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## Collateral Consequences: the Experiences of Black Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones

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COLLATERAL CONSEQUENCES: THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN WITH  
INCARCERATED LOVED ONES

by

Keiondra Jné Grace

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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# COLLATERAL CONSEQUENCES: THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN WITH INCARCERATED LOVED ONES

Keiondra Jné Grace, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2020

A wealth of research exists that considers the causes of mass incarceration, particularly how it has shaped crime narratives and the life courses of Black men and Black women that experience imprisonment. Scholars have also explored the collateral consequences of incarceration for families and communities in general, but mentioning that Black families and communities in particular are disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration. Despite the documented impact of incarceration on families, and the acknowledgement of the toll mass incarceration has on Black communities—the social cost of mass incarceration in the lives of Black women whom have not experienced incarcerated is yet to be fully explored. This is important given that Black women often serve as primary care takers within Black communities and families (Ritchie, 2002).

Utilizing Black feminist theoretical frameworks and symbolic interactionist perspectives, the current study seeks to understand how having an immediate family member who is currently or was formerly incarcerated impacts the daily life, self-concepts, and perception of the criminal legal system for Black women. Through 20 semi-structured life history interviews, three main themes emerged. First, most of the women in the study held the self-concept of the *strongblackwoman*. This self-concept held by (and placed upon) many Black women —defined

as being motivated, hardworking breadwinners who suppress their emotional needs, while anticipating those of others—impacted the ways in which the women in this study gave and received support during the incarceration period of their loved ones. Second, most of the women held negative perceptions of the criminal legal system, often based on negative experiences with actors in the system. Finally, despite their burdened contact with the system, the women enacted agency in a multitude of ways including activism towards criminal legal system reform.

*Keywords:* Black feminist criminology; African American women; mass incarceration; collateral consequences

## DEDICATION

To my grandmother: Equilla Smith. You were part of my reason for this project. No words can express how much I miss you. Thank you for all your love, support, and encouragement. I love you. Rest in peace.

Keiondra Jné Grace

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Keiondra Jné Grace

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The United States incarceration rate is alarming. The United States locks up more people per capita than any other nation, with about 2.3 million people confined in state and federal prisons, local jails, and other forms of detention (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). Perhaps even more so alarming are the trends within the incarcerated population. The American penal system reflects extreme social and economic disparities. More than 90% of all those in prison or jail are men. While women's incarceration rates have increased more quickly than men's, with Black women being the fastest growing prison population, the overrepresentation of men in the system means that many women are being left at home to raise families (Ritchie, 2012). Further, these men tend to be poor, young, Black men of working age that are fathers (Western, 2006). Many circulate in and out of the system, which leaves many questions regarding the circumstances of their families, children, and partners.

Indeed, research shows that incarceration is concentrated among the disadvantaged (Davis, 2008). Surveys of inmates show they average less than eleven years of school, and do not have steady employment at the time of incarceration. Further as previously stated, many of these men tend to be Black. The racial differences in incarceration are harrowing. Black men are over six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men (Simms, McDaniel, Monson & Fortuny, 2013). The pathway through adulthood for Black men is vastly different from their white counterparts, with imprisonment being an expected life event for them. In fact, Black men ages 18-19 are 9.3 times more likely than white men of the same age to be imprisoned (McDaniel et. al, 2014). The demographic concentration of imprisonment produces the systematic

imprisonment of whole groups of the population which can have has detrimental effects on their families and communities.

The overall objective of this project is to center the experiences of Black women that disproportionately bear the collateral consequences of the criminal legal system. Much of the literature that exists to discuss the impact of mass incarceration on Black women lends attention to their experiences as inmates. However, as Megan Comfort (2009) contends, focusing exclusively on female inmates overlooks the daily impact of the criminal legal system in the lives of the partners, mothers, daughters, and other female kin of incarcerated people. These women also experience the consequences of incarceration, “even though they are legally innocent and dwell outside of the prison walls” (Comfort, 2009, p.7). Additionally, studies that address the collateral damage of the criminal legal system, suffer from predominately white samples, and/or lack intersectional analysis, rendering the experiences of the most disadvantaged population—Black women—at the margins of inquiry.

### **Research Questions**

The current study seeks to answer a number of questions about the experiences of Black women that serve as primary support networks for incarcerated family members. Those questions include:

1. What are the participant’s self-concepts and roles, and how have they been affected by the incarceration period (s)?
2. What coping strategies (negative or positive) do participants report using during and/or after the incarceration period(s)?
3. How has the incarceration period (s) shaped their perceptions of the criminal legal system?

## Review of Relevant Literature

Mass incarceration—the well-documented rise in US incarceration since 1974— has wide reaching impacts beyond incarcerated individuals. These impacts are often referred to as “collateral consequences” in the relevant literature. The literature regarding families of incarcerated people focuses on the negative impacts of incarceration for family members. The consequences for families with incarcerated loved ones can be especially troubling given that many of them are families with children. More than 1.7 million children, or 2.3% of the population under the age of 18, have a parent that is in prison, and millions more have parents that are in jails or under some type of correctional supervision (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

Many edited volumes, articles, and books have emerged that recognize the detrimental impact of incarceration on families (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002; Park & Clarker-Stewart, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). Many of these works categorize the consequences for families in terms of the economic, social, and emotional impacts on families. Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind (2002), for instance, have an edited volume entitled *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment* in which many authors from a variety of disciplines discuss the effect of policies that they conclude have transformed family and community dynamics. *Fractured Families* is a section within the volume that discusses a variety of issues for families from loss of income, to diminished relationships and social isolation. Also within that volume, Black feminist criminologist Beth Ritchie calls for scholars to assess the social impact of mass incarceration on women. She argues that women of color from low-income communities occupy a set of uniquely vulnerable positions when considering the social impact of mass incarceration. She maintains “the story of collateral damage is seriously incomplete without understanding the

particular ways that women are affected by mass incarceration” (2002, p.149). Most recently Rachel Condry and Peter Scharff Smith have published an edited volume entitled, *Prisons, Punishment and the Family* (2018). Their volume provides a global look at how imprisonment creates, reproduces and reinforces patterns of social inequality. The work in the volume specifically focuses on the impact of prison upon the families of offenders.

### **Economic Effects**

An overwhelming majority of work focuses on the economic burden to families of the incarcerated. Literature highlights that men from low-income communities are more likely to experience incarceration; therefore in many cases their incarceration may exacerbate the financial hardship already being experienced by families (Turanovic, Rodriguez & Pratt, 2012). One impact is the perceived loss of income from the incarcerated individual. Mumola (2000) found that close to 70% of incarcerated fathers earned income the month prior to their incarceration. Further, Arditti (2012) notes that many caregivers for incarcerated individuals’ children—primarily current and past partners—experience the loss of jobs or income due to increased responsibility for the well being of the children. Scholars also highlight new expenses that families incur with a period of incarceration, including telephone calls, postage fees for letters, travel costs for visitation, attorney fees, and money sent directly to the inmate for commissary purchases (Arditti 2012; Comfort 2014; Turanovic et al., 2012).

### **Emotional Effects**

Emotional effects are also a major theme addressed by researchers in this area. Family members experience considerable grief about the loss of the family member (Jorgenson, Hernandez & Warren, 1986). Many studies regarding the emotional effects on partners of incarcerated individuals note at the most basic level; an incarceration period can produce

depression and anxiety among partners (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002; Park & Clarker-Stewart, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). In essence, the partner and children of the incarcerated individual simultaneously start a sentence. Oftentimes the removal results in the loss of support from a partner, the need to learn about the criminal legal system, and innovation regarding new household dynamics. Many times, partners of inmates are left feeling alone and ashamed (Chui, 2009).

### **Social Effects**

Critics of mass incarceration have argued that perhaps one of the most significant social consequences of mass incarceration is the destabilization of communities (Ritchie, 2002). Literature on the collateral consequences of incarceration also notes the social effect on families and communities due to the criminalization of individuals (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2014; Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002; Schneller, 1978; Swan, 1981). The period of incarceration for families has been likened to other contexts of loss such as death or military deployment (Arditti, 2012). However, oftentimes the social acceptance of families of incarcerated individuals is not similar to the supportive and sympathetic offerings from the community and social support networks of families within these other contexts of loss. For prison spouses there are not usually casseroles or other informal recognition, government assistance, or even formal recognition that the family has sustained a significant loss that will bear heavily on their health and wellness (Arditti, 2012). This traditional lack of outreach on behalf of social networks and support systems reflects the idea that the partners and children of incarcerated individuals bear some of the blame for their loved one's criminalization. They are certainly not considered innocent by society. Comfort goes so far as to argue that a woman's personal allegiance with a prisoner sullies her with the stigma



of the offender—identifying her as “potentially threatening and deserving of recrimination” (2014, p. 63).

Scholars also state, as family members are called upon to visit inmates, pay for calls, and provide economic and social support, their relationships with the incarcerated individual can become severely strained (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2014; Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002). Oftentimes tensions arise between meeting the demands of the incarcerated individual and satisfying personal goals and objectives unrelated to the prison system for the family member (Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006). Some family members completely sever ties with the incarcerated person due to the strain, however others may maintain the contact choosing to endure the economic, emotional, and social difficulties discussed earlier (Braman, 2004; Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006). Family members are strapped with difficult decisions surrounding how to devote resources to their loved one, while developing their own strategies of resilience and agency outside of prison walls (Arditti, 2012). Navigating the challenges associated with providing support for incarcerated individuals, as well as personal marginalization and disadvantage seems to suggest that family members must employ a variety of coping mechanisms.

Some scholars argue that another part of researching the prison system and its effects is recognizing the potentially positive aspects of incarceration for family members. For example, some studies suggest that partners of incarcerated individuals experience decreased violence within the household, as well as increases in their personal self-esteem and independence (Chui, 2009; Daniel & Barrett, 1981; Jorgensen et al., 1986; Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002). Turonovich, Rodriguez, and Pratt (2012) note that assessment of how the incarcerated partner interacted with the family prior to incarceration is imperative because inmates can impact the

family in complex ways, some of which can be negative. If the family member was engaging in dangerous or reckless behavior prior to incarceration, their removal may result in more positive functioning for their partner and children. Further, Giordano (2010) found that at times family members expressed being “on guard” when their family member was not incarcerated because the inmate had violent and unstable behavior. A discussion of the potentially positive aspects of incarceration for family members is thus critical. Understanding the range of relationship dynamics can help to provide adequate support for those harmed by the criminal legal system.

While the literature on collateral consequences is vast in terms of the general financial, emotional, and social impact of incarceration for families, much of that literature lacks an assessment of the disproportionate impact these consequences have for particular families. For instance, while many major scholars in this area note that Black individuals are disproportionately impacted by incarceration in their families and communities, I found one edited volume focused exclusively on the impact of incarceration on Black families—*Impacts of Incarceration on the African American Family*— edited by Othello Harris and Robin Miller (2002). Their work brings together a variety of disciplines to discuss the economic, emotional and social consequence for Black families. They touch on the increased marginalization, as well as the emotional and economic strain of incarceration for an already marginalized group. I contend more research that captures the specific impact on Black families is necessary to develop a full picture of collateral consequences.

### **Significance of the Study**

As mentioned above, the literature surrounding the effects of incarceration on families of incarcerated individuals is broad and encompasses many aspects of the issue. Focusing on the collateral consequences of mass incarceration, many scholars have highlighted the economic

impact that incarceration has on families (Arditti, 2012; Comfort, 2014; Mumola, 2000; Turanovic et al., 2012). Further, much is known about the emotional and social impacts specifically on children, with literature highlighting feelings on a spectrum from hostility to isolation (Arditti, 2012; Braman, 2004; Chui, 2009; Comfort, 2014; Mauer & Chesney-Lind 2002; Schneller, 1978; Swan 1981). What is lesser known, is how other family members, particularly the Black mothers, partners, and confidants, are affected by incarceration. This information is an important piece to the puzzle given current research on mass incarceration and Black women. For example, Lee, McCormick, Hicken and Wildeman (2015) found that 44% of Black women have a family member who is incarcerated. This was higher than Black men (32%), White men (5%) and White women (12%). For Black women already sullied with their double status as Black and women, mass incarceration shapes their lives in multiple ways that warrant further attention in criminal justice scholarship.

With many studies noting the disproportionate impacts of incarceration for Black families and communities, studies that focus specifically on Black women are important, especially considering that Black women are often the primary caretakers in Black families and communities (hooks, 1992). Many of the most cited studies in this area have few Black women participants, yet they almost all note the need for analysis of their experiences (Arditti, 2012; Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2014). Further, it appears when studies have a sufficient number of Black women participants they fail to highlight the multilayered connections among race, gender, class and these collateral consequences. The social context of Black women's lives present unique challenges to navigating society and systems such as the criminal legal system. These multilayered impacts deserve full exploration in criminal justice scholarship.

Utilizing a Black feminist theoretical perspective moves Black women to the center of analysis. Black feminist scholars contend that much more can be understood by investigating the experiences of those that exist at the margins of society. Without Black feminist frameworks, Black women are marginalized in both research about women, which implicitly or explicitly focuses on the experiences of White women, and research about Black people which privileges the experiences of Black men (Crenshaw, 1989). The concept of intersectionality is particularly relevant in criminal justice research due to the additional subordinate status it creates for inmates or those connected to inmates, many of which already occupy subordinate statuses in society.

Additionally, the incorporation of symbolic interaction perspectives can assist with framing the experiences of these women, in regards to the outlined research questions. It can guide the exploration of potential shifting self-concepts and various role dynamics experienced due to the incarceration of a loved one. For instance, criminologists contend that at times women partners experience positive self-development with the incarceration of their loved one, including increased self-esteem/self-image and positive role shifts (Chui, 2009; Daniel & Barrett, 1981; Jorgensen et al., 1986; Mauer & Chesney-Lind 2002).

There have been numerous studies that have assessed the collateral damage of the criminal legal system for families. However, many of those studies fail to center the experiences of those most impacted by mass incarceration, Black women. As the pillars of families and communities disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration, Black women are uniquely positioned to experience these collateral damages. Therefore, theories that center their unique standpoint in society offer a privileged vantage point on the study of collateral consequences. Black feminist theoretical perspectives allow scholars to go beneath the surface of the social

world and reveal concealed relations by centering Black women's experiences and perspectives. The current study seeks to carry out this task.

### **Summary & Conclusion**

This chapter expressed the intended goals and significance of the current project. Additionally, I provided a brief overview of the literature regarding the collateral consequences of mass incarceration. In Chapter 2, I will outline the conceptual framework that will guide this work. Chapter 3 will address the methods and reasoning behind my research choices, and particulars about the sample. Chapters 4 and 5 will be devoted to answering my research questions. I will conclude, in Chapter 6, with a synthesis of my findings, contributions to the literature, limitations and future research and recommendations.

## CHAPTER II

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework for the study. First, I discuss the need for understanding Black women's experience with an incarcerated loved one. I next demonstrate the applicability of symbolic interactionist framework for understanding how individuals may negotiate their experiences with an incarcerated family member and the impact it can have on their self-perceptions, various roles and interactions with others. Finally, I argue a Black feminist framework specifically, centers the experiences of Black women, who are disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration. Additionally, I outline Black feminist theoretical contributions that demonstrate the applicability of the frameworks for the current study.

The impact of incarceration for Black communities is often a main focus of research and policy analysis within the field of criminal justice. Studies have demonstrated that the Black male incarceration rate is about 6.2 times that of their white male counterparts (Sabol, Couture & Harrison, 2007). Additionally, Black women are the fastest growing prison population in the United States, with a rate 3.1 times higher than that of white women (Sabol, Couture & Harrison, 2007). These rates have contributed to many social and moral impacts for Black communities and families (Roberts, 2004). Given this information, it appears imperative that there is focused attention on the indirect impacts of incarceration on Black families. Specifically, I contend we need to focus on Black women as caretakers for Black families.

There has been ample recognition of the gender specific experiences of incarcerated women, however scholars have expressed the need for focused attention on the impact of incarceration beyond incarcerated individuals. For example, Megan Comfort asserts the necessity for this attention for women in general in her work *Doing Time Together* (2008). She notes:

...concentrating exclusively on female convicts overlooks millions of women whose lives are directly affected by the criminal justice system on a daily basis: the wives, girlfriends, mothers, daughters, and other female kin and intimates of prisoners who, through their contact with loved ones and close associates caught in the revolving door of corrections, experience restricted rights, diminished resources, social marginalization, and other consequences of penal confinement, even though they are legally innocent and dwell outside of the prison walls. (2008, p. 7)

Lee, McCormick, Hicken and Wildeman (2015) found that 44% of Black women have a family member that is incarcerated. This means that Black women compose a significant and disproportionate percentage of those women that Comfort discussed as overlooked. Scholars contend that Black women are often called to serve as the social support system for incarcerated family members (Braman, 2004; Ritchie, 1992). Black women consequently serve as care takers for incarcerated family members' children, (Ruiz, 2002), provide places to live for formerly incarcerated family members, and experience "secondary prisonization" as they visit and care for incarcerated family (Comfort, 2003). It is important to note that Black women carry out these functions in the context of their multiply marginalized positions in society.

While many studies that address the wide reaching impact of mass incarceration have included Black women participants, work has rarely incorporated frameworks that account for the interlocking consequences of social structures in the their lives. For instance, Travis (2006), notes several ways that the lives of women in general are affected by mass incarceration, and calls for a specific research agenda around the impacts on women stating:

[A] research agenda is needed that is woman-centered, not offender centered, and not even woman-offender-centered. The era of mass incarceration has profoundly changed the dynamics of human development, male-female relationships, and the roles of women, and we need a research frame that captures these broad effects. (Travis, 2006, p. 130)

Travis provides a solid starting point for the varied ways incarceration impacts the lives of women, but using an intersectional framework can uncover the unique effect that mass incarceration has on Black women specifically, due to their position in society (Collins, 2008).

Black feminist theory, and its use of intersectionality, provides an appropriate framework for understanding these experiences in the context of Black women's lives. Intersectionality—understood as the overlapping nature of social structures—captures Black women's experiences without assigning them to either race or gender categories. It highlights that Black women's experiences must be understood in terms of the multiplicative nature of their multiple identities. Without an intersectional framework, Black women become marginalized in research about women, which tends to center the experiences of White women, and research about Black people, which often privileges the experiences of Black men (Crenshaw, 1989).

Over the last two decades feminist scholars—particularly women of color—have advocated for an intersectional approach to studying the lives and experiences of women. However, intersectionality continues to be a neglected topic in criminal justice research and policy due in part to the white male dominated nature of the field and the seemingly complex nature of the concept. Additionally, intersectionality explicitly acknowledges marginalization and challenges individuals to uncover the ways social structure influences the lives, and constraints the choices of individuals (Christian & Thomas, 2009). Later in this chapter I will clearly discuss intersectionality and its applicability to the project.

Western (2006) provides a good example of the ways that intersectional analysis can be applied in criminal justice scholarship, focusing on the ways that racism and other structural disadvantages interact to filter Black people—specifically those with limited education—into the prison system. Western (2006) demonstrates how the lives of Black men are impacted on many levels including future employment opportunities and marriageability. The incorporation of class factors—operationalized as educational attainment—helps to further the claim that imprisonment has created a unique form of stratification within Black communities. Western's work



demonstrates the nuances that can be uncovered when using intersectional frameworks for understanding mass incarceration and the consequences it has in the lives of individuals.

While criminal justice scholarship has expanded to include the experiences of women—thanks to the scholarship of feminist criminologists—and the impact of mass incarceration in the lives of Black men, the specific experiences of Black women continue to garner limited attention outside of Black feminist scholarship (Ritchie, 1996, 2012; Potter, 2008). Exploring and understanding the various impacts of mass incarceration for Black women is a logical step in criminal justice scholarship given the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration in their lives. Utilizing Black feminist theories, and symbolic interactionism perspectives of self as the conceptual framework for the proposed study can help to elucidate the social impact of mass incarceration on Black women that have incarcerated loved ones.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism (SI) is a valuable perspective for the phenomenon under study. The relationship between individuals and their surrounding societal contexts has been a central theme of sociology and social psychology since the publication of George H. Mead's *Mind, Self & Society* (1934). Symbolic interactionist viewpoints often prioritize the role of social structural forces in shaping people's identities and self-concepts. They often emphasize the ways agency is enacted by individuals to define selfhood and negotiate their actions. Such a perspective is paramount to this study for understanding how Black women negotiate their experiences with an incarcerated family member and the impact it has on their self-perceptions, various roles, and interactions with others.

According to Mead, the self is constructed through social experience and activity. Essentially, people develop their self-concept through role taking, or how they think others

perceive them. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the choices that individuals make are always linked to social structure and constraints, and the meaning they give to their choices and behaviors exist within these structures. In other words, people make choices based on how they understand their roles, contexts and interactions with others. Therefore individuals' subjective descriptions and interpretations of their lived experiences provide important insights into understanding the evolution of self and its dialectical connection to the social world. Black women are particularly cognizant of how society views them and their family. Black feminist theory (discussed in the next section) helps us to understand the ways in which Black women are acutely aware of their position in society. These views are complicated by incarceration, resulting in additional stigmatized identities, even for those outside the prison walls.

Erving Goffman is another notable scholar within the symbolic interactionist perspective. Goffman (1959) explains how the self consists of the multiplicity of roles performed in different situated contexts. This work is important for understanding role changes given incarcerated contexts. Additionally, Goffman's concept of stigma is highly utilized in collateral consequence literature and can help explain the experiences of the population under study. Goffman (1963) discusses the devaluation of identity that occurs when experiencing stigmatized conditions, such as incarceration. Stigma refers to a special kind of gap between what he terms "virtual social identity" and "actual social identity", describing stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1963, p.3). The assigned attribute reduces a person in the minds of others "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p.3). Goffman categorizes individuals' relation to stigma into three categories— 1) those that bear the stigma, 2) 'normals' who do not bear the stigma, and 3) the wise - "persons who are normal but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized

individual and sympathetic with it” (1963, p.28). The wise category encompasses family members. Goffman states:

“ the individual[s] who is related through the social structure to a stigmatized individual—a relationship that leads the wider society to treat both individuals in some respects as one. Thus the loyal spouse of the mental patient, the daughter of the ex-con, the parent of the cripple, the friend of the blind, the family of the hangman, are all obliged to share some of the discredit of the stigmatized person to whom they are related. (1963, p.30)

The concept of stigma lends support for research on the effects of incarceration on family members. Goffman indicates that those that feel stigmatized may feel that others do not accept them, or treat them as inferior. They experience feelings of shame, isolation and fear of discovery. These feelings directly impact the self; therefore assessment of these concepts for family members is important, and presents a gap in the current literature. Stigmatized individuals may feel the need to constantly engage in impression management, or management of image in certain social contexts, such as incarceration.

As illustration, Megan Comfort (2008) found that prison wives experience what she coined *secondary prisonization*, which is the idea that prison contact profoundly changes the social life of partners. She found that the women in her study provided tremendous support for their partners so as to mitigate the deprivations of prison, including forfeiting their own privacy, depleting their already limited resources, and jeopardizing their emotional well-being. She argues that these impacts, as well as the positive changes in self for family members, needs to be explored at greater length within the literature. While a wealth of scholars focus on how families navigate stigma—often focusing on lying about an inmate’s actual whereabouts to save face—less is known about their resilience. Black women experiencing the incarceration of family members serve as a good sample population for the exploration of these concepts considering their already stigmatized identities and adoption of strength images. Black feminist theory will

be discussed in the next section. This perspective allows for the centering of Black women's experiences in terms of the research study.

### **Black Feminist Theory**

Black feminism allows for Black women to examine how the many issues that they face are a part of the liberation struggles of women globally. Feminism is often viewed within society as the cultural property of white women, due to the fact that white women have historically accepted segregated institutions, including feminist organizations (Collins, 1989). Despite the lack of inclusion that Black women experienced in feminist movements historically, Black women continually challenged the assumptions of mainstream feminist movements in order to create more inclusive frameworks to account for their lived experience. Additionally Black women have also experienced marginalization in struggles for Black liberation leading to their organizing on behalf of their race and gender identities.

Around the 1980s, with women's growing access to higher education, Black women writers and literacy critics began to theorize about gender in historical and contemporary contexts (Taylor, 1998). They saw the importance of demonstrating their reality through writing and distributing their work in an effort to speak for themselves (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). This collective scholarship—which also consists of highlighting the scholarship of Black women in the eras before—expressed something in addition to the collective standpoint Black woman engaged in through feminist efforts. According to Collins:

Black feminist thought represents a second level of knowledge, furnished by experts who are part of a group and who express the groups standpoint...black feminist thought articulates the taken for granted knowledge of African American women, it also encourages all black women to create new self-definitions that validate a black women's standpoint. (1989, p.750)

Collins sought to articulate the collective consciousness that Black women have been demonstrating throughout history with their activism and scholarship, and believed that Black women scholars were best positioned to tell these stories.

Collins landmark book *Black Feminist Thought* (2008) outlined the connection of activism and theory in the lives of Black women. Collins outlines core themes that can be seen in the lived experience of Black women forming a collective standpoint—the interconnectedness of race, class and gender oppression in Black women’s lives; the need to reject typical stereotypes of Black women and internalize positive self images; and the importance of active struggle to resist oppression and realize individual as well as group empowerment (Collins, 2008). Collins contends that Black feminist theory is necessary—despite its suppression within and outside of the academy— because “social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from service in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice” (Collins, 2008, p.11). Following from Collins theorizing, Black women intellectuals—utilizing Black feminist theory—seek to reclaim Black women’s subjugated knowledge, and highlight Black women’s collective standpoint. Collins is careful to note that there is no one homogenous standpoint; rather “the Black women’s collective standpoint is characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges” (Collins, 2008, p.32).

***Intersectionality*** Black feminist theory goes beyond the recognition of differences and similarities among women and examines the position of people in terms of the “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2008). The matrix of domination is a concept first introduced by Patricia Hill Collins, which draws attention to the complexity of privilege and oppression as they operate in social systems and the lives of individuals. Collins contends that various forms of

privilege/oppression —race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.—do not exist independently in the social world or in people’s experiences, but are interconnected in ways that can pose unique challenges for people. It is essentially impossible to pay attention to one form of privilege without paying attention to its connections to others. For example, rather than starting with gender and adding other systems of oppression in the lives of individuals, such as race, sexuality and class separately, Black feminist thought—through the matrix concept—understands these systems are parts of one overarching structure of domination (hooks, 1984).

