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## **Motherhood, Trauma, Justice: A Critical Look at Black Women’s Reentry Pathways**

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*Objectives: This article seeks to investigate the particular problems that Black mothers with justice involvement experience upon reentry and to offer a more effective framework for their assistance.*

*Hypothesis: Traditional reentry frameworks fail to address the complexity that emerges from the combination of race, gender, and trauma experienced by Black mothers.*

*Methods: The article conducts a critical intersectional analysis using Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC). This study analyzes previous research and combines the findings from each framework.*

*Results: The research demonstrates three essential things: that systemic racism in the criminal justice system disproportionately imprisons Black women, contributing to unfavorable reentry experiences; that Black women show perseverance and opposition to carceral regimes, but their unique perspectives and agency are frequently left unattended; and that trauma is common among Black women and has an immense impact on their reentry experiences. The requirement for trauma-informed support programs is vital.*

*Conclusion: Based on the findings, a re-conceptualized reintegration support framework is presented, focusing on racial justice, gender equality, and the well-being of Black women and their families.*

**Keywords:** Black Mothers; Justice Involvement; Reentry; Mass Incarceration; Critical Race Theory (CRT); Black Feminist Theory (BFT); Trauma-Informed Care (TIC); Systemic Racism; Gender Equality; Support Programs; Intersectionality; Jail; Prison

## INTRODUCTION

Black women who are released from prison after serving time in the criminal justice system confront several hurdles as they work to reintegrate into society. These challenges extend far beyond the urgent concerns of finding housing and employment. A large proportion of women suffer from the long-term psychological consequences of incarceration, as well as the stress of strained familial connections, which are frequently the result of their involvement in the system. Traditional reintegration programs usually fail to address the intricate interplay of trauma, gender, and race that African American mothers experience after release.

A search for "court" or "jail" in this article may not produce immediate results. However, addressing Black women's reintegration experiences requires incarceration inside the criminal justice system, with an emphasis on those who are currently in prison. This emphasis is consistent with the sequential intercept model, which emphasizes Black women's disproportionate involvement in the criminal justice system at several phases (including arrest, pre-trial detention, and punishment). These various entry points may provide unique reintegration challenges.

The article recommends combining Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) as a new approach to reintegration. The goal is to create a comprehensive framework that will explore the unique obstacles that African American women confront after being released from prison, with a particular emphasis on those incarcerated in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, it provides Black women with the resources and support they require to successfully reintegrate into their communities, resulting in improved reentry outcomes. The criminal justice system frequently portrays Black men as criminals, white women as victims, and middle-class heterosexual couples as the ideal, ignoring their actual circumstances (Crenshaw, 1989; Richie, 2017). This article investigates Black women's difficulties when reintegrating into a society based on these beliefs.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A viewpoint that acknowledges the intertwined identities of black mothers, who have endured maltreatment and marginalization in the United States since 1619, when Africans were transported here against their will as part of the transatlantic slave trade, is absent. Historically and presently, recognition of the feminine attributes possessed by black women has been limited as a result of their coerced labor alongside males and the dehumanization they endured. Due to their intersectional identities, this is the case. Black women have managed to evade recognition owing to their unique attributes, which set them apart from white women, black men, and white men and have a substantial influence on their personal lives. To promote the successful reintegration of African American mothers into their communities following their release from incarceration, it is critical to address this disparity.

This article describes a novel method that uses the three theoretical approaches of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) as interconnected analytical tools to understand better the challenges and opportunities faced by black mothers during their reintegration process. By examining criminal justice reentry using these frameworks, we may acquire a better understanding of the institutional and cultural challenges that Black women face, as well as their reintegration experiences and trauma recovery concerns. We may uncover the deep and diverse aspects of Black mothers' experiences using these interconnected perspectives, opening the path for a more comprehensive and fair reintegration process.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF INTERSECTIONS

### Review of Literature

The arrival of black women in the United States commenced with their enslavement from Africa and involvement in chattel slavery, a practice that lasted from approximately 1619 until its abolition in 1865. During that era, black women were dehumanized and deprived of their femininity and the ability to become mothers; they were also forced to perform servile labor alongside males. African women continued to face dire circumstances despite the abolition of slavery, primarily attributable to the absence of legal safeguards. In contrast to white women, black women were not afforded protection against physical or sexual assault; in fact, legislative measures were implemented to penalize those who defended themselves against assailants. Black women may have been excluded from legal protections due to their disadvantaged socioeconomic status and racial prejudice, according to Hong (2018).

