

Womanist Bioethics: Food Security, Faith-Based Reentry, & Women's Mass Incarceration

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE This paper explores faith-based reentry programs as a site of intervention to the cycle of poverty, trauma, and recidivism that contributes to the exponential growth rate of women's mass incarceration in the United States, specifically as it affects Black women. It provides an overview of women's mass incarceration with a particular focus on food insecurity as an aspect of poverty that contributes to recidivism and that has been exploited as a tool for punishing offenses related to illicit drug use, sanctioned by federal policy. While food insecurity is the primary aspect of poverty, exploitation, and recidivism that this paper explores, it is important to note that it is only one particular piece of the plethora of structural and interpersonal systems of power and oppression that contribute to women's mass incarceration. The intervention posed aims to address these larger-scale issues of recidivism and incarceration, particularly for Black women, rather than addressing food security individually. This paper makes the case that in addition to faith-based programming and services that support women during incarceration, programs that emphasize dignity, humanity, and power for formerly incarcerated folks are necessary as sites for healing and reintegration to community. **METHODS** This paper uses secondary data and particularly explores how low-income Black women are disproportionately impacted by women's mass incarceration and specifically by policy that affects food security by limiting or eliminating SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits due to drug-related offenses. Secondary data is also used to assess the role that faith-based organizations, which is broadly-defined in this paper and will be discussed in greater detail, can play in reentry programming and addressing challenges post-incarceration, including food insecurity, that contribute to recidivism. **RESULTS** We find that women's incarceration in

the US has increased exponentially since 1980 and that women are primarily incarcerated for crimes related to substance use, mental health, and property--these arrests disproportionately impact low-income Black women. We find that food insecurity acts as both a cause and effect of women's incarceration in this population and that current policy regarding incarceration and SNAP benefits most specifically affects women impacted by substance use. We also find that faith-based programs are uniquely positioned to play a significant role in reentry for this population and reducing recidivism. **CONCLUSIONS** Faith-based reentry programs are positioned to play a key role in reducing recidivism for women facing poverty-related challenges post-incarceration.

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Food Security, Faith-Based Reentry, & Women's Mass

Incarceration

Introduction

In the midst of mounting humanitarian crises across the globe, including mass incarceration, climate change, violent conflict, and pandemics--ineffective policy that constantly removes culpability from harmful state and governmental forces often prompts responses from individuals and institutions most invested in transformative justice efforts to make a more caring and equitable world. Religious and faith-based institutions and organizations have the opportunity to make a significant impact in addressing multiple aspects of these multidimensional crises. An essential foundation for addressing this multitude of crises is acknowledging the humanity of every person and their value, regardless of sociopolitical labels and constructs, and faith-based spaces can offer a unique approach to doing so as they often emphasize this sentiment in both individual and communal contexts. They can be particularly powerful when approaching the large-scale and multifaceted issue of the criminal-legal system and mass incarceration in the United States, particularly for those who are further marginalized upon attempts at re-entry and dignified reintegration into communities.

The rate of Black women incarcerated and interacting with the prison-industrial complex has increased dramatically over the last ten years and there is a significant link between interacting with the criminal-legal system and food insecurity for Black women within the United States (The Sentencing Project, 2018; Born, 2018). Though the most effective solution to

address mass incarceration and the impacts of the prison-industrial complex is to eradicate the system in its entirety, or to *abolish* the carceral complex. Policy and programming must still be devised to address the needs of those currently affected by the trauma of incarceration. This paper explores women's mass incarceration by specifically examining food insecurity as it contributes to interactions with the prison-industrial complex for Black women within the United States. It goes on to propose faith-based organizations as a site of intervention to address the needs of this hyper-marginalized population, which include food security among other factors, post-incarceration (Cox & Wallace, 2016). A womanist theological bioethics framework is applied to this analysis of the ongoing connection between incarceration, food insecurity, and faith based institutions. This particular framework prompts potential solutions geared toward maintaining dignity and emphasizing humanity for this population. It does so by focusing on the role of faith and faith communities in the lives and experiences of Black women and marginalized folks within an oppressive society, and how this role can contribute to addressing health concerns. Scholars, bioethicists, and practitioners from a variety of fields that attempt to address these humanitarian crises that were created by and are perpetuated by these harmful systems, must first address the basic needs of those most marginalized by these systems. As Emilie Townes writes, "The challenge for a womanist ethicist is to create and then articulate a positive moral standard that critiques the elitism of dominant ethics at its oppressive core and is relevant for the African American community and the larger society" (Cannon et al., 1989). It is necessary to emphasize the rights and strengths of these marginalized populations while simultaneously deconstructing the forces that attempt to stifle them.

Methodology

Womanist Theological Bioethics

Despite the disturbing data about how the cycle of poverty and mass incarceration constantly impacts the most vulnerable--it is necessary to turn toward potential interventions and praxis so that this data can be used beyond simply assessment or to further marginalize the marginalized. Womanism is an epistemological and praxis-based framework that centers the everyday experiences of Black women as sites of knowledge for addressing change and justice in the world and as calls to action to dismantle the systems that reinforce experiences of oppression (Cannon et al., 2011). Theological bioethics considers the role of faith and religion along with faith communities in influencing moral and ethical decisions in the context of health and healthcare (Cahill, 2005). Therefore, a womanist approach to theological bioethics considers the role of faith and spirituality, particularly in the ways that Black women experience health and healthcare. This approach, which aims to center the voices and experiences of those most marginalized by systems of oppression, is appropriate for assessing the health crisis of food insecurity as it pertains to formerly incarcerated Black women with drug felony convictions as well as the larger-scale challenge of addressing women's mass-incarceration and efforts to reduce recidivism¹ while combating the structural forces which contribute to it.

The secondary data surveyed for this project, pooled from various individual studies and information from the Bureau of Justice and the US Department of Agriculture as well as social

¹ Mass incarceration refers to the abundant population of incarcerated folks in the US while recidivism refers to the phenomenon of folks being incarcerated again after initial incarceration and continuing to cycle through the carceral complex.

justice organizations, uses this lens to center the experiences of Black women as they are impacted disproportionately by both incarceration and food security (Snodgrass, 2019; sentencingproject.org; uda.gov; bjs.gov) . When considering interventions to these disparities and injustices, a womanist theological bioethics framework will be used to assess how gender-specific, trauma-sensitive reentry programs available to Black women and other women of color are the most well-suited to validate these women's experiences and restore their sense of humanity as the carceral system aims to strip them of their basic rights, even post-incarceration. Though the availability of these programs are minimal, the interventions surveyed below indicate that they are possible, effective, and that further socio-political support is necessary for their sustainability.²

Relationship between Faith, Food Security, and Incarceration: An Overview

The Significance of *Faith-Based* rather than *Religious* Interventions

Faith-based organizations, religious communities, and community-based initiatives guided by moral and ethical principles of justice and those working to ensure that everyone has a chance to not only *survive*, but *thrive* can and have played a pivotal role in making transformational change as they are often led in conjunction with community. Though the terms *faith*, *spirituality*, and *religion* are often used interchangeably, they carry different meanings for different folks depending on experiences and beliefs--the term *faith-based* is the most expansive of these terms as it encompasses the concept of any practice based on a belief of any kind, it is not tied to a specific set of beliefs or practices as the terms *religion* and *spirituality* imply.