Social structures such as race, class, and gender are viewed as interlocking in Black feminist thought, which expands the focus of analysis from mere descriptions of similarities and differences between people, to understanding the ways they constrain agency. In order to understand the multiple systems constitutive of the matrix of domination, Black feminists have developed the concept of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality emphasizes the mutually constitutive nature of inequalities, which shape a person’s social location (Collins, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989). Race, class, and gender are the salient intersections analyzed in most Black feminist scholarship, however some scholars note that other locations of inequality (i.e. ability, nationality, sexuality) are always equally as important for analysis.

The term “intersectionality” continues to be ambiguous in the literature. It has come to be understood as “the interaction between race, class, gender and other locations of inequality in individuals lives, social practices institutional arrangements and cultural ideologies and the outcome of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), “intersectionality” was meant to capture the experiences of Black women that were traditionally lost due to the assumptions inherent in the women’s and civil rights movement; that all women are white, and all Blacks are men. Crenshaw coined the term in her

1989 piece, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”. Within that article, Crenshaw recounted an encounter with a Black woman that felt she was discriminated against because a manufacturing plant hired white women for secretarial positions or Black men for janitorial tasks, but as a Black woman there was no fit for her, and thus she was not hired. Essentially, intersectionality approaches gender and other social divisions as articulated through other salient dimensions of difference such as race and class. Crenshaw’s initial work highlights the unique challenge that Black women face in trying to prove the discrimination they experience. The discrimination is usually based on their race *and* gender, but at the time anti-discrimination law did not recognize, what it contends as compound classes— being both Black and female (Crenshaw, 1989). Additionally Crenshaw’s scholarship demonstrates how elucidating the voice of this one woman in turn highlights the collective complex existence of Black women as a group.

Intersectionality has been positioned within feminist theory for the purpose of elucidating the voices of those in the most oppressed positions. Hancock (2009) and McCall (2001) highlight the importance of studying multiply marginalized groups. Hancock emphasizes “multiple intersections” and McCall uses “intra-categorical” approaches, which focus on the different and unique experiences of subgroups within categories, such as Black women within women. This means it is true that all women share a standpoint unique to women, but Black women specifically have a shared worldview due to their position at the margins of society and their gender as racialized (Collins, 2008). Furthermore, comparisons to white women and Black men to understand the discrimination, unequal treatment, and violence Black women experience as

*Black women*, is not enough because it does not take into consideration the intersections of their experience (Crenshaw, 1989).

***Controlling Images*** Collins (2008) argues that the placement of groups within the matrix of domination is justified through the use of controlling images. Controlling images can be understood as representations of subordinate groups that guide the behavior of individuals as well as other's interactions with these group members. Controlling images serve to constrain how groups are viewed by others, but can also be internalized among these groups and influence their self-perceptions. Images constructed for particular groups establish their positions in relations to power. Controlling images are generalized representations about a group, however the concept pushes analysis a step further to assume these images are purposively created in order to police marginalized groups and limit their empowerment (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009).

Controlling images establish the subordination of groups that are not deemed normative. Bem asserts that controlling images are the ideological glue that secures the matrix of domination and its goal of reproducing "rich, white, Christian, male, heterosexual power" (1995, p.46). Through the use of controlling images, those with hegemonic power are able to construct the representations of oppressed groups, distorting objective social relations. Intersectional approaches can reveal the ways in which gender has been racialized in the United States, allowing for an understanding of the experiences of Black women. Specifically centered on the current project, recognition of Black women's adoption of these images can serve to uncover how they impact self-image, societal views, and the wellbeing of their families.

Black women have always been depicted as less than human in society, originating as a justification for chattel slavery and the various abuses that were present within it. The characterization of Black women as exceptional creatures has, and continues to, aid in the



justification for the social abuses against them. Exploitation of this group has resulted in the construction of controlling images meant to police their bodies and justify their mistreatment. Black women constantly face negative stereotypes in the media and society. Nikol Alexander posits that Black women are the “ultimate outsiders” of society (1995, p. 15) and “perhaps the most consistently marginalized segment of our society in terms of economic and political power” (1995, p. 6).

Collins (2008) discusses controlling images of Black women as “matriarchs”, “mammies”, “jezebels”, “welfare queens”, and “hoochies” and how these images have led to the policing of Black women’s bodies and justification for social abuse. Many Black feminist scholars have contributed to the literature on controlling images and their effect on Black women. They have noted that with time these images evolve; however their purpose and underlying assertions remain constant. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) asserts that Black women are just trying to navigate society effectively despite the burdens and stereotypes placed upon them. Two specific, widely studied, and accepted, controlling images of Black women relevant to the current study are that of the matriarch, and the mammy—which has evolved into the image of the *strongblackwoman*. These images can act to mask the social abuse Black women experience at the hands of their families and the criminal legal system.

The matriarchy idea dates back to Frazier (1939) who described it as maternal-led households with absent husbands. Frazier contended that due to the absence of the male in the household, Black women grew strong, self-reliant, and achievement oriented. Frazier (1939) noted that this process occurred during slavery, wherein Black women learned self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and a familiarity with playing the dominant role in marital and family relations. While originally used to describe women in father-absent families, the matriarch has come to be

characterized as negative and emasculating of Black men. The positive survival attributes noted by Frazier morphed into negative perceptions, most notably used to disparage Black women as emasculating, obnoxious, and undesirable (Harris-Perry, 2011). In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, through his report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, promulgated the idea that the problems in inner city communities (i.e. Black communities) was the result of a tangled pathology perpetrated by unmarried mothers. The report stated that Black families were disorganized, ensnared in absolute poverty, and subject to deviant gender norms essentially due to their own behaviors. He argued that high rates of divorce, separation, and desertion led to the high rates of female-headed households in Black communities, and the overuse of social welfare programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC formerly ADC) by these communities.

Ultimately, the Moynihan report viewed Black women as a social threat, and guilty of raising criminals and urban underclass citizens. Thus issues of poverty, joblessness, and crime in some Black communities became the burden of Black women. The acceptance and dissemination of the report gave validation to the controlling image of the matriarch (and the controlling images of the welfare queen) without critical analysis of long-standing exploitative economic policies and practices on the part of the government and social actors. This image can easily be linked to the discussion of mass incarceration, as the issues of urban environments often lead to incarceration for Black individuals, and the image of female-headed households—as matriarchs and welfare queens—compose the collective vision of poor Black women in these communities.

The controlling image of Mammy was constructed in the 1830s as that of a contented slave who expressed gratitude to her white owners (Collins, 2008). Mammy presented whites with a distorted sentimental view of societal relations during slavery by presenting a redeeming

assessment of Black womanhood as hardworking, powerless, and committed to white rule (Harris-Perry, 2011). The construction of Mammy was intended to create contented subordination among Black people. Mammy, as a Black woman, knew her place and helped to regulate the “good” behavior of other slaves through her disciplined, caretaking, and hard working nature. Mammy was often presented in media and entertainment as a short, dark-skinned, smiling, diligent and asexual being (Harris-Perry, 2011).

Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) contends that the image of Mammy has been modernized to express good Black womanhood, or respectability, in terms of the *strongblackwoman*. Hip-Hop feminist Joan Morgan combines the words strong, black, and woman in her text *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999), to highlight the myth within the image of Black women as always strong and self-sacrificing. No longer relegated to domestic service, employed Black women are often treated as modern-day mummies, expected to perform “emotion work” (Hoschild, 1979) and praised for their caring, selfless nature and acceptance of the status quo (Collins, 2008). Omolade (1994) coined the term “mammification” to refer to the interactional dynamics that force Black women to assume status-reassuring deference to whites, particularly in the workplace. Additionally hooks contends:

Racist and sexist assumptions that Black women are somehow “innately” more capable of caring for others continues to permeate cultural thinking about Black female roles. As a consequence, Black women in all walks of life, from corporate professionals and university professors to service workers, complain that colleagues co-workers and supervisors, etc. ask them to assume multi-purpose caretaker roles, be their guidance counselors, nannies, therapists, priests; i.e. to be that all nurturing “breast”—to be the mammy. (1992, p.154)

Often this emotion work is expected without added benefit; Black women’s success and abilities are regarded in terms of the ability to carry out these tasks in addition to work responsibilities, all without complaint or disruption of workplace power dynamics (Omolade, 1994). Black women’s work in these roles is often regarded as essential to the function of the workplace, but they are often relegated to relative powerlessness in these spaces.

**Strength** A common thread between both the matriarch and the mammy/*strongblackwoman* is the idea of strength. Since slavery, the representations of Black women, both negative and positive, have revolved around a social order built on their ability for hard work and resilience, yet relative powerless status in the social order (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Notions of Black womanhood have been constructed as opposite of white women, whom are presented as beautiful, virtuous, dainty, and fragile (Davis, 2008). An intersectional analysis reveals the racialized nature of gender and how it has reproduced a spectrum where proposed White and Black womanhood are anchored extremes. Controlling images help to uphold this idea and regulate Black women's bodies. However, at the same time, the idea of the *strongblackwoman* is embraced as a powerful cultural signifier, viewed in Black communities as a "link to generations of Black women who have overcome adversity, slavery and racism" (Edge & Rodgers, 2005, p.22). It has come to be fiercely claimed by Black women in the face of attempts to erase cultural uniqueness through unfavorable comparisons to white women. Additionally, outside of Black women, society has adopted strength as a general consensus regarding what makes Black women special in our society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009).

Sheila Radford-Hill (2002) argues that Black mothers of the 1970s reimaged the *strongblackwoman* controlling image in an effort to construct and pass down a self-concept for their daughters that would allow them to navigate the racism and sexism they would surely experience. This reimagining consisted of messages that would equip these young Black girls with "the capacity to build a self concept that could withstand male rejection, economic deprivation, crushing family responsibilities, and countless forms of discrimination" (Radford-Hill, 2002, p. 1086). This conceptualization of the *strongblackwoman* was to be absent of "false promises and unrealistic expectations" that the image evoked of Black women past. Through this analysis, the

image appears to be a culturally generated measure for protecting Black women against the structural barriers that inform their position in the matrix. It stands as an alternative to mainstream constructions of femininity for white women, given the lack of access granted Black women. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafont states:

Determination, caring, the ability to manage adversity and a defined and resilient sense of self are qualities that Black girls and women see widely exemplified by the women closest to them and which they subsequently value as positive marks of distinction over others, especially white women. (2009, p.26)

It can be seen that strength has become a naturalized part of Black women's self-concept and Black women's identity in their communities and society.

***Familial Roles & Caretaking*** While the roles of Black women in cross-race interactions, particularly in the workplace, have been discussed previously, the exploitation of Black women's labor exists within Black communities and families as well. Black feminist scholar Michele Wallace (1978) in her contested work, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, was one of the first scholars to advance the notion that strength in this context was problematic. She cited it as a myth whose uncritical acceptance valorized unequal social conditions as the unavoidable, yet glorified fate of Black women. She argued that strength was a story of Black women told from the point of view of Black and white men, whom had a vested interest in maintaining patriarchy, rendering Black women capable, yet docile. Wallace asserted that claims of strength did nothing to critically assess the enormity of the conditions that Black women were facing in their communities, particularly conditions of overwork, distress, and discontent (Wallace, 1978).

The critiques advanced by Wallace (1978) were motivated by her own resistance to white femininity and Black feminine "strength", as well as the desire to refute the work of Daniel Moynihan (1965). As discussed previously, this report gave life to the matriarch stereotype portraying Black women, specifically Black mothers, as solely responsible for the emotional development of Black men and children with no attention to the economic policies and

subsequent structural disadvantages created by the US social structure. Essentially, Black women were accused of undermining the integrity of normative patriarchal families. It would seem that the idea of the matriarch may still persist in Black communities and society at large given the steady rise of incarceration and exacerbated issues in these communities.

Unfortunately the patriarchal family mode resonated within Black communities, and the report validated this male-centered appeal, and created a false notion of assault on Black manhood by Black women (Richardson, 2003). In order to establish Black people as morally fit for full citizenship, Black women were expected to adopt roles as patient, faithful wives and good self sacrificing mothers, which advanced the male centeredness that long existed within Black communities. This focus can be seen in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement but is exceptionally well documented in the Black Power movements of the 1970s, which followed the Moynihan report. The emergence of Black Power rhetoric brought about a masculinized discourse and practices that led to the silencing and minimizing of Black women's roles in the movement (Davis, 2008).

For instance, according to the nationalist sentiments of the Black power movement and subsequently the Black Panther party, the truly "revolutionary" role of Black women was a supportive one in which they kept the house while the Black man kept revolution and reclaimed his public manhood (Giddings, 1984). The masculinity demonstrated in Black Nationalist rhetoric has been explained by Black feminist scholars as a response to the Black matriarchy theory put forth in the 1965 Moynihan report (Giddings, 1984; Roth 2004). The attack of the Black family put forth through the state with that report had a devastating effect on the relationships of Black men and women. Noted Black feminist scholar Angela Davis served as a

public presence within Black Nationalist organizing of the late 1960s, however she noted the ill relationship of men and women in militant organizations caused her to leave the movement:

I was criticized very heavily, especially by male members of [Ron] Karenga's [US] organization, for doing a "man's job." Women should not play leadership roles, they insisted. A woman was to "inspire" her man and educate his children (Giddings 1984, p.316).

The quote delivered by Davis at an organizing event in San Diego highlights the tenuous relationship between Black women and Black men. Additionally it demonstrates the tone and the backstage caretaking roles Black women were expected to serve within liberation movements and many Black communities in general.

Similar to Davis, many Black feminist scholars argue that a gender silence exists within Black communities, which leads to systemic and culturally approved abuses of Black women's concern for others and their hard work (Gillespie, 1984). Scholars argue that this gender silence, or neglect of gendered issues in Black communities is especially clear in discussions about strong Black mothers. The use of epic materialism, or self sacrificing mothers that give to their children and communities, making "a way outa no way" fails to tell the entire experience of Black women, and their experiences with inequality (Jordan, 1983). Black women who adopt these roles are hindered in their ability to be aware of and contest the "inequitable care responsibilities, lack of reciprocity in relationships, and abuses suffered" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p.32). Inherently, strength becomes a way to normalize sexism within Black communities.

Wallace (1978) argues, through the use of vivid examples, that words such as "strong" when applied to the disadvantaged circumstances of Black women strategically work to minimize outrage about their circumstances, absolve society from guilt, and render assistance unnecessary. The application of this image virtually hides the underlying conditions by avoiding questions that ask about social structural issues that produce the need to be resilient or strong against certain circumstances. Gillespie illustrates this point, stating:

Think about it: how many times have you heard the term applied to a woman whose life no rational person would choose in a million years? Some sister struggling under an impossible load, who'd love to be able to shrug her shoulders or at least have a few other shoulders to share the burden with. "That's a strong Black woman," someone will say in a solemn, near-reverent tone that is usually followed by a moment of silence. It's almost as if one were judging a performance instead of empathizing with her life. As a result, her complexities, pain and struggle somehow made mythic... (1978, p.33).

Gillespie implicates strength in Black women's devaluation. She points out that the image of strength tends to reduce Black women to less than human, rendering them into spectacles expected to be "de mule uh de world" (Hurston, 1937). Unlike conventionally feminine women who get to be prized, pedestaled, and enjoy various race and class privileges, the strong Black woman is a "female Atlas" (Gillespie, 1978, p.32), expected to carry the weight of the world on her sturdy shoulders. She is endowed with qualities that allow her to overcome her exploitation because she is superwoman. She cannot be victimized and does not suffer under even the most extreme circumstances. Black women are not seen sympathetically as persons to be assisted, understood, or protected.

Appeals to the strength of Black women do not challenge established social order; rather they maintain Black women's positions in the matrix of domination. In fact, Gillespie (1978) asserts that if Black women challenge the imperative for strength as a component of Black womanhood then the stability of the matrix of domination is threatened. Black women have assumed this glorified vision of strength, and thus the variance of their emotions towards being unappreciated and devalued (as mothers, caretakers, and problem solvers in their communities) have been silenced. Collins (2008) argues that too often Black women's strength is called upon to compensate for men's lack of accountability to the women and children in their lives. As a result, Black women's strength is often measured by their ability to "absorb mistreatment" within their families and community institutions (Collins, 2005). In regards to the current study, it is important to assess if the participants have taken on more roles and work in their family to fill the gap of their loved one, and if their adoption of these roles led itself to discussions of strength.



I would assume that through the life histories of these women, I would find strength components as well as minimization of their need to take on new roles. Additionally, I contend they will believe they are solely responsible for maintaining support with little support themselves formally or informally.

Critiquing the role of the *strongblackwoman*, and the family and care responsibilities of Black women is not a devaluation of the work Black women do for their communities and families. Rather critical assessment of the idea of strength in the lives of Black women uncovers questions about their unequal roles and the way sexism and racism restrict these loads to Black women. Self-sacrifice has become an underlying requirement for good Black womanhood, which is not reflective of “self love nor strength” (hooks, 2001, p.39), but rather an indicator that the humanity, complexity, and agency of Black women is denied under the illusion of their exceptional strength (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). The theme of Black women’s roles given mass incarceration is interesting to assess in conjunction with controlling images.

***Agency and Resilience*** Martin (2003, p.57) argues that the success of the *strongblackwoman* discourse does not become evident simply when it is experienced as a set of expectations and practices imposed on Black women, but rather when it effortlessly shapes their thinking and behavior “from the inside”. Martin’s assertion captures the place of agency in the discussion of the *strongblackwoman*. Individuals are not simply recipients of structural forces or controlling images, they are active agents that negotiate meaning and resist structural constraints. Looking at the context of collateral consequence, Black women have adopted roles as support networks and caretakers for these incarcerated family members. Giddens (1979) argues that the relation between social structure and individuals is dialectic, with social structure both constraining and enabling individual agency. Diane Wolf (1992) explains that agency is the

reaction to structural constraints, and takes various forms including resistance, defiance, accommodation, passivity and withdrawal. Much gender scholarship focuses on how structural forces place women in disadvantageous positions that constrain their choices. I contend that the choices made by Black women with incarcerated family members are heavily constrained and influenced by the criminal legal system.

Some early scholars, such as Michele Wallace (1979) who focused on the *strongblackwoman* in the lives of Black women, painted a bleak picture of the agency Black women have under controlling images. Wallace argued that Black women and girls taken in by the discourse became disconnected from their violations, vulnerabilities, and the overall costs and conditions of their much prized survival. She contends that Black women and girls become complacent in their mistreatment under the strength discourse, due to the internalized subordination through “the myth of the superwoman” (Wallace, 1979, p.105). Without access to privileged identities of race, class, and gender, poor Black women and girls are not afforded protections and recognition as inherently valuable and worthy of demonstrating the range of their emotions.

Despite the lack of critical engagement with the dialectical relationship between social structure and the individual from Wallace (1979), other Black feminists have attempted to address the relational nature and complex relationship individual Black women have with controlling images, particularly the *strongblackwoman* (Hine, 1989; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Darlene Clark Hine put forth the concept of dissemblance, understood as a general strategy of the oppressed to “accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle” (Hine, 1989, p. 915). Hine contends that Black women, to protect the sanctity of their inner lives, purposely constructed the

image of strength. Black women “crafted the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma” (Hine, 1979, p.915) in order to navigate the intersectional dynamics of racism, sexism, and classism.

Dissemblance allows us to understand how Black women enact agency against social structures. This concept centers Black women within the symbolic interactionist viewpoint. Black women did not possess the power to eradicate the negative images of them, therefore in the face of these pervasive images, such as the matriarch and the mammy; they collectively created alternative self-images that allowed them to function. Hine (1989) notes:

A secret, undisclosed persona allowed the individual Black woman to function, to work effectively as a domestic in white households, to bear and rear children, to endure the frustration-born violence of frequently under- or unemployed mates, to support churches, to found institutions, and to engage in social service activities, all while living within a clearly hostile white, patriarchal, middle-class America” (Hine, 1989, p.916).

The idea of dissemblance continues to be relevant in the lives of Black women. For instance Jones and Shorten-Gooden developed the concept of “shifting” to explain the ways in which Black women enact strategic self-presentation. “To counter the myths and manage direct acts of discrimination Black women endlessly compromise themselves to put other people at ease, counteract the misperceptions and stereotypes, and deflect the impact of those hostilities on their lives and the lives of their mates and children” (Jones and Shorten-Gooden, 2003, p.63). Essentially, shifting is an exhausting use of dissemblance, where Black women are constantly aware of the self-presentation with others. These concepts can be understood as intentional “impression management” (Goffman, 1959).

Unfortunately the need to navigate these systems (race, class, gender), utilizing tools like dissemblance take a toll on Black women’s health and wellness. Sociologist Kesho Scott maintains that these tactics have become “unexamined and unquestioned traditions” (1991, p.8) because Black women have been conditioned to see themselves as charged with maintaining

their families and communities. They have adopted strength as a way to enact agency over their circumstances, however adoption of the *strongblackwoman* as the mandate for good Black womanhood leads to the denial of pain, vulnerability and suffering that Black women endure at the hands of society and their communities. The paradox is that this denial is often viewed as for the benefit of society and their communities. The *strongblackwoman* has become synonymous with Black womanhood and this discourse, at its premise, demonstrates the intersectional problems that Black women face “are not grounds for social outrage but acceptable tests of individual mettle” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009, p. 42). Living under the controlling image of the *strongblackwoman*, and enacting the perpetual impression management of dissemblance and shifting, creates silence in and about the lives of Black women and the conditions they face.

### **Summary & Conclusion**

This chapter reviews the conceptual framework for my study. I argue that using a Black feminist framework aids in uncovering the complex intersections of race, class, and gender, within the context of mass incarceration for Black women. This framework centers the experiences of Black women who, through their positions in society, disproportionately shoulder these consequences. Feminist scholars note that centering the experiences of the most marginalized offers a privileged vantage point for exploration of social phenomenon. Additionally, symbolic interactionist perspectives provide a valuable framework for understanding the meaning these women give to their experiences and the adoption of self-concepts such as the *strongblackwoman*. These frameworks can also aid in assessing how these women navigate social structures through the enactment of their agency and resilience.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

I begin this chapter with a discussion of my position as a researcher. Given my methodological approach, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, it is important to discuss the bias that can arise based on my social identities. Next, I reiterate the goals of this research and questions for investigation. I then move into a discussion of phenomenological, feminist and symbolic interactionist approaches used for data collection and analysis. From here I outline my research design, including the use of life history method, access and recruitment, sampling techniques, and data analysis. I conclude with a discussion of ethical considerations.

#### **Position as a Researcher**

Feminist research expects the researcher to identify their position in terms of the research (Potter, 2013). A major feminist criticism of traditional male dominated research is the emphasis on objectivity—the idea that the researcher must distance themselves from their research subjects in order to find the truth about what they seek to understand. Harding (1987) points out that researchers cannot completely ignore their subjectivity, and by trying to do so they will ignore how their biases, emotions, and assumptions become part of the study. Further, the idea of value free research is not valid according to feminist researchers, especially considering that traditionally, science has largely excluded marginalized individuals.

As a Black woman, I believe I occupy a position that allowed for the participants to have a certain level of comfort with me due to our shared race and gender status. Patricia Hill Collins stated, “Black women intellectuals best contribute to a Black women’s group standpoint by using their experiences as situated knowers” (2008, p.22). Therefore, “In terms of Black women’s relationships with one another, African-American women may find it easier than others to

recognize connectedness as a primary way of knowing, simply because we have more opportunities to do so and must rely upon it more heavily than others” (Collins, 1990, p.260).

The sentiments of Collins were witnessed during the study. At many times throughout, I shared similar experiences and perspectives with my participants. As will be discussed later, a collective standpoint emerged from the various independent interviews.

In addition to shared identity aspects, I also personally have experience with incarcerated loved ones. While I have not experienced the incarceration of an immediate family member, like the women in this study, I have had two uncles that have been incarcerated. I remember my grandmother waiting by the phone on certain days and at certain times to receive a phone call from my uncle. I also remember discussions between my aunt and other adult family members about the stress of not having my uncle present on holidays. Additionally, my other uncle has expressed the many barriers he faced as a convicted felon, in particular the complicated relationships it produced with his daughters. In all of these experiences, the most salient aspect was the indirect toll on my grandmother, aunt, and cousins who were also pained, although they were not sentenced for a crime.

In addition, I have studied criminal justice for the past 10 years. My decision to pursue a degree in criminal justice originated from my desire to help my community. The disproportionate criminalization of Black men is a major topic of discussion within Black communities. I believed at 18, being a criminal defense attorney would allow me to impact change. Rather than attend law school, my educational trajectory has taken me through graduate school. Throughout my development as a scholar and Black feminist, I routinely interrogate the criminal legal system and have theorized better avenues for change that will lead to abolishing the system.

However, I also value providing immediate assistance to those most impacted. I have become involved with many different organizations and individuals dedicated to meeting the needs of those impacted by the criminal legal system. For example, I currently volunteer with a local organization that provides employment skills and services to formerly incarcerated women. I have also been involved with a governing team in my community tasked with creating wrap around services in Kalamazoo for returning citizens. Additionally, I was a filing clerk and teaching assistant for the Wrongful Conviction program at Western Michigan University. That program allowed students to examine the criminal documents of individuals that believed they had been wrongfully convicted of a crime. The program sought to exonerate as many of these individuals as possible.

My work within these organizations allowed me to understand the services that exist for formerly incarcerated populations. While still a work in progress, there are many agencies that provide services for those who have faced incarceration, specifically men. However, I seldom hear discussions about the informal support networks of these individuals. I think about my grandmother who would not leave the house on days that my uncle usually called, or my aunt that had to raise her son without his father during formative years. Additionally, I think about the fact that many of the emergency contacts for the inmates involved in the Wrongful Conviction Program were mothers, wives, female partners, sisters, and daughters. As a Black feminist, I am committed to other Black women, and I believe that their experience supporting incarcerated loved ones deserves recognition and support.

### **Research Goal & Questions**

The overall goal of this study was to highlight the experiences of Black women that bear the burden of collateral consequences of incarceration. Much of the empirical literature that

exists to discuss the impacts of mass incarceration on Black women deals with their direct experiences with incarceration, as opposed to their experiences dealing with the effects of an incarcerated family member. Research questions included:

1. What are the participant's self-concepts and roles, and how have they been affected by the incarceration period (s)?
2. What coping strategies (negative or positive) do participants report using during and/or after the incarceration period(s)?
3. How has the incarceration period (s) shaped their perceptions of the criminal legal system?

