surveillance that takes place through millions of dollars invested yearly to incarcerate and control people and resources (Dupuy et al. 2019), all of which affect health, life chances, and criminalizing processes.

Connecting Criminalization, Violence, and Health

Building on the scholarship of criminalization which occurs through set practices and ideologies subtle and direct outside of prison walls into community, schools, etc. (Flores 2016; Restrepo 2019; Rios 2011), this study looks closely at the criminalization of women affiliated to gangs. Davis (2017) shows how young girls navigate power and status while being marginalized within different institutions such as the family, the gang, and the group home. Through this contact with the juvenile justice system, these elements are expressed in the intricacies of the lives of these young women prior to entering the juvenile justice system, the time in the facility, and after release, similar to what Flores (2016) refers to “wraparound incarceration.” In the same vein, Rios (2011) shows how youth of color are hyper criminalized through the “youth control complex” where multiple institutions work together to discipline youth, a complex that controls sexuality as well (Chesney-Lind and Jones 2010; Maldonado 2018). I extend this body of work and argue that while mothers are experiencing criminalization as racialized poor Chicanas, and stigmatized mothers, factors of poverty, gendered violence, and mental health are to be connected and examined within studies of criminalization. Criminologists and public health scholars have documented consequences of gang membership on health due to risky sexual behaviors, violence and victimization, substance use (Hunt et al. 2011; Sanders et al. 2013; Valdez et al. 2006) and the impacts to mental health such as anxiety, depression, and stress (Harper et al. 2008; Li et al. 2002). Research from over 20 years (1990–2010) in Los Angeles, San Antonio
and San Francisco has shown specific connections between gang violence, sexual victimization and substance use (Sanders et al. 2013). In Los Angeles majority of the sample (three fourths) felt they would one day be killed violently, in San Francisco 66% of females reported experiences of domestic, family and gang violence, in San Antonio 56% reported being arrested for violent offence including murder (Sanders et al. 2013). These data show the interrelationship between experiences of violence for gang youth and likelihood for negative health which is a major domain of public health. This body of research has recognized the importance of moving away from interventions and prevention efforts that are “suppression heavy approaches” left in the hands of criminal justice enforcement, and instead move to health professionals’ support systems. However, while risk factors associated to gang membership and criminal justice involvement are documented in relation to health, less research exists on the ways these are also interconnected to long-term criminalization associated with multiple risk factors, and the way labels (gang members, criminals) criminalize and form part of the social problem to deal with public health issues. Incarceration has also shown to exacerbate health disorders and expose people to elevated health risks such as viral infections and victimization (Sanders et al. 2013) and because violence and incarceration happen more often in poor communities of color, entire neighborhoods suffer from negative health outcomes, such as high blood pressure and stress (Gifford 2019; Wilson et al. 2000). Maternal incarceration includes serious health problems such as traumas due to child separation and long-term substance use and history of physical and sexual abuse (Owen 2003). Incarceration and other institutional behaviors of criminalization are often justified under logics of punishment, due to this we lack deeper understanding of other forms of violence outside of interpersonal ones for system-impacted people and gang-affiliated mothers more specifically. We need to look closer at criminalizing processes embedded within institutional violence, while blurring boundaries of individual risk factors, this study focuses on the ways that mothers navigate intersecting risks and forms of violence that impact how they navigate crisis. As Bourgeois (2010) notes, the invisible process of violence is legitimized because it is normalized through everyday interaction, and these mothers bring stories to delegitimize the normality behind violence that harms the health of their body. The current study examines how the criminalization of gang-affiliated mothers and other stigmatizations impact mothering and health. Empirical evidence is needed to show how forms of state-sanctioned violence affect the health of mothers who are vulnerable to experiencing scarcity of resources through race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, immigration status, and other factors that influence how punishment is experienced, how health conditions are created, and how mothers learn the tools of liberation. If we are all living under a global capitalist project, then the experiences of state repression require an analysis of mothers’ life course shifts and transformations and the ways health is addressed within violence, and cultural knowledge.

Theoretical Perspective(s)

In this study, I use a feminist abolitionist decolonial perspective, continuing collective struggle towards radical freedom (Davis 2003; Fanon 1963) while placing Chicanas and Latinas at the center of knowledge production. I recognize decoloniality as a larger struggle to undo the colonial violence both within ourselves and larger society and as connected to creating a non-punitive (i.e., abolitionist) society that recognizes the material economic interests associated with control. “At the core of decoloniality is the agenda of shifting
the geography and biography of knowledge—who generates knowledge and from where?” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Drawing from a borderland perspective, the stories and theoretical lenses used form part of a third space that expands on Chicana Feminist theory and lays out the complexities of living in between spaces of violence (institutional, intergenerational), liminal spaces that develop facultades, and the commitment to unpack what it means to speak from a place that is marginal in mainstream research and activism. Thus, mothers in this study, as organic intellectuals, form part of theoretical processes rooted in experience, documenting the histories and microprocesses that are often left untold. While the overarching political project is to center Chicanas and Latinas as knowledge producers who teach us about intricate processes of criminality, I specifically apply a life course perspective, as used in criminology, sociology, and fields of health. I utilize life course theory to assess the fluidity and transformation of criminalized behaviors rather than criminal careers. Sampson and Laub’s (1990) life course theory suggests that criminal behaviors explain the life course outcomes of people involved in crime. Life course theory examines continuity and change in behavior as people age and how events shape future events. It acknowledges multiple factors, like historical and geographical context, social networks, agency, and timing. The theory has been utilized in the past by other gang researchers to understand the process of and reasons for exiting gang life (Pyrooz et al., 2017). The life trajectories of mothers involve not only developmental changes associated with biological age but also the institutional changes that emerge from women’s changing experiences with formal and informal forms of social control across their life spans (Sampson and Laub 2016). This theory identifies events associated with alterations to the life course, such as marriage, parenthood, and incarceration, which can be influenced by structures and markers of gang involvement, making institutional violence and mechanisms of resistance persistent. Desistance research within this line of work argues that the long-term absence of crime and criminality must focus on individual journeys connected with the “structural obstacles inherent in the desistance process and the macro-social changes” and include a “much wider web of influences across the life course, including families, employers, communities and beyond” (Maruna 2017, p. 8). Expanding life course perspectives for criminalized people requires positioning material conditions within specific sociohistorical contexts and recognizing the health effects these trajectories and transformations have for individuals, their families, and communities. The struggle to overcome crisis over time, the methods of survival and resistance, and the social forces that influence how we adapt to change are central to this theoretical perspective.

