Article

Formerly Incarcerated Black Mothers Matter Too: Resisting Social Constructions of Motherhood

The Prison Journal
2019, Vol. 99(4) 420–436

DOI: 10.1177/0032885519852079
journals.sagepub.com/home/tpj
SAGE

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Abstract

Mass incarceration as a system of racialized and gendered social control has disproportionately impacted Black women, many of whom are mothers. Contrary to dominant social constructions of motherhood, these women employ their own strategies of mothering unique to their lived experiences. This study relies on interview data to understand Black women's motherhood experiences post-incarceration. Drawing from five semistructured interviews of Black mothers across a large urban area in Texas, we argue for more critical, qualitative research of formerly incarcerated Black women, grounded in Black feminist theory (BFT).

Keywords

formerly incarcerated, motherhood, Black women, Black feminist theory

Introduction

Since 1980, the number of incarcerated women has outpaced the rate of men by 50%, making them the fastest growing segment of the nation's prison population (The Sentencing Project, 2018). Increasingly, this population of

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women consists of mothers with dependent children; approximately two-thirds of incarcerated women have minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010), posing negative implications for families left behind (Arditti & Few, 2006; Turney & Wildeman, 2018). Despite this reality, relatively few studies have focused specifically on the unique experiences of incarcerated mothers (Celinska & Siegel, 2010). Like men, most incarcerated women will eventually return to their communities. However, because reentry is a gendered phenomenon, women's life circumstances post-incarceration are distinct from men's (Cobbina, 2010; Heldemann, Cederbaum, & Martinez, 2016). Obstacles faced by returning women may be further exacerbated by motherhood (Garcia, 2016; Hayes, 2009).

When considering parental incarceration and reentry, the experiences of formerly incarcerated women are of critical importance because they are more likely than their male counterparts to be primary caregivers prior to their incarceration and plan to resume maternal responsibilities upon release (Arditti, 2012; Opsal, 2009). Since 1991, the number of children who have experienced maternal incarceration increased by 131%, far surpassing the rate of experiences of paternal incarceration (Barnes & Stringer, 2014). However, few research studies have examined the challenges formerly incarcerated mothers face despite the sharp increase in female incarceration rates over the past few decades (Cooper-Sadlo, Mancini, Meyer, & Chou, 2019).

While mothers returning home from incarceration face additional obstacles, the experiences and challenges of motherhood are not universal. Mothers from different race and class backgrounds define and employ their own conceptions of what it means to be a good mother and, therefore, do not fit within hegemonic ideals of motherhood (Aiello & McQueeney, 2016; Roberts, 1993b). In the United States, societal views of Black mothers differ from and contradict those of White mothers (Roberts, 1993b). Thus throughout history, Black women have fallen outside the realm of what constitutes a good mother (Davis, 1981; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Roberts, 1993b). The dominant ideologies of mothering continue to be based upon White, upper-to-middle class, heterosexual women who enjoy a greater degree of privilege and financial security (Collins, 1994). Therefore, women who diverge from conventional ideologies and conceptions of motherhood are often considered bad or unfit mothers (Baker & Carson, 1999).

Formerly incarcerated Black mothers' membership in several intersecting categories of oppression places them at the extreme ends of marginalized groups. While the experiences of all women have historical invisibility in the criminal justice system (Arditti, 2012; Richie, 2001), gender traditionally has been understood as referring to White women. Black women have continuously experienced a special kind of oppression in the United States, both

because of their racial and gender identities (Davis, 1981; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). For Black women with incarceration histories, their intersectional identities intensify experiences of stigma, especially in the context of motherhood (Gunn, Sacks, & Jemal, 2018).

Black women's overrepresentation among the incarcerated female population is startling. Their rates of incarceration have surpassed those of Black men, and remain higher than their White and Hispanic counterparts (Willingham, 2011). Despite their disproportionate representation among incarcerated and returning mothers, Black women's qualitative experiences remain limited in criminological and criminal justice discourse on gender and punishment. An enlarged population of incarcerated mothers shapes the carceral experiences of Black women. Yet, little scholarly attention has been devoted specifically to Black women's navigation of motherhood during reentry (see Gurusami, 2019, for an exception). This article is part of an ongoing study exploring women's parenting experiences postincarceration. We attempt to answer the call by Garcia (2016) for more qualitative criminological research of formerly incarcerated mothers in their own words. By using an intersectional, Black feminist framework, we bring to forefront the additional burdens Black mothers face after incarceration through their narratives, to convey the message that formerly incarcerated Black mothers matter too, and engage in "motherwork" (Collins, 1994; Gurusami, 2019; Nichols, Gringle, & Pulliam, 2015) that is unique to their lived experiences.

