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## African American Matriarch's Experiences with Reentry after Incarceration

Denise Little  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Denise Little

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## Review Committee

Dr. Stephen Hampe, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty

Dr. Alethea Baker, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Dr. Brandy Benson, University Reviewer, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2022

**Abstract**

**African American Matriarchs' Experiences with Reentry after Incarceration**

**by**

**Denise Little**

**MS, Walden University, 2018**

**MS, Roosevelt University, 2008**

**BS, Roosevelt University, 2004**

**Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Psychology**

**Walden University**

**May, 2022**

## Abstract

Reentering society after incarceration can be difficult for all ex-convicts but worse for African American women. Once released from prison, these women face the challenges of reintegrating back into the community and rebuilding their lives. When released, most African American women are disproportionately under-educated, have low income, and possess little to no employment skills. As mothers, these African American women have the additional challenge of supporting a family while integrating into society. This study was conducted to examine the experiences and perspectives of African American matriarchs reentering society after incarceration. A qualitative phenomenological design guided this investigation exploring 15 African American matriarchs' experiences reentering society after incarceration. Using critical race theory, the effect of race and socioeconomic status of these women was emphasized to identify their impact on this targeted group of ex-offenders. A questionnaire and a series of follow-up interviews were employed to collect the participants' experiences. The findings identify the factors that most impacted these women when they attempted to reenter society after incarceration; themes included belief in self, finding housing, finding employment, family support, and reentry experiences. Subthemes included ethnicity, education, getting custody of children, reentry services, and job readiness. The results can inform public policies and social programs that address ex-offenders and their ability to obtain public funding or other services when reentering the community.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Being released from prison can be an exciting experience; however, it can also be terrifying for many. Once released from prison, all former inmates face challenges reintegrating back into the community, but this can be particularly difficult for African American women (Western et al., 2015). Some African American female ex-convicts find themselves unemployed, poor, and homeless (Opsal & Foley, 2013). Further complicating matters, many of these women return to the community where they were arrested, and they no longer hold the status they had pre-incarceration (Anderson & Pitner, 2018).

Additionally, formerly incarcerated African American women form a complicated population and require gender and culture-specific amenities and treatments (Jalali & Hashemi, 2019; Opsal & Foley, 2013; Perry et al., 2013). These women must collectively deal with being an ex-convict and female in addition to the oppression associated with being Black (Maruschak et al., 2015). Some of these women were mothers and were faced with regaining custody of their children. Thus, these women require holistic interventions that support their spiritual, physical, and psychological needs as well as finding stable employment, education, and housing for a successful transition into the community (Anderson & Pitner, 2018).

Though some evidence of African American women's experiences and perspectives successfully reentering society has been established, little evidence shows the specific experience of African American matriarchs re-entering the community (Mitchell & Davis, 2019). It is important to identify this group as matriarchs because they

hold special meaning in the African American community. The *Black matriarch* is a term that refers to a strong Black woman who is the head of her house. She is expected to be in control of the family due to the disparity of Black men in the labor force. Her energy is focused on making sure her children are cared for and ensuring her home runs smoothly. These Black matriarchs endure adversity for the sake of their family (Andrews et al., 2017). The matriarch is usually the family's primary caregiver, which fortifies the family's bond. Although these women may have some support from their extended families, the overall expectation is that they become financially independent and care for their own immediate families (Muthee et al., 2020).

This exploratory study addressed African American matriarchs' experiences and perspectives seeking social assistance for essential necessities, such as employment, housing, health care, and psychological needs. In considering these factors, the matriarchs' experiences and perspectives re-entering into their community can bring attention to the inequality they often face in a society that challenges their livelihood. The following chapter presents a background on the study as well as details on the nature of the study, definitions of key terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study.

### **Background**

With the number of incarcerated people increasing, the number of people returning to the community has also increased. In the past decade, the United States has shown a growing number of ex-convicts re-entering society (FBI, 2015). In 2018, according to the Department of Justice, more than 10 million people were arrested in the

United States; of these, over 219,000 were Black women. Similarly, over 700,000 ex-convicts are released back into the community each year, and at least 9,000 are women of color (Department of Justice, 2019). Black ex-offenders are disproportionately challenged in health care, housing, and employment (Muthee et al., 2020). Black people are denied political, social, and economic help with societal re-entry (Forman, 2018). Though most women returning to the community after incarceration may experience similar barriers, African American women's experiences have been worse than other ex-convicts.

Black women possess a unique set of problems when it comes to re-entry. Due to a historical race-based disparity in society, particularly with social services, oppression, and abuse, at least 80% of Black women suffer from some form of comorbidity (i.e., depression, sexual assault, violence, posttraumatic stress disorder; (Donovan & West, 2015). Because of these traumatic events, women are more likely than men to shift from substance abuse to alcohol or drug dependency, with many becoming addicted to more than one substance (McHugh et al., 2018). As treatment is often lacking in prison, the illness often intensifies, producing additional distress during societal reentry (Mitchell & Davis 2019). Too often, these women are also mothers. For example, in Illinois, at least 48% of all Black women re-entering the community after incarceration under 31 were mothers, and 51% of these women were from a lower socioeconomic neighborhood. The educational level of these women ranged from elementary school to some college. However, 33% of these women did not complete high school or GED (IL DOC, 2017).

For women of color to re-enter society successfully, there need to be more available and equitable services (Gordon, 2018). But studies focusing on a lack of resources during reentry lack information about African American women's unique obstacles and experiences when obtaining housing, employment, and health care (Oser et al., 2016). More attention needs to be given to reentry resources, rehabilitation, and determining why the current system does not support African American women (Christian, 2013). Further, due to issues with culture, race disparity, gender, and class, more understanding is needed about African American women's perceptions and experiences as they negotiate the context of re-entering their neighborhood (Opsal & Foley, 2013). Other researchers concur, suggesting a lack of research overall on the reasons for racial inequality regarding resources in the African American community (McMahon, 2013).

Previous reentry research has focused on men's experiences; however, little research focuses on women's experiences (Bowleg et al., 2013; Griffith et al., 2013; Lurigio et al., 2016). Further, little research focuses on African American women who are the head of their house and are reentering society after incarceration (Callahan et al., 2016; Heidemann et al., 2016). Most research on men's experiences is generalized to reflect women's experiences, but few, if any, capture women's actual experiences as the matriarch (Link & Oser, 2018). The matriarch is a powerful woman who single-handedly controls her home; the matriarch provides stability to keep the home organized and operational (Sewell, 2013). However, little research focuses on Black female ex-convicts' long-term success with children and how they can surmount the numerous obstacles

while trying to improve and successfully sustain their matriarchal lifestyle (Mitchell & Davis 2019). This study addresses these gaps in the research by focusing on the experiences of African American women matriarchs reentering society after incarceration.

### **Problem Statement**

As recently as 2017, in the United States, the number of previously incarcerated African American women reentering their community rose from 8% to 12% (IL DOC, 2017). Most of these women reentering the community are matriarchs with limited skills, major health problems, alcohol or substance abuse history, and mental illness (Ruiz & Kopak, 2014). But they are uniquely challenged by a lack of dedicated social services that facilitate a sustainable existence for themselves and their dependent children. Though most Black women are resilient when starting over, being Black heads of the household makes reentering their community more difficult (Donovan & West, 2015). Upon their release, these women require exceptional support and resources to adequately care for their children and reintegrate back into the community.

Research on ex-convicts reentering society has focused mostly on Caucasians and men. There is little research on African American women's experiences in the United States reentering society after incarceration even though in 2016 there were an estimated 21,340 African American women in prison and 26,900 African American women in jail (Carson, 2016). Of these, 15,647 are reportedly matriarchs (Ruiz & Kopak, 2014). Moreover, there is a gap in the knowledge regarding African American matriarchs returning to the community. This study addressed the gap by providing an in-depth



exploration of their experiences reentering their community after incarceration, the challenges they faced, and what resources were accessible in that effort. Specifically, I explored how they attempted to find employment, housing, transportation, regain custody of their children, and reinstate control of their home.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to provide new research on the lived experiences of African American matriarchs reentering society after incarceration. The results will contribute to the literature by providing African American matriarchs' perspectives and challenges when reentering their community such as their experiences when seeking housing, jobs, and education during reentry. Analysis of these women's experiences can also further inform social programs and public policies that target ex-offenders, particularly those that may directly impact single mothers seeking resources, comprehension of these women's encounters, and perspectives while seeking assistance reentering society. Lastly, this research contributes to the body of literature on critical race theory (CRT) as it investigates how race impacts the societal perception of formerly incarcerated Black mothers who are heads of their households.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to gather information about African American matriarchs' experience when reentering society:

Research Question 1: In what ways do African American matriarchs describe their experiences when reentering the community after incarceration?

Research Question 2: In what ways do formerly incarcerated African American matriarchs obtain human services (e.g., health care, employment, childcare) when reentering society?

Research Question 3: In what ways has race impacted reentry into society for formerly incarcerated African American matriarchs?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework is grounded in CRT (Heenehan, 2020). CRT is the use of first-hand knowledge regarding the Black population and their culture to emphasize how race, racism, and oppression, directly and indirectly, affect minorities' culture. CRT states that racism and racial inequality are repetitive and determine how individuals are perceived and treated in society. Further, it claims that organizations and institutions are mainly responsible for persistent racial disparity (Heenehan, 2020).

In the early 1970s, Derrick Bell, the first African American professor at Harvard Law School, started the CRT movement to examine the appearance of racism in the Black community (Delgado et al., 2013). In the 1980s, Kimberle Crenshaw continued to use CRT to address oppression and promote understanding black women's experiences of being Black and being a woman in a racist society. CRT can be traced back to the civil rights era and Black women's roles in the anti-slavery movement from the 1830s to the present. In this study, CRT addresses the role of race and racism concerning Black matriarchs' experiences and disparities, with employment, housing, and educational resources upon societal reentry following incarceration. It also informed the study's analysis about racism (Montaño & Kasprzyk, 2015) about this target population.

### **Nature of the Study**

The research method for this study was qualitative with a phenomenological design, allowing me to study the phenomenon in an interpretive environment using semistructured interviews (Creswell, 2018). The sampling strategy was a convenience selection of participants from a social service agency that provided reentry services. In addition, snowball sampling was used as a follow-up approach by requesting referrals from previously selected participants because additional participants were needed.

To ensure rich data, I conducted interviews with 15 ex-convict African American matriarchs reentering society after incarceration who were not on parole or probation. In qualitative research, the sample size is dependent on the paradigm used to collect the data. Data collection continued until saturation, which is when the researcher is unable to obtain any new information and is an indication that there are sufficient samples (Lowe, Norris, Farris, & Babbage, 2018). According to previous research, eight to 10 participants are sufficient to reach saturation for the phenomenological design (Creswell, 2018).

Data were collected using face-to-face, semistructured interviews via teleconference and videoconference. The interview elicited the participants' experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Data analysis is the process of organizing the data according to themes, emotions, and other unexpected sections. The data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software (Faber et al., 2019). NVivo was used to organize non-numerical and unstructured data. The software was used to classify, sort, examine themes in the data, arrange data, and combine analysis.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Desistance:* To desist from committing crimes. Desistance is a way of thinking for some ex-convicts when the ex-criminal reaches a point in their life and ceases committing criminal acts (Kay, 2015).