### **Methodological Framework**

The methodological approach to the current study is framed by Black feminism (specifically intersectionality and standpoint theory), phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism. The feminist nature of research can be seen in the overall purpose of the research, how it was designed and implemented, and the subject matter that is being addressed. Feminist research is a “holistic endeavor that incorporates all stages of the research process, from the theoretical to the practical, from the formulation of research questions to the write-up of research findings” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p.4). Feminist researchers seek to document the influence of gender in the lives of individuals, often focusing on women's lives, experiences and concerns. They seek to uncover women's subjugated knowledge, challenging ideologies that oppress women, fostering the empowerment of marginalized groups, and often apply their research in ways that can impact social change (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

There is not a single feminist method, methodology or epistemology, rather feminist scholars take a wide range of perspectives. However, qualitative methods are often viewed as



much more in line with feminist considerations because they allow for the exploration of research questions, ability to investigate hard to study groups, and ability to determine the meaning people assign to their lives. Qualitative methods also have an orientation to social context, and allow the ability to capture the subjective meaning that people attach to their lives (Schutt, 2012). Given the outlined nature of feminist research, the methods of the study, to be discussed at length later, are best in line to achieve the outlined research goals.

Given my origins as a Black feminist researcher specifically, I utilized an intersectional lens to approach this study. This means that it is not enough to simply assess the influence of gender in the lives of individuals, but it is important to understand how individuals' social identities are inextricably integrated in a way that creates unique experiences for them. In other words, it is important to understand women's life experiences are diverse due to their different social locations, which are shaped not only by gender, but also by other social variables such as race, social class, and sexuality.

Patricia Hill Collins argues in her text *Black Feminist Thought* (2008) that when Black women are in charge of their own self-definitions, four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology come to the forefront—lived experience as criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethic of personal responsibility, and the ethics of caring (Collins 2008). These contentions support the use of qualitative research methods such as life history method. In fact, she states explicitly that requirements for positivist methodological approaches “ask African-American women [scholars] to objectify themselves, devalue their emotional life, displace their motivations for furthering knowledge about Black women, and confront in an adversarial relationship those with more social, economic and professional power” (Collins, 2008, p.274).

Further Collins contends, “Historically, Black women’s group location in intersecting oppressions produced commonalities among individual African-American women” (Collins, 2000, p.28). The current study on secondary incarceration impacts for Black women illuminates that shared standpoint. Much in line with this discussion, although the women in the study shared individual stories, a collective picture emerged about their experiences. This highlighted feminist standpoint theory, which seeks to ensure that the voices of gender minorities are centered in the research process. As a theoretical model, feminist standpoint theory maintains that there is valuable knowledge to be gained from emphasizing the lived experience of women (Hartsock 1983).

Phenomenology is relevant to the current study due to its focus on human experience and behavior. Researchers using this approach are able to “determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1944, p.13). The lives of participants, as told through their own stories, are reflections of their experiences and changes through the journey. Patton (2002, p.56) contends that the inductive design allows patterns to emerge from the data without strictly “presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be.” Methodology that thoroughly captures individuals’ lived experiences as they “perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” is important for exploring how they make sense of experiences and transform those experiences into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning (Patton, 2002, p.104). Utilizing this approach allowed me to listen to the women as they talked about their experiences of having an incarcerated family member. The patterns and themes that emerged from the data helped to explain the impact of incarceration in their lives.

Further, the phenomenological approach provided the opportunity to explore, through in depth interviews, the meaning that participants assigned to their lived experiences, their way of understanding and constructing those experiences, and how they have been impacted by the experience of incarceration. Clandinin and Connelly (1989) state that the telling of personal experience in narrative form reveals the personal and social growth of participants. Through the use of interviews, I was able to discern how these women have navigated their circumstances.

In order to uncover how these women acted in response to their experience of supporting an incarcerated loved one and discover what meaning they placed on the experience and actions, a symbolic interactionist approach was also utilized for data analysis. Symbolic interactionism also allows for the analysis of data beyond descriptive accounts. This approach insists that humans act in life based on the meanings they give to events. Much of this meaning is developed out of interactions with others. Therefore, “social interaction is a formative process” in that people are “directing, checking, bending and transforming their lines of action in the light of what they encounter in the actions of others” (Blumer, 1969, p. 53). Essentially, in order to understand the choices that individuals make, the meanings they assign to their actions and the context of their behaviors have to be considered. This was important when assessing Black women with incarcerated loved ones due to their need to adapt to the situational context. Symbolic interactionist viewpoints recognize the way in which individuals choose to adapt to their experiences, and the ways others engage with them, is confined by their identities and the social structure. Denzin provides support for this assumption stating, “Interactional experience is assumed to be organized in terms of the motives and accounts that persons give themselves for acting. These accounts are learned from others, as well as popular culture” (Denzin, 2007, p.20).

### **Description of Data and Data Collection Process**

Using purposive and snowball sampling schemes, I began participant recruitment for the interviews in the summer of 2019. I initially sent emails to informants and agencies with which I had made connections in Kalamazoo, Detroit, and Lansing, Michigan throughout my academic career. All of the individuals and agencies I contacted work with incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals. Since the beginning of the study process, I did not believe that it would be challenging to find Black women willing to discuss their secondary experiences with incarceration, and I was correct. Emails and calls began to come in rapidly once I sent out my calls for participation, with most interviews being scheduled within the first few weeks. Around October 2019 calls began to naturally taper off. This is when I decided to conclude data collection. I received one message in November, however when following up I did not receive a reply. Additionally, with preliminary analysis I was witnessing common reoccurring themes, which I regarded as having reached saturation.

To my surprise, although I only sent information to individuals in Michigan because those were my established relationships, I began to receive calls from across the United States. This led to some interviews being conducted in person and others over the phone (9 face-to-face, 11 over-the-phone). Recruitment and interviewing began in June 2019 and ended in October 2019. The call for participation (see: Appendix I) solicited adult, self-identified U.S. Black women with an incarcerated parent, sibling, child or partner. In total, 21 Black women inquired about the study and 20 were interviewed. I began an interview with one of the women, but her phone died midway through and I was unable to reach her again.

For each woman that called or emailed to inquire about the study, I was sure to explain the study in detail, as well as my motivation and intent with the project given its sensitive nature.

I also explained they would have to sign and return a consent form prior to the interview if over the phone, or at the start of the interview if an in person meeting occurred.

### **Sample Demographics**

At the beginning of each interview, I asked a series of demographic questions in order to keep track of basic characteristics of the women. This also served to begin the interview neutrally before diving into hard questions. Much of that information was also confirmed and explored further during the interview. The twenty women interviewed represent a diverse range of ages, social economic backgrounds, and regions. Appendix II provides a brief synopsis of each woman's story, including information about her region, socioeconomic status, education level and relationship to their incarcerated loved one. In line with feminist methods, I felt it necessary to give a complete narrative of each woman in the study, aside from the quotes pulled to highlight the themes that emerged. Below I briefly discuss some sample demographics.

The sample was limited to adult women—those 18 and older. This allowed me to avoid complications that would have arisen had I interviewed minors, including the need for parental permission. While the experiences of Black girls in terms of experiencing secondary incarceration is important, that is beyond the scope of the present study. The purpose of this study was to assess adult women and their experience having to provide support for incarcerated individuals. Adult women are likely to have provided a greater range of support for incarcerated persons. However, this study also includes adult women that experienced, and reflected on, the secondary impacts of incarceration from childhood. By the conclusion of this study the youngest participant was 22 and the oldest was 77. The average age of the participants was 44 years old.

In line with Black feminist criminologist Hillary Potter's work *Battle Cries* (2008), I considered various measures to determine how to gauge socioeconomic status among the

women. Along with income, I took into account home ownership, education, use of public assistance and occupation as factors when determining the women's SES at the time of the interview. I directly asked the women which SES classification—low income, working class, middle class, and upper middle class—they would put themselves in, however I mostly relied on my own interpretation, based on the interview data.

I utilized the operational definitions created by Potter to classify the women in the study (Potter, 2008, p.215). Low-income households are ones where the residents were not regularly working and received government assistance as a major means for survival. Working-class is defined by Potter as the next step up, in the class hierarchy—characterized by stable employment, but in typically lower skilled professions or ones that do not provide adequate income. They often face challenges paying bills and affording necessities of material goods. Middle class households are characterized as working in professional, highly skilled, or college-level occupations. They have jobs that provide a stable environment and include benefits such as health insurance and retirement plans. Additionally home ownership is a factor for identifying middle class status.

It should be stated that overwhelmingly the women believed that they were poor relative to where they lived. However, given the outlined classifications, within the sample seven of the women were classified as living in low-income households. All of these women mentioned receiving significant government assistance for survival. Nine women were classified as working class. Two of these women were students working on graduate degrees, and received university stipends. Additionally, one of the young women received food stamps to subsidize her graduate income. The other women in this category noted having either an associates or bachelor's degree and maintaining a stable job with benefits and no government subsidies. None of the low-income

or working class women mentioned being married, however two were engaged to men in prison. Three women in the sample were classified as middle class. These women all had well paying jobs with benefits, were married, and owned homes. There was one woman in the sample that chose not to disclose her monthly income. However throughout the interview she noted having stable income and the ability to travel frequently.

The sample was pretty well dispersed among education levels. I asked the women their highest level of education completed at the time of the interview. Five of the women noted having a high school diploma or GED. Another four mentioned having moved past high school education to have completed some college and acquired an associate's degree. The remaining eleven women had earned at least a 4-year college degree: six had earned a bachelor's degree and five had a master's degree. Two of the women classified as living in low-income households held a college degree—however they both noted receiving significant government assistance as a means for survival. Additionally, as mentioned above, two women with at least one 4-year degree were classified as working class given their pursuit of additional degrees.

As mentioned earlier, although I only put out my call for participation to agencies and individuals in Michigan with which I already had contact, I received calls from all across the United States of women interested in participating. In total eleven of the women were from the U.S. Midwest region. Three participants called from the U.S. Northeast region. Five women contacted me from the U.S. South and one woman called from the U.S. West. Regions were categorized using a map from the U.S. Bureau of the Census. These regions are also mentioned when describing the women throughout data analysis chapters. Regions, as opposed to specific states or cities are mentioned in an effort to maintain confidentiality.

The current study focused on the experiences of Black women with incarcerated loved ones. In my call for participation, I operationalized incarcerated loved one as a parent, child, sibling, or partner in line with other literature regarding families of incarcerated individuals. I did not limit this to one type of relationship—similar to other studies of collateral consequences—primarily because I was focusing on questions about the women specifically. I contend that despite the relationship, the way the women chose to navigate and support incarcerated people is very similar given they are immediate family members. Also, in capturing a variety of relationships, any nuances that may exist can come to light.

Within the sample, the vast majority<sup>1</sup> of the women discussed a male incarcerated loved one. Only one woman (Patrisse) discussed a female incarcerated loved one, her mother. Also, five women<sup>2</sup> discussed more than one person that they provided support for while incarcerated. The type of material support provided for individuals did not differ much based on relationship—except the three women (Morgan, Dorothy, and Patrisse) that discussed having an incarcerated parent during their childhood. This was due to the inability of children to provide material support. Additionally, the emotions and experiences navigating the system did not differ much based on relationship.

Each of the women expressed similar emotions and relationship strains during the process. The most difference was in the ways the women discussed the individual choices of their loved one. Partners tended to have a more romantic “stand-by your man” philosophy, whereas other relationships were more comfortable discussing the faults of their loved one in terms of the choices they made that led to incarceration, particularly for siblings. Interestingly,

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<sup>1</sup> N=19 (2 fathers, 3 brothers, 6 sons, 5 partners, 2 nephews, & 1 close family friend)

<sup>2</sup> Barbara, Frances, Beverly, Angela, and Audre



even mothers were able to discuss at length what they believed were the failures of their sons. These distinctions will be discussed in greater detail throughout the analysis chapters.

The sole source of data collection for this study was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The data were collected using a cross-sectional approach, which provides a one-time measurement within a narrow span of time, and is more exploratory and descriptive (Potter, 2008). For the current study, interviews on average lasted about an hour. The longest interview was 1 hour and 19 minutes and the shortest was about 28 minutes.

Using the life history interview approach, the women interviewed spoke in-depth about their love ones, the various stages of the incarceration experience, as well as their perceptions, reactions, and feelings about the process, and the criminal legal system in general. Life histories seek to “examine and analyze the subjective experiences of individuals and their constructions of the social world” (Jones, 1983, p.147). This method is a form of in-depth interviewing meant to capture the interaction between an individual’s understanding of her world and the world itself. The life-history method can help to capture the way patterns evolve and are linked to the life of an individual. Black feminist scholars often use the life history method to capture the meaning Black women make of their circumstances. For example, Black feminist criminologist Beth Ritchie utilized life histories to understand the experiences and ongoing social processes that were associated with battered Black women’s gender role development, experience of intimate partner violence and the circumstances that led to arrest for those women (Ritchie, 1996). She argues that life history interviews allow “a more intense opportunity to learn about subjects’ backgrounds, opinions, feelings and the meanings they give to mundane events and exceptional experiences in their lives” (1996, p.17).

In line with other Black feminist life history methods, at the outset I asked each woman “Growing up, what did you learn about what it meant to be a Black woman?” This question often led into the women discussing their upbringing and sense of self. An interview guide was developed to guide the interviews and ensure consistency while collecting data (See Appendix III). Questions specific to my research questions were included. For instance, I asked extensive questions about the women’s relationships with and support provided for their loved ones. I also wanted to hear about their emotions throughout the process, and views regarding the criminal legal system. Another question specific to my research involved the support they received while dealing with the experience of having an incarcerated loved one. During my first few interviews, themes began to emerge that I wanted to explore further. For instance, originally I did not intend to explore different role dynamics within the childhood homes of participants. However during an early interview I began to see that participants expressed feeling as though they had care-taking roles within their families that were beyond those they considered appropriate for children. I was sure to explore this emerging theme in subsequent interviews.

Due to the sensitive subject matter of this study, the women were assured of their confidentiality verbally and in writing with the use of an informed-consent form approved by the Human Subject Institutional Review Board of Western Michigan University (Appendix IV). Each participant read and signed a consent form. Participants were informed they could end the interview at any time, however each women completed the entire interview with the exception of the woman mentioned above, with whom I lost connection early in the interview and was unable to reach again.

Each interview took place in a private or semi-private location. With in-person interviewing, the participants often selected the locations, which consisted primarily of library

spaces, coffee shops, and work offices. One interview took place in the living room of a participant. For phone interviews, I made sure to always be in a private location free from distraction—often my home office—and asked the same of my participants. At the conclusion of each in-person interview, participants were given a \$20 gift-card to their choice of Wal-Mart or Target, a thank-you note, and my business card. For phone interviews, these materials were mailed to participants after getting their mailing information. Gift cards were funded by the Kercher Center for Social Research at Western Michigan University. None of the women refused the gift cards. While I did not ask what they intended to spend the gift cards on, some did share how they intended to use the money. One woman noted she planned to give it to the child of her formerly incarcerated son. Another expressed planning to give it to her mother whom lives on a fixed income. A few of the women contacted me after the conclusion of their interviews to inquire about my progress in writing. All interviews were audio recorded—with the consent of all participants—transcribed verbatim, and coded by reoccurring theme.

### **Transcription and Data Analysis**

From the first interview, I began looking for preliminary themes within the data. I began transcribing the interviews soon after the first was completed and completed the transcriptions in a similarly timely fashion for all of the interviews. This allowed for me to become familiar with themes early on in the process and make notes in the margins of my transcriptions with developing thoughts. Any identifying information shared during the interviews was changed during transcription to fictitious names and places to ensure confidentiality. Additionally pseudonyms have been given to participants throughout this document.

Once all of the interviews were transcribed, I printed each and read through them again, highlighting recurrent themes. As this process continued, patterns emerged in regards to self-

definitions, supports provided and received, and perceptions of the criminal legal system.

Additionally thematic patterns around agency and action also emerged through the transcripts. At this stage of analysis I also began open coding—working closely with the data, line-by-line, to identify themes and categories that emerged (Esterberg, 2002). As those themes were identified, I consistently went back over other transcripts, reading through them again to see if similar patterns emerged. For instance, I noticed that participants with incarcerated brothers would discuss how they felt there were differences in the roles they had to perform versus those that their brother was required to take on in their households growing up. I revisited the transcripts to see if other participants also discussed these differences.

### **Validity and Reliability Assessments**

Validity, the credibility of data and results, as well as reliability, the consistency and stability of responses, can be seen as challenging to establish in qualitative research. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that of primary concern for the qualitative researcher is to understand a phenomenon's truth-value—if the data makes sense—as opposed to its “truth”. From a feminist perspective, assessing the accuracy of each participant is not at issue, because generally standpoint scholars agree that attention should be given to subjective and subjugated knowledges, and understand lived experience as valid for analysis and conclusions about the world. Therefore, in order to capture validity and reliability, qualitative researchers use strategies that include triangulation, trust building, rich descriptions of setting and interactions, and open communication and shared conclusions with participants (Creswell, 2003).

A triangulation strategy to address validity was important for this study. Through my own lived experience and research, I have become very informed about the criminal legal system and those that have to navigate and experience it. For many of my participants, particularly those

with loved ones incarcerated at the time of the interview; it was easy to verify their stories. While I did not specifically ask for names and locations of loved ones—and do not believe someone would make up a story about incarceration—oftentimes when discussing the travel times to facilities or back stories of their experience, the women would mention facility locations and names or let me know that the case received media coverage. That allowed for me to look up stories or names on various databases. Also, some participants had loved ones with cases I'd already heard about through local news or work.

In regards to trust building, oftentimes simply outlining my motivation and intent for the study built trust among the women. In addition, the use of purposive and snowball sampling resulted in an already established bond, in which they felt comfortable because I was recommended through someone with which they were already familiar. Throughout interviews some women would note their initial skepticism, but would reassure me that they believed in my purpose. The support from my participants at times felt overwhelming, due to my desire to eloquently tell their stories and uphold the established trust.

Assessing reliability, the analysis sections within this study help to highlight consistencies among the different participants. Standard definitions of generalizability were not the concern of the current study. Qualitative research tends to be more concerned with depth and richness. Highlighting the life histories of these women, common threads emerged. Further, qualitative methods are mostly concerned with transferability—providing clear descriptions about the setting so that other researchers can transfer the information to their population in the future (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purposes of this study, generalizability is located in the truth each woman defined for herself.

Additionally, throughout each interview, I made sure that I clarified points made by the women and asked if I correctly understood what they were communicating. At first, I believed that asking clarifying questions might lead to some women shutting down, however it was quite the contrary. I realized that many enjoyed the fact that our interviews were more of a dialogue, where I encouraged them to ask me questions, and mentioned at the outset that I would be asking questions to make sure I was accurately reflecting their answers. Many of the women asked me about my experiences with incarceration as well as my thoughts on the criminal legal system. With many of the interviews it felt as though I was talking to friends and many expressed that the interview had helped them to process some things they did not know they had been holding.

### **Ethical Concerns**

Considering the feminist orientation of the study, it is important to consider ethical issues. While generally proscriptions to ‘do no harm’ are inherent within social science research, feminist scholars often interpret this mandate more broadly. The often collaborate nature of feminist research projects can lead to ethical issues that may not arise in non-feminist research, such as disclosure of sensitive information and the desire to help participants above the call of research. Feminist researchers work hard to minimize power differentials, thus often building personal “true” relationships with participants (Reinhartz 1992). The establishment of these relationships can pose an interesting issue when projects end, especially if the research is not carried out in an area that the researcher intends to stay. Kirsch (1999) states that it is important for feminist researchers to define ethical guidelines and stick to them, as well as seek critical feedback from knowledgeable colleagues and their participants. We must work hard to assure that our research does not further marginalize the population, therefore feminist scholars believe in transparency at all points in the research and continuous dialogue with participants.

With the present study, I took great efforts to insure that I was creating an empowering space for my participants. Drawing on my own personal experiences as well as skills from my training in victim advocacy, I approached my interviews with empathy and compassion. I regularly acknowledged the difficulty of the topic, affirmed their feelings and sentiments and repeatedly expressed my gratitude for their willingness to participate. In a few interviews, participants expressed that outside of immediate family, they had not discussed their loved one's incarceration, particularly how it had impacted them. Most often, the women discussed the experience of their loved one with ease, but struggled to articulate how they specifically felt and the support—or lack thereof—they received throughout the process. Their gratitude for the space to vent or discuss assured me that I was upholding feminist principles within the study.

### **Summary & Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the methodological framework for collecting and analyzing data for the current project, as well as sample demographics. Feminist approaches to research, specifically intersectionality and standpoint theory, help to guide the purpose and direction of the project by centering the voices of Black women within the context of mass incarceration. Additionally, phenomenological and symbolic interactionist approaches helped to assess the meaning that the women attached to their experience of supporting an incarcerated loved one. Through 20 semi-structured interviews, data was collected and analyzed for common themes. These themes serve as the basis for analysis in the chapters that follow.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I will present the findings of my research. I will begin by discussing a common shared self-concept among the women, the *strongblackwoman* and how it connects to the support they provided loved ones, as well as their personal relationships, and coping strategies. Next, in Chapter 5, I will discuss their lifelong perceptions of the criminal legal

system, general experiences with actors within the system, and the ways in which they navigated their circumstances. In the concluding chapter, I will provide a summary of findings, contributions to the field, limitations and directions for future research, and recommendations for reform.



## CHAPTER IV

### STRONG BLACK WOMEN

Revisiting the discussion from Chapter 2, a Black feminist framework is necessary to center the experiences of Black women, who are disproportionately impacted by the criminal legal system. Black feminist frameworks uncover the interlocking nature of social structures, particularly in the lives of the most marginalized within communities. Several themes and subthemes emerged within this study that contribute to and further extend Black feminist theoretical contributions within the context of mass incarceration and demonstrate the applicability of the frameworks for unpacking this phenomenon. The women within the study were guided by questions about their general experiences, roles, and coping strategies. Their responses generated a wealth of detail pertaining to their own self-concepts as Black women and the experience of having an incarcerated loved one.

This chapter will explore what the women believed it meant to be a Black woman navigating the world in general, how they learned what it meant, and its application within the context of secondary contact with the criminal legal system. Many women mentioned defining characteristics of the *strongblackwoman*, as discussed in Chapter 2. I contend the adoption of the *strongblackwoman* as a self-concept permeated the ways the women in this study gave and received support throughout the experience.

#### **Defining the *Strongblackwoman***

Melissa Harris Perry, in her book *Sister Citizen* (2011), argues that Black women are “standing in a room skewed by stereotypes that deny their humanity and distort them into ugly caricatures of their true selves” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p.183). Essentially, Black women are bombarded with warped images of their humanity, and often have to tilt and bend themselves to

fit the distortion (i.e. structural constraints influence their behaviors). As discussed in Chapter 2, controlling images of Black women include the jezebel, matriarch, and mammy. These collective ideas about Black womanhood adopted in mainstream narratives have disastrous consequences for the emotional, psychological, and political wellbeing of Black women. They serve to “decrease their opportunities for recognition by the state, reduce the effectiveness of them speaking on their own behalf, and set off spirals of fury that lead to further victimization”(Harris-Perry, 2011, p.183).

Despite these controlling images, Black women have managed to demonstrate their agency and become leaders within society, their families, and their communities. Harris-Perry likens this agency to standing up in a “crooked room”. One way that Black women are able to stand up in this “crooked room” is through the crafting of alternative images of themselves, including that of the *strongblackwoman*. The *strongblackwoman* is a widely accepted understanding—by Black women and others—of Black women as “motivated, hardworking breadwinners who suppress their emotional needs, while anticipating those of others” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p.186). It can be seen that this definition of strength has become a naturalized part of Black women’s self-concept and Black women’s identity in their communities and society. While being strong, in and of itself is not a bad thing, scholars contend when Black women are expected to always be super-strong, they can not simply be human (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011). The data within the current study illustrates that participants often expressed learning the *strongblackwoman* construct as the requirement for good Black womanhood.

Each interview was different as some women freely shared and discussed their experience of dealing with an incarcerated loved one with very limited prompting. Other interviews required strict adherence to the interview schedule. Each interview began with the

women being prompted to answer the question, “Growing up, what did you learn about what it meant to be a Black woman?” Regardless of different demographic characteristics, overwhelmingly (n=14)<sup>3</sup> the women in the study mentioned that they learned being a Black woman meant you had to be strong, hardworking, emotionless, and self-sacrificing. Consider the following excerpt from Toni, a 57-year-old Midwest retiree:

Whew, growing up I learned being a Black woman meant you had to work a lot. You have to work hard; you have to take care of everyone. You had to take care of the family. You had to be organized um and then you have to be prepared for [the] heartbreak and pain that comes along with taking care of everyone.

The things that Toni learned about Black womanhood illustrate strength and the need to work hard, essentially for everyone else. She also notes that it will come at the price of self-pain, which she believes is just part of the deal. Through learning and adhering to the *strongblackwoman*, Black women help to create an understanding of themselves as self-denying caregivers in their homes and communities. Similarly, Fannie, a 47-year-old woman located in the South expressed:

Oooh um, strong, confident, hard worker; very family oriented, ya know. Very aware of [how] their actions reflected on their family or were representative of their family. In some instances deferred to their husbands in terms of being behind the scenes instead of being the face, does that make sense?

Fannie’s understanding of Black womanhood, like Toni’s, touched on being a hard worker and taking care of your family. However, Fannie goes a bit further in mentioning that while Black women are expected to take care of their families, they are at the same time intended to take a backseat to men in their lives. Her articulation is illustrative of Black feminist insights regarding gender dynamics within Black families and communities. Further, her discussion highlights the fact that the *strongblackwoman* is intended to be a reflection of her family and community. To

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<sup>3</sup> Toni, Mary, Charlene, Dorothy, Fannie, Mia, Janet, Joan, Joy, Frances, Angela, Brittney, Michelle, and Patrisse

not behave in this way necessitates shame on the family and community because Black women are praised for how they behave, not for who they are.

While the majority of the women in the study identified the *strongblackwoman* as part of their learned self-concept, some recognized that it was a harmful identification in many ways.

Joan, a 44-year-old Black woman from the Northeast illustrates this point in great detail:

Um I would say that it is probably, the most difficult position to occupy. I think that the expectation of everyone, from every other race, including our own, rests on our shoulders to make things happen, to come through, to be strong for any and everybody. To never break down, but I think that's just so much on us. And we do it... I mean it's just, we're so used to having to adjust. No matter what socioeconomic level we find ourselves at, or what situation we find ourselves at, I feel like that's just what we've been doing for centuries and it's what we continue to do now. It's not easy... So I just feel that it's a very difficult position to be envied, desired, and wanted, and to be hated at the same time by all those same people. It's an impossible position, but somehow with God's help we just make it work, we just do what we do.

