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Decolonizing Community Re-entry: Effective Case Studies of Community-Led Programs and Services to Support Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Canada

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Abstract. Decolonizing re-entry programs require rethinking traditional approaches in supporting formerly incarcerated individuals and challenging colonial and deficit frameworks embedded in the criminal legal system, which often has an exclusive focus on punishment. This article names the risk factors and systemic barriers faced by equity-denied individuals during reintegration with a focus on the Canadian context. Two community-led programs in Ontario are highlighted as innovative case studies for effectively supporting reintegration of individuals exiting carceral institutions. Key characteristics of these programs which are offered by the Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE) and Walls to Bridges (W2B) are outlined. Implications are discussed for enhancing effective community re-entry with a focus on amplifying the transformative impact of peer-led, trauma-informed programs that capitalize on the lived and living experiences of criminalized individuals. A series of recommendations are outlined regarding the importance of integrating Indigenous and Africentric knowledge systems and offering more programs and services rooted in trauma-informed approaches. These strategies would mitigate the unique challenges faced by Indigenous, Black, and other equity-denied identities who are disproportionately incarcerated.

Keywords: Community Re-entry, Reintegration, Culturally Responsive Programs, Culturally Responsive Services, Incarceration, Equity-denied Identities.

Introduction

This article critically examines the systemic barriers faced by Indigenous, Black, and other equity-denied identities during reintegration with a focus on the Canadian context. In alignment with the theme of the special issue exploring "whose life and voice matters?", the article contributes to the broader discourse on decolonizing education and reintegration by challenging binary notions of success and failure, with a focus on how individuals and families are impacted by incarceration and how they can effectively be supported as part of community re-entry (Chan et al., 2017; Eizadirad, 2021; Jones, 2022). A critical examination of how the criminal legal system intersects with education through the school to prison pipeline is also highlighted.

We refer to the "criminal justice system" as more accurately the "criminal legal system" to describe policing, prosecution, courts, and corrections in Canada that have historically not delivered justice for many Indigenous, Black, and racialized people and communities (for further reading, see Bryant, 2021). Therefore, employing a decolonial lens to effectively support collective care and self-determination for re-entry requires rethinking traditional approaches that are often saturated with punishment discourse. This involves integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, African/Caribbean/Black Social Histories (ACBSH), culturally responsive practices, and community-led initiatives to examine and address these unique challenges. For example, Indigenous and Black youth experience higher rates of poverty and violence with elevated levels of school pushouts and incarceration compared to other demographic groups, perpetuating the vicious cycle of the school-to-prison pipeline (Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, 2019; James, 2017; MacCarthy, 2023; Owusu-Bempah & Jones, 2023; Parsaud, 2021; Reece, 2020). A comprehensive report by Carl James (2017) titled "*The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area,*" sheds light on the disparities in high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment among Black students compared to their white peers: only 69% of Black students graduated high school, a significantly lower proportion compared to 84% for their white counterparts. Furthermore, only 25% of Black students were confirmed attending Ontario universities compared to 60% for other racialized students and 47% for white students. The school-to-prison pipeline exacerbates these challenges as equity-denied youth face disproportionate disciplinary measures and punitive actions at all levels of schooling in Ontario (Black Legal Action Centre, 2022; Maynard, 2022).

Therefore, the need for decolonized approaches is urgent, particularly given the disproportionate suspension rate and incarceration rates of Indigenous and Black individuals in Canada (MacCarthy, 2023; Owusu-Bempah & Jones, 2023; Reece, 2020). Indigenous peoples make up approximately 5% of the Canadian population but represent over 30% of the federal prison population, a statistic that is even more alarming for Indigenous women, who constitute 42% of women in custody (Office of the

Correctional Investigator, 2021). Similarly, Black Canadians, comprising about 3.5% of the general population, account for 7.2% of federal inmates (Government of Canada, 2022). These disparities highlight the racialized dynamics of the criminal legal system and underscore the need for decolonial community-led re-entry strategies. Decolonization in this context means not only creating programs tailored to the cultural and historical contexts of racialized and marginalized communities but also dismantling systemic barriers rooted in inequitable policies and practices that perpetuate cycles of reincarceration and criminal legal system reinvolvement (Eizadirad et al., 2025; Sharpe, 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Waller, 2019).