*Disparity:* Unequal treatment based on race, sex, culture, sexual orientation, or any discriminatory act (Link & Oster, 2018).

*Ex-offender:* An individual who was no longer incarcerated but is now released (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016).

*Matriarch:* Women in authority within the household who takes charge of the children, the chores, and the home's finances (Swell, 2013).

*Recidivism:* An ex-convict who has undergone rehabilitation who relapses and re-offends. Recidivism usually occurs within 3 years of the person being released from prison. The ex-convict usually commits a crime similar to the original crime (Brock, 2017).

*Reentry:* For the purposes of this study, reentry refers to the successful return to the community using legal and socially acceptable practices (Cobbina & Bender, 2012).

*Socioeconomic status:* An individual or group's financial and class rank in society. Socioeconomic status could determine how a person is perceived and treated by the community. Some individuals are denied services based on their income, race, and sexual orientation (Potter et al., 2019).

### **Assumptions**

This study was based on the assumptions that (a) the participants were truthful in answering the questions and sharing their experiences; (b) some of the participants had similar reentry experiences; (c) the participants provided an accurate description of their reintegration experiences, and (d) the participants had a vested interest in the study and were not doing it for any secular benefit. These assumptions ensure that any criteria outside of my control had minimal impact on the study's outcome.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope included how socioeconomic status, race, and gender affected African American matriarchs' reintegration experiences and perspectives after incarceration. Specifically, the research focused on these targeted ex-offenders' experiences finding employment, housing, and other basic necessities. Participants included 15 African American ex-offenders who were classified as matriarchs. Age was not a factor. Therefore, the delimitations of the study included collecting data from a specific population in a major city in the Midwestern United States in Illinois. Exclusion criteria consisted of non-African Americans, males, and women who were not matriarchs.

### **Limitations**

A limitation to this research is that this qualitative study is limited to African American matriarch ex-convicts, not on parole or supervision; therefore, this study may not be transferable or generalizable to the broader populations of non-African American matriarchs or female African American ex-offenders. In addition, teleconferencing and videoconferencing were utilized due to the COVID-19 virus, which may have limited the

information from participants who were less comfortable with those communication platforms. I also made a reasonable attempt to avoid any personal biases that could have affected the results.

### **Significance**

This study may contribute to advancing knowledge concerning African American matriarch ex-offender reintegration back into the community. Women in this situation offered information regarding their experiences and how they navigated the system, which could assist other women in similar circumstances. It can also encourage policymakers to provide more equitable and substantive assistance to re-integrating this population, including increased mechanisms to help these women navigate the existing human service system. Further, these results could have significant implications for lawmakers to change the policies and practices that impact ex-offenders. Such changes could enable these women a way out of poverty and allow them the opportunity to take care of their families while reentering the community. This research could also create a more consistent view of these women's reintegration experiences, which could help streamline the transition from being incarcerated to returning to the community.

### **Summary**

Research has shown that some African American women reentering the community after incarceration may face some barriers when reentering society (Callahan et al., 2016). However, there is limited information about African American matriarch experiences reintegrating after incarceration. The problem is that the lived experiences of Black matriarchs when they are released from incarceration are uniquely challenged by a

lack of dedicated social services that facilitate a sustainable existence for themselves and their dependent children. Chapter 1 presented the topic for this study: formerly incarcerated African American women matriarchs attempting to reintegrate into society. In Chapter 2, I will provide a review of the literature that explored various viewpoints regarding African American matriarchs' reentry experiences after incarceration.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore African American matriarchs' experiences reentering society after incarceration, which brings attention to these women's experiences when looking for housing, employment, and education. Understanding what these women go through can encourage policymakers to change the policies to help these women better navigate the system. It can also help them find resources specific to their needs (Anderson & Pitner, 2018). Based on the current literature, African American women continue to deal with oppression and disparity, similar to women's experiences in the 1950s. Disproportionately, Black women are subjected to poor standards due to lower educational attainments and lower social-economic status (Link & Oster, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2017), 66% of all Black women in the United States are either uneducated or undereducated. There needs to be more understanding of African American women's experiences and any barriers they may endure while reentering the community. Further, there needs to be a long-term solution to women's experiences and their perception of how they are treated when reentering society (Tiburcio, 2008).

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To identify relevant literature, the following databases were used: EBSCOHost, PsycINFO, psycARTICLES, and SocINDEX. Most of the articles used are peer-reviewed articles dated from 1988–2020. Keywords included, but were not limited to *recidivism, jail, prison, women of color, African American women, Black women, abuse, locked up reentry, reintegration, released, incarceration, convicts, ex-convicts, community, and*



*resources*. In addition, the following terms were added to refine the search further: *women's experiences*, *women of color*, *ex-offender*, and *socioeconomic status*. Finally, due to the limited literature regarding African American women and their experiences reentering the community after incarceration, a few articles were included that were not peer-reviewed, specifically documentaries written about women with these experiences.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is CRT (Johnson, 2015). This framework was based on Black women's culture, gender, social network, and experiences (Hamilton, 2003). This approach was conceptualized by Blacks fighting segregation due to the enslavement of Blacks in the 1800s. The theory evolved from Black women's role in the anti-slavery movement in 1830. Race and gender are social categories usually viewed through successful White men's experiences to identify differences among people (Haslanger, 2000). However, both categories were based on assumptions and beliefs on an individual and social level that affect African Americans' thoughts, feelings, behaviors, resources, and treatment (Bell & Nkomo, 2001). Using CRT can allow the reader to understand why Black women's experiences reentering their community after incarceration are different from other populations.

### **Critical Race Theory**

In this research, CRT was used to signify the relationship between the authorities, people of color, racial tension, segregation, and subordination to help combat racism. CRT purports that White privilege and racial sovereignty are sustained over time due to racism and disparity. From the Civil Rights movements to the 21st century, African

Americans have continued to battle similar racial tension and oppression that Black Americans endured in the 1800s. In 1866, the Civil Rights Act was signed and passed by Congress, which stated that all Blacks were citizens; however, they continued to suffer at the hands of Whites. White supremacy groups rioted against Blacks and even created a “Black code” that restricted them from truly being free. Section 1 of the 14th Amendment was passed in 1868, which offered protection to all citizens; however, it would take years before the law would be even marginally applied to Black citizens. As such, during the time of its passage, Whites continued to torture Black citizens. In 1876, Jim Crow became a state and local law that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. This law was mainly in the Southern states and used to separate and marginalize African Americans in shared public spaces. African Americans accused of defying the law were severely punished regardless of their newfound citizenship status. In the 1900s, when race-neutral laws were put into effect to minimize racism and eliminate segregation, the oppression of Blacks continued (Crenshaw, 1988).

From the ongoing racial tension and disparity for African Americans, CRT emerged. CRT is in line with DuBois’s mission to integrate racism with White supremacy. DuBois felt that for Blacks to achieve empowerment, there had to be cultivation and dissemination of the African American population. CRT applies to advocacy in the 1900s for justice for people of color by evading the issues of race, oppression, and dissemination (Schiffer, 2014). According to CRT, racism and racial inequality are continual and determine how an individual is perceived and treated in society. Organizations and institutions are mainly responsible for persistent racial

disparity (Reece, 2018). Some of the common tenets of CRT agreed upon by most theorists are that racism is a common everyday experience that is not discussed to avoid it. Essentially, racism continues to exist because White power is not interested in changing their way of thinking (Schiffer, 2014).

Some examples of CRT in historical action can be seen in the U.S. military and throughout the Civil Rights Movement. In 1948, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, ending segregation in the military. However, racism, prejudice, discrimination, and inequities still existed. The Civil Rights Movement began in the 1950s, rallying against segregation. It started with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, ruling that public schools' racial segregation was unconstitutional. In 1957 nine African American female students were denied enrollment in Little Rock Central High School due to racial segregation by Governor Faubus. The students' struggle was sustained by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which stated that school segregation was unconstitutional. However, White protesters became violent, attacking the students. One student was expelled because she fought back. Governor Faubus was reelected in 1958, but instead of desegregation, he closed all of Little Rock's schools (Devlin, 2018). The following century continued to spawn protest after protest with Blacks fighting for equal rights.

In response to the Civil Rights Movement in the 70s, a group of legal scholars officially coined CRT (Simba, 2017); however, Derrick Bell has been credited as CRT's founder (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Bell attended the American Association of Law Schools and Critical Legal Studies annual conference to discuss mainstream issues at

Harvard Law School, though he resigned due to a lack of diversity at the school (Simba, 2017). CRT gained momentum in the 80s when conservative Supreme Court policies slowed the progress made in the 60s after the Civil Rights Movement. New terms like *colorblindness* and *race/gender elimination* made it difficult for states and Congress to address racial and gender inequality issues. CRTs acknowledged the historical role that laws played in hindering Blacks from advancing. For Black women, that sentiment is extended. In that regard, Crenshaw (1991) proposed that if gender were eliminated from the analysis of racism, only the need for men of color would be addressed.

In the late 80s, Kimberlé Crenshaw (2011) and 23 law students at Harvard University further developed CRT. Crenshaw stated that CRT arose as an intervention for women of color and examined the relationship between race, racism, power, and how women of color lives were shaped due to racism. Crenshaw and the 23 members' objective was to advance Black people's future by exploring the race and gender magnitudes of discrimination and violence against people of color. CRT is used by women to address disparities (Schiffer, 2014; Trevino et al., 2008) and to analyze issues confronted by Black women (Johnson, 2015). For example, CRT may be used to explain how African American women were thought of as possessions or slaves to White men and unable to contribute financially, and whose sole role was to be supportive wives to their spouses (Hamilton, 2003). Two prevailing stereotypes associated with African American women during these historical periods (and to some extent today) were that they are not educated and are only suitable for domestic chores. At that time, it was

perceived that African American women could not care for themselves or even get an education (Hamilton, 2003).

In 2013, African Americans took center stage in response to police shootings and racial profiling of Black men. In 2015, the police killed a Black man in Missouri, which sparked the Black Lives Matter initiative (Dixson, 2017). In this new movement, CRT can be used to understand and promote interventions for the issues that affect the lives of Black people. As such, the media began to report how little value was placed on the lives of Black men and women (Dixson, 2017). In response, there have been at least 85 federal and state laws passed in response to Black Lives Matter. In 2016, a group of leaders from 50 organizations convened to present demands that the Black community wanted to see (Harris, 2018). Some of the demands were to end the unnecessary killing of Black men and women by law enforcement and focus on education and employment in the Black community (Harris, 2018). A struggle for equality has always included a fight for education and employment (McPhearson, 2014).