Nearly two centuries later, black women and their specific needs continue to merit protection or assistance. In the period following the abolition of slavery, the United States had numerous opportunities to demonstrate its support for this demographic; nevertheless, it refrained from doing so on various occasions. Despite the eradication of slavery, this intentional and persistent exclusion of aid for black women continues to this day. Numerous women from multiple ethnic backgrounds have shown their willingness to help amid the current outpouring of solidarity for the black community, as seen in organizations like Black Lives Matter. Despite the considerable attention allocated to the death of George Floyd, the neglect of law enforcement's mistreatment of black women persists.

Significant discoveries are unveiled through a comprehensive analysis of the most recent scholarly works about reentry and Black mothers. Owens (2010) employed semi-structured interviews with ten black women and three service providers who assisted in reintegrating black women into her research. One of the three advocates expressed that she had not previously contemplated the possible influence that the ethnicity of the participant might have on their reintegration process. This statement from the service provider exemplifies the mundane nature of their occupation and their disregard for the value of interpersonal engagement. In situations where professional responsibilities are inextricably linked to the success of others and require regular interactions, it is vital to have an understanding of their identities and environments to support them in attaining self-identified success.

Mitchell and Davis conducted a 2019 study in Texas that included five in-depth interviews with self-identified black mothers of young children. Each of these mothers had been released from incarceration within the previous three years. The interviews centered around the subjects' holistic viewpoints regarding maternity, their reintegration into society while under state supervision, and any challenges they faced regarding housing and employment, among other topics. Their concerns, such as the housing, education, and welfare of their children, the experience of rearing children without assistance, and the challenges they face with mental health and substance abuse, were among the topics addressed in the study's findings.

Begna Gonena et al. conducted a qualitative synthesis review in 2023 to examine the real-life challenges faced by parents who have undergone incarceration. Three recurring motifs were identified in the fourteen articles (all of which were published before January 2020) that were examined. The scholars discerned three principal themes: the resumption of motherhood following incarceration, the consequences of imprisonment on the relationship between mothers and their children, and the presence or absence of a support system and its subsequent influence on the mothers' responsibilities after their release. It is imperative to acknowledge that, while other topics were not explicitly discussed, they continue to exist. The aforementioned elements comprise the accessibility of professional support, inequitable treatment in the labor market and employment, challenges in securing housing, housing instability, and the ability to pursue additional education.

### ***Critical Race Theory (CRT)***

Despite initial disagreement, it is now commonly accepted in academia that Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as the result of the efforts of legal academics. These scholars sought to analyze the formation and representation of race and racial power within the American judicial system (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). From its beginning, Critical Race Theory has been applied in many fields, such as nursing, education, public health, and homeland security, to question the concept of colorblindness in the United States. Although there is currently no universally accepted comprehensive framework, this paper will concentrate on the five core principles of critical race theory and their role in understanding the experiences of black women involved in the justice system as they reintegrate into society.

Sule (2020) delineates the five tenets of critical race theory: (1) Racism is prevalent throughout the sociopolitical structure of the United States. (2) Policies and practices based on race are designed to benefit white people, referred to as interest convergence. (3) The phenomenon of racialization is not uniform and differs both between and within oppressed groups, a concept known as intersectionality. (4) Acknowledging the significance of the firsthand experiences of racially marginalized communities in tackling inequalities. (5) The notion of meritocracy impedes endeavors to attain social justice.