As it relates to terminology, we rely less on the state definition of "reintegration" which focuses on the individual experience of re-entry or resettlement, with a focus on assisting formerly incarcerated people to transition to "law-abiding" citizens in community settings after their release. As part of reintegration, formerly incarcerated individuals seek stability in key areas such as housing, employment, and accessing educational opportunities for upward social mobility. While this definition focuses on individuals overcoming systemic barriers to achieve stability and reclaim stable and sustainable autonomy, it does not trouble the structural oppression that is embedded within carceral spaces, and the resultant impact of criminalization in several areas of individuals' lives. In other words, reintegration as defined by the state assumes that adequate culturally responsive programs are available in carceral institutions and any failure to reintegrate is onus-dependent of the individual post-release. Instead, we use the term "community re-entry" to focus on the importance of community-led and community-driven support that is desire-based. This term recognizes the complexities associated with social determinants of health and well-being related to housing, employment, and access to education. Further, this term recognizes that intersectional dynamics such as race, gender, class, ability, and sexual orientation, are also factors that simultaneously impact community re-entry and access to resources. It views these systems as embedded with colonial ideologies and inequitable policies that require an abolitionist lens promulgated on centering the multifaceted and nuanced lived and living experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals. Similarly, although we cite government documents that use the term recidivism, as discussed later, this term is not one without discontent. As a state-defined term, recidivism refers to when a previously convicted person relapses or receives sanctions for the same or a new offence. However, there is no universal definition of the term used in the legal system. The inconsistent definition of the term, and the variance in data collection (metrics for recidivism can include re-contact, re-arrest, re-incarceration, or reconviction), can alter public perception of what the data is actually demonstrating. For example, lumping together an individual's rate of re-arrest compared to an individual's return to prison does not draw the same conclusion, and in the legal arena the operationalizing and conceptualisation (Schoeman, 2010) of the term recidivism can be used as

a catch-all container for mis/assessing risk and misleading statistics which can impact policy decision-makers. Lastly, the term recidivism stigmatizes individuals with mental health and addiction challenges who may be involved in the legal system. Decolonizing programs and services for effective community re-entry involves embedding trauma-informed practices that acknowledge the intergenerational effects of colonization, systemic racism, and displacement (Eizadirad et al., 2025; Jones, 2022; Khenti, 2013; Parsaud, 2021). *The Federal Framework to Reduce Recidivism* by Public Safety Canada (2022) emphasizes the importance of addressing risk factors in various key areas to holistically mitigate legal system involvement. These areas include access to housing, education, employment, health, and positive support networks. However, it falls short of making recommendations to intentionally fund and implement Indigenous or Black-led initiatives that prioritize community healing and empowerment, which aligns with recommendations from the *Gladue Report* and the *Black Justice Strategy* (Government of Canada, 2023; Government of Canada, 2022; McCaskill & FitzMaurice, 2020; Owusu-Bempah & Jones, 2023). In response, two community-led programs in Ontario are highlighted as innovative case studies for effectively supporting reintegration of individuals exiting carceral institutions. Key characteristics of these programs which are offered by the Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE) and Walls to Bridges (W2B) are outlined. Implications are discussed for enhancing effective community re-entry with a focus on amplifying the transformative impact of peer-led, trauma-informed programs that capitalize on the lived and living experiences of criminalized individuals.