Further, medical sociological studies on health utilize life course theory to understand how social structures, that is, the patterns of social life that shape people’s attitudes, beliefs, actions, and material and psychological resources (Williams and Sternthal 2010 18), influence life experiences and health outcomes across the lifespan (Schnittker and McLeod 2005). Childhood adversities, structural conditions, and the stressors produced from these experiences can “accumulate throughout the life course to produce cumulative disadvantage in health over time (Ben-Shlomo and Kuh 2002; Hatch 2005; Hayward and Gorman 2004). Montes de Oca and colleagues (2011) explain that trajectories and transitions depend on institutional environments and occur in individual, familial, historical terms. The cumulative inequality that occurs over the life course affects the accumulation of risks, available resources, trajectories, and agency (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009, p. 334).

3 Facultades are a sixth sense developed through borderland consciousness, seeing beyond surface meanings and deeper realities (Anzaldúa 1987).
Social status predicts physical, mental, and emotional health (Montes de Oca et al., 2011, 19), examining criminalized statuses, such as poor system-impacted Chicanas who are gang affiliated, contribute to multiple marginality perspectives that affect transitions and trajectories.

Bridging the fields of criminology and health, I connect the ways that social control via criminalization influences the health of mothers. Thus, life course criminalization is an apt analytical and theoretical tool to understand how mothers navigate carcerality (social control) in their everyday lives. I work from this perspective to suggest that different levels of criminalization from childhood to adulthood, as daughters, mothers, and grandmothers, create long-term health impacts for the mothers and, in turn, their children and families. By looking across time in the lives of Chicana gang affiliates who are system-impacted, we can observe how “human development is a multidimensional process that encompasses birth to death” (forthcoming Cordero 2021). This process includes multiple institutions, familial connections and networks, and ever-evolving forms of resistance to trajectories that hold traumas and violence.

Methods, Setting, and Context

Mothers in this study were raised in South Central (SC), Los Angeles. This community is central to the understanding of gang affiliation, carcerality, and poverty. It operates the largest jail system on earth with the East Side and the West Side of South Central encompassing the largest costs of incarceration across all of Los Angeles County (Dupuy, Lee, Tso, Bryan & Lytle Hernandez 2019). This is a critical setting and stigmatized place (Contreras 2017) that brings to light the carceral and violent experiences of poor Black and Brown people. South Central has a history of gangs that illuminates much of what media and politics center their attention to, drugs, violence, death but also hyper policing through police surveillance and immigration enforcement (Martinez 2016) and struggles that come through diminished social services and resources, racism and discrimination (Rosas 2019). This community also has a known history of coalition building through Black and Brown organizing practices and relational building that develops spaces of resistances across time and place (Bermudez 2020). SC as a barrio, with many barrios within who hold multiple struggles from the Black community, and Latina/o/x community, shape the intergenerational ways poverty, place, and racial geographies influence families’ life chances. As a gang-affiliated system-impacted Chicana from SC, my status afforded me the privilege of being part of a world that’s much hidden to outsiders. As gang-affiliated scholars have shown, recruitment processes, rapport, and understanding of hidden populations are central to the methodology of research study (Duran 2013). I drew on my personal networks and experiences for this study. The sample included 13 participants who self-identified as gang-affiliated Chicanas in the South Central Los Angeles area. They were mothers of one or more children. Their ages ranged from 22 to 45 years, with an average age of 29.6 years. The average number of children participants had was three. Participants had desisted “active” gang involvement, on average, 12 years prior to the interview (Table 1). As mothers who understand stigma from being criminalized, all of them saw gang life as the “past” which is why “exit” is noted here. However, all of them understood that being gang-affiliated was a lifestyle they were part of because it involved a familial love, and networks that most of them were born into. To be active in the gang as mothers was something they had to negotiate for the rest of their lives. All the participants were system-impacted. They all
had direct experiences with child welfare whether through removal or referrals, or families’ threats by CWS. All mothers shared knowledge about navigating the criminal legal system such as directly through incarceration, or victimization (DV cases) or indirectly with partners/families’ incarceration. All of them indirectly had impacts of immigration system via their parents’ migration status, and one of the participants is undocumented, another holds residency status. Mothers all had experiences of navigating social welfare agencies as well (currently or previously on welfare).

