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RACE, GENDER, AND THE REALITIES OF REENTRY: EQUITY-CENTERED INNOVATIONS FOR SUPPORTING RETURNING CITIZENS

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of race and gender as fundamental to reentry, drawing on Black feminist theory and new empirical research. The discussion identifies persistent barriers in employment, housing, health, and family life for Black men, Black women, and other marginalized groups. Key innovations, including trauma-informed care, peer mentorship, and equity-focused policy reform, are highlighted. Actionable recommendations support practitioners and policymakers in building collaborative, culturally responsive, and structurally transformative reentry systems. Centering equity and lived experience is essential for achieving justice and successful reintegration for all returning citizens.

Keywords: Reentry, Black feminist theory, intersectionality, equity-centered policy reform

Introduction

On any given day in the United States, more than 1.9 million people are held in jails and prisons. This figure highlights how incarceration remains deeply structured by longstanding racial and gender inequalities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2025; Prison Policy Initiative, 2025). Black Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites, and Black women also experience imprisonment at much higher rates compared to other groups (The Sentencing Project, 2023; Prison Policy Initiative, 2025). Together, these numbers reveal that hundreds of thousands of marginalized men and women are released each year, often returning home to face barriers that can disrupt family reunification and community ties (Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2020; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020).

Reentry should not be viewed only as the conclusion of a sentence. Instead, it is a complex and prolonged process, often shaped by discrimination, trauma, and changing social expectations (Browning, Miller & Spruance, 2001; Collins, 2000; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020; Williams, 2019). Many in the field now recognize that typical programs, designed without attention to race and gender, often miss critical intersections, resulting in the significant needs and unique strengths of diverse groups being overlooked (Leverenz, 2014; Morash, 2010; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2020).

This article draws on significant research, practitioner expertise, and the lived experiences of returning citizens to examine how race and gender shape reentry. By focusing on persistent barriers and recent innovations, it provides actionable lessons for practitioners, supporting the development of systems that ensure successful reintegration is possible for all.

Historical and Policy Context

The roots of contemporary reentry challenges are grounded in the rise of mass incarceration during the late twentieth century, shaped by punitive policies that disproportionately targeted communities of color and people living in poverty (Alexander, 2010; Hinton, 2016; Middlemass, 2017). Historical analysis shows that as criminal justice shifted from social welfare to policing and sentencing, patterns of exclusion reflected and reproduced both racial and gender hierarchies (Hinton, 2016; Travis, 2005). Black feminist and intersectional scholarship has further underscored that these policy harms are never experienced in isolation. Black women, mothers, and LGBTQ+ individuals often encounter additional forms of surveillance and collateral damage (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Richie, 2012).

Beyond the individual, incarceration has reshaped family life and community structure. Researchers demonstrate that entire neighborhoods, especially those with concentrated disadvantage, bear the generational weight of disrupted family ties, reduced civic engagement, and diminished intergenerational mobility (Comfort, 2019; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Current reforms, including efforts at decarceration, have begun to address some of these imbalances. Yet, persistent disparities show that deeply embedded policies and social attitudes continue to make reentry significantly harder for Black men and women and for other marginalized groups (Western, 2018).

These historical trends remind us that effective reentry practice requires more than technical assistance. Practitioners and policymakers must recognize that each returning citizen's experience is shaped by these broader legacies, making equity a central concern for any agenda that aims to produce genuine reintegration and transformation.

Review of Key Evidence and Theoretical Approaches

Decades of research confirm that reentry is not a uniform experience. Outcomes are shaped by factors such as race, gender, family context, health status, and the broader social and legal structures that influence people's return home (Richie, 2012; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020). Black feminist analysis and intersectional theory encourage practitioners to acknowledge how multiple aspects of identity intersect to form patterns of disadvantage and resilience. Concepts such as "motherwork" and "spoiled identity" highlight the complex challenges that individuals face as parents and partners within the criminal legal system, drawing attention to the importance of context (Collins, 2000; Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017; Gurusami, 2019).

Reentry for Black women and men is frequently marked by concurrent struggles to secure employment, housing, and health care, while persistent stigma and extended surveillance from agencies and communities further complicate reintegration (Gurusami, 2019; Richie & Martensen, 2013; Pager, 2003; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020). Qualitative research shows that the experiences of mothers vary not only by gender or race, but also by geography and community context. For instance, Gurusami (2019) describes how formerly incarcerated Black women develop and employ collective, hypervigilant, and crisis-oriented strategies to maintain parenting roles amid systemic racism, supervision, and child welfare scrutiny. Easterling and Feldmeyer (2017) document that rural white mothers can encounter forms of stigma and spoiled identity as a result of their incarceration, with social exclusion becoming particularly acute in communities where such events are seen as a dramatic departure from the norm. At the same time, legal scholarship points out that courts and policies reinforce racialized and gendered ideals of motherhood, which complicate reentry and make family reunification more difficult (Roberts, 1995).

For fathers, reentry presents its own complex set of challenges. The child support system, as shown by Battle (2019), is a key site where policies and court practices often label non-custodial men, especially men of color, as "deadbeat dads." This labelling sharpens shame, creates feelings of exclusion, and complicates men's efforts to restore healthy family life and community engagement after incarceration.