Weaving Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and Abolitionist Feminism

Using Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011) and transformative justice paradigms (Hurtado, 2022; hooks, 2003), this article interrogates the ways race, gender, and class intersect and weave to shape reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals. There is a particular focus on the roles of community-led programs in dismantling systemic hurdles by offering holistic wrap-around supports offered by people with relevant lived experiences (Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, 2019; Government of Canada, 2022). Drawing from a myriad of scholarly works and reports, including insights from Canadian policies such as the Black Justice Strategy (Owusu-Bempah & Jones, 2023) and the Federal Framework to Reduce Recidivism (Public Safety Canada, 2022), this examination delves into the nuances of community re-entry and the importance of access to essential support services as protective factors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), encapsulating its multifaceted essence beyond mere resettlement. As we dissect systemic barriers that impede effective transition to post-secondary education for formerly incarcerated or legal-system involved individuals, particularly for

racialized identities, we strive to discern what has proven efficacious and what has faltered, while spotlighting the glaring disparities exacerbated by structural inequities (Chan et al., 2017; James, 2012; Williams et al., 2013).

We particularly argue that Critical Race Theory (CRT) is beneficial to examining the intersectional nexus of race and gender within the re-entry narrative. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a call for a critical examination of race in American legal proceedings. As such, CRT began in the United States as an outgrowth of critical legal studies, a field of study where leading scholars questioned the application and role of the law in legitimizing structural oppression impacting the lives of Black people (Yosso, 2005). Derrick Bell coined the term "interest convergence" (1980) to argue that unless the interests of white people align with Black people, civil rights and racial progress would not be made. Although Bell is credited as the person who created CRT, in 1989, critical legal scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), Richard Delgado (1989), Patricia Williams (1991), and Mari Matsuda (1991) began publishing in legal journals focusing on the intersections of race, law, and power **(**Cobb, 2021**).** They argued that racial classifications and hierarchies that perpetuated racism were not only evident in legal jurisprudence but in all aspects of American life where structural oppression was systemic (Reece, 2024). As a theoretical framework, CRT focuses on how race and racial power are constructed and constituted in American society and given the entrenchment of white supremacy in the legal system, Black people could not achieve full equal and equitable civil rights under American laws. CRT has since evolved beyond its early theoretical premise of focusing on law and expanded to examine structural oppressions in other fields such as education, healthcare, child welfare, refugee and immigration, housing, and employment systems.

Regarding feminist theorizing, in 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of "intersectionality" to the field of CRT, arguing that women located within multiple social categories (i.e., race, class, gender, disability, sexuality etc.) experience multiple layers of oppression simultaneously. Crenshaw further argued that examining oppression from a "single-axis framework" (p. 140) erased Black women's experiences with multiple and sometimes overlapping oppressions. Crenshaw emphasized that Black women can experience racial *and* gender oppression, and at the same time these categories should not be viewed as mutually exclusive but as a dynamic set of interrelated forms of oppression (Reece, 2024). Therefore, CRT is a relevant framework for examining structural oppression in Canada, in particular, how relevant social histories of anti-racism, particularly anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism (Kendi, 2019; Maynard, 2022; Sharpe, 2022), impact the trajectory of people who have had contact with the Canadian criminal legal system, contributing to disproportionate levels of incarceration. It also provides a lens to examine the unique challenges they experience as part of community re-entry, including access to educational opportunities and extents of support available.

Black feminist intersections of CRT and abolitionist feminism (Ananda, 2022) are also central to discussions of and with incarcerated Black and racialized women. The ongoing contestations and dialogues regarding carceral post-release planning and community re-entry illuminate the need for anti-racist decolonizing methodologies and praxis. Abolitionist feminists (Ananda, 2022; Lorde, 2017; Jones, 2022) seek to abolish the police and prison-industrial complex, defined as a set of "overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems" (Critical Resistance, n.d., para. 1). Therefore, interpersonal and structural violence must be addressed together by combining critical analysis with praxis for social transformation (Freire, 1970), rather than exclusively relying on punishment and fear tactics for social control. Feminist abolitionists invite us to reconsider the world we want and how to reorganize to build it beyond prisons: recognizing that nuanced approaches to anti-carceral activism cross-pollinates with anti-racism and anti-capitalism dimensions (Davis et al, 2022).