To collect data, I bridged visual sociological technique photo elicitation interviews, with life history testimonios. Photo elicitation is participatory, photographic, and visual technique, involves a collaborative process of using photos and images such as drawings and photographs to encourage respondents to tell their life stories. The photos guide the interview and analysis, which are “auto driven” (Clark 1999). Testimonios bridged with visual methodology allows a multidimensional perspective to develop, one where marginalized women share their life experiences through the lenses and tools they have, archival stories through memory and visuals. Testimonios allow participants to theorize on status and experiences through reflexión (Espino et al. 2012).

First, I asked mothers to collect photographs and visuals that were meaningful to them in relation to a study on gang-affiliated mothers. They gathered as many or as few photographs as they wanted, and had the option of presenting the photos physically or electronically. All of them presented photos of their children and families. The streets they grew up in, locations they visited (car shows, prisons, parks, churches). Some brought artwork, such as prison art from incarcerated family members; documents from courts; artifacts such as bible verses or children’s letters. Mothers shared photographs related to their life as mothers and family members (sisters, partners/wives), major life events (deaths, cps cases, children’s graduations) and visuals of family bonds such as prison art and children art. This allowed them to guide what they shared in their testimonio and empower them to become active storytellers of the life they wanted to share for this study. The life history testimonios complemented the visuals as we were able to create a story of their life through photographs but also generate understandings of their experiences through questions about life trajectories that were related to the images shared. Collectively, conversations and

| Participant | Age | Number of children | Years since gang “exit” |
|-------------|-----|--------------------|------------------------|
| Estefania   | 21  | 3                  | 2                      |
| Mariela     | 22  | 1                  | 6                      |
| Monica      | 23  | 2                  | 5                      |
| Lorena      | 25  | 3                  | 7                      |
| Beatriz     | 25  | 2                  | 8                      |
| Cristal     | 26  | 2                  | 8                      |
| Patricia    | 27  | 3                  | 7                      |
| Leticia     | 29  | 4                  | 10                     |
| Mayra       | 31  | 5                  | 12                     |
| Jasmine     | 32  | 2                  | 14                     |
| Susana      | 40  | 4                  | 24                     |
| Margarita   | 44  | 11                 | 25                     |
| Rocio       | 45  | 3                  | 27                     |

Table 1  Sample characteristics (N = 13)
reflections around mothering, institutional violence, gang affiliation networks, trauma and health, and spirituality were common for all mothers. Due to constraints in gaining authorization, these images are not included here, but I hope to exhibit in the future.

Most of the participants of this study I knew before conducting this study, approximately 10–15 years prior. I knew them from direct relationships such as friends, sisters of friends, or neighborhood homegirls. I interacted with them prior to the interview and after as well. Throughout the data collection period, I was part of family gatherings, I provided child care, attended graduations, funerals and major life events such as incarcerations and hospitalizations. Trust and intimacy were developed far before these interviews were collected and would have not developed this if I was not directly involved in my barrio with close friendships and sisterhood. As we interacted through late night phone calls, institutional bureaucracies, and collectively searching for resources in times of crisis such as mutual aid without police or hospitals, we deepened relationships and understanding of what it meant to navigate mental health crisis, grief, poverty, as well as successes and healing. During the course of 6 months, interviews were audio recorded, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

I employed grounded theory for analytical purposes (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Grounded theory involves inductive analysis which means that the themes that emerge solely from the data (Patton 1980). This process involved identification of recurrent patterns or themes, where I constructed cohesive representation of data. The interviews were coded for themes related to institutional violence, interactions with institutions, mothering practices and strategies for resistance to institutional violence. As an insider and qualitative researcher of social inequality my analysis was also shaped by moving through existing theories and frameworks on race, class gender, violence, and life course. This follows a process of abductive analysis which involves entering the interviews with a broad theoretical base and developing a theoretical repertoire throughout the research process (Timmerman and Iddo 2012). Grabbing from a critical race methodological toolbox, however, by remaining reflexive throughout the research process I am able to “ground” this study in the life experiences of Chicana mothers.

A Brief Note on Reflexivity

Being reflexive is a key action to take as researchers, to connect our positionalities and experiences with research processes (Taylor and White 2001; Zavella 1993). As a system-impacted mother myself, and gang-affiliated from South Central, Los Angeles, I am aware of the multiple dimensions of carcerality women navigate. Coming from a poor family, I have navigated different forms of violence (domestic violence, drug overdoses, etc.,) and systems such as immigration system, criminal justice system, and child welfare system my entire life. From the day after I was born when my father was shot and killed, to the first child welfare case my mother had with me, to the deportation and incarceration of my brother, the incarceration of my kids’ father, the tragic deaths of my homegirls all of whom were mothers, the multiple cases I have caught, my life revolves around living through liminal spaces of death, survival, and healing. With personal experiences of physical and psychological forms of violence, and six years of research with criminalized women, I am aware certain stigmas are more prevalent and visible than others, and the influence economic forces and gendered control has. Violence and mental health crises become enhanced, but the responses to these forms of violence are often invisible in the
eyes of scholars and outsiders who do not get to reach women who live in the margins, who resist from these spaces to survive and hold families together. I remain reflexive about my positionality and privilege to conduct research that affects my family, community, and I at different levels. The theoretical, methodological, and analytical tools used in this study are a product of pain, rage, hope, and resistance. Through this reflexivity, I acknowledge and center mothers who hold it down for the survival of our communities. As I observe what it’s like to live through ongoing collective trauma, I see how intergenerational pains continue, and the anxieties to see children and youth grow through this make this urgency to do this type of work from a place of reflection a heavy responsibility, a form of deep spiritual work. This work is much like Anzaldúa describes the “Coyolxauqui imperative,” one that