When considering African American women who were formerly incarcerated and trying to reenter society, CRT can illustrate how vital race may be for this population. Crenshaw (1989) suggested that race, class, gender, sex, and social-economic status contribute to the marginalization of Blacks; CRT not only questions essentialism in African American women but can be applied to the experiences of African American matriarchs to examine their experiences when reentering the community. CRT can explain the experiences of African American women who are reentering society and potentially increase their chances of successfully reintegrating into the community

(Simien, 2004). With such understanding, the reentry process could be made more accessible, helping these newly released women become gainfully employed, connect with their family, community, and live a productive life. Though the Hamilton project (2003) used the Community and Law Enforcement Resources Together (ComALERT) and Reintegration of Offenders frameworks to address problems with reentry, these frameworks do not address the specific and unique needs of African American women ex-offenders. These frameworks missed important considerations or features that are critical for Black women (Hamilton, 2003), such as experiencing a unique class of oppression that is explicit to their race and gender (Perry et al., 2013).

### **Literature Review**

This literature review focuses on African American women's experiences reentering society once they were released from jail/prison. This review also focuses on understanding the barriers some of these women faced, their experiences reentering the community, and their experiences seeking resources that may affect them successfully reentering society. Overall, researchers identified three primary barriers for ex-offenders: employment, health, and racial disparities. Research also showed that most ex-offenders had negative experiences reentering the community, particularly if resources were limited or nonexistent (Opsal & Foley, 2013).

Further, African American women are often the only support for their families, meaning these women must navigate complex obstacles that hinder their efforts to survive in their community (Opsal & Foley, 2013). Many Black women in the United States are poor, live in lower socioeconomic status, and are oppressed (Huebner et al.,

2010). But little attention has been given to female ex-convicts reentering society (Christian, 2013) despite their experiences with racism, sexism, and classism before incarceration, which are worse after incarceration.

### **Reentering Society**

As of 2015, African Americans made up about 15% of the United States' population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). However, Blacks make up 67% of the prison population, and African American women make up over 52% of the women in prison. There has been an increase in African American ex-convicts reentering the community. Approximately 800,000 of the prison population reenter the community yearly (Glaze & Bonczar, 2009). When women reenter society, they encounter many adverse experiences related to reintegrating back into the community, including substance abuse, physical and mental health (Bowman & Travis, 2012). In state prisons, 52% of the women have admitted to substance abuse.

Additionally, mental health is one of the leading causes for unsuccessful reentry by ex-offenders, particularly for women (Goomany & Dickinson, 2015). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 73.1% of females in state prison, 61% in federal prison, and 75.4% in prison have some form of mental disorder, and 23% receive medication for a psychological disorder (James & Glaze, 2006). Research in a New Jersey prison also showed that at least 18% of the inmates had a behavioral health disorder (Blita et al., 2005). Further, women's chances of being diagnosed with a psychological disorder while in prison were 37%, and 50 % of African Americans had a mental disorder, though only about 30% of Black women were diagnosed. Once released from prison, these women

most likely recidivate due to non-compliance and a lack of assistance finding resources (Blita et al., 2005). Further, when considering essential medical health, 90% of the female inmates in state prisons have not received a gynecological exam, 5% were pregnant when arrested, 4% did not receive prenatal care before admission (Greenfield, 2000).

Women need reentry services that focus on physical, sexual, and substance abuse. Further, African American women reentering the community have a greater need for social services intervention than Caucasian women (Crenshaw, 2011). African American ex-offenders do not have good health care options, and many may not be inclined to get what is available due to mental health concerns or substance abuse problems. For example, many of these women have suffered physical or sexual abuse that likely has led to undiagnosed mental health issues. A large majority of these women (69%) have reported sexual abuse before they were 18 years old. According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, 40% of Black women reported a high drug and alcohol usage rate before and during their arrest (Motivans, 2015). Black women returning to the community from lower socioeconomic status have indicated felt substance abuse treatment was a significant need for women reentering society (Ritchie, 2018).

Based on these needs, more programs be developed for women reentering the community (Scroggins & Malley, 2010). Programs available for these women may require them to visit multiple locations to receive services, which may not be an option (Scroggins & Malley, 2010). In addition to being an ex-convict, they may not qualify for some services. A greater understanding of why ex-convicts cannot get some public



resources and how they are expected to be productive citizens is needed, as they often cannot get these services (Scroggins & Malley, 2010).

Once released, African American women struggle to regain their life. Their children may have been placed in foster homes. They struggle to find employment in order to regain custody of their children. Some women have to deal with preexisting health problems like HIV, high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease, which are more common in the African American community. Due to these issues, women find it challenging to find housing, employment, and medical care. According to McMahon (2013), women are not given the same opportunities as men when it comes to rehabilitation while incarcerated. There is more racial inequality relating to resources in the African American community than in other populations (McMahon, 2013; Leverentz, 2010; Deivasigamani, 2019; Achiume, 2018). African Americans have to endure racialized structural forces such as unemployment and housing discrimination, producing hyper-segregated and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. African American women are not granted the same opportunities as Caucasian women (Leverentz, 2010). With the vast number of people reentering the community comes a need for much-needed funding for reentry services (Brown, 2010). According to Brown (2010): The communities cannot meet the needs of the massive number of people re-entering the neighborhoods due to little or no funding.

Due to disparity and oppression, African American women encounter challenges when re-entering and reintegrating into a society that other women do not encounter (Brown, 2010). Christian (2013) suggested that more resources should be dedicated to

understanding African American women's perceptions and experiences with race, class, and gender as they negotiate their neighborhood context.

### **Experiences of African American Women**

African American women face opposition with reentry that other cultures do not have to endure. At least 62% of African American women convicts were mothers and heads of families before being arrested. These women are more likely to be the custodial parent of children under 18 (Ropes, Kennedy, Lloyd, Veeh, & Tripodi, 2020).

Koski and Cosanza (2010) documented some women's experiences reentering their community. One woman stated that once released, she did not know where to begin looking for resources. The woman felt very uncertain and did not know what to expect. Another woman stated that she tried to stop substance use; however, she kept using due to a lack of education. Most of these women were frustrated due to the lack of education. Once arrested, their children are put in foster care, and the support that the families need stops. These women need to support reintegrating with their children. More often, African American women are the only support for these families. African American women usually have cultural of health issues that are not addressed while in prison, and once released, the condition is perpetuated (Brown, 2010). Cultural of health enables everyone the ability to lead a healthier life by having access to health care (Belgrave & Abrams 2016). African American women had dealt with health issues as far back as the Civil Rights Movement when Ms. Fannie Lou Hammer died from hypertension and breast cancer. "Fannie Lou Hammer's tombstone reads, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired" (Williams 2019).

Due to the disparity and discrimination, Black women endure, their quality of life is being affected. Their rate of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes has doubled compared to other cultures. Further, there is a disproportionate amount of illness in the African American community, and many have limited access to healthcare. For example, as recently as 2018, 23% of African Americans are uninsured, and 7.5 % are underinsured and lack self-care (Wehby, & Lyu, 2018). Without self-care, these women are even further challenged by any critical illness.

When ex-offenders do seek social services in healthcare or for other needs, their experiences are problematic. Specifically, the women express difficulties finding resources, and when they do, the time frame to access the services is extensive. For example, some newly released women have reported wait times as long as three to four months for medical services and housing (Keene, Rosenberg, Schlesinger, Guo, & Blankenship, 2018). They fear that they do not have access to decent housing or medical care (Binswanger, 2011). Without these services, these women fear that they will not be able to care for their children or themselves.

Many black women in the U.S. are poor, live in lower socioeconomic status, and are oppressed (Huebner et al., 2010). According to Christian (2013), very little attention has been given to female ex-convicts re-entering society. African American women experience racism, sexism, and classism before incarceration, and it is worse after imprisonment. Due to oppression, it is more difficult for African American women to find employment.

Couloute and Kopf (2018) state that unemployment rates for African American women are at an all-time high, and the unemployment rate for these women is much higher than for other races. Therefore, African American women returning to the community are shut out of the job market; their unemployment rate is five times higher than for the general population.

Traditionally, most inmates are men, so most reentry programs and research focus on men. According to Rosenfield et al. (2003), gender, race, and ethnicity influence an individual's ability to suppress personal problems and affect the ex-convict's ability to reenter society successfully. Many ex-convicts were paroled back into the community from which they were arrested. They return to a life of poverty, which increases their risk of recidivating.

African American women are excessively victimized by systems that aggravate reentry and retain poverty (Brown, 2010). The theoretical framework labeling theory states that individuals respond to labels placed on them by others (Christian, 2013).

Anderson and Pitner's (2018) study on 50 Black females and 152 White females suggested that little attention is given to Black female ex-convicts re-entering society. Most Black women in the study were housed in a custodial facility with limited or no rehabilitation services compared to most Caucasian women housed in reformatory facilities, with various reentry and reform programs (Anderson & Pitner, 2018). The study concluded that Black females were invisible to policymakers making policies and new reforms to increase their chance of successfully reentering the community.

In racial discourse, Black women were often invisible. Sesko and Biernat (2018) posed that sexism usually refers to Caucasian women and racism usually refers to Black men. Sesko and Biernat (2018) suggest that Black women were invisible because they did not fit the prototypical image of the stereotyped population. Because Black women were thought to be invisible, their faces and voices were not noticed. To explore this phenomenon, Sesko and Biernat conducted five different studies designed to examine the invisibility effect of Black women. The first two studies used 91 White undergraduates for a face recognition test. They were shown photos of Black women, White women, and Black men. The participants were asked to recall the faces in the photos.

In most cases, the participants were unable to recall a substantial number of Black women's pictures. Therefore, the remaining three studies focused on similarities and differences using the same participants. The results showed that the participants could identify the similarity of White women and Black men; however, they could only identify what was different about Black women compared to White women. The collective results from all five studies revealed that Black women were perceived to be invisible due to increased prototypicality. Moreover, this invisibility has also been noted in mainstream workplaces. For example, according to McCluney and Rabelo (2019), when referring to Black women working for General Motors:

In essence, GM did not 'see' their policy as disproportionately impacting Black women because the Black women employees did not stand out as a distinct group, nor was their removal perceived as disrupting organizational processes, indicating low levels of belonging to the company. (p. 145)

### **Barriers to Women Reentering Society Successfully**

African American women experience racism, sexism, and classism before incarceration, and it is worse after incarceration. According to Opsal and Foley (2013), the typical demographics of Black women released from prison are in their 30s; convicted of a non-violent or drug crime; history of childhood abuse; usually has no more than a high school diploma (if any education at all); often has chronic health issues (physical or mental), and was unemployed before her arrest. Once released from jail or prison, these women have a difficult road ahead of them. These women encounter numerous obstacles that complicate their ability to successfully reenter the community (Opsal & Foley, 2013).

Most of the barriers for these women are known and can be addressed early. More specifically, barriers such as not being qualified for jobs, lack of education, and unable to find work could be mapped out before release. Unfortunately, there are not many options for employment assistance given the difficulty ex-cons have with jobs, regardless of race or gender. Also notable is that women may have more difficulty getting employment because many of the jobs available to ex-cons are in industrial labor (e.g., mechanics, agriculture, construction, or landscaping), which are male-dominated jobs.

In general, before former incarceration is even considered, women of color's chances of getting out of poverty are much lower than that of other races. Even recently, Black women were often underqualified, for example, when the surge of tech and other skilled jobs boomed due to a lack of education (Schlager, 2018; Angell et al., 2014). Once former incarceration is added to the equation, the inability to find employment

often leads to these women's return to committing the same crime that initially landed them in prison (Tiburcio, 2008). These crimes are often referred to as "gender-related crimes," i.e., drug-related crimes, assaulting or killing an abusive partner, prostitution, and similar crimes (Thompson, 2008).