The Pains of Black Womanhood and Motherhood

Throughout various historical periods, Black women have faced forms of oppression not experienced by White women and other women of color. For example, Haley (2016) chronicles the exploitation and abuse Black women endured in early Southern penal regimes, also documenting their forms of resistance to gendered racial terror. Since the days of slavery and Jim Crow-style punishment, Black women have been subjected to varying degrees of oppressive treatment based on their intersectional identities (Battle, 2016). Furthermore, their womanhood has been devalued and often served only as the symbolic other with which White women are positioned (Davis, 1981; Haley, 2016). Although being a mother poses its unique challenges for all women who share this identity, racialized experiences remain (Roberts, 1993a). While dominant ideologies of intensive mothering convey the belief that good mothers should invest infinite time, money, and emotional labor in raising their children (Hays, 1998), motherhood for Black women is complicated by their raced, classed, and gendered positions in society (Collins, 1994, 2000). Black mothers have the added burden of raising their children in

a racist society, often alone, with limited financial capital (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Roberts, 1993b).

Starting in slavery, Black women have mothered under the most extreme deprivations and have provided for their children often to the detriment of their own emotional and physical well-being (Davis, 1981; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). In Georgia's convict lease system, the disproportionate imprisonment of Black mothers posed extreme economic and emotional consequences for their families, especially children (Haley, 2016). Historically, Black mothers have had to struggle to be allowed to mother (Davis, 1981; Haley, 2016), a status only White women have been privileged to enjoy (Roberts, 1993b). The use of controlling images to develop a perception of maternal illegitimacy was used, in part, to deny Black women autonomy in motherhood (Roberts, 1999). The White, hetero-patriarchal structure devalued Black motherhood as an attempt to disregard Black humanity (Roberts, 1993b).

Challenges of Criminalized Mothers

While mothers with incarceration histories strive to provide and care for their children often with limited resources, their criminal record reduces them to maternal outcasts by society (Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010; Garcia, 2016). For instance, studies on substance abusing and law-breaking women (see Baker & Carson, 1999; Couvrette, Brochu, & Plourde, 2016) show how these mothers, due to their criminal histories, are labeled as deviant and unfit for their failure to satisfy conventional standards of mothering. In their study of drug-offending, incarcerated mothers in Kentucky, Allen et al. (2010) found that these mothers are ostracized, marginalized, powerless, and, therefore, considered "throwaway moms." Their life histories of substance abuse, poverty, victimization, and involvement with the criminal justice system affected their perception of themselves as mothers. While these mothers expressed guilt about their past, they strived to be the best mother they could and hoped for a better future for their children.

Many women involved in the criminal justice system have life histories characterized by a triple threat of disadvantages, including substance abuse, depression, and intimate partner violence (Arditti & Few, 2006). Owing to the lack of treatment for such problems, these traumas become exacerbated during periods of incarceration and create maternal distress that complicates reentry into family and community life (Arditti & Few, 2008). In their application of maternal distress to reentry, Arditti and Few (2008) conclude that concerns over their children, economic insecurity, and health challenges are the core of women's experience, and access to holistic programming is critical to sustaining their family and community ties after incarceration.

Rather than recognize the maternal labor these mothers struggle to perform, hegemonic ideologies of motherhood create additional problems for these women. Motherhood, under the gaze of the state, provides even more complications because women under the surveillance of probation, parole, and child welfare services have to negotiate reentry under the occurrence of multiple demands (Richie, 2001). Women under state supervision experience social and economic vulnerabilities that place motherhood at high-risk for failure, given the immense obstacles they confront postincarceration (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Opsal, 2009; Robison & Miller, 2016). While Black motherhood has never been fully recognized, mothers with incarceration histories are shadowed in relative invisibility.

Black feminist theory (BFT) has been a critical theoretical framework used to contextualize Black women's experiences, especially in the context of gendered punishment and victimization (see Potter, 2008; Richie, 2012, 1996). BFT places the lived experiences of Black women and their resistance to oppressive situations at the center of analysis rather than the periphery (Evans-Winters, 2019; Potter, 2006). This theoretical framework also recognizes the importance of analyzing Black women's experiences through the lens of intersectionality to capture the nuance of their lives. In the context of Black women and incarceration, criminological research lacks the standpoint of intersectionality due to its complexity and acknowledgment of marginalization and oppression (Christian & Thomas, 2009). Incorporating intersectionality into criminological research ensures that scholars make a concerted effort to explore several intersecting identities rather than focus on these categories separately (Potter, 2015).