Positionality of the Authors

In providing a blueprint for anti-racist decolonizing research and praxis, we arrive at this work from multiple vantage points. As co-authors, we have many years of experience working within community settings where our community-based work intersects with our academic research and activist teaching pedagogies (Eizadirad et al., 2023). As such, we position ourselves in this article as researchers and learners, where much of our work intersects firsthand with the populations that we write about. We write as activists, advocates, and learners, deeply indebted to the people whose firsthand experiences in carceral systems continue to shape their lives as they negotiate daily systemic and institutional barriers designed to hinder their socio-economic and emotional growth and development. We also do not write from the perspective that people who have been criminalized or have criminal records are deficient or damaged (Eizadirad & Chambers, 2023). Rather, we see them as assets with many insights to offer. Tuck (2009) reminds us that as researchers we must suspend further damage in communities that have historically been researched, exploited, and studied to death. These communities owe us nothing, and we owe them everything for the uncompensated and unsung labour that has been exploited in the name of research. To that end, we come to this work with respect and accountability for the process, knowing that we bear much responsibility in the production and currency of this work. In the following paragraphs, we outline more details about each author and the unique lived and professional experiences that impact their approach to research and knowledge mobilization.

Ardavan: I was born in Iran and immigrated with my family to Toronto, Canada in 1998. I grew up in numerous under-resourced communities in

Toronto. Since 2007, I have worked with YAAACE in various capacities in the Jane and Finch community: as a basketball coach, teacher, and most recently as the Executive Director of the organization for 3 years. In these roles, I have contributed to supporting marginalized and underserved youth, particularly Black youth and others from equity-denied groups. My lived experiences, including friendships with individuals and family members who have been previously or currently incarcerated, have profoundly shaped my perspective and commitment to social justice. These relationships have underscored the urgent need for community-led programs that address systemic inequities and prioritize healing and dismantling barriers to employment, education, and housing post-release. As a result, it has been a priority at YAAACE to actively develop and implement trauma-informed and culturally responsive programs and services to create inclusive spaces that empower youth by centering Black experiences and Africentricity. It is important to note that Africentricity is an orientation and approach to understanding and engaging reality from the perspective and interests of a person of African descent. This affirming orientation is embedded in violence prevention and intervention programs offered at YAAACE such as TO Wards Peace and New Narrative. These programs offer case management services to support reintegration, led by Black peers, who have experiences with violence and/or incarceration. With a Black-led leadership team at YAAACE, with extensive experience across different sectors and generations, rich insights are combined to lead various research and knowledge mobilization efforts as part of advocacy for systemic change. As part of the advocacy, YAAACE examines the lived experiences of incarcerated individuals and their journeys post-release to better understand barriers they face and how to strategically create innovative pathways through culturally responsive programs and services to support their community re-entry. One example of YAAACE knowledge mobilization efforts include the launch of the *Safer Communities Canada* podcast (See YAAACE, 2024 to access all 9 episodes). As a co-host, along with the founder of YAAACE Devon Jones, we facilitate authentic, brave conversations about community safety issues impacting local communities across Canada. We discuss the root causes of violence, the risk factors that exacerbate this phenomenon, and how to disrupt them to create safer, thriving communities. Our insightful discussions with experts, professionals, community leaders, and people with lived experiences, including those who were previously incarcerated, aims to empower listeners with the knowledge for personal and collective liberation.