### ***Black Feminist Theory (BFT)***

A critical framework, Black Feminist Theory, assists in reorienting societal issues associated with racism, misogyny, and classism in terms of the identities of individuals. Collins (2000) posits that Black Feminist Theory purposefully amalgamates theoretical interpretations with the lived experiences of black women. Black Feminist Theory, according to Budhai and Lewis Grant (2023), consists of four tenets that they label dimensions. These dimensions function as criteria for validating knowledge. A criterion for significance, concrete experience, constitutes the initial tenet. Dialogue is the second tenet that guides the evaluation of knowledge claims. The ethics of personal accountability is the fourth tenet, while the ethics of caring is the third.

### ***Trauma Informed-Care (TIC)***

As a result of the social and political repercussions of racism, misogyny, and other forms of intersectional oppression, black women, indigenous women, and other women of color face an increased susceptibility to trauma (Bryant Davis et al., 2024). According to Greer (2023), trauma-informed care is a strategy that emphasizes a person's positive traits and is based on five core principles that support mindful, compassionate, and open care regarding expectations and boundaries. The following tenets guide the treatment process: (1) safety, (2) trustworthiness, (3) choice, (4) collaboration; and (5) empowerment. These tenets ensure that the client is protected, that their opinion is considered throughout the treatment plan, and that they have the greatest amount of autonomy possible.

## **A Framework for the Reintegration of Black Mothers: The Integration of CRT, BFT, and TIC**

The author presents a conceptual framework that synthesizes trauma-informed care (TIC), critical race theory (CRT), and black feminist theory (BFT) to comprehend and confront the unique obstacles that reintegrating Black mothers into society entails. The objective of this framework is to surpass conventional reintegration models by recognizing the intricate dynamics between trauma, ethnicity, and gender in individuals' lives. The tenets of this framework include acknowledging systemic racism, emphasizing black maternity, and comprehending the trauma that black women in the United States have experienced historically and currently.

Critical race theory (CRT) exposes the widespread racism deeply embedded in the criminal justice system, leading to a disproportionate number of Black women being imprisoned. As Crenshaw (1989) argues, racialized perceptions of crime and the concept of "dangerous motherhood" further marginalize Black mothers during the reintegration process. Intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw (1989), anti-blackness, and white supremacy, as analyzed by Gillborn (2015), provide illumination on how race, gender, and class intersect to shape the experiences of Black women in the criminal justice system.

Black Feminist Theory revolves around Black mothers' agency and lived experiences, contesting prevailing narratives that are frequently constructed in a deficiency-oriented manner (Hill Collins, 2000). Frameworks such as sisterhood (Collins, 2000), womanism (Wallace, 1993), and the Combahee River Collective statement (BlackPast, 2012) offer insights into the tenacity and resistance exhibited by African American women when confronted with oppression. Carceral feminism is subject to criticism by BFT due to its failure to adequately address the unique circumstances and requirements of Black mothers (Richie, 2012).

Black women experience a disproportionate amount of exposure to traumatic events, such as historical physical and racial trauma, racist trauma, and interactions with the criminal justice system. To effectively address the emotional and psychological challenges faced by Black mothers, reentry programs should incorporate trauma-informed care principles—including empowerment, safety, cultural sensitivity, and peer support—into their design (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). By doing so, these programs can recognize and address the historical and ongoing traumatic experiences that have befallen black women.

### **Aspects of the Framework**

The five aspects of this framework are: (1) in-reach intervention; (2) culturally responsive reentry supports and services; (3) family and community reintegration; (4) economic empowerment; and (5) advocating for policy changes.

### **Implications and Application**

By adopting an in-reach strategy, criminal justice agencies can take advantage of opportunities to integrate culturally sensitive initiatives to equip Black mothers with the necessary skills and knowledge to reintegrate into society successfully. Crucial elements of these programs include facilitating connections to support systems, promoting emotional well-being, and efficiently targeting potential barriers.