² Though this paper utilizes footnotes, the primary citation style is APA in accordance with public health and bioethics citation methodologies.

Faith-based organizations (FBOs), as they are defined for the purposes of this paper, are not necessarily delineated by a specific religion or focused only on serving those who are part of particular faith communities, rather they tend to incorporate religious or spiritual elements into the work they do in order to affect change--this is important as religious institutions have also been a site of pain, rejection, and re-enforcement of structural violence against folks with certain identities (Willison et al., 2011). This paper utilizes the term *faith-based organization (FBO)*, as organizations that utilize elements of religious or spiritual practices to restore and emphasize dignity, healing, strength, and inner power ideologically and practically for those who are formerly incarcerated to equip them to reintegrate into society and reduce their likelihood of recidivism. FBOs can reframe principles from within various religious traditions as sites of healing instead of rejection and influence communal morals and values related to justice and care for those most marginalized within society. Those focused specifically on re-entry and rehabilitation for folks post-incarceration can serve a variety of folks regardless of religious affiliation or background. FBOs can play a particularly important role for folks who are often further disenfranchised post-incarceration due to structural barriers that inhibit access to basic necessities for survival. For Black women facing society post-incarceration, these interventions may be life-changing, necessary steps toward inner healing, stability in food security and other basic necessities, and reduce behaviors that can lead to recidivism.

Historically Black Churches and the Need for Ministry Beyond Incarceration

African-American churches and religious institutions have often played an important role in specifically responding to social injustices that impact community members as well as providing a community for resilience and resistance efforts--as demonstrated during slavery and

the Civil Rights Movement (Stanley, 2016). In terms of mass incarceration specifically, these institutions have played an important role in providing outreach to folks during incarceration, which is important as it can foster community and internal transformation. Several research studies speak to the role of religion and prison ministry during incarceration as an important source for those who are imprisoned to seek clarity and cope with the challenges of incarceration as well as access to specific types of programming (Stringer, 2009; Snodgrass, 2019). Theologian Dr. Jill Snodgrass writes that faith-based and religious interventions are significant in addressing both incarceration and reentry because “faith functions as a protective factor against criminal activity [because] when one is involved in a faith community, a local network of social and emotional support is often created” (2019). She also notes that communities cultivated by shared beliefs often promote positive socialization that can be protective against behaviors related to structural oppression (including drug use, theft, and other ‘antisocial’ behaviors) that contribute to incarceration and recidivism (Snodgrass, 2019). Despite the importance of this ministry during incarceration, outreach efforts for folks post-incarceration and during reentry, particularly those catered to Black community members are limited. Kathryn Stanley adds that Black churches have an ethical obligation not only to continue to support folks beyond prison ministry during reentry, but also that there are specific steps these institutions can take to support Black women by working toward restoring dignity, agency, and allowing room for women to mourn the losses incurred during incarceration, including time, relationships, and dignity (2016). Specific needs for this community must be addressed, especially as many of the structural and interpersonal challenges that lead to initial incarceration, are the same factors that contribute to recidivism and food insecurity.

Policy & Food Insecurity Post-Incarceration

In addition to understanding how spiritual and religious identity can inform the ways individuals interact with society before, during, and after incarceration, which can contribute to recidivism rates, it is also necessary to acknowledge that in order to thrive, humans must have their basic needs for sustenance, shelter, safety, and security met. Having access to high-quality, nutrient-rich food is instrumental to this end. Food insecurity is a powerful and necessary lens to explore poverty-related causes of incarceration, especially as rates of food security and food access disparities among populations can provide insight into both population health and individual well-being (Frongillo et al., 2017; Jaron & Galal, 2009). Food security is a key factor to ensuring successful reentry post-incarceration for folks who have been marginalized by the criminal-legal system and unfortunately, this marginalization continues as there are many intentional barriers to basic welfare necessities including food access for this population because of policies that seek to further punish folks post-incarceration. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) is the most significant policy that actively infringes on access to this basic human necessity for individuals with drug felony convictions. In addition to major changes to welfare benefits overall, PRWORA implemented a lifetime ban on SNAP and TANF benefits for individuals who have been convicted of a drug felony. States do have the option of individually opting-out and most states have as of 2019, but the inclusion of this lifetime ban has already had an impact on food insecurity for many formerly incarcerated folks, primarily single, Black mothers, and is exemplary of the efforts by the federal government to continue to dehumanize criminalized populations (O'Connor, 2001; Mauer & McCalmont, 2013).

The Plight of Black Women

These systems of oppression shape the carceral system and the historical legacy of racism and white supremacy continues in both structural and interpersonal encounters with law enforcement and policing within Black communities in the United States (Alexander, 2012). While the magnitude of the impact of mass incarceration on Black men in America remains an issue of concern, the plight of Black women within the prison industrial complex and the impacts of interactions with these systems on the rest of their lives remains highly invisibilized (Sawyer, 2018; Swavala et al., 2016). Black women in America face the double-burden of both racism and sexism in nearly all facets of their lives from educational settings to healthcare to workplace opportunities. This double-burden is further exacerbated by the prison-industrial complex as it targets and affects Black women in highly racialized and gender-specific ways that can lead to outcomes including food insecurity within a cycle of poverty and trauma-related recidivism (Gross, 2015). Due to the specific nature of the oppression that Black women in America face and the ways that this is further manifested during and post-incarceration, interventions for reduced recidivism, positive health outcomes, and reintegration into society must also be highly specific and best suited for this particular population. Religious/spiritual identity can play a pivotal role in both personal and societal transformation, and faith-based intervention strategies can fill gaps caused by oppressive policy like PRWORA, poverty, and poor social support systems that disproportionately impact Black women.

The Problem

Women's Mass Incarceration

Overview of Women's Mass Incarceration

The term *mass incarceration* refers to the fact that the US carceral system is overburdened with imprisoned folks at a greater quantity than any other nation in the world (sentencingproject.org, 2013). Imprisonment impacts different populations of people in different ways and those who are most susceptible to incarceration tend to be those most 'at the margins' in the US by race, income, education, or other aspects of identity that are often negatively impacted by oppressive socio-political structures including over-policing and discriminatory policy. There is a stark racial disparity within incarcerated populations in which African Americans are overrepresented regardless of gender--this disparity is largely due to continued structural racism and intentional efforts to oppress this population since the Civil War and the enslavement of this population until the mid-20th century (Alexander, 2012). Increased rates of incarceration, both overall and particularly for Black folks, has occurred most notably over the last forty years. Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan's socio-political 'War on Drugs' in the 1970s and 1980s entailed policing of Black neighborhoods and Black people more heavily than ever before and contributed to this exponential rate and quantity of Black folks who interact with the carceral system (sentencingproject.org, 2013). Recent media, research, and academic work--notably the documentary *13th*, the book *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, and Bryan Stevenson's work with the Equal Justice Initiative--have exposed how the prison-industrial complex, or the capitalist enterprise of the carceral system, intentionally targets

and impacts Black men in America (DuVernay, Averick, & Barish, 2016; Alexander, 2012). Black men are incarcerated at the highest rate of any racial or ethnic group in America ; 1 out of 3 Black men are likely to be incarcerated throughout their lifetime (sentencingproject.org, 2019). While there have been efforts toward decarceration and lowering this rate, these efforts have primarily focused on incarcerated men--women's mass incarceration is an under-discussed topic. For that same statistic that demonstrates that Black men are disproportionately incarcerated within the US, Black women had the highest likelihood of incarceration out of women overall in the United States--with the rate of 1 in 18 of all Black women in the US compared to 1 in 56 for the entire US population of women (sentencingproject.org, 2019).

