

**THIS IS WHAT WE HAVE, THIS IS WHAT WE DON'T HAVE, THIS IS WHAT WE NEED.
THE POST-INCARCERATION EXPERIENCES OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED BLACK
WOMEN IN CANADA**

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Abstract

In recent decades, the burgeoning population of racialized women in Canadian prisons has begun to capture the attention of scholars. While there is widespread and growing awareness that Black women are disproportionately represented within these prisons, the research literature on the post-incarceration experiences of this population remains scant. The challenges that Black women encounter post-incarceration are riddled with sequelae of the structural discrimination that these women experience both inside *and* outside of prison walls. The current work aims to uncover the diverse challenges that Black women face on their trajectory towards rebuilding their lives after prison in order to bolster our understanding of the uniquely complex and intersectional post-incarceration experiences of Black women in Canada. This study will also investigate the efficacy of ongoing initiatives and programming available to support formerly incarcerated women with reintegration into their communities. To address these aims, I adopted a qualitative study design utilizing a semi-structured interview approach to examine the postincarceration experiences of 17 relevant stakeholders as they relate to the experiences of reintegration of formerly incarcerated Black women, with a specific focus on the impact of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The sample was comprised of formerly incarcerated Black women ($n = 13$), non-Black incarcerated women ($n = 1$), community organization members ($n = 1$), prison rights advocates ($n = 2$), and politicians ($n = 1$).

Drawing upon fundamental Black feminist theories of law (e.g., intersectionality and critical race theory), I analyzed qualitative interview data by employing content analysis to uncover salient themes. The results indicated that for formerly incarcerated Black women, reintegration involves overcoming robust structural barriers, including difficulties securing

employment, stigmatization, and lack of effective support. The insights shared by participants in the current study highlight the extent to which Black women's marginalized identities adversely shape their experiences pre- and post-incarceration. Evidently, the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women are unique and shaped by a multitude of factors. The current work shines light on the need for further investigations and efforts to mitigate post-release challenges in order to promote equitable post-incarceration experiences.

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York University's Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate program must be credited for providing me with the opportunity to conduct this research. This program encourages its students to go beyond the traditional frameworks of academia by allowing us to engage with multiple disciplines in order to produce interdisciplinary work, differently from other graduate programs where students are expected to remain within the boundaries of a specific discipline. Dr. Bird and Fiona Fernandes have been two staple figures in my Master's work as they have both gone above and beyond to ensure that IS students are welcomed and supported throughout the University. I owe much thanks to these two ladies for their ongoing support throughout the last three years.

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Intent

“I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't” (Lorde & Hall, 2004, p.90).

When I first began to curate an interview guide, I realized that this research study was not going to be a small task. However, I felt it would be easy to get formerly incarcerated Black women to answer my seemingly straight forward interview questions; I was in for quite the surprise. Unbeknownst to us all, these questions were much more difficult to answer than we anticipated. And so, I began to reflect on why that is. Why is speaking about ourselves as Black women challenging for some? Although I do not have the answer to this question in its entirety, I do have some thoughts on why this may be. First, I believe as Black women, we are not often provided with the opportunity to speak our truth in its most authentically raw form. In situations where we are provided with the space to allow our voices to be heard, we are almost certain to be subconsciously following a *how-to* guideline of how to be, how to appear, how to act and how to speak (amongst many other codes that have been socially engrained into our beings). Thus, an opportunity to be unapologetically your Black self within an academic space came across as being a no brainer, when in fact it took all the brain power to complete. Secondly, when discussing Black women and our value, it can be disheartening to have to state the obvious. Personally, I found myself feeling frustrated that Black women still need to educate people about ourselves and why we are worthy. I found it frustrating that as a Black woman, I am still learning to un-learn the stereotypical narratives of Black women that have been instilled in me by a society constructed by colonialism. Lastly, I believe it can be challenging for Black women to speak about themselves because we fear being misunderstood, we fear our blackness being incorrectly perceived, we fear not being enough. By creating this project, I believe I am

contributing to any social movement that seeks to empower Black women by not only giving them a platform to have their voices heard but also to be seen for who they are. It cannot be denied that Black women's identities have for far too long been socialized out of existence to a certain degree (Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

Black women are seldom recognized as a group separate from Black men. Discussions about Black people tend to be centered on Black men and discussions about women tend to focus on white women (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Within this equation, Black women are erased and rendered invisible. I aim to undo this invisibility by continuing to educate myself on Black feminist theories as well as making sure to actively participate in the ongoing fight for justice and equality in as many ways as possible. The experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women are unique and multifaceted and are undoubtedly worthy of attention from any initiative committed to combatting systems of oppression. However, our needs and challenges are frequently overlooked, underrepresented, and misrepresented. The injustices of society that heavily affect Black women need to be understood as also affecting the Black community at large and we need to be prioritized at the level we deserve (Elassar, 2020). We often see movements grouping the struggles of Black men and women as being one in the same when in fact they are not. Consequently, Black women are left feeling unnoticed and excluded from women's movements as well as movements within their own communities where issues of race tend to be prioritized over gender and sexuality (Elassar, 2020). Our stories deserve to be shared and our voices deserve to be heard because it is through our own narratives that we can continue the works of Black feminists and we can do what the courageous Black Artist and Activist

Barbara Ann Teer said and “Set Y[our] Blackness Free” (Forsgren, 2015, p.136). In completing this research study, I believe I have done just that. Although, just a start, I am completing this task feeling more liberated than I did before I began it. For that, I am thankful.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Intent</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Chapter 1: Literature Review</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Chapter 3: Methodology</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Chapter 4: Background</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>Chapter 5: Black Women’s Critiques of the Prison System and Stigmatization</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Chapter 6: Compounding Black Women’s Post-incarceration Experiences</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Chapter 7: And Still We Rise—Formerly Incarcerated Black Women on Defining Success</i>	<i>87</i>
<i>Chapter 8: This is What We Know-- Conclusion and Recommendations</i>	<i>97</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>110</i>

Introduction

Since the early 21st century there has been a substantial increase in the number of racialized women being incarcerated in Canada. The lived experiences of incarcerated Black women have begun to garner the attention of Social Science researchers. However, there has not been nearly enough focus allocated to the experiences of these women once they have been released back into their communities. This paucity of research literature is unsettling because it demonstrates the ongoing reality of the exclusion of Black women in research spaces as well as the dismissal of their truths. Pollack (2003) and Balfour (2008) argue that despite the scarcity of literature on incarcerated Black women in Canada, the information that does exist illustrates that Black women are alarmingly overrepresented in prison. Indeed, there is a correlation that exists between criminal offences and systems of oppression amongst Black women because such forms of oppression create systemic barriers that can make it difficult for these women to prevail as law-abiding citizens and this is no less true for Black women coming out of prison (Osazuwa, 2015).

It is no secret that the transition from prison back into the community is challenging for most individuals but for Black women these challenges can often be exacerbated by a range of structural barriers, including further marginalization and discrimination (Bunn, 2019). Formerly incarcerated Black women also struggle navigating through structural barriers that are reinforced by laws and policies that inadvertently disenfranchise women with criminal records. There are a plethora of inequalities and disadvantages Black women face that transcend into their pathways to and within prison (Owen et al., 2017). Consequently, these women's access to the primary resources necessary for sound transitions back into their communities are often restricted. The barriers these women face to accessing vital resources such as employment and housing cannot

be overlooked in carceral research as they are crucial components in their reintegration experiences. Research on the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black Canadian women can offer great insight into their multi-layered needs that are too frequently understood in isolation of one another. The lack of effective programming and resources available to assist these women is very likely a result of the minimal research efforts put forth to discovering their post-carceral needs. Additionally, examining these women's reintegration experiences provides program coordinators and policy makers with the opportunity to access research literature that can inform their decision making in a way that allows for the development of more effective measures to assist formerly incarcerated Black women in reintegrating back into their communities.

This research examines the experiences of community reintegration for formerly incarcerated Black women in Canada. It investigates the need for Canada's correctional system to improve its efforts in assisting these Black women in their journeys towards successful community reintegration post incarceration. Canada's correctional system cannot possibly fulfill the reintegration needs of formerly incarcerated Black women without developing a more indepth understanding of the challenges they face post-release. It is therefore imperative to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by these women. The ways in which several of these challenges arise from or are intensified by the intersection of one's minority status as a woman, with other aspects of their identity that play a role in their lived experiences with oppression (e.g., blackness, ex-offender identity, ethnicity, socio-economic status) is noteworthy.

The improvement of community resources and protective policies for Black women postincarceration requires empirical knowledge about the complexities of reintegration, as well

as the ability to understand this phenomenon through a critical lens. This knowledge will enable us to consider the elements of differentiation that exist in these cases and the multiple ways in which they take form, as well as provide insight on how these can be reduced if not eliminated.

This thesis is guided by two research questions: 1. What are the experiences of community reintegration for formerly incarcerated Black women in Canada? 2. How do institutions and social conditions impact the reintegration journey of Black women? Rather than focusing on the criminal convictions of formerly incarcerated Black women, these research questions allow us to redirect our attention to their experiences of reintegrating back into their communities. A qualitative approach was employed to conduct the research; semi-structured one on one interviews were conducted with a wide range of formerly incarcerated women in Canada. Most of these women identified as Black and over age 25. This research considers the theories of intersectionality, critical race theory, and stigma to draw attention to the way in which their social identities complicate their reintegration experiences. I argue that the number of challenges formerly incarcerated Black women face in their reintegration experiences is reflective of the interconnectedness of institutions and social conditions that work together to further displace and marginalize these women. Moreover, I contend that the lack of effective programs and resources accessible to formerly incarcerated Black women is a consequence of the oppressive nature of the Canadian correctional system that reinforces racist, sexist and classist biases. It is also evident that the challenges and barriers that formerly incarcerated Black women face are linked to the historical ways in which marginalization, discrimination, racism, and sexism continue to be key features of the Canadian society (Reece, 2010).

Formerly incarcerated Black women in Canada continue to be positioned in the margins of society and the limitations in existing research literature that accounts for their experiences is

a reminder of this. Thus, the ultimate purpose of this project is to contribute to the little Canadian literature that does exist about Black women post incarceration. This research steers away from traditional theories of reintegration that take a non-critical approach to understanding the experiences of formerly incarcerated women. Traditional concepts of reintegration are undoubtedly problematic because they are informed by assumptions that do not reflect the real lived experiences of women post-release (Bunn, 2018). Traditional theories of reintegration postrelease fail in their assumptions that an individual has been successfully *rehabilitated* simply because of their imprisonment, and upon release the individual is reasonably equipped with the tools needed to endure the pressures and challenges that arise post-release (Bunn, 2018). Additionally, these assumptions are not supported by empirical evidence, particularly the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women and they assume that the community to which the formerly incarcerated return is willing and ready to accept and welcome them back.

In this study empirical evidence is gathered from 17 semi-structured interviews with formerly incarcerated Black women, non-Black formerly incarcerated women, and members from community organizations that demonstrate the complex nature of community reintegration and the wide range of factors that contribute to these unique experiences. We begin in Chapter 1 with a literature review to become familiar with the pre-existing research or lack thereof on formerly incarcerated Black women in Canada. Throughout the literature review we begin to identify areas in research on incarcerated Black women that can be further developed and explored. Following this chapter are the theoretical framework and methodology chapters. The theoretical framework chapter goes over the relevance of applying intersectionality, critical race theory and stigma in analyzing the empirical data produced from this study. Additionally, the methodology chapter explains the qualitative components of this research, which methods were

employed and how they were deemed appropriate. The subsequent chapters present the analysis and discussion of the empirical findings of my fieldwork. Finally, the conclusion chapter, reiterates the key points of my research that illustrate the complexities of Black women's postincarceration experiences. This includes challenges with CSC programming, accessing housing and employment, managing trauma, and stigmatized identities. To end, limitations that were uncovered and recommendations for the future are addressed.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Despite a growing interest in the systemic needs and circumstances of women in correctional settings, the research literature to date concerning the post-incarceration experiences of Black women is scant. Reintegration from a criminological perspective is identified by Bahr et al. (2013) as “the process of transitioning from incarceration to the community, adjusting to life outside of prison or jail and attempting to maintain a crime-free lifestyle” (p.448). This literature review analyzes the ways in which successful community reintegration has been characterized by scholarly discourse that examines formerly incarcerated Black women’s ability to obtain and maintain employment, housing, financial stability, and absence of recidivism. Reintegration is a multifaceted process that is worthy of further exploration as it is an essential part of the rehabilitative features expected of Canadian correctional affairs.

Hannah-Moffat’s (2013) research indicates that the intersection of race, culture, gender, and socio-economic status that contributes to the complexity of the minority identity of Black women is a critical area for examination in the pursuit of identifying the challenges to successful community reintegration arise. The condition of Black women’s lives in Canada is heavily entrenched in their lived realities of racial and gendered oppression. For this reason, the intricacy of these variables is amplified when these women are left to face the additional oppression that is attached to their criminalized identities as female offenders (Sudbury, 2005). As such, the discriminatory workings of gender, race and class become overtly evident in experiences they endure post criminalization, including inside and outside correctional walls. Namely, Black women face dilemmas surrounding accessing affordable housing, securing employment as well as reforming social networks that enable them to steer away from the lifestyles they had prior to being incarcerated (Reece, 2005).

In discussing Black women's experiences of community reintegration post-release, it is worth using an intersectional lens as a means of adequately investigating their intricate experiences with Canada's correctional system, as well as identifying the multiple factors that play a role in shaping such experiences. As eloquently put by Black feminist scholar Audre Lorde (1984), "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (p.11). The intersection of racism and sexism has been used by Black Queer Feminist scholar Moya Bailey (2016) to coin the term *misogynoir* in which she describes a specific type of hatred directed at Black women. For Bailey (2016), "Mysogynoir describes the co-constitutive, anti-Black, and misogynistic racism directed at Black women...it is the particular amalgamation of anti-Black racism and misogyny" (p.2). While Bailey (2016) uses *misogynoir* to describe what takes place throughout popular culture and social media, I propose that the elements of *misogynoir* are very much at play within various institutional sites of power, specifically the Canadian criminal justice and corrections systems. For example, Reece's (2010) interviews with 10 Black women currently serving a sentence in Canadian federal prisons highlight the targeted animosity towards incarcerated Black women that several interviewees describe. The participants in Reece's (2010) study and Cobbina's (2010) study had different accounts of their experiences of incarceration but one theme was common to all: discrimination on the basis of their race and gender. Many of these women reveal that they observed differences in sentencing, job allocations, living spaces and program accessibility in comparison to their non-Black counterparts. Cobbina's (2010) findings demonstrate the importance of having postrelease services available to assist recently released women in acquiring the fundamentals needed to rebuild a life outside of prison, including, temporary housing, job finding assistance, transportation, and childcare services. Additionally, the women in Cobbina's (2010) study proved

positive support networks to be the most important factor in successful reintegration. Women in the study who reported having negative support networks (i.e., criminal networks, unsupportive parole officers, difficult family members) considered their reintegration journeys to be consumed with many failures, some involving contact with the law again. Similarly, Reece (2010) highlights the need for development of community support networks willing to work with incarcerated Black women as well as programming that is racially/culturally relevant.

In 2013, the federal prison ombudsman conducted a study to investigate and reveal the presence of racial discrimination and stereotyping that affect Black inmates. Although the findings of the report were quite disheartening, the revelations were not much of a surprise. The relationship between race and the Canadian justice system has been an ongoing point of concern for marginalized groups, especially Blacks and Indigenous communities (Bronskill, 2020). The findings reported by the federal ombudsman vividly demonstrate the presence of systemic racism and discrimination within Canada's correctional and justice system. Some of the ombudsman's findings reported that Black inmates often experience instances of racial discrimination which transcends into the various institutional structures they inevitably must navigate. For example, primary correctional programs do not sufficiently represent the experiences of Blacks, leaving them with minimal opportunities to discuss matters that are pertinent to their lived experiences and identities. Additionally, the report asserts that there are noteworthy inconsistencies of ethnocultural programs offered to Black inmates due to programs often being available in another institution than their own, thus, access to such programs is dependent on the location of the correctional facility to which they are sentenced (Bronskill, 2020). Lastly, the 2013 report addresses the absence of affiliations with Black community organizations. Also, similarly to several research studies such as Reece (2010) and Cobbina (2010), the ombudsman report does

not focus exclusively on the needs of Black women inmates in spite of the fact that they are a specific population with unique and particular needs that cannot possibly be understood in conjunction with their non-Black counterparts. Moreover, it has taken nearly a decade after the release of the ombudsman's report for the Correctional Service of Canada to initiate efforts to accommodate the needs of Black offenders by announcing the commissioning of a study aimed at better understanding the needs of the Black inmate population (Bronskill, 2020).

Starks (2018) emphasizes the importance of examining Black women in prison through a lens that considers colonial histories in evaluating the efficacy of rehabilitation programs designated to assist them. Furthermore, Reece (2010) argues that the ineffectiveness of the rehabilitation programs currently offered to Black women in Ontario is a result of unacknowledged colonial histories. Reece (2010) adds, "that program delivery for incarcerated Black women does not provide the necessary tools for reintegration in their communities once released" (p.97). Unquestionably, incarcerated and post-incarcerated Black women experience a trifecta of structural oppression when racism, sexism and classism permeate their lives inside and outside of prison (Reece, 2010), to shape their experiences of stigma and discrimination. This correlation is emphasized by Reece (2010) as she comments, "when the bodies of women, many of whom are women of colour are condemned to punishment, ownership of their bodies is simultaneously condemned to the state. Moreover, state incarcerated female bodies present a physical template upon which to map discourses of gender, race, science and conquest" (Reece, 2010, p. 136). Although some studies have focused on the experiences of Black women in the CJS, my research is focused on their post-incarceration journey and the ways it is affected by their treatment in the system.

Consideration of the social determinants that lead women into criminal activity is important in discussing Black women and their carceral experiences. Such barriers tend to place this vulnerable group of women in a position where they begin to feel as though they are at a crossroads trying to make ends meet and so the options to keep a law-abiding life afloat are seen as sparse (Bahr, 2010). Hodson and Ganesh's (2021) data suggests that neglecting the effects of racism and sexism can lead to the reproduction of institutional oppression for these women. Furthermore, their work demonstrates that inequalities must be assessed to identify structural sites of power.

Morgan and Bullen (2015) also assert that anti-Black racism is severely entrenched in Canada's institutional policies and practices and the denial of anti-Black racism within these institutions only further excludes Black Canadians. They contend that the contemporary form of anti-Black racism replicates historical sanctions that often operated to racially, economically and socially segregate and divide populations (Morgan & Bullen, 2015). The pervasion of anti-Black racism throughout the criminal justice system can be observed within the statistics provided in Morgan and Bullen's (2015) study which reveal disproportionate levels of Blacks federally incarcerated in Canada between 2005 and 2015. The data shows that while the population of incarcerated Blacks increased by 77.5%, the population of whites declined by 6.8%. However, like much of the research literature available in discussing anti-Black racism and the criminal justice system, there is little focus given to Black women as an independent group.

Legal scholarship illustrates the government sanctioned modes of control that are dependent on ideologies of race, gender and class that underpin Western hegemony. Additionally, Reece (2010) argues that "there is need for effective reintegration programming in prison that connects in a more visceral way to the lived experiences of Black women" (p. 53). In

order to legitimize the carceral experiences of Black women and address their needs, Reece's (2010) study demonstrates the direct narratives of these women are central to reframing the vast majority of research literature on this population that is too often articulated on their behalf while being heavily influenced by Eurocentric ideologies. As Hannah-Moffat (2013) argues, scholars must push towards normalizing collaboration with research subjects rather than speaking on behalf of those we hope to educate ourselves about; this recommendation is an approach this research seeks to adopt.

Formerly Incarcerated Black Women: Challenges of Community Reintegration

A review of the literature that centers on the topic of community reintegration of women offenders suggests that this vulnerable population's struggles against social and institutional forces of oppression tend to be exacerbated within their experiences of attempting to successfully reintegrate into their communities; that is, leading a legitimate life free of any criminalized activities that could potentially back track them into the punitive spaces of the law (Richie, 2001). The bulk of this literature does not focus exclusively on Black Canadian women; thus, pointing to a need for more research on the contemporary realities of this population. The literature examined prefaces some of the themes that are discussed in the following sections by drawing on the findings of similar studies aimed at investigating the relationships between Black women and the penal system.