These women must navigate complex obstacles that hinder their efforts to survive in the community (Visher et al., 2004). Before being locked up, they may have been dependent on substances or alcohol and have significant medical or mental health issues. Mental health and substance resources are limited inside of the correction facility. Once released, the ex-convict may have to go without treatment because of the community's limited resources (Opsal & Foley, 2013). Due to these women's mental and physical health problems, finding jobs and housing becomes even more challenging. Without employment and a place to live, the women are left with few options but to re-offend. Once a person offends, he/she no longer qualify for federal funding or Section 8 housing vouchers (Keene et al., 2018). When released from prison, they return to neighborhoods with few financial opportunities. Education, job opportunities, and social networks are basic necessities these ex-offenders need to reenter the community successfully (McMahon, 2013).

Case-management services that assist with housing, job placement, education, family reintegration, and mental and physical health care transition for female offenders should begin at least three months before they are released. When inmates participate in programs like Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous before their release, their outcomes after their release were improved. Specifically, women who participated in the 12-step

program. Women who participated in the twelve-step program obtained vocational training, were more self-aware, and could more successfully return to the community (Tiburcio, 2008).

### **Experience in the Community**

Perry et al. (2013) maintain that African American women have always been oppressed by society in different domains. However, there has been some success with female ex-convicts who lived in disadvantaged and racially segregated neighborhoods before their arrest. These women of color worked to empower each other and reorganized their lives to succeed and not re-offend (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). These matriarchal women embraced and supported each other, "it takes a village," which is hailed throughout the Black community. In doing so, they not only raised their own children, but they often also cared for children in the community (O'Reilly, 2014), enabling them to be more successful than others who did not have similar support systems. According to Leverentz (2010), African American women were seen as weak and poor and were trained to rely on themselves for help. Self-empowerment gave these women a voice through which they gained their independence (Leverentz, 2010).

Once released from prison, ex-convicts have limited options in deciding where to live, so they end up in disadvantaged, crime-ridden communities. There is little to no assistance by the state to help transition from behind bars to the community. The ex-convict is given a small financial voucher and sent on their way. These women often choose to return to their old neighborhoods. For example, Leverentz (2010) suggested that African American women in the inner-city dealing with the intersection of ethnicity,



class, and gender were encouraged to avoid the neighborhood they lived in before their arrest. However, these women saw their old community as an impartial or positive influence for them and the community (Leverentz, 2010).

### **Successfully Transitioning Back into the Community**

Parsons and Warner-Robbins (2002) defined conditions related to women's effective transition back into the community after incarceration. The participants were a part of a faith-based prison-to-home women's ministry called Welcome Home Ministries (WHM). Twenty-seven women were interviewed to ask what assistance most contributed to them successfully reentering the community. Out of the 27 women, 17 stated that the top two were being able to secure housing and employment. For these participants, at least one of these conditions was met as part of the WHM program.

Job readiness for women of color is essential to help minimize recidivism (McLemore et al., 2017). WHM trains its participants as doulas. Training low-income ex-convict women to work as doulas is a new approach to solving unemployment difficulties women face when reentering communities from jail. Doulas have an important role as they provide needed support to vulnerable populations by helping to improve birth outcomes. The WHM doula reentry-training program has successfully produced 16 African American women who could achieve gainful employment by working as doulas. None of the program participants has re-offended.

Nicholas et al. (2007) recommended that public policies supporting all ex-convicts be put in place to help them find employment, drug treatment programs, housing, and health care to promote reentry effectively into civilization. Access to job

training, employment opportunities, and health insurance make reentering society an experience that rebuilds rather than upsets individuals, families, and society (Nicholas, 2007).

Even though in Parson and Warner-Robbins' (2002) study, 17 of the women could secure housing and employment, they still struggled and expressed concern about making it. Parsons and Warner-Robbins (2002) suggested that more understanding is needed on what can be done to help ex-convict women successfully reenter the community and get financial support from the community for faith-based intervention.

### **Recidivism**

Some factors that lead to recidivism are poverty (before and after arrest), disparate arrests and convictions, and a lack of social services (healthcare, jobs, education, and childcare). McMahon (2013) asserted that only one in three Black women would successfully reenter the community after an arrest. According to Kubrin et al. (2007), there is a direct relationship between race, disadvantaged neighborhoods, and recidivism. Therefore, one of the reasons Black women are more inclined towards recidivism is that they come from and remain in poverty-stricken, disadvantaged neighborhoods.

In 2002, over 60 percent of the convicts were below the poverty line before incarceration. Furthermore, over 60 percent of incarcerated African Americans did not have a high school diploma (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). Not only is poverty an issue, but there is also a high rate of disparity and oppression in Black communities. For example, impoverished black neighborhoods are patrolled more often, which increases the number

of arrests. Once released from jail, the inmates return to the same neighborhood, continuing the cycle (Chauhan et al., 2010).

The number of incarcerated women has risen in the past years. Around 18,000 of the prison population are disproportionately African American women. Within two years of being discharged from jail or prison, around 10,440 of these women recidivate, and 3,967.20 be reconvicted. These women have a vast criminal background, are undereducated, and more often than not, drug-dependent (Deschenes et al., 2007).

Just as successful reentry is impacted, significant factors that impact recidivism among African American women include race, class, inequality, substance abuse, mental health disorders, and gender (Burgess-Proctor, 2006). Beyond these factors, housing, employment, and financial support are not an option due to their substance use before and after being incarcerated. Studies have shown that substance and alcohol abuse are a way for these women to cover their pain from physical and sexual abuse (Melchior, 2019). According to Harmon and Boppre (2018), between 1970 and 2012, the rate of black females being convicted of crime rose 828%, three times the rate for Caucasian women. In addition, Black women are more likely than Caucasian women to be arrested for a drug crime and domestic violence. Once arrested, they are more likely to do time than Caucasian women are (Harmon & Boppre, 2018).

Recidivism is likely due to these women not having employment, lacking childcare, racial discrimination, and no social support (Keene et al., 2018). Federal law prohibits anyone convicted of drug possession from receiving public funding for school, childcare, or housing. Therefore, it is legal for property owners and other public housing

to discriminate against ex-convicts by not renting to them or having a specific lease agreement. As housing is challenging, so is gainful employment and adequate social support. For those who have their children, employment is often an issue due to a lack of childcare.

Additionally, women with prison records usually isolate themselves from the community, which precludes them from the network (Willging et al., 2016). Given the limitations of being an ex-felon, without employment and social support, these women cannot legally provide for themselves and their families. Within two years of being released, these women could once again become a victim of the penal system and are re-incarcerated (Willging et al., 2016). Victimization, economic marginalization, and abuse are a few forms of oppression these women face that would cause them to fall back into criminal activities (Belknap, 2007).

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 included the conceptual framework and comprehensive review of the literature that supports the need for this research to include discussions on barriers women in the African American community may encounter after incarceration. The literature review provides relevant information regarding ex-convict African American women's barriers, experience reentering the community, successfully transiting back into the community, and recidivism. There is more disparity among women in the African American community than women in other cultures. However, it is worse for African American women that are ex-offenders. There is little information regarding African American matriarch and their experience reentering the community after incarceration.

This study provided an in-depth exploration of the research relating to African American matriarch's experiences reentering the community after incarceration.

The methodology described in Chapter 3 addressed the research questions regarding the women's experiences, design, and the rationale used for this study. I described my role as the researcher of the study and the methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to provide new research on the lived experiences of African American matriarchs reentering society after incarceration. Findings from this study seek to identify the specific factors that most impacted these women when they attempted to reenter society after incarceration. The main goal of this study was to address the research questions regarding these matriarchal experiences and their perspectives about self while reentering society after incarceration. This chapter described the research design and rationale, followed by the methodology, data collection procedures, and data analysis. I gathered the lived experience of the participants while reentering society after incarceration. I discussed the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, participant's selection, recruitment, instrumentation, data collection data analysis, issues of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, and ethical consideration

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

This exploratory study about African American matriarch reentry experiences after incarceration examined their perspectives regarding seeking assistance for necessities like employment, housing, and health care. The research method chosen for this study was qualitative, which helped answer the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: In what ways do African American matriarchs describe their experiences when reentering the community after incarceration?

- Research Question 2: In what ways do formerly incarcerated African American matriarchs obtain human services (e.g., healthcare, employment, childcare) when reentering society?
- Research Question 3: In what ways do African American matriarchs use social support from family and friends while reentering society?

Qualitative research is used to understand human beings' experiences in a humanistic and interpretive design (Kruth, 2015). The focus is to understand the participants' richly textured experiences and their reflection about their experiences. Qualitative research explores the understanding and meaning associated with the participants' experience in a social or human situation (Kruth, 2015). The qualitative method was chosen for this study because it allows the researcher to examine participants' responses to questions to understand the study phenomenon.

I used a phenomenological research design to understand and describe the phenomenon and the essence of the participants' lived experiences. Other designs that were considered but were not chosen were ethnography, grounded theory, and case study. Ethnography describes the participant's environment, which requires submersion in the participants' culture (Creswell, 2016). Grounded theory provides an abstract explanation or theory related to the information, not the participants' experience or perspective, which was the focus of the current study. Additionally, the design does not align with this study's conceptual framework, CRT (Kruth, 2015). Finally, case studies are used to investigate contemporary real-life phenomena through detailed contextual analysis number of occurrences or disorders and their relationships. The researcher collects

detailed information using different data collection techniques over time (Yin, 2014).

Due to the nature of the study, case study was also deemed inappropriate. The chosen design for this study was a phenomenological research design.

To capture and understand the lived experiences and perspectives of African American matriarchs after incarceration, the phenomenological interpretive design was chosen. Two phenomenological designs were considered: the phenomenological descriptive design and the phenomenological interpretative design. A phenomenological descriptive design is known as transcendental phenomenology, in which the researcher exists with the phenomenon, and the essences cannot be bracketed off from how one identifies the essence of a phenomenon (Kruth, 2015). The phenomenological interpretative design aligned better with this study than the descriptive design. Interpretive phenomenology analysis (IPA) was chosen because it refers to the lived experiences, thoughts, and techniques used to analyze questions about experiences and perspectives (Amour-Burton, 2020), which I applied to African American matriarchs. IPA focuses on a thorough description and interpretation of individuals' lived experience. The steps of IPA were to (a) assume the phenomenological attitude, (b) read the complete written account to understand the whole, (c) describe meaning units, (d) transform the meaning units into statements of these women's lived experiences, and (e) synthesize data and the psychological makeup of the women's experience based on the features of their experience (see Giorgi & Giorgi, 2017).



### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher's role was that of an outsider observer participant concerning ex-convict African American matriarchs. As the researcher, I used the participants' information to better understand their lived experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I did this by (a) ensuring that the study was explained without biases, (b) constructing interviews correctly and according to the research design, (c) conducting appropriate observations, (d) being aware of any threats to internal or external validity, and (e) analyzing and interpreting the data correctly (Karagiozis, 2018). Once I understood the participant's perspective, I interpreted the participant's lived experiences. No personal or professional relationship existed between me and the participants (Karagiozis, 2018).