There has been a consistent upward trend of women's incarceration since the 1970s in both local jails and in state prisons (Sawyer, 2018). *Jails* can hold people who have been arrested before they are convicted of a crime as well as after, while *prisons* are reserved for those who have been convicted of a crime and who have been sentenced to long-term sentences (Swavala et al., 2016). The population of incarcerated women in both jail and state prisons is about the same--this significantly differs from men's incarceration as men are much more likely to be held in prisons post-conviction versus in jails (Sawyer, 2018). Jails have particularly negative impacts for women, especially because even short-term incarceration or pre-trial detention can have devastating consequences on their employment, social benefits, access to children, and more (Swavala et al., 2016). While the number of men who are incarcerated is greater than the number of women incarcerated, women's mass incarceration has grown at a significantly faster and higher rate than men's incarceration since the 1970s--with an estimated 834% increase in incarceration rate for women versus a 367% increase for men's incarceration (Sawyer, 2018) .

When the carceral system and mass incarceration are discussed as a whole, it considers both those who are physically detained but also those who are being actively monitored by the carceral system including those on probation or parole. *Probation* refers to the period pre-incarceration or as an alternative to incarceration through programming--the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports an estimate of 1.3 million women on probation in addition to those incarcerated (sentencingproject.org, 2019). *Parole* refers to post-incarceration monitoring and tracking to “prevent” recidivism, but failure to pay fees or meet certain requirements of parole regardless of actual ‘behavior’ can lead to recidivism (sentencingproject.org, 2019). These high rates of women’s interactions with the carceral system are further complicated by race, socioeconomic status, and other identity markers.

Disparities in Women’s Incarceration & Population Vulnerabilities

Black women are twice as likely to be incarcerated as their white counterparts--though this notes a racial disparity, this rate has shifted significantly since 2000 from Black women being six times as likely to face incarceration as their white counterparts (Mauer, 2013). Rates of incarceration by race are shifting for incarcerated women with an increase in white women’s incarceration and a decrease in Black women’s incarceration (though the rate for Black women is still higher as noted previously), particularly because jails have become a primary place for detaining women in the last 40 years (Sawyer, 2018). Despite these population shifts for incarcerated women, the actual number (rather than solely the rate) of incarcerated Black women compared to the general population of Black women in the US is still significantly higher than that of white women compared to the general population of white women within the US, so this disparity remains. In addition to this disparity, these trends are even more severe for Black women who also identify

as part of the LGBT+ population--lesbians and transgender Black women have the highest rates of incarceration within this already marginalized group (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2018).

In addition to racial disparities, incarceration targets low-income populations regardless of race and gender--however, when race and gender are considered, Black and Latinx incarcerated women tend to have the lowest levels of income compared to their white counterparts and men of color (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). This disparity of incarcerated women of color tending to have the lowest levels of income is reflective of socio-economic opportunities for women of color within the US, as many face structural barriers related to both gender and race that make economic mobility challenging (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). This figure is complicated by the fact that 80% of incarcerated women are mothers to children under the age of 18 and a majority of this population are single mothers--meaning their incarceration whether short-term or long-term in prison or jails not only impacts children psychologically but also financially and socially due to separation from their primary caretakers (Sawyer & Bertram, 2018).

In addition to these identity-specific disparities that evidence that Black, low-income women with children are at the highest risk for incarceration--women who are incarcerated tend to have experienced violent or sexual trauma, tend to have mental and chronic physical illnesses, and tend to have a history of substance use disorders (Snodgrass, 2018). These factors contribute to the disparities in the types of offenses that women are incarcerated for--after violent offenses, women are incarcerated in prisons for offenses related to drugs or property violations (such as possession or burglary) (Sawyer, 2018; Snodgrass, 2018). Jails also reflect how most women who interact with the carceral system tend to be incarcerated primarily because of drug or

property offenses (Swavala et al., 2016; Snodgrass, 2018). The high proportion of this population of women who are incarcerated due to drug offenses related to substance use disorders will be examined more closely in this paper in its relationship to specific policy that impacts food security for this already vulnerable population.

Religious Identity & Spirituality for Women During and Post-Incarceration

Data regarding religious identity in prisons and jails in the United States is reflective of that of the general population with most folks identifying as Christian, followed by Muslim, Jewish, Native American, and Buddhist (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2008). Notably, due to the overrepresentation of people of color in incarcerated populations, there is also a significant difference in folks who identify with religious traditions that tend to have ethnic associations including Islam, Native American traditions, Buddhism, Paganism, and Afro-Caribbean traditions compared to the general US population³. Data specifically regarding women's religious practices and beliefs while incarcerated is limited, conflicting, and dated as Jill Snodgrass indicates, however various qualitative data studies have been performed which show the importance of faith and spirituality for incarcerated women and women of color in particular (2019).

Snodgrass mentions that in her study, major themes related to cultivating a relationship with God, finding resilience and seeking personal transformation, and being able to build connections with other inmates or chaplains in a space that often does not allow supportive

³ Though many of these religions have multiple and varied ethnic and racial congregants, they specifically tend to have large population percentages of congregants who identify as people-of-color who are most likely to be incarcerated. (ie. Black Muslims and Afro-Caribbean religious practitioners)

relationships to be established (2019). Stringer's study, noting religious identity particularly for Black mothers who are incarcerated, found that most Black women who are incarcerated identify as Christian and mention that religion is very important to them as a coping mechanism and understand their incarceration as "part of God's plan" for their lives (2009). Snodgrass does mention that ministry inside of prisons and prison chaplaincy is heavily Christian and proselytizing despite efforts to term religious programming as 'faith-based' with the illusion of spiritual diversity; nonetheless, religious and spiritual identity is very important to incarcerated folks and there is opportunity for faith-based programs to establish efforts to support Black women during incarceration that can be carried forward with post-incarceration support systems.