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4 “The Coyolxauqui imperative is to heal and achieve integration. When fragmentations occur, you fall apart and feel as though you’ve been expelled from paradise. Coyolxauqui is my symbol for the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation, of seeing that self or the situations you’re embroiled in differently. Coyolxauqui is also my symbol for reconstruction and reframing, one that allows for putting the pieces together in a new way. The Coyolxauqui imperative is an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing.” (Anzaldua 2015, p.20).
“represents the psychic and creative process of tearing apart and pulling together (deconstructing/constructing)” (Anzaldúa 2015, p. 50). In this process, one question remains the same, how do we guide children and youth to not only survive the traumas of violence, but thrive in the midst of the struggle to live free and healthy? While there are multiple answers to this and not discussed in this article, this study has been an attempt to make sense of a lot of different processes. The following is one of criminalization.

**Life Course Criminalization in the Trails of Violence**

Criminalized mothers have stigmas that produce their criminality and reduce their bodies to that of criminal and neglectful. Ideologically, the affiliation to a gang is a measure to be labeled “gang affiliated” and translates to being treated like a “de facto” criminal (Cacho 2012) and to being “sentenced by association” (Blake 1990). While entire communities are sometimes labeled, the specific processes of institutional violence have not been detailed. Figure 1 is a conceptual model that shows how multiple forms of violence, institutional and interpersonal, intergenerational traumas, social control, and health are interconnected with forms of survival and resistances that exist in barrio families. This model is not linear model; it captures how stigmatized labels, violence, and resistance work together in the lives of mothers, and how mothers make sense of themselves within and outside these categories. The model also shows that mothers and their families resist carceral controls and punishments at every stage of their life through different forms of survival, cultural wealth, and spiritual resistance. Mothers in this study show that because this process of labeling and control includes institutional and other forms of violence, the process is not linear and can affect health over time. Life course criminalization manifests itself in different forms: structural (i.e., poverty, racism, sexism), legal (i.e., child welfare cases), social control (i.e., criminalization), and stigmatized ideologies (i.e., gang and barrio affiliation). I highlight this process for gang-affiliated mothers and the ways their experiences relate to health complications over time.

**“Keeping trucha” of the Legality of Criminalization**

Criminalization is often written in laws, prescribed in treatments, and normalized through racial capitalist ideology. Formal and informal records of involvement with the criminal legal system and its branches create lifelong impediments to upward mobility and mental stability. Many systems are part of creating and expanding carceral communities, such as policing in criminal justice, surveillance through Child Protection Services, sanctions through Department of Public Social Services, punishment in schools, and treatment in rehabilitation centers, among others (Paik 2021). Navigating these intersectional spaces, with intersectional identities creates conflicting responses in the legal system, as Crenshaw

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5 While mothers shared their resistance practices and strategies, they are not detailed in this article as I would not be doing justice to the stories and practices shared, which is why it is in another forthcoming article on “system impacted motherwork” that shares how they created 1. Safety for family protection, 2. Aspirations for collective material transformations, and 3. Spiritual attention for mental wellbeing.

6 Bohrer discusses the tensions between intersectionality and marxist traditions, that is beyond the scope of this paper to read more see Bohrer 2020, Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism.
(1991) has argued, the injuries resulting from being harmed in an intersection could result from multiple discriminations around race, class, gender, and others. While the law is not the center of their experiences, and rather shows how reformist and racist ideologies function, mothers who are part of multiple cultural centers frame aspects of their marginality and resistance within connected systems. For gang-affiliated mothers, these forms of criminalization are justified under logics of “saviorship” and social control. Both logics are tied to the same spectrum of legally marginalizing mothers who do not fit the mainstream models of mothering. Mothers in this study highlight what these processes create over the life course, and pay attention to the ways criminalization has degrees of consequences that are contextual to the resources and mental state that is present at the time of crisis in the legal system. All of the mothers’ contact with the child welfare system, family court, and or criminal legal system included legal interaction with street bureaucrats involved with the law like judges, attorneys, law enforcement, and or social services like social workers, therapists, drug rehabilitation, etc. Whether it is documenting the consistency of drug testing through a case or having to be the line of communication for their partners, brothers who are incarcerated, mothers have an awareness that legal connections hold multiple levels of criminalization that can jeopardize the present and future of their families. This is a form of bio-politics that not only shows how power is enacted within governing processes, but how it affects the body and health, and the navigations and resistances that may become invisible in between crisis, in between crucial moments of life and death. While these fears and threats in many instances become normalized because this is the way carcerality and remnants of colonization work in communities like South Central Los Angeles, mothers were not passive about these consequences. As Leticia once said when sharing about an incident where police and social workers raided her house due to her brother’s warrant for arrest,

When that social worker told me it was easy to go in and out, it felt like it was like a set up. I knew that they weren’t only coming for me but my kids too, and I began to see how all their laws can just change your life from one second to another… Even the way family be pointing out joking and shit how CPS this and that, it reminds me how anyone can be part of this set up.