Additionally, the researcher should identify any personal bias early in the research that could potentially affect the study (Creswell, 2014). The two most common biases in qualitative research are selection bias and information bias (Polit, 2014). To avoid selection bias, I ensured that the participants selected were representative of the population being studied. To avoid information bias, I allowed the participants to review their interview transcripts for accuracy (Polit, 2014). I used open-ended questions to collect data and answer the guided questions, and responses were recorded verbatim. I showed sensitivity, trustfulness, respect, and was ethical at all times. I also considered my personal bias and beliefs to understand how these may affect the data outcome (Kruth, 2015).

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

The participants consisted of African American matriarch ex-convicts who were mothers and heads of their households returning to their roles in society. This study's inclusion criteria included African American females with children considered the head of her house upon arrest. The participants must also be an ex-convict who was not on parole, under supervision, or on probation. The participant must be seeking or have used reentry services. The participant must be similar to the population being studied.

Five to 25 participants is sufficient to reach saturation for the phenomenological design (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2018; Morse, 1994), though other researchers have recommended fewer than 10 participants to enhance the validity of the study and the in-depth inquiry when conducting interviews for qualitative research (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). A small study with moderate claims may reach saturation quicker than a study seeking to describe a process that covers different phenomena. Therefore, the participants for this study were 15 African American matriarch ex-offenders between the age of 32–65 who were clients at a local nonprofit agency that provides reentry services and counseling.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited via flyers posted in an approved public area at a local nonprofit agency that provided reentry services and counseling. Interested participants were instructed to call me to ensure they qualified for the study. Screening questions included gender, race, if they were parents, an ex-convict not on parole, and if they were

a matriarch. An overview of the study was provided to the participants, including the study's length and information regarding confidentiality. Before conducting the research, each participant was given an informed consent form that details the study's purpose, any risks involved, and the benefits of the study. Participants received a \$10 Visa gift card as a thank you for their participation. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

### **Instrumentation**

This qualitative study utilized semi-structured face-to-face interviews with ten open-ended questions. The interviews were flexible and interactive. Given the potential network of participants, a snowball sampling was also used due to too few participants (Creswell, 2018). According to Barrett and Twycross (2018), interviews are an excellent way to better understand the participants and capture their experiences. The researcher read the questions to the participants and recorded the answers both digitally and via hand-written notes. The questions focused on the participant's lived experiences regarding their reentry process.

Content validity is the extent to which the questions and scores on an instrument represent all potential questions that could be asked about a phenomenon to provide a preliminary assessment of the internal consistency of each item; and to improve the questions, format, and instructions (Creswell, 2018). The researcher stops collecting data when all categories and themes are saturated. Saturation is achieved when there is an adequate sample and collecting additional data no longer reveals new information (Creswell, 2018).

To add credibility to the study member check was used. Member check is a central part of establishing credibility in a study. It consists of giving the participants a copy of the transcript to confirm the credibility of the data collected. The participants were allowed to add or delete any information before approving the transcript. The researcher asked each participant to verify their transcript, that the themes made sense, and that their information was accurate. The participant's comments were incorporated into the final transcript, allowing the participants to add credibility to the collected data (Creswell, 2018).

#### **Data Collection**

The data was collected using a semi-structured interview with ten open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted via teleconference or videoconference. With the participant's consent, the researcher used a voice recorder to record the participant's experiences accurately. A second mobile voice recorder was available in case of equipment failure. The participants provided and signed informed consent before the interview. The interviews took between 50 and 90 minutes. The participants were informed that they could opt-out of the research any time during the process without penalty. The participants were allowed to ask questions before and after the process. A member check established credibility for the data interpretation extracted from the participant's response. A second appointment was made with the participants for member check.

All data were organized using NVivo software. NVivo is a data analysis software used to analyze, create audio transcripts, organize, code, and conduct data analysis more

effectively. The interviews were transcribed, organized, and reviewed by the researcher. The participants received a copy of the final transcript. The data will be kept on a password-protected laptop for five years.

### ***Interviews***

Once contacted by the participants, I determined if the interview would be via teleconference or videoconference. I conducted the interviews in a secure and confidential office with a closed door. The participant was allowed to select the location of the interview. The participant was informed that a public place is not guaranteed to be confidential. If the interviews were conducted via teleconference or videoconference, it was the participant's responsibility to ensure that they were in a secure location during the interview. Once the participant confirmed a location, I explained the study and provided her a copy of the consent form to sign via email or verbally. I then answered any questions before the interview. When the interview was completed, I answered any additional questions the participant may have had.

### ***Debriefing***

The participants were debriefed at the end of the interview. The researcher answered any questions the participants had and informed them of the follow-up call one week after the interview to ensure that all of her questions were answered sufficiently. If the participants experience any emotional distress as they describe their reentry experiences, arrangements were made with their current agency that allocated free sessions to address any feelings that may have arisen during or after the interview.

## **Data Analysis**

This study used data analysis to identify patterns and themes in data collected regarding the participant's lived experiences. The researcher looked for patterns that identify themes in their shared experiences reentering the community. The researcher grouped and labeled like themes that were identified during the data collection.

Coding is an essential part of qualitative research when using interviews to collect data. The data must be transcribed before the data can be coded. When coding, the researcher must make sure the information is accurate and that the information is not misinterpreted or misunderstood. Coding can be done in several ways, including hand or digitally (Parameswaran et al., 2020). This research was coded using NVivo, which was used to analyze unstructured text when using interviews for qualitative research. The software analyzed and organized unstructured information (Creswell, 2018). Next, the interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word. The data collected from the interviews was simplified and transformed by identifying behaviors, attitudes, and themes within the data. The data were coded and examined using short words and phrases to convey the participant's experiences. The data was used to provide a comprehensive analysis of the participant's experiences while reentering society.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

When conducting qualitative research, it is essential to ensure that the data collected and reported is trustworthy. Creswell (2018) suggests four essential areas that should be addressed to mitigate issues with trustworthiness. The four areas are credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016; Creswell, 2018).

These techniques were used in this study to assess the trustworthiness of the research. Member checks were used to establish credibility for the data interpretation extracted from the participant's response. Member check was also used to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings as experienced by the participants. The participants were given a copy of their transcript as an additional check for accuracy (Maxwell, 2013; Creswell, 2018).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is the extent to which the research is believable, true and that the research is conducted to describe the participant's experiences and perspective and not the researcher. Credibility must be established in qualitative research to ensure the results' validity and reliability (Patton, 2014). Amankwaa (2016) confirmed that one way to check for credibility is by using member checking. Member checks control for research bias and increase qualitative research findings' credibility and accuracy when interpreting the data. Member checks also allow the participants to view a copy of their transcript to ensure their statement is accurate. After the interview, each participant was given a copy of their transcript and asked to verify the information for correctness. If a member check is not completed, the participant must agree to the use of the collected data without it. The researcher reviewed the final document with each participant to ensure that the data was correct. Once the research was finalized, each participant was given a copy of the final document (DeCino & Waalkes, 2019).

**Transferability**

Transferability is the degree to which the research findings can be transferred to other contexts using similar surveys (Carl & Ravitch, 2016). Creswell (2018) posits that providing thick, rich descriptions allows other researchers to share the experiences as the participants see them. A rich and robust analysis of the participants' data provided the context and information that allowed the reader to decide if the findings could be transferred to similar settings. Qualitative research can enhance transferability due to its rich description and information; however, transferability is at the discretion of the person doing the generalizing.

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to the study's methodology and the extent that the research is reliable across time, researchers, and data (Morse, 2015). Dependability allows the participants to evaluate the study's findings to ensure that the data recorded and the interpretations are the participants. According to Creswell (2018), the researcher should document the research step by step to ensure that the study can be replicated. This study's process and findings were documented and tracked using an audit trail to ensure that the research is replicable. An audit trail is a detailed, chronological documentation of the research process, analysis, emerging themes, categories, and memos recorded throughout the process. An audit trail allowed the reader to follow a researcher's logic and decide if the study's findings may be a trusted platform for additional investigation (Mores, 2015). The dissertation committee members conducted an audit trail to establish dependability



for this study. The committee also reviewed all research results to ensure that the study is documented and replicable and that other researchers can achieve similar results.

### **Conformability**

Conformability is the degree to which another researcher can confirm the findings of the study. The researcher must ensure that the study's findings represent the participants' experiences and perspectives and not that of the researcher (Morse, 2015). The integrity of the findings is in the data, and it is the researcher's responsibility to connect the data, analytic process, and findings so that the reader can confirm the findings (Amankwaa, 2016). This study utilized reflectivity. Reflectivity is the researcher's self-appraisal to confirm that their own biases, preferences, and preconceptions do not influence their relationship with the participant and their reply to the interview.

According to Creswell (2018), reflexivity is when researchers take notes during the process, focus on their own personal experiences, and reflect on how their personal experiences may affect the findings. Moreover, the researchers ensured that their personal bias and experiences did not affect the research's content or methods in this study.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Before data was collected in this study, the researcher submitted a proposal to Walden University's Institutional Review Board to secure approval (approval no. 03-16-21-0175067). The researcher was mindful of any at-risk participants and avoided deceptive practices that misrepresented the research's purpose or benefits. Next, approval was obtained from the social service agency where the data was collected. The social

service agency received and approved a copy of the information and questionnaire used in the research.

After institutional review board and the agency's approval, a flyer was posted at the agency-requesting volunteers for the study. The flyer provided information outlining the study's purpose, eligibility requirements, and how to contact the researcher to participate. In addition, participants were presented with informed consent before the data collection process. The consent form included a confidentiality agreement, the study's purpose, the recruitment process, the benefits, potential harm, the significance, and permission to use a tape recorder. The participant was also informed that free therapy sessions would be allocated if they experience any distress due to the interview. The services were provided by their current agency, with which I have no affiliation. Finally, the participants were informed that the research was voluntary, and they could stop the interview at any time during the research without penalty.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 addressed the research design and rationale behind the phenomenon being researched. The role of the researcher and the chosen methodology was addressed. Participant selection logic, and procedures, and how participants were recruited were explained. The data collection, data analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures were also explained. Chapter 4 covered a detailed analysis of how the data was collected.

## Chapter 4: Results

In this qualitative study, the focus was on African American matriarchs' experiences with reentry after incarceration. Data were collected that described the reintegration experiences of African American matriarchs between the age of 32–65 who had spent between 4 and 25 years in prison. Chapter 4 includes a description of the setting in which data collection took place, the demographics of the participants in the study, and an analysis of the data collection. This chapter also includes the number of participants, the location, data collected, and the duration of data collection. The Data Analysis section includes a discussion of the categories and themes and any discrepancies with the cases. Finally, Chapter 4 ends with evidence of trustworthiness, a discussion about the credibility and transferability of the analysis, and finally, the study results and summary of the chapter.