Rai: I was born in the United Kingdom, immigrated to Canada in 1976, and raised in a diverse working-class neighbourhood east of Toronto called Scarborough. I identify as a Black feminist, critical anti-racist educator, and abolitionist. In 2007, I conducted the first research project in Canada to exclusively examine the intersections of race, incarceration, and the meaning of Canadian citizenship pertaining to federally sentenced Black

women. In 2016, I participated in the Walls to Bridges (W2B) Instructor Training program with incarcerated women at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) and became a collective member of the organization in 2017. Since then, I have provided anti-racist training during the annual W2B Instructor training course held at GVI and helped train the alumni collective in facilitation skills. My lived experiences as a Black woman, my previous frontline employment working with HIV+ prisoners, and as someone who has known individuals who have been and are currently incarcerated has informed my teaching and research which centers liberatory, anti-colonial, and anti-racist pedagogies as a way to deeply reflect and hold space for personal, interpersonal, and collective care for ourselves and our communities. I currently coordinate the W2B program in the Faculty of Arts at Toronto Metropolitan University in Toronto.

Systemic Barriers in Community Re-Entry for Indigenous, Black, and Other Equity-Denied Identities: Housing, Employment, and Access to Support

Supportive and culturally relevant community re-entry extends beyond mere resettlement into society. It involves addressing the emotional and psychological toll of incarceration which often remains unacknowledged in mainstream discourses (Eizadirad & Chambers, 2023; Eizadirad et al., 2025; Lachapelle et al., 2025; John Howard Society of Ontario, 2018). Since 2015, the remand population (individuals who are detained in custody while awaiting trial or sentencing but not yet been convicted of a crime) has outgrown the sentenced population in Canada which further complicates the landscape of incarceration and community safety (Eizadirad, 2021). This trend indicates a growing number of individuals detained pre-trial, exacerbating issues, cycles of (re)incarceration, and highlighting the inefficacies of current rehabilitation and community re-entry models. The correlation between ineffective rehabilitation programs and high recidivism rates underscores the need for innovative solutions. Housing, employment, and social connections are foundational, yet these are frequently inaccessible due to the pervasive intersecting effects of racism and criminalization. An example of this is how Black men are more likely to have criminal records due to anti-Black racism within institutional policies and practices (Canadian Civil Liberties Association, 2014; Colour of Poverty, 2019; Sapers et al., 2018). This could be attributed to several practices including increased police presence and surveillance in racialized under-resourced neighbourhoods, racial profiling, deficit thinking, and stereotypical ideologies normalized via dominant discourses and stereotypical representations in popular culture mediums (Chan et al., 2017; Eizadirad, 2016; Fanon, 1961; James, 2017; Maynard, 2022). Furthermore, individuals transitioning to community settings from incarceration face heightened systemic barriers (Maynard, 2022; Sharpe, 2022) which disproportionately impact Indigenous, Black, and racialized populations (Colour of Poverty, 2019; Parsaud, 2021; Schmitt and Kandra,

2021; Williams, Jones & Bailey, 2013; YAAACE, 2025). This is a systemic issue that is intrinsic within many institutions going beyond the legal system into healthcare, education, government, and other institutions (Block & Galabuzi, 2011; Colour of Poverty, 2019; Maynard, 2022; McMurtry & Curling, 2008; Sharpe, 2022).