Here, Leticia did not have a legal case when the social worker commented, her brother did, yet the “set up” she mentions brings connections to the surveillance processes that happen when involved with multiple institutions, have prior cases, and connected to family networks. The ideological social control that happens when threats of family separation come in time of family crisis, create particular awareness when in between spaces of survival. Her gang affiliation and knowledge about street and interpersonal violence made her aware of the legal forms of criminalization that can happen over time not only with the distrust in the system but also the consequences it has on community bonds. Through the “CPS joking” she shared the way that remnants of gang affiliation are tied to interactions that are not solely legal but connected to the discourse on what legal documentation can do. This is similarly documented in the ways racial geographies of CPS cases create distrust within poor communities of color (Roberts 2008), and Leticia’s awareness was directly pointing to the threats of the law outside of having personal cases in the system. As she states later in that conversation, “I keep trucha… not just as a mom but as a sister and daughter… trust is something you don’t fuck around with.” She talks about the distrust that can happen when a state agent can name the “set up” when it is “easy to go in and out” of the system, but also the commitment to trusting the ways that keeping trucha allows for safety within criminalizing processes. These types of interactions that point to the criminalization that
exist for families also influences how mothers can parent during crisis. Patricia explains how direct contacts with CPS influenced how she responded to threats around involvement.

When I was a teen mom, I kind of just learned as I went with what I knew from my friends. As I got older, I feel like it just depends on how my mind and life was… for a good time I was really trying, but after some time I got tired. I felt like either way, I wasn’t doing enough and my fears around CPS were just whatever… Like I cared, but I no longer cared what anyone thought of me and the way I am a mom… Today I just try to be me because it’s tiring to have to worry about what CPS, doctors or teachers can do to your whole life and kids.

The ideas around mothering are ingrained in the laws and policies across carceral and social systems, and mothers like Patricia are aware of that and push back. Her response to the ways she recognized how these ideas are imposed and should be challenged, not because she did not feel like a “good” mom but because these ideas were coming from preconceived ideas about “good motherhood.” The experiences and lessons within CPS for herself and networks created long-term mothering practices and ways of being that not only challenged ideological notions of gang-affiliated women involved in CPS, but also interfering directly with social control by not allowing worries to take over her mothering. This reflection on challenging ideas around intensive mothering (Hays 1996), the ways that social policy and ideology are grounded within the heterosexual nuclear family model, has been shown to devalue those that do not fit those mainstream ways of mothering, like incarcerated mothers (Bloom and Brown 2011; Luker 2000). Here, gang affiliation becomes another mechanism in which these ideologies are used as a target of gendered social control for those who fit stigmatizing labels. Patricia’s way of caring became rooted in her own ideas of motherhood and her understanding of the legal forms of criminalization that can happen over time made her interact with these ideas and systems through problematizing her own ideas of motherhood, motherwork, and carework.

It’s not about being fully a mom all the time. They try to make it so that you are feared in being a full-time mom. Like I am all these other things. I do all these other things in life, but the way you are marked is connected to your past hood life and how you should be working away from it…. There’s no walking away because this is our life, but not many can see the consequences of this. So for me, as things come up for me and my family, we learn how, like, deal with it. Like a case for my brother and him g’tting’ locked up was stressful, but my mom and I just figured it out as we went. It’s always like that and when it gets crazier, pues (well), again sometimes I give a fuck and others I don’t…. I can’t be responsible for what he gets into or what anyone else, but as a mom I’m always not tryna get marked cuz its different.

Patricia shows how her networks and awareness of certain points of legal and familial crisis are crucial to the navigation of criminalization in current and future contexts. Her understanding of the multiple avenues that exist to remain in crisis show how she speaks from a place of the struggle within resistance practices to look outside of what those crises mean, whether legal, economic, or familial (not mutually exclusive either). As she shared, “I’m not tryna get marked” refers to institutional, legalized markings that stay on record, and markings by communities who live within similar contexts. Her unapologetic way of navigating both her judgements as a mother by recognizing that those stigmas exist and that she does not abide by them because she gets to define who
and what she is in the context she lives in. Such as her familial networks and responses to criminalizing instances, she shared through our conversation that her responses stem from her awareness as a caring mother but also the familial networks she is part of and the larger constructions of carceral systems. Family criminalization (Elliot and Reid 2019) becomes a mechanism to expand carceral experiences throughout life. For Patricia, her relationship with her brother and previous partner as well as concern for children became central in how she adapted to certain transitions over her life and responses to criminalizing processes, for other mothers like Jasmine, relationships with partners and local organizations became of importance through this process. Jasmine shared the difficulty of reaching out for help during domestic violence,

I wanted to reach out for help during those times, but there was no place for me that wouldn’t point fingers and put some legal record on it…. They send you to some orgs that supposed to help, but those orgs, the same shit. It seems like to get help, you need to follow all these lists of things and if you don’t, you’re judged or out. So, for me it was better to deal with it at home, but as soon as people in the streets saw me getting fucked up, police showed up and made it worse for me…. I just wanted an escape, but at that time I had to cover up what I was going through, and today, I’m dealing with all that shit that caused me to suffocate and affected my kids…. I think about what would it be 5 years from now if I were in the same situation of domestic violence or street shit, and I don’t know. It’s scary.