### Setting

The interviews were conducted in a major city in Illinois via tele or video conference, and all efforts to ensure privacy and confidentiality by both the researcher and participant were completed. All interviews were conducted in a private room in my home. Similarly, all participants were also advised to find a location where they could communicate privately without interruptions. My room contained two laptops, two cell phones, and two voice recorders in case of equipment failure. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

### Demographics

This study included 15 African American matriarchs ranging in age from 32 to 65 years old. The participants' time in prison ranged from 4 years to 25 years. Before this study, each participant had been released from prison for at least 5 years and was not on parole or probation. All participants were in the process of reintegrating and reestablishing their lives back into the community. Among them, eight were employed, and seven were unemployed. Currently, the participants' education level ranges from eighth grade to bachelor's degrees. All the participants are mothers reuniting with their children or attempting to regain custody of their children. Four of the participants were married, two were divorced, and nine were single. Table 1 shows the demographic information provided by the participants.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Participants*

Participants	Age	Marital Status	No. of children	Level of Education	Employment Status	Years in Prison
Lily A.	32	S	1	11 <sup>th</sup>	Unemployed	4
Angel	33	S	2	9 <sup>th</sup>	Unemployed	18
Carolyn	36	S	2	9 <sup>th</sup>	Public Assistance	4
Daphanie	43	M	4	GED	Employed	6
Sylvia	43	S	3	12 <sup>th</sup>	Employed	10
Annie	44	S	3	9 <sup>th</sup>	Public Assistance	8
Gwen	45	M	1	Associate	Employed	10
Mesha	45	S	4	10 <sup>th</sup>	Employed	8
Maggie	49	M	4	10 <sup>th</sup>	Unemployed	5
Fay	54	S	1	12 <sup>th</sup>	Employed	4
Jasmine	54	M	3	9 <sup>th</sup>	Employed	22
Jo Jo	57	D	2	9 <sup>th</sup>	Employed	25
Sandra	61	S	1	Bachelor	Employed	8
Lily C.	63	S	2	8 <sup>th</sup>	Public Assistance	20
Lee	65	D	3	9 <sup>th</sup>	SSI	18

Upon initial contact, each potential participant was asked six pre-interview questions via phone or email to verify that they qualified for the study. Twenty-three potential participants were screened, and 15 qualified for the study. For this study, nine participants were recruited via a recruitment flyer posted at a local social service agency in a major city in the Midwestern United States. Six additional participants were recruited via snowballing from the first nine participants. The 15 semistructured interviews included a series of 10 open-ended questions designed to induce an exploration of the participants' lived experiences (see Appendix).

A description of the study was provided to each potential participant via phone or email, and all the participants' questions were answered. Six participants were provided with an email copy of the consent form, and nine gave verbal consent via the phone or teleconference. The study parameters were reviewed with each participant before starting the interview, and each participant was permitted time to ask questions. In addition, participants were told that they could withdraw at any time during the process, and each participant would receive a \$15.00 gift card as a thank you.

The interviews were held on 10 different days to accommodate the participants' schedules. Six interviews were conducted via teleconferencing, and nine were via telephone. The duration of the interviews was about 60 minutes. Before beginning the interviews, participants were allowed time via casual conversation to get comfortable with sharing information about their reentry experiences. Each participant was interviewed only once beyond the prequalification questions.

With the consent of the participants, a tape recorder was used along with handwritten notes to capture the participants' physical appearances, expressions, or other nuances. In addition, participants were debriefed after their interview and were provided an opportunity to express any concerns regarding their participation in the study. They were also encouraged to discuss any discomfort they may have experienced during their participation in the study. Finally, each participant was provided a transcribed copy of their interview to ensure the accuracy of its content, along with a \$15.00 Visa gift card as a thank you for her participation.

### **Data Analysis**

The following steps were used to analyze the data for this research. According to Creswell (2019), the four steps of organizing qualitative data are: organize the data, code the data, discover descriptions and themes, and report the findings. First, the data were collected using semistructured tele/video conference interviews. Next, the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder to ensure accuracy. Then I recorded and transcribed the data. Finally, Microsoft Word was used to transcribe the interview responses, and NVivo was used to code, organize, and analyze the data. NVivo allowed me to analyze each interview for specific words and themes. From this effort, a list of codewords was created for each interview. After narrowing the words and forming clusters, specific themes emerged among the participants. In addition, NVivo enabled the identification of direct quotes, which helped minimize researcher bias. Further, detailed descriptions were used to maintain the breadth and depth of the meaning of what the participants said about their reentry experiences. These descriptions provided the

foundation for a reflective structural analysis that depicted the overall meaning of the participant's experiences centered on their individual stories.

The emergent categories from the NVivo analysis were: (a) education, (b) housing, (c) employment, and (d) family. The perceptions and experiences from these women were first sectioned into these four categories, then later reorganized into primary and subthemes. The themes were also aligned with the time these women spent in prison and their level of education.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness strengthens the significance of the study (Amankwaa, 2016), which involves credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Trustworthiness is the degree that the research is thorough and accurate, which was demonstrated through a consistent, precise, and exhaustive analysis of the data collection.

### **Credibility**

Credibility ensures that the study results are believable and focus on the richness of the information collected instead of the amount of information collected (Amin et al., 2020). The participants were asked to provide honest and accurate responses as part of the research. The participants' responses were also recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure credibility. Researcher field notes were also used to keep a record of the participant's non-verbal communication. In addition, each participant was asked to review the transcript of her interview to ensure that the information was accurate.

**Transferability**

Transferability is achieved if the findings from a study can be generalized or are applicable in other settings (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the transferability of this study, I documented the entire process, including the documentation of the rich, detailed descriptions of the participants' perspective and experiences reentering the community after incarceration. Evidence of the study's findings was also presented. Detailed information was presented regarding the recruiting and selection process. Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of the interviews and what the participants conveyed.

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to whether the study's method and findings are consistent and can be repeated by other researchers (Morse, 2015). An audio recorder was used to record the interviews, which were transcribed verbatim to establish dependability. The process of acquiring the data was also documented to establish dependability. The transcribed data was based solely on the experiences of the participants and not the researcher. The transcripts were also reviewed several times for accuracy by both me and participant.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is impartiality to how the findings are formed and supported when the data was collected (Amankwaa, 2016). Research bias could be due to the assumption that qualitative research allows the researcher to bring a unique perspective to the study. Research bias can be avoided by using an audit trail (Mores, 2015). For this study, an



audit trail was used to establish confirmability. Specifically, this study includes a detailed description of how the study was conducted and how the data was collected. Reflexivity is the researcher taking notes during the entire process. As the researcher, I focused on my own personal experiences and contemplated on how my personal feelings and experiences may have affected the results. However, my personal bias and experiences did not affect the research's content or methods.

### **Results**

Three research questions and 10 interview questions guided this study. The research questions guiding this study were

1. In what ways do African American matriarchs describe their experiences when reentering the community after incarceration?
2. In what ways do formerly incarcerated African American matriarchs obtain human services (e.g., healthcare, employment, childcare) when reentering society?
3. In what ways has race impacted reentry into society for formerly incarcerated African American matriarchs?

The interview questions were

1. Where did you live after your release?
2. Describe your experience getting financial assistance?
3. Describe how reentry services helped you?
4. Describe your experience reuniting with your family.
5. Describe the process of regaining custody of your children.

6. Describe your experience seeking employment.
7. Describe your experiences seeking medical services.
8. Describe your experience reentering your community.
9. What do you think can be done differently to support matriarchs reentering their community?
10. Describe any barriers that may have affected your reentry process.

These interview questions were created to address the research questions and acquire full, descriptions of participants' lived experiences when reentering their community after incarceration. The 10 questions focused on the following areas: the reentry process, belief in self, finding employment, reintegrating with family, finding housing, demographics, medical assistance, reentering the community, and regaining custody of children. The responses to these questions and accompanying descriptions of the lived experiences provided by the participants produced five primary themes and several subthemes. Table 2 highlights the final primary and subthemes from this analysis.

**Table 2**

*Themes and Subthemes*

Primary Themes	Subthemes
Belief in Self	Ethnicity
Finding Housing	Education
Finding Employment	Getting custody of children
Family Support	Reentry services
Reentry Experiences	Job readiness

The research question presented the results, highlighting the specific theme and subthemes that were applicable and appropriate for its response. Each theme and

subtheme includes direct quotations and/or detailed descriptions from participants that best capture the essence of that theme. All participant names use an alias to protect their identity while allowing continuity of their specific responses across themes. In addition, the specific interview questions that align with the research question are provided.

### **Research Question 1**

To better understand the participants' experiences when reentering their communities, eight interview questions related to the participants' experiences: Interview Questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10. In general, the participants' response to these interview questions revealed that most of the participants were stressed about the support they received concerning financial assistance, reentry support, reuniting with their family and children, seeking employment, medical services, and reentering the community after incarceration.

### **Research Question 2**

To better understand the participants' experience obtaining human services (e.g., health care, employment, childcare) when reentering society, five interview questions related to the participant's experiences: Interview Questions 2, 5, 6, 7, and 10. The participants' responses to these interview questions revealed that they felt it was difficult to seek human services during reentry. For example, all the participants said that health care was essential but was not a priority compared to employment and regaining custody of their children or grandchildren.

### **Research Question 3**

To better understand how race impacted the participants' reentry experience, five interview questions related to the participants' experiences. Specifically, interview questions 2,7,8,9 and 10 provided data for these questions. The participants' responses to these interview questions revealed that all of the participants felt that race was a factor in them successfully reintegrating back into society. The women felt that if they were not African American, reintegration might be a little easier.

### **Theme 1: Belief in Self**

Eleven of the fifteen participants expressed some form of belief in themselves. The women felt that without belief in self, they would not have survived. Five of the women specifically expressed a feeling of future hope. They expressed the need to improve their current situation and become productive citizens. Even after spending years in prison, they felt that they could be productive in society. Some of the participants stated that they knew that life would not be accessible after incarceration. Some of the women talked about how thankful they were to be free and out of prison. Most were grateful for their family. Some of the women also expressed how their friends and family stood behind them in their time of need. The following participant descriptions further highlight the "Belief in Self" theme:

- Sandra stated that because she was black, female, and an ex-convict that she would have to work ten times as hard as the average female to be successful. She stated that she was successful before she was arrested and was a success after

incarceration. Sandra stated that she was in school working on her Associate degree and was hopeful that her being incarcerated would not be held against her.

- Jo Jo is a 57-year-old matriarch and mother of two who stated that she had been to prison three times, but this time would be different. She felt that because she was a Black woman, the cards were stacked against her. She stated that both of her children were born in prison. She said, "I am a good mother and have been out of prison for three years, and I am looking for a job. I have five grandchildren that need me because they are in foster care." She said that she would never go back to jail.

- Gwen stated that she knew that she would be all right after prison. Gwen said that she was in prison for nine years, 11 months, and 12 days. Gwen stated, "While in prison, I wrote two books and my amazing family had them published." Gwen indicated that she has a supportive family that is also close. Once released from prison, she was sent to a halfway house. The royalties from her books were enough to take care of her needs. Once back in her hometown, she worked for her cousin, who owns his own business. Gwen never doubted that she would be ok after she was released. She now owns her own business.