A broad field of empirical studies indicates that discrimination, exclusionary policies, and limited culturally responsive support are persistent barriers for reentering individuals (Browning, Miller, & Spruance, 2001; Leverentz, 2014; Williams, Wilson & Bergeson, 2020). Black men often face economic insecurity and institutionalized racism, both of which undermine employment transitions and reinforce the strain of masculine identity after prison (Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019). For women, the process of coming home involves navigating histories of trauma, ongoing threats to family unity, and legal risks that put child custody in jeopardy (Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2020).

Research demonstrates that the effects of these challenges are seldom contained to the individual. Longitudinal evidence shows the impact of exclusion and instability in reentry on children, families, and entire communities (Comfort, 2019; Wildeman & Western, 2010.). Programs and interventions closely aligned with lived experience and tailored to address race, gender, and context consistently yield better outcomes in health, employment, and reduced recidivism than generic models (Lattimore et al., 2010; Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2008). Theoretical frameworks from Black feminist thought and

intersectionality continue to illuminate how overlapping systems of inequality shape the realities of reentry. These perspectives underscore the necessity for policies and interventions that are profoundly responsive to complexity and that transcend incremental changes to yield meaningful outcomes (Collins, 2000).

Realities of Reentry: Persistent Barriers

Employment Discrimination

Access to employment is one of the most significant hurdles for people returning from incarceration. Many individuals encounter outright discrimination during job searches, and background checks or licensing bans in specific industries systematically prevent people from accessing stable employment (Pager, 2003; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019). For Black men, these barriers are intensified by the intersection of racial discrimination and the stigma of a record, creating a persistent gap in both hiring and job retention. For women, particularly Black and Latina women, reentry into caregiving and service jobs remains tenuous as employers may doubt their trustworthiness or fitness for such roles (Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017; Garcia-Hallett, 2022; Gurusami, 2019).

Housing Instability

Safe, affordable housing is a significant barrier. Formerly incarcerated people are often excluded from public housing, and private landlords regularly refuse to rent to individuals with convictions, leaving many homeless or reliant on unstable group living situations (Lee & Wildeman, 2021; National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2024). Studies show that when people lack stable housing upon release, risks of recidivism and poor health outcomes increase significantly (Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2008; Williams & Bergeson, 2019; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Mothers, particularly those seeking reunification with their children, face the additional burden of meeting stringent housing requirements set by child welfare agencies (Gurusami, 2019).

Health Challenges

Incarceration increases the prevalence of chronic disease, mental health disorders, and substance use issues among affected populations (Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2008; Williams, Bergeson, & Wilson, 2020). Upon reentry, health insurance challenges and uncoordinated care often result in lapses in medication or therapy, with serious consequences for well-being. Black and Brown people face especially sharp health disparities, which are exacerbated by both systemic neglect and a lack of culturally competent services (Williams & Bergeson, 2019; Western, 2018).

Family and Community Strain

The disruption caused by incarceration reverberates through families. Children of incarcerated parents may be placed with relatives or in foster care, and family reunification is often slowed by poverty, unstable housing, and ongoing social service involvement (Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017; Lee & Wildeman, 2021). Black mothers encounter deeply ingrained stereotypes about being neglectful or unfit, adding pressure and surveillance during reunification efforts (Gurusami, 2019; Roberts, 1995). Fathers face distinct challenges with child support and legal supervision, sometimes labeled "deadbeat dads" and cycled through punitive enforcement systems that do little to stabilize family bonds (Battle, 2019).

Systemic Policy Barriers

Many of the most enduring obstacles stem from policy and structural inequity. Restrictions on voting, ineligibility for government benefits, and limited professional or educational licensing opportunities create a civic landscape in which many returning citizens cannot achieve full participation (Alexander, 2010; Chesney-Lind & Mauer, 2003; Richie, 2012). These collateral consequences intersect and compound, burdening individuals and communities and structuring a reality in which meaningful second chances remain elusive for Black and Brown communities most affected by mass incarceration.

Best Practices and Innovations

Culturally Responsive Services

Effective reentry programs prioritize culturally and gender-responsive care, tailoring approaches to the lived realities of returning citizens. The Women's Prison Association (WPA) in New York, for example, offers gender-specific trauma counseling, housing support, job training, and parenting assistance. WPA's approach emphasizes cultural humility, community engagement, and flexible case management, which is especially important for Black and Latina mothers who face layered surveillance from social services and legal systems (WPA, 2025; Garcia-Hallett, 2022; Gurusami, 2019; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020).

Pre-Release and Community-Based Support

Research demonstrates that reentry is most successful when services begin before release and follow participants into the community. The Fresh Start Program by STRIVE delivers intensive case management, one-on-one peer mentoring, and job placement with ongoing support during transition (Lattimore & Steffey, 2010; Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2013; STRIVE, 2024). The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) employs a transitional jobs approach, which includes immediate, paid work and personalized job coaching. Evaluations show that CEO participants are significantly more likely to find employment and reduce recidivism, with outcomes being strongest when support begins within three months of release (CEO, 2025; Pager, 2003; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2020).