Methodology

Evaluating experiences of the current sample of Black mothers is part of an ongoing study on the navigation of motherhood during reentry. We used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit formerly incarcerated women who identify as mothers in an urban area in Texas. Participants were recruited through widely distributed flyers at several nonprofit organizations that provide services and programming for formerly incarcerated individuals. We intentionally chose not to recruit study participants from formal criminal justice agencies, such as probation and parole offices, to minimize their risk and protect their privacy.

To be eligible to participate, respondents needed to be at least 18 years old, identify as mothers, have minor children, and have been released recently from jail or prison. All participants in this research were clients of one nonprofit organization dedicated to helping formerly incarcerated individuals obtain the essential services and resources needed to reintegrate back into

society successfully. Once a mother was identified as appropriate for this study (i.e., Black, formerly incarcerated, and mother of minor children during incarceration), she was asked if she would be interested in discussing her experiences related to mothering, incarceration, and reentry. Private interviews were conducted with consenting mothers at the office of the nonprofit organization. All research was conducted in accordance with the university's institutional review board–approved protocol.

Five in-depth interviews were conducted with self-identified Black mothers of minor children released from jail or prison within the last 3 years. Each participant received a $15 CVS gift card for taking part in the interview. The label "mother" was not restricted to women with biological children to incorporate women who self-identified regardless of their legal or biological maternal status, allowing for more diversity in our sample. Using a phenomenological approach (Bhattacharya, 2017), semistructured interviews comprised questions that placed the experience of motherhood at the center of inquiry to understand how participants' lived experiences shaped their mothering strategies after incarceration.

Interview questions focused broadly on interviewees' views of motherhood, maternal reentry under state supervision, and challenges in other aspects of reentry, including housing and employment. Each interview lasted from 25 minutes to 1 hour 37 minutes. After each interview, the audio files were transcribed and "lean coding" (Creswell, 2016) was used to form a smaller number of codes in the analysis process. Next, identified themes were discussed and negotiated, with consensus reached on each one. This method allowed themes to emerge through close reading and discussion of the raw data.

Research Site

The nonprofit reentry organization serves men and women recently released from jails and prisons in Texas. The organization is nonresidential and consists of reentry specialists and case managers that assist clients find housing, employment, and learn life skills such as financial literacy and parenting. All five participants from this study were recruited with assistance from organization staff. Program staff posted flyers around the office and helped introduce the researchers to potentially interested clients, scheduled interviews, and provided quiet office space to conduct interviews.

Participants

Research participants vary in age, number of children, involvement with the criminal justice system, and family life. The average age of the women was

31.8, ranging from 28 to 39. Most participants were incarcerated more than once in her lifetime ($n = 4$) and unemployed at the time of the interview ($n = 4$). The time since most recent release ranged from 2 weeks to 2 years. The women had between one and six children, of varying ages. One participant was homeless at the time of the interview.

Findings

Several themes emerged from the interview data. We discuss here the topics that emerged most frequently. Although reentry is a gendered phenomenon (Brown & Bloom, 2009) and mothers returning from incarceration confront obstacles constructed within the context of mass incarceration (Robison & Miller, 2016), mothering strategies for Black women after incarceration are shaped by the racialized and gendered contours of mass incarceration (Gurusami, 2019). These mothering practices fall outside the realm of hegemonic ideologies of intensive mothering to ensure survival for their children, and themselves. The parenting concerns and challenges returning Black mothers face in our study were unique to their lived realities.

Black Mothers' Concern for Their Children

Safety

Our findings revealed that one of the parenting challenges and concerns for women in this study focused on raising and protecting their children, especially sons, from the unsavory streets. In ghettoized communities, poor, Black, single mothers have the additional burden of worrying about the welfare of their children amid drugs and violence. These mothers often sacrifice and work to protect their children in the absence of larger social support (Elliott et al., 2015).