According to Strimelle and Frigon (2011), the role of social and penal institutions in reproducing stigma are necessary to consider in examining community reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals, especially racialized and gendered persons. To substantiate this claim, Strimelle and Frigon (2011) conducted 35 interviews of formerly incarcerated women in Quebec, to reveal that the interplay between race, gender, and criminal status affect the

community reintegration outcome of Black women at a higher rate than their non-black counterparts (Strimelle & Frigon, 2011). This study declares that imprisonment transforms an individual's identity by forming a new social category of stigmatized individuals labelled as "exprisoners" (Strimelle & Frigon, 2011). Although, Strimelle and Frigon (2011) and others demonstrate the need to consider gender in discussing and analyzing women and life after the penal system, future work should consider racialization and class more comprehensively. Nonetheless, the current research literature available establishes that the penal system reinforces and reproduces stigmatization despite its prided rehabilitative purposes, thus, falling short in being able to effectively assist formerly incarcerated women successfully reintegrate into their communities.

Richie's (2001) qualitative research project uses the responses of formerly incarcerated American women of colour to gain insight into the ways in which said women face challenges of reintegrating into their communities. The analysis of the interviews reveals the extent to which gender, ethnic identity and economic status operate in accordance with one another to complicate the processes involved in community reintegration, such as accessing employment, housing and social networks (Richie, 2001). Richie's findings suggest a need for redeveloped programs and resources committed to resolving the comprehensive needs of these women, while taking into consideration their multi-faceted identities and the way in which these shape both their needs and challenges post incarceration. In furthering the findings of Richie's (2001) study, the ethnographic observations of Black women post incarceration conducted by Gurusami (2017) produces thought provoking conceptualizations of these women's experiences with accessing employment, which has been identified over time through research as a crucial component of the community reintegration process. Such experiences involve navigating the obstacles that are

produced from the stigma associated to their criminal records, as a result these women face limited access to appropriate education and job training, reluctance of employers to hire them, and lack of opportunities for upward mobility (Gurusami, 2017). Although the study is conducted within an American context, it would be naïve to presume that the effects of systemic racism highlighted throughout Gurusami's (2017) work do not transcend into the Canadian labour market. In fact, Ontario's Anti-Black Racism strategy publicly documents that "Black women are more likely than white women to be unemployed or underemployed, despite having higher levels of education" (Ontario, 2020, p.1) This document is significant in acknowledging the very real effects of systemic racism on the lives of Black women in Canada as well.

The persistence of barriers that prevent this vulnerable female population from reaching their potential contradicts the notion of Canadian meritocracy and multiculturalism that seeks to promote equality and equity for all Canadian citizens. Noteworthy experimental studies like Pager's (2003) suggest that there are gendered and racial factors involved in the reintegration of formerly incarcerated women in Canada: "30 percent of women with criminal records receiving job interviews compared to nearly 60 percent of men with otherwise identical applications, while white women with criminal records receive 11 percent more interviews than black women without criminal records" (p. 81). Hence, rehabilitation labour is an important concept highlighting Black women's disadvantaged position in the labour market. Solinas-Saunders et al.'s (2015) discussion of racial capitalism and rehabilitative labour reveals how racism continues to be used as a tool to subordinate formerly incarcerated Black women in the labour market by reinforcing marginalizing ideologies and practices rooted in capitalism. Gurusami (2017) builds on this discussion when she argues that "the state's historical policing of black women's lives compels their marginalized participation in the labor market through surveillance and carceral

punishment, and therefore makes their lack of participation in the traditional labor market hypervisible” (p.20). Since post-release obligations require releasees to secure employment on a time-sensitive basis or risk being reincarcerated, Petersilia (2003) suggests that the penal system considers employment as a primary signifier of successful rehabilitation.

For Gurusami (2017), it is through the “economic and sociocultural exploitation of Black women in the labour market” (p.45) that the hegemonic devaluation of Black women is projected, constructed and reinforced. Gurusami (2017) draws off of Kimberle Crenshaw’s (1989) influential theory of intersectionality and coins what she refers to as “intersectional capitalism” to describe the unique process in which race and gender operate co-constitutively with rehabilitation labour. In line with the works of invaluable legal scholars such as Angela Davis (2003) on prison and punishment, the study contends that the racialized and gendered ideologies that are the foundation of governance and punishment play a primary role in constructing the lived experiences of oppression for Black women in the labour market. Additionally, Gurusami (2017) comments,

Rehabilitation labour emerges from intersectional capitalism, as carceral punishment is shaped by the state’s definition of productivity in the labour market. The construction of Black women as immoral using the logics of the labour market justifies the state’s practices of discipline and punishment after incarceration, which in turn further supports the reduction of Black women to their perceived sociocultural and economic labour contributions. (p.57)

Beatty et al. (2014) highlight how certain groups of women become more disadvantaged than most within critical markets like labour and housing by examining the way in which race and gender operate in this context. In the same way, Gill (2001) sheds light on the trends in the labour and housing market that illustrate that Black women are often socially excluded. Gill (2001) shows how there continues to be a gap in wages of Black women in comparison to their

non-Black counterparts as well as segregation of Black women in the housing market as seen through the locations and characteristics of Black communities.

Other ethnic and racial identities also face the strife of structural barriers in the labour market post incarceration in Canada, especially Indigenous communities. However, the historical use of Black women's bodies for capitalistic gains and its effects in shaping systemic and institutional relationships has been overlooked in Canada's racist colonial history (Beaty et al, 2014). Moreover, Reece (2010) suggests that analyses of these women's experiences alongside that of Aboriginal women's experiences shed insight on contemporary issues of social justice that are at the forefront of concern for feminist criminologists whose discourses draw parallels to the histories of racism targeted at Aboriginal and Black Canadian women. A report by Correctional Service of Canada (2006) recommends incorporating gender-based needs into the programs available for incarcerated women, yet there is no mention of the need to address race and/or ethnicity-based challenges and needs for racialized women.

As described by Becker (1973),

The formerly incarcerated individual who returns to society is almost immediately regarded as an outsider, one who cannot be trusted to abide by the rules of the law. Such attitudinal approaches to perceiving formerly incarcerated persons is detrimental to their reintegration back into their communities for the individual is in a sense displaced all while attempting to regain their place in society. (p.1)

This is no less true for formerly incarcerated Black women whose reintegration experiences cast a spotlight on their marginality forcing them to constantly be battling between their prison and post-prison identities. Exploring the reintegration of formerly incarcerated Black women means addressing the ways in which the challenges these women face post-incarceration are different from their non-Black and non-female counterparts. Research has demonstrated that many of the

Black women who are incarcerated share similar characteristics as they are often mothers, from lower-income communities where education and employment levels are considerably low (Hannah-Moffat, 2001).

Defining what constitutes successful community reintegration is a difficult task because of its subjective nature but research that does generally discuss the reintegration of formerly incarcerated women asserts that the three key factors in achieving successful community reintegration are employment, housing, and familial/community support (Brown, 2010). For many Black women who are released on parole conditions, the aspect of being under surveillance and controlled does not suddenly evade their lives. Instead, these women are expected to comply to the conditions of their release no matter how strenuous, unreasonable, or challenging they may be (Hannah-Moffat, 2003). Additionally, it has been reported by formerly incarcerated women in previous studies, such as Reece (2010), Hannah-Moffat and Innocente (2013), and Cobbina (2010), that maintaining healthy relationships with their parole officers is a major factor in achieving successful reintegration. Parole officers are required to monitor and assist their parolees in their reintegration processes by keeping in regular contact with them as well as ensuring they comply with the conditions of their release. Relationships premised on a power-based dynamic can create additional challenges for formerly incarcerated Black women attempting to establish themselves post-incarceration. Hannah-Moffat (2003) proposes that, "There is a tendency to view community living as a liberated space somewhat free from the surveillance and restriction associated with prison, yet community practitioners are often entangled in power relationships with the women they work with. Women faced with the difficult task of reintegration often require more support than control." (p.45) Having a good relationship with parole officers and other support workers is integral to the reintegration process for formerly

incarcerated Black women. Currently, there are several challenges that arise with many of the stressful conditions of release that can easily make formerly incarcerated Black women feel anything but free. For example, in some cases it is mandatory for parolees to obtain employment within a specified amount of time. According to Strimelle and Frigon (2013), many formerly incarcerated women express frustration with the difficulties in securing legitimate employment in a timely manner all while having to navigate the effects of stigma of their criminalized identities that make securing employment seem nearly impossible.

The programs offered by Correctional Service Canada (CSC) have begun to face scrutiny for the lack of racial, gender and cultural inclusivity in their designs and objectives. In 2014, the Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI) conducted a case study on the Black inmate experience and reached several conclusions that portray the lack of understanding of and needs fulfilment for incarcerated Black inmates. What stood out the most were concerns with the correctional programs and adequate community support (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2014). The OCI reported that while the programs available for Black inmates are intended to equip them with significant skills and tools, they do not reflect the reality of Black inmates, thus baring no use to them. Lastly, it was expressed that Black inmates would be better served from the programs offered by CSC if they were to relate to their lived experiences as well as be led by more diverse members (Office for the Correctional Investigator, 2014). The findings of the OCI's case study highlights the need for these programs to be revised to fit the diverse needs of various inmates. Hannah-Moffat (2003) suggests that the services available to assist Black women in their reintegration journeys before and after incarceration will continue to be ineffective for most if the traditional approaches to program delivery is not significantly reworked. Release and reintegration planning requires a multi-tiered approach that includes as many contributors as

necessary to support the reintegration process for Black women (Reece, 2010). Reece (2010) asserts that the typical type of prison programs available for women are grounded in Cognitive Behaviour Models which do not adequately serve the population of incarcerated Black women. According to Reece (2010), such programs undermine the lived experiences of Black women and are fundamentally constructed by Eurocentric perspectives on rehabilitation.

At the programmatic level, Richie (2001) suggests that formerly incarcerated Black women can benefit from participating in programs that employ “wrap-around services” that allow women to acquire assistance for a wide range of needs in one place so that multiple needs can be addressed concurrently. Richie (2001) asserts that these types of case management approaches to interventions are more effective than traditional approaches in dealing with women in need of support. According to Covington et al. (2002), every Black woman nearing their release from prison requires a plan that is racially, culturally and gender specific to them while drawing on a synchronized range of support systems available in a community, such as,

Alcohol and other drug programs; programs for survivors of family and sexual violence; family service agencies; emergency shelter, food, and financial assistance programs; educational, vocational, and employment services; health care services; the child welfare system; transportation; child care; children’s services; educational organizations; selfhelp groups; organizations concerned with subgroups of women; consumer advocacy groups; organizations that provide leisure options; faith-based organizations; and community service clubs. (p.17)

To emphasize the interplay between reintegration services and formerly incarcerated women’s reintegration success, Cobbina (2010) states,

The use of post-release services also facilitated women’s re-entry. For example, most formerly incarcerated women were involved in community- based organizations, which assisted them with employment and housing. The use of gender-specific program, such as childcare assistance and parenting services, also aided women’s transition from prison to the free world... Community-based transitional programs should be developed to assist

returning females with temporary housing, job placement assistance, childcare, health care, public transportation, referrals for treatment, and case management. A comprehensive approach should be used to meet women's specific needs during and postimprisonment. (p. 227-28)

Cobbina (2010) shows that the involvement of the community in the reintegration journey of formerly incarcerated Black women is an essential part of the support they require post-release. Although many incarcerated Black women deal with various forms of trauma prior to being incarcerated, the effects of being imprisoned are heavy enough to magnify their issues with trauma. Consequently, upon release, several formerly incarcerated Black women struggle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that is usually undiagnosed and untreated. Over the course of several decades, mental health care workers have begun to recognize the extent to which many women have histories of severe traumatic experiences that impact their lives in sometimes unacknowledged ways (Covington et al., 2002) The challenges Black women face with appropriately caring for their mental health stems from deep rooted cultural ideologies that steer away from accepting mental health as being important. To explain this apprehensive nature towards mental health within the Black community, Okeke (2013) comments,

The image of the “strong Black woman” disinclines Black women to show vulnerability, while also adding to a culture of stigma regarding mental illness. Through performance of such controlling scripts, Black women with mental illness may not be treating their mental issues, but instead masking them... Openly suffering from mental illness is something that is highly tabooed in the cultural relations of Black women... Another common perception in Black communities is that mental illness is not something that affects Black people... The pressure of having one's mental ability and authenticity as a racial or ethnic minority questioned due to mental illness can be extremely stressing on Black women. Some Black women living with mental illness have expressed donning the “strong Black woman” façade so much that they came to believe it was real. (p. 29)

Furthermore, the Black community and cultures' responses to mental health becomes internalized by Black women leaving them to frequently suppress trauma they have experienced. Formerly incarcerated Black women are likely to be released from prison with even more trauma

than they had going in. Accumulated trauma from their time spent incarcerated left untreated can pose even greater challenges for these women post-release (Ervin et al., 2020). Accordingly, Williams et al. (2021) found that most formerly incarcerated Black women face trauma on three levels: “pre-incarceration trauma, carceral trauma, and post-incarceration trauma” (p.1118). Many formerly incarcerated women report that there is room for improvement in release planning and support for successful reintegration, specifically with developing services that are designed to address trauma (Ervin et al., 2020). The hardships associated with reintegration can enhance the trauma that these women endure but if adequately addressed can be less detrimental. Undoubtedly, the need for programs and support services that seek to understand and support formerly incarcerated Black women and their various needs during their incarceration and postincarceration is vital to their successful reintegration.

While there is much room for further exploration of Black women’s post-incarceration experiences, the literature that does exist highlights the ways in which their reintegration journeys are filled with complexities. However, until it is understood how the intersectionality of race, gender, and class compound the challenges that this group face, unique biases and stereotypes that Black women continue to encounter and be impacted by will not be fully considered. Moreover, the initiatives in place to assist these women’s post-release must consider the histories of Black women’s lives that contribute to the ways in which they are perceived and or overlooked. The literature shows that multilayered nature of Black women’s identities and the way in which the stain of a criminal record complicates and exacerbates their experiences of oppression post-incarceration. Additionally, their experiences are better understood through critical approaches that facilitate a more nuanced exploration of the reintegration process for Black women. To build on the existing literature, this research adopts a combination of critical

theories and qualitative methodologies to unpack its findings.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This chapter covers the theoretical aspect of this study, and which theoretical tools were employed to facilitate data analysis. Additionally, it highlights the ways in which each theory informs the research as well as how they relate to one another and help to portray key findings throughout the study. It begins with explaining critical race theory and then continues to the theory of intersectionality and stigma. Finally, this chapter concludes by identifying how each theoretical framework works to inform the other in relation to the themes discovered surrounding the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical race theory is a valuable tool of analysis in my research as it is central to my underlying notion that racism is pervasive in Canadian society. Although Canada as a nation promises to protect its citizens equally under the law, that is far from the reality of the experiences for Black women. A brief look into Canadian history will demonstrate the ways in which politicians, criminal justice officials and other powerful society members alike have allowed the justice system to further marginalize and oppress Black communities. For example, the slavery era, the former police-carding procedures in Toronto, ON, and the over policing of Black communities to name a few. My research draws from the claim that racism, sexism and classism continue to permeate both the Canadian justice system and prison system. Critical race theory is grounded in the notion that the concept of race is embedded in our social, systemic, and organizational structures (Harewood, 2006). Since the late 1970's CRT has influenced the works of scholars in legal studies and race relations, as well as challenged the traditional approaches to

racial justice (Harewood, 2006). In line with the goals of my research, critical race theorists are committed to ensuring the voices of marginalized individuals are heard. CRT acknowledges that the relationships between the criminal justice system and racialized groups are situated in the historical legacy of colonialism. Consequently, critical race theorists suggest counter-storytelling as a means of reframing literature that deems Blacks as inferior to Whites. By doing so, subordinated BIPOC groups can have the agency to construct their own narratives and voice their own truths (Harewood, 2006). Most importantly, critical race theorists assert that “some groups are more likely to suffer oppressive social relations based on racism, sexism, and class division” (Harewood, 2006, p.39).

The interplay between systems of oppression is significant to consider in seeking to comprehend the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women because it is through their lived experiences that the damaging consequences of oppression are revealed. Incorporating CRT allows for the deconstruction of preconceptions, myths, and stigmas about Black women in legal discourse that so often render these women as subordinate.

In a complementary way, Black feminist thought illustrates Black women’s growing power as producers of knowledge (Collins, 1990). For far too long, Black women have been objectified to appease the interests of elite white men whose Eurocentric masculinist world constructs the subordination of Black women. This subordination of Black women rendered our challenges unworthy of attention or resolution. Thus, it was only a matter of time before Black women joined forces to take on the struggle for peace and justice for not only themselves, but the entire Black race and working-class population (Jones, 1949). Unsurprisingly, by the mid 1900’s, militancy amongst Black women began to erupt along with the focus “to overcome the gross neglect of the special problems of Negro women” (Jones, 1949, p.2). To date, Black feminist

scholars continue to equip themselves with the tools needed to resist and challenge the intersecting forces of oppression that Black women are exposed to in society. Black feminist theory seeks to address and identify the ways in which Black women have been both overlooked and neglected within traditional feminist approaches, which in turn has resulted in the erasure of Black women in various theoretical frameworks. In addressing this invisibility, Coles and Pasek (2020) remark, “Black women have not been seen as a discrete group with a unique history, unique strength and unique disabilities. By creating two separate categories for its major social problems—“the race problem” and “the women’s issue”—society has ignored the group which stands at the interstices of these two groups, Black women” (p. 317). Black feminist thought emerges from this realization that the basis of discrimination against Black women stems from the combination of their racial and gender identities. To adequately theorize and discuss the lived experiences of Black women in Western society and globally, Black feminist thought continues to develop an understanding of the multiple degrees to which patterns of discrimination intersect. Moreover, through the approach of intersectionality, Black feminist theory explores the intersection of varying layers of one’s identity that play a role in shaping the lived experiences of racialized individuals.

Black feminist criminology (BFC) similarly examines the relationships between race, gender, class, and criminal identity while offering a means by which the complexity of their experiences post incarceration can be understood. As such, BFC “incorporates the tenets of interconnected identities, interconnected social forces, and distinct circumstances to better theorize, conduct research, and inform policy regarding criminal behavior and victimization among African Americans” (Potter, 2006, p. 109). BFC can be further understood as a field of inquiry that considers the paucity in Black women’s perspectives in criminological discourse

(Reece, 2010). The BFC approach considers the structural constraints that encroach on Black women's reintegration experiences. Incorporating BFC into this study illuminates the mythic nature of reintegration that assumes women are free post-incarceration. Additionally, BFC encourages research on Black women using their own voices. Hence, the qualitative structure of this research corresponds greatly with the fundamentals of BFC.

Intersectionality

The theory of intersectionality emerged from discourses of Black feminism and critical race theory to assert that individuals are disadvantaged by the intersection of multiple layers of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) first coined the term by arguing that the experiences of discrimination for women of colour are unique because of the interconnectedness of their gender and race. She further describes intersectionality in relation to Black women:

Many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood...the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1244)

Other intersectional scholars have argued that systems of power cannot be understood in isolation because of their co-constitutive nature of relying on one another to operate (Bunn, 2010). The theory of intersectionality has been on the rise for some time, however, it is just recently that criminology and legal scholars have begun to incorporate it into their studies. As pointed out by Bunn (2010),

Criminology is fertile ground for intersectional scholarship, where mainstream theories have been criticized for being androcentric and failing to take complex factors of social identity into account...intersectionality has influenced an approach to studying crime that recognizes multiple, intersecting inequalities. (n.p.)