Jasmine shared how her responses to violence were related to her own knowledge about how records of mothering and violence are documented. The need to ask for help for mothers was similar in that they navigated times where they had family support and others where they did not. In the experiences they shared, mothers like Jasmine were navigating uncertain spaces of crisis where they had to assess and reassess what it would mean to reach external support. Jasmine and other mothers with experiences of domestic violence shared how the process of “coming out” of violent relationships was connected to the ways that speaking up, criminalized and legalized the experience of such violence. As previously shown, criminalized mothers are “subjected to a heightened stigmatization for violating both the criminal code and gendered expectations about women’s behavior” (Schur 1983). This violence was not disconnected to their status as poor gang-affiliated women, and their negotiation of tapping into familial or outside resources was tied to negotiating mainstream ideas around mothering. Jasmine further stated,

All of it was connected to how I responded instead of why I was going through it... It’s hard to explain that if I reached out one way or another, I would end up caught up in family court or locked up. It just felt like being in prison too. Like in the streets at least you had back up. Here I felt like I didn’t... Today, even though I can think better I still feel like I would just want to disappear from the space I was in and move... not be found by him or the system that protected him.

Jasmine shares how her experiences with domestic violence were related to feelings of imprisonment, criminalization, and victimization through the “system that protected him.” Her reflections about court involvement are not disconnected to the ways her status as a gang-affiliated mother taught her to navigate extreme cases of interpersonal violence. Jasmine makes the case that interpersonal forms of violence often become entangled with structural ones because courts are dominated by patriarchal ideologies that justify and perpetuate violence as well as racial capitalist ideologies that maintain them. Her experiences from past, present and thoughts of the future reflect the complex formation and
transformations of labels, poverty, resources, and violence. Moving across spaces of violence requires attention to the ways crisis jumps in and out of multiple forms of marginalization, from social labels that mark people as criminal and neglectful, to psychological controls that create traumas.

Mothers show how life course criminalization requires constant evaluation of how to properly attend to crises which are caused by the interactions of institutional and interpersonal forms of violence, and navigated with tools that are cultivated as criminalization awareness intensifies. All the mothers shared the importance of this awareness (keeping trucha) in ways that explained how the legal involvement affects their mothering, but also discourse on legal connections such as having incarcerated fathers, brothers, partners, prior CPS cases, is connected to larger justifications around criminalization, thus creating this process of the legality of criminalization. Similar to what Abrego and Menjivar (2011) theorize on legal violence, as the “instances where laws and their implementation give rise to practices that harm individuals physically, economically, psychologically or emotionally” (11), life course criminalization is the process by which these harms can occur in carceral contexts where criminal legal, child welfare, and immigration threats are often the norm. For system-impacted families and communities, life course criminalization involves trajectories and transitions that make crisis and the resistance to such crisis possible, over time and across space. Mothers show how through legalizing criminalization through ideological and everyday interactions, social bonds and social support are impacted, community fragmentation can be further divided, mothering practices affected, and overall health too.

Rage and Faith: “it’s never been just one crisis”

The process of criminalizing health is connected to the criminalization of the family. When one family member suffers from a mental crisis, physical or mental disability, or physical illness, the entire family can be impacted, and their health can be at risk too. As these crises are interrelated to multiple state-sanctioned and structural inequities, the way that these are manifested in the bodies of entire families depends on the context one is living in. If the context consists of multiple sources of threats and violence, the struggle of the body to resist such stressors can become “tiring” and impact navigation against criminalization and mothering. Mayra who navigates poverty, deportation threat, gang-affiliated stigmas, while raising five children shares the impacts of this emotional, physical, and psychological navigation of crisis. When talking about art that she had in her room that she was using as a method to relax, our conversation was led into reflecting what it means to “relax” in a continuous life crisis. The constant stressors that build up from being in between of multiple struggles at once does not “get easier or harder” as she shares,

It becomes a way of living where you kinda just learn to live at the pace things come … So, when we’ve gone homeless, I lose sleep. I can’t eat, and that’s the pace I’m going through… I lose weight within days. My anxiety rises, and I’m just worried about what’s next because it’s always just being in and out of crisis. So I’m ready for it, but it’s tiring. It’s really tiring, and it shows up in my body…

As Mayra reflects on the coping that occurs when her health begins to deteriorate, she also shares in detail how basic needs of her body are impacted due to larger structural issues related to housing. The stressors that accumulate for Mayra is something she has learned to trace and identify, and also events she stays ready for as life transitions, back and forth, like a pendulum—from crisis, to transformative life events. Here, experiencing
the stress of being homeless with five children is not something she disconnects from her status as an undocumented woman, documented gang member, and the effects it has to her children. The health impacts she shares (anxiety, loss of appetite) form part of multi-institutional violent processes that “show up” in the body. It impacts how she understands care and well-being but also mothering. When talking about care she began sharing how the connection to the way her daughters navigate their own struggles also manifest in her health. She states further,

But when my daughters are going through things, I can get depressed and I know it. Like when she was going through hood stuff, I was scared something would happen to her. I never wanted her to go through the same things I went through in the streets… They know it, but I can’t control how my body responds sometimes, and outside people won’t get what it means because they don’t know what it’s like to do this on your own …. My kids know what’s up, they know…

The way Mayra reflected on her experiences of crisis related to her health show that the familial experiences are not disconnected, and the ways children are affected by the context in which they are in can affect mothers’ health like it has to Mayra. To raise children in heightened states of stress becomes unavoidable at some points because a lot of what occurs within barrio crisis stays within, so the resources available in moments of urgency are those at hands with family and neighbors. These resources can be lacking when your support network as an undocumented Chicana raising Afro-Latinx children in gang-affiliated neighborhoods are highly stigmatized and criminalized. For instance, when Mayra attempted to get support from the department of public social services (DPSS) she was denied and told she had to figure it out on her own.