Tanya, a 30-year-old mother of five children, lives in a low-income apartment complex. When discussing her four boys she says, "the way the streets is today for young men, I don't want my sons growing up like that." Tanya sees incarceration as a common experience in the community where she lives and substantiates this reality when she says, "nine times out ten if they out the hood where I'm at, they have been locked up." Therefore, she does not want her sons to be treated like criminals or future criminals, a common experience in urban ghettos (Alexander, 2010). In describing herself as a mother, Tanya admits that she has not always been a good mother in the past but now credits herself for being a "damn good mother."

Similar to mothers of all racial and class backgrounds, a concern and fear exists about their children's future. Linda shares her greatest fear for her sons: "that I have not taught them enough to overcome the crap that I've introduced them to that can be, and is, learned behavior every time it surfaces. That's my biggest fear my boys." On the contrary, she wishes that her boys "know their place as Black men. Not know your place like stay in your place, but know your power. Know your power . . . and use it with humility and mercy. That's my biggest wish for them." Linda understands that her Black sons will confront a different set of challenges in society and hopes that they can withstand and persevere through all obstacles placed before them.

Many formerly incarcerated mothers return to neighborhood contexts characterized by social ills such as crime, drugs, and violence (Leverentz, 2010). Parenting strategies under these conditions call for close surveillance of your children to protect them from victimization and intervention by the state. In her three typologies of motherwork, Gurusami (2019) refers to "hyper vigilant motherwork" as a parenting style that requires proximity to children at all times to ensure their protection from any danger. After returning home from both prison and a psychiatric treatment facility, Linda explains how she prefers the confines of her home to make sure her sons are safe:

> I rather be at my house where it's safe cuz I know when they leave I'm there, and I know when they get back I'll be there. If I drive off, something can go wrong. I done already been through it unexpectedly, you know? So, that's my biggest battle right now.

Education

Not only do Black mothers like Tanya worry about their children's safety and physical and mental well-being, their concern also spills over into other domains such as education. In describing expectations she feels she has as a mother, Tanya discusses the importance of making sure her son receives a quality education and graduates from high school. She recognizes the crisis of Black male dropouts and wants her son to break the intergenerational cycle within her own family:

> I'm like real strong about making sure he go to school and make sure he get an education because the majority of young black men don't finish school, and he's going to finish school I don't care what it is he's going to finish. I didn't finish. His daddy didn't finish. It's a change. You gotta break that chain.

Tina, a 31-year-old mother on parole who has no biological children of her own, yet takes care of her ex-boyfriend's daughter, shared the same

sentiments about education. When talking about the one wish for her, she stresses the importance of her obtaining a college education someday: "I want to see her go to college . . . and I'm going to make that happen you know cuz I didn't finish school." Many of the concerns of these mothers derive from their discontent with their own life experiences, shortcomings, and missed opportunities. Therefore, they willingly sacrifice to ensure their children succeed and break through barriers and hardships that hindered their own success.

Housing

Since slavery, Black mothers have had to make immense sacrifices for the sake of their children (Davis, 1981). In her quest for housing after being released from prison, Linda, a 39-year-old mother of two sons, said the following about the degree to which she sacrificed to obtain an apartment for her and her sons:

> I called sixty-two people, sixty-two properties, and that wasn't even the whole list that I called. That was just the numbers that worked. Three people were willing to work with me. One of them actually did after they pulled my background and I paid a double deposit plus first month's rent . . . No income. I paid $30 to move into my place through MHMR Tarrant Works. I had no income. We pushed my van to my house, pushed it around the corner. You know? I had $30 from donating plasma when I got the call.

Poor, single mothers like Linda already face economic marginalization in society; however, a criminal record exacerbates the inequality they face. The lack of housing for returning women with minor children potentially places them in a precarious situation (Middlemass, 2017). Linda's decision to donate plasma for money exemplifies both her desperation for economic survival while showing her sacrifice to ensuring the survival of her children. Throughout history, Black mothers have put their children first even at the expense of their own self-care (Nichols et al., 2015). Aligned with elements of intensive mothering, these women demonstrate incredible thoughtfulness, courage, and self-sacrifice on a daily basis to provide for and protect their children from violence, homelessness, and state intervention.

Black Mothers Raising Children Without Support

Although hyper vigilant motherwork is performed by mothers of all racial and class backgrounds, poor, single, Black mothers have to struggle to be good mothers with less familial and other social support (Elliott et al., 2015).