Understanding that systems of oppression work in solidarity with one another is a driving tenet of intersectionality. Many scholars continue to employ the theory of intersectionality into their legal research making for compelling findings. For example, Ben-Moshe (2020) used intersectionality in her research to highlight the intersectional and transcarceral nature of punishment inflicted on criminalized individuals cross-continently. Subsequently, her research revealed that the criminal justice responses to offenders were highly racialized and gendered. In addition, she outlined several flaws within an approach to re-entry that contributes to the failures of reintegration of individuals, and neglects to acknowledge the continuation of structural barriers that disadvantage them regularly. Correspondingly, Reece (2010) conducted a study on the relationship between race, gender, imprisonment, and reintegration of incarcerated Black women in which she discusses the nature of intersecting identities for subjugated populations. She describes how a formerly incarcerated Black person's self-concept is not made up of their racial identity alone, but rather multiple, intersecting identities. According to Reece (2010), individuals' intersecting identities lead to experiences of inequality and disenfranchisement on a multitude of levels.

Overall, Ben-Moshe (2020) and Reece's (2010) intersectionality-informed approaches illustrate the potential for formerly incarcerated Black women's multiple identities to contribute to the multiple forms of discrimination they experience as well as the difficulties they face transitioning back into their communities post-release. Thus, the theory of intersectionality enhances my research in several significant ways but, most importantly it helps to illuminate the structural forces that impact the lives of Black women by situating them in unique experiences. For example, in discussing challenges of sexism amongst formerly incarcerated women, intersectionality requires the discussion to include other identity markers for consideration, such

as, race, class, disability etc. Finally, intersectionality does not discredit individual agency. Although there is focus on the oppressive forces that shape experiences of different groups, it does not regard the oppressed as being inherently powerless. Rather, the agency articulated here relies on the ability of the oppressed to share their lived experiences (Bunn, 2010). From an intersectional perspective, human agency is about Black women's struggles against structures of oppression, complicated by societal and attitudinal biases and stigma.

Stigma

Stigma as a conceptual tool is useful in understanding the reintegration of formerly incarcerated Black women as it reveals the ways in which societal perceptions are infused with biases that inevitably shape their experiences. Incorporating stigma in this research sheds light on the presence of systemic challenges, including limited employment opportunities and social ostracization while contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities these women encounter. It has been over 50 years since Erving Goffman's (1963) landmark publication titled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Since then, many scholars from various backgrounds have used the theory of stigma to uncover the multiple ways in which it operates within society. Goffman (1963) first theorized stigma as "an attribute of that is deeply discrediting...and the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (p.9). In this case stigma relates to a particular type of negative social characteristic that emerges when an individual fails to adhere to a particular norm (Tyler, 2018). For formerly incarcerated Black women, the perceived norm they have gone against is abiding by the law. Further examination has illustrated that stigma is the result of labelling, exclusion and discrimination based on power relations that encourage discrediting stigmatized identities

(Feingold, 2021). For Goffman (1997), the relationship between identity and stigma is that once an identity is stigmatized it becomes contaminated and considered as spoiled. Consequently, stigmatized individuals are received in society as being part of the undesirable and unacceptable groups, thus situating them as being less than and unworthy of equal treatment. Throughout my research, developing my understanding of how structural stigma operates was important in unpacking the insights shared by participants. Structural stigma arises when stigmatic assumptions transcend into social policies and practices that unduly disadvantage certain groups over others (Hannem, 2012). Through the use of language that deems specific groups as being risky, or threatening, many forms of criminalization, surveillance, and intervention become condoned (Hannem, 2012). Additionally, as institutions enforce policies and practices that restrict opportunities of a group, they further perpetuate the effects of social stigma (Huebner et al., 2019).

The combination of critical race theory, intersectionality, and stigma are suitable for uncovering various trends of inequality that permeate the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women. While critical race theory and intersectionality inform one another by having related understandings of the power of racialization in shaping individuals' lived experiences of oppression, it is particularly important to consider in the experiences of Black women post-incarceration. On the other end, stigma addresses the areas of their reintegration journey where the challenges of post-carcer life become exacerbated by societal prejudices.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Formerly incarcerated Black women in Canada continue to be positioned in the margins of society and the limitations in existing research literature that accounts for their experiences is a reminder of this. Correspondingly, the ultimate purpose of this project is to contribute to Canadian studies that focus on the inherently important process of community reintegration for Black women post incarceration. It is important to recognize that formerly incarcerated Black women are the sole experts of their lives and are in an advantaged position to tell and help contextualize their experiences (Reece, 2010). The voices and perspectives of Black women have been silenced in spaces of academia for far too long and the growing inclusion of Black women's voices in such spaces is largely due to the works of Black feminist scholars and activists alike who continue to work tirelessly to break such barriers. As eloquently stated by Audre Lorde (1984), "silence as a communicative action is associated with social situations in which there is a known and unequal distribution of power among focal participants...Black feminists speak as women because we are women and do not need others to speak for us" (p.52). Therefore, to contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature that seeks to shine light on to the lived experiences of Black women through their own lens and perspectives, it was imperative for a qualitative methodological approach to be used.

This chapter aims to outline the methodological approach undertaken to investigate the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black Canadian women post incarceration. It will describe how participants were selected for this study, including who and how many they were. The topic of ethics will be discussed to explain how I went about ensuring that informed consent was given by all participants, including consent to store the data they produced. The

reliability and validity of my research findings will be addressed as well as the limitations I faced. Lastly, the chapter will describe how the data was analyzed.

In keeping with my commitment to providing opportunities for Black women's narratives of their life experiences to be heard, I felt it was best to use a Qualitative Method of data collection. I believe that employing qualitative interviews for my research allowed for a deeper understanding of their reintegration experiences because it afforded one on one discussions. According to Gill et al. (2008),

Interviews are...most appropriate where little is already known about the study phenomenon or where detailed insights are required from individual participants. They are also particularly appropriate for exploring sensitive topics, where participants may not want to talk about such issues in a group environment (p. 292).

A main goal of this research has been to contribute to the little knowledge there is of the reintegration experiences of Black women, but I felt the only way to properly do so would be to seek insight from the women and other people whose lived experiences could relate. For this reason I conducted semi-structured interviews with an array of individuals, including a prison reform focused politician, community organization members, and non-Black formerly incarcerated women.

Semi-structured interviews allow for the researcher to partially prepare their questions ahead of time to ensure that the data produced from the interviews is insightful and sound (Woods, 2011). Additionally, semi-structured interviews in comparison to structured interviews are less formal and more flexible in their flow of direction. To avoid making any of the research participants uncomfortable, intimidated, or uninterested in the study, a semi-structured approach to gathering information from them was most appropriate. Given that my discussion with some of the participants was bound to touch on some sensitive topics, I was certain that the interview

route was the most appropriate direction to follow. At times interviews on sensitive topics can be distressful to participants but there can be benefits in doing so. According to Rosetto (2014), when participants are given the opportunity to speak about themselves and their experiences with a researcher, an emotional release is facilitated which has potential therapeutic value. As noted by Rosetto (2014),

Sharing information, stories, and experiences can also raise self-awareness, help individuals better understand their situations, find a sense of purpose, and even change their thinking patterns. This organization of thoughts can incite new perspectives, promote resolutions, and act as an agent for change. (p. 484)

Thus, conducting interviews on sensitive topics had the potential to be therapeutic for the participants as it offered a “space for catharsis through sharing” (Rosetto, 2014, p. 484).

Although the focus of this research is on Black women’s reintegration experiences, I found including the narratives of non-Black women to be a catalyst in drawing connections amongst the variations of their experiences. There was much insight gained from comparing the information shared in interviews with various formerly incarcerated women. This allowed space for the concerns and comments made about CSC by Black women to be reinforced and supported by other women who could relate. Additionally, I spoke with individuals from a number of justice involved community organizations, prison advocacy groups and women support groups such as Walls to Bridges, Revitalized Reintegration, DISMAS fellowship, and Elizabeth Fry Society. The reason for reaching out to groups of this sort was to gain additional insight about the reintegration processes of formerly incarcerated Black women from people who have experience in working with these women. Thus, they could offer information about various observations they have made, as well as help to validate some of the claims made by the formerly incarcerated Black women interviewed. I found including such participants to be an effective approach to

establishing validity of the information shared by my research's target group (Black women).

Urban et al. (2018) refer to validity in qualitative research as

“trustworthiness, or the extent to which findings can be trusted as accurate representations of the data and the lives, cultures, and contexts from which they come” (p.119). To establish credibility, I employed theoretical triangulation to draw on various theoretical perspectives to analyze my findings. According to Denzin (2009), “assessment cannot be solely derived from principles given in research manuals—it is an emergent process, contingent on the investigator, his research setting, and his theoretical perspective” (p.310). This helps ensure that my findings are solid, by providing a complete understanding and reducing the chance of biases. Once I was able to identify links between the findings of the interviews and the theoretical perspectives I relied on, the credibility of my findings was enhanced. Furthermore, I found it useful to compare the responses of various participants to uncover any discrepancies between their claims.

Initially, I employed a snowball method for recruiting participants for this study. I began by contacting a number of community support organizations that were in contact with all kinds of Black women. My hope was that in doing so, someone would be able to get me in touch with a Black woman who had been incarcerated or perhaps know another Black woman who had been. I reached out to these prospects by doing Google searches to locate their websites and email addresses. Once I was able to get an email contact, I sent out short emails describing the purpose of my study and who I was interested in speaking with. This technique started off slow but ended up growing larger than I had anticipated. Through word of mouth, I was able to get in touch with many different individuals who were interested in assisting me in my research in any way possible. Many of the organizations I was in contact with shared my email and recruitment poster on their community platforms which was how many of the Black women I spoke with

were introduced to this study. The criteria for participants in the study were different for incarcerated individuals and community members. The criteria for both were as follows:

Formerly incarcerated individuals

- Must be at least 21 years of age
- Must be female
- Out of prison for minimum of 6 months
- Incarcerated for minimum 1 year

Community organization members

- Must have experience working with formerly incarcerated Black

women In total, I was able to interview 7 Black women and 3 non-Black women who had been formerly incarcerated in an Ontario prison. Additionally, I spoke with 6 individuals from various community organizations and one politician.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with my research participants through video-calls using the Zoom app. It was important for my research participants to feel as comfortable as possible while speaking with me as I went over topics that evoked a variety of emotions, both good and bad. Because of the informal nature of semi-structured interviews that allows for a relaxed interaction between interviewer and interviewee, there were some challenges I encountered, such as going over the original amount of time allotted to the interviews, as well as spending too much time on topics that were not necessarily relevant. However, in each instance where any of these challenges occurred, I was able to allocate more time to our calls. Hence, using a semi-structured interview to generate authentic and reliable data for this study was the best route to take for the purposes of my research. The limitations I encountered while conducting qualitative interviews were mainly related to the scope of responsibility I had as the

interviewer and researcher to adequately transcribe and interpret the content of my interviews. According to Fortado (1990), within semi-structured interviews it is essential for the interviewer to maintain awareness throughout of the various ways in which respondents may fabricate responses by misleading or embellishing their points as a means of attracting a specific response. In some instances, respondents may be looking to “attain a cathartic release or exact revenge upon a foe” (p. 39). I attempted to mitigate this risk by paying attention to inconsistencies amongst participants’ responses and employing secondary sources to help confirm validity and accuracy of their accounts.

With qualitative interviews it is easy for meanings to be mis-conveyed and translations be lost through the process as the interviewer is left to extrapolate meaning and knowledge from the insights shared in interviews, this is no little task and can be tricky to establish the validity of interviewees responses at times. To this end, Mishler (1991) explains that “there are an endless number of decisions that must be made about re-presentation of speech as text, that is, as a transcript, which although apparently mundane, have serious implications for how we might understand the discourse” (p.91). Still I was able to draw similarities and differences amongst the interviews I conducted to assist in minimizing such inescapable limitations while strengthening validity.

I used the record feature inscribed within the Zoom app so I could keep them in my records as a point of reference if needed for future clarification of transcriptions purposes. The recordings were then manually transcribed verbatim, into a password protected Word document. When participants mentioned another individual’s name, I omitted the name by replacing it with a pseudonym. The formerly incarcerated women I spoke with were all given pseudonyms to

protect their identities, however, the other individuals who were interviewed agreed to have their real names included.

It was disclosed to each participant prior to the interview that the entire interview was being recorded through the Zoom app. The interview questions were designed to encourage these women to speak about various reintegration topics, such as accessibility to resources provided by Correctional Service Canada, the type of support programs available from CSC and their communities, access to housing and employment, managing stigma, and rebuilding life after incarceration.

When undertaking qualitative research with human participants, especially vulnerable populations, it is responsible to consider both the ethical and practical complexities of conducting such research (Abbott et al., 2018). Ethics is a crucial part of my research as a great portion of this research project relies on information gathered from human subjects during a series of interviews. For the research I obtained through these interviews to be admissible in my research project I underwent a process of ethics approval.

Moreover, another ethical consideration for this study I have considered are the ways in which my own personal identity, experiences and assumptions can influence the production of knowledge. For example, prior to conducting interviews I had to reflect on my personal and rather uninformed thoughts towards the topic and unpack how these feelings could influence my interviews. Prior to the onset of my research, I had negative thoughts about the realities of formerly incarcerated Black women that assumed their lives were consumed by struggle and sorrow. Undoubtedly, I have realized that these assumptions were based on salacious portrayals I had encountered through various forms of media, such as films, television shows, and news reports.

As a Black woman researcher engaging with Black women participants, I was aware that our racial solidarity may have influenced the way in which I contextualized and theorized the information provided. To manage this, I employed the methodological tool of Bracketing which allows for the researcher to investigate their own experiences and presumptions prior to conducting the interview (Dempsey et al., 2016). Bracketing provides the researcher with an opportunity to be interviewed on the topic of study to reveal any personal or professional experiences during the data collection and analysis (Dempsey et al., 2016). I engaged with primary sources such as news reports, government of Canada public reports, and a documentary to bolster my interpretations of the interviews conducted. It was significant for me to understand my own thoughts and experiences in relation to the various themes that have been discussed throughout this study as a means of preventing and controlling any form of bias or misjudgement from occurring on my end. Not only does bracketing permit the researcher to “objectively explore any hidden or blind assumptions” (Dempsey et al., 2016, p.488) so that the collection of data and analysis is conducted in a manner where the researcher is able to be critical, but it also encourages researchers to engage in self-reflexivity to prepare for the interviewing process. For example, the ongoing exposure of overtly racist acts on various social media platforms towards black bodies in the West has been overwhelming. In particular, the egregious acts of police brutality towards black bodies in recent years have left me grappling with lack of trust in nearly everything police related, including their treatment of racialized citizens and the inherent racism embedded in the institution they represent. I had to work on detaching myself from this sentiment to avoid running into instances of confirmation bias during my interviews. Confirmation bias “connotes the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand” (Nickerson, 1998, p.175). I did not want

to be in a position where I was allowing my emotions to blurry my ability to clearly understand my participants' responses by letting my own personal feelings towards institutional sites of power manipulate what I was taking from them. To navigate this potential occurrence, I used journaling as an exercise of releasing my inner emotions and thoughts about key topics of the study such as incarceration, reintegration, Black women, the law, racism, and sexism. After each interview, I would freely journal what my takeaway thoughts were and how I was feeling at the time. Journaling is an effective tool for emotional relief. This has been beneficial for me as the interviewer by allowing me to acknowledge and identify any preconceptions I may have had prior to conducting interviews, while providing me with the mental space to proactively manage such biases. Moreover, combining different types of qualitative data and sources was effective in creating a more robust understanding of the knowledge I was trying to uncover by offering a variety of likeminded perspectives to engage with. The combination of two forms of qualitative analysis, text-based information (e.g. books, academic journals, theses/dissertations, government documents) and interviews, allows us to get closer to understanding the challenges the women of my study encounter as well as potential solutions to address them.

Methods of Analysis

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a commonly used qualitative research method. Different from single axis methods, contemporary applications of this technique are categorized into three approaches: conventional, directed, or summative. For this study, I took on conventional and summative approaches to analyzing data. Conventional analysis of data is typically appropriate in research that aims to investigate a phenomenon that is for the most part limited in research studies and literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This form of analysis steers away from using pre-existing

categories, allowing categories and the names for them to develop directly from the data itself (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For example, if data that is collected primarily through interviews presents a reoccurring mention of a particular organization, employing a conventional analysis approach would allow me to use this organization as a category for organizing data (i.e., Elizabeth Fry). Additionally, researchers conducting conventional style of content analysis allow themselves to be immersed into the data by repeatedly going over interview transcripts and searching for categories that emerge themselves directly from the words of the participants allowing for a unique coding process. Codes are derived from the data by identifying words from the transcripts that reflect key thoughts and concepts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Consequently, the labels that were formed for codes became reflective of multiple key thoughts and concepts. Finally, the codes were sorted into different categories based on their interrelatedness to one another.

The summative approach to content analysis requires the researcher begins with locating and quantifying specific words or content within a transcript or text for the purpose of gaining deeper understanding of the contextual use of the words or content (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). However, the quantification of words or content is not meant to deduce meanings, instead it is used to investigate the usage and why it has been used. For example, if through examining the data collected from my interviews with participants, I observed that the word *neglect* has been used 100 times in total, the focus point for analysis will not be on the number of times the word was used, but rather why this word was used and what the contextual implications of its usage are. If the analysis was complete after determining the numeric value of the use of the word *neglect*, then the analysis could be considered quantitative. A summative approach to content analysis goes further than a word count to include latent content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon,

2005), towards discovering overlooked meanings of words or content. The semi-structured interviews I conducted allowed me to have insightful discussions with formerly incarcerated Black women in Canada, so it was especially significant to pay attention to the reoccurring use of a particular word amongst these participants in developing my analysis. There are certain advantages of employing a summative approach to content analysis that are relevant to this study but most importantly, it allows for credibility to be formed or inconsistencies to be revealed by demonstrating whether the evidence provided by text is congruent with the interpretations developed.

Overall, this qualitative study employing a semi-structured approach to conduct interviews has been the most effective means of producing knowledge on the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women in Canada. Not only did this methodological approach allow for the perspectives of the participants to be central to the study, but it also helped to create a space in which the voices of Black women are considered of value to the production of scholarly knowledge. That alone is a step in the right direction of empowering formerly incarcerated Black women in Canada to share their experiences with the intentions of helping to bring about change in the lives of this often-overlooked population of Canadian women.

Chapter 4: Background

“Black women suffer the double disadvantaged of being stereotyped according to race and gender, readily labeled as deviant in the community and overrepresented in prison. They now represent 18% of the rising female prison population, yet little is known of their experience.” (Chiqwada, 1989, p.100)

“Imprisonment is increasingly used as a strategy of deflection of the underlying social problems—racism, poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and so on.” (Davis, 2016, p.212)

“To imprison a woman is to remove her voice from the world, but many female inmates have been silenced by life long before the transport van carries them from the courthouse to the correctional facility.... Their essays, then, are victories against voicelessness.” (Willingham, 2011, p.55)

This context chapter traces the historical trajectory of Black women’s relationship with the Canadian criminal justice system to accentuate the significance of this investigation. The aim is to demonstrate the extent to which these histories continue to shape the experiences these women have with CJS. Evidently, the marginalized positions of Black women and Black bodies in Canadian society is reflected in their carceral outcomes. Additionally, the context chapter provides details on the state of incarceration of Black women that is persistently on the rise and the conflicts they endure with the law and policies that often criminalizes them. It is important that background and context is provided to highlight the importance of this research and the need for further investigations to be conducted to help alleviate some of the challenges these women face in their reintegration journeys.

Dating back nearly 30 years, issues of discrimination within the Canadian criminal justice system have been investigated and reported to the public but there has not been much to reduce or control its impact in the lives of marginalized populations, chiefly, Black women. Black bodies in general face disproportionate levels of police violence and surveillance which is partially responsible for their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (African Canadian

Legal Clinic, 2008). In 1995, the Report on the Commission on Systemic Racism in Ontario demonstrated that there were questionable patterns of incarceration amongst African Canadians. Despite only accounting for 1% of the Canadian population at the time, Black women constituted 5% of the incarcerated women in federal prisons (African Canadian Legal Clinic, 2008). Still, these problematic patterns are relevant today in the 21st century because the disproportionate levels of incarceration of Black women persist—a clear indication that there is still more work to be done. In 2022, the Government of Canada (GOC) published a report on the overrepresentation of Black people in the criminal justice system that demonstrated not much has changed with these patterns and indeed there is need for improvement. The report draws from a collection of data produced by credible sources including Statistics Canada’s Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics, the Department of Justice Canada’s Research and Statistics Division, the Correctional Service of Canada, and the Office of the Correctional Investigator. Like the statistics presented by the Ontario Human Rights Commission in the *Systemic Racism in Ontario Criminal Justice System* report nearly 30 years ago, the GOC’s 2022 report notes that Black women constitute 6% of the total female offender population, making 4% of the custody population, while only constituting 7% of the community population. Evidently, there is room for investigative inquiry into *the concerning* trends that appear to reflect the plethora of disadvantageous experiences Black women undergo inside/outside of the prison.