Joan begins her discussion with stating that it is difficult to be a Black woman based on the expectations placed upon them. She outlines the duality of being expected to have it altogether for everyone else—family and society—while still being “hated”. Black feminist scholars have noted the challenges Black women face, having to display tremendous personal fortitude while also belonging to a group with limited structural resources and support (Beauboeuf-Lafont, 2009; Collins, 2008; Harris-Perry, 2011).

Joan also appears to grapple with the fact that while she has objections to the *strongblackwoman*, many Black women—Joan included— simply continue to adhere to its premise. This can be contextualized by Black feminist literature that argues the *strongblackwoman* serves as a constructive role model for Black women to draw encouragement and self-assurance (Harris-Perry, 2011). Further Joan's response evokes insights from Patricia Hill Collins regarding Black women's standpoint, citing that regardless of individual differences there is a collective understanding among Black women about strength (Collins, 2008).

## Learning to be a *Strongblackwoman*

In an effort to follow up on how the *strongblackwoman* became a part of their self-concept, I often asked those that mentioned strength follow up questions about if these were things they simply witnessed from Black women in their lives, or if they were vocalized. Many women mentioned that it was observed, while some stated it was a combination. For many of those that freely discussed question prompts, they went into detail about their upbringing in general. Scholar Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafont states that, “Determination, caring, the ability to manage adversity and a defined and resilient sense of self are qualities that Black girls and women see widely exemplified by the women closes to them” (2009, p.26). This was emphasized by most of the women that identified with an adherence to the *strongblackwoman*. Mia, a 30-year-old Black woman from the South mentioned strength as a required part of Black womanhood and went on to state:

That’s a complex question because I feel like I know now, but growing up I just—well I grew up in [a] predominately Black area—but of course I’m raised by Black women. I don’t know I always feel like Black women were always working, always carrying the load of everybody.

When asked what she meant by “carrying the load” she stated: “On both sides [of my family] I just [saw] that it’s always women doing everything. They’re the ones having to raise the children, they’re coming together to help raise other children, and that’s just what I saw.” Mia’s discussion of strength included a discussion of the fact that she believes that Black women have to be strong and hardworking because that is what she saw from the Black women that raised her. Her answer suggests that the women in her life took care of family and community responsibilities without much thought. Similarly, Mia’s thought process about the question suggests that strength, as a self-concept, is not something she often thinks about intentionally.

Similarly, Patrisse a 32-year-old women from the Midwest responded that she learned the requirements for Black womanhood from watching her grandmother raise her and her five siblings while her mother was in and out of incarceration:

I guess watching my grandmother. She took care of all six of us while my mom was doing her thing. So looking back it was like, oh okay we've gotta be strong. We have to learn this or about that because that kind of got us through.

Joy, a 50-year-old woman from the Midwest also identified with the *strongblackwoman*, and when asked if these were things she picked up, or if they were said, Joy stated:

It was kinda both. It was definitely witnessed—and kinda—it was said as well because... my mom primarily was a single parent...so basically all of the Black women figures that I seen were single people. They were single mothers; they were individuals that were ya know doing whatever they had to do to make things happen to be able to survive.

Joy's understanding of Black womanhood was tied to both witnessing her single mother and other single women exemplify the *strongblackwoman*, but she expressed that she was also told that being strong, hard-working, and self reliant were a part of being a Black woman. Similar to Patrisse, her response reflects how the *strongblackwoman* imperative requires tremendous fortitude even from women with limited structural resources.

Another response worth noting because is reflects the collective standpoint of Black women is from Brittney—a 45-year-old woman from the Midwest. When asked what she learned about being a Black woman growing up, she responded:

I guess growing up, being independent because my mother was a single mother but um she still pushed marriage. She would be like, "you know one day you're going to have a husband"...but I was really never that person that [wanted] to get married and have a husband and children, that wasn't the thing for me. But I knew that I had to be strong. I knew that I had to be persevering for things because of the women that fought for me to be able to do that, ya know Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks. All these women like that. So [trying] to be a Black woman that made a difference in life, in society, in the world. No matter what it was...

Brittney's response stands out, because it appears that she learned to be independent from watching her mother be single, yet her mother vocalized the need to aspire to be a family woman. Brittney contends that she doesn't want a traditional family, and leans towards figures

that seemingly exemplify the *strongblackwoman*—Coretta Scott King and Rosa Parks. Her articulation of these women as her role models for learning a *strongblackwoman* self-concept, lends strength to discussions about the way Black women learn this image. It is exemplified in the family, as well as larger society as something Black women should aspire to become.

An interesting picture also emerged from those women that did not mention the *strongblackwoman* in their responses to my initial questions. Of those women, five<sup>4</sup> used general racialized language to explain what they learned growing up. For instance Alice, a 23-year-old woman from the West stated:

Uh well I never really learned much about it... I was taught different things and how to act. Racial profiling is a big thing that my parents worried about, so we had to act a certain way. I guess very classy, not too loud, too—ya know—belligerent, I guess.

Alice mentioned later in the interview that she has two brothers. Realizing that the socialization of Black girls may be different, having conducted a few interviews before Alice, I asked if she believed her brothers learned different things. Alice responded: “they learned the same things. Not to be too loud or act a certain way when you’re in public. Like right now we live in a state that’s predominately white, um Caucasian, and we always get racially profiled.” From Alice’s response, it appeared as though her parents did not teach different things about being a Black woman, rather they taught their children how to navigate the world as a Black person in general.

Similarly Morgan, a 22-year-old woman from the Northeast responded:

Well, okay I guess the way I would see it is the household that I was in there wasn’t really an option to not know that. But I think that all of that was influenced by my parents. My dad had a huge book collection and that’s how I think I came to some of my understanding of self, but I also grew up in a mixed rural suburb. That also, I think, made it so that I was very acutely aware of my Blackness in that way.

Alice and Morgan both note growing up in areas where it appears that being Black was somewhat of an anomaly in their larger community. Therefore, their parents appear to have made a strong Black self-concept the priority for their children. Also, it is worth noting that these

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<sup>4</sup> Anna, Beverly, Barbara, Alice and Morgan

women are two of the youngest within the sample, and may not have interrogated what the intersection of race and gender look like for them.

As noted by many Black feminist scholars our society, and some Black communities, does a poor job of discussing the intersections of race and gender (Davis 1981; Guy Sheftall 1995; Ritchie 2017). I would argue that a Black feminist or womanist consciousness could take time, a different series of questions, or various forms of education—including conversations with individuals that are not researchers—to cultivate. Despite not mentioning the *strongblackwoman* outright, many of the experiences of these women—in the context of incarceration and their socialization—reflect the idea of the *strongblackwoman*.

### **Black Girl Socialization**

As mentioned above, about 70% of the Black women in this study directly mentioned learning that qualities of the *strongblackwoman* were an essential part of Black womanhood. The previous section explored how the participants came to understand that from the women in their lives. However, while discussing this question some women (n=7)<sup>5</sup> mentioned specific examples of the socialization in action. The experiences of these women reflect how some Black daughters are taught to assume centralized family roles that condition them to be strong, self-reliant, and independent (Hill, 2001). Within the context of the current study, both women that outright mentioned strength and those that did not discussed experiences that reflect these family roles. All of the women touched on these socialization processes within the context of their secondary incarceration experience, having a relative—for this section a parent or sibling—that was incarcerated.

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<sup>5</sup> Charlene, Mia, Toni, Morgan, Patrisse, Dorothy, and Anna



Among the participants, Charlene, Mia, and Toni chose to discuss the incarceration of their brothers. Each of those women mentioned differential socialization between themselves and their brothers. Due to the fact that the interview and questions were largely dependent on the direction taken by participants, the questions that prompted their discussion of socialization varied. However, their answers were largely similar. Each expressed that they learned different things from their parents about navigating the world.

Charlene, a 41-year-old woman located in the Northeast, spoke about a very complicated relationship with her formerly incarcerated brother. Sadly, her brother passed away in 2011, following his most recent incarceration. She expressed that her brother had been in and out of prison since the age of 15, up until his death at 35. While musing over his 20 year struggle with the penal system, Charlene expressed that upbringing could have played a role in his troubled history. I then asked, “Were there differences in the way your parents talked to you and your brother?”, to which she replied:

Yea, absolutely yes, yes, yes! So my mom always talked to him as a dark skinned Black man. My brother was a larger man, he wasn't a fat guy, but he was over 6 foot so a lot of people were intimidated by his complexion, build, um and the fact that he was a male. So where my mom would talk to us about safety as far as [whom] we were dating, if the police approach you, if you get arrested, what you say to them—we didn't get those conversations.

Later in the interview she circles back around to talk about differential dynamics growing up saying:

Towards our teenage years, my sister and I were always like very involved in things. My mom always had us in stuff, like some type of dance class or school or swimming, stuff like that... Because he had a heart murmur as a child [and] had a weak heart he couldn't participate [in activities]. He couldn't do football, eh couldn't do baseball, he couldn't be involved in things. Where my mom would show up to support us, he had nothing to show up to support him.

Research regarding gender shows that from birth, children are socialized to look and perform in ways associated with biological sex (Hill, 2001). Additionally, research on families with various racial backgrounds suggests that gender plays an important role in the differential

parenting that a child can receive (Mandara, Varner, & Richmond, 2010). Hill (2001) notes, that historical race and gender ideologies reinforce those differences, while also characterizing differences in gender socialization as a means to protect and enhance a child's overall well being, particularly under racial and economic hardships. Essentially, Black parents are well aware of the fact that race and gender will shape future opportunities for their children, and try to prepare them for the future accordingly.

This dynamic was undoubtedly demonstrated by Charlene's discussion of differences in the way she and her brother were raised, throughout the interview. She mentioned that while she and her sister learned safety measures—associated with our understanding of U.S. rape culture—her brother learned about being a Black man in America. The discussion that she stated her parents had with her brother has—since the increasing awareness of police brutality among Black people—come to be known as “the talk” (Ritchie, 2017).

Some scholars suggest that Black parents consciously express higher expectations for their daughters in comparison to their sons because they are made plainly aware—via media etc.—of the obstacles and dangers their sons are likely to endure. Oftentimes these obstacles occur as a result of understandings and behaviors associated with Black masculinity (Hill, 2001; McHale, Crouter, Kim, Burton, Davis, Dotterer, & Swanson, 2006). However, for Black girls—although the implications for race may be similar to those of Black boys—the intersection of race and gender, for them, often manifests in a sort of “double jeopardy” (Beale, 1969). While Black girls are socialized to be domestic and nurturing caregivers (to be discussed later) they may also be socialized via norms of strength, resilience, and independence as discussed previously. Charlene's response illustrates this through her mentioning of she and her sister

being pushed to keep busy with after school activities, largely, which was not the case for her brother.

Another participant Mia (previously cited regarding the *strongblackwoman*) also illustrates the differential socialization between her and her brother. Mia's brother is currently incarcerated, with an estimated release date in 2025. When asked to discuss the person she had in mind when she saw the call for participation, Mia mentioned it was her brother and reveals issues of differential socialization:

My brother was never truly a violent person. Boys do their share of fighting, but he was never a person that goes around threatening people or anything like that. He was the only boy and he was coddled a lot by my mom... So my theories of how he led up to that moment was like I said, um disconnected. My mom was the type of mom like, "yea ya'll girls you have to come home at this time. Boy, oh you do what you want, boys can't touch dishes." [Me and my sister] would try to hold him accountable for the things he'd do...

She goes on to talk about the dynamic between her mother and brother:

My brother would be telling her all the illegal stuff he's doing and she would be laughing at him, and this was when he was an adult already. But then she spent a lot of time in childhood telling him, "you're going to be just like your daddy. You're going to go to jail" [yet] that was coming from a loving place even though it was wrong... That's the nature of what we went through. Her defending him or his sorry behaviors. Holding us accountable for everything, but [not holding] him accountable...

While discussing the differential socialization, I could hear that Mia was frustrated for a few reasons. First, it appears as though she believes her brother was not held accountable in the same ways that she and her sister were, which she feels greatly impacted his contact with the criminal legal system. Additionally, the lack of accountability that her brother experienced appears to have negatively impacted her, because she then had to pick up his slack. Her excerpt lends support for the caregiver aspect of the double jeopardy that Black girls experience during socialization.

Mia's response reflects what scholars suggest is a pitfall for some Black parents, in that their desire to protect their sons from the harsh social realities they will face outside the home, can lead to them overcompensating by reducing accountability for boys in an effort to buffer

those societal realities (Jefferson, Watkins, & Mitchell, 2016). While the behavior is meant to be protective, Jefferson et al. (2016) contends that it can be harmful for boys' development. In the case of many of the women in my study, this stunted development of Black males, has led to increased caretaking responsibilities them.

As mentioned earlier, part of the double jeopardy of Black girl socialization is caregiving responsibilities early in their development. This reflects the gender socialization that girls experience in particular according to the literature. However, assessing it from an intersectional lens, the women demonstrated through their responses the racialized and gendered nature of their socialization. Toni (cited earlier in the chapter) had this to say about her experience caregiving in her family when asked about her relationship with her younger, currently incarcerated brother:

I was really close to my siblings. I looked after my three younger brothers. I would take them to the ballpark because my father couldn't. My father was injured... he couldn't do a lot....I spent a lot of time with my brothers um until I turned 18. When I turned 18 I left and I went off to college and I didn't really go back and I didn't really [she smacks her lips, sighs and trails off]. Yea the education I was getting I wasn't coming back to share it with my younger brothers anymore. I just kind of, I had to leave the environment and just take care of myself.

Throughout our interview, it was apparent that Toni was doing a lot of self-reflection. In this particular response, she seemed troubled that she left for college, as if she somehow failed her brother. Toni noted early in the interview that her family was very close, but her admission that she left and did not look back is telling. It demonstrates the toll that caring for her younger brothers took on Toni as a child herself. Essentially, it appears as though Toni was limited in her ability to focus on herself while at home, as evidenced from the fact she saw college as an opportunity to achieve that task. Toni's experience with caregiving is similar to another participant, Morgan.

Morgan did not explicitly mention strength as a part of her socialization growing up (discussed above), however, her response to various questions throughout the interview made me

aware that she had witnessed and experienced the *strongblackwoman* growing up. Morgan's father was incarcerated for three years when she was four, for "a sex offense involving a 14-year-old girl." She discussed burdens placed on her and her family due to her father's actions (to be discussed in greater detail later). She also expressed that her father's incarceration and subsequent inability to contribute to the household when he returned—he was a teacher prior to the conviction—took a major toll on her mother and thus damaged Morgan's subsequent relationship with her. She stated that her mother (a doctor) had to work more hours to support the family, which took her out of the home more during and after the incarceration.

When asked if she remembers if the incarceration impacted role dynamics in her family she stated:

Oh for sure. I definitely feel that way, um, with my mom. I think my mom went through a lot in the situation, and we just had a conversation last week about how during the time I was like four. She remembers me like routinely consoling her, and I think it's that [and] a lot of other things, like having to give certain kinds of emotional support. But I also remember feeling burdened with it in a way that my brother was not if that makes sense.

While Morgan admitted that being so young she is not sure if she remembers the things she discussed, or if they are memories told to her by her mother, it is safe to assume that in some regard Morgan was burdened by caregiving in a particular way that her brother was not, due to her identities and circumstances. Further, her discussion of the issues her mother underwent, underscore the damaging effects of contact with the criminal legal system for Black women. Here, Morgan a four-year-old child is consoling her mother, a task that stunts the freedom of childhood. Another participant, Patrisse also underscores this point.

Patrisse (discussed earlier) grew up in the Midwest going between her grandmother and foster care due to her mother's drug addiction, for which she spent various stints in and out of incarceration. Patrisse's story is not an anomaly among Black children with incarcerated parents—particularly mothers. Research suggests that when Black mothers are incarcerated, the

burden often falls to grandmothers to support children (Ruiz, 2002) and when they are unable—often due to structural barriers—children end up in the foster care system (Roberts, 2004).

Patrisse expressed interest in my study after being referred by another participant. We met in a diner, and she expressed initial hesitation at participating, primarily due to her busy schedule, but also because she doesn't often discuss her upbringing. According to Patrisse, the only time she speaks freely about her circumstances is when mentoring youth in similar situations. Patrisse (cited earlier as identifying with the *strongblackwoman*) vividly illustrates the caregiving required of Black girls early in life when discussing her current relationship with her mother, who has been sober and out of prison for a few years now:

Sometimes I look at things and say maybe this would be different or that would be different, if things were different coming up because obviously we had to learn how to survive as opposed to living and being kids and being what we wanted to be...When we got to a certain age we were kinda a lot for my grandmother so we just stayed at home by ourselves and then the younger siblings my grandmother adopted. So my sister naturally stopped going to school, made sure the house was clean, and that we had food, ya know grown up stuff when we were a kid.

Later when discussing how her mother's history impacted her family dynamics she also stated:

I think it changed it in that way [living with her grandmother and being in foster care]...so like all the way from when we were little we walked dogs, mowed lawns, cut grass, you know like shoveled snow. Whatever so that we could get money, so we could eat.

Patrisse's testimony is powerful in that it demonstrates the impact of having to worry about things like care giving at such a young age. Within the interview, Patrisse mentioned that she had six siblings, four of which were younger than her. She expressed that the older four were often left to fend for themselves especially after her grandmother adopted the younger children. Through her discussion it was gleaned that her two older sisters were the primary caregivers for her and her younger brother. Tragically, she told me that her brother was murdered 13 years ago, and she somewhat attributes his troubled life to her mother's crack addiction. She contends that she and her siblings were not able to simply enjoy childhood due to their home circumstances. She represents a powerful—but not unique—reality for many Black children. The

structural barriers to success for Black families have directly harmful and differential impacts on Black children and their socialization.

The at length discussion of the meaning, understanding, dissemination, and acceptance of the *strongblackwoman* image is important for understanding the ways in which the women in the study navigate and cope with the experience of having an incarcerated loved one. At the outset of this study, I was unaware of the extent to which the controlling image of the *strongblackwoman* would assist in understanding how Black women have constructed their self-concepts and in turn dealt with secondary incarceration in their lives. In addition it serves to help understand how their families, communities and the state, respond to Black women. Dissection of this dangerous image is necessary for understanding Black women's self-concepts and thus subsequent navigation of their various circumstances, including secondary contact with the criminal legal system.

### **Dealing with Incarceration**

As discussed in the previous section, many of the participants identified with the *strongblackwoman* self-concept, and those that did not often acknowledged at least learning about it. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) argues that strong women and girls are often encouraged to think of themselves as emotional and financial caretakers of men in their lives, and associate self-care and concern with weakness and selfishness. This premise was evident in discussion with the women in the current study in three important ways: 1) how they answered questions about the support they provided to incarcerated loved ones, 2) the support they received from others and 3) the ways they spoke about caring for themselves throughout the incarceration experience.

### **Providing and Receiving Support**

Much of the literature on collateral consequences of mass incarceration mention the financial, social, and emotional toll that incarceration takes on the incarcerated individual's family (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002; Park & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003). This was apparent in discussions with the women in the present study. All but three women, Mary, Morgan and Dorothy, noted providing direct support—visits, money, phone calls—to their loved one while incarcerated. Mary, a 58-year-old woman from the Midwest noted that she did not feel she provided support to her son at the time he was incarcerated, nearly ten years ago. When asked what support she provided, Mary looked down and responded,

None, because I didn't know when he was in and out of jail. He didn't contact me. No phone calls, no nothing. And that's a lot of my fault too. [She pauses, and looks up] Well no because you know he didn't try to call me. He called his dad and I guess all the little girls he used to mess around with, they kept money on his books. I don't know, I guess he was okay.

I could see that Mary was struggling with this direct question about support, realizing that she felt she did not support her son. I gently pressed to understand why she did not provide support. Mary responded, "I didn't know when he was in jail and financially I'm raising two [other] children, my daughters. I couldn't afford it". She expressed that her son was "grown" at the time of incarceration and she was raising two daughters in a state away from where he was located.

Throughout the interview with Mary, she discussed her relationship with her son in a contentious manner. She mentions that their relationship has never been very stable. In regards to the incarceration period, she mentioned that for much of her son's initial incarceration she was unaware he was in prison. She did not find out until a family member who worked at the facility in which he was incarcerated notified the entire family that he was there. Mary stated he was incarcerated in this particular instance for about five years for "drugs" at the age of 28 and later went back briefly for a probation violation.



During our interview some underlying reasons for Mary's lack of support became apparent. Specifically, when asked if she would have done anything differently regarding her son's incarceration period Mary stated:

So um ... yea I would do everything differently. I still wouldn't go visit him. I don't want to see my child locked up like an animal and that's the only reason I wouldn't go see him. Um I will not send you money because when you [were] out there hustling you should have been hustling for a rainy day... So I don't know. I ain't visiting you, don't call me. Yea I'd write a letter... Our relationship has always been strange. I don't know. I have to honestly say [sighs] maybe I did abandon him [begins to cry], not meaning to but maybe I did.

While Mary said she would have done things differently, her explanation does not reflect that sentiment. Throughout the interview, Mary spoke at length about abuse she suffered at the hands of multiple Black men in her life. She mentioned her father "disowning" her when he learned she was pregnant at 18 with her son. She also discussed sexual molestation while young, and emotional abuse in the relationship with her children's father. In all, Mary seemed to believe that the potential abandonment of her son and their "strange" relationship could be attributed to her feelings about Black men in general, saying at one point, "...even with my son, I'm just leery of Black men." Throughout the interview, Mary's demeanor and words reflected strength. The ways in which she discussed her lack of protection touch firmly on Black feminist insights regarding the lack of care for Black women, and their need to be strong in an effort to overcome those situations (Harris-Perry, 2011). For Mary, being strong manifested as focusing on herself and her daughters. It can be assumed that her lack of confidence in men to care, led her to specific decisions regarding the incarceration of her son.

Mary also mentioned many times that one of her main missions in raising her children was to make sure her daughters did not experience any abuse similar to the things she experienced. Her sentiments speak directly to the previous discussions of differential

socialization between black boys and girls. For example when reflecting on the lack of support for her adult son she stated:

I was so busy trying to raise my children and working three jobs so all of the things that happened in my life wouldn't happen to my daughters. So my main priority was making sure my daughters were safe. I wasn't raising them in the projects. I wasn't raising them in [a] shelter. They didn't have to sleep with one eye open and one eye closed. They didn't have to worry about [extended pause] anyone sexually molesting them like what I experienced throughout my entire life [begins crying].

While Mary did not provide support to her son while he was in prison, she noted, "...now when my son did get out of jail I pushed for him and helped him get work." She mentioned that the relationship with her son is still shaky, but it has been better in recent years. She even expressed that the gift card she received for participating would be going to his daughter for school supplies.

Morgan and Dorothy also stated they did not provide support for their fathers during their incarceration due to the fact they were only children. However, as mentioned earlier, Morgan did discuss supporting her mother during her father's incarceration, at a young age. Dorothy, a 31-year-old woman from the South, similarly mentioned changed dynamics in her household due to the incarceration of her father. She stated, "for my mom [dynamics] definitely changed in terms of like having support at the house. Having to pick up extra shifts at work and having to find health care and day care and all those things that come with being a single parent." While they did not provide direct support, each woman witnessed Black women in their lives take on additional roles due to the situations of their male partners. Each of the women spoke at length in the interviews about how the incarceration of a parent in their formative years impacted their understanding of the world as well as their family dynamics. Therefore, although not able to provide much insight into direct support, they each brought depth to the analysis in other ways.

For those that did provide direct support at the time of incarceration, and after, their efforts were much in line with the typical financial and emotional support discussed in the literature. Sending money, visiting, writing letters, talking on the phone and providing words of encouragement, were all mentioned as ways the women supported their incarcerated loved ones. As much as the women expressed being happy to be able to support in whatever ways possible, they spoke at length about the burden it places on their often already strained resources. As is known, poor individuals are more likely to be incarcerated and their poverty—as well as that of their families—is more likely to be exacerbated by the policies and practices of the criminal legal system (deVuono-powell, Schweidler, Walters, & Zohrabi, 2015). Consider the following excerpt from Frances, a 51-year-old woman from the Midwest supporting four incarcerated nephews,

I found myself taking what little bit I had and trying to do what their mothers would not do, which was to support them, get them a secure pack. Not so much writing letters but making sure the letters contained a money order or something like that. It just really got to be too much. I only had a little bit of income and I'm the only one in this family that is actively trying to make sure they have something.

During the interview, Frances noted that her primary source of income is Supplemental Security Income (SSI). While she is married, and together operates a small business with her husband, she stated that she only has a little bit to give. Further, she feels an obligation to support her nephews because other members of the family will not, due to their religious and personal beliefs regarding incarceration. She is providing both financial and emotional support. At another point in the interview, Frances further touched on this point. When asked to clarify what she meant by a “secure pack”:

...sometimes they weren't even getting the money because they had come in with a medical bill or an injury from a brawl with an officer. So then they're charged for their medicine...so if I would send \$15 they were getting \$3 or something like that. I didn't find that out until one of them got ahold of me by phone and was like, “Don't even send it, it's nothing. If you can get your

money together and do a secure pack that would be way more helpful for you to order everything instead of send money and they're going to take it.”

Frances' discussion highlights how—often already disadvantaged families—are burdened by cost-saving policies of the criminal legal system. While she initially believed she was sending money to her nephews for whatever they saw fit, that money was being taken by the state to pay for expenses it believes they incurred. Toni had a similar experience when sending money to her brother for personal needs:

For a while I was just putting money on his book, like \$200 every time, and I learned that that money was being used to pay his restitution, and that he was not getting that money to help him buy the supplies that he needed in the prison. The state would just take it and put it towards his restitution. I did not want to pay his restitution, I just wanted to help him get through his incarceration by making sure he had whatever he needed like snacks and soap and underwear and toothpaste; things that the prison doesn't actually provide. Um so when I found out my money was being used for restitution I stopped the large sums...

A research group at The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (2015) found that beginning in 1990s, to cover and reduce the costs of incarceration, states began employing strategies such as imposing fines, privatizing prisons, contracting with private vendors, and cutting programs aimed at reducing recidivism. Other burdens mentioned by a majority of the women included visitation and phone calls. Michelle, a 53-year-old woman from the Midwest, said that the telephone was her primary source of communication with her son, and mentioned its costs:

He calls me every few days and we talk. I have to keep money on the phone. The phone costs like \$3 for 15 minutes. So I usually put \$10 on there and it can last for the week. So like every Friday I might put \$10 on there. Or if he gets money, cause I have a cousin who every first of the month she sends him money, he might put money on his phone.