Single motherhood for Black women and other women of color is already a challenging task but is intensified when combined with the stigma of a criminal record (Gunn et al., 2018). In describing the differences in support for White women and women of color with incarceration histories, Danielle, a 28-year-old mother of six children says:

> I think that Caucasian women have more family factors as far as their support system than women of color. You know? Because with women of color, the black males that were there as fathers have not been a part of their lives you know what I mean? So women of color are there by themselves and they can't do it by themselves. It's just too much. Then there's women of color with backgrounds that have like, uh, felonies and all those different factors come into play to where women of color will have it harder for their family to get their children because of their backgrounds.

It exacerbates the maternal stress when raising children with special needs and limited financial capital. Tanya says:

> Like my son, he got behavioral problems. I did everything in my power to get him help you know what I'm sayin? Now he on that medicine, and now that he on that medicine, he off the wall. With that medicine he a better child. His dad was like "you just wanna get this money." No, I'm trying to help my son. It's just me. You don't do nothing. You don't come pick up or take him to get no haircut. You don't spend time with him. It's just me, I'm doing everything.

Incarcerated and returning women often receive no child care assistance from spouses or their children's fathers (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001). The reality that most women involved in the criminal justice system are poor, single mothers creates an additional strain on mothers' struggling to navigate reentry. Poor, Black mothers are further disadvantaged because of the gender imbalance due to mass incarceration in urban, disenfranchised communities (Alexander, 2010; Clear, 2007). Mass incarceration is a system of social control and is responsible for the increasing representation of women in the correctional population, primarily through the criminalization of female poverty (Allen et al., 2010). Vanessa echoes this reality when discussing incarceration in her family and how she broke the law to provide for her daughter:

> Like getting in trouble that's a bad decision I was making but I was making choices for to feed her cuz I'm a single parent. Her dad is incarcerated also, he's doing seven years. So, he's been in and out of prison and I've been in and out of prison. This is my second time going in and coming home but he still in.

Tanya expresses the sacrifices she made to provide for her newborn daughter due to desperation, and a lack of support:

> In 2005 I got locked up for a theft case but I was stealing for her because I didn't have stuff for her. They said I was having a boy and a week before I had her it was a girl so I had all boy clothes. So I went stealing and got jammed up and went to jail. My mind was going crazy because I didn't know where my baby was at because she was little and I gotta know. So, like in my situation, I was just trying to get stuff that I needed for my child you know what I'm sayin? Cuz I didn't have no help, I was young.

For Black single mothers, the lack of social structural support may shape their mothering strategies and perceptions (Elliott et al., 2015). Despite the expectations of intensive mothering, these women resist social constructions of motherhood and provide for their children by any means necessary. Although mothers who break the law are considered unfit and deviant by dominant society, their willingness to sacrifice their own freedom to ensure the well-being of their children exemplifies the essence of motherhood.

Black Mothers Battling Mental Illness and Addiction

The presence of mental illness, drug addiction, and victimization are common experiences among women involved with the criminal justice system (Arditti & Few, 2006). These challenges become exacerbated when trying to navigate parenting expectations and reentry. Maternal distress was experienced by a few mothers in our sample, mostly in the form of mental health and addiction, induced at times from worry over children. In discussing the aftermath of her kids' removal by child protective services (CPS), Tanya says,

> First, I was depressed; I was depressed for a long time. Right now I take medicine to help me sleep cuz if I'm just up . . . I was depressed for like three months. I just stayed up. I wasn't eating. I wasn't doing nothing. I just came back into myself because I was used to my kids being with me every night sleeping with me every night. Like it wasn't a day my kids wasn't with me . . . I cried the other day because of the fact I was at a point where I didn't wanna live no more.

Tanya's anguish over her children's removal from her custody drove her to the verge of suicide. The maternal distress that she experienced during their absence inspired her to eventually seek out parenting classes to show "them people [CPS]" that she was worthy of regaining custody. After showing

commitment to the parenting program, her caseworker has set a preliminary date for the return of her children.

Danielle has struggled with drug addiction for years and recently completed a jail sentence because of her involvement with drugs. She currently does not have custody of any of her six children and believes their current living arrangements provide her with a space to work on herself. While Danielle loves her children dearly and wants to be with them, she loathes the woman she has become due to her addiction. After returning home from jail, she believes it is best for her children not see her. When discussing her views of a bad mother, Danielle says the following:

> I would have to say that's what I've probably been these past couple years, not being there . . . struggling with addiction. Um they're used to me being there you know, when they were little that type of thing and now they're getting older and I'm not around, um but it's because I have to focus on getting myself better before I can be back in their lives because that's not healthy.