Oppressive Policy & Impacts on Women Post-Incarceration

PRWORA--Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 & SNAP Access

In addition to the social challenges that women of color in particular face upon reentry post-incarceration, there are specific policies that target formerly incarcerated folks and have lasting impacts on their quality of life. A major policy that poses challenges to successful reentry for folks post-incarceration is the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, as it greatly restricts access to federal aid for poverty-related circumstances. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) of 1996 was the largest federal reform to national welfare since efforts made during Lyndon B. Johnson's 'War on Poverty' in the late 1960s (Connor, 2001; Born, 2018). This act, which was passed by Bill Clinton's administration, was not only part of Clinton's presidential promise to, "End welfare as we know it", but it also carried forth many of the racially-targeted strategies to continue to systematically disenfranchise

African-Americans that were explicitly pronounced in Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan's 'War on Drugs' (Connor, 2001). The motives for both the 'War on Drugs' and Clinton's efforts toward welfare used racially-coded language about family structure, the sanctity of marriage, and criminality associated with poverty and single-parent households (Born, 2018; Thompson, 2019). This language reflects archetypes of African-Americans that have continued beyond the end of slavery in attempts to degrade and dehumanize them as moral and social deviants--this language also serves to distance inherently oppressive power structures from any culpability for the conditions that cause disproportionate rates of poverty, single-parent households, and negative interactions with law enforcement within African American communities (Townes, 2006).

Ronald Reagan's particular 'War on Drugs' led to over-policing, increased police brutality, and overall surveillance notably impacting and criminalizing African American men. However, his criticism of welfare programs and social services to address poverty were targeted toward unmarried, African American single mothers, whom he alluded to as 'welfare queens' (Dolnick, 2019). Clinton's welfare reform efforts similarly targeted this population--who supposedly depend on and exploit government funds in order to avoid working and 'taking responsibility' for their actions, such as having children outside of marriage (Murch, 2016). This trope is one of many that specifically dehumanize and criminalize African American women for being both Black and woman--and the name of this bill reflects its intent to frame poverty as something that is an individual's 'personal responsibility' to overcome rather than a systemic issue due to racism, sexism, and a variety of other factors that favor socioeconomic mobility for white men rather than 'others' (Townes, 2006).

Implications

In addition to imposing more restrictive income eligibility and changing the duration of welfare benefits, or nationally-funded aid for low-income families in need, PRWORA also prompted states to offer more job training and ‘work opportunities’ for individuals using benefits to gain skills to theoretically join the workforce and become economically independent, though its effectiveness has been challenged by recent statistics (Connor, 2001; Ehrenfreund, 2016). These changes greatly impacted low-income populations across the nation that benefited from welfare as a means of economically and nutritionally supplementing individuals and families--while this bill used racially-coded language that demonstrates intent toward effects on African American communities, it has had large impacts on groups across racial identities and backgrounds (Ehrenfreund, 2016).

An under discussed provision of this act that is most relevant to the focus of this paper, is the lifetime ban on SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families) for individuals who have been convicted specifically of drug-related felonies (Mauer, 2013; Thompson, 2019). This provision was added to this bill within two minutes of discussion and is an indication of the disregard and dehumanization of those who have been criminalized because of substance use disorders or interactions with illicit substances (Mauer, 2013). This is a federal lifetime ban on these benefits, however, states do have the opportunity to modify or opt out of this ban (Mauer, 2013). This lifetime ban has had particularly devastating consequences for the population of incarcerated women described above, which is particularly low-income, Black women who are single mothers, who have a history of trauma in addition to ongoing substance use disorders, and who have been arrested and convicted of crimes

related to drug use (Cox & Wallace, 2016; Wolkomir, 2018). In addition to socioeconomic barriers that make it challenging for most folks to successfully rejoin society post-incarceration, including social stigma and difficulty finding housing and employment, this ban on access to welfare benefits for this already highly vulnerable population disregards their basic human needs (Harding et al., 2014).

Critically examining this bill's impact on formerly incarcerated women, particularly the lifetime ban on SNAP, and understanding the impact of this bill on food security for women and children within this affected population is not only necessary from a public health standpoint, as food security is particularly linked with a variety of chronic illnesses for both adults and children, but also from a legal standpoint as food security is linked with recidivism rates (Morash et al., 2017; Harding et al., 2014). In addition to the impact of food security on these realms and their impact on this population of women and their children, the inclusion of this provision in policy must be questioned from a bioethical perspective as part of the ongoing conversation about what types of restrictions 'should' or should not be imposed on formerly incarcerated folks--and whether incarceration should continue at all.

Though states had the option to modify or opt out of this lifetime ban on welfare benefits after the act was ratified in 1996, by 2011 only 16 states had fully opted out of this ban (Mauer, 2013). A few other states had modified the ban but literature indicates that these modifications often still make it challenging for most formerly incarcerated folks to access these benefits--this includes some states lifting restrictions for only certain types of drug offenses or requiring regular drug testing (Mauer, 2013; Thompson, 2019). Recent research efforts and initiatives within states calling for this lifetime ban to be lifted and further examining the challenges

individuals face post-incarceration have led to an increase in more states modifying and opting out of this ban--as of July of 2019, South Carolina is the only state that still imposes a full lifetime ban on SNAP and TANF for individuals with drug felony convictions (Polkey, 2019). West Virginia and Mississippi opted out of this lifetime ban in 2019 (Polkey, 2019).

Though most states have opted out or modified this ban as of July of 2019, the impacts this bill has had on formerly incarcerated women and their children over the last 23 years is still significant and has been researched. Cox and Wallace demonstrate that there is a direct causal link between food insecurity and women's incarceration because of loss of social benefits such as SNAP (2016). Lombe et al. also demonstrate that there is a direct causal link between maternal incarceration and children's food security (2017). In addition to this empirical research, according to the United States Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the states with the highest rates of women's incarceration are also the states with the highest rates of food insecurity (usda.gov; bjs.gov). This lifetime ban on SNAP has had consequences for this population of formerly incarcerated women and their children and will continue to because of the long-term impacts of food insecurity on health and overall social well-being.

Food Insecurity & Previously Incarcerated Women

The USDA defines food insecurity as low food security and very low food security characterized by “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet...” and “multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake”, respectively (usda.gov, 2019). Food insecurity, which is often coupled with other aspects of poverty including unstable housing, chronic illness, and low educational and job opportunities, has a variety of health impacts on

both adults and children (Young, 2019; Lombe et al., 2017). For women and children of color, these external forces affecting their health are added to stressors of racism, sexism, classism and more; the even further marginalized population of previously incarcerated women of color and their children are even further impacted (Young, 2019; Testa & Jackson, 2019).

Some of the health impacts on adults who face food security are “higher rates of diabetes and hypertension, self-reported fair or poor health, maternal depression, behavioral problems/developmental delays in early life, and poor academic achievement” and studies indicate that many of these have causal links to rates of recidivism, as previously incarcerated folks often turn to previously criminalized activities or coping mechanisms for these stressors related to health and food insecurity (Young, 2019; Cox & Wallace, 2016; Hardin et al., 2014). Testa and Jackson further note that food insecurity post-incarceration can particularly impact formerly incarcerated women as it has adverse effects on mental health for this population that already faces a disproportionate rate of mental illness (Testa & Jackson, 2019). Crystal Yang notes that SNAP and other social benefits play a large role in disrupting this cycle of poverty and recidivism specifically for this formerly incarcerated population (Yang, 2017). Several authors also demonstrate that children, including those with incarcerated parents, that face food insecurity have better health outcomes, including lowered rates of heart disease and obesity later in life, and higher rates of educational achievement, when they have access to SNAP compared to their counterparts (Carlson et al., 2016; Wolkimir, 2018; Young, 2019; Mauer, 2013). Additionally, low-income adults, particularly people of color, who have access to SNAP benefits are less likely to have severe chronic illnesses (Young, 2019). Food security is greatly affected by SNAP for low-income and marginalized populations, Lyons demonstrates that even brief

disruptions (such as withdrawn benefits due to pre-trial detention at a jail) to these benefits can have dire effects on health (Lyons, 2019).