- Maggie is a very shy and quiet forty-nine-year-old matriarch. Maggie stated that she should not have been in prison. Maggie is a mother of four children, two she had before she went to prison, and two more were born after she was released from prison. Maggie stated that "My children are my reason for living. "I had to fight to regain custody of my children and grandchildren" "I am

hopeful that I can rekindle my relationship with the older two,” Maggie stated that she was not the smartest person, but she figured out how to make away. Maggie is currently the caretaker for her parents, her two young children, and three grandchildren.

- Participant number two refused to give her name and is referred to in the study as Angel. Angel is thirty-three years old with two children. The participant was first in prison for six years, was out for three years, and then went back for another twelve years on an unrelated charge. Angel stated that she was hopeful that this time would be different. She stated that she did not have a role model growing up: “My momma was in prison most of my life, and I don’t want to be like her.” Angel stated that she was having a hard time finding employment, but she wanted to break the cycle. Her children are fourteen and sixteen; she does not want them to “follow in her footsteps.” Currently, she is trying to regain custody of her children.
- Mesha is a 45-year-old employed mother of 4. Mesha has a 10th-grade education and spent eight years in prison. During the interview, Mesha and expressed her fears, weakness, and strengths. Mesha stated that even though she appeared to be strong and resilient, sometimes appearances can be deceiving.
- Fay is a single 54 years old, employed mother of one child. Fay stated, “I spent four years in prison for trying to feed my children; I took some food from a store and got caught. I bet if I was white, I would not have even gotten arrested.

“When I got out, I had to fight to get custody of my child.” I am a strong, Black woman, so I did what I had to do.”

- Daphanie said that she had to be strong to keep from being crushed by the system. Daphanie stated, “Children protective services are making me fight for my kids. It is not right; I was a good mother.”
- Carolyn stated, “If it was not for my family, I would not have made it because the system is designed for black women to fail.”

## **Theme 2: Finding Housing**

When reentering society after incarceration, some ex-offenders may experience homelessness (Asberg & Renk, 2015). During the interview, the participants were asked where they lived after their release. All fifteen participants stated that their first concern was finding a place to live upon being released from prison. However, being an ex-offender made it difficult for these women to find housing. The following descriptions highlight some of the issues the participants had surrounding housing:

- Gwen stated that she was lucky because her parents allowed her to come back home after spending six months in a halfway house. Gwen stated, “Without permanent housing, I was not able to get a state ID or even apply for a job. My parents let me use their home phone to apply for jobs.” Gwen stated that once she finds a place of her own to live, she could then work on regaining custody of her daughter.

- Participant 2 said, “I have no one and nowhere to go. The day I was released, I so badly wanted to find a place to stay so I could get my kids back. My mama also needed me; she is struggling too.”
- Daphanie stated that she returned to her neighborhood. “I lived with some old friends for a little while, but I still didn’t have custody of my daughter. I really wanted her with me...My older kids didn’t want nothing to do with me.”
- JoJo stated that housing was a priority, but she went from prison to a transition house.
- Maggie stated that she also lived in a transition home she said, “I ain’t have nowhere to go, I couldn’t get an apartment cause I was a felon; nobody wanted to rent to me. My family was living with people too. I had to figure out how to take care of them too.”
- Jasmine said she never thought about where she would live after she was released. She stated she was simply happy to be free. Jasmine stated that she lived in a shelter until she got a job cleaning office building.
- Annie’s mom had custody of her children and allowed her to move in with them. Annie had three children - two before her arrest and one after.
- Lily C. stated that she applied for public assistance and was approved a week later. She was able to get income-based housing in the same building she lived in before her arrest.
- Sandra lived with her parents after spending time in a halfway house. “I was blessed to have come from a family that supported me. They had my back.”



- Carolyn stated that she “lived on the streets.”
- Lee somehow managed to care for her children even while in prison. She had a home waiting for her after she was released. Lee resumed her role as matriarch of the family.
- Mesha, Fay, Sylvia and Lily A. all moved in with family after they were released from prison.

### **Theme 3: Finding Employment**

Another barrier faced by ex-offender matriarchs reentering society is finding employment. Finding and maintaining a job is a critical part of reentry; however, some employers are hesitant to hire people with a criminal background. Most ex-offenders usually work in temporary jobs or not-for-profit agencies. Williams et al. (2019) stated that employment is the number one necessity for ex-offenders to reenter the community successfully. The participants were asked to describe their experience seeking employment.

- Daphanie stated that she was a part of the job reentry program once she was released; however, she was unsuccessful. Daphanie stated, “I tried really hard to find a job. Because I was an ex-con and black, it was hard to find anything. They sent me on a lot of interviews, but when they discovered that I had a record, their attitude changed. Therefore, I had to figure out how to support myself. I currently own my own daycare center and making good money too.”
- Sandra stated, “I was determined to provide for myself. I got a job working as an assistant at a university in the upper Midwest US.”

- Angel stated, "I had a hard time finding a job, so I just had to make it do what it do. I work a lot of cash jobs or laborer jobs through temp agencies."
- Jasmine stated, "She got a job cleaning up."
- Jo Jo stated that she was able to get a job as a bus driver. "As a black woman, the system do not care if we make it or not. I got locked up for drugs three times over a 25-year period and each time I got out and the bus company gave me my job back, but they said this is the last time."
- Maggie stated that she could not get public assistance when she was released. She worked in a factory and commented, "There are a lot of Black and Hispanic people working here that can't get a normal job."
- Annie said, "I tried to get into a treatment center, but they told me no. I don't understand why, but I got clean on my own. I am still on public assistance and is coming to this social service agency to get some job training... They said that they have places that would hire me and give me a second chance."
- Sylvia states that she works in the family dry cleaning business. "I am lucky; my family has their own business. I just got with the wrong crowd and ended up doing time."
- Gwen stated, Black people don't stand a chance in this world. Even in prison they were racist. "I wrote two books while in prison. I also wrote a play. My cousin got the books published for me before I got out. The money from my books went to my family. My daughter and mom is well taken care of. After I was

released from prison my cousin gave me a job in his clinic; he is a doctor. I now have my own business.”

- Lily A. said, “I live with my parents; they take care of my child for me. I am back in school getting my GED and hoping this make a difference in my family’s life.”
- Mesha stated, “It was hard out there, I did not seek public assistance because they would only give me about five hundred a month for me and my youngest child. I started selling dinners. I would cook a lot of food, make plates and go around to different beauty, barbershop, and sell them. People always saying that I should own my own business. So, I did it. I got my sanitation license and city license and now I have a catering business.”
- Fay said, “While in prison they had this doula training class. I didn’t really know what it was, but I took it just to have something to do. I never thought someone would hire me to be an emotion support person, but they did. I work at an agency that assigns me to people in need.”
- Carolyn states, I work in a factory, but it took me a long time to get that. They pay me less than the other people that ain’t been to prison.”
- Lily C and Lee are both unemployed and receive public assistance.

#### **Theme 4: Family Support**

Family support was very important to the participants when reintegrating back into the community and into the family. Some of the women explained in detail how family support played an important role in their lives as they reintegrated back into

society. Nine of the women had a positive experience reuniting with their families. Three of the participants had negative experiences, and three did not want to talk about their experiences reintegrating with their families. Some of the women explained how their families no longer wanted to reunite with them. Others spoke about how they lost custody of their younger children, and their adult children wanted nothing more to do with them.

The following descriptions and anecdotes from the participants highlight this theme:

- Jasmine said, “I have three kids that are in prison, and my family don’t want to be around me anymore. I am all alone now. I got some home girls but that is it.”
- Maggie state, “My kids were not too happy to see me cause they didn’t know me no more.”
- Lily C. lives with her son and his girlfriend.
- Mesha stated, “My family was happy to see me. They really missed me.”
- Jo Jo stated, “I had friends and family to pick me up at the gates when I was released. They said that I could live with them, but they was ready to party. I had to find different friends because that’s what got me locked up in the first place...My family did come through when I needed them, but I can’t live with them.”
- Sandra said, “My family took really good care of me; we are a very close family.”
- Annie said, “My mom and sisters were happy to see me; they showed me love.”

- Gwen stated that her family was very close.
- Lily A. and Sylvia lived with their families after being released. They both felt that taking care of family is what family is supposed to do.

### **Theme 5: Reentry Experience**

Successfully reentering back into the community can be difficult for ex-offenders. The process can be even harder for African American matriarchs due to disparity. In this study, the term reentry process is defined by the participant's experiences and perspective as they navigate the system reuniting back into society. The following participant commentary highlights their responses:

- Jasmine stated, "The process was very hard. Just like I said before, my kids are in prison and if the process was a little bit easier, they probably would get the help they needed. Nobody really told me how to do nothing. The first thing we need is a place to stay and it was hard finding somewhere to go."
- Gwen stated, "The process itself was difficult but I had help. As I said before my family was there for me. These people need to understand that they can't keep doing the same thing they were doing before. It is hard for black people to make it and even harder if you are an ex-con."
- Annie stated, "People look at me weird; I could tell they were talking about me, but I don't care. The very people that supposed to be helping me are the ones that look down on me. They treated me like I had the plague. But if it wasn't for my family, I would probably be back in prison. They help me find this agency."

- Sandra stated, "Being an ex-offender was not the only thing that made the process difficult. Being an African American woman also played a part in it. I did not have to use a reentry service because I had my family. But the process in general, yes, it was difficult."
- Jo Jo: "The same people that I left in the hood was still there when I got back. When I left prison all I had was a bag of my personal stuff. I didn't know how to care for myself. I was referred to this social services that helped me with everything, and I am grateful for their help."
- Mesha said, "Well I had to move to a new neighborhood if I wanted to do better for me and my kids. My family was a big help when I got out, but it was still hard being in my community because I was always judged, but the process was not."
- Lily C stated, "I didn't go back to my old neighborhood. I moved in with my kids. I am at a different stage in my life now. I asked people that had went through the process for help. I am doing ok now."
- Fay stated, "My experiences was not too bad; I had a trade and got a job."
- Angel, "I have always made a way and I have figured out how to make it this time too. I am good."
- Lily A. stated, "I knew people on the outside that had been in prison before me; they told me what to do and how to make it."

- Sylvia stated, “My experience reentering was not that bad because I had family and they made the process a lot easier for me. I didn’t have to struggle, and I had a bed and food every night.”
- Maggie, stated, no one an ex-offender in their neighbor especially a Black one”.
- Daphanie, felt the process of reentering was difficult. she did not know what to do or where to go for help.
- Lee also felt that being Black was a major barrier in reentering the community.
- Carolyn stated, “I was lost; I needed someone to tell me when to get up, eat or sleep.”
- Some women even stated, “They made it in the community through trial and error.”

### **Summary**

The results of this research study highlighted the lived experiences of African American Matriarch ex-offenders reentering society after incarceration. The subthemes that emerged were 1) ethnicity, 2) education, 3) community, 4) reentry resources, and 5) job readiness. Most (70%) of the participants believed in themselves - the women felt if they did not believe in themselves, no one would. However, some of the women felt sad and hopeless due to their circumstances. Some of the women had children in prison and wanted to be an example to them when they returned home. 73% of the women could find housing by living with family, yet the remaining 27% were homeless or living in a

shelter following incarceration. Most of the participants were employed - about a fourth (26%) of the participants were unemployed; 20% were self-employed, and 14% were employed by the family. More than half (60%) of the participants reported a positive experience when reentering their community, while a fifth (20%) each reported a negative experience or refused to respond to the question.