Although her absence may have a negative effect on her children, Danielle does not believe it is right for her children to see her battling addiction. Furthermore, she is currently homeless and lives day-to-day struggling to survive on the streets. Her decision to keep her kids in the custody of others is a mothering strategy many women use to protect their children from multiple dangers on the streets and in shelters (Allen et al., 2010). She constantly reiterates that her attention right now is on herself and maintaining sobriety. Four of her children are in kinship care, while two are up for adoption, although she plans to regain custody of the two. Nonetheless, Danielle does not feel that she can live up to the expectations of motherhood in her current situation. According to her, "Right now I'm just pretty much being selfish, focusing on Danielle. I love my kids, yes I do, but if I don't better myself I can't be a better mom one day." Mothers like Danielle who do not live with their children, reject cultural expectations of motherhood that a woman must be a resident mother and have custody of her children.

Women who fit this profile tend to be viewed as abandoning, neglectful, and bad mothers (Kielty, 2008). After incarceration, it is a common experience for returning women not to live with or have custody of their children (Garcia, 2016). While discussing her opposition to the belief that mothers should have custody of their children, Danielle says:

> No, I don't think that's true. I think that children being in a safe place you know, and a mother being able to get herself together and being able to see them, send them money, and different little things like that like what I'm trying

> to get to because honestly, I feel like my children are better off living with family. That way I don't have to worry about if I were to make a mistake the state would come back which is what they did in the past. I don't want my kids scattered around because I make one mistake. You know? Have too much to drink or whatever you know what I mean?

Linda also believes that it is acceptable for a mother to be away from her children while resolving her own problems. When discussing her views about mothers having to have custody of their children she says, "No, that's not a requirement because you have to always protect your kids from yourself, and your demons, and your vices, as a mother." Linda also has a diagnosed mental illness and struggles daily to keep her symptoms under control while raising two teenage sons. In responding to a question about her greatest challenge during reentry she states,

> My mental illness, the depression, and not expecting the newness of the world moving around and being in it. Like standing on the sidewalk and a car driving down the street. That was the biggest struggle for me when I first got out. I didn't expect to be afraid of that. I didn't expect that that would make me feel some type of way and when it did I thought I was coo coo for cocoa puffs.

The effect of incarceration coupled with mental health issues exacerbates the difficulty of navigating motherhood postincarceration (Arditti, 2012). The nervousness Linda feels about the world around her is a common feeling experienced by returning citizens during their transition back into the society (Middlemass, 2017). The prison as a total institution is a completely different environment with its own social norms (Sykes, 1958/2007). Returning back to the free world and adapting to new technologies and other developments can be a challenging experience that induces various physical, mental, and emotional responses (Middlemass, 2017). The prevalence of mental health disorders, substance use addiction, and cumulative disadvantages among women in the criminal justice system render them the most vulnerable among all women (Arditti, 2012). Furthermore, the overrepresentation of mothers among the incarcerated and reentry population call for more attention and social support for their unique needs (Garcia, 2016; Moe & Ferraro, 2006).

Conclusion

This study adds to the criminology and criminal justice literature on women's reentry by placing motherhood at the center of analysis. Beyond that, this study situates the unique experiences of formerly incarcerated Black women,

a marginalized group whose voices are seldom heard. While parental incarceration is a topic with rapidly growing scholarly interest (Arditti, 2012; Turney & Wildeman, 2018; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014), the priority tends to be on exploring the effects on children. However, more attention should be given to justice-involved mothers who face maternal hardships and endure additional stigma and discrimination due to their intersectional identities (Garcia, 2016; Gunn et al., 2018). As the ideals and practices of motherhood are complicated by race and class (Gurusami, 2019), we chose to focus exclusively on Black mothers due to the scarcity of literature documenting their unique experiences navigating motherhood during reentry. While not exhaustive, our findings reveal concerns and challenges Black women deal with that are unique to their lived realities.

All the mothers in our sample shared a common experience of being single, Black, and living in or near poverty. Despite their marginalized positions in society, each mother showed tremendous sacrifice and concern for their children, even while battling mental health issues, drug addiction, and homelessness. While the stigma and barriers these women face are common among many women involved with the criminal justice system, Black women have to deal with racism, sexism, and a host of other forms of oppression in their homes, communities, and society (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). While our findings are not generalizable to the population of returning women with children, it is our hope that future reentry studies incorporate the lived experiences of justice-involved women and foreground their voices using critical theoretical frameworks.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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