Three critical protective factors arise for supporting effective community re-entry which include access to stable housing, employment, and family or community support. Housing provides stability and safety, yet many formerly incarcerated individuals face discrimination in accessing suitable accommodation due to having a criminal record. Employment is equally vital, offering financial independence and a sense of purpose. Despite the Federal Framework to Reduce Recidivism (Public Safety Canada , 2022) emphasizing employment as a key protective factor for reducing recidivism, systemic biases in hiring practices persist related to mandatory criminal record checks and the stigma associated with previously being incarcerated, which disproportionately excludes Indigenous, Black and other racialized individuals from the workforce further marginalizing them who are already underrepresented in many sectors (Husein et al., 2025; McMurtry & Curling, 2008; Schmitt & Kandra, 2021; Sharpe, 2022). A report by Tasca et al. (2024) titled *Locked Up. Locked Out. The Revolving Door of Homelessness and Ontario's Justice System* outlines how formerly incarcerated individuals are ten times more likely to experience homelessness, with racialized populations facing even higher rates due to discrimination and socio-economic disparities. Also, the John Howard Society of Ontario (2018) report *The Invisible Burden: Police Records and the Barriers to Employment in Toronto* highlight significant barriers faced by formerly incarcerated individuals in accessing employment due to having lower levels of educational attainment and limited work experience, compounded by minimal opportunities for training and capacity-building during incarceration (Eizadirad, 2021; Eizadirad & Chambers, 2023). A study by Schmitt and Kandra (2021) further emphasized that racialized individuals with criminal records face significantly lower callback rates for job applications compared to their white counterparts. These challenges are further magnified due to the intersection of race, gender, and social class (Block & Galabuzi, 2011; Husein et al., 2025; Jones, 2022; MacCarthy, 2023). Therefore, innovative community re-entry programs and services require an intersectional approach that acknowledges and addresses these overlapping layers of oppression.

Additionally, access to education which could provide a pathway to meaningful employment, is hindered by policies and practices that prioritize neoliberal market logic over rehabilitative and restorative approaches (Correctional Service Canada, 2019; Eizadirad, 2021; Freire, 1970). Correctional Service Canada (CSC) reported in 2018 that 72% of incarcerated individuals have some need for education/employment, with 46.1% of the incarcerated population indicating a grade 10 to grade 12 education or below (Federal Framework to Reduce Recidivism, 2022). For

women, access to educational opportunities while incarcerated and outside involves further unique challenges. Many women who are incarcerated have social histories of sexual abuse, intimate partner violence (IPV), trauma, substance use disorder, or mental health challenges. In addition, the social conditions of women's lives often include the feminization of poverty, racism, sexism, and disability (Block & Galabuzi, 2011; Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, 2019). The intersections of these multiple oppressions have an indelible impact on women, and by extension, affect the ways in which programming inside carceral spaces is delivered. Indigenous and Black women navigate the dual stigma of being racialized and having a criminal record, which impacts their chances to secure housing, employment, and custody of their children. Research by the Black Legal Action Centre (2022) highlights how systemic inequities in child welfare systems disproportionately penalize racialized mothers, complicating their re-entry journeys. In particular, women often struggle to regain custody of their children due to the involvement of Children's Aid Societies. This process can be emotionally taxing and further isolates them from crucial familial support networks. Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach that centers trauma-informed, culturally collective responses. Overall, the process of community re-entry and securing opportunities and resources for upward social mobility is disproportionately difficult for Indigenous, Black, and other racialized individuals due to intersecting forms of systemic barriers across different sectors.

Bridging the Gap with Innovative Community-Led Solutions: Walls to Bridges and YAAACE as Case Studies for Effective Re-Entry Community Models

In this section, the innovative initiatives of two community-led organizations in Ontario are highlighted for their effectiveness: W2B and YAAACE. As a collective, they illustrate how decolonizing approaches to education and community re-entry through trauma-informed, culturally responsive programs and services offer effective support for empowerment of previously incarcerated individuals. Programs like W2B and YAAACE exemplify best practices in facilitating access to holistic wrap-around support and empowerment among legal-system involved individuals (Walls to Bridges, 2023; YAAACE, 2025). These initiatives emphasize the importance of mentorship, case management offered by people with lived experiences, and experienced-based reflective programming in addressing root causes of systemic barriers from an intersectional perspective.

Walls to Bridges (W2B: https://wallstobridges.ca/)

Effective community re-entry requires strength-based, community-driven solutions that prioritize the voices and experiences of racialized and marginalized populations, including formerly incarcerated people. W2B is a program that focuses on access to education for adults who are incarcerated. It is an accredited education program that offers post-

secondary college and university courses inside prison and supports the continued learning of individuals post-release