Chapter 5 presents an overview of the study and an in-depth interpretation of the findings. Chapter 5 also includes a discussion of the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, an implication for social change, and the study's conclusion.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to provide new research on the lived experiences of African American matriarchs reentering society after incarceration. These women's experiences could help provide a better reentry experience for other matriarchs once released from prison. Their experiences could also help change laws relating to the reentry process, leading to an understanding of what these women encounter when reentering the community. Chapter 5 presents the findings' interpretation and discusses the implications, recommendations, and final conclusions of the results. Based on the interviews with 15 African American ex-offender matriarchs with reentry experiences, this qualitative phenomenological research can shed light on these women's perspectives and experiences when reentering society after incarceration.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The five primary themes that emerged from these interviews included belief in self, finding housing, finding employment, family support, and reentry experiences, further supporting that African American matriarch ex-offenders experience unique challenges due to their race and status as mothers. The findings for this study both aligned and did not align with previous research regarding women ex-offenders reentering society after incarceration. For instance, this study's outcomes align with research stating that returning home from prison is a traumatic but exciting event (Anderson & Pitner, 2018). Once released from prison, the participants demonstrated a fear of the unknown; that fear was exacerbated when the women revealed their

experience seeking a place to live after being released. The women did not know where they would live or how they would survive daily.

Despite the challenges, for some of these women, the challenges increased their belief in self because without belief in themselves, they would not have been successfully reentering their community after incarceration. Because of their belief, some of these women could find a place to live and care for their families. Previous research has also shown that self-empowerment allows these women to find their voice and gain their independence (Leverentz, 2010). The participants felt that if they did not believe in themselves, no one else would. African American women struggled before they were incarcerated and knew it would be more difficult as ex-offenders once released from prison.

Compounding these issues, most women lacked formal education and lost custody of their children once arrested. Although housing was essential to these women, regaining custody of their children was also important. Most women, when arrested, are the sole support for their families (Brown, 2010). Once the matriarch is imprisoned, their children usually end up in foster care. Once released, the participants' first priority was finding housing, becoming financially stable, and regaining custody of their children or grandchildren (see also Deivasigamani, 2019). But due to historical race-based disparity, these women found it difficult to find resources to successfully reenter society; they faced issues with culture, race, gender, and class (Opsal & Foley, 2013). Some institutions perpetuate racism (Heenehan, 2020). Some women felt unequal treatment-seeking resources due to their race and not just their status as ex-offenders. The research also

highlighted a lack of resources available to African American women in their community, which was similar for the participants in this study. Ex-offenders with pre-existing conditions find it difficult to get medical or psychological services. The disparity among Black women is severer than for women of other cultures, and it crosses all ages and socioeconomic statuses. These women found it difficult to get the help they needed to reconnect with their children and grandchildren and fully obtain the necessary financial support to care for their families. Some of the women stated that it took them years to get custody of their children or grandchildren. Others stated that they are still seeking custody.

The key to successful reentry is attaining and maintaining stable employment. Matriarchs are strong women at the head of their homes (Andrews et al., 2017), and they are usually expected to take control of the home due to the disparity of Black men in the labor force. However, most of the participants felt that it was difficult finding and maintain steady employment. As a Black female, it was already challenging to find employment. But as a Black female ex-offender, it was almost impossible to find employment. Further, most of the jobs available to ex-offenders were laborer jobs, which were predominantly male-orientated positions. The participants in this study felt that they had to find some form of financial support to reunite their family back together. However, these women felt that they had to subject themselves to lower standards due to their lower educational achievements and low social-economic status (see Link & Oster, 2018; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Based on previous research, Black ex-offenders are often not qualified for the surge of available positions (e.g., technology, management,

clerical; Schlager, 2018). Most of the participants in this study were under-educated, had to work for the family, or became entrepreneurs. Only three had notable education: one of the participants had her GED, another one had an associate degree, and one had a bachelor's degree; most did not finish high school.

The family was a crucial component in most of these women surviving. Some of the participants stated that they felt a strong sense of support from their families. Several of the participants relayed how their family gave them a place to stay. Other participants stated that their families employed them. However, some participants did not have such family support. They stated that their family wanted nothing to do with them.

The process of reentry is always tricky and should start before the ex-offender is released. Some of the participants stated that they did not use reentry services; however, the process itself was complicated. Those participants with family support felt the transition was a little easier. Housing and employment were considered the most essential necessities for the women, but race and gender were a factor in their ability to gain either. The participants felt that if they were male or Caucasian, finding employment would have been more accessible, making finding housing easier. A few participants looking for employment mentioned that the interview was over when hiring managers discovered they were ex-offenders.

Most of the participants felt that the only people who accepted them were from their old neighborhood. However, most participants felt that they had to leave their old friends and community behind not to recidivate. Some of the participants in this study did use reentry services and were content with the help they received. However, the

participants felt that more could be done to help ex-offenders reenter society successfully. Some participants felt that there should be some form of help at least thirty days before release. Others felt that they did not need or want help from reentry services.

The findings from this study show that African American matriarch ex-offenders face racial disparity, financial and social challenges when reentering society after incarceration. Not only do they have extreme difficulty reuniting with their children, who may be wards of the state, but they also find it challenging to obtain employment and a stable home. The participants felt they would be more successful upon release if they were better prepared before being released. For example, participants felt there should be reentry programs in the prison to prepare them for the outside world. Such programs would include services that offered job readiness training, housing options, and classes to help them gain custody of their children. Several participants felt that they would have had a better chance at successful reentry if they could get employment with a fresh start program before being released.

### **Limitations**

The limitation of this study and how trustworthiness was established and discussed in Chapter 1. The limitations include the study being limited to only African American matriarch and ex-offenders, not on parole. The interview platform was a limitation since some participants were uncomfortable with or unable to participate via videoconference. Therefore, phone interviews were implemented for those participants. However, the experiences of these matriarchs may not represent the experiences of all ex-

offender African American matriarchs. Due to the small number of participants, this study cannot be generalized across all African American matriarch ex-offenders.

### **Recommendations**

Finding housing, employment, family support, and regaining custody of children are some of the problems faced by African American matriarchs reentering society after incarceration. Accessing reentry services and family support is vital to these women's success. According to Brown (2010), ethnicity and gender make it even more difficult for Black matriarchs to reenter society successfully.

This study sheds light on the lived experiences and perspectives of ex-offender African American matriarchs reentering their community. Some of the participants discussed their experiences reuniting with their families and the barriers they faced after being released from prison. Others talked about how complex the reentry process was. Most of the participants felt that the reentry process could be better. The women provided insight into some of what it takes to reintegrate after being released from prison successfully. Most of the women in this study felt that race and gender were factors that hindered them from successfully reentering their community. Based on the findings of this research, these women felt that they did not have the resources they needed to be successful in the community upon their release from prison.

My recommendation for African American Ex-offenders is to put pre-entry programs in place in prisons. There should be an orientation on what to expect once released, including where they live and how to attain financial support. These programs would assist the women in finding resources before they are released. These women

should also have access to some form of job readiness, educational, or vocational training to aid them in finding employment. The women would know where they live upon their release, they would have some form of job readiness training, and the program would have parenting classes to help them regain custody of their children. Ex-offenders with preexisting conditions would be referred to a free clinic for help. Policies should also be implemented to help ex-offenders with housing and financial services.

Further recommendations for more research should examine the process these ex-offenders experience before they are released from prison. By giving these women the help and services they need, they benefit, and so does their community, as these women become productive citizens.

### **Implications**

The results of this study are aligned with the outcomes noted throughout the literature review. The overall implication from this study is that African American matriarch ex-offenders do possess a unique set of problems when it comes to reentry. Some of the unique problems are historically race-based disparity in society, mainly social services, oppression. There needs to be an increased sense of responsibility and autonomy, leading to these women having a stronger belief in themselves. Whether the penal system encourages these women to pull themselves up, they need to take responsibility for themselves.

The implication for social change is that this study may advance knowledge concerning African American matriarch ex-offenders' reintegration into society. Information from this study could help other ex-offenders navigate the system, find jobs,

housing, and medical resources. Moreover, other ex-offender matriarchs could use the information to successfully reunite with their families and regain custody of their children. This study also has implications for public policy concerning women ex-offenders, irrespective of race. Lawmakers should consider changing their policies and practices to minimize the negative impact on ex-offenders. Doing so would reduce the likelihood that these Black matriarchs remain in poverty and improve their chances to reunite their families.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory study examined the lived experiences and perspectives of African American matriarchs reentering society after incarceration. African American Matriarch is vital to the success of their families. However, they are overlooked due to racism and disparity. Disparities in Black women stem from years of discrimination due to race and gender bias and society's perception. In the 1800s, Black women worked hard to promote their ideas and become a part of society (Brown, 2010). However, they were still ignored. Even in the twenty-first century, as head of their house, Black women continue to face discrimination and prejudice, unlike other cultures (Brown, 2010). Some African American women are often invisible and not seen as productive members of society. Therefore, these women as ex-offenders are challenged by unique social obstacles that affect their ability to succeed in society (Brown, 2010).

Once released from prison, these women find themselves in a unique situation. These women's future hangs in the balance. They must first find a place to live, employment, and reunite with their family to seek custody of their children while dealing



with racial and gender inequality. By better understanding these women's experiences, policymakers can be encouraged to promote better understanding and offer more resources for these women. By supporting these ex-offenders, the community would improve also. If given the means to do so, these women may become productive community members and refrain from crime. As highlighted in one of the major themes from this study, a critical factor in being successful following prison release is the belief in self. These women felt that by believing in themselves, they could be successful in reentering the community. Given their willingness to believe in themselves and do the work, it is incumbent upon society to allow them every chance to do so.

This research contributes to the literature by providing additional African American matriarch's perspectives and challenges when reentering society. Further, these results could have significant implications on lawmakers to change the policies and practices that impact ex-offenders. Such changes could enable these women to access services to care for themselves and their families while reentering the community. Finally, this research could also create a positive image of these women's reintegration experiences, which could help streamline the transition from incarcerated to returning to the community.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date and time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

### Verification

1. Verify informed consent formed before collecting data
2. Give participant copy of signed consent form
3. Remind participant that she can quit at any time during the study

### Pre-interview Questions

1. Where you previously incarcerated?
2. Are you on parole or supervision?
3. Are you African American?
4. Are you a matriarch?
5. Do you have children?
6. Are you or have you had to seek reentry services?

### Interview Questions

1. Where did you live after your release?
2. Describe your experience getting financial assistance?
3. Describe how reentry services helped you?
4. Describe your experience reuniting with your family.
5. Describe the process of regaining custody of your children.
6. Describe your experience seeking employment.
7. Describe your experiences seeking medical services.
8. Describe your experience reentering you community.
9. What do you think can be done differently to support matriarch reentering their community?
10. Describe any barriers that may have affected your reentry process.