In discussing Black women and their various relationships with Canadian society, it is important to consider the country’s history: specifically, the colonial knowledge through which Canada’s history has been developed, understood and distributed globally. Put simply, Canadian history has been presented and spread by “white founding fathers” (Reece, 2010, p.77) whose “master” or “mainstream” narratives have been embedded in central Canadian legal texts and

government policies (Reece, 2010, p.77). Conceptualizing the extent to which the intersections of race and gender operate to shape the lived experiences of this female population, it must first be accepted that the colonial knowledge as presented through Canada's history still very much holds its weight of influence in the formation of various sites of power in Canadian society, including the legal and justice system. Consequently, the racialized and gendered treatment of Black women in Canadian society is inherently a result of the colonial history embedded in the nation's structure that continues to hierarchize certain bodies over one another, thus, impacting their lived experiences with institutional and systemic structures (Benn-John, 2016). While exploring and tracing the subordination and ongoing marginalization of Black women today in Canada's racist colonial history, Benn-John (2016) notes, "the reverberations from the atrocity of colonization are still experienced in Canada...colonization has a specific intersectional impact on Black women that is different from White women's experience of sexism and Black men's experience of racism. We exist on the margins" (p.163).

These truths of Blacks' histories and current realities are relevant because they continue to persist in contemporary society manifesting in a plethora of forms including implicit racism, systemic racism, and institutional racism. This sector of Canada's past is relevant because it makes evident the way in which racist histories of enslavement and colonialism continue to influence various sites of power that inevitably impact the lives of those who are incessantly positioned at the margins of society, in this case Black women. Consequently, the lasting effects of racist historical projects must be addressed as an ongoing issue instead of a problematic issue of the past. It cannot be denied that the foundation of institutional structures is maintained under the premise of racial, gendered, and classist categories that operate to organize individuals within the confines of these groups. Still, racism is deeply entrenched in the layers of Canadian society

and will continue to be until the dark truths of the history of race are accepted and properly confronted. Moreover, the replication of historical forms of colonial knowledge and racism not only conditions but reinforces effects of social exclusion and economic disadvantages. For instance, statistics continue to show that Black women in the labour market are the most economically disadvantaged and are often underpaid in comparison to their non-Black counterparts (Henrique, 1996). The precarity of Black women's lives continues to be evident in the overrepresentation of Black women in the criminal justice system as well as in the underrepresentation of their lives post-incarceration.

The construction of Canada's correctional system has for so long been a direct reflection of a white, patriarchal, male-dominated society (Tyagi, 2006). With the establishment of modern prisons designed with only male offenders in mind, Canada's correctional services had already further marginalized women offenders from the onset of their implementations. For example, common images used to represent federal prisons in Canada are typically men, more specifically, Black men. These continuations and holdovers which are more properly situated with Canada's colonial history and racism towards Black women show the extent to which exclusion undergirds their lives. Carceral representations are commonly shared through popular media outlets, including news stations, newspapers, and social media platforms. This focus on men is not unsubstantiated as males have for so long dominated most prison populations (provincial and federal), however, it has rendered the experiences, challenges, and concerns of women, and especially Black women, invisible (Spidle, 2017).

This marginalization is exacerbated for Black and racialized women whose experiences with Canada's correctional services illustrate the extent to which they are overlooked entirely as

a population worthy of prioritization in almost all aspects of human life. The multi-tiered disadvantages faced by Black women within the criminal justice system are a result of the intersection of stereotypes, discriminatory ideations, racism, sexism, and classism that influence the way in which they are perceived, understood, and treated (Chigwada-Bailey, 1989). We cannot address the marginalization of Black women in relation to the criminal justice system without also addressing how their *hyper-criminalization* is congruent to their experiences with this institution. Several studies have demonstrated the relationship between Black women's socio-economic and political marginality and their criminalization. Racism, sexism and classism are socially constructed processes that disadvantage Black women within the criminal justice system by putting them in situations where their racial, gender, and cultural and class identities are used to justify assumptions about their so-called criminality (Allspach, 2010). Pollack's (2000) research describes how Black women's criminalization occurs because of structural inequality and oppression. She comments: "shoplifting, fraud and drug importation were a means of releasing Black women from poverty and racist practices that reinforced their marginalization. Relying on or supplementing their income through illegal jobs, women were able to adequately support themselves and their family" (Pollack 2000, p.78). Stoner and Yearwood (2007) suggest that we cannot discuss their criminalization without acknowledging the underlying paradox that is "the racialization of crime and the criminalization of race" (p.1). The criminal justice system targets racialized individuals, including Black women who make up a large sum of the communities that are the most socially and economically marginalized. Black women from disadvantaged communities tend to have difficulty accessing social and economic opportunities which both are key determinants to an individual's likelihood to engage in criminal activity.

Today Black women continue to be overlooked in conversations surrounding criminal justice and incarceration. Even with the growing number of Black women being incarcerated, there is still not nearly enough information as to why these disheartening trends of inequality for Black women continue to exist and what can be done by Canada's criminal justice system to help reduce and reform this state of affairs. The lack of investigation on the complexities of Black women and their experiences with the Canadian justice system is just one of the ways in which Black women are invisibilized in this nation. In 2010, Black women were considered three times more likely than white women to be incarcerated in Canada (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2021). However, research on the topic of women in prison is often concentrated on placing blame on the women rather than considering the structural barriers that systemically target them such as unequal opportunities in the labour market, and susceptibility to violence in low-income neighbourhoods (Pollack, 2009). For Black women, their experiences with imprisonment are rarely looked at from the perspective in which systemic oppression combined with the structural barriers they face in their daily lives are taken into consideration. Although these two factors are correlated, they tend to present themselves differently. Systemic oppression occurs when patterns of discrimination and inequalities immersed in societal systems affect these women, such as experiences of mistreatment based on their perceived race and gender, sexism, as well as classism stemming from their socio-economic status. Structural barriers take form in the challenges these women encounter in attempting to navigate a system that produces disadvantages that hinder them from equal access to resources such as employment and housing as well as fundamental human rights. Indeed these barriers can be considered consequences of systemic oppressions but take form as concrete hurdles, such as discriminatory policies, unequal access to education, or biased hiring practices. For example, Pate (2006) discusses how government

sanctions conveniently cut back on social assistance but then proceed to place sole blame on disenfranchised individuals when they resort to illegal activities to survive and provide for their families. In advocating for Canadian women in prison, Pate (2006) stated:

It is these laws and policies that are causing human suffering. It is these laws and policies that effectively criminalize poverty, disabilities, and resistance to colonization. It is these bureaucrats, parliamentarians, welfare and police officers, as well as their friends in the universities who come along and develop classification schemes, methods of assessment and correction tools. These are the folks pretending that the poor people who have been grabbed, sucked, or thrown into criminal and correctional systems are there because of their own wish and will power. (p.82)

The overrepresentation of Black women in Canada's criminal justice system is increasingly gaining the attention of scholars, policymakers, and community social justice advocacy groups as an issue of importance in Canadian society. In recent years, Canada's justice system has faced intense pressure to address and respond to the challenges of diversity and cultural needs of women in prisons. The Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI) conducted a case study on diversity in corrections and reported that there was a rising number of Black women serving time in federal penitentiaries and their needs were unmet (OCI, 2013). Additionally, the case study revealed that 53% of Black women were convicted for drug-related offences. When the Correctional Investigator conducted interviews with Black women serving time at the Grand Valley Institute for Women, they discovered that many of these women's crimes were committed to overcome their poverty (OCI, 2013). Other Black women interviewed in the study expressed that they took the risk of committing crime in efforts to protect the well-being of their children. In acknowledging the overarching concerns noted of Black women participants, the report states:

There were other concerns noted by the women in group and individual interviews: the lack of availability and access to special medicated creams and ointments for skin and hair care; lack of appropriate skills training (rather than laundering, folding, ironing and sewing of clothes); and cuts to part-time chaplains, reflecting a concern that their spiritual needs could not be met by Christian chaplains. Finally, though many Black

women at GVI were incarcerated for drug trafficking, conviction for this type of offence does not necessarily translate into having a drug addiction or substance abuse problem. Several women reported that they could not understand why they were required to complete this type of programming, even as part of a broader core correctional program, in the absence of an identified need. (TCIC, 2013, p.13)

The perpetuation of racial and gender discrimination in the criminal justice system is not new and it continues to be found within the layers of Black women's experiences with it. Particularly, stereotypes of gang members or drug addicts are saturated in the carceral experiences of Black women and thus undergird the injustices they face. Once released from prison, Black women are physically free but in actuality continue to be held captive by the forces of oppression that work against them (Williams, 2013). Unfortunately for formerly incarcerated Black women, the stigmas that are so tightly bound to their identities affect their experiences by grouping them as women whose needs are one in the same and overall unimportant.

Exploring the current condition of formerly incarcerated Black women's reintegration experiences can help to uncover and address the inequities these women face in their quests to rebuild their lives within their communities post release. Essentially, it is important to understand the context of this research to help illustrate the way in which formerly incarcerated Black women's experiences are undergirded with injustices and prejudices that can lead to violations of their basic rights. As the coming chapters will show, the findings of this study reflect some of the ways in which such injustices take form in this broader political, social, and institutional context.

Chapter 5: Black Women's Critiques of the Prison System and Stigmatization

“Because once you're with the institution, you're with the institution” -Levi (formerly incarcerated Black woman)

“You know, it used to be that yeah, they helped us...meaning the society at large, um, and corrections, pardon my language, not to be fuck ups, then you gave us programs to feel better about being fuck ups. And now you tell us that we're still fuck ups, but it's our fault that we're fuck ups” -Rykie (formerly incarcerated Black woman)

“Yeah. So like, stuff like that, all these little, I feel like they put these things in place, so you can't move forward. I'm stuck where I am. And if I didn't have the determination, because I know better, I can do better. Where would I have been?” -Elwyn (formerly incarcerated Black woman)

The production of knowledge, history, and literature operate in the best interest of nationstate narratives that are not able to sufficiently account for Black women's “presence and imagination” (Davis, 2020, p.2). Situated within this recognition of historical and contemporary erasures of Black women's experiences, I turn to the voices of the formerly incarcerated Black women I interviewed as a means of resisting against the forces of oppression that continue to taint their lives and as a way of providing these women the safe space to share their reintegration experiences. Their interviews elucidate the ways in which the confluence of race, gender and class exacerbate the challenges these women face in successfully navigating post-incarceration. Additionally, this chapter includes the insight provided in interviews with non-Black formerly incarcerated women, as well as different professionals with experience in working with incarcerated Black women and supporting their post-incarceration reintegration.

Institutional Racism in the Criminal Justice System

The voices presented in this section shed light on the nature of institutional racism in Canada and its various manifestations in incarcerated Black women's lives and particular environments that far transcend the prison institution. Within this section we begin to see the

effects of covert institutional racism in the prison system that limit the upward mobility of Black women in and outside of it. The comments shared in this study demonstrate the need to further investigate the way in which institutional racism impacts incarcerated Black women and how it continues to affect them post-incarceration. Black women have been and continue to be misplaced and mistreated within institutional settings and this is a concern this chapter seeks to highlight and understand.

The interview I conducted with Chy, a 52-year-old formerly incarcerated Black woman who spent 5 years in a federal women's prison, portrayed some of the improvements that could be made within the prison institution to better meet the needs of Black women, and therefore, more effectively assist them to reintegrate back into their communities. I asked Chy to comment on the nature of prison programming, and she had the following to say:

Well, first, as far as being Black, like for black women, I think we need support from our own people that can understand where we're coming from. Just like the natives, with the natives in prison, it's a whole different system. So they get the people coming in that are native, that they deal with different than how we're getting treated. They're getting different treatment because they're native. So I think with the Blacks, I think that we need that. We need support from our own people...because our needs and our issues are different than white people. And I'm not going to say we don't kill or rob, we're not doing anything different, but I'm saying our issues are different, you know, in our community. I found that when I was there and I watched the Black women, like even in the program groups, I'm looking around the room and I'm saying to myself, like I don't get it. I guess, because we didn't really have serious issues, right? So in our group, there was nobody that was on drugs. The crimes varied. You know what I'm saying? Like our issues were different. So I think those things have to be addressed.

Similarly, Levi had this to say: "No one is thinking about us [Black women]. They just see us as another Black chick inside...there's no resources for us [Black women], none whatsoever". Chy and Levi suggest the process of reintegration lacks support that can address their needs as Black women, and this includes acknowledging the challenges Black women are likely to encounter

and developing strategies to readily equip them to overcome these challenges. To do so, it must first be acknowledged that the experiences of incarceration for Black women widely differs from those of their non-Black counterparts, including other racialized women. Chy and Levi's comments emphasize the lack of insight CSC has into the lived realities of Black women and the way in which their unmet needs are a result of them being underprioritized as a group. When asked what they thought could be done by CSC to help Black women who are currently incarcerated and set to be released soon, Rykie nervously laughed and somberly replied, "umm...remember that we exist for starters and maybe that we matter".

Institutional racism can be tricky to identify because it goes far beyond laws and written policies, but also includes unwritten policies and practices so deeply entrenched in racist ideologies that ultimately render Black women as less than human (Braveman et al., 2022). Moreover, these forms of oppression are rooted in historical anti-Black prejudices where misconceptions about Black women deem them as unworthy and most certainly not deserving of respect. Alexis, Honey, and Rykie's accounts show how such misconceptions translate within different encounters they face:

Alexis: They thought that I didn't cooperate. I was not transparent. And it's funny because I've been transparent from when I went, when I got in. So when they say I was not transparent, I was so mad. I was so mad. And, um, the peels, the PO [parole officer] that I had was saying, well, you can apply for parole, but I'm not going to support you. I knew why [because I'm Black], but their thing was, oh, well, you weren't cooperating. You're not co-operating.

Honey: They [case workers] said I needed anger management and I did not want that. I had to take the program and it actually pissed me off. I was more angry going to that program if anything.

Rykie: think that prison and the whole penal system are a joke because race racism is heavy, heavy in that system. I am willing to bet my whole life had I been a white woman, I would have been victimized instead of vilified.

Historically, Black women within public discourse have stereotypically been portrayed as untamed, wild animals. This can be evidenced in racist portrayals of Black women as monkeys, associating them with having animalistic qualities (Moody, 2012). Further, such women have been described as masculine, aggressive by nature, angry, and hostile. As the above quotations suggest, these historical depictions of Black women transcend into the punitive carceral system and thus, take part in producing an oppressive regime for these women to navigate upon inception of incarceration and release. When Black women are consistently stereotyped as an "angry black woman," from the onset of their incarceration, it can also evoke frustration, because not only does it shape the way in which they are treated in carceral settings but it also perpetuates an inadequate and unjust frequent characterization of these women. Accordingly, this can contribute to the development of genuine frustration and anger.

Lack of Black mentors present in these women's journeys is a point of concern for them as they do not feel as though they are adequately represented or supported in a gender and racially sensitive manner. For instance, Jam expressed her reason for not forming supportive relationships with prison personnel and various support workers while incarcerated in this response: "I just kind of focused on myself, I knew that this was just an opportunity for me to better myself. And there was not really much Black people in there [staff] to relate to so yeah". Den shared similar sentiments when she explained how Black inmates would form their own support groups to make up for the lack of Black and culturally relevant support that was available. "We would find each other and stick together, helping each other with whatever we needed, food, hair products, that kind of stuff," she explained. Although these women's responses to the lack of Black visibility in their prison settings are different, they both constitute a form of resistance towards the invisibilization of Black women. For Jam, she was able to take

her time spent incarcerated with minimal Black support staff as a reason to keep to herself and concentrate on self-improvement, whereas Den's form of resistance was in finding solidarity amongst other incarcerated Black women who could relate and support her in the precise ways she required. Both women's actions defy their invisibility by creating visibility whether it was of self, or of others. Their accounts show that Black women continue to resist their invisibilization in many ways that make space for them to freely express and share their multifaceted experiences, perspectives and challenges that ultimately lead to them being both heard and seen. It must be noted though that as these women struggle to make themselves visible, they encounter additional forms of prejudice and marginalization linked to stigma.

Struggles with Stigma

As discussed, the conditions of formerly incarcerated Black women's lives are compounded by the effects of gender, racial and class-based oppression. Additionally, the intricacies of these factors are amplified when one is also dealing with oppression due to their criminal record. As a result, these women experience two forms of stigma that Feingold (2021) identifies as enacted and anticipated stigma. Instances of enacted stigma occur when individuals experience external discrimination from others such as being disregarded for a job because of past incarceration, whereas anticipated stigma occurs when people who have engaged in deviantized behaviours expect to face rejection and/or discrimination (Feingold, 2021). These features of stigma were present in the stories of formerly incarcerated Black women participants. For Rykie, the way in which stigma was affecting her life was apparent:

These [parole] officers are doing more harm than they are good. Do you know how many officers have looked in the face of addicts and said all you're going to be is an addict and you'll be back, don't worry, you're going to keep my bills paid, I'll see you again soon. I'm just, I'm terrified of everything. Also jail has given me like a new

fear of being judged and being on a public platform, so I just hide from everything. I've seen a lot of girls become a worse version of themselves before they entered.

Maxi, a woman who spent over a decade incarcerated, shared with me that she did not feel as though the correctional system was designed to help Black women move forward in life but rather to remain stagnant in prison. Like Chy, she also mentioned that programs focusing on addictions and substance abuse were not necessarily relevant to Black women inside and so this was another area in which the realities of Black women are disregarded by resources of support. Instead, assumptions casting Black women as drug addicts, “welfare queens”, “breeders”, and “jezebels” (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016, p.416) demonstrate the extent to which stereotypes affiliated with their stigmatized identities result in programs that do not fit the context of these women’s life experiences. Because of these stereotypes, instead of putting them into programs that would help them address the economic disadvantages they are bound to confront, the measures in place to assist them were both inappropriate and ineffective. Chy criticized of the programs and support services available to Black women like herself, commenting,

Black women who, you know, some of them, majority of them were there for importing, right. And it's like, they want, I don't know. I felt like they want us to struggle, or they want to break us in a sense, but I didn't allow that to happen, at one point I almost did. But then I said to myself, if I make them break me, that means I will never get out. Yeah. Because even with, even with the CSC programming, it was like, their program was

based on people who have addictions. It wasn't, it wasn't, um, programs that had to do with Black women and the struggles that they have.

For many of the crimes committed by Black women, it is clear that they were economically motivated, yet the economic nature of their offences was overlooked. Indeed, this suggests that appropriate support should focus on the economic factors that compel individuals to commit crimes. The correlation between economic disadvantages, race, and crime is significant

in conceptualizing Black women's experiences prior to and post-incarceration. Albeit within an American context, but still relevant to the Canadian context, Butler (1995) explains, "criminal conduct among African Americans is often a predictable reaction to oppression. Sometimes black crime is a symptom of internalized white supremacy; other times it is a reasonable response to the racial and economic subordination of every African-American" (p.50). The lack of consideration for Black women's needs in prison programming is informed by stigma, but is also reflective of the anti-Black racism that permeates the prison system as a whole.

Nella, a Black woman who had been incarcerated for 3 years and recently released, similarly felt as though the overall correctional system sets Black women up for failure by heightening the likelihood of their reoffence. She comments,

You give no chance to do better and then release them. There's no plan set up. Cool. You can put me in the re-entry program where everybody talks about how great they're going to be this time around, but we'll talk with no plan, no execution. No, no nothing. You're all set up for failure. I can't tell you how many times I talked to people. They were like, guess who's back. And I'm like, not surprised.