Family Reunification and Parenting Interventions

The Family Reunion Program in New York enables approved parents and children to spend extended, home-like visits together, supporting healthy bonds during reentry. Parenting Inside Out is an evidence-based curriculum implemented in prisons and communities, building parenting skills and supporting reunification for parents who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Family-centered transitional housing and kin contact support, highlighted in both the Milwaukee County Community Reintegration Center and national peer-mentoring models, also bolster reunification for mothers and fathers resuming caregiving roles (Browning, Miller & Spruance, 2001; Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017; Parenting Inside Out, 2024; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020).

Advocacy and Systemic Change

Peer mentoring models, such as those developed by the Alliance for Community and Justice Innovation (ACJI), pair individuals with lived experience to support newly returning citizens, reduce isolation, and facilitate engagement with services (ACJI, 2024). Research by Sells et al (2020) links this mentorship to improved employment, housing, and behavioral health outcomes. Large-scale system reforms, such as "ban the box," expungement initiatives, and expanded access to Pell

Grants, are advocated by coalitions like Reentry 2030. These efforts integrate practitioner insights, research, and the lived experience of returning citizens to address barriers across policy, housing, and employment landscapes (Alexander, 2010; Chesney-Lind & Mauer, 2002; Reentry 2030, 2025).

Collectively, these innovations demonstrate that reentry success relies on multisector partnerships and robust, evidence-based support. Centering the voices of returning citizens and responding directly to their intersecting challenges provides a foundation for lasting recovery and stronger, more inclusive communities.

Applied Policy and Practice Recommendations

Practitioners and policymakers must recognize that meaningful change in reentry practice starts with centering equity and intersectionality. Organizations should adopt trauma-informed and culturally responsive service models. This includes ensuring that staff receive ongoing training in cultural humility and that program design is grounded in the realities of clients' racial, gendered, and family experiences (Garcia-Hallett, 2022; Gurusami, 2019; Morash, 2010; Williams, Spencer & Wilson, 2020). Collaboration across fields is essential; correctional agencies, healthcare providers, housing authorities, and community-based organizations should work together in sustained partnerships to address the housing, behavioral health, and parenting needs of returning citizens (Lee & Wildeman, 202; Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2013).

Continuous data monitoring is critical. Agencies should track and publish outcomes disaggregated by race, gender, and geography. These outcomes should encompass not only recidivism but also housing stability, employment quality, health improvements, and family reunification. Staff training must be ongoing, clearly tied to client feedback, and paired with evaluation tools that use both quantitative and qualitative research to assess gaps and highlight innovative solutions (Lattimore & Steffey, 2010; Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019).

Advocacy to remove structural barriers remains vital. Practitioners can partner with legal, housing, and employment advocacy groups to advocate for expanded expungement opportunities, fair hiring legislation, increased access to public housing, and policy changes that facilitate reunification and mobility for parents (Alexander, 2010; Chesney-Lind & Mauer, 2002; WPA, 2025). Reentry programs should also make a formal commitment to integrating peer mentorship, drawing on the expertise of formerly incarcerated individuals to provide practical guidance and hope (Battle, 2019; CEO, 2025; Sells et al., 2020).

Above all, agency leadership and frontline practitioners should prioritize the input and agency of returning citizens. This involves creating formal structures for participant leadership, using flexible service models, and building intentional coalitions informed by the latest research. This collaborative and responsive approach is necessary for closing equity gaps, transforming systems, and building healthier communities.

Conclusion

Reentry remains a central challenge in the criminal justice system and a defining issue for communities that are disproportionately affected by incarceration. Current research and practice show that successful reintegration requires a strong commitment to racial and gender equity, trauma-

informed care, and culturally responsive programming. The barriers faced by Black men, Black women, and other marginalized groups are complex and deeply rooted in policy, history, and social attitudes (Gurusami, 2019; Pager, 2003; Williams, Spencer, & Wilson, 2020;).

Practitioner innovations and collaborative models demonstrate that real progress is attainable. When agencies focus on providing tailored supports, fostering community partnerships, promoting client involvement, and advocating for reform, they help enable real change for individuals and families. These approaches point to new possibilities for closing equity gaps and building communities where returning citizens can reclaim agency and begin to heal and thrive.

The need for change is urgent, and sustained action is necessary. Integrating evidence-based practices, supporting policy transformation, and centering lived experience ensure that the promise of meaningful second chances becomes a reality. Equity-focused reentry is essential for genuine justice and for the health and well-being of communities everywhere.

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Williams has published widely on intersectionality, race, and social justice, co-editing key works such as *Black Males and the Criminal Justice System*, *Abolish Criminology*, and *Survivor Criminology*. His fieldwork includes studies in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, where he examined the relationship between police institutions and Black communities following nationally significant cases of police violence.

Committed to praxis, Williams has collaborated with initiatives such as the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice and the Open Society Foundations to expand restorative and transformative justice practices. He co-chairs Passaic County's inaugural Restorative Justice Hub and serves on the New Jersey Coordinating Council on Restorative Justice, where he helps design youth diversion and reentry programs across the state.

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