Long-Term Impacts

Considering the increase in the rate of women who are incarcerated in jails and prisons due to drug convictions and the abrupt end to their benefits both during incarceration and post-incarceration because of PRWORA legislation and the delayed state response, it is concerning to consider how many women and their children have been impacted by this policy since it was enacted 23 years ago (Mauer, 2013; Born, 2018; Thompson, 2019). As many of the researchers that are examining food security among other factors that impact the livelihood of women beyond incarceration write, *When does the punishment end?* And if there are governmental and social forces that continue punishment through prohibiting social benefits and opportunities to thrive, *what can be done to support this already highly marginalized population?*

Faith-based organizations, as defined for the purposes of this paper, have historically been sites of support and change particularly for previously incarcerated folks, though they have also been sites of deep pain and rejection. A womanist bioethical lens on women's mass incarceration and food insecurity in addition to associated factors that contribute to recidivism, posits that faith-based organizations can be sites of profound healing, opportunity, and transformation for reentering women of color facing socio-political rejection (Willison et al., 2011). As mentioned previously, though food security is the specific lens that this paper uses to consider the connections between policy, poverty, and recidivism as they relate to women's mass

incarceration--it is situated within a larger frame of structural challenges that can be addressed with intentional, faith-based reentry programming. The subsequent recommendations will reflect the ways in which faith-based reentry programs can address the overall challenges of reentry for women, and Black women particularly, including but not singularly focused on food security.

A Potential Solution

Faith-Based Organizations as a Site of Intervention

While it is necessary to understand the full scope of the impact of mass incarceration specifically on Black women and those most marginalized by the criminal-punishment system by analyzing quantitative and qualitative data as done in prior sections, using a womanist bioethics lens prompts action toward justice and calls that even in the research process--not only are problems defined, but also their potential solutions. Faith-based organizations, including religious institutions, spirituality-based spaces, and programs that incorporate any elements of a set of beliefs, have long played a role in addressing issues related to incarceration and its aftermath. While there has long been an acknowledgement of the need for faith-based strategies for re-entry beyond the large focus on volunteer efforts and ministry for folks during incarceration, it is useful and timely to analyze the most appropriate types of faith-based reentry programs and sociopolitical supports that will effectively address the needs of Black women post-incarceration, which include food security among other poverty and trauma-related factors that contribute to recidivism (Stanley, 2016). As mentioned above, in the context of this paper, *faith-based* programs are defined by their rootedness in religious or spiritual practices and morals that emphasize restoring feelings of dignity and humanity along with inner strength and power

for individuals which the criminal-legal system has sought to strip of these inner values of self-worth along with their access to socioeconomic benefits.

Following this approach and available research, the specific type of faith-based reentry programming that is most effective for Black women and women in general post-incarceration is trauma-informed, gender-specific, culturally-competent, and residential (Snodgrass, 2019; Stanley, 2016). This type of programming considers the social and emotional needs that women face post-incarceration while providing them with healthy environments to transition back into general society and basic resources like food, clothing for job opportunities, and even mental or behavioral health programs for women who were unable to receive effective treatment while incarcerated. Additionally, as these programs are faith-based--they tend to focus on community-building, or establishing emotional and social support systems, while also encouraging personal growth and reflection; these elements can be essential for shaping behaviors and coping mechanisms that can reduce recidivism. Willison and colleagues note that, "Faith-based programs are differentiated by the manner and degree to which faith and spirituality intersects around four dimensions: program identity; religious activities; staff and volunteers; and key outcomes"--in other words, regardless of how program participants themselves identify spiritually or religiously, these programs interweave elements of belief and humanity throughout their structures and these features contribute to their effectiveness (2011).

Reentry Policy & Support for Reentry Programming

Though religious institutions, particularly the so-called Black Church and the Nation of Islam for African-Americans, have long played a role in not only addressing issues related to

incarceration, but also have called for social and political transformation toward justice--the role of the federal government in providing support for these efforts has been limited for various reasons including government interests in maintaining the prison-industrial complex (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). Despite these potential barriers to government support and socio-political justifications for government inaction, “in 2001, President George W. Bush founded the Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) which endowed faith-based prison and reentry programs with access to federal funding, thus enabling more faith-based organizations to serve both inmates and returning citizens” (Snodgrass, 2019). This Office also provided funding for chaplains of various faiths specifically for prison ministry. Though there were already many faith-based organizations and initiatives toward addressing issues related to incarceration and reentry before this Presidential Office was established, there was a surge in the number of these programs after this Office was established as funding opportunities from these primarily volunteer-based initiatives arose (Willison et al., 2011). In 2008, the *Second Chance Act* was signed into law and reinforced efforts to provide support for reentry and opportunities for previously incarcerated folks to seek personal, economic, and social transformation. Though this Office initially sparked many reentry programs, including some gender-specific and trauma-informed programs for women, it failed to maintain momentum, even with the Second Chance Act to legally back its initiatives. President Barack Obama renamed the OFBCI to the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships in 2010 and established an Advisory Council related to initiatives with hopes of expanding the work this Office could do (obamawhitehouse.archive.org). Even with these changes, faith-based reentry programs still lack resources and support for long-term sustainability and capacity to help the hundreds of thousands

of folks reentering general society post-incarceration. As of 2019, President Trump had established a White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative by an Executive Order but no subsequent steps have been taken to address the mission of this initiative and the previous website for the Obama Administration's Office has been removed (whitehouse.gov). The often controversial concept of 'separation of church and state'⁴, which will not be explored further for the purposes of this paper, has also played an important role in establishing the scope of these faith-based offices (Parent, 2003).