To foster cultural sensitivity, it is critical to evolve reentry services to address the unique circumstances and requirements of Black mothers specifically. This encompasses the integration of trauma-informed methodologies, the rectification of concerns regarding racial prejudice in the criminal justice system, and the provision of mental health services that are culturally sensitive.

By prioritizing family and community reintegration, potential obstacles to restoring custody can be reduced and strengthened through facilitated reunification programs. Advocate for forming community networks that provide mutual support employing mentorship programs, partnerships with African American congregations, and collaborative endeavors with social justice organizations.

Implement initiatives such as vocational training programs, seminars on financial literacy, and childcare assistance to foster economic independence and stability among African American mothers.

Social workers assume a vital function in advocating for policy reforms that seek to eradicate racial biases that are prevalent in the criminal justice system. This includes the promotion of housing equality for individuals with prior incarceration, the advocacy for reforms in sentencing, and the pursuit of eliminating employment discrimination.

## Limitations and Future Opportunities

Scholarly studies that use Critical Race Theory (CRT) frameworks shed light on the effects of racialized criminalization and stereotypes about African American mothers' experiences in the justice system and their chances of reintegration (Alexander, 2020; Wacquant, 2010). Family and community support networks are critical for promoting resilience and successful reintegration, according to research anchored in Black Feminist Theory. Research has shown that interventions that incorporate trauma-informed care (TIC) are effective in addressing trauma and facilitating rehabilitation within reintegration programs. Despite this, the current research environment has limitations—most notably, the lack of studies that concurrently employ all three frameworks. Further investigation utilizing these interrelated frameworks is crucial to acquiring a deeper awareness of the reintegration experiences of African American mothers.

This framework serves as an initial reference and necessitates continuous assessment and improvement. While Black women have a unique experience, their experience is not a monolith. The constant input of Black mothers is vital for the development and modification of the framework so that it may optimally cater to their requirements. It is recommended that combined research methods (quantitative and qualitative) be employed to evaluate the framework's efficacy in enhancing reintegration outcomes for Black mothers.

## CONCLUSION

This article proposes a new framework that integrates Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) to help Black moms reintegrate into society after release from prison. This approach acknowledges the impact of structural racial and gender inequalities in the criminal justice system, the long-term effects of trauma, and the unique challenges that Black moms face following release.

### Tackling Systemic Barriers

Critical Race Theory (CRT) reveals the presence of systematic racism that is deeply embedded in the criminal justice system. Black women are more likely to be detained, face harsher penalties, and be incarcerated for nonviolent offenses than white women. This framework promotes the elimination of discriminatory practices.

BFT recognizes the intersection of race and gender in Black women's experiences. The framework addresses the underrepresentation of Black women in the system by promoting activities that address their housing, employment, and family reunification needs.

Facilitating healing and reintegration:

The TIC (Trauma-Informed Care) approach emphasizes the need to understand and address the trauma that Black women frequently experience as a result of their involvement within the criminal justice system. This includes providing trauma-informed treatment, mental health services, and support groups to encourage healing and resilience.

The proposed framework aims to equip Black moms with tools and resources to overcome institutional barriers, recover from trauma, and successfully reintegrate into communities. This approach goes beyond addressing immediate necessities such as housing and employment, focusing on long-term human empowerment and removing institutional barriers perpetuating these obstacles.

Social workers and other professionals who work with this population can contribute to implementing this framework, advocating for policy reform, and creating a more just and equitable reintegration process for Black moms.

## NOTES

1. **Acknowledgments.** In the spirit of transparency that aligns with my values, it is important to acknowledge my positionality as a woman of African and Native American descent who grew up in low economic status along the North East and South East Coast Of the United States. It is also important to note that my professional education includes a Bachelor of Criminal Justice, a Master of Social Work, and a Doctorate of Social Work Degree that focuses on utilizing DEIPAR (Dyer & Gushwa, 2023), an evergreen diversity and social justice framework/lens. In addition to my professional experience, while training as a clinical social worker and addictions counselor, I also operationalize a third-wave behavioral therapeutic frame, ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Theory), as a foundation of engagement with others.
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