She told me she didn’t care if we wouldn’t have our food stamps, or that my daughter was going through this. She would just click the phone… Like, I don’t got no car or know how to do her job… It pissed me off so much, and I’m supposed to stay calm? Hell no. Like all these people claim to be here to “help” and make it worse for our whole family… My kids end up seeing how stressed I am when I get into it with social workers, and that’s not okay for any of us.

The stressors and rage Mayra encountered with institutional agents are not a product of isolated instances of crisis but an accumulation of what Ferraro and Shippee (2009) call “cumulative inequality” that incorporates how macro- and microsociological elements generate inequality and affect health over the life course. Her discussion around stress stemmed from the lack of basic needs, the stigmatization and criminalization of her mothering, and the carceral context she lived in that constrained her access to resources. Although she’s managed to reach resources through her own barrio networks, her health has reached points of tension that impacted her pregnancies,

I had a miscarriage because I was so stressed out… The doctor said my blood pressure was too high and needed to watch out, even after I went through that loss. I already have my kids to take care of, and the thought of not being here because of all the stress drives me crazy… How the fuck I’m supposed to think about my health when it’s always something happening?

Her miscarriage and blood pressure can be a consequence of a lot of health complications, but the connections Mayra shares about how it has been influenced through the accumulation of a lot of crisis shows how crucial it is to understand context and social support for criminalized mothers’ health needs. As noted in previous research, women’s
experiences of intense poverty, racism, violence, and other forms of oppression place them at risk for punishment via the child welfare and criminal justice system (Brown & Bloom 2009; Richie 2012; Roberts 2011) and these worsen women’s stress negatively impacting mental health (Fedock et al. 2018). Thus, for Mayra and other mothers in this study looking at the role of familial punishment over time in connection with health is necessary. In a similar vein, understanding how the health of a family member can affect others health is also of concern in the lives of gang-affiliated poor Chicanas. Rocío, who’s navigated her husband’s and son’s gang affiliation shares this experience.

Rocío, says that for her son’s youth years she feared what happened with him in the streets and at school because of his gang affiliation and the heavy policing he experienced daily. Even when he had children and focused on being a family man, she worried about what that heightened policing can do to his health, especially when having a disability. Many years after heavy surveillance and violence, his incarceration triggered criminalization for Rocío across spaces. From visiting her son in county jail, attending courts, investigations in her home, all of it became exacerbated which created stressors that impacted her health.

After he got incarcerated, my health went down again. So much anxiety, I couldn’t sleep… I felt desperate not knowing how he was getting treated in there…more than anything it was a mental battle. I felt like I was living but out of this world, like I would do things but I would forget what I said, what I was doing...There are points where you feel like you’re going crazy. I was walking, but my mind was out, worried a lot, something inside was missing.

K: Like when we feel empty?
R: “Yes, empty. Your mentality never comes back the same again. Sometimes, I’ll be washing dishes, and I feel like I have to go back to those pieces that are damaged inside me, pray, and cry them out.”

Rocío’s reflection on her health decline after her son’s incarceration shows how it created several stressors as time went on, and the long-term consequences of mental health impacts. Not only is she constantly worried about his health inside due to his disability, but she is concerned with her psychological and physical health needs. Rocío pointed to the ways that her mental health exacerbated, how her mind was scarred through this type of violence and how she learned to cope with the uncertainties of what could happen next. Research has shown the collateral consequences of having family members incarcerated (Lopez-Aguado 2018) and the secondary prisonization that women experience when their loved ones are incarcerated (Comfort 2008), but rarely any research touches on the ways the physical and mental health of mothers deteriorates as time in jail and prison goes by. Mothers like Rocío, and especially the older mothers in the study show how the criminalization of themselves and their sons, daughters, brothers, and partners impacts their health and well-being. Rocío consistently brought attention to the ways the health of her entire family was at risk, and talked about her youngest daughter and grandchildren’s mental and emotional health because of it, she shared,

The first weeks were adapting to seeing him (husband) cry, something that in over 30 years of being with him I never witnessed… Ella también (points to her daughter), si le pego bien duro cuando se lo llevaron de aquí (it hit her hard when they took him from here). She would wake up crying and I didn’t know how to respond to
her besides telling her we needed faith. The hardest part was seeing the pain of my grandchildren, especially in court, and everyone in there with different emotions. Not knowing the outcome of his case, and feeling my heart as if I could get a heart attack anytime, wishing my grandkids would never go through this. It’s something I’m still not okay from, all of us are repairing what this did to our spirit, mind, to our health.

K: How does this process of repairing, of healing look like now?

I went through this with his dad. So, all I can think of was what my mother-in-law went through, something that as a mother I understand differently today. I remember since he was born post-partum, it got to me really bad because of the traumas that were going on with his dad, but I focused on him and forced it to go away…what I know it’s never been just one crisis, it’s been a familial crisis, his health (son), my daughters’ health, and the ones yet to come. This is why I ground myself in god because the laws of the system, of men, can affect us yes. The system debilitates you, but I won’t be manipulated and instead ground myself in god, you find freedom and healing with god because god is the center.