Concerns & Challenges with Government Support

There are many challenges that arise related to this government support related to faith-based reentry programming and many of these challenges emphasize the need for resources that will allow communities to address the harm caused by incarceration as well as prompt the need for continued efforts to completely abolish carceral institutions entirely. In addition to those who are proponents of the concept of 'separation of church and state' and take issue with federal support of faith-based programming, there are also many who oppose these initiatives because they are not fully encompassing of traditions that reflect the various beliefs of incarcerated folks and many fear that resources are allocated to organizations with strong bases in particular traditions (Snodgrass, 2019). Additionally, another challenge is whether faith-based initiatives and organizations may be coerced into supporting politics that do not align with their missions for the purposes of securing funding or if they will face retaliation if they oppose other aspects of a particular administration or vice versa--when Barack Obama initiated this Office,

⁴ This statement and implications were solidified in the Supreme Court Case *Lemon v. Kutzman*. FBOs as described in this paper would pass the 'Lemon Test' because they are designated for the secular purpose of reentry and reducing recidivism rather than primarily existing as religious institutions.

there was much concern from religious groups about policies supporting contraception and abortion that opposed their ideological beliefs but that many felt complicit in enacting because they had accepted funding from this administration (Geraghty, 2017). Another concern is that government funding for organizations rather than government initiatives themselves will prompt the notion that communities and individuals must work toward transformation rather than the overarching structural injustices that lead to incarceration--this was a concern during the Bush administration, with writers such as Dr. Mark Chaves, criticizing the pressure put onto faith-based organizations to enact and provide social services with these grants without means of effective administration, capacity, and support (2009). Though government support did prompt more attention and support for faith-based programming, many still existing faith-based organizations rely on private grants and funding from donations to remain operational (Willison et al., 2010; Yoon & Nickel, 2006). These challenges are significant and intentional efforts that maintain the autonomy of faith-based organizations and that do not coerce them into being the sole providers of social services in their communities for funding, but provides them with adequate support for the services they are providing, is absolutely necessary for government involvement moving forward. Additionally, specific funding opportunities should be reserved for programming that addresses the needs of those most vulnerable within the carceral complex--particularly Black women and other people of color.

Specific Reentry Needs for Black Women

About 81,000 women are released from state prisons yearly, while 1.8 million more are released from jail each year; due to the varied length of stay and the gender disparity in rates of incarceration in jails, there is less reentry support for folks, primarily women, post-incarceration

in jail (Sawyer, 2019). This is significant to note as women are more likely to be incarcerated in jails than prisons than their male counterparts. In addition to this gap in reentry support by place of incarceration, recent though limited data demonstrates that reentry rates by race are reflective of incarceration rates, as the majority of women who are released are African-American, most have experienced some form of trauma or abuse, most face a substance use disorder, and many have some form of disability or illness (ANWOL, 2018). The same conditions that may have contributed to incarceration and made this population most vulnerable to involvement with the criminal-punishment system, are many of the same conditions that women must still cope with upon re-entry, now with the label of ‘convicted felon’ or ‘repeat offender’ attached to their names and identities. Racial disparities for this population of women persist upon reentry and can be seen in the types of support and accessibility to programming that can lead to reduced recidivism and reintegration that heals individuals post-incarceration by allowing them to rebuild relationships, find community, and personally transform.

Harding and colleagues performed a qualitative study in which they followed folks of varying race-gender identities post-incarceration and found that, “institutional and legal restrictions, stigma and low human capital...”--alluding to restrictive public benefits policy and social stigma folks face post-incarceration--play a large role in shaping reentry experiences and behaviors that may contribute to recidivism (2014). This study demonstrated that compared to their white counterparts, Black women faced greater challenges gaining stability post-incarceration--defined by stable and sustainable housing, employment, income, and access to food and other necessary services (Harding et al., 2014). This study also demonstrated that public benefits were vital to the survival of the Black women who participated, as many

subsisted on food stamps or relied on public housing, because of a lack of social support from family and community post-incarceration and challenges securing employment that were likely related to race in addition to criminalized history. In addition to the needs for stability defined by this study, several other qualitative studies demonstrate that previously incarcerated women know exactly what they need in order to gain a sense of stability post-incarceration--responsive programming is what is lacking for their recovery (Harding et al., 2014; ANWOL, 2018; Snodgrass,2019) .

In a qualitative study performed by the gender-specific and faith-based reentry program, A New Way of Life, in 2018, many women indicated a need for housing, substance use treatment, access to food, transportation, mental and physical health needs, along with job training, and social supports as a path toward stability (ANWOL, 2018). Similarly, Jill Snodgrass found that many of the incarcerated women she interviewed indicated those *same* needs (Snodgrass, 2019). There are several other qualitative and quantitative studies demonstrating the need for programming that is responsive to the basic needs for social support, access to healthcare and basic needs of housing and food security, and treatment for mental and physical health challenges. However, there is still a lack of widespread support and funding for reentry programs for women that address these needs (Sawyer, 2019).

The specific aspects of *faith-based, residential reentry* programming must be understood in parts, as all pieces of this type of programming are intentional and would be most effective in addressing the needs of formerly incarcerated women. The call for *faith-based* programming, as defined-here, relies on the concept of personal, communal, and spiritual healing and transformation, regardless of how a person might specifically identify religiously or spiritually.

Programs that are faith-based using this definition tend to focus on restoring dignity to folks post-incarceration and recognizing their humanity after their interactions with a system that is built to deeply dehumanize folks. *Residential* programming is necessary for women who may not have access to stable housing upon release or who may be forced back into toxic social environments with family or partners that may contribute to behaviors that will lead to recidivism. *Gender-specific* programming is necessary to acknowledge the specific needs of women who have been incarcerated, as demonstrated above, women tend to be incarcerated for different reasons than men--the disparity is the greatest among women who are incarcerated because of behaviors related to substance use disorders. Gender-specific, residential programs can address these disorders and provide a safe space for women to seek counseling and support related to abuse and trauma. *Trauma-informed* programming is necessary to this end as these women who have been marginalized by society and the criminal-punishment system must have support and empathetic mentors and peers in order to reconcile trauma and abuses they may have faced that contributed to incarceration and those that occur during incarceration. *Culturally competent* programming is also necessary to ensure that particularly women of color are treated in ways that validate their racial and ethnic identities and which don't perpetuate interpersonal and structural racism during their healing process. (Snodgrass, 2019; Stanely, 2016; Sawyer, 2019) These specific aspects of programming post-incarceration may provide women, particularly Black women who tend to be the most marginalized following incarceration, with gaining the skills and support necessary to find stability and reintegrate back into their communities post-incarceration.

Though this type of holistic programming is most helpful and relevant for the thousands

of Black women expected to reintegrate into society post-incarceration; there are major deficits in access and availability of these types of programs. The few programs that do exist which encompass all of these features tend to be faith-based organizations started by formerly incarcerated Black women themselves. There is a common sentiment that ‘the only people looking out for Black women are Black women’ despite the legacy of Black women contributing to the well-being of society overall regardless of race, class, gender, or other aspect of identity. A couple of programs that have many of these features, though not all, are also reviewed with a discussion on how these programs can be improved to be more inclusive and needs-specific. As mass criminalization and incarceration continue and Black women’s needs continue to be unmet upon their reentry--the vicious cycle between poverty, including food insecurity, abuse/trauma, and incarceration continues for this population. There have been few efforts by the federal government toward supporting reentry programming, but as this is the same entity that has perpetuated many of the egregious policies that have led to mass incarceration in the first place, faith-based organizations and religious institutions can and must play a vital role in filling this gap while also holding the federal government accountable and advocating for the abolition of the carceral complex.

Though it is beyond the scope of this particular paper, guidelines for these types of programming including federal funding criteria along with trackability, sustainability, and qualitative data collection about the experiences of folks who participate in these programs is necessary to understand their long-term effectiveness. Additionally, these programs should provide models that can be replicated and flexibly modified across varying community contexts. The following examples of program models demonstrate this and fit into a womanist bioethics

frame as the most effective for addressing reentry for Black women facing food insecurity and other needs for dignified reintegration.