Deconstruction of the social stigmas and oppressive outcomes that these women experience can only be achieved if there are communities and authoritative figures (e.g., CSC, parole officers, half-way home supervisors, employers, landlords, etc.) in their corners, genuinely rooting for their success, willing and ready to support them, and practical planning to rebuild their lives post release. Without such practical considerations in place, these women are ill equipped to face the injustices of oppression that will inevitably push them to the peripheries of Canadian society. The lack of positive relationships with the various actors involved in their carceral experiences can be seen as effects of stigma and racialization. Intersectionality allows us to consider how

formerly incarcerated Black women's race, gender, class, and criminal identity shape the way in which they are perceived and treated in carceral settings.

Chy expressed that stigma was involved in the disconnect she felt many Black women had with different authority figures they encounter during their experiences with incarceration. She shared her dismay with some of these individuals when she remarked,

We [Black women] are aware of the disgrace that comes with our criminal records but it's different when you feel like you are being judged by the same folks whose job is to help you and it shows how they act with us, we're just another Black criminal to them. Here, the women's responses demonstrate that the perception of their identity produces negative outcomes, further marginalizing them as a group. Critical race theorists would agree that "Black women have a unique perceived absence of status, for example, and are perceived as distinct from being Black, or a woman" (Billups et al., 2022, p.24). Based on some of the insights shared throughout interviews, it is reasonable to assert that these judgemental biases inform the experiences of Black women during and post incarceration in which their social categorizations produce multiple disadvantages. Consequently, many formerly incarcerated women find themselves returning to prison because of a wide range of factors such as a lack of release planning, stigma of being angry Black women, difficulty securing employment and housing, as well as returning to toxic areas. As Elwyn pointed out, "the stuff we deal with as Black women trying to survive in a world that doesn't value us, doesn't magically disappear when we get canded [incarcerated]; if anything, it gets worse. And sometimes it's not even obvious [racism] but like we know, we know what is meant by things said to us and how we are treated sometimes". Six out of the seven Black women participants highlighted their criminal record as being a significant contributor to the challenges they encounter with obtaining employment. Most of the women felt as though

their race combined with their gender has always been a cause for challenges with employment but not as challenging as it becomes once their status of being previously incarcerated is disclosed. My interview with Jam, who had recently been released from prison, was insightful in illustrating how several women feel about the dilemma they face in acquiring employment while being transparent about their criminal record. Jam and Den expressed their frustration about this:

Jam: I'm trying to [get a job], like, I had, um, a couple of places call me back and it's like, right now they're calling me. And then they're saying they have to do a background check. So it's like, I just get discouraged because it's like every job for me to do a background check. Now they're going to see whatever. So it's just forget about that job then, because when they do the background check, it's going to obviously show [criminal record], I just feel like, like your back's up against a wall.

The frustration expressed by some of the women I interviewed in trying to secure a legal means of income is unfortunate given the objectives of employment focused prison programs that are developed by correctional services. Such programs are intended to improve the value systems of incarcerated individuals while equipping them with the general skills needed to survive in the workforce (Strimelle & Frigon, 2011). Nonetheless, formerly incarcerated Black women, like many other marginalized people, continue to experience difficulties in obtaining and maintaining employment post-incarceration. The literature on stigma provides valuable insight into the correlation between reintegration and identity transformation by demonstrating the extent to which these processes can be extensive and problematic. Goffman (1963) argues that irrespective of the efforts a stigmatized individual puts forth to “correct what he sees as the objective basis of his failing...what often results is not the acquisition of fully normal status, but a transformation of self from someone with a particular blemish into someone with a record of having a corrected a particular blemish” (p.9). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that while the prominence of a criminal record may diminish over time, the stigma attached to the label of

having been incarcerated will persist, despite the reparative attempts formerly incarcerated Black women make (Rumpf & Williams, 2020). Additionally, Yang et al. (2007) describe that for incarcerated people, stigma appears “when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold” (p.367). This consideration of power relations demonstrates how stigma is both interactional and structural (Williams & Rumpf, 2020). Even when participants in this study did not explicitly identify individual instances of discrimination, their comments elucidate the way in which stigma manages to affect all areas of their life post-incarceration. Moreover, attention to their markers of race and gender in this context expose how these women’s experiences of the effects of stigma are distinctive because they are multilayered. Nonetheless, their stigmatized identity renders them vulnerable to being labeled as outcasts, dangerous, and threatening and thus become susceptible to discrimination. As Williams and Rumpf (2020) write,

The criminal legal system administers a process of ongoing stigmatization, what John Braithwaite (1989) terms “disintegrative shaming in which no effort is made to reconcile the offender with the community. The offender is outcast, her deviance is allowed to become a master status, degradation ceremonies are not followed by ceremonies to decertify deviance” (p. 101). Even after completing their sentence, criminalized people are denied “acquisition of the fully normal status” (Goffman, 1963, p. 9). (p.8).

Difficulties securing employment

The process of obtaining employment for formerly incarcerated Black women can be quite grueling, especially while attempting to navigate the many spheres of reintegration. When I spoke with Elwyn who had been incarcerated for 15 months, she explained that, although she was able to eventually return the job she had prior to incarceration, her initial job search experience was stressful and discouraging:

When you're done online applications, as soon as they see, if you don't answer criminal record, they won't respond to you. If you answered 'Yes', they won't respond to you. So the only option is to have in-person interviews and then they may, or they may not ask. I didn't tell them unless they asked, they asked, I was like let me be honest where I was for the last 15 months. Um, and then my employer, actually my old employer offered my job back. But I've actually been like, there's a lot of times you're at home and you're thinking, you know what? It was so much easier when I was in prison.

Honey: Especially when you've done a long time, you're used to getting your essential things that they get you. You know what I mean? You have that support inside because the prison is responsible for you in a way. But they need to have it implemented outside so that I don't fail so that other people don't feel and end up backed up against the rope and going back to prison.

Prison support group representative: You see them wondering if things were better while they were in [prison].

The notion of prison being less challenging than the outside for some Black women is ironic because it suggests that there were benefits of their freedom being lost. But more important are the structural implications of such sentiments, which point to broader societal issues. To begin to understand and address these structural implications, it must be accepted that Canada still has deep-rooted issues of systemic racism, economic inequality, and social disparities to resolve. The post-release challenges these women encounter are much more complex than the generic needs some services may suggest. The demands and needs of these women produce an influx of stressors and anxieties that regularly play with and aggravate one another (Richie, 2001). The formerly incarcerated Black women I spoke with made clear that the challenge of multiple demands was salient in their journeys. For some, this was illustrated by the recounts of attempting to secure employment and housing, regain confidence, and regain access to their children. For others, this was simply the crossover of being back in the community and regaining autonomy while keeping in line with their parole stipulations.

The process of obtaining employment post-release can be particularly difficult for women who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and are released back into those communities to reintegrate. Past research has shown that the obstacles formerly incarcerated women have faced through their job searches are:

...often technical (e.g. training, skills, abilities), societal (e.g. obtaining credit, personal insurance), institutional and structural (e.g. release process, conditions, numerous counsellors and specialists to be seen, criminal record, obtaining a pardon, stigmatization, feminization of poverty, gendered stratification) or family related (e.g. children into care for, single parenting). (Strimelle & Frigon, 2011, p. 109)

Employment is a fundamental part of the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women and the numerous difficulties they face in obtaining employment are reflective of the effects of sexist, racist and classist oppression. Formerly incarcerated Black women should not have to endure the consequences of stigma in obtaining employment especially when securing employment is normally part of the stipulations in place for their release, meaning if they are unable to do so, they risk being sent back to prison. A representative from a prison support group made a comment about the disheartening state of the job search process for formerly incarcerated women:

We do find that, um, uh, it's almost like there's a set up with job searches. It's almost like they're [employers] going to judge you one more time for your crime. I think they [employers] can be the ones that really mess it up [securing employment] for women. I know women who are out right now who can't seem to make ends meet... We try to help them keep from being discouraged you know.

Comparatively, Shen who had only been released for two weeks when we spoke described how she was feeling thus far in her initial stages of reintegration:

This is what it is. Like they want you do these things to make it basically harder for us. When we get out here, like how do you expect us to function? Find a job back. It's like, oh, did you find a job where it can check all these spaces? They know that a lot of these

jobs are going to be asking for criminal background checks. It's just like, you get your hopes up and then it doesn't even make sense because now the moment they ask for the criminal background check, it's like, okay, this one's obviously out the window. Like even the one that just called me for, um, a hotel room attendant, like clean the rooms of hotels and stuff like that. I told her next week I would do the testing and stuff, but I know it doesn't even make sense because if she wants a criminal background check, then how does that help? And this is what I said to my lawyer. Now you guys are saying you're helping us to reintegrate back, but how? We have a record now, it's hard for us to even get a job.

The difficulties these women experience are overwhelming and can be better addressed prior to release. If such discrepancies are left unresolved, the potential of reoffending heightens. Studies on the recidivism of female offenders illustrate the ways in which women's minority status in the socio-economic hierarchy creates circumstances for them that heavily influence their choices to engage in activity that can pose a risk of being re-incarcerated (Bonta et al., 1995). The reality of the lived experiences of Black women post-release contribute to the build-up of negative sentiments towards CSC these women develop because as expressed by several of the formerly incarcerated participants, it begins to appear as if they are being set up for failure by a system that is said to be devoted to helping them "be better and do better" (Walls to Bridges employee). Arguably, the most important goal of Canada's prison programs is to return offenders back to their communities with a minimized risk to re-offend, yet many of these programs to date are not designed well enough to include the many considerations necessary in examining what causes certain people to offend in the first place. In doing so, such program designs would need to not only be gender inclusive, but racially and culturally appropriate by relating to the lived experiences of Black women that are inherently different from their counterparts. When I asked AP to speak about her thoughts on prison programming and efforts made to assist Black women post-release, she responded:

It's difficult because a lot, a lot of women come out and they're lost. You know what I mean? Um, and then they got all their emotional shit behind them as well. Right? And they don't know how to reach out and you know, you're not going to reach out to somebody and let everything that's going on really going on inside you to a perfect stranger. It's not that easy. It's not that simple. Especially if you already have problems like say being sexually assaulted or something like that, you already had problems with trust issues. So how are you going to be able to open up to, to a psychiatrist or to a psychologist? How many appointments do you attend that you don't even say one or two words. You know what I mean? It's just a repeating cycle. They need more structure that makes incentives for women to want to participate and believe there is benefit for them. Right. So it's like, you're left to do the same shit you did in the beginning to get there. Now you're going back. So I think they need to have a lot more, uh, programs that can build ones, you know, to build one person's, uh, you know, outlook, right. Where they actually have something in place and they have goals. They need more goals to be able to reach, you know?

Most of these women agree that having a release plan in place for when they return to their communities is not only an essential asset to successful reintegration, but also to their personal development post release. However, what the women wanted out of prison programming differed based on their personal circumstances. For instance, AP's comments demonstrate the need for assistance in goal setting, whereas Honey's concerns were with attending to her mental health post-release, and for Jam, her critique came from a place of wanting more support as a mother trying to reconnect with her child. An intersectional approach to understanding the various needs of incarcerated women during and post-release allows for more relatable and effective programs and resources to be developed. Consideration of the role their race, gender, and criminalized status plays in shaping their experiences is necessary. Black feminist scholar Geniece Crawford Mondé (2022), in her analysis of Black woman's post carceral struggles with attaining freedom, remarks,

The hurdles that a formerly incarcerated individual faces are difficult across the board, but for Black women in particular, the post-incarceration transition means also contending with challenges pre-dating their imprisonment. As a result, the narratives that women share illuminate the ways in which life after imprisonment is not synonymous with freedom (Williams, 2019; Williams, et al., 2021). Rather, the re-entry process, as it

currently exists, is often a modified version of unfreedom that women must navigate amid structural barriers and the burdensome expectations of institutional actors. (p.354)

Analysis through an intersectional lens not only highlights the intricacies of Black women's post-incarceration but it also summons a critical re-envisioning of how successful reintegration is defined and the effective measures required to attain it.

Responses Supporting Black Women's Concerns about Incarceration

For this research, I also got into contact with many prison justice advocates, including individuals from grassroots organizations such as Dismas Fellowship Network, The Second Chance Foundation, and Uplift Black. For several years, prison justice advocates and supporters alike have been urging the government of Canada to make improvements to women's prisons in several areas including healthcare, programming, safety, and issues of recidivism. As recently as November 2022, the Correctional Investigator of Canada, Dr. Ivan Zinger (2022), conducted a report on the experiences of BIPOC prisoners and concluded that the system was indeed failing both Black and Indigenous prisoners; he states, "for an organization that spends so much money to have poor correctional outcomes, especially for Indigenous prisoners as well as for Black prisoners, is a real shame and something that Canadians should be concerned with" (p.1). Many advocates who work on behalf of incarcerated folks express that there are many inequalities that persist amongst prisoners in and out of carceral spaces. For example, Senator Pate is committed to advocating for the rights of marginalized, institutionalized, and criminalized individuals. Additionally, she has worked with the Elizabeth Fry Association that focuses on supporting a wide range of women, specifically, women who have had encounters with the law and/or have been formerly incarcerated. As a result, Senator Pate has had much experience working with and on behalf of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black women. In our interview, Senator Pate

expressed her dismay with Canada's penal system as well as the justice system overall. She was direct about her feelings towards the current state of Canada's criminal justice system (CJS), explaining why she refers to the CJS as a legal system: "I don't call it a justice system because there's nothing much just about it." She then continued,

Part of the reason we see an over-representation of those who are the least privileged in prison is because it's the only system that can't refuse people. We see the failures of every other system captured within the prison system. I would say housing is a way to support them, and too often, that's the inadequacy of social assistance or minimum wage jobs. Housing is a way to support themselves and forms a community of support. As part of that, when those basic needs are met, there's a way for them to actually contribute and have agency, if I can put it that way, as some people describe it as self-actualizing, but basically something in addition to working or to having a way to support themselves, something that allows them to in whatever way they see as important. I'm working so much on things like guaranteed livable income, PharmaCare, dental care, mental health care, housing strategies, all of the issues that give rise to the inequities that result in people being more likely, particularly those who are racialized, to be discriminated on the basis of gender and of course, the intersection, when you're talking about women of African descent or black women is huge because there's all of the intersections of class, race, and gender. Senator Pate expressed that she was not compelled to say that the current programs and resources in place with Correction Service Canada (CSC) are effective in adequately serving the needs of the women under their care. Similarly, when I spoke with women's prisons right advocate Toni, she explained that through her work with formerly incarcerated racialized women, she believed that there was room for CSC to take more action in supporting these women. She states:

Initiatives for release planning is atrocious. CSC says they do all of this stuff and they care about this stuff, but realistically they do not put the effort or the work into it. I feel like they spend all their money on staff training, and I really wish they would stop training their staff because no amount of training is going to make them understand or care. So we really could utilize that money in other areas.

This lack of faith in the penal system to accommodate the specific needs of women who come into their contact is reflective of the sentiments expressed to me by every single individual I had the opportunity to speak with. Many of the participants in my study including formerly

incarcerated Black women agree that the efficacy of the resources and support available to assist Black women in their reintegration processes post-incarceration is low. Marie, a chaplain of 25+ years for women in prison, had this to say regarding challenges Black women inmates face:

I think they kind of um, look after one another because no one's looking out for them it seems, or what they need. The prison doesn't give them enough attention to know what can help these girls when they're in [prison] let alone out [of prison]. How they can get a job and some shelter, some of them have kids you know?...Even for me I had to call in a friend of mine to help talk with the Black women because I'm a white lady I can't properly relate to their issues you know? So um, she came in and it was better the engagement we got, they even talked about the kind of food they needed to be brought in and hair products, like that kind of stuff. Talked about what they needed to get back on their feet once um out of there. They need support from people they can relate to or else it's...pointless, and they're not feeling seen.

Rykie similarly alluded to there not being nearly enough relatable representation for Black women in prison:

It's funny because we go inside [prison] and there's so many of us [incarcerates] but really not that many of us, like we're not the staff, the Black people aren't the workers there and they want me believe anyone is gonna know or care how to help me, like we don't live the same life to understand, I can't teach somebody that, like teach them how to see my life as being a Black.

The idea of being seen was a reoccurring theme that emerged in my research. Engaging with various insights on the experiences and challenges Black women in and outside of prison face, an underlying feeling of invisibility of these women was undeniable. Community organization members, prison support advocates, and fellowship workers interviewed expressed that there was an overall lack of attention given to the specificity of these women's experiences and needs and that this could be better resolved with more racialized figures involved in the resources and support offered by prisons. AP, who had spent several years incarcerated, described that there was a lack of racialized staff that she observed throughout the years: "near

11 years there [prison] and I can count on a hand...like I can count the most like 6 Black or coloured workers I seen, and I used to be like why is that?” Likewise, Den commented,

Black women are not represented. We are not represented. There’s a handful of Black lawyers in the grand scheme of things, few Black judges and there was definitely no Blacks on the Parole board when I dealt with them. It’s just a lack of representation, no parole officers, like we’re underrepresented.

Mowatt et al. (2013) in their research explain how Black women tend to exist in a state of “systemic invisibility or problematic visibility” (p. 648). The concept of problematic visibility is echoed in the earlier responses from Alexis, Honey, and Rykie where a common theme was them being perceived negatively despite having legitimate reasons for their frustrations. These misconceptions of Black women as angry, bitter, and problematic are fueled by oppression by white people that seek to simultaneously silence, conceal, and disadvantage them “instead of being...shown kindness or just simply understood” (Anderson & Anderson, 2021, p. 22). This notion of invisibility is vividly reflected throughout the multiple ways Black women encounter systemic oppression. It seeps into their experiences of incarceration and is seen in the intersections of discrimination they encounter based on race, sex, class, and criminalized status. Moreover, these women are overlooked as a group of importance all while being overrepresented as being difficult. Consequently, prison advocates like Pate and Toni are dedicated to doing their best to ensure that these women have all the support they need once they return to their communities.

Better to Plan Ahead

Many of the organizations I connected with agree that it would be helpful for partnerships between various employers and the CSC be developed to ensure that there are employers willing

to give individuals with criminal backgrounds the opportunity to redeem themselves in the legal labour market. The significance of such plans being in place upon release is that they act as a blueprint for directions and guidance for these women who otherwise face dealing with the distress associated with difficulties in securing employment. We know that this is plausible as per the objectives of Section 81 of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act in which an agreement can be put in place for an Indigenous offender to be transferred from the care of CSC into the care of their Indigenous community under a set of stipulations agreed upon by relevant parties. As stated by Jam, “they can’t just release us to the jungle and give us no tools to get it together, who is gonna give me a job? Finding work has always been hard for me and now it’ll be worse I’m sure, like why can’t we get chances to show we can do the work and we want to work”. Jam demonstrates the need for community assistance post-release as she expresses a clear challenge of obtaining work. Bearing in mind Section 81 in which direct arrangements are made to ensure Indigenous offenders receive necessary community assistance, shows that there has not been such considerations or alternative measures to offer and incarcerated Black women the same type of support. Chy expressed that precariousness attached to post-incarceration life leaves many incarcerated women feeling “underprioritized” even when there’s an upcoming release.

Underprioritized. That is precisely the word to describe the vast majority of formerly incarcerated Black women participants’ reintegration journeys. These women find themselves *underprioritized* and restricted from various spheres within the community and in their reintegration journeys they encounter many forms of *roadblocks*. Such roadblocks include challenges with rebuilding relationships with friends and family, acquiring social acceptance, and loss of social ties. Rykie describes coming to terms with her loss of social ties while being

incarcerated: “I haven't seen people in three years. I haven't had a boyfriend in three years. I haven't had anything in those past three years. People’s lives have gone on. Some I forgot about, lots of friends I lost.” Additionally, Alexis explained that her prison experience left her with a yearning to be alone and thus cut ties with all of her friends she had prior to incarceration. She also went on to express that she had a difficulty accepting that some of her friends were not willing to show her any support during her time spent away as she comments on the lack of visits she received from people she thought cared about her. She goes on further to say “only two of my friends came to see me, and that was twice. My childhood friends never came, never spoke to me at all. When I came out, I felt the need to just be alone, I didn’t want to be social with anyone anymore unless it was for work.” Both Alexis and Rykie illustrate that their experiences of incarceration impacted their lives socially post incarceration though in varying ways but at the core of both expressions is the theme of loss. For Rykie, it’s clear that the time she spent incarcerated diminished the connections she had with people outside of prison and upon release she was left without some of those who had previously been a part of her life. On the other hand, Alexis’ post-release loss resulted from her desire to socially recluse and remain detached from people she had previously valued in her life prior to incarceration. Still, both women describe a loss of sorts to aspects of their lives involving relationships and social interactions.