The way Rocio talks about health and healing, feelings of rage (not being able to do anything from the outside), and faith (constantly bringing God and prayer up) shows that there is no linear emotional or psychological trajectory in the life of poor Chicana mothers who must hold the weight of living within carcerality and contexts associated, such as poverty. Rocio points to the intergenerational mechanisms that connect the body’s health, family surveillance, and criminalization processes to survival, and spiritual resistance. While these parts of her testimonio are not detailed here, and rather focus on the moments of crisis her body and mothering responded to, Rocio has shared how carcerality across generations opens up doors to mediate wounds and also reject spaces of scarcity, because she remained grounded to spiritual tools to overcome such crisis—something that all mothers had in common.

Criminalizing health is a consequence of criminalizing the social body one exists in, here the Chicana, the poor woman, the stigmatized mother, the gang affiliated, the person with stressors—is all connected to the roots of how the criminalization of health happens, not just in medical and legal institutions, but the actual process of harming the body through criminalizing treatment. Mayra, Rocio, and the rest of the mothers in the study reveal the processes within the life trajectories and transitioning points (such as extreme crisis) that make criminalization a harmful ideological, material, and psychological attack on the bodies of Chicanas and their families. Life course perspectives and the stress process model have offered understandings on the ways that social, personal, and environmental context impact health, “interconnected stressors of childhood abuse, intimate partner violence, and child welfare involvement, community-based correctional supervision adds stressors to women’s lives that may also be associated with their symptoms of depression and anxiety” (Fedock et al. 2018). These interconnected stressors must be analyzed through life course perspectives that recognize the criminalization and stigmatization that certain communities, such as gang-affiliated barrios experience over time. The health of the physical bodies of mothers shows connections to the state’s consistent agenda to control poor communities, and racial capitalist patriarchal systems that drive the justifications of harm. These are forms of health abuse that become invisible to the eyes of many because the body, like the social interactions, is influenced by multidimensional processes of becoming and evolving. I argue that the legal, social and health narratives that the body tells us, such
as the mothers in this study, must drive the resistance to these intergenerational traumas, physical, spiritual, psychological, and material.

Conclusions

Thirteen mothers raising children, youth, and grandchildren in South Central, Los Angeles, share the ways that criminalization is a branch of control that impacts entire family well-being. Mothers who are system-impacted and gang-affiliated hold unique perspectives that speak from the margins and intersections of that control, with bodies who trace the health transformations over time. This study focused on two major mechanisms within life course criminalization, a process that shows how (1) criminalization becomes legalized through ideological and material punishment and (2) how this impacts health, the “invisible” process of criminalizing health. These mechanisms form part of the dialectics of the life course, which show how material conditions and struggles to surpass violence and transform crises, are moving within the sociohistorical context we are in. The methods to surpass are part of the process to survive, and hold families together, yet it remains that they are part of an interconnected experience that can also destabilize their health through forces outside of their control, forces shaped by multidimensional processes that are rooted in keeping Brown bodies in long-term trauma.

Xicana feminist writers have noted that health is a community responsibility where our actions and inactions affect the well-being of ourselves and communities we are part of (Carillo et al. 2017: 177) and we must continue to expand the ways that health is prioritized. Mothers’ cultural knowledge is part of centering that community responsibility. In Latinx cultures “la cultura cura” culture heals, and we must remain attentive to the ways culture’s strength is stigmatized and criminalized. “Culture changes, shifts, and transforms over time. What we offer here is cultural knowledge—our cultural capital that has assisted us in overcoming traumas, in celebrating significant transitions in our lives, and in connecting with our ancestors and the natural world” (Medina and Gonzales 2019:15). As we trace these changes historically, politically, and culturally in the daily lives of those who live within normalized violence, we must connect the multiple mechanisms that offer spaces of freedom, healing, and health. If the conditions mothers navigate are constantly in transit, and their responses to the structural forms of inequality, such as poverty, racism, and patriarchy have to shift in order to survive, what happens to mothers, like gang-affiliated mothers whose lives move beyond the specific transition points, and in and out of daily points of crisis that impact how violence, trauma, and criminalization is experienced? How do we construct understandings of gang-affiliated people and the communities they are part of with crucial attention to the bodies they inhabit during the ongoing relationships to normalized carcerality?

The contact and responses to institutional and other forms of violence are dependent on what sociopolitical, economic, and individual factors are at play through these interactions. Life course perspectives need to be able to adapt with the real life implications of navigating punishment and violence. If we continue to think about the processes and relations

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7 Nixon in Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor describes slow violence as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.”.
of slow violence, the one affecting the environmental well-being of the planet, we must connect the long-term violence that happens within institutions and within bodies. Life course criminalization, as a process, creates a bridge to develop this analysis, but shows the importance of long-term support to the resistance of mothers. So, how do we continue to center mothers to create a decolonial abolitionist future? How do we center health in the movement towards radical freedom? How do crises during times of a global pandemic deepen inequality while at the same time strengthen spiritual resistance as a collective? This is a call to commit to long-term support to the resistance of families in barrios, like South Central, LA. As mothers form channels between life, birth, and death, we must look to the matriarchs of our communities to push forward interventions of crisis that embody cultural knowledge in times where hypercriminalization and health effects are evolving. In community, in struggle, with multidimensional understandings of human experience, with mutual respect, and tools of empowerment, as Dorothy Roberts (2020) stated, “we must abolish the family regulation system” and prioritize the health of poor families and the barrios and communities we are part of.

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Declarations

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