Costs associated with incarceration quickly add up. Taking the excerpt from Michelle, she would spend about \$12 to talk to her son for an hour. This poses a significant challenge for low-income and working class families, like Michele, who only works part time. Although expensive, communication is necessary because “in many ways family support is our national reentry

program” (deVuono-powell et.al, 2015). Individuals need to maintain connections with family, as they are oftentimes their primary source of support when they exit prison. The financial costs of incarceration will be discussed further in Chapter 5 to underscore the ways it affects perceptions of the criminal legal system for marginalized people.

Visitation also takes a significant toll on Black women. Staying with Michelle, she mentioned an emotional impact associated with visiting her son. She noted that she does not visit as often as she would like “because he always wants money.” Michele expressed that not being able to give him as much as he would like impacts her tremendously. While she notes the emotional impact of not being able to provide, others touched on the sheer burden of logistics. For example, Alice stated she commutes 14 hours with her young daughter to see her partner in prison, an increase from the eight at his former institution. This results in her only getting to visit every three months, which has exacerbated her feelings of separation and loneliness.

Unfortunately, when loved ones leave incarceration, the burden does not diminish. Oftentimes it leads to further challenges. Take, for example, this excerpt from Angela, a 77-year-old woman that lets her formerly incarcerated son live with her:

My son lives with me. He’s almost 56 years old and has a hard time even getting a place to live [and a job] because he is an ex-convict. Then he fell, and when he got out [a community group] got him an apartment. He was standing on his balcony and fell...from the balcony. Anyway he hurt his back. He has a disability now. But he also has become addicted to heroine. He is fighting that battle.

Next, I asked Angela if helping her son posed any significant impacts for her financial situation, as her primary source of income is Social Security. She stated:

Well you know he had some money so I told him, “You can stay here.” It’s already hard to live off the money I have [and] I’m not going to go hungry trying to take care of a grown child. It’s not easy watching him destroy himself, but one of the reasons I let him stay is because there is no help here. When I talk to the director of [program to help felons], she said well, “you have to put him out because he has to be homeless. But I’m not going to tell you to do that because shelters are full, so there is nowhere for him to go waiting on us to help him.” So it’s a vicious cycle. They need help, but there ain’t no help because they are overcrowded and there ain’t no money.

The state doesn't give them money, they are cutting programs rather than helping so you are just kind of stuck. He's stuck and I'm stuck.

Angela's discussion clearly illustrates the burden low-income Black women and families face while trying to care for loved ones. Within her interview, she stated that she feels her son's drug addiction is a direct result of experiencing incarceration. Further, she feels an obligation to support him regardless, because there is nobody else. In addition to her SSI, Angela is in the Housing Choice Voucher Program (known as Section 8). Angela stated that she was at risk of losing her housing program assistance if it was discovered that her son lived in her apartment. However, she expressed it was a chance she is willing to take, as opposed to putting her son out of her house. Following our interview, I looked into the Section 8 restrictions in Angela's state. While her son's conviction for embezzlement is not a disqualifying offense, not reporting that 1) he is living with her and 2) he is a convicted felon, puts Angela's assistance in jeopardy. Further, his drug use also serves as a justification for the state to take her assistance. In sum, Angela feels obligated to assist her son. Without Angela's support, he would likely be homeless—and worse— due to the lack of resources in their community for convicted felons. In addition, Angela is filling in for these lack of resources, at the risk of losing the limited resources she is provide by the state.

Similarly, Alice mentioned that once her partner is released from prison, he would not be able to stay with her and their child due to his conviction and her housing voucher. When asked about how they will manage, Alice stated:

He says that he would not mess with anything for me and my daughter. So he would probably try to find somewhere else, like live at a friend's house or couch surf. He [does not] want me to lose the benefits because a lot of areas are getting really expensive despite having a degree or anything. Like people are struggling to find a stable job...

According to the National Institute of Justice Collateral Consequences Inventory (2015) there are more than 44,000 federal, state and local restrictions placed on people with criminal convictions.

Both Alice and Angela are troubled by these sanctions, and restricted in terms of providing the best support possible for their families. In a sense, the state is limiting the chance for success of incarcerated people but tying the hands of their largest support networks.

While support such as visitation, phone calls, and money were standard among most women; some went above and beyond those supports. Consider this example from Joan when asked about the support she provides for her incarcerated fiancé:

I give him a team is what I give him. I give him someone he can depend on, someone he can trust. If he says to me, “baby I need money on my account. I’m short this month” I put money on his account. I don’t do a lot [chuckles] because I don’t have a lot to spare, but I make sure he can have food. If he needs help with medical and they’re not letting him go to medical or giving him a hard time or write him a thing saying we’re going to do this, that and the other; if [it’s] not legal,, then I’m on the phone or emailing with the warden. Everything I keep in writing. I keep a record of all of it for him. So if he ever has to go back, we have it. I told him yesterday, “I need a salary, because you are a full time job. Do you not understand you are a full time job [said jokingly]?” You know, it is a lot.

Joan’s passage highlights how far and beyond Black women can go to support their loved ones.

In Joan’s case, she met her fiancé after he was incarcerated through a dating site. When they began dating, she made it her mission to read everything she could about his case and believes that his sentence was too harsh. Given her conviction, she noted feeling as though she is his connection to the outside, and mentioned she is basically his only support. During our conversation Joan seemed proud of the additional support she provided, however she mentioned many times that it was “a lot.” Her demeanor reflects the *strongblackwoman* concept, in that she somewhat minimizes the toll it takes on her and her time.

Unlike Joan, who seemed proud to be able to provide the extended support to her fiancé, Fannie’s demeanor was more exhausted while discussing all that she managed for her nephew while he was incarcerated:

So while we are going through the process and he was in the jail, I became a paralegal. I was pretty much the one he called first. We’re only 10 years apart. He’s like my little brother—I helped to raise him and his sister. Like they lived at my parent’s house for a large part of their childhood. So he calls me. I’m talking to him, I’m playing telephone game; telling his

grandmother, telling his mother—my sister—and brother what’s going on. I’m the one putting money on his commissary. I’m the one putting money on his phone account so he can make calls. I’m the one driving his grandmother across the river when he was at a facility that was near us, before he was transferred to where he ultimately did his time. That was all me. That all fell to me.

When Fannie spoke about taking on all these additional responsibilities for her nephew, it seemed as though it came at a significant expense to her overall wellness. A lot of this could have to do with the circumstances and her outlook on her nephew’s incarceration, as opposed to Joan and her fiancé. Fannie believed that because her nephew killed a passenger while driving drunk, his conviction was “preventable”. Nonetheless, she stepped in to make sure he was receiving support throughout the process, from arrest through release. Within the passage she mentions that it all fell to her. It can be gleaned that although there were multiple other members of the family, she took the large share of responsibility for her nephew.

Both Joan and Fannie illustrate the point outlined earlier by Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009). Each woman felt compelled to take on these additional roles and responsibilities for choices they did not make, and ultimately had no control over. Fannie’s mention of becoming a paralegal was not an official position, but rather in terms of everything she accomplished for her nephew. Similarly Joan’s expression of needing a salary reflects the additional time she spends helping her fiancé. Both women mentioned the *strongblackwoman* self-concept, and noted the pitfalls in their interviews. However, the discussion of all they do for their loved ones reflects their adoption of the self-concept and the ways it manifested in the incarceration context. Each of the women discussed in this section, shouldered a lot of responsibility and mentioned they felt they were the only ones that could do so, demonstrating the self-sacrificing and hard working nature of the *strongblackwoman*.

The moral parameters of strength necessitate that no “good” woman would focus on herself when struggle is omnipresent, the needs of others so profound, and the capacities of such



a “strong” woman so limitless” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p.74). The women in this study illustrate this point vividly. Oftentimes they could discuss at length the situations of their loved ones and the support they provided to them. However, they were often taken aback when asked if they had any support throughout the incarceration period. During my interview with Mia, she made an interesting point about support. The amount to which women felt supported varied depending on their personal definitions:

Support? Um, no. I can't really think of somebody that said I just want to support you because I know your brother is locked up. No, no. I guess it depends on what support means to people. I don't feel like its support [but] occasionally I'll talk to friends or [whomever] I was dating at the time...

While Mia finds support to be more than talking to friends, many identified family and friends as a type of support. Therefore, I categorized support as formal and informal for the purposes of analysis.

The number one source of support mentioned was informal (n=8)<sup>6</sup>, such as family or friends. While the majority of women discussed talking to family or friends, the often mentioned how the extent of that support was limited. For example, Audre, a 59-year-old woman located in the Midwest stated:

Yeah, my friend [Sherry]. She and I have been close for 20 some odd years, but I don't think that she likes my relationship because she says that I have hopeless faith. She says that my faith is hopeless. She's like “do you know when he's getting out?” No. “Is he coming up for parole?” Not that I know of. You know, so whatever she's asking me I don't know.

While Audre stated that her friend Sherry provides support for her, the response appears as though Sherry brings her own ideas about Audre's relationship with her to that support. Audre mentions a number of questions Sherry poses to her, as if questioning whether she should be engaging with her partner. Essentially, although Audre confides in Sherry about her experiences, the relationship does not appear supportive.

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<sup>6</sup> Audre, Joan, Joy, Charlene, Barbara, Janet, Frances, Brittney

Joan's support system—her mother—similarly reflects the stigmatization women, specifically with incarcerated partners, seem to face:

Huh [surprised tone]...My mom is huge. She may not agree with everything that I do, or everything that I desire for myself, but she never, she never pits herself against me. So I can talk to her about anything and she [is] a great source of comfort and encouragement for me.

I noted the surprised tone Joan took when I asked about support. It appeared as if she had not stopped to think about her support network, while speaking at length about being a “team” for her fiancé. Joan finds comfort in talking to her mother, but the mentioning of her mother's disagreement implies that the support her mother can provide is restricted by her own ideas about what is best for Joan.

Women that discussed non-partner incarcerated loved ones similarly expressed the extent to which support from family and friends could be limited. Take, for example, this excerpt from Charlene:

No, just family and really we just really started discussing this after he died. I think because while he was still alive we were tiptoeing around him. My dad would be like, “I don't feel like dealing with this, get out my house” and then my mom would [say], “He's a Black man and the worlds not good to him.” So it was kind of like I was the one that had to hold everybody together and I was like, “ya'll wearing me the hell put man.” So once he died we kind of just talked about it. Like we talk about it all the time now

Charlene first expressed that family is a support when asked, however she then circles back to her role as caretaker. Essentially, despite her family talking about the incarceration now, it provides only a limited amount of support for her. Joy, a 50-year-old Black woman from the Midwest, similarly expressed that informal support could only go so far within the context of incarceration:

Oh yea, I did [have support] because I have a network of family and friends in that we support each other. And I had a lot of support but at the end of the day it's your struggle. Nobody is going to be as passionate about justice for your child; nobody is going to be more passionate about that than you. So at the end of the day when you have these conversations, you talk, you meet with your friends, your family, get your pep talk or whatever, then you go home and you still got emails to write, you still got this to do, and you still have to process the fact that this is what's happening right now...

Joy's excerpt implies informal support serves the women in terms of having an outlet to express their frustrations, but it does little to help the women process and provide within the context of incarceration. This can be assumed to be true, because while the women are dealing with the experience, so too are their family members. It also sheds light why women that have partners, expressed that their informal supports stigmatize their interactions.

Toni, Fannie, Morgan, and Patrisse were the only ones to mention some type of formal support—specifically accessing therapy and counseling. Toni mentioned that while she understands the incarceration has impacted her in particular ways, she did not seek therapy solely to process that experience, but to become better in general. Additionally she notes that her access to this resource was only through stable employment. Similarly, Morgan stated that her mother put her in therapy in middle school to address behavior concerns—which she muses were linked to her father's incarceration—however, she did not mention the experience during therapy sessions and her therapist did not bring up the issue.

It is worth noting that Fannie and Toni were two of the three women considered middle class at the time of our interview. Both were employed in university positions that provided benefits such as access to mental health care. Additionally, Morgan mentioned being raised upper-middle class in her interview. This is an important point. Their acquisition of, and ability to receive, mental health services demonstrate the poignancy of intersectionality. Their class privilege granted them access and knowledge about these services that low income and working class women in this study were not privy to. For Patrisse, she mentions that therapy was a resource provided by the State when she was a child in foster care.

Five<sup>7</sup> women in the study expressed that they did not receive any support to deal with the incarceration. For example Alice stated, “No, I kind of just keep it inside basically. You know like my parents, well my dad’s in [another state], and my mom has other things to deal with, so I feel like I can deal with it myself.” Alice implies that she does not find her experience and feelings of isolation and loneliness (as discussed earlier) worthy of bothering the people in her life. Although she did not mention learning the *strongblackwoman* image, it is highlighted her in her words. She is supporting her partner, and raising a young child alone while pushing her feelings aside for those of others.

Angela similarly stated that she does not have any support, “Uh (she seems taken aback by the question) I don’t have a lot of support, but I don’t need a lot of support. I support myself because most people ain’t where I’m at so I don’t think they even know how to support me.” Angela’s words illustrate the *strongblackwoman* concept because they imply that she has given up trying to be supported. This is underscored by many answers Angela provided throughout the interview regarding not feeling seen or heard by individuals and systems within her life. Angela has decided to tell herself that she does not need support, despite the strain of incarceration she expressed earlier in the chapter.

### **Taking Care of Self**

Much like the discussion of support received, the women were often surprised when asked about how they take care of their mental and physical wellbeing. There were a variety of answers, however, oftentimes they had to take a moment to think deeply about this, whereas talking about the support they provided came with ease. Consider the following from Brittney:

[Laughs] The physical part is where I need to be focusing. [Then} maybe the mental part part will be alleviated. The working out part, I’m trying to get to that. I have so much going on that I haven’t taken that time to be working out. Because I’m listening to myself thinking, “I need to get

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<sup>7</sup> Alice, Angela, Mary, Michelle, Beverly

this off me some kind of way because it sounds really stressful.” But um mentally I go get a manicure, pedicure. I read a lot. And that’s pretty much it. And I go to church a lot, that’s another thing that really sustains me...

Within this excerpt, Brittney appears to come to the realization that she doesn’t take much time to think about all the tasks she performs. Throughout the interview she speaks at length about being the “eyes and ears” of her incarcerated partner. Her words are telling because although she knows what she wants to do, it seems to fall secondary to helping her partner. This furthers my contention that Brittney has bought into the *strongblackwoman* as part of her self-concept.

Similarly Frances laughed before answering, “I used to be very healthy, working out. I have like every piece of equipment you can think of. Prayer and meditation is a constant force in my life. I fast, at the end of the year I fast for 10 days...” The moments Frances and Brittney take to laugh seem to indicate both that they are not often asked about their wellness in this manner, and they are not doing what they feel they should. Toni also demonstrated the time it took to even think about how she cares for herself:

Hmm, take care of myself? Hmm. Walking, lots of trees, lots of oxygen. Drinking lots of water [and] occasionally tequila, my favorite upper [laughs]. Hmm dancing, like moving my body and then just loving on anything created, like flowers and babies. Yea just trying to pour out love is yea, you know how I keep myself together.

While many women were able to draw on something they did to take care of themselves, Fannie and Mia directly expressed that they did not do this well or they had limited help or assistance accessing mental health care. For example, Mia said:

Um I’ve been trying to get in counseling for the past two years, just in general for myself. That’s something I’m still working on. I’m busy with a lot and I have a lot on my plate, just outside of this. So there are times when I am numb and not really thinking about it. But there are times when I have to face it, have to sit in that pain, sit and cry about it...Just sometimes talking to my sister but I don’t get to be raw with her, she’s not a real touchy person but ya know we talk about how messed up this is. But my ultimate plan, I’m still looking for a counselor and I’m gonna definitely be talking about these things.

Mia states that she wants formal support, however it is not accessible currently. Therefore she uses informal outlets such as her sister to deal with the experience. This touches on the point

made earlier about class and access to formal resources. Mia, and a working class Black woman, has struggled to secure formal support for her life circumstances, including the incarceration of her brother. Later in the interview she notes that not being able to find adequate counseling is due to Medicaid and the lack of quality coverage. Her story illustrates the need for quality state support. Mia later spoke more about the challenges she faces in addition to navigating contact with the criminal legal system:

I have 3 children. I live with a chronic pain disorder. Just those things alone have been a lot on my plate, where I haven't really had the time to address what's going on because when it first happened, that's probably the worst I felt... but I just kind of put it to the side. It's like one of those compartmentalized things...

Mia stated that dealing with the incarceration, taking care of three children and a chronic illness all take a toll on her health, but currently she simply puts it to the side and continues managing everything. Her words reflect the self-concept of the *strongblackwoman* through her inability to let the emotions associated with having an incarcerated brother take up too much space, because of everything else going on.

Fannie's testimony is a powerful example of the toll that the *strongblackwoman* can take on the wellbeing of Black women within the context of mass incarceration. When asked how she took care of herself during the incarceration of her nephew, Fannie stated:

I can't say I did. Other than I was going to therapy, I was already in therapy when all this happened so it was part of my therapy conversation. Like I said, I was talking to some really good girlfriends [and family members]. I am diabetic. I take my medication, but I am never at the top of my own priority list. That came up in my therapy and sometimes I feel like nobody would care if I drop dead tomorrow. They would just be upset that nobody else is doing that work and now somebody else has to do it. Because I feel like sometimes I'm doing so much for other people and nobody really understands I'm dealing with this. Like I'm also the primary caretaker for my mom. Like she does not drive so yesterday I took her to get fitted for dentures. Tomorrow I have to take her for lab work, next week to get toenails clipped. So like I'm the one taking her to doctor appointments and everywhere. So it's like in addition to a paralegal, I'm also a medical care professional. So yeah that has been frustrating because I feel like nobody—like people ask how you're doing but do you really give two shits how I'm doing or does it matter how it will impact you?

As mentioned previously, Fannie takes issue with the *strongblackwoman* and the implications it has on the health of Black women. However, she also mentioned, and demonstrates, that she has internalized the self-concept. In the above passage, Fannie admits that although she has a host of medical issues, she does not prioritize herself, and to an extent feels like she cannot because there is no one else to provide care for her loved ones. Further, the pain and frustration of doing everything is evident in her words. Black feminist insights regarding strength are underscored by Fannie's words, particularly in the ways that strength is a prescriptive discourse (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). It requires that Black women muster through all adversity, unscathed, and try to help all people without limits. Further, they should not ask or expect assistance.

### **Summary & Conclusion**

In this chapter, I outlined participants' self-concepts and familial roles generally, and within the context of incarceration. Most of the women in this study held the *strongblackwoman* as a self-concept. They were socialized to become self-sacrificing caretakers within their families. This impacted the ways in which they provided support during incarceration, oftentimes at the expense of their own well-being. Additionally, the support provided was oftentimes necessary to buffer the lack of resources from the State for people during and after incarceration. Despite their limited power and resources, these women felt obligated to fill in these gaps. Further, they received limited support from informal sources and expressed the need for more adequate formal support structures.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM: PERCEPTIONS & RESISTANCE**

This chapter is intended to 1) discuss the women's perceptions of the criminal legal system prior to providing support and as shaped by their experience providing support, and 2) demonstrate how the women enacted agency to cope with their experiences. Specifically, the women highlight themes of prisonization and the prison industrial complex when discussing their understanding, perception, and experience with the legal system. Additionally, the women enact their agency and engage in activism as a way of dealing with their experiences, which I argue is an important way in which the women coped with the experience. It became clear that although this experience was out of their direct control, the women used a variety of strategies to resist what they viewed as the negative impact of the system in their lives.

#### **Early Perceptions of the Criminal Legal System**

In an effort to gauge the women's understanding of the criminal legal system prior to the secondary incarceration experience (which is important to understand since the experience may have impacted their perception), I asked about their family discussions of the criminal legal



system growing up. Most of the women (n=14)<sup>8</sup> did not express a critical understanding of the criminal legal system during childhood. This was surprising due to literature that suggests Black individuals are acutely aware of the criminal legal system and its impact on their lives and communities at very young ages (Nettles & Eng, 2019). The awareness discussed in the literature did not typically develop until young adulthood, and sometimes not until the secondary incarceration experience. Both women that grew up around people that were incarcerated, as well as those that mentioned regular interaction with the criminal legal system reflected this lack of critical assessment. Take, for example, this excerpt from Mary when asked her earliest understanding of prison:

My earliest memory? I have to actually say when my son [went], because I didn't know anybody that went to prison... I don't remember anybody in my family; at least we didn't talk about it. In the generation that I grew up in, there were a lot of things we didn't talk about. And so I don't remember any of the family we were allowed to connect with in the prison system. So my earliest memory is when I was 30 years old.

Recall Mary from Chapter 4. At the time of our interview, she was 58 years old. In this passage Mary implies that there may have been family members that were in prison, but because of the beliefs of the generation that was raising her, she was not allowed to interact with them.

Dorothy and Brittney also discussed a lack of critical understanding. Dorothy's father was incarcerated when she was a child, but when asked how her family discussed the criminal legal system, she replied, "I don't think there were conversations. I don't think there were any conversations about the criminal justice system." Similarly Brittney mentioned that she remembers people coming in and out of jail when she was a child. However, despite this exposure, she expressed a rather basic understanding of the criminal legal system:

So I never knew what the criminal justice system was. I knew that I had people that went to jail, or that did something and went to jail. They did something they should not have

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<sup>8</sup> Frances, Audre, Mary, Angela, Mia, Michele, Dorothy, Janet, Patrisse, Alice, Morgan, Toni, Brittney, and Fannie

been doing, but they would end up coming home. I [don't] remember [court cases and trials] because I'm guessing these people pled guilty because they really did the crime. So I didn't know... they went in, they came out... I never knew any specifics.

Although it appears that Brittney's exposure to the criminal legal system may have been more salient than that of Dorothy or Mary, her belief that a guilty plea is an indication of innocence highlights the lack of acute understanding of criminal legal system as referenced in the literature regarding racialized socialization (Burnett, 2012; Whitaker & Snell, 2016). Legal scholarship notes that guilty pleas are not always indicative of guilt and are often the best option for Black individuals against potential discrimination from a jury or judge (Ghandnoosh, 2014). Brittney's sentiments about innocence make her different from participants that demonstrated a more critical understanding of the criminal legal system, such as Charlene and Beverly.

While the majority of women in my sample did not come to develop a critical understanding of the criminal legal system until later in life, some recalled feeling suspicious of the criminal legal system when they were young. Oftentimes, their awareness was due to open discussions within their families about the system. Charlene, for instance, recalled how her family discussed racism in the criminal legal system and the importance of Black empowerment. She explained that her family viewed the criminal legal system as "the man" placing "his foot on the Black man's neck." Beverly also described memories of her grandmother explaining how Black people have to "pay the price" in a way that White people do not. Both of these women highlight the discrepancies in perceptions of the criminal legal system of Black (and other POC) and White people.

The ways in which the women in the current study discussed their ideas prior to contact with the criminal legal system in adulthood highlights the gendered nature of racialized socialization as discussed in Chapter 4. Moreover, the critical assessment given by Charlene uncovers a phenomenon that could be at play for Black girls—they are exposed to the criminal

legal system but are not taught how to deal with it until it becomes a burden they must face as Black women and thus caretakers of their families.

In Andrea Ritchie's book *Invisible No More* (2017), she speaks at length about the fact that Black women and other women of Color's experiences with the criminal legal system largely go under acknowledged and under theorized. I contend that just as their experiences as adults and juveniles with direct system contact go under theorized, so too does their disproportionate (and often inevitable) secondary contact with the system as caretakers. As has been outlined, the responsibility of caretaking often falls to women, and in the case of many Black women, this means supporting loved ones dealing with incarceration. The women in this study clearly illustrate that although the criminal legal system is present in their lives at young ages, critical understanding of the system is often lacking. Moreover, this was evidenced when speaking about their early perceptions of the criminal legal system. Most women discussed the system as solely impacting Black men. I pressed some women on this. For example, I asked Charlene if her family discussed Black women and the criminal legal system, to which she replied "No, nope. Not at all."

### **Perceptions Post Contact with the Criminal Legal System**

Overwhelmingly (19)<sup>9</sup>, of the women I interviewed held negative perceptions of the criminal legal system at the time of the interview. In general, they described the criminal legal system as unfair, racist, profiteering, and causing more harm than good. Their negative perceptions often came as a direct result of their experiences supporting their loved ones.

Fannie, for instance, described the criminal legal system as "a financial racquet" and stated that

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<sup>9</sup> Audre was the only one that did not express a negative view of the criminal legal system. I believe this was due to the fact that her experience, supporting her perpetrator, was vastly different than that of the other women. Although she also discussed her partner, the story of her relationship with her perpetrator seemed most salient to Audre. Her focus during the interview was on that relationship, rather than critiquing the system.

sitting through her nephew's plea hearing and seeing him "marched" into the courtroom connected to other Black men by "shackles" evoked imagery of "chain gangs and slavery."

Charlene made a similar comparison:

Because there is no slavery, what they're banking on now is the penal system. It's all about the commodity of the Black body. America is going to make their money off the Black body and they don't want to pay for it. They did it in slavery and literally they're extending these slave laws into modern day laws. There are racial disparities. So that's why they're not building more schools, they're building more jails...privatizing the jails because they're going to make money off the Black body...free labor. I think in jail my brother used to make 33 cents a day or something like that. Compared to if he was out and could make \$33 per hour [as a] carpenter.

Charlene implies that Black bodies have been (and remain) under the control of the state. While Charlene expressed having a critical understanding of the criminal legal system prior to this experience, Fannie noted that the experience allowed her to see "the practical side" of the criminal legal system.

The answers of Fannie and Charlene fall in line with those posited by various scholars (Alexander, 2012; Coates, 2015; Davis, 2003). Michele Alexander, in her work *The New Jim Crow* (2012), contends that the U.S. criminal legal system is a tool of racial control. The fact that over half of the young Black men in many large American cities have some type of contact with the criminal legal system is not, as many argue, simply a symptom of poverty and poor choices, but evidence of a new racial caste at work in the U.S. (Alexander, 2012). Alexander's work clearly outlines the history of racialized social control in the United States, the structure of mass incarceration with specific attention to the War on Drugs, and the role of race in the criminal legal system.

Charlene also mentioned profiteering and privatized prisons. Recall (when discussing the support she provided for her son Chapter 4) Michelle mentioned similar themes:

I don't get to see him as often because he always wants money, because the food is terrible in there. I thought he was just exaggerating, but as I talked to some other parents who have loved

ones in there, they say “no they don’t want that food in there”. And they charge them an arm and a leg for that. So really it’s a business and I’ve been praying against the private prisons.