On the surface, it is inarguable that imprisonment affects the quality of relationships, be it familial, romantic, or platonic. Incarcerated women’s removal from society is a key factor in the disruption of pre-existing relationships as well as the formation of new ones. However, these challenges with relationships can present as roadblocks to reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals who are known to benefit from having the support of others. In fact, research has highlighted the importance of acquiring social and familial support for assisting the formerly

incarcerated in navigating the plethora of challenges they inevitably face through their reintegration journeys. Cochran (2014) comments,

Connections with social ties constitute one of the critical factors that will help individuals negotiate prison experiences and navigate the transition back into society...social bonds and social capital are likely to help constrain behavior and to help “bridge” returning inmates’ transition from prison back into communities. (p.203)

There is mounting research evidence regarding the significance of social support (even informal) in promoting post-release success for individuals. Therefore, if women are facing difficulties in securing such types of support due to various reasons, yet another challenge they are faced with post-release emerges. Black women have been under attack of oppressive forces in society that render them under-prioritized, and this is reflected in their treatment within the CJS and the lack of effective measures put in place by the CSC to meet their needs.

As this chapter has shown, the needs of Black women entering or going through the process of reintegration cannot sufficiently be met without examining the current measures in place to assist them and areas in which improvements must be made to do so. Reintegration centered prison programming needs to steer away from Eurocentric ideologies of rehabilitation and become familiar with the relevance of racially and culturally inclusive initiatives for Black women who do not meet nor relate to the standards of assessment that most programs are derived from. This need is further stressed by AP when she comments, “As Black women we need certain things that are part of being a Black woman, like our hair products, our homeland foods, we had to wait till Black history month to get some Jamaican food and it’s like I’m not even Jamaican, they don’t even understand what life being Black is about or how our problems are different”. This chapter has introduced the effects of institutional racism on the challenges Black women have with getting adequate attention, support, and resources pre, during, and post their

incarceration. It has uncovered the multiple components that shape the challenges these women experience in trying to successfully reintegrate. In doing so, the chapter has brought these important concerns to the forefront of discussions about the carceral and reintegration experiences of Black women.

Chapter 6: Compounding Black Women's Post-incarceration Experiences

It is optimistic to equate release from prison to freedom, but the reality is that a woman's road to re-entry is far from free, and is saturated with challenges. The process of reintegration for formerly incarcerated women is influenced by a wide range of factors. For the Black women I interviewed who spoke on their reintegration journeys, the major obstacles that arose that I will discuss in this chapter are centered on managing trauma and troubles with parole. This chapter includes the responses of interviewees that shine light on the need for advancements of current processes and resources in place said to help such women. It details the ways in which trauma has played a significant role in these Black women's lives, as well as how their experiences with parole exacerbated challenges of reintegration.

Hoskins and Morash (2021) describe trauma as “indicated by (a) a negative event (b) that is experienced as overwhelming, damaging, or threatening, and (c) which has long-term complex effects on the well-being and ability to function” (p.12809). The theme of trauma highlights the need for trauma informed correctional approaches that can better support formerly incarcerated Black women. The purpose of release protocols such as parole and assignment to a parole officer is to provide incarcerated women with the opportunities to develop and maintain external supports that can assist them in their transitions from institution to community (Rizun, 2012). However, the trauma that many of these women are dealing with appears to be disregarded. Conditions of parole such as strict supervision, prejudicial treatment, and restricted freedom may affect Black women in a way that evokes a heightened sense of surveillance, regulation and limitation which can contribute to ongoing trauma. Quiros (2019) remarks, “trauma-specific

service delivery models have historically failed to emphasize the significance of race and racism as both interpersonal and sociopolitical traumas. In turn, the interventions fail to provide a structural analysis of racism and Whiteness as part of the trauma narrative” (p.325). The reintegration hurdles formerly incarcerated Black women face can hinder their chances of wholly healing from past traumas but instead sustain it. Black women require support that is cognizant of the complex nature of the trauma of being a Black woman in a colonial nation. Without addressing the various ways in which trauma presents itself within these womens experiences including their time on parole, they will continue to be underserved through their reintegration journeys.

Paroled and Controlled: *You gotta learn what to say and what not to say because at the end of the day they hold your freedom.* -Jam

The reintegration process for formerly incarcerated Black women is strictly regulated by the conditions of their release as provided to them by the parole board. For many of these women, their time spent on parole poses challenges that are similar to those that they faced while incarcerated. There are various factors that contribute to the difficulties that arise for Black women on parole, however, most of the Black women I interviewed identified two key challenges: building meaningful relationships with their parole officers and complying to the stipulations of their parole. Allspach (2010) suggests that the type of rapport Black women develop with their parole officers and the rigidity of their parole conditions impact their reintegration experiences. The governance of parole conditions combined with difficulties in developing relationships with their parole officers tend to conflict with Black women’s efforts to successfully reintegrate (Allspach, 2010). For my participants, there were concerns about being able to make most benefit of their parole officers due to an inability to relate, feeling as though

the half-way home environments were much too similar to the prison environment, and being micro-managed and over-surveyed.

Additionally, Black interviewees demonstrated that there were racism at play in the criminal justice system, for example in interactions reflecting implicit racism at different levels of the CJS, including with parole officers. The disparities in criminal legal outcomes are foreseen and explained by critical race theorists as the effects of the biased application of the law that operates to preserve social inequality (O'Connell & Laniyonu, 2023). When I asked Den and Alexis to speak on their experiences with parole, they responded:

Den: From the very inception of carceral space, from arrest to conviction, You want to see someone that looks like you, you know? I wanted to continue my education at the University of Toronto and my parole officer was just so unsupportive. She made my life when I was released very difficult. They want you to go work in a factory, my PO said to me “why are you trying to be, an academic?” as if I had no business trying to get education. So I fought to have her switched after I threatened to expose them to the media, I got another one [PO].

Alexis: So when I tried to apply [for parole] I didn't have no inside charges. I was actually pretty good. I was actually really good. Um, I was involved in so many things, including like chaplains police stuff, anything that CSC wants us to do, I was doing it. What the problem was: they thought that I didn't cooperate; I was not transparent. And it's funny because I've been transparent from when I went, when I got in. So when they say I was not transparent, I was so mad. I was so mad. And, um, the peels, the PO that I had was saying, well, you can apply for parole, but I'm not going to support you. My minds like you know, and I knew why, but their thing was, oh, well, you weren't cooperative. You're not cooperating of what really happened. I'm like yes, I had. So when I had to take out, I had to, uh, withdraw my application. I was so mad. I started getting charges. I think here I started, I just didn't care. I was arguing with the guards.

Den's experience is indicative of the many ways formerly incarcerated Black women continue to be criminalized as well as further marginalized post-release. Honey's account of her experiences while currently living in a half-way house indicated that surveillance and triggering

control mechanisms are sometimes imposed by these systems and the individuals who operate and manage them. She expressed her utter frustration with the half-way house, stating:

Honestly, there is no support when you go to the halfway house, there's none at all. There's no support. I literally had to do everything to make sure I can live my best life. You have to report everywhere you go. So if I went to Walmart and that I stepped out and went to the grocery store right beside it, I have to be called that in every five minutes. Everything I was doing, if I was at the halfway house itself, I would have someone watch me all the time. They would, they would have to do checkups, which I didn't understand. But every 15 minutes later, bang on my door. You good? Yes. I'm fine. Hey, you good? Yes, I'm fine. If I went and told them, I'm going to go have a nap. They was still coming to bang on my door. There's points in time where I had to yell at them and be like, if you guys keep doing this, I'm going to lose it. I'm going to black out. Then I'm going to lose my shit. And then I'm going to be back in prison because you guys are doing too much. I'm like, I'm not in prison. You treat me like I'm in prison. That's what the guards used to do every minute. Come and check in on your nature, your flashlights in your face and stuff. I'm like, if you guys need to you to do that with me, I'm literally going to box you out because you guys are stressing me out. I just couldn't. It was too much. You can't be a halfway house and try and be like, oh, we help people. We help our girls potential, but yet you're treating me like, I'm back in prison. You're treating me like, you're a guard. That's not it. That's not a thing.

Halfway houses are a common stipulation of parole and for some can feel like a continuation of imprisonment where new challenges present themselves. Moreover, research has shown that women often report halfway houses as environments in which oppressive prison dynamics are mirrored (Allspach, 2010). To sufficiently address these challenges, it is necessary for halfway houses to adopt approaches that address these concerns. This involves tailoring post-release measures, providing gender-specific support, offering appropriate vocational training, and establishing an environment that acknowledges and addresses the intersectionality of race and gender during the reentry process. Nonetheless, the mandate of halfway houses for Black women on parole can expose them to issues in which the positive progress of their reintegration is at risk. The challenges of being in half-way houses that some participants shared illustrate that the penal nature of these institutions can often trigger trauma that some women carry with them as a

result of their time spent incarcerated. Rather than focusing on effectively helping these women in their reintegration journeys, half-way homes appeared to rely on functions of control and surveillance.

Levi had this to say:

The most challenging thing for me was with the parole officer... Like these permits I had to have everything I wanted to do, had to run by her first, um, one of my conditions. I had to provide financial disclosure, um, everything down to my car when I'm driving. That was probably the hardest, because again, it's supervision. You can't help me find a job. Can't do anything. If I didn't have the money for my rent, you're not giving it to me. But you want to know where I'm getting it? Why does that matter? You're not helping me in relation, but if I help myself, I need to explain how and why?...My problems were more of you're not doing anything for me. Like come on and help me something, you know, all you want to do is dictate. What is the purpose? I'm not even sure. Cause' you know, I've asked over the five years I was in the community, I kid you not, I went once a month to the police station to sign in. So I had to see a parole officer once a month. And then I went to the police station once a month. I asked the same question every time and here we are five years later and nobody can answer it. I said, what exactly is the purpose of me coming here to sign in? What is it, why do I have to do that? They'd answer like, 'mm, geez, I'm not really sure. That's a good question. But I never got an answer but if I didn't show up at my parole office, she'd put a warrant out.

The parole stipulations that formerly incarcerated Black women experience can be distressful and challenging to abide by especially if they appear to be unreasonable. Additionally, if these women do not sense that there is a genuine source of support coming from their parole officers the time spent on parole can seem almost too similar to their incarceration experiences. Furthermore, some of the comments made by women regarding interactions with parole officers show that some women resort to dishonesty to appease their parole officers and remain as problem free in this area as possible. The shared consensus amongst these women is that parole has the power to “make or break you once you’re out” (Jam). The recounts of their time spent on parole demonstrates that most of these women felt anything but free post-release, rather these

women felt discriminated against, ridiculed and unsupported. As Chy, Alexis and Shen had to say:

Chy: She [parole officer] stressed me out, but it was because I thought it was stupid. Like lady do I look like I need supervision? We had words several times, 'cause I just let her have it. What are you going to do to send me back? Cause' I'm speaking my mind? You want to supervise me and I only see you once in 30 days, I could be anywhere in those 30 days doing anything and you have no idea. I kid you not the length of the visit was short, it took us more time to decide when we're going to have that visit, than the actual visit itself.

Alexis: I thought the parole officer I had was cool but then she asked me certain questions and I looked at her and I said, are you going to support me? Or you're not going to support me? If you're not going to support me, let me know now, so I could change to the other PO. She goes, well you know what's going to happen, right? [Sighs] When you have a bias PO it's hard, it's hard.

Shen: I mean, I heard that the parole officer, she likes to press your buttons and she's very disrespectful. They basically want to tell you, you have to take it [strict conditions] and suck it up. I dunno, I haven't met her yet, but I heard she's not really helpful from my understanding, just there to watch how you move. A lot of people that are like blacks saying she doesn't like black, like she deals with us very harsh.

There is an intersectional relationship worth considering in the experiences of parole and surveillance of formerly incarcerated Black women. During their interviews, these women made it clear that they were affected by the level of surveillance and tedious conditions involved in their reintegration journeys which can be exacerbated by racism from authority figures. These challenges can be exacerbated by the conditions of social class inequality, such as their living situation post-release, access to transportation, and community support. Perceived racism from parole officers is another example where a combination of factors like racism and economic issues combine to complicate and make more challenging the reintegration experiences of the women interviewed. For example, women returning to low-income neighborhoods that are saturated with higher levels of crime as well as police over-surveillance are faced with the likeliness to run into conflict with conditions of their parole. Especially for women who have

drug related charges (as the majority of the formerly incarcerated Black women interviewed did), returning to their communities poses great threat to their well-being post-release. Gurusami (2017) notes, “after incarceration, many formerly incarcerated women return to neighborhoods with poor socioeconomic conditions, including violence and instability, as well as high levels of state surveillance” (p.16). The conditions attached to their parole can set them up for failure as many of these women’s conditions involve abstaining contact from environments and individuals where drugs may be present, and for some this can be incredibly difficult to avoid. Jam expressed the area in which the location of the half-way house was a point of concern in her reintegration:

Jam: I feel like the housing places they’re subjecting you to make it harder and that makes no sense. Like downtown the drug and sex worker areas, areas where crime is high, yet you’re telling me to avoid it. All of these places they’re suggesting are a risk, all of them are high risk. You guys are putting me in a high-risk situations.

These women’s agency post-incarceration is reduced, and in many ways they are belittled, by the conditions of their release that force them into unavoidable situations such as unfavourable interactions with their parole officers and half-way house staff, micro-managing of their day to day moves, and stressful employment seeking experiences. Equally important are the effects of stigma on their experiences of being monitored through the conditions attached to their parole. Stigma certainly influences the interactions these women have with their parole officers and even more so the extent to which their conditions can lead to reincarceration. Moore et al., (2016) found that perceptions of stigma were higher amongst racialized offenders and the effect of their stigmatization directly impacts their experiences post-release, especially with regard to community reintegration. Additionally, Rutter and Barr (2021) found in their research that,

Positive relationships which challenge feelings of shame and stigmatisation are essential to women's desistance both from crime and harm achieved through the qualities of trust, being respected, not being judged, evidencing understanding and the importance of time. With the voices of criminalised women in mind, we repeat call for a critical desistance based on strategies of compassion, love and support rather than responsibility, surveillance, punishment and prison. (p.171)

For formerly incarcerated Black women, the stigma of being incarcerated, combined with their hyper-criminalization as a result of being racialized and gendered as Black women affects their reintegration experiences on a social and structural level. The labelling that occurs with formerly incarcerated Black women produces an insider versus outsider dynamic where they are further ostracized and othered post-release. Formerly incarcerated Black women fall into the category of *unconcealable* stigmatized identities by way of their race and gender. Feingold (2021) explains this interplay stating, "stigmatized identities that are perceptible to the general public, such as being of minority race/ethnicity and/or being female...an individual may possess multiple stigmatized identities or characteristics, and the unique combination of a person's identities may be associated with distinct experiences of discrimination and prejudice" (p.41). As with the theory of intersectionality, Feingold's (2021) account of unconcealable stigmatized identity is relevant to the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women because it acknowledges the fact that these women's experiences post-incarceration are bound to be complex based on the multi-faceted nature of their stigmatized identities inside and outside of prison walls. Black women with a criminal record may be more likely to experience stigma related to their criminal legal involvements than White women. Research has demonstrated that public reactions towards formerly incarcerated individuals are very much dependant on the various markers of identity the individual portrays (e.g., skin colour, class status, disability, etc.) (Feingold, 2021). Structurally, formerly incarcerated Black women may be excluded from employment opportunities, face housing restrictions and lose access to various public benefits, in

a sense at the structural level, they experience a diminished sense of civil rights (Feingold, 2021). At the interpersonal level, these women encounter stigmatizing attitudes and stereotypes from their communities, such as assumptions that they are a threat, unmotivated, disobedient, and untrustworthy. These types of attitudes towards formerly incarcerated Black women facilitate discriminatory responses from the collective, such as lost job opportunities, and overt social exclusion (Feingold, 2021). These women are also experiencing issues that anyone who has gone through the system would experience as well, however, racism adds another layer to this process.

As Opsal (2009) argues, “a system that was once for so long oriented by the idea of reintegration of prisoners into the community is now oriented toward isolating and containing this population” (p.317). The women recognized a sense of being ostracized by their parole officers and conditions post-release and most did not express that they felt that their parole officers were present to assist them in reintegrating into the community but rather there to reinforce their conditions while “keeping a tab” (Elwyn) on their movements. It is through these experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women that we can begin to see how post-release practices like conditions of parole can reproduce ideologies about the “criminally deviant Black female subject to justify invasive practices of surveillance and punishment” (Gurusami, 2017, p.32). Gurusami’s (2017) work illustrates how the criminal rehabilitation of “jailed Black women,” as Nye (formerly incarcerated Black woman) termed it, is framed as necessary to achieve independence from the state. However, at the same time rigid penal practices, like considering it a violation of parole conditions if these women fail to secure employment almost immediately post-release, despite their susceptibility to employment discrimination, bond these women to the state indefinitely. Despite being released from prison, these women’s recounts of

their parole experiences symbolize the effects stigma has on the control and surveillance they continuously undergo across various spaces far beyond prison walls. Overall, navigating trauma and fostering sound parole processes is a point of difficulty for Black women post-incarceration.

Dealing with Trauma

Most of the formerly incarcerated Black women I interviewed recounted their experiences that led them into prison as a time in their lives when they were vulnerable and desperate to make ends meet financially, and/or involved in unhealthy relationships and lifestyles. The theme of trauma was common throughout the interviews. In some cases, women explicitly acknowledged that they had been dealing with trauma prior to their incarceration or were currently dealing with trauma because of having been incarcerated. Nye described that she was in an abusive relationship for quite some time in which resulted in her acquiring a toxic social circle. She attributes her incarceration to the trauma she endured through her relationship. She comments, “I can’t put all the blame on him but I can say that my abuse was traumatic enough to send me off course”. For the women in my study, prison brought about many life changing experiences, including loss of autonomy, spoiled relationships, and isolation—these types of trauma were in addition to the trauma they had internalized from prior life experiences. Harner and Burgess (2011), De Veaux (2013), and Green et al. (2016) focus on the relationship between trauma and the experience of incarceration, but what many studies have largely ignored is how this trauma can affect the process of reintegration for Black women ex-offenders, if it has not been adequately taken care of and addressed. Although there is healthcare provided to women in prison, there are benefits to be gained from adapting a trauma-informed approach to addressing the specific needs of Black women. As noted by Bloom and Covington (2006), “one of the most important developments in health care over the past several decades is the recognition that a

substantial proportion of women have a history of serious traumatic experiences that play a vital and often unrecognized role in the evolution of a woman's physical and mental health problems" (p.14). For Black women, navigating trauma post-incarceration is additionally complex, particularly for those who come from communities that do not prioritize mental health. For many of these women, mental health has never been regarded as a topic of importance in their lives, let alone something worth seeking help with. This notion can be toxic because it encourages a sense of denial of having any sort of mental health issue and it results in such women not seeking proper treatment for their mental health which can lead to bigger challenges post-release. Rykie expressed how the mental health struggles of Black women she served time with were easily overlooked:

You have women that are clearly mentally disturbed, women that are facing, that have faced abuse and trauma their whole lives and are literally acting out because nobody has ever seen them. Nobody has ever been there for them. Nobody has ever defended protected, guided, loved, nurtured, taught them, just throwing them in jail, isolating them from society and keeping them essentially trapped in that... We're not getting to the root of the trauma, the root of the issues, not even therapy to discuss their crimes and what they've gone through and what even brought them there, they're still carrying around the pain.

In discussing the hesitancy to address mental health issues within Black communities, Alvidrez et al. (2008) reported that many Black people come from,

Environments where they learned that mental illness was a topic to be avoided and that mental health issues were to be kept within the family. Growing up in a culture that valued strength in the face of adversity, consumers learned that succumbing to mental illness or requiring professional help to address it was a sign of weakness. (p.888) The culturally constructed notion of weakness attached to mental health issues is significant in understanding how stigma towards mental health within Black communities translates into the experiences

Black women have with imprisonment as it guides the ways in which they address or suppress their mental health needs pre and post incarceration. As stated by Nelson (2021),

Correctional systems as a whole are catastrophically dark places. They disconnect people from everything they know and love. They drain hope out of a person's life and people — especially women, and especially Black women and women of color — are overly exposed to trauma within these systems. (n.p.).