Site Examples and Models of Reentry Programming

Project Sister Connect- A Model for Reentry Programming

Jill Snodgrass details the importance of spirituality and religion in relation to women's mass incarceration and women's needs during incarceration and post-incarceration in the book *Women Leaving Prison*. She speaks to the importance of the aforementioned faith-based programming which is *residential, trauma-informed, gender-specific, and culturally competent* and provides an example with the Project Sister Connect model, which can be implemented across contexts. She writes, "Project Sister Connect is grounded in practices of radical acceptance, connection, and righteous indignation in the face of structural injustices, as exemplified in the ministry of Jesus"--this reentry programming relies heavily on principles based in Christianity and also acknowledges the need for reentry programs to not only address the basic needs of women post-incarceration, but also to challenge the structural injustices that allow for incarceration in the first place; she calls this the "Two Feet of Love in Action". Project Sister Connect itself is not an active faith-based reentry organization, rather it is a faith-based reentry model which can be modified for different faith communities in various settings. This model relies on the concept of 'sisterhood' as a basis for social support beginning during incarceration and continuing through reentry. Each incarcerated person is assigned a network of at least five 'sisters' who are mentors, companions, and advocates for emotional and mental health support, connections to resources, spiritual guidance, job training and advocacy,

goal-setting, substance use treatment if necessary, and reunification efforts with children if necessary. These are accountability partners with whom women have already established relationships and can play a vital role in not letting women ‘slip through the cracks’ toward recidivism. This model touches on the aspects of reentry that are vital to support, sustenance, and sustainability for women post-incarceration and can play a large role in reducing recidivism. (Snodgrass, 2019)

Hope House

An example of an existing trauma-informed, gender-specific, residential, faith-based reentry program is Ladies of Hope Ministries (LOHM), based in New York City. LOHM was founded by Topeka K. Sam, who is a Black woman who was formerly incarcerated with a drug felony conviction and faced the gaps in reentry support that many Black women face post-incarceration including substance use treatment, housing and food security, reunification services for children, employment, and mental health services. LOHM’s Hope House provides a residential space for women to heal and find opportunity post-incarceration in a way that is culturally competent and not only encourages personal transformation, but also advocates for large scale change. In addition to addressing basic needs for housing, mental health, and social support--LOHM also directly addresses the issue of food security specifically with their Angel Foods initiative, which provides fresh produce and groceries at no charge to formerly incarcerated women and their families. LOHM is the epitome of the ideal womanist bioethics approach to reentry programming as described throughout this paper. (LOHM.org)

A New Way of Life

A New Way of Life (ANWOL) is the largest women's reentry program in Los Angeles, California and operates not only as a gender-specific, trauma-informed, and faith-based reentry organization but also as an advocacy and research initiative. This organization was founded by Susan Burton, a Black woman, who was caught in a cycle of incarceration and a drug use disorder. After recovering from her addiction at an affluent recovery center in a primarily white neighborhood in California, she decided to begin A New Way of Life in order to make more culturally competent reentry and rehabilitative services available and accessible to women of color in South Los Angeles. ANWOL encourages both healing and transformation for formerly incarcerated women and their families, as well as widespread policy changes to generate more opportunities for formerly incarcerated women to reintegrate into general society. This organization is not explicitly faith-based but does incorporate many elements of spirituality into its programming toward rehabilitation and is responsive to spiritual needs of participants by partnering with local faith-based and religious institutions. This organization also publishes a yearly report detailing reentry needs for women nationally, using quantitative and qualitative data collected from sent surveys to former participants and their networks with other formerly incarcerated women. (ANWOL.org)

Angela House

Angela House in Houston, Texas is a faith-based, trauma-informed residential reentry program for women that provides mental health services, twelve-step recovery programs, job training, and healthcare, as well as spiritual support for women following incarceration. Angela

House also has an initiative within women's prisons and jails in Houston that provides services before women are released to begin their transition and establish relationships early--this is similar to the model proposed by Jill Snodgrass in Project Sister Connect. Angela House was founded by Maureen O'Connell, a white woman and former police officer, then a police chaplain in Chicago. She subsequently served children and victims of crimes; she gained a perspective about women's needs toward reducing recidivism through her work and founded Angela House to provide care and treatment for women trapped in cycles of recidivism, substance use, and poverty.

In addition to this care, Angela House offers sustained support to participants as previous program participants can continue to utilize counseling and support services as well as offer mentorship to new participants beyond their graduation. Additionally, this organization has strategic partnerships with a variety of local organizations and institutions to provide a multitude of social services that address food security, job searches, clothing, reconnecting with children, and more. This is an example of a potential model that can combat some of the challenges of government funding and subsequent overburdening to providing social services. Though this organization does not explicitly work with women of color, it does provide a model of support that can be impactful to women regardless of race--a limitation however, is that there is an application process for Angela House that must be completed prior to release and the organization has not released data on rates of acceptance by race nor is it clear how accessible this application is to currently incarcerated women (angelahouse.org).

The Lovelady Center--An Imperfect Example

The Lovelady Center in Birmingham, Alabama is a gender-specific, residential, and faith-based reentry program--however, the mission of this organization does state goals and programming that is explicitly Christian and describes itself as a “faith-based, Christ-centered program”. This is exemplified in their mission statement, “empowering women, through faith-based initiatives, so they can return to society as well-equipped women of God”. This organization is also primarily catered toward reentry services but is open to women who are facing any other aspects of major life transition or who are in need of “additional life skills”. This program does not provide rehabilitative services as participants must arrive clean of any substances but does offer educational credit, job training, childcare, as well as legal assistance and often works in conjunction with the Alabama court system as a form of a probationary *alternative sentence* to incarceration.

A major factor that differentiates this program from ANWOL or LOHM is that its founder, Brenda Lovelady Spahn, is a white woman who has never been incarcerated herself but felt spiritually called to address the cycle of recidivism that women in Alabama face. Though Angela House’s founder is also a white woman, she did have some prior engagement with incarcerated folks through her roles as a police officer and chaplain. Contrarily, as The Lovelady Center’s program has impacted many women positively and contributed to reduced recidivism in Alabama--it does expose some of the limits and challenges of faith-based programming, even with the best intentions. The Lovelady Center seemingly welcomes any woman who is beginning their reentry process, however the women must be clean and sober which limits the population it reaches and the mission is explicitly Christian as the program embeds specific aspects of worship

and practice. Additionally, despite the fact that it serves many Black women and women of color, Miss Brenda's recorded interviews reveal biases and fear toward many of the women the organization serves as well as patronizing tone toward addressing some of their needs--including framing the women as 'helpless' (The Lovelady Center, 2018). Though this example does not fit into the ideal model of reentry programming from a womanist bioethics lens, it is important to include because it reveals that though there are some impactful reentry programs, there are still many limitations and challenges in faith-based reentry programming that may not support all women involved and that could lead to greater harm rather than healing. (loveladycenter.org).

Challenges to Reentry Programming: Who is Left out?