All three women, Fannie, Charlene, and Michelle, touch on the money that is made from individuals being incarcerated. Charlene and Michelle attribute the shift to the inception of private prisons. They are not misguided in their concerns. In 2017, private prisons represented 8.2% of the total state and federal prison population (The Sentencing Project, 2019). The use of private prisons —justified as a cost saving measure for governments—since the 1980s facilitated unprecedented growth in incarceration without any significant cost savings to federal or state governments (The Sentencing Project, 2019). However, they have come at a great cost to marginalized communities, as mentioned by some of the women in the current study. The construction of private prisons led to the need for bodies within them, ultimately culminating in a tangle of racialized arrests and sentencing policies (Chung, Pearl, & Hunter, 2019). Beyond private prison companies, there are multiple prison profiteers including companies looking for low wage workers, phone companies that charge outrageous amounts for families to communicate with loved ones, and politicians who structure deals to build prisons in white rural communities (Alexander, 2012). Michelle and Fannie both addressed the money required to talk on the phone, and how oftentimes due to the low wages within prison, their loved ones look to them to provide those funds.

The treatment of incarcerated people also led to negative perceptions among the women.

Joan, for instance, had this to say about the treatment of people that are incarcerated:

The system punishes them over and over again—[it’s] just cruel and unusual for no reason. When they get their sentence, [the] sentence was to be incarcerated. [Incarceration] was the punishment. It should not be, now you’re not going to eat good food, you’re not going to take showers for three days, I’m going to put you in solitary confinement, oh you’re not going to get phone abilities tonight...It should not be a continuous degrading of who they are, but that is the system.

Joan views incarceration, in and of itself, as the punishment, but sees the criminal legal system as purposefully designed to ensure prolonged castigation. She believes conditions like solitary confinement, lack of nutritional food, and loss of communication “privileges” with family to be “cruel and unusual.” Joan’s argument is compelling. Indeed, if incarceration is the punishment, what is the purpose of these extra sanctions?

Mia made a similar observation about the degrading nature of imprisonment: “They are being treated like animals, animals that are about to be executed because they bit too many people.” Mia also discussed mistreatment of visitors by prison staff:

Some of the staff workers give people a really hard time. Like there are times when they don’t let us see him because of silly reasons. There was one time my sister had wires in her bra that made the metal detectors go off. They didn’t give her the option to take her bra off, so we rode an hour and forty [minutes] to see him [for nothing]. Some of them are bourgeois and nasty, and I feel like they think they have to be like that because they work there, but we are people we don’t take too kind to our family members being back there and having to live such savage lives, for ya’ll to treat us like crap. That could be mentally taxing. It’s ridiculous, and the nasty attitudes.

Mia reflected on her direct contact, which seemingly deepened her negative perception of the criminal legal system.

Interestingly, for both Mia and Joan, this was not their perception of the criminal legal system prior to their loved one’s incarceration. They similarly stated they believed that prison was rehabilitative prior to the experience. However, now they believe prison serves to further stigmatize and criminalize those inside. Mia’s discussion of “nasty” prison staff demonstrates that the stigmatization and criminalization often extends to families as well. This further reiterates my prior finding, that Black girls are not privy to the realities of the criminal legal system in the ways that we expect they might be. For the women in this sample, it is not until the burden of caretaking that they are faced with these harsh realities. Further, Mia’s discussion highlights how the reach of the prison system—the degrading of individuals—oftentimes extends

to those on the outside. Family members experiencing similar stigmatization to that of their incarcerated loved ones, is referred to as secondary prisonization (Comfort, 2008).

It is important to point out that dehumanization is key to Mia and Joan's description of the criminal legal system. Their discussion underscores a point made by Binnall (2008), which refers to current prison management schemes as "waste management" as opposed to rehabilitative settings. In essence, prisons and those who operate them view individuals inside as commodities, unworthy of rehabilitative efforts (Binnall, 2008). Tanehasi Coats (2015) refers to prisons as "Gray Wastes" due to the fact that the general public does not often have to think about what goes on behind those chain link fences. Similarly, Angela Davis (2003) states, "[Prison] relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism." Essentially, prison serves as a means for society to forget about those they deem least desirable. All too often, those undesirables are low-income people of color.

The efficacy of incarceration was also closely tied to participants' perception of the criminal legal system. I contend this is tied to the lack of critical understanding of the criminal legal system. A few women expressed disbelief that prison was not always a place for rehabilitation. Some even formed new opinions based on their secondary experience, and described incarceration as a type of school where individuals went to learn how to become better criminals. Toni illustrates this point. During our conversation she explained:

I thought that it was about rehabilitation. I always thought that. Okay you go to prison and get some psychological, spiritual, emotional help so that when you come back out you're fixed! And you're ready to be in the society and among people. I learned that uh no it's not quite set up that way. It really doesn't rehabilitate. Prison seems to be more of a university to learn how to be a better criminal. It's like a criminal institution. That is what it seemed to be, more than rehabilitation.

Joy shared a very similar perspective:

My thought process regarding the system of criminal justice is that...it's not a place to be rehabilitated. It's not a place to be reformed. From the information I have been given, basically people hone their craft there. They get better, talk to people, "oh you did that, so I won't do that". They actually figure out how to be better criminals in prison.

Mia was similar to Toni and Joy. She spoke about a "culture of prison." Mia told me that her brother has planned "get rich quick" schemes for when he is released in 2025, thought up while behind bars. She expressed that he formed these ideas based on the unspoken codes within prison, regarding lack of trust, violence to solve conflict and individualistic mindsets.

The process of dehumanizing, stigmatizing, and routinizing incarcerated people is referred to as prisonization. Clemmer's *The Prison Community* (1958) first put forth the concept of prisonization, stating, "[A]s we use the term Americanization to describe a greater or lesser degree of the immigrant's integration into the American scheme of life, we may use the term prisonization to indicate the taking on in greater or less degree of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary" (1958, p.299). While Clemmer proposed there are varying degrees of prisonization for individuals, he expressed there were certain "universal factors of prisonization." These include acceptance of an inferior role, accumulation of facts regarding prison organization, and somewhat new habits of sleeping, eating, working, and language (Clemmer, 1958). His concept has been widely adopted, and critiqued, in criminological scholarship (Shlosberg, et.al, 2018). However his foundational ideas regarding the ways in which prison is harmful to society provide important insights.

Mia believed that the culture of prison, and thus prisonization, would lead her brother to end up back on the inside, even after serving his time. Indeed, these participants described prison—and the system in general—as a criminalizing agent. This is concerning given that we expect individuals to serve time and not return to prison. However, the actual picture is harrowing, with more than 68% of released prisoners rearrested within three years (Hughes &



Wilson, 2020). Additionally, much scholarly research suggests that imprisonment affects reoffending (Nagin, Cullen, and Jonson 2008; Orsagh and Chen 1988; Shlosberg, Ho, & Mandery, 2018). This demonstrates that the concerns these women have regarding the efficacy of prison, and the criminal legal system in general, are warranted.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2020) at least 95% of all state prisoners will be released from prison at some point. The importance of maintaining contact with family throughout incarceration is well documented in the literature (deVuono-Powell, et. al, 2015). Maintaining family contact improves the chances of successful reentry and significantly reduces recidivism (Shanahan & Anudelo, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative that prisons are places of rehabilitation, that seek to foster and maintain relationships between those inside and their families. However, some women in the study spoke at length about the ways in which their family has undergone broken bonds due to the incarceration. Take, for example, this excerpt from Beverly when discussing her perception of the criminal legal system:

The penal system...[it] breaks up families because a lot of the stuff they are accused of and put in prison for is not that serious. I just think that's the worst thing they can do, is break up families. If they break up families, then as Black people we don't have a strong unit.

Beverly's answer reveals her negative perception, given she believes individuals are punished harshly. She is not misguided in her critique. Racial disparities pervade the U.S. legal system, with Black individuals being more likely to be arrested than Whites; once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted; and once convicted, they are more likely to experience lengthy prison sentences (The Sentencing Project, 2018). Additionally, Beverly stated that the incarceration of people diminishes family strength, which she believes is detrimental to Black people. Her sentiments highlight the social costs for Black people by talking about diminished social bonds.

Criminological theorists, such as Robert Sampson, have discussed at length the need for strong social bonds to mitigate crime (Sampson, 2015).

Alice and Janet are similar. Alice's partner was incarcerated in 2009. She mentioned that initially, he was incarcerated in a state with conjugal visits, and she became pregnant. During our interview, she mentioned that because she had her daughter while her partner was incarcerated, her child "knows of her dad" but "doesn't really know she has a dad." Similarly, Janet expressed these lack of social bonds when asked about challenges due to the recent incarceration of her partner:

It's just me with two kids [now]. I had to go through my whole pregnancy by myself (begins to cry). I had to have her by myself and it was hard not having him there. Like that was his first child, so he missed everything. My oldest daughter thinks he is at work.

These women specifically highlight the detrimental nature of incarceration, and the criminal legal system, for children of incarcerated parents. Alice and Janet have to step in as sole primary caregivers for children due to incarceration. While there is a wealth of literature about the impact on children of incarcerated people (Arditti, 2012; Glaze & Maruschak, 2010; LeFlore & Holston, 1990), I want to highlight the impact for the remaining parent. They felt as though they are alone, and in many ways they were. Throughout their interviews the tone of the women over the phone was very melancholy. It is evident that they are burdened, not just with their responsibilities as single mothers, but also by the toll it has on the relationship between their children and their fathers. Their stories underscore the impact for Black women as caretakers of their families.

The women in this study highlighted prisonization by mentioning the mindset shifts of their loved ones. Discussions about the culture of prison (dehumanization and the institution as a criminalizing agent) leave the women worried for the safety and well-being of their loved ones. Additionally, like in the case of Mia, they too can experience trauma from the system. These experiences take a psychological toll on the women themselves. Negative interactions led to

mistrust, anxiety, and anger within the women, despite their lack of constant direct contact. As discussed in Chapter 4, oftentimes these women do not receive (and often can not afford) formal support and their informal support systems are also limited to help them deal with these impacts.

In addition to prisonization, the women touched on the interconnected nature of racism and the pursuit of profit within the system. The term “prison industrial complex” was introduced by scholars and activists to argue that prison construction, and the push to fill them with human bodies, has been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit (Davis, 2003). It underscores a dangerous allegiance between the prison system and the corporate world. My participants discussed the profit making of prisons through their direct experiences. Davis (2003) contends that an important structural feature of the prison industrial complex is that profits are gained from social destruction. Specifically, corporations, elected officials, and government agents all have stake in the expansion of the system, which visits grief and devastation upon poor and racially dominated communities in the U.S and throughout the world. Imprisoned bodies, often Black and Brown bodies, become sources of profit who consume and produce various commodities.

### **Resisting the Criminal Legal System**

Despite the negative perceptions and experiences of dealing with the criminal legal system, the women in the study touched on many ways in which they were able to resist and expressed their resilience despite circumstance. As referenced in Chapter 2, individuals are not simply passive recipients of structural conditions. They are active agents that negotiate meaning and resist structural constraints. The women within this study provided insights into the ways in which individuals can enact their agency even under the thumb of the criminal legal system.

They demonstrated resistance and defiance in the face of the criminal legal system and under the constraints of social structures.

### **Resistance Strategies**

Black feminist scholar Maria del Guadalupe Davidson (2017) argues that agency—defined as the right to act and be seen as an actor—is *the* foundational principle in Black feminist thought. In her book *Black Women, Agency, and the New Black Feminism* (2017), she explores the differences between traditional Black feminism’s definitions of agency and the new ways in which agency is discussed by younger Black women. Davidson notes that there is no one action that constitutes agency, rather it is “reflective of a multiplicity of actions undertaken by Black women with the intention of defying systems of oppression and domination” (2017, p.5). She stresses that there are incalculable moments in U.S. history of Black women asserting their agency, both documented—such as Harriet Tubman—and undocumented everyday acts of resistance and defiance. Black women scholars and activists have developed markers of agency such as voice, resistance, community and piety, which are all unique to Black feminist traditions (Davidson, 2017).

The women within the present study clearly exemplify what it means to enact agency under structural constraints. One theme among the women was that of activism. Patricia Hill Collins (2008) states that Black women’s activism, as individuals or in groups, has occurred in two primary dimensions. The first she calls “struggles for group survival” which consists of resisting oppressive structures by undermining them (Collins, 2008, p.219). Second, she mentions “struggles for institutional transformation” which consists of actions that directly challenge legal and customary rules that enable subordination (Collins, 2008, p.219). While conceptually distinct, these dimensions are interdependent. All but two of the women, Michele

and Dorothy, noted engaging in one or both of the dimensions of activism. However, Michele expressed interest in becoming more involved, and Dorothy stated that school commitments prevent her from being as active as she would like.

In regards to the dimension of group survival, Collins states that external constraints such as racism, sexism, and poverty, along with a lack of resources, often make it difficult for Black women to participate in organized political activities (Collins, 2008). Therefore a majority of Black women employ everyday resistance strategies to undermine oppressive institutions. Education is one example that was utilized by women within my study. Charlene, for example, had this to say when asked what she did to deal with the incarceration of her brother: “Just pouring into younger boys. I used to be a substitute teacher. I used to be in there, teaching the kids all about the school to prison pipeline and stuff...” For Charlene, educating younger children about the dangers they may face as gendered and racialized beings helped her to cope with her brother’s incarceration. It also highlighted the group struggle dimension of activism given that she is educating the community. Her “undermining” of the criminal legal system consists of education Black boys about how it is structured in ways to disadvantage them.

Frances was similar. She used to be in “a position of authority” during recovery group meetings, and would ask men that were court mandated to attend questions about their situation.

She went on to state:

I think the more I interacted with individuals in the system—and they began to detail to me their struggle from the inside with correction officers and their parole officers when they got out—I felt like they needed a defender. Someone to look at their paperwork to say, “look they didn’t cross their T’s and dot their I’s here. This is your way out and we are going to work this out and get you some time off. We are going to make this work for us because they made a mistake.”

During our interview, Frances admitted that she had no formal legal training. However, as evidenced in her excerpt, that did not prevent her from wanting to help. She also spoke about calling parole officers on behalf of men that asked for her help. It is important to note that

providing education to other members of Black communities about the inequalities inherent within the criminal legal system is key to both Charlene and Frances' descriptions of their activism. They are not engaging in a large-scale organized activity. Their resistance is located within everyday discussions regarding structural inequality. Additionally, as illustrated by their language, subversion is on the behalf of the group. Both women use language that point to a collective identity among Black people.

Beverly was similar to Frances and Charlene. She mentioned talking to young people in the community about Black political and self-empowerment:

If I know a young person, I can tell them to do something better for their life—to know their rights. Have more pride because that's really important. Because if you have been in a situation where your family members have went to prison, you don't want that for yourself. And I just try to tell them to try and do better.

During our interview, Beverly expressed that her family has always been vocal about the need for Black people to understand U.S. criminal law. Beverly implies that she tries to instill a sense of empowerment within Black youth, challenging them not to accept the given narratives of their lives. Angela similarly expressed this idea of empowerment through education. She mentioned that she pushes young people “to learn more about our history and our ancestors.” Black empowerment through education about history appears to be a key resistance strategy for Beverly and Angela women. It reinforces the point that Black women's activism and subversion takes on forms that empower Black communities collectively, and exist through everyday interactions.

Joan described activism through participation in online and other formal organizations aimed at addressing issues within the criminal legal system. She found comfort through groups that enabled her to understand local laws and practices:

I am a part of FAMM (Families Against Mandatory Minimums). I'm a part of Florida Cares, which is another prison reform group. There are a lot of groups like that that I found through

Facebook. Some are just support groups. FAMM and Florida Cares, they actively pursue things in the political and legal arena to make change for the incarcerated. That's what's important. So I'm trying to align myself with groups that are going to make a difference so I'm not just spinning my wheels.

Barbara similarly discussed social media support groups, and being more politically aware since the incarcerations of her sons. When asked how she has been changed by the experience, she stated: "I am more active in social justice and stuff like that." When pushed on what this activity looks like, she said: "When they have petitions on Facebook or outside of stores and businesses, I sign. I give my opinion on how things should be." She also mentioned that she is part of online prison support groups, where she can discuss how she is feeling and hear from others with similar situations. Barbara is resisting what she sees as an "unfair system" by voicing her concerns with others that are experiencing similar situations, and taking the time to be politically active. She is not necessarily going out of her way to be involved, but she noted taking advantage of opportunities to affect change.

Joan and Barbara demonstrate the interconnected nature of Black women's activism. They both expressed that being connected to others facing similar circumstances serves as a coping mechanism for their situations. It can be assumed that given the disproportionate number of Black women that face this similar experience, many Black women exist in these online support spaces. While I did not ask about the racial make-up of their support groups, given the fact that some participants in this study shared that they saw my call for participation on Facebook, I can assume this to be true.

Social science research tends to focus on public, official, and visible political activity as the standard for activism (Collins, 2008). However, this understanding of activism pushes Black women's contributions to the margins. Black women's positions within the matrix of domination limit their ability to create overarching structural change. Therefore, equally important—for

those with less power— are everyday acts of resistance such as those performed by the women above. Through acts such as educating and empowering Black youth, and creating and participating in spaces of mutual support, the Black women in this study reflect Collin’s first dimension of Black women’s activism. Additionally, they demonstrate a multiplicity of actions that defy the oppression of Black people by the criminal legal system. They are not simply beings to be acted upon. They chose to subvert the system in ways—within their power— that involve group survival.

While the activism of the women described above was situated within “struggles for group survival”, some women (7)<sup>10</sup> clearly illustrated “struggles for institutional transformation.” The “struggles of institutional transformation” dimension outlined by Collins (2008) more closely reflects prevailing definitions of political activism and resistance. Patrisse expressed that she felt her experience having an incarcerated mother impacted her through the work opportunities she has pursued. When asked what specific things she has worked on, Patrisse stated:

I work on housing issues. I’m working on some [stuff] in the courts with the criminal justice system and the [county] prosecutor. I’m working on a domestic violence trauma court—just a lot of different things. I am on an education task force. Like I do a lot of that work (laughs), a lot of activism and advocacy work.

Patrisse implies that each of her tasks is related to activism and advocacy. The tasks she mentions each greatly impact incarcerated populations. Audre was similar to Patrisse, mentioning that she advocated at the state and federal level for eliminating juvenile life without parole sentences. Audre’s connection to this work stems from the relationship and support she provides to her perpetrator. He was convicted and sentenced to life without parole at the age of 16 for his attack on Audre and the murder of his mother.

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<sup>10</sup> Toni, Mary, Alice, Joy, Angela, Audre and Patrisse



Patrisse and Audre demonstrate activism through direct challenges to legal and customary rules. For Patrisse, the work she mentions centers on building more equitable communities. Housing issues, the criminal legal system, domestic violence, trauma, and education impacts marginalized people, including incarcerated individuals. Looking at Audre's efforts, juvenile life without parole sentences disproportionately impact youth of color. Black youth are sentenced to life without parole at a rate 10 times greater than that of white youth (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017) Each of these women is using her voice and service to uplift Black communities. This is a direct reflection of Black women's activism stemming from their lived experience.

Mary, Joy, and Toni all held leadership roles in organizations dedicated to institutional transformation. This is an important distinction, given that Patricia Hill Collins argues, "Black women's style of activism also reflects a belief that teaching people how to be self-reliant fosters more empowerment than teaching them how to follow" (2008, p 235). Both Mary and Joy started their own non-profit organizations dedicated to assisting some of the most marginalized people in their respective communities.

Additionally, the way Mary and Joy discussed the populations they serve reflects the idea that Black women's conceptualization of power includes restructuring systems so that there is not a hierarchy, but rather that all people feel empowered (Collins, 2008). For example, when asked what can be done to assist Black families with incarcerated loved ones, Mary stated,

There [are] so many people coming out of incarceration that are being shafted and don't even realize....I have walked people through expunging their record... They tell you the prison system is not a social service system but it should be. Stop lying about telling people that "this exists and this exists so when you get out you'll be able to do this, this and this." That's not [necessarily] true. That's why every week I'm on the phone [asking companies and programs], "are you all still offering services, are you still hiring folks with felonies or misdemeanors?" That's an ongoing thing.

Mary's efforts towards assistance highlight the empowerment piece that Collins discussed among Black woman leaders. Through her organization, Mary works to make sure individuals know how to find employment and social services they need to be self-reliant. During our interview she showed me the list of companies that she keeps updated to give to formerly incarcerated people. Although small, her nonprofit works to provide services and programs to help them reach their goals.

Joy similarly founded and operates a non-profit in her community that helps returning citizens navigate life post incarceration. Like Mary, Joy's organization is about empowering people to reach their goals despite their history. Specifically, Joy stated her organization helps people navigate the criminal legal system including providing things like "finger prints and FOIA requests." Additionally Joy's organization recently launched an initiative to provide tiny houses to single adults with criminal histories. Both these women illustrate the importance they see in self-reliance and empowerment. Rather than simply try to fix or address the issues they see facing incarcerated people, they provide tools that help them build.

When connecting the resistance strategies of the Black women discussed here, to the *strongblackwoman* image, as discussed in Chapter 4, a potential contradiction emerges. I contend it is similar to what hip-hop feminists refer to as "fucking with the grays" (Morgan, 1999; Cooper, 2018). Fucking with the grays is a foundational part of hip-hop feminism; it understands that people can have contradictions between the way they live and their political ideologies. In the case of the women in this study—and many Black women in general—the resistance strategies they employ can be seen as reifying the *strongblackwoman* image. Due in part to their socialization, and the experience of incarceration, they have launched into professional areas and advocacy that could further burden their lives. However, I believe the fact that the women

mentioned these acts as ways in which they felt empowered, demonstrates their agency under the constraints.

### **Pathways Forward**

Throughout the interviews I touched on many tough and sensitive topics. In order to conclude the interviews in a more neutral or positive place, we discussed their advice for supporting incarcerated loved ones and their ideas about reform. This was in line with research suggesting specific techniques when interviewing about sensitive topics (Elmir, Schmied, Jackson & Wilkes, 2011).

#### **Advice for Black Women**

Eight<sup>11</sup> of the women I interviewed had advice for Black women that focused on mechanisms for continuing to support your loved one. They advised women to “be strong” and “hang in there.” This advice harkens back to the *strongblackwoman* self-concept discussed in Chapter 4. Black women often take on the burdens of family and community, with very little help or acknowledgement of their efforts (Harris-Perry, 2011). Take, for example, this excerpt from Patrisse:

I would say support any way you can. Don't give up. Push through. So what I do a lot of times, (and it's weird because I have to stop myself and [say] this is not your responsibility) but a lot of my friends or people I grew up with...are in prison. I write everybody in prison. I send money. I be like this is not my obligation and now this person is talking to me like I'm obligated to do things and I'm not. I just do it out of the kindness of my heart....

Patrisse suggests that she over extends herself to provide help to others, which leads them to expect she will provide. Similarly Michelle advised: “Just know who you are. You have to be strong. People aren't going to understand...” Michelle appears to suggest that women should expect to experience this primarily alone.

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<sup>11</sup> Patrisse, Beverly, Alice, Audre, Barbara, Morgan, Michelle, Brittney

Both Brittney and Barbara were similar in that their advice focused on continuing to support loved ones. However, they differ from Patrisse and Michelle, because their advice centers the loved one. For example, Brittney stated:

I really would say write them, a lot. Let them know that they mean something to you. Listen to them a lot, be good listeners. Continue to pray for them. It doesn't really matter if they did the crime or not, they still are in prison. And um just to pray for their safety because there is a lot going on in there that we don't know about. It's really a whole other society.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Brittney tends to go above and beyond for her incarcerated partner. She mentioned that helping him was like having another full time job. This answer reflects her dedication to that work. Barbara's answer was like that of Brittney: "Just be there for them, give them support. Keep their head up, because they will get down on themselves being around all that negativity."

An important observation about Brittney and Barbara's advice is that neither centers Black women. Their advice is focused on serving others, not themselves. This directly highlights a fundamental issue with the *strongblackwoman* self-concept. Adoption of this image leads women to prioritize others above themselves. While it is true that being incarcerated takes a significant psychological and emotional toll, as Brittney and Barbara expressed, I have demonstrated so too does the experience of supporting incarcerated people. I believe that a lack of adherence to the *strongblackwoman* would center the needs of Black women within the context of these experiences.

Interestingly, some women (n=6)<sup>12</sup> noted that trying to do everything for their loved ones was not feasible. This demonstrates they have learned from this experience, the perils of the *strongblackwoman*, at least within the context of mass incarceration. Take, for instance, this excerpt from Fannie:

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<sup>12</sup> Fannie, Dorothy, Charlene, Alice, Mia, Frances

[Be] okay with saying no. Sometimes I tell him, “Look, I just sent you something. You’re going to have to spend wise or is it something you actually need?” My job is not to make him comfortable. So you have to remember to say no sometimes and push back. At some point [recognize] you have a life. You had a life before this happened [and] your life did not come to a screeching halt when this happened. It might have come to a pause but it did not stop and end. So you have to fight to maintain whatever was your normal you know, normal operations or normal lifestyle before that happened.

For Fannie, it is imperative for Black women who support incarcerated loved ones to use “no” when necessary. As discussed in Chapter 4, Fannie took on a lot during her nephew’s incarceration, noting she was essentially his sole provider and contact on the outside. However, here, she mentions times in which she set limits on what she could bear, and advises other Black women to do the same.

Charlene and Mia are similar. Charlene advised Black women not to “do the time with them” and “love them from afar.” Similarly, Mia explained that she had to take a step back and think about what she could reasonably provide for her brother:

Don’t feel like you have to over do it. I have to be at peace with myself that I financially can’t support my brother. As much as I want to, I have three children, and they have to come first. So if I [weren’t] as aware as I am, I would be beating myself up really, really bad about it. But I don’t. This is the reality. Just recognizing you can only do what you can.

Mia’s seems to recognize that setting limits is not an easy task. I would argue that racialized socialization and the *strongblackwoman* self-concept make it challenging for the women to establish and assert their needs within this context.