Similar sentiments were shared by Alexis when she explained coming to terms with her mental illness diagnosis:

They [case workers, parole officers, prison personnel] only look at what the court says, what the police say and then they go from there. They don't look at, you know, look at the person themselves, what they went through, because they have not gone through shit. That takes a toll. I was diagnosed with postpartum and that's when I had tears in my eyes. I said, holy shit, I've been denying that I have postpartum because I don't know what it is. But when you go through the emotions, and you don't have support. I had to sit and like reflect on that and I reflect on that every day since because it's not easy.

Both women acknowledged that many of the women who are incarcerated are struggling with some sort of mental health issue that is likely related to their traumas prior to or during their incarceration. Navigating trauma as an incarcerated Black woman is difficult because of cultural influences that render mental health issues as a form of weakness and the lack of sufficient support in helping these women to come to terms with their trauma (e.g., culturally appropriate mental health workers). Although not every Black participant spoke about challenges with mental health, those who did made it apparent that it played an important role in their reintegration experiences. As Den mentioned, “we come out and most of us are scarred and abused, have no housing, no job, we're traumatized from being in there [prison]...”. For critical race theorists, trauma exists far beyond the scopes of psychology, as it is also the effects of unequal social economic conditions reinforced by gender and racial discrimination that individuals endure. As such, these women's traumas are exacerbated by systemic factors that

contribute to their experiences with mental health. Critical race theory acknowledges the significance of employing a race-based lens to societal issues and for the formerly incarcerated Black women in this study, the combination of their race and gender alone calls attention to the ways in which trauma plays a role in their experiences. We must focus on the structural aspects related to their trauma to steer away from blaming these women for their own traumas.

Amongst participants, trauma takes multiple forms. For some the trauma is a product of experiences in their lives pre-incarceration, such as abusive relationships, unhealthy familial dynamics, homelessness, and financial insecurities. For others, trauma came from experiences they faced during their incarceration, such as deaths of cellmates, unsuccessful parole applications, and loss of connection to the outside. Rykie explained how the trauma of being incarcerated has followed her into her life post-release:

It's still something that I struggle with, like not being overwhelmed by everything. I have never, ever since I came back been able to deal with the split [difference between being inside/outside of prison]. Just sounds... like I currently rent a room in a house and it's like the sound of footsteps sends me on edge. My heart's racing at the sound of anything around me that's not supposed to be in that space... it sets me off. And it just takes me back to like the officers coming by your room to check on you all night, flashing flashlights in your face to purposely wake you up, hitting the metal door with their metal keys, making this loud, booming sound that scares you out of your sleep, every little sound. And I'm just like, I still can't do like large groups of people. I still can't do loud noises and too much yelling. I still just can't do it. I get so easily startled...

Nonetheless, these women agree that acquiring the appropriate type of mental health support is beneficial to overcoming challenges post-release that can hinder their success. Lastly, these women would benefit from resources that facilitate them in developing their interpersonal skills which have been altered through their carceral experiences (e.g. building healthy relationships, effective communication, group interactions, and conflict resolution). While some of these things are offered by CSC, for instance, programs that are “women-centred” (GOC, 2019), and

mental health support that caters to various illnesses, including schizophrenia and substance abuse disorder, they are still insufficient in dealing with the complex issues that formerly incarcerated Black women face, such as coping with trauma and oppression. As they stand, the current offerings by CSC do not delve deeply enough into the multifaceted needs and experiences of the Black population, let alone Black women.

The formerly incarcerated Black women I interviewed displayed negative sentiments when asked to respond to the following statement and question:

Correctional service of Canada states that two of their main priorities are: safe management of eligible offenders during their transition from the institution to the community, and while on supervision, effective, culturally appropriate interventions and reintegration support for First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders. Are these priorities reflected in your experiences as a formerly incarcerated Black woman? Would you describe your time incarcerated as being rehabilitative?

Most of the formerly incarcerated women contested this statement from CSC but did agree that there were indeed culturally appropriate modes of support for Indigenous women. Still, they did not feel as though the same could be said of CSC policies or interventions available to Black women. While the CSC policy does not explicitly mention Black women, this is further shown in the way CSC interventions did not respond to Black women in a culturally appropriate way. In line with concerns shared by participants, Mario's (2022) analysis of CSC programming for incarcerated women reveals that "there is little to no consideration of women's intersecting identities (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and the interlocking systems of oppression (patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, etc.) that contribute to their criminalization and their mental distress" (p.57). On the topic of gaining any sort of rehabilitative benefit from their time spent incarcerated, many women's responses were along the lines of Rykie's:

That's another thing. I think that they need to offer realistic financial literacy, the reason that I say that is because when you're in there everything is substantially cheaper. A hundred dollars can stretch for a month if you let it. And like a box of chicken is 10 bucks. A box of chicken in the real world is like 50. So it takes something as simple as like explaining that the prices in here are completely decreased... The average prices of groceries, the average price of like, a metro pass and really just giving people, actual figures and numbers to go home with. another thing that's super overwhelming, the expectation setting in there...oh, when I get home, everything's just going to be great. It's not for rehabilitative purposes because if it was, you would put proper funding and proper like professionals in the building.

Relatedly, for formerly incarcerated Black women, these issues are heightened due to factors like poverty, and the systemic oppression they face in the form of discrimination, racism, sexism, and classism. Again, trauma becomes compounded by poor economic conditions that they face which in turn adds hardship to their experiences. Viewed from an intersectional lens, we see that the interlocking oppressions that follow these women into prison make the process of de-traumatizing more strenuous as they are forced to exist in a space that reinforces their traumas. My participants did not regard their time spent incarcerated as time of rehabilitative growth and reform. Sadly, “many women consider themselves worsened by imprisonment” (Eaton, 1993, p.41). Research has shown that frequently reported symptoms of formerly incarcerated women include struggles with their mental health (depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations) and struggles with sleep (Rizun, 2012). These postrelease challenges faced by formerly incarcerated Black women are part of the conditions associated with “pains of imprisonment” which essentially refers to the various forms of deprivation that these women have endured: tarnished relationships, loss of goods and services, identity, social security, and overall liberty (Rizun, 2012). Such deprivations that the Black women I interviewed expressed are characteristics of what Goffman (1961) calls “total institutions” (Rizun, 2012, p.23). Prison is regarded as a total institution in which its population is fenced off from the rest of society, built off uneven power dynamics between the “keepers” and the “kept”, enmeshed with

constant surveillance, and subjected to unyielding rules and routines (Rizun, 2012). Upon returning to their communities, formerly incarcerated Black women have tremendous psychological and behavioural adjustments. For those who find themselves under circumstances where they have minimal support and are released to unfamiliar communities, the challenges of settling themselves can cause immense distress.

Trauma cannot be detached from the process of reintegration for formerly incarcerated Black women because it is steeped in every sphere of their experience and can be exacerbated by racism and sexism from authority figures. Confronting the presence of trauma amongst Black women within every context allows for a “significant step in the direction of acknowledging and curtailing the systemic violence and trauma Black women experience within our society” (Turner, 2023, p.4). Overall, the narratives shared by Black women during the interviews shed light on the intricate and multifaceted challenges they face during the process of reintegration. The experiences highlighted in this chapter emphasize the critical role of trauma in the lives of Black women post-incarceration and illuminate the ways in which parole experiences can intensify the already complex challenges they face. Such experiences present as contentions with their parole stipulations including unfavourable relationships with parole officers, feelings of alienation and uneasiness within their environments, and challenges managing their mental health, all of which contribute to the distress of having to adapt to life after prison. Recognizing the significance of these obstacles is crucial for implementing more effective, culturally sensitive strategies to facilitate their successful reentries. As we move forward, it becomes evident the need to advocate for advancements in support mechanisms, policy reforms, and rehabilitative programs that consider the necessities of Black women during the post-incarceration phase. By acknowledging and addressing the unique intersectionality of race and gender in the

reintegration process, we can strive for a more equitable and just system that truly operates to assist those it claims to serve, particularly Black women.

Chapter 7: And Still We Rise—Formerly Incarcerated Black Women on Defining Success

The theory of intersectionality allows us to acknowledge that individuals hold multiple, intersecting social identities that can influence their experiences, opportunities, and their perspectives about various aspects of life (Runyan, 2018). Success, within this framework, is not considered to be a one-size-fits-all concept. Instead, it considers Black women's capacity to navigate the unique intersections of race, gender, class, as well as other contributing factors that shape individuals' lives. Success in this context can be defined by achieving positive outcomes while simultaneously navigating and challenging systemic inequalities and discrimination (Epstein, 1973). It recognizes that individuals may face different barriers and advantages based on their intersecting identities. Success is not solely measured by traditional markers but also by the ability to overcome obstacles related to intersecting social categories. Although success is socially defined and sometimes conceptions of success for formerly incarcerated Black women may have been imposed upon them, it is worth noting these women's articulations of success. The meaning of the word success is subjective and researchers from various fields have yet to reach a consensus on its definition (DeVeaux, 2017). Several scholars insist that success is assessed in terms of attainment of goals or development of an idea or object (DeVeaux, 2017). Carlton et al. (2016) suggest that,

Reoffending and reincarceration are not in and of themselves indicators of success or failure. Rather within a transcarceral context, especially where criminalisation and marginalisation are enmeshed, it is critical to make sense of the broader structures that over-arch and shape women's experiences. There are significant challenges in measuring success that stem primarily from its ambiguous definition and interpretation. (p.284) While scholars have begun to investigate the post-release needs and challenges of formerly incarcerated women, very little

research has aimed to discover how formerly incarcerated Black women define success in life post-incarceration. Although “literature exists concerning factors that shape the post-release transition of FIW [formerly incarcerated women], success is often defined by whether or not women return to prison (i.e., recidivism) rather than asking participants to define success for themselves” (DeVries, 2022, p.143). It is important that their definitions of success are included in the dialogue to help illustrate that success postincarceration should not be considered unattainable as it presents itself differently for different individuals. Hence, it is not cast out of their journeys as being improbable.

At first, all of the formerly incarcerated Black women in this study expressed some surprise when asked to define success. As Jam put it, “no one’s ever asked me about that [success] before”. Also, as a tool for rechannelling the negative aspects of their experiences into positive, speaking about definitions of success can be empowering as it positions these women as active agents in reshaping and rebuilding their lives amid adversities (DeVeaux, 2017). The formerly incarcerated Black women I interviewed defined success in several unique and pragmatic ways. Despite the overall challenging nature of their post-release reintegration experiences, their definitions of success pertained to material, social or psychological growth. Many of the women connected their definitions of success to their ability to both endure and overcome some of the most trying times in their lives. As this chapter will show, it is important for Black women to be given opportunities to share their successes to help dismantle predominant conceptions that portray them as being far from the scope of success. To this end, this chapter will look at efforts they undertook to build support systems, relationships, and resilience amid multilayered forces of inequality.

Building Support Systems and Relationships

Success post-incarceration may be defined by multiple factors, such as, “the acquisition of physical measurable items like income social success, satisfying peer relationships and acceptance among peers and psychological success – positive feeling about the self and or wellbeing” (DeVeaux, 2017, p.117). Each of these attributes of success were expressed by most of the Black women participants. Honey, who identifies as Black and Indigenous, defined success through the acquisition of a trustworthy support system:

Well, right now I have a great support system with like the members from Uplift Black [community based-organization focused on helping Black people rebuild their lives postincarceration]. Um, the ladies that are here on this panel basically like they're big support. Also I just got connected with the friendship native center. So I have major supports. And then I found a couple friends here [half-way house] and they're major supports in my life too. So they keep pushing me like there's days where I'm like, hey, I'm having a hard day, whatever. And we talk it out, you know, or go for a walk or do something. But like they're, major supports right now. There are dark days, but they helped me get out of it. So I'm very, very thankful and very happy about that.

Honey's definition of success demonstrates the importance of building meaningful relationships and solidifying systems of support for formerly incarcerated Black women – from their families, communities or with various case workers they encounter. However, it cannot be overlooked that Honey's Indigenous cultural affiliations may play a role in her access as well as personal investment in community building. When I asked Senator Pate about the success stories of formerly incarcerated Black women, she expressed her admiration of these women's ability to push through whatever hurdles are thrown their way and come out stronger than before:

What's always a shock to me is despite all of the strikes against them and the discriminatory nature of the system, how many get out and never come back. I'm always, you know, humbled and I'm impressed by how resilient they are you know, resilience is such an overused word, but the resourcefulness, I guess, is probably a better word of women to link up share resources, even when they have very little themselves, but to share those resources and try and help each other make ends meet.

Pate's comment on the overuse of the term resilience hints at the paradox behind Black women's resiliency. But intersectionality allows us to consider the way in which these women's constructions of success are shaped by the intersections of race and culture within their own contexts. For Elwyn, success meant being able to help those in need in the Black community as well as being able to care for others while caring for yourself. In this account, steering towards non-stigmatized roles and activities such as charity and caregiving was a strategy to attaining success. Elwyn illustrated the way in which accumulation of conventional roles post-release could positively influence women's decisions to avoid any illegal activities:

My version of success is just to be in the community and help however you think you can help. Cause some people helping means that they need to spend time in church. Um, volunteer doing this, volunteer, doing that. My take is that as long as you and everyone's happy, everybody's content, you're not doing anything wrong, staying out of trouble, you're doing the best you can and what you think is possible. That's the bottom line, I think, is looking after yourself first, before you can look after someone else.

Similarly, Rykie and Den's definitions of success indicated that success was personal and involved character development. Rykie associated overcoming stigma of being a Black formerly incarcerated woman as being significant relative to her understanding of success and Den equated success to a state of individual spirituality:

Rykie: I want to say [success is] returning a bit to like your old self, but at the same time, it's like, it's not possible. Um, you'll never be able to be fully who you were previously at any stage in your life, especially after such a big occurrence. I think the one success is just getting past the stigma. Like the stigma attached to incarceration is like, you are the worst person in the world. And for me it's always fun when people meet me and have hung out with me a few times, and then I'm like, oh yeah, by the way, if you never knew [of her incarceration]... I'm like, exactly, they're [incarcerated] not all wild, wild west. Like, you know, gun totin' robbers, some people are just normal everyday folk that got caught up.

Rykie's comment demonstrates that success is based on the ability to redefine herself outside of the stigma attached to her prior incarceration.

Den however uses spirituality to help build her definition of success: “Success is holistic, success is an interconnected human spirit. Success is not hegemonic”. Den’s reference to spirituality echoes the perspectives of Black feminist theorists on spirituality as it relates to resistance and activism. For many Black women, their survival and ultimate success is deeply connected to their faith traditions. According to Gayle (2011), “the ability to survive against all odds offers an insight into Black women’s spirituality and the connectedness to the self” (p.113). Black women often use spirituality as a form of resistance by drawing strength, resilience, and empowerment from their faith traditions. When speaking about success being holistic, Den appeared to be the most relaxed she had been since the beginning of the interview. By connecting with their spirituality, Black women may find the inner resources to navigate and challenge societal inequalities, promoting both personal and collective empowerment (Gayle, 2011).

Some Black women regard success to be aligned with acquisition of employment, housing, and primary care of their children. Aside from the internal development that some women expressed as being key to success, others, like Jam, defined success through being able to get a job and home so that she could be granted custody of her son. For Jam, as soon as she can acquire all three of the aforementioned goals, she will be able to consider herself as being “back on my feet” and getting “back to regular life”. When I asked her to elaborate on what success looked like to her, she responded:

I wish that I was with my son right now and just know my situation and just kind, just see with me. I'm just hoping to find a job so that the housing and then I could have somebody stay there with him too as well while I'm there because you know, I have my friend that would check. She would help. I just need to get adjusted to this new normal. I was a single mom, whatever it happened, and I want to put it past me, but it's like, they keep revisiting it. I want to get life back together because I did live, you know, I had my own place. I work, I have one son. It wasn't one of those, like I was living a criminal life, like

it [criminal offence] was just monetary gain. But yeah, once I can do all of that I think I can say that is success to me.

Although the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women are affected by various systemically triggered factors, such as institutional racism, discrimination, systemic oppression, disparities in access to effective reintegration focused programming, housing and education, these strong women continue to survive and strive toward better tomorrows even in the face of negativity that tends to be ready to infiltrate and pollute their lives. Through this we see how their resilience is observed through their willingness to “achieve positive developmental outcomes despite exposure to known threats to adaptation” (Stewart, 2022, p.42).

Resilience

Indeed, Black women have long been victimized by the overlapping effects of racism, sexism and classism (amongst many other *isms*) which have led to the frequent portrayal of these women through a lens that views them as unfortunate victims of abusive oppressions and societal inequalities. Yet, there continues to be a glorified image of the strong Black woman (SBW) that attaches the idea of resiliency to their identities. Black feminist scholars argue that the SBW schema can be problematic as it normalizes the suffering of Black women while rendering them innately capable of overcoming it (Walker, 2009). As Watson and Hunter (2016) state, “one’s status as a strong Black woman was tried, tested, and achieved by arduous circumstances” (p.438). The politics of Black women's resilience involves recognizing and addressing the intersectionality of their identities, acknowledging historical and systemic injustices, and challenging societal structures that contribute to their oppression and need for resiliency to survive. Similar to multiculturalism discourses, the language of resilience is ingrained with notions of colorblindness and lack of consideration of the systemic inequalities grounded in these

concepts (Bonds, 2018). Furthermore, resilience thinking obscures the political and racial nature of structural inequalities, concealing the way in which “policies, institutions, and authorities” (Bonds, 2018, p.1287) perpetuate the need for Black women’s resiliency. Consequently, Black feminists like myself, come forward to both acknowledge these perspectives while simultaneously reframing them to actively strive towards bringing about change through awareness, understanding and healing. I argue that despite the fraught politics of Black women’s resiliency, considering the context of reintegration allows for a redirection of focus that places emphasis on their ability to progress despite the structural oppressive factors that contribute to their challenges.

For the formerly incarcerated Black women in this study, their resilience is shown by their ability to mitigate the challenges of their incarceration. As such, their participation was symbolic of both their resistance as well as insistence to persevere and move forward in their lives. This is important in acknowledging the way in which Black women are able to extract positive meanings from negative experiences by their willingness to define success in their own terms. We must continue to remember, celebrate, and commemorate the histories of perseverance that are embedded in the origins of existence of Black women. In discussing the way in which resiliency of these Black women becomes a form of agency in their post-incarceration lives we create a space that welcomes a different perspective on otherwise inherently negative topics.

Within the reintegration experiences of Black women, it is especially difficult to locate the good in seemingly arduous times, but it is doable if we allow our psyches to step outside of the darkness that our histories and struggles have boxed us within. Mohamed (2018) says, “if loss gave us our collective trauma, it also gave us the conditions for the birth of black diasporic life in

the West” (p.1). Short and sweet, Mohamed’s (2018) account of reframing our trauma to acknowledge how far it has brought us is a noteworthy example of how our struggles have played a role in yielding our progress. And so, when I suggest we reframe Black women’s experiences of oppression, trauma, and success as a form of resistance and activism, I assert that our realities of progress serve as evidence of the ability and power of Black women to break through the *shackles, boundaries, barriers and confines* the white man’s world has incessantly tried to limit us within. The comments Chy shared with me about success reflect the subjective nature of defining success: **Chy:** I don’t think success can be defined in one way only, I think it is a bunch of things. And in everyone’s lives with their own circumstances, success can present itself differently for us all. For me, being able to overcome my traumas and find the will to wake up every morning is my version of success after being locked up. But for some of my friends I made from inside, they might say success is keeping clean [sober] and staying away from the wrong crowds. So it’s different you know for everyone. I think being a Black woman in a white man’s world is success, even if you’re just keeping alive. Upon the completion of our interviews, I was intrigued by the various definitions the women I spoke with had of success. Like the participants in Heidemann et al.’s (2016) study, success is heavily related to perseverance through which participants “feel successful each day they are able to “make it through” and to take a step forward in a positive direction” (p. 36). It was clear that enduring bouts of trauma in their lives, both prior and post incarceration, would not prevent these women from being able to move forward from their experiences of trials and tribulations to reshape their lives in a way that allows them to feel successful. The contributions of the Black women in this study can be considered as expressions of their resiliency as well as forms of resistance against oppressive regime in which they exist. While there are scholars that critique the celebration of

Black women's resilience as overshadowing the conditions that require their resiliency like the ongoing presence of anti-Black racism, within this context these women's display of resilience was in their abilities to better their lives post-incarceration despite the challenges they faced along the way. Dismantling frameworks that seek to restrict formerly incarcerated Black women from full participation in society equips these women with the strength to develop sound consciousness about who they are and why they matter. Despite existing in a world that has both historically and contemporarily employed a stratification system that seeks to position and maintain Black people at the bottom, these women's willingness to share their experiences of hardship while still acknowledging their potentials for success are one of many ways in which Black women have and continue to prosper against all odds.