Despite the goal of creating programming that is accessible and effective for all women and particularly women of color, who are most marginalized by the criminal-punishment system, there are limitations to these programs and challenges that may cause some women to feel even more marginalized by programs that offer to assist them. There is no regulatory body over faith-based reentry initiatives, especially because many of them are privately funded or are connected to particular religious institutions which disqualifies them from some federal funding. This lack of regulation leaves programming and support services completely at the discretion of founders and directors of these programs, some of whom may not necessarily have interacted with the criminal-punishment system before themselves and may have biases toward formerly incarcerated folks and not promote best practices toward reentry. In addition to a regulatory body providing guidance for inclusive programming and resources, flexible and replicable program models, like Project Sister Connect proposed by Jill Snodgrass, also need to be available and audited regularly. These models can assure longevity and sustainability beyond the vision of the

founder of these organizations and this would allow them to have the widest impact.

In addition to these challenges, some faith-based programming may require participants to engage in religious-specific practices that may not spiritually resonate with them but that they may feel obligated to participate in to obtain the benefits of the program. Lastly, within the already marginalized population of women of color who are incarcerated, particularly Black women, there is also a disproportionate amount of women who identify as LGBT+ and many faith-based spaces may not feel welcoming or encouraging to all aspects of their identities (Kerrison, 2018).

Due to these potential obstacles toward programming that is more accessible to more formerly incarcerated women, there needs to be some sort of national evaluation and accreditation system for these specific types of reentry organizations in order for them to be most effective and impactful. This accreditation should be created in conjunction with formerly incarcerated women and those who have participated in programs like this themselves so that they can share their insights on what is most helpful for reentry. The knowledge and experience that formerly incarcerated women themselves can provide is vital for identifying which features of these programs would be most helpful for their successful reentry and healing processes. Additionally, this type of support may aid in longevity and sustainability as well as replication of these sites and services so that they can truly serve a larger group of the thousands of women who are released from incarceration annually. A womanist bioethics lens seeks to constantly uplift those most marginalized by varying systems and to this end, it is important to not only acknowledge the positive impact that these organizations have had on many individuals, families, and communities--but also, to consider those who are still being excluded from these

paths toward recovery and reentry and to continue to advocate for more inclusive, accessible, and equitable options.

Conclusion

Faith and religion play an important role in the lives of many incarcerated folks as they provide necessary coping methods as well as prompt individuals to consider their own needs toward growth and transformation. Additionally, faith-based and religious programming that emphasize dignity and humanity have long played a role in reentry services and combating injustices that perpetuate mass incarceration and over-policing as well as structural challenges related to food insecurity and housing for people of color and other marginalized groups specifically. Women's mass incarceration is an overgrown and under-discussed phenomenon that disproportionately affects Black women and continues to affect many beyond incarceration due to specific laws, like the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which limits welfare and food stamps for those convicted of drug felonies. As the population of women who are likely to be incarcerated tends to be those who have faced trauma and abuse, cope with mental and physical disabilities, tend to be low-income mothers, and tend to have substance use disorders--policies like this contribute to a cycle of poverty-related challenges and incarceration particularly for women of color.

Recent social justice initiatives, including Black Lives Matter among others, have exposed the intentionality with which particular populations have been exploited, dehumanized, and disenfranchised in the United States within socioeconomic and political systems and structures tied to access to healthcare, housing, jobs, as well as other social means to thrive and

flourish. These systems oppress populations on the basis of racism, classism, sexism and more discriminatory lenses that tend to privilege White, mid-to-high income level, heterosexual, cis-gender folks and place those that fall outside of privileged identities as subordinate ‘others’. Socioeconomic and political structures within the United States were created to favor these privileged identities while keeping the ‘others’ disenfranchised via slavery, genocide, quotas, segregation and many more methods of oppression including criminalization. Criminalization of African American folks post-slavery within the South via racist policies contributed to building the current prison-industrial complex which thrives on mass incarceration of this population (Alexander, 2012; DuVernay, Averick, & Barish, 2016). Regardless of this history, the fact remains that prisoner status or a criminalized record does not make anyone less human, despite the fact that the original United States Constitution defined enslaved Africans and their children as three-fifths human (Alexander, 2012; Snodgrass, 2018).

Faith-based organizations and religious/spiritual communities invested in not only acknowledging the humanity of folks during incarceration, but that are also invested in ensuring their well-being beyond incarceration and in working toward systematic change are necessary to address the challenges that Black women specifically face post-incarceration. A womanist bioethics lens prioritizes the experiences and needs of Black women toward reentry to prompt praxis toward justice and a potential avenue for this is greater support for residential reentry programs that are *faith-based, culturally competent, trauma-informed, and gender specific*. Though there are limitations to these programs and the populations they are most accessible to and effective for, they are among the strongest systems for reentry and reduced recidivism for folks reentering general society following incarceration and they work to not only address the

material challenges women face but also to address the traumas of their lives before and during incarceration by emphasizing their humanity and dignity despite their incarceration. These programs serve as an important pathway towards healing for formerly incarcerated women, their families, and their communities affected by the criminal-punishment system; this is important work that must be done simultaneously as those interested in larger scale change and transformation of a society that allows for mass incarceration in the first place, continue to advocate for abolition--getting rid of the prison industrial-complex and incarceration in its entirety.

Author's Note

Finishing this thesis in the middle of a global pandemic, has been challenging. While editing and putting the pieces together for this final draft--I found myself wondering, what is the point of writing about this when there are people actively dying--particularly Black folks and many incarcerated folks--due to COVID-19? However, I was inspired to give this final draft my best effort because in many ways, this is the *perfect* time to discuss the issue of women's mass incarceration, post-incarceration food security, reentry programming for women, and the need for programs that heal those affected by the carceral system while simultaneously seeking to eradicate it in its entirety. This is a time of great and inevitable change and despite all of the horror and pain of this time, I see much opportunity for global growth and care and even greater need for abolition of the prison-industrial complex and all of its tendrils.

It is frustrating to write about a subject that feels obvious to me--many of the questions I had throughout this writing process were: *why do I need to justify the fact that folks who have*

been deemed 'criminals' by structural powers are still human? Why do I need to prove that food security is an issue? Why do I need to stress the necessity of places of healing after the trauma of incarceration and adequate funding for them? These are questions that I grapple with constantly as a scholar-activist, even though I know the answer. I am grateful to have the opportunity to share my voice on this issue at Harvard University, but I also long for the day in which I do not have to do the work of what feels like 'stating the obvious' nor have it validated by this so-called elite institution, which itself is heavily involved in reinforcing the prison-industrial complex, for some 'power' to call for change. Prisons, jails, detention centers, and the entire prison-industrial complex need to be abolished and an important step in this is Harvard University's divestment from carceral institutions.

Additionally, as a reader for this paper--if you would like to take immediate action, please consider making a [donation](#) to the gender-specific, trauma-informed reentry program, [New Beginnings Re-Entry Services](#). This organization is based in Boston and was founded by a formerly incarcerated Black woman, Stacey Borden, who was the keynote speaker for the 2020 Black Religion, Spirituality, & Culture Conference at Harvard Divinity School. This organization is actively establishing a residential program that can directly support housing needs for women who have been recently released from incarceration--any support would be greatly appreciated and is necessary.

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