It is important to point out that establishing boundaries to maintain normalcy is key to the advice these women would give others. Also, they center Black women in their responses. Both Fannie and Charlene highlight the importance of not feeling as though you are in prison yourself. As discussed previously, the prisonization that incarcerated men often undergo permeates the lives of their families—known as secondary prisonization (Comfort, 2008). These women often experience the stigma, criminalization, routinization and negative emotions associated with the criminal legal system despite lack of primary contact. Mia similarly recognizes that given other

material and social constraints, there is only so much that can be done for incarcerated family. Instead of suffering to make everything work, as the *strongblackwoman* self-concept mandates, Mia advises to make peace with what is within your limit.

### **Resources & Assistance**

When asked what can be done to provide support for Black families with incarcerated loved ones, some participants began their discussion with how Black families and communities could help themselves. Applying Black feminist frameworks for understanding, this falls in line with literature pertaining to self-determination and Black liberation within Black communities (Khan-Cullors & Bansele, 2017; Carruthers, 2018). In *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* (2018), Charlene Carruthers contends that systems within the United States were designed by, and work for, people who meet the standards of those in power. Unfortunately, that excludes many of those that come into contact with the criminal legal system.

Michelle underscores this point when discussing what can be done to support Black families: “That’s hard. There really is no help out there because you can’t trust the system.” Using Michelle’s answer as an example, it is not hard to understand why some women in the study believed Black communities must rely on their own strategies for liberation. Take, also, this excerpt from Mia when asked about support that could be provided:

Um, that’s a complex question. Most [of] the time families can pull resources together; organizing that physical part [to help] the prisoner. There’s a lot of people and especially Black people, we have been trained to be antagonistic towards each other. Everybody wants to feel superior. Like “oh you’re not in prison but you’ve done a lot of illegal things that could have got you there, but because you are free you are better?” I feel like people have to be real with themselves, people have to check themselves on where this superior or apathetic mindset comes from [and] realize they are humans too, and got caught doing what they were doing in a bad predicament. I feel like its so many layers to that.

Mia suggests that Black people should come together to assist each other.

Dorothy is similar in her beliefs regarding what is needed to support families dealing with incarceration:

I don't like to project, but I do wish we, as a community, would be more supportive. I think most often we jump to judgment. That's fine and dandy but it doesn't help the current situation right here. This family just lost income so how can we help these families? I think it happens sometimes but I would love for it to happen more often and on a larger scale [but] that comes with so many other things. Like sometimes it's hard to do right, it's hard to help someone that is down because you don't have that much to give, but I think I would love for us to be back to that old school unity where it's like [if] one thing falls apart it's cool we got you because we are all in this together.

Both Mia and Dorothy point out the need for solidarity among Black people. As evidenced by their assertions about “community”, they view this solidarity as necessary to support families. Their views seem to focus on the individual level support that can be provided for families. It is interesting that they believe Black people are not unified. This seemingly reflects their buy-in to negative images of Black personhood. This is most unfortunate given current frames for Black liberation note the strong community bonds between Black people, as well as the power of those bonds for liberation (Taylor, 2016; Carruthers, 2018)

While Black individuals are very much community oriented, their existence on the margins of society and lack of power serve to hinder structural change that needs to take place to address mass incarceration. Some participants (n=6)<sup>13</sup> underscored this point through discussions regarding the importance of structural change. For example, Morgan contended:

I think there has to be structural differences because we know that incarceration doesn't just affect the person who's incarcerated. But I think that has to do with the nature of how we think about punishment. It is something that very much seeps out like a fog or something. So I don't know, I think it [needs to be] more on a larger scale like policy.

Morgan implies that mass incarceration has far reaching effects that can not simply be addressed at the individual level. Toni also mentioned that a large-scale policy regarding reparations for Black people could be beneficial to healing Black families impacted by incarceration:

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<sup>13</sup> Angela, Morgan, Dorothy, Fannie, Charlene and Joan

So if I could determine how some of our reparations should be spent, I think it should be spent on incarcerated individuals. Even if it's just giving them an island to themselves [for] more space and more opportunity to interact with their loved ones, to interact with professional psychologists and psychiatrists. To get out in nature and have access to oxygen and have access to the land and have [the ability] to maybe grow their own food. To become more connected to the land itself, I think would help any body that's been in a cellblock. Like [a cell block] will just make a person more insane.

Morgan expressed the need for systemic change, and Toni provided an example. I find Toni's answer interesting because she is also hinting at a need for trauma-informed care within the context of mass incarceration. Individuals involved with the criminal legal system have often been exposed to extensive violence and have significant histories of trauma (Williams, 2008). For Toni, reconnecting to nature in a setting filled with professionals and loved ones, is a rehabilitative measure for people that have experienced incarceration. Additionally, she sees a large-scale reparations policy as one way to achieve that goal. This also demonstrates that Toni is fully aware of how mass incarceration has devastated Black families and communities specifically.

Charlene and Joan similarly thought about macro-level changes as necessary for impacting the system. However, they believed Black people needed positions of power for these changes to occur. For instance, Charlene stated:

I tell people we need to get into law. We need some Black judges and lawyers. We need Black congress people. If we don't get into Congress, we can't make laws. The laws are against us. So we need people to get into Congress [who are] going to change these laws. Especially depending on the region. How do these laws impact us? Who's our advocate?

Joan similarly mentioned:

Black people really need to be fighting for positions in the places to make the laws. Because even though I voted for an amendment last year which would give people that are reentering society the ability to vote again, despite felonies, [the] white [legislators] went through the whole legislative session and made new laws that didn't involve our opinion as a people? To negate everything we had voted for? So we're out here fighting the wind, while they are out here writing the laws. The stuff that's in black and white is what matters.



Charlene and Joan are alike in their belief about Black political empowerment. They both acknowledge discriminatory laws (and their implementation) negatively impact Black communities. I contend that their experience with incarceration has made them hyper aware of these realities. In addition, their macro-level solutions still uplift ideas of Black solidarity and community. This demonstrates that regardless of level, Black women's ideas about "how we get free" reflect group survival drawing on Black empowerment, and Black solidarity to bring liberation. They also use many resistance and activist strategies to cope with the impact of incarceration in their lives, and communities.

### **Summary & Conclusion**

This chapter addressed 1) participants' perceptions of the criminal legal system as shaped by their experience providing support, and 2) demonstrated how the women have coped with the experience. Overwhelmingly the women in this study held negative perceptions of the criminal legal system, drawn from their experience supporting incarcerated loved ones. The women perceived the criminal legal system as racist, profiteering, unfair, and generally less than helpful. Despite their negative experiences, the women managed to mitigate the distress that resulted from their secondary contact with the criminal legal system. Their resistance against the criminal legal system demonstrates the agency Black women enact under structural constraints. The next and final chapter of this study will include a summary of findings, their theoretical and empirical implications, as well as suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, I will first provide a brief overview of the findings from the study. Next, I will discuss the project contributions, followed by limitations of the current project. I will conclude with recommendations based on the feedback from participants regarding criminal legal system reform and directions for future research. The overall goal of this study was to highlight the experiences of Black women that bear the burden of collateral consequences of incarceration. Specifically, I examined the experiences of 20 U.S. Black women via semi-structured life-history interviews. This research was guided by three primary questions.

**R.Q.1: What are the participant’s self-concepts and roles, and how have they been affected by the incarceration period(s)?**

The findings in Chapter 4 highlight the *strongblackwoman* within the context of mass incarceration. As mentioned, one significant finding of this study is that the women learned and oftentimes adopted the *strongblackwoman* as part of their self-concept. Overwhelmingly, the women expressed that their understandings of what it meant to be a Black woman included being

“strong”, “hardworking”, “emotionless”, and “self-sacrificing.” The women often learned these things through watching other Black women, such as their mothers and grandmothers take on most of the family care responsibilities with limited complaint. Additionally, some women expressed that they were directly told, and experienced, having to take on these responsibilities at young ages.

Utilizing an intersectional framework illuminates the ways in which controlling images of gender have been racialized in the U.S. Images of White and Black womanhood exist at different ends of the constructed continuum. White womanhood necessitates that one be dainty, helpless, prized, and pedestaled, whereas, since slavery Black women have been imaged as physically indomitable, hardworking, emotionally resilient and self-sacrificing. Basically, Black women are portrayed as endowed with qualities that make their victimization impossible, and renders that they do not suffer under any circumstance. Learning the *strongblackwoman*, as part of “good” Black womanhood negatively impacts the health and wellness of Black women. They oftentimes, are expected to, and take on much more than they can easily manage. That was evidenced in this study through the discussion of their experiences supporting incarcerated loved ones.

Under the *strongblackwoman* mandate, Black women and girls are often encouraged to think of themselves as emotional and financial caretakers of men in their lives, and associate self-care and concern with weakness and selfishness (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; hooks, 2001). In the context of incarceration this care work becomes increasingly necessary and stressful. The ways in which the women supported loved ones, most often males, reflected the internalized *strongblackwoman*. Many participants mentioned navigating the system on behalf of their loved ones, and paying for things such as phone calls, fines, restitution, visitation, and commissary

items. A common societal misconception regarding incarceration is that “taxpayers”, and by extension the state, pays for everything (Lewis & Lockwood, 2019). However, The Prison Policy Initiative estimated that families spend 2.9 billion a year on commissary and phone calls. Additionally, one report found that families on average paid \$13,000 in fines and fees (Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, 2015). These financial burdens tend to disproportionately impact poor Black families and as I have demonstrated oftentimes the ones that provide this support, in part due to racialized gender proscriptions, are Black women.

**R.Q.2: What coping strategies (negative or positive) do participants report using during and/or after the incarceration period(s)?**

Both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 address the ways in which the women coped with the experience of providing support for incarcerated family members. Chapter 4 specifically discussed individual ways women addressed their physical and mental health. As mentioned above, the women often struggled when confronted with direct questions regarding their self-care practices. Many women mentioned they did not believe they do a good job taking care of themselves. This further highlighted the self-sacrificing quality of the *strongblackwoman*. Black women invested in being recognized as “strong”, tend to edit personal needs and perspectives from their interactions (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Under the image, Black women are expected to be “superwoman”, not simply a woman or a human being. She cannot take time to reflect on her own emotions, she must always be present and ready to assist others.

Women that mentioned self-care, while still taken aback by my question, noted taking time to be alone, exercising, journaling, and venting to friends and family about the situation when possible. These individual level coping mechanisms were all informal means of dealing

with the stress of supporting incarcerated loved ones. In regards to formal coping mechanisms an intersection emerged: Only women that held middle to upper middle class status discussed accessing formal mechanisms such therapy and counseling. This seemingly suggests fundamental divides by class regarding access to formal support for Black women. While research suggests that Black women, regardless of class status, disproportionately carry the burden of collateral consequences (Thomas & Christian, 2009; Lee, et al., 2015), my findings highlight the ways they are able to deal with the experience vary by their socio-economic position.

Research suggests a cultural stigma exists regarding therapy in Black communities (Vance, 2019). However, many of the women in my study viewed therapy as a useful and necessary tool for dealing with the experience of incarceration, both for themselves and their loved ones. Despite the majority of women viewing therapy as valuable only four women mentioned actually accessing therapy. Three of them had graduate degrees and employment that provided adequate health insurance. This further highlights the failure of society to address the needs of those most vulnerable. While the women believed that they could benefit from formal support, most were not able to access it largely due to their class status.

Chapter 5 highlighted activism as a significant coping mechanism for Black women. As mentioned in Chapter 2, individuals are not simply passive recipients of structural conditions. They are active agents that negotiate meaning and resist structural constraints. The findings in this study reflect ways in which Black women enact their agency despite the structural constraints of race, class, gender and incarceration. Patricia Hill Collins (2008) states that Black women's activism, as individuals or in groups, has occurred in two primary dimensions— "struggles for group survival" which consists of resisting oppressive structures by undermining them and

“struggles for institutional transformation” which consists of actions that directly challenge legal and customary rules that enable subordination (p.219).

The women oftentimes noted that their secondary experience with incarceration led them into larger advocacy regarding criminal legal system reform. They mentioned things such as speaking to the youth about Black political and self empowerment, participating in court watch programs, starting non-profit organizations, signing petitions, and joining organizations, community boards, and task forces. Therefore, although the women noted feeling “helpless” and “powerless” against mechanisms of the criminal legal system, they enacted agency to resist its overwhelming influence. I viewed this as a way in which the women coped with the negative secondary experience of incarceration. At the individual level (helping their loved ones) they felt as though they would be consumed by the system. However, they resisted constraints via everyday resistance strategies, and organized collective action. While their roles in larger advocacy projects could reify their position in society as “strong”, their pursuit of these avenues appeared to be self-gratifying.

**R.Q.3: How has the incarceration period (s) shaped their perceptions of the criminal legal system?**

Chapter 5 also outlined the women’s perceptions of the criminal legal system. Overwhelmingly I found the women expressed negative perceptions of the criminal legal system during the interviews. In general, they described the criminal legal system as unfair, racist, profiteering, and causing more harm than good. Interestingly, their negative perceptions were a direct result of their contact with the system. Despite research that suggests Black children are acutely aware of the criminal legal system (Nettles & Eng, 2019) most of the women did not have a critical understanding of the system prior to their secondary contact.

Those that lacked a critical understanding prior to their experience supporting loved ones, largely believed the system to be unbiased and rehabilitative. This held true even for those whom mentioned having a lot of family or community members involved with the system. This finding further highlights the need for intersectional frameworks in discussing the impact of the legal system in the lives of Black people. Studies that suggest awareness regarding disparities and impacts of the criminal legal system for Black people, truly mean Black men are made acutely aware of how it impacts their lives. Additionally Black girls are also made aware of the impact for Black men, not themselves (Ritchie, 1996; Ritchie, 2017). This detrimental to Black women and girls considering they will often be impacted by the system via caretaking responsibilities or their own direct experience (Bobo & Thompson, 2010; Christian & Thomas, 2009; Lee et. al., 2015; Ritchie, 2002).

Most of the women in the study demonstrated a critical assessment of the criminal legal post secondary contact. Their experiences with the system bred feelings of anxiety, mistrust, and anger. They expressed being acutely aware of just how “treacherous” the system could be, particularly for low-income Black families. Meaning, they recognized their relatively powerless status regarding systemic racism and capitalism inherent within the criminal legal system.

The findings from participants regarding their experiences provided credence to scholarship regarding national perceptions of the criminal legal system. Characterizations of the legal system by participants as racist, profiteering and biased underscore discrepancies regarding perceptions of legal system that exist between Black and White individuals. For example, in 2013, 68% of Black people, but only 25% of White people believed the legal system was biased against Blacks (Newport, 2013). Further, their experiences exist within the larger context of

research on the prison industrial complex, which refers to the dangerous allegiance between the prison system and the corporate world.

### **Project Contributions**

This study further demonstrates the applicability and necessity of intersectionality in criminological research. Critical analysis of gender, race, and crime is a longstanding issue within the field (Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Potter, 2013). Intersectionality is assumed to be a challenging idea to grapple with, however it is necessary in criminology because it explicitly acknowledges power. Intersectionality addresses feminist criminology's calls to include the experiences of women relating to the criminal legal system (Potter, 2013). The current study utilizes intersectionality as the theoretical context for a discussion of the ways in which Black women's lives are affected by mass imprisonment. Since slavery, the representations of Black women, both negative and positive, have revolved around a social order built on their ability for hard work and resilience, yet relative powerless status in the social order (Davis, 2008).

I have demonstrated that Black women with already existing statuses as “multiply burdened”—marginalized in regard to race, gender, class, etc.— are disproportionately burdened with serving as social support systems for incarcerated men and women. This includes caring for grandchildren upon a child's incarceration, handling administrative responsibilities for incarcerated partners, and undergoing “secondary prisonization” when visiting loved ones. While the Black women in this study proved to be strong and resilient, adherence to, and acceptance of, the *strongblackwoman* image is damaging in many ways. Most importantly, it hides underlying conditions by avoiding questions that call into question systemic issues (racism, capitalism, sexism), which produce the need for Black women to be resilient or strong against these circumstances. This study illuminated the need for better state responses to mass imprisonment.



At the present moment, many of the pitfalls of the criminal legal system are seemingly becoming the responsibility of poor Black women, whom maintain a relatively powerless status in the social order.

I have also shown the importance of using the lived experiences of Black women to serve as a criterion of meaning. Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2008) stated, “for most African-American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences” (2008, p.276). The present study shares Black women’s experiences with the criminal legal system and the detrimental effects it can have on them. Through their individual stories, a collective picture emerged regarding the collective inequalities faced by Black women in the United States in general, and pertaining to the legal system specifically. This work speaks from the standpoint of Black women, and shares their partial, situated knowledge. This is important given the lack of credence Black women receive as agents of knowledge via white-male controlled social institutions (Collins, 2008). Also, it demonstrates the value that can be gleaned from talking to those most impacted by a phenomenon. Addressing the issues of Black women, serves to liberate all people (Combahee, 1982). The individual experiences, and group standpoint, of the women in the present study lend credence to the literature on collateral consequences. In addition, their experiences highlighted the multilayered and complex nature of oppression within the context of mass incarceration.

### **Addressing Limitations in Method**

As with any research project, this study has limitations. Issues of generalizability are often raised when discussing qualitative research. The ability to apply the results of a study to the general population is typically limited by the sample size of qualitative projects. Furthermore,

the self-selection of study participants may also limit its generalizability. Despite diligent recruitment efforts, my sample was limited to 20 participants. Many of these women were recruited through organizations and people with which I was already familiar. Outside of my established rapport with gatekeepers, there could be any number of reasons why the women chose to participate in the study. Nonetheless, qualitative researchers contend “transferability” should be the preferred measure for evaluating qualitative research, as opposed to positivist measures of generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability refers to if the study can generate insights that are applicable to other times and places in the human experience. Transferability is affirmed within the current study given the broad geographic representation of study sample.

Another potential limitation pertaining to the sample includes the relationship between the participants and the incarcerated loved one. For the current study, “loved one” was defined as a parent, sibling, child, or partner that had been, or was currently, incarcerated. This led to many different relationships to analyze. However, I provided one of the first known studies to incorporate various relationships into one study. This highlighted potential ways these relationships change the nature of women’s experiences. For example, women with incarcerated partners faced greater stigma from family and friends than those with bloodline relationships. This was counter to research regarding collateral consequences, which generally state that families with incarcerated members face stigma associated with the incarceration.

Finally, a potential limitation that could be raised regarding this study is the use of an all-Black sample. A question I received many times throughout this process was, “why only focus on Black women”? Studies contend that Black women are disproportionately affected by the collateral consequences of mass incarceration, specifically due to the disproportionate

incarceration of low-income, Black men and women (Christian & Thomas, 2009; Comfort, 2008; Lee, et.al, 2015; Ritchie, 2002; Ruiz, 2002). The overall goal of this study was to highlight their experiences dealing with these collateral consequences. Specifically focusing on Black women allowed for the centering of their experience—apart from other race and gender groups— and the illumination of the intersections of race, class, and gender within the context of mass incarceration for Black women. Although cross-cultural and cross-racial inquiries are useful, this study was not intended to be comparative.

### **Recommendations for Action**

An inherent component of intersectionality is praxis: putting theory into action (Potter, 2015). Patricia Hill Collins contends that Black feminist thought—the conceptual framework for this study—as a critical social theory is critical because of “its commitment to justice, for one’s own group and for other groups” (2008, p.35). Essentially, knowledge for knowledge’s sake is not enough. Black feminist thought is tied to Black women’s experiences and aims to better those experiences in some form or fashion (Collins, 2008). My concluding questions to participants focused on criminal legal system reform. Their responses, clearly outlined in Chapter 5, inform my recommendations for action.

### **Role of the Community**

Some participants expressed the desire to stop contact with the system altogether believing that the criminal legal system could not be reformed. They expressed desiring more critical discussions about the criminal legal system, and its devastating impacts, within their communities. Furthermore participants wanted policy makers and educators to speak to them about what is happening in their communities. Much in line with the discussion above regarding

subjugated knowledge, the women expressed that those with the power to create systemic change seldom involve those most impacted by their policies.

1. Communities should offer regular events and critical discussions regarding the impacts of the legal systems in the lives of community members.
2. Safe spaces should be created where individuals supporting incarcerated loved ones can go to talk about the emotions and experiences without judgment.
3. The community should hold rallies to contact policy makers on behalf of their interests. They should include workshops around political and self-empowerment for Black people.

### **Role of Community Organizations & Workers**

Participant answers regarding community organizations often centered on counseling and other formal resources for support.

1. Accessible, trauma-informed, multiculturally competent counseling and therapy should be available in communities most impacted by mass incarceration (i.e. low income Black cities).
2. More organizations should exist designated to providing legal resources (such as transportation, legal counsel, assistance applying for government assistance programs, etc.) for families dealing with incarceration.
3. Shared network systems should exist between community programs to best assist families and individuals accessing resources. .

### **Role of the State and Federal Governments**

At the governmental level, participants' ideas for reform involved anti-racism education for actors within the system, and support services for incarcerated people during and post incarceration.

1. Anti-racism education should be a mandatory part of K-12 curriculums. Additionally, individuals going into fields where they have to interact with different racial groups should be required to take quality courses and/or training on intersectionality and structural inequality.
2. Existing (and newly formed) laws and policies should be evaluated for structural inequities and restructured to alleviate any of those inconsistencies. Members of communities that may be most impacted should be included in the developments and revisions.
3. Officials should assess housing and job restrictions placed on felons
4. Political participation should exist for all currently and formerly incarcerated people. This includes reinstatement of voting rights, and the ability of voting while in prison
5. Quality education and job skill programs should exist in all U.S. prisons. Facilities should adequately prepare individuals for reintegration by connecting them to outside resources BEFORE they exit.

### **Directions for Future Research**

First, future research should focus on ethnographic research within a specific community. This could allow for a richer picture to emerge regarding the impacts of incarceration in specific communities for Black women. For instance questions regarding other mothers and community support could be uncovered. Next, scholars should seek to reach theoretical saturation among

each different familial relationship. Given the limited time and financial resources of the current study, this was not possible. However, greater numbers of participants for each category could allow for greater exploration of the ways these relationships change the nature of women's experiences. For instance, do bloodline relationships mitigate the stigma that may be associated with incarceration? In addition, cross-racial and/or cross-cultural analyses are necessary to further the discussion about the nuances of collateral consequences of incarceration. It would be interesting to see how collateral consequences may differ across various groups. For instance, how are the experiences supporting incarcerated loved one different for Latino women? How might their cultural scripts differ from those of Black women within the context of incarceration? In all, this work should be understood as an attempt to push criminal justice scholarship, specifically the literature regarding collateral consequences of mass incarceration, to be nuanced in the ways it discusses the impact for families. Without Black feminist insights regarding intersectionality, scholarship simply reifies power differentials among groups.

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Appendix A  
Call for Participation

## CALL FOR PARTICIPATION: BLACK WOMEN WITH INCARCERATED OR FORMERLY INCARCERATED LOVED ONES

Keiondra Grace is a doctoral candidate in the department of sociology at Western Michigan University. She is conducting a study for her dissertation on Black women with currently or formerly incarcerated loved ones and is looking for people to interview. Participants will engage in an approximately 45- 90-minute interview that will focus on their experiences supporting incarcerated loved ones. Participation is voluntary. In person interviews will take place in a public location of the participant's choice, or suggestions can be provided. Interviews can also be completed via telephone or electronic communication. Upon completion of the interview participants will receive a \$20 gift card as a token of appreciation for their contributions. If you meet the inclusion criteria and are interested in learning more about this study, please contact her at [keiondra.j.grace@wmich.edu](mailto:keiondra.j.grace@wmich.edu) or by calling (269) 350-3351 and leaving a message with your name and number.

Thanks and I hope to hear from you!

### **Study Qualifications- Participants must meet the following criteria to participate:**

- Be 18 years or older
- Be a Black woman with at least one current or formerly incarcerated loved one (parent/guardian, child, partner, or sibling).
- Be comfortable discussing your experiences dealing with the incarceration, focusing on information including but not limited to: identity, family roles, the impact of incarceration on personal and professional relationships, coping strategies, and view of the criminal justice system.

*If you would like more information about participating in this study, please contact Keiondra Grace by email, [keiondra.j.grace@wmich.edu](mailto:keiondra.j.grace@wmich.edu), or phone (269) 350-3351.*

Appendix B  
Participant Snapshots

**Angela (77) (6/29/2019)**

I met Angela in her home, in the Midwest. Angela had the first and longest interview of the participants, lasting about two hours. She was eager to discuss the topic. She characterized her upbringing as “simple”. Angela was an only child, and lived with her working class mother and father. Angela stated that she lived on a fixed income, receiving social security and Medicare. She decided to speak about the incarceration of both her son and grandson. Her son was incarcerated for eighteen months for embezzlement, but had been out for a while at the time of our interview. She stated her son was staying with her due to his inability to find stable housing and employment. He was not home at the time of the interview. Unfortunately, Angela stated that her son had become addicted to opioids, which she hypothesized was a way to deal with the impact of incarceration in his life.

When discussing the support she provides for her son, she spoke at length about how the State fails to rehabilitate and provide support for individuals that have had contact with the system. She recognized that the burden was falling to family members like her. In regards to her grandson, she believed that she was not doing as much as she could due to limited resources and lack of transportation. At the time of our interview, he was serving a total of 14 years for “molestation”. In order to combat the feeling of not providing enough for her grandson, Angela said she was very active in her local community regarding race relations. She mentioned various organized protests and events in community that she has participated in to help enact change. Angela expressed she has always been the type of person to care about human rights. Her first understanding of race relations came at the age of 14 with the case of Emmitt Till. She said she felt changed by watching his funeral and national coverage of his murder. From that point she

decided to dedicate time to learning about Black history and creating change within Black communities.

**Mary (58) (7/3/2019)**

I interviewed Mary in the office of her non-profit. At the time of our interview, Mary was the executive director at a non-profit in her community, and also received Social Security Disability income. Mary grew up in the Northeast, and described her childhood as “crazy and dysfunctional” due to her parent’s separation. She mentioned being close to her father. However, when she became pregnant with her son at 18, he essentially “disowned” her and she was forced to move back and forth between her aunts. Eventually, Mary married the father of her son and they moved to the South where he was stationed in the army. He was eventually discharged from the military, which ultimately led to their split. At that time she took her daughters, and moved to the Midwest, while her son stayed with his father.

During her interview, I could tell that discussing the incarceration of her son led to a sort of processing that she had not done. She often cried during the interview and took time to reflect on the questions. She was the only person (who was not a child at the time of incarceration) in the study that expressed not providing the typical supports while her son was incarcerated. I found this interesting given the way I presented the study. I thought about not including her interview in the final analysis, when she expressed this. However, Mary went on to state she did provide support once her son was home and continues to support him and his children. Mary expressed that her relationship with her son has never been good, much of which she attributed to having him at a young age and being abused by Black men throughout her life. My interview with Mary was about an hour and 15 minutes.