Unlike mainstream feminist theoretical discussions of Black women's experiences that applied a monolithic lens, Black feminist thought has introduced more appropriate ways to theoretically unpack various components of the Black experience. Theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality and critical race theory allow for a more nuanced understanding of challenges Black women face. In regard to the success of formerly incarcerated Black women, it is critical to note that although their successes do exist, these stories are not frequently distributed through popular public platforms like the news, social media, and academic environments. Instead,

It is our presumed failures. The "fact" that we are more likely to be incarcerated, sick, in poverty, undereducated, and victims of state violence overrun the narratives in not just white, but often Black media... it is important to talk about the ways Black girls are thriving in order to combat and balance, the predominate messages produced by mainstream media, academics, and thinkers that Black girls specifically and Black people in general are perpetually suffering and struggling at the hands of white systems of oppressions. (Zinobia & Taylor, 2022, p.225)

Although the women affirmed that many factors involved in their reintegration, such as sound relationships and economic stability were vital contributors to success, it became evident that success was best defined within the contexts of their reintegration journeys. Creating spaces where Black women, and other racialized bodies alike can feel safe, seen, heard, admired, celebrated, valued, and loved is an imperative component of Black feminisms' quest to successfully *burn the house down!*

Throughout this study Black women's accounts of how they continue to strive toward success post-incarceration reflect the way in which they are agentic beings capable of demonstrating acts of resistance while remaining resilient through adversities (Gordon, 2017). I argue that while participation in research like this may not initially appear as works of activism, the willingness to contribute their lived experiences to this study is a powerful form of active resistance towards the inequalities that Black women inevitably face. Here, resiliency is shown through Honey's efforts establish support systems by building and maintaining healthy relationships to enhance her well-being, Elwyn's desires to contribute to the Black community by helping others, Rykie's commitment to overcoming stigmatization, Den's development of her spirituality, Jam's attempts to rebuild her life for her and her son, and Chy's understanding that success can take multiple forms. Together, these women display the way in which resiliency, resistance and success are interconnected for Black women post-incarceration.

Chapter 8: This is What We Know-- Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study is to contribute to existing research on formerly incarcerated Black women in Canada and their reintegration experiences. By analyzing the perceptions of formerly incarcerated Black women who have been or are currently going through reintegration processes, I have identified the ways in which systemic and structural oppression operate to further disadvantage these women post-incarceration. The challenges that a formerly incarcerated individual faces are difficult on all levels, but for Black women their reintegration processes are informed by the conflux of race, gender, class, and stigma. Subsequently, this research can be used as a point of reference in future affairs that seek to investigate the reintegration experiences of marginalized populations including the efficacy of reintegration programming and the role of CSC in assisting these women. Additionally, research on these women affords the opportunity to uncover developing patterns and similarities amongst formerly incarcerated Black women that also illustrate the pervasiveness of inequality in Canadian society. Analysis of these women's reintegration experiences is important to draw connections to the literature that does exist in order to elucidate the relationships between the different barriers formerly incarcerated people encounter and the factors that shape these encounters. This chapter seeks to present the takeaways from this research that draw attention to the need for further investigation of the post-incarceration experiences of the overlooked group of formerly incarcerated Black women.

The interviews with formerly incarcerated Black women brought about many different topics but the main ones are: challenges of relatability to the programs offered by CSC, navigating trauma pre and post-release, the acquisition of housing and employment, navigating their stigmatized identities, adjusting to the changes of life outside of prison walls, obtaining

substantial support systems, and defining success. Though in different capacities, all the participants in my study touched on these topics.

Most of the formerly incarcerated Black women I interviewed had experienced difficulties with their parole officers and the stipulations of their release informed by institutional racism and sexism. They felt that there could be more effort put into ensuring diversity amongst parole officers. Lack of inclusion of racialized members on the National Parole Board proves to be problematic for Black women who find their race is a contributing factor to the decisions made by the Parole Board. Hence, these women expressed that a representation of individuals who represent their various racial and cultural backgrounds is vital to the outcomes of their postrelease experiences. The women illustrated that building meaningful relationships with their parole-officers was made difficult because of perceived racial and cultural disconnects, as well as unhealthy power dynamics between themselves and their parole officers. These factors are significant to consider in analyzing the various ways in which the role of parole officers is central to the reintegration outcomes of formerly incarcerated Black women. With regard to the challenges of developing rapport between parolees and parole officers, Cnaan and Woida (2020) state,

When a PO recommends a certain behavior, there is no formal command, but resisting or confronting the officer can bring about costly consequences. The more the helping professional can impose authority, the more powerful they are in the relationship (Canton, 2007). The parole system creates an imbalanced power dynamic which positions the PO as the expert controlling knowledge and resources and the client as a passive recipient. Dewan (2017) wrote: Parolees may not live behind bars, but they are far from free. Their parole officers have enormous power to dictate whom they can see, where they can go, and whether they are allowed to do perfectly legal things like have a beer. Breaking those rules can land a parolee back in jail—the decision is up to the parole officer. (p.579)

All of the formerly incarcerated women interviewed made reference to the challenges they encountered in maintaining sound relationships with their parole officers, and though not all considered racial and cultural differences to be a factor, all acknowledged the power their parole officers had in deciding their fate post-incarceration.

In this study, prison programming and specifically reintegration focused programming was something that formerly incarcerated Black women highlighted as an area in need of change within CSC. The programs that they had participated in proved to be ineffective in adequately preparing them for reintegration. According to these women, programs offered through CSC are difficult to relate to as most are not racially and culturally appropriate, and do not reflect the lived realities of Black women, thus, making them ineffective in their objectives and unappealing. The relevance of prison programming for Black women is connected to their reintegration experiences because it is through these programs that these women can prepare themselves to integrate back into their communities post-release. The women I spoke with echoed one another's sentiments regarding feeling underprioritized, mistreated, and misunderstood, and the apparent lack of racially and culturally relevant programming plays a role in building these sentiments. As a result, there is distrust in the Canadian criminal justice system and its intentions in helping formerly incarcerated Black women move forward in life post-incarceration. Many of the women identified that the scarcity of available resources combined with the inefficacy of the programs they complete makes them believe that the criminal justice system and CSC attempt to discretely set them up for failure in their reintegration journeys. Similar to the findings of Reece's (2010) study, implementation of racially and culturally appropriate programming is a staple point of recommendation by Black women. Reece (2010) states,

The common denominator regarding the exigent need for racially and culturally appropriate programming whether delivered inside the prison, or by an outside agency, is that the lack of inclusion and connection to the material reality of Black women's lives ought to be included as central to their reality of pre-release and reintegration planning, what reintegration looks like and means to Black women is heterogeneous because the experiences of their lives while crosscutting similarities are also peppered with differences. (p.172)

The efforts of CSC to ensure that the reintegration-based needs of Black women are being met can only be effective if the conditions of their lived realities are incorporated into these initiatives.

Formerly incarcerated Black women are also at a disadvantage in the labour and housing markets. The convergence of their criminal record, race, gender, and class negatively effects their mobility in these markets post-release. A common theme emerging from the interviews with formerly incarcerated Black women was the challenges they faced with securing housing and employment. All but one of the Black women found that the difficulty of finding somewhere to live worked hand in hand with acquiring employment. Additionally, all seven women who expressed that their racial and gender identity were further stigmatized by the addition of their criminal record experienced barriers to accessing housing and employment postrelease. Several studies have considered the relationship between race and the housing market and have concluded that race does hold weight in determining individuals' treatment and overall experiences in the housing market. Racialized individuals' experiences with the rental market are then further impacted when other identity markers are considered as well, for this study, gender, class, and criminalized identity. As demonstrated by some of the claims made to the Ontario Human Rights Commission in 2008, "people of African descent have difficulty finding housing because landlords believe that they are criminals or have too many children...the Commission also heard other stereotypes, such as the belief that Black Canadian tenants are more likely to be

involved with drugs or be violent” (Alini, 2020, n.p.). Such stigmatized attitudes in the housing market are problematic given the importance of stable housing for successful reintegration.

The same circumstances apply to trouble in securing employment post-release. Black women are often deprived of employment opportunities the moment their criminal record is uncovered. The similarity between the challenges formerly incarcerated Black women face in accessing housing and securing employment is that the racism, sexism, classism, alongside the stigmatization attached to their criminal records simultaneously work alongside one another to prevent them from accessing equal opportunities in these spheres. Moreover, it is very unlikely for a formerly incarcerated Black woman to be able to afford safe and appropriate housing for their situation without having a stable source of income. Although the women did get to spend time in half-way homes post-incarceration, for some, the urgency to secure their own housing and employment was due to a few different reasons, including the fear of being returned to prison, being left to live in a shelter, not being able to house their children, and becoming homeless. For some, the feeling of still being in prison because of the regulative conditions of half-way homes was also a factor.

The responses of the women throughout the interviews revealed that stigma was one of the most maddening and prohibitive barriers faced in their reintegration journeys. Stigma played a significant role in many of the unfavourable encounters the women faced post release, such as negative interactions with their parole officers, employers, community members, and family members. Two out of the seven formerly incarcerated Black women participants spoke of having internalized stigma, which had affected their self-perceptions. Both women revealed that they were struggling with their mental health as a result. Stigma produces many barriers for these

women throughout their reintegration journeys and is often salient in institutional spaces that they are bound to enter. For many of these women, stigma is unavoidable and is likely to form barriers for them in important aspects of their lives post-release. All the women were aware of the effects stigma had in their reintegration journeys but were unsurprised and expected it to be an issue they would have to learn to tolerate. This aligns with Frankel and Depoy's (2021) study that argues the stigma that these women internalize becomes an accepted part of their postcarceral experiences. The effects of stigma on any individual can be detrimental, but for formerly incarcerated Black women who have learned to accept this, these effects can be longstanding and life altering. Frankel and Depoy (2021) suggest that,

The realization that an individual belongs to a cohort that is not valued has a negative effect perpetrated on one's post-release life. This diminished sense of value or worth is often evident in an individual's struggle with mental health and coping and negatively influential on motivation, communitarian behavior and interaction within one's social environment. Individuals experiencing internalized stigma, defined by Link and Phelan as the acceptance of social devaluation and integration of a denigrated self ... stigma forms deeply felt barriers by the stigmatized. Thus, studies of how diverse understandings of stigma affect the re-entry transition can inform programmatic change on many levels.

(p.6)

Formerly incarcerated women face societal stigma that hinders their ability to access the resources and support necessary to secure employment, housing, and rebuild their lives. As per intersectionality, stigma is regularly magnified for Black women due to the intersections of race, gender, class, and criminal history. The theory of stigma stresses the importance of addressing societal attitudes that include responses to crime and policies to reduce discrimination against these women in particular. Stigma undoubtedly shapes the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women, but the extent to which it does can be minimized if well informed

efforts are put forth in all of the areas that most affect these women, such as pre-release and reintegration-focused programming.

Success was an interesting point of discussion with the formerly incarcerated Black women interviewed because each woman's definition differed from one another. For the most part, their definitions illustrated that success was both personal and material. Some described success post-incarceration as being able to rebuild a life for themselves (and children) that was better than the one they lived before coming into conflict with the law. Other definitions of success included aspects of self-growth and finding inner peace. Overall, the women acknowledged that successful reintegration post-release was not something people reached on their own, but with the help of others.

It is important to note that there are limitations to this study. Given that the research sample was quite small, it is plausible to suggest that there may be much richer findings to discover from widening the sample to include different types of racialized women. Perhaps, if the participant eligibility criteria were expanded to include the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated Indigenous women and South Asian women the results of the research could produce plenty more themes worthy of discussion such as BIPOC women and challenges with parole and obtaining employment, and housing as a formerly incarcerated BIPOC woman. It is also acknowledged that the participants of this study were limited to Ontario which narrows the focus to just one Canadian province. Thus, it cannot be guaranteed that the results can be generalized to a larger population of Black women. In future research, I wish to include the narratives of other racialized women from various regions in Canada, such as Vancouver and Edmonton, as the population of incarcerated racialized women in North America continues to increase (Lawson, 2020). However, to avoid challenges with the amount of time allocated to

complete this project, it was not practical to extend the scope of my research to these areas. Additionally, while this study suggests that the intersections of race, gender, class, and criminalized identity play a role in shaping Black women's experiences and subsequent challenges, future research should continue to develop intersectional approaches to evaluating the lived experiences of marginalized populations, especially in discussions where systemic and structural inequalities are salient. This includes acknowledging the presence of racial and gender discrimination that is deeply embedded within institutions like the criminal justice and prison system. Moreover, an intersectional lens in this regard accounts for the many variations that play a role in shaping underrepresented groups experiences of oppression, this goes beyond race, gender, and class, and includes other aspects of identity such as religion, ethnicity, and age.

Nevertheless this qualitative study has highlighted some policy oversights that require attention. Effective programming to help formerly incarcerated Black women must account for the community's role in their reintegration process. This means that programs need to consider ways in which they can connect with suitable groups to strengthen the community's capability to welcome back and work with these women in their transitions post-release (Richie, 2001). Community-based organizations are especially significant in this regard as they have the power to support them in meaningful ways. For example, if organizations that are committed to assisting Black women like Walls to Bridges and Uplift Black are given the opportunity to work together with reintegration programs provided by CSC, the multifaceted needs of formerly incarcerated Black women have a greater chance of being met. Additionally, this approach would encourage community-based organizations to begin working with incarcerated Black women prior to their release which would be beneficial in preparing them for their transitions back to the communities to which they belong (Richie, 2001). Although many of the formerly incarcerated

women in this study appeared to have negative feelings towards their carceral experiences, when it came to looking back at their journey to date, they had positive experiences to share as well. Some of the women believed that their incarceration and reintegration experiences provided them with the space to evolve as women by learning new things about themselves. These women have proved that being released from prison is only the first step of many to successfully reintegrating into society.

Black feminists and critical race theorists alike postulate that any discussion regarding Black women and the decisions they make that warrant their contact with the law must be understood in parallel with social, political, and economic factors. This can only begin to be achieved if and when programs offered by CSC effectively employ anti-racist and antioppressive designs. Acknowledgement of the different ways in which Black women experience the law begins with assessing how stigma, discrimination, and criminality affect their carceral experiences as well as what they require to succeed post-incarceration. Intersectionality emphasizes that individuals' experiences are defined by several interconnected factors, such as race, gender, and class. For formerly incarcerated Black women, it helps to reveal the complexity of the challenges they face post-incarceration. Not only do these women experience racial disparities within the criminal justice system but also gender and class specific concerns. Additionally, intersectionality identifies the need to investigate the confluence of oppression and how this differentiates the experiences Black women have with the criminal justice system in comparison to Black men and non-Black women. Such an analysis allows for the development of more tailored interventions that seek to resolve the unique challenges women like those included in this study face.

Prison initiatives to assist formerly incarcerated Black women will continue to be flawed until efforts to understand how these individuals' relationships with the criminal justice system are oppressive well before they come into contact with it. This reality cannot be altered without consultation of these women to directly locate the areas in which their needs have not been met. Reece (2010) suggests that authoritative figures in the criminal justice system,

Must work with and build coalitions with community groups interested in working with and maintaining connections with incarcerated Black women; they must take into account diversity among Black women; and they must examine systemic and institutional oppression within the context of white supremacist ideology (p.196).

The idea is that once these women can be part of the quest to transform their lives, the challenges and adversities they face post-incarceration may be predicted and/or prevented. Many of the individuals I interviewed shared similar sentiments towards the state of racial and cultural inclusivity in the programs and resources in place to assist reintegration; the common message was that these features were lacking. As Jewel, a member of Legal Justice for Blacks whom I interviewed, pointed out:

The fact of the matter is prisons were initially designed with the focus on white men, there's tons of literature on the formation of the prison industrial complex. But yeah, here in Canada, if we're talking about considerations for visible minorities, especially in the legal field, much of the attention is given to Indigenous communities. So there isn't much chatter about Black women, let alone addressing their needs in and out of prison you know?

Jewel's commentary is telling of the invisibility that seemingly plagues this particular prison population. As history has shown, Black women tend to be underprioritized. This trend is no less present in the experiences of reintegration that have been shared in this study. Evidently, Black women continue to be incarcerated at high rates and their experiences of being disregarded are important to consider for better reintegration outcomes including reduced rates of

reincarceration. Huebner et al. (2010) state that “incarceration can have a profound impact on post-release outcomes, and that women’s racial and cultural ethnicities shape both the prison and re-entry experience” (p.229). For the most part, formerly incarcerated Black women did not find CSC to have contributed to any of their successes post-release; rather they viewed CSC as trying to hinder their chances of successfully reintegrating. In this regard, Elwyn remarked,

We are Black women in prison, CSC groups us all together and almost ignores the fact that we’re Black and have layers to unpack, our issues aren’t surface level, seems like we’re last priority when it comes to proper resources that are like you know that actually help...

The discrimination they experience prior to incarceration tends to reproduce and advance itself through their carceral experiences in which they remain oppressed. As a result, they are likely to confront issues resulting from old and new trauma.

The aim of this project was to bring to light the experiences of reintegration of criminalized Black women who have had to navigate the terrains of finding success in their lives after prison, through a critical, analytical, and theoretical lens. Through these lens this study’s findings portray the realities of Black women and the law that are innately oppressive. In this respect, my goal has been to shed light on what these women have, what they do not, and what they need. This research has allowed me to identify the key ways that formerly incarcerated Black women ought to be considered for the unique population that they are. This includes acknowledging how their multilayered identities shape their experiences of oppression long before, as well as after, incarceration. The women in this study demonstrate that to bring about future change to the reintegration challenges Black women face, systemic issues must be addressed through policy advocacy, social support resources, and relevant programming. Critical race theorists argue that to decolonize the criminal justice system it must first be acknowledged

and accepted that the ongoing legacies of colonialism and racism persist (Schiffer, 2014). Doing so involves addressing structural inequalities that disproportionately affect Black women and reinforce their disempowered positions during and after incarceration. As this research demonstrates, these women encounter a wide range of biases within their reintegrations quests, most notably limited access to effective resources of support. Furthermore, this study advocates for reform efforts that seek to address racial and gendered inequalities that are deeply entrenched within the carceral system. This direction of reform promotes the redevelopment of policies that prioritize successful reintegration, restorative justice, underrepresented community empowerment, and equitable access to resources and opportunities. Until then, formerly incarcerated Black women will continue to endure post-release obstacles with securing employment and affordable housing, managing their stigmatized identities, and abiding by parole regulations. Certainly these are challenges that could otherwise be reduced if not prevented provided appropriate efforts are made. As Gianetta (2021) articulates, “we must examine the purpose of the CJS, why it looks and works the way it does, who it harms and how it harms them” (p.8). Complacency with policy solutions strictly within the existing carceral framework, limits discourse on fundamental change. Incremental reforms tend to tinker with problematic elements without addressing or challenging the broader societal and political underpinnings of the justice system. This approach perpetuates inequalities by overlooking the impact of colonial histories upon underrepresented communities and how this is reflected throughout their carceral experiences. Embedded in colonialism, the criminal justice system serves as a tool for ongoing subjugation and oppression of Black women. Moving forward, efforts to restore and reform the criminal justice system will continue to fall short if they do not adamantly commit to addressing

the deeper flaws of the system, including its historically unhealthy relationship with the Black community at large.

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