**Toni (57) (7/8/2019)**

I met with Toni at my university library, in a closed off study room. Toni grew up in a large city in the Midwest as a middle child, providing support to her younger brothers. Toni was retired, however had a long career in university administration. Toni expressed that growing up her oldest brother had multiple contacts with the criminal legal system. She remembered the toll it had on her parents' already strained resources. Toni went to school a few hours from her hometown, however she did not return home often. Once she graduated she stayed in her college town and began work at her alma mater until her retirement.

At the time of the interview, one of her younger brothers was incarcerated for attempting to murder the mother of his children. She expressed that she supports him by contributing to the family care package sent monthly, and helping to take care of his multiple children. While she condemns the actions of her brother, she feels that she is obligated to support him because she is "her brother's keeper". Unlike a number of other participants, Toni actually makes time to take care of her personal needs, noting that she attends therapy, gardens, and loves to be on the water. Additionally, Toni expressed that our interview was not as emotional as she believed it would be, attributing that to the work she had done in therapy over the years. Since her retirement, Toni mentioned joining a court watch program and chairing a committee to heal wounds left by racial inequities in her community. The interview with Toni was very relaxed, and she eloquently discussed mass incarceration and the impact in Black communities.

**Morgan (22) (7/15/19)**

Morgan was the youngest person to participate in the study. Also unique, her experience with incarceration was while she just four years old. Her father was incarcerated for a year for a sex offense involving a minor child. When he was released, he violated the terms of his



probation and received an additional two years. Due to the nature of his crime, Morgan spoke at length about how it has impacted her and the perception of her father. She says that while she was young, her family did not speak much about his incarceration; in fact, she was told he had gone to “activist camp.” It was not until she was in middle school that she began to “investigate” her father’s conviction.

I interviewed Morgan via phone. At the time of the interview, she was located in the Northeast, where she is currently pursuing a graduate degree. Morgan was straightforward in her responses, but also appeared to have a somber nature. She expressed that her family did not discuss her father’s incarceration and although it was an event the family directly experienced, when her father speaks about the criminal legal system it is always abstract. He does not mention his own contact, but rather how the system fails communities of color as a whole.

Morgan also noted that she identifies as an abolitionist, but her father’s crime and sex offenders in general “vex” her thoughts. Overall, Morgan painted the picture of the relationship with her father as complicated and mentioned that not processing those emotions, coupled with her current graduate degree pursuit, landed her in psychiatric treatment. She likened the experience to the prison system in the ways that it fails the mentally ill. She spoke at length about the need for mental health care such as therapy and was very aware that her upper middle class upbringing assisted in her ability to access psychiatric treatment for her issues.

**Charlene (41) (7/17/19)**

Charlene was very expressive and excited about our telephone interview. At the time, Charlene lived in the Northeastern part of the U.S. She has a master’s degree and is married with children. Charlene still lived in her home state. She stated that she grew up in “one of the most crime-ridden cities in the nation.” She made sure to mention that despite the negative stereotypes

that may be attributed to her birth city, she grew up in a two-parent household and her parents owned their house. Therefore, she believed her brother's constant contact with the legal system was shocking to her family and others. During our interview Charlene did a lot of reflecting on her upbringing and the impact it had on her brother. She mentioned that her father, "a foreigner", did not spend as much time as he should have with her brother. She also stated that her father did not understand American Black male conditions, and often felt that simply being respectable would allow his son to avoid being profiled.

Unfortunately Charlene's brother passed away shortly after his last incarceration. She often shared that because he was incarcerated so much, she does not think of him as dead, but rather still away. She noted that it was not until his passing that her family started to think about his life and the impact their actions may have had on his circumstances. During the interview she realized that her current work on "childhood trauma from an urban perspective" was a way to tell her brother she recognized his pain. She thanked me for helping her to come to that realization, and expressed that it was something she would think about long after our interview.

### **Dorothy (31) (7/17/19)**

Dorothy has the shortest interview, lasting about 28 minutes. I interviewed her via telephone. At the time of the interview, Dorothy resided in the Northeast and was pursuing a master's degree. The loved one she spoke about was her father. He was incarcerated for one year, when Dorothy was seven. Dorothy believed that the short sentence and one time contact with the system was an anomaly for many Black families. She spoke at length about how her father turned his life around to become a successful business owner. Given her language, it was clear that Dorothy had a particular idea about individuals that come into contact with the criminal legal system. Dorothy noted that her father's incarceration ultimately led to the dissolution of her

parents' relationship. Her mother chose not to stay with her father during the incarceration period, or get back together after. Dorothy expressed that this profoundly altered her childhood; because she believes her parents would have stayed together if not for the incarceration.

**Fannie (47) (7/18/2019)**

The interview with Fannie took place via telephone. Fannie grew up in the U.S. South, one of four children. She stated that her father was a blue-collar worker and pastor. Her mother worked "cleaning up white folks houses" in a close suburb. Fannie said there was a 14-year age gap between herself and her older siblings. Therefore, she mostly felt like an only child. Additionally, she had to help take care of her aging parents while growing up. Much of the caretaking responsibilities fell to Fannie, because her older siblings were out of the house and raising their own families.

At the time of our interview, Fannie was a faculty member at a university in her hometown and married to a police officer. She went into detail about the contention of present times and her husband's career, especially considering her negative perceptions of the criminal legal system. The individual she expressed providing the most support for during incarceration was her close nephew. Fannie provided a range of support, including money on books, phone calls, and visits. Additionally after her nephew's arrest, she helped him to navigate his plea deal and other discussions with actors of the criminal legal system. She also served as a conduit between him and other family members. At the time of interview, he had just been released (about a month prior) after serving three years of a ten-year sentence. Fannie has provided minimal support since his release, but expressed she was largely done, and it was now up to him to succeed. Fannie was very thoughtful in her answers and provided a lot of information.

**Alice (23) (7/21/2019)**

Alice was very concise and reserved with her answers during our phone interview. At the time, she resided in the Western region of the United States. She worked as a probation officer, but stated the income was not enough to meet her family's basic needs. Therefore, she also received public housing assistance, food benefits, and Medicaid. She spoke about the need for affordable housing and livable wages for residents across the U.S. Alice didn't really divulge much about her childhood. She mostly answered by questions directly.

Alice stated her partner was the incarcerated person she wanted to discuss. She mentioned providing a range of support and it was apparent she was struggling with the lack of his presence in the household. She mentioned many times how hard it was to be taking care of everything alone. She stated that the incarceration has caused her a lot of anxiety and depression. Alice was joyful that her partner would be released in 2020 after being incarcerated since 2009 for a violent crime. However, she expressed that his release would bring new challenges for their family. Specifically, because she has public housing assistance, and he is a violent offender, he will not be able to live with the family. Their options are to give up the housing voucher and find a place together, or live separately. Unfortunately, Alice did not think she could afford housing in her area given her part time job. Additionally, she believed he would have a hard time finding significant employment given his criminal background. Overall Alice seemed sad and exhausted from the experience of having an incarcerated partner.

**Mia (30) (7/22/19)**

Mia and I spoke via telephone. At the time, Mia still lived in her hometown in the South. She was unemployed, and her and her three children live with her sister. Mia suffers from a chronic pain disorder that makes it hard to keep stable employment. Mia said she comes for a single parent household. She contends that her mother is a narcissist, who had a better

relationship with Mia's younger brother. She believed her strained relationship with her mother resulted from her desire to hold her mom accountable for her actions. Although she had a negative relationship with her mother, Mia stated that her and her brother and sister were all close growing up.

She wanted to discuss the incarceration of her brother for our interview. She believed her mother's narcissism had a lot to do with her brother's contact with the system. Additionally, Mia stated the lack of men in their family left her brother without positive male role models. Mia was very reflective during our interview. It was clear that she had spent time thinking about her brother's incarceration and the way it has shaped her present family dynamics. She mentioned providing support for him in terms of visitation and trying to keep him positive. She felt as though prison was doing her brother a disservice, because he was not actively engaged in programs to set him up for success on the outside.

**Barbara (47) (7/29/19)**

I spoke with Barbara via phone. Barbara contacted me after seeing my call for participation posted in an online Facebook group for families with incarcerated loved ones. She was also very short and direct with her answers. Even when I pressed for more information, she seemed hesitant to share. Barbara was raised and resided in the Midwest. She said that her childhood was "unstable" and she was emancipated at 15. She said she got married shortly after, and has been married to the same man since. She stated she received SSI and Disability.

Barbara stated that both of her sons were incarcerated for a robbery they committed together. Overall, Barbara seemed defeated by the entire process, from arrest to conviction. She stated during the interview, when her sons were arrested she already knew how it was going to go. She said her husband seemed to take it hardest, sinking into a deep depression. Barbara said

that the online Facebook group was a support for her to vent. She was looking forward to the release of one of her sons soon. She expressed that one son was looking forward to completing a truck driving program upon release. She mentioned that the other son was heavily medicated while incarcerated and she and her husband would assume caretaking responsibilities for him.

**Audre (59) (7/30/19)**

I conducted the interview with Audre via the phone. At the time of our interview she was located in the Midwest, working as a legal secretary. She chose not to speak about her childhood besides the fact that she has a severely strained relationship with her mother. She felt as though her mother showed favoritism towards her brothers. Audre was somewhat of an outlier in the sample. She initially contacted me to discuss her relationship with her perpetrator. She expressed that her perpetrator was the son of a woman she considered a mother figure. One night, he stabbed Audre and murdered his mother. After about 20 years, Audre reached out to him and formed a relationship. She mentioned that she uses their story to speak about the power of forgiveness nationally. She stated they formed a bond, and she has spoke on his behalf regarding release.

In addition to her perpetrator, Audre also discussed her incarcerated partner. They met through an online dating site. Audre mentioned their relationship largely consists of a lot of deep and meaningful discussions as well as the typical means of support (commissary, phone calls, visitation, etc). Throughout the interview, Audre spoke at length about how her faith assists her significantly in navigating these experiences.

**Janet (24) (7/31/19)**

Janet contacted me via phone to participate. She was from the South and mentioned that her upbringing was relatively stable. While her father was a drug user, her mom remarried to her

stepfather when she was only seven. During our interview, Janet was very emotional. Her partner had been recently sentenced to 20 years in prison for “malicious wounding.” Janet admitted that she found the sentence excessive and it greatly affected her perception of the criminal legal system. Due to his incarceration, Janet lost her job because of lack of childcare. She also mentioned struggling to keep up with household bills due to the loss of his income.

In addition, Janet had recently given birth to a baby girl. She explained that she went through her entire pregnancy and the delivery alone. While her mother and stepfather are around, she doesn’t want to burden them with her issues. Janet also felt as though her family has passed a lot of judgment on her partner for his situation. At many points during the interview she would pause and begin to cry. Janet was the hardest interview for me, due to her emotional state. I attributed her displays of emotion to the relatively new experience with incarceration.

**Joan (44) (7/31/19)**

I interviewed Joan over the phone. She was located in the Northeast. Throughout our interview Joan was very impassioned about the topic. Joan described her childhood in great detail. Most notably, Joan was raised by a single mother and touched on many experiences that helped shape her identity. One in particular, was the work of her mother with incarcerated populations. She said because of her mother’s employment she grew a soft spot regarding issues of incarceration. At the time, Joan worked at a department store and expressed being in significant debt due to a recent divorce.

Joan’s incarcerated loved one was her partner. She met him through an online dating site, and while hesitant, decided to proceed with the relationship. She spoke at length about how she believed his conviction was excessive given his history and the offense. At the time of our interview, he had been incarcerated for 15 years, and was serving a 90-year sentence: they have

been together for two years. She expressed that although she faces stigma from her family and friends regarding her relationship, she believes in it and their connection. Joan was hopeful that her efforts would lead to her fiancé's release in the near future.

**Michelle (53) (8/16/19)**

I conducted an in person interview with Michele at a coffee shop in her area. At the time of her interview, she was a few minutes late because she had to drop off her granddaughter at daycare. When we began to talk, Michelle let me know she was from a huge family that mostly kept to themselves. She stated that her best friends were her cousins. Michele had her son in mind for our interview. She stated that her son went to trial instead of taking a plea because he maintained his innocence. Although Michelle and her son believe he is innocent, he was sentenced to 35-45 years for home invasion, criminal sexual conduct and assault with great bodily harm less than murder. It was apparent that Michelle believed her son was wrongfully convicted because she spoke at length about the inconsistencies presented during trial and mentioned that her family pooled money to get him an independent lawyer.

Michelle informed me that she learned about my study through a wrongful conviction lawyer she connected with at a local conference regarding wrongful conviction. While her son has come to terms with the sentence, Michelle expressed that she wants multiple actors in the criminal legal system to be held accountable for what she perceived as their lack of care and attention to case details. At the time of our interview *When They See Us* was recently released, and Michelle expressed that the Exonerated Five's story greatly resonated with her, specifically the fact that throughout arrest, sentencing, and trial she was often confused about terms and procedures. Overall her son's contact with the criminal legal system had left Michelle with a



newly negative perspective of the system as well as anxiety around and mistrust of law enforcement officials.

**Anna (37) (8/20/19)**

Anna called from the South after learning about the study through a friend on Facebook. She expressed that she was really excited to speak to me because it seemed that I was doing good work. Anna was the only participant that chose to not answer certain questions. For instance when I asked about her childhood she stated it was not something she wanted to revisit. At times she seemed hostile to the process. It was clear Anna only wanted to talk about the incarceration specifically. She called because her fiancé was incarcerated at the time of our interview, serving a ten-year sentence. However she also said that she had been incarcerated and was recently released. In regards to her fiancé, Anna noted that she helps him navigate the corrections department. While she is not permitted to visit, Anna said that she still serves as his major support system. Through the interview, Anna seemed very upset when discussing the criminal legal system. She mentioned that she and her fiancé made bad choices in life, however she believes that the system could do more to support her outside and provide services for him inside.

At the time of the interview Anna was not employed and was living with a friend. She had only a high school diploma, but expressed wanting to go back to school. She said it was really hard to stay positive because she feels like she gets the run around from service agencies and potential employers. Anna stated she does not feel hopeful about how they (she and her fiancé) will fair in the future, but she was trying to stay positive. Despite those outlooks, Anna was very invigorated when discussing all the ways that they system could be fixed and said she plans to advocate for those changes going forward.

**Brittney (45) (8/31/19)**

Brittney informed me that another participant, Michelle, gave her my call for participation. We met at a local teashop in her area. Brittney was raised by a single mother in a predominately Black city in the Midwest. At the time of our interview she was still living in her hometown and expressed she planned to stay there for the duration of her life. She elected not to share her income. Brittney was very inquisitive throughout the interview; stopping it many times to ask me questions. I was careful not to lead her into any particular answer, but also be upfront regarding my thoughts.

Brittney chose to discuss her incarcerated fiancé. She stated that they met before he was incarcerated, lost contact, and reconnected after a mutual friend notified her that he was in prison. Her fiancé was charged with 2<sup>nd</sup> degree murder and sentenced to life without parole. Throughout the interview Brittney went into detail about the facts of the case, which led her to believe he was wrongfully convicted. For Brittney, the biggest challenge was the run around she received from officials. She mentioned completing many administrative tasks on the behalf of her fiancé. Despite the increased work, Brittney repeatedly expressed she was happy to be able to support him.

**Joy (50) (9/12/2019)**

Joy was an interesting participant because although she spoke specifically about her son's incarceration, she also worked with returning citizens. Joy would oftentimes switch between talking about her specific experience and those of her clients. I completed my interview with Joy in her work office. Joy started her own non-profit, however she also participated in many initiatives in her community. During our interview, she stated that the criminal legal system has been part of her life for as long as she could remember. She met her biological father for the first

time in prison at the age of six. Due to that experience, she had a very critical assessment of the criminal legal system calling it “appalling”. Joy believed that the whole system needed to be “deconstructed.” She used her son as an example of how individuals are often given harsh sentences that do not fit their crimes. In her case, she mentioned that her son was given significantly less time than initially levied, because she knew how to navigate the system. Joy stated many families she worked with were unaware of the roles and power of various players in the system, particularly the prosecutor, and therefore they often accept what they are told with little rebuttal.

In the case of her son, he was initially charged with an armed robbery, with a potential sentence of 10-25 years. Given her savvy, Joy said she was able to critique the facts used to construct the charges. Ultimately he was sentenced to 90-days in boot camp. However, while in quarantine her son got into an altercation with his co-defendant (who was ultimately sentenced to seven years) and was forced to serve 3 years in prison. Joy extensively discussed the lack of support for individuals and families involved with the criminal legal system. She also championed more education in communities of color about the inner workings of the criminal legal system.

**Beverly (60) (9/20/19)**

I met with Beverly in a local library study room. At the time, she was homeless and living with a woman she met at church. She received SSDI and food benefits. She was also on dialysis. Beverly stated she grew up in a small Midwest town and has never left. She mentioned growing up her parents argued a lot because they were very young when they started their family. She was raised in the church. Her family stressed a strong emphasis on God and family. Throughout our interview, Beverly was very soft spoken. In regards to the criminal legal system,

Beverly expressed she has always been aware that the criminal legal system was racist. However, her elders often taught her to be respectful of law enforcement in an effort to mitigate potential contact. Similarly, Beverly expressed that she tells young people to be respectful of police. She stated that even today, in her community, relationships with police are “strained.”

Beverly stated that she has multiple Black male family members who have been incarcerated, but she never thought that it would be her son. When speaking of the incarceration of her son, Beverly mentioned that their strong family ties helped to ensure he did not have to use a public defender and was able to receive a reduced sentence. Her son was charged with armed robbery. According to Beverly, he served three months in jail during his trial and ultimately received probation. Beverly stated that her son unknowingly drove a friend to commit the robbery and due to the confession of the co-defendant, her son’s sentence was “knocked off.” Beverly stated that during this process she was injured on the job, and received a settlement that allowed her to pay her son’s restitution and get him released from probation. In all, Beverly noted that her strong faith enabled her to deal with the situation.

**Frances (51) (9/24/19)**

Francis and I met at her place of employment following the Narcotics Anonymous meeting she led. She mentioned she was paid to hold the meetings and maintain the building, but it did not pay much. In addition to this income, Frances also operated a small business with her husband. During our interview, Frances stated she grew up in the Midwest, within a mixed race blended family. She expressed that having a white stepfather impacted her position in her community. Both Black children and White children would give her “a hard time.” Frances admitted she grew up within a highly religious family and spoke about “wearing a double mask” in which she had one identity with her family and another with her friends and romantic partners.

Throughout the course of the interview, Frances discussed how she has always felt like a crusader for the most marginalized in her community. For example, during her Narcotics Anonymous meetings, she pinpointed individuals that had contact with the criminal legal system and began to help them navigate their probation requirements. She discussed driving individuals' family members to visit various state facilities. Frances was very matter-of-fact during our interview. Personally, she spoke about her nephews that were incarcerated. She described offering the typical support, but added that she was the only person in her family that was assisting her nephews. Providing support was challenging given her limited resources, but she was committed to helping.

**Patrisse (32) (10/25/19)**

Patrisse was my final interview. We met at a local coffee shop in her area, early in the morning before Patrisse went to work. She grew up in the Midwest. Patrisse spoke about her experience with an incarcerated mother growing up. Due to her mother's drug addiction, Patrisse and her five siblings spent time going back and forth between foster care and her grandmother's home. The back and forth was because her grandmother was "very old" and did not have the energy and resources to take care of them each time her daughter was incarcerated or out of the household.

In speaking with Patrisse, I could tell she was a quiet and reserved person. She mentioned in the interview that people often believed she was "mean", however she noted that her nature was a result of her childhood. According to Patrisse, she was a private person because the details of her life can be seen as a reason to exclude her from certain circles. She did not want to give people an opportunity to prejudge her, especially considering she does not have a formal education. At the time of our interview, her mother was no longer incarcerated and was doing

pretty well in a drug recovery program. Patrisse stated that although her mother has relapsed many times over the years, she is committed to helping her in any way possible.

Appendix C  
Interview Guide

## Demographics

- Age
  - Race/Ethnicity
  - Nationality
  - Religious Affiliation
  - Region
  - Monthly Income
  - Receive Public Assistance
  - Highest Level Education Completed
- 
- ❖ Growing up, what did you learn about what it meant to be a Black woman?
    - Region growing up, household class
  - ❖ When did you learn what the criminal justice system was?
    - Was it discussed growing up? In your community?
  - ❖ Can you tell me a little about your incarcerated loved one & the circumstances that led them to become incarcerated?
    - Age, Reason for incarceration, Relationship with them (now/ then)
  - ❖ What emotions come to mind to describe the experience of having an incarcerated loved one?
  - ❖ What type of support do you provide for your incarcerated love one?
    - -Visit? Call? Write? Financial?
  - ❖ Do you feel an obligated to support them? Why?
  - ❖ What has been your biggest challenge due to the incarceration
  - ❖ Do you think you have changed at all as a result of dealing with your loved ones situation?
  - ❖ Has your perception of the criminal justice system changed since the experience of incarceration?
  - ❖ Has the incarceration impacted your relationships with others?
    - Did your family dynamics change as a result of the incarceration?
  - ❖ What things do you do to take care of your mental and physical health?
    - Does the incarceration play heavily into your need for care?
  - ❖ Do you have or use any support to deal with this experience?



- ❖ What piece of advice would you give to other Black women dealing with the incarceration of a loved one?
- ❖ What do you think needs to be done to assist Black families with incarcerated loved ones?
- ❖ If you could wave a magic wand, what would you do to the criminal justice system?

Appendix D  
Informed Consent Form



**Western Michigan University  
Sociology**

**Principal Investigator:** Angela Moe

**Student Investigator:** Keiondra Grace

**Title of the Study:** Collateral Consequences: The Experiences of Black Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones

**STUDY SUMMARY:** This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to center and uplift the voices of Black women in regards to mass incarceration through understanding their experiences with supporting incarcerated and formerly incarcerated loved ones and will serve as Keiondra Grace's dissertation for the requirements of the doctoral degree in Sociology. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to complete an open-ended interview about your experiences supporting an incarcerated loved one. You will be asked a series of questions about the incarceration, its impact on your life, coping strategies you have utilized, your opinions about the criminal justice system, and additionally your hopes for reform. You will be asked to allow me to audio record the interview and will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym if you wish. Pseudonyms will be used for everyone to ensure confidentiality. Your time in the study will take 45 to 90 minutes to complete. Possible risks to you for taking part in the study may include distress from speaking about the ways incarceration has impacted your life. There are no significant costs associated with participating in the study aside from time and potential travel. Potential direct benefits of taking part may be a sense of empowerment from being able to discuss your experiences in an affirming space. Additionally, those who participate in this study will be providing information that may lead to a better understanding of the impacts and effects of mass incarceration in the lives of Black women, and by extension Black families and communities. The alternative to taking part in the study is to not take part in it.

You are invited to participate in this research project titled "*Collateral Consequences: The Experiences of Black Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones*" and the following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

**What are we trying to find out in this study?**

The purpose of this study is to center and uplift the voices of Black women in regards to mass incarceration through understanding their experiences with supporting incarcerated and formerly incarcerated loved ones.



**Who can participate in this study?**

You can participate if you are a Black woman, 18 years or older, with an immediate family member that has been or is currently incarcerated. Immediate family member is defined as a primary guardian (such as parent), partner, child, or sibling. You must be willing to have your interview recorded to participate in the study.

**Where will this study take place?**

Interviews for this study will take place in a quiet and safe location at a time and day of your choice. You should choose a place where you feel relaxed and comfortable speaking freely; this could be a coffee shop, library, office, etc. If you do not have access to a location that fulfills these needs, the student investigator will provide options such as a reserved meeting room or private study room at Western Michigan University.

**What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**

You will complete an open-ended interview that will last from 45-90 minutes. At the end of each interview you will be asked if you are willing to agree to any follow-up questions later on in the data collection phase to generate or clarify information if necessary. Follow-up interviews may be conducted over the phone or via email depending on your preference. You can decline to be contacted for follow-up interviews without penalty.

**What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**

You will complete an open-ended interview about your experiences supporting an incarcerated loved one. You will be asked a series of questions about the incarceration, its impact on your life, coping strategies you have utilized, your opinions about the criminal justice system, and additionally your hopes for reform. You will be asked to allow the student investigator to audio record the interview and will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym if you wish. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants to ensure confidentiality.

**What information is being measured during this study?**

This is a qualitative study which aims to understand the impact of having an incarcerated family member on the lives of Black women. In-depth interviews will allow you to speak freely about your experiences. The information collected during interviews center and uplift the voices of Black women regarding the toll of mass incarceration on Black families and communities.

**What are the risks of participating in this study, and how will these risks be minimized?**

It is possible that you might experience distress when speaking about the ways incarceration has impacted your life. The subject matter is sensitive. If you exhibit distress during the interview, or are unable to continue the interview for any reason, the interview will be ended.



**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

You may benefit from a sense of empowerment from being able to discuss your experiences in an affirming space. You will also be providing information that may lead to a better understanding of the impacts and effects of mass incarceration in the lives of Black women, and by extension Black families and communities.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**

There are no significant costs associated with the study outside of time and travel. Participants may have to pay for transportation to interview locations; however the student investigator is willing to meet participants in locations most convenient for them.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**

You will receive a \$20 gift card upon completion of the interview as a small token of appreciation for your contributions.

**Who will have access to the information collected during the study?**

Only the student investigator will have access to the information collected during the study. The student investigator will share aspects of data collected during the study with the principle investigator but no one else will know the passwords for any of the password protected security measures. This study is being conducted as a dissertation and thus will be published and available at Western Michigan University Waldo Library. Results from the study will also likely be presented at professional academic conferences, and in additional published works.

**What will happen to my information collected for this research after the study is over?**

The information collected about you for this research will not be used by or distributed to investigators for other research.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**

You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. At any time during the data collection phase of the study, you may ask to revoke portions, or the entirety of your interview.

The student investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Angie Moe at (269) 387-5276 or [angie.moe@wmich.edu](mailto:angie.moe@wmich.edu). You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at (269) 387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.





This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

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I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Please Print Your Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Letter

# WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Institutional Review Board  
FWA00007042  
IRB00000254

Date: May 23, 2019

To: Angela Moe, Principal Investigator  
Keiondra Grace, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 19-05-15

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Collateral Consequences: The Experiences of Black Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., ***add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.***). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

**A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) May 22, 2020 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.**

**When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at <https://wmich.edu/research/forms>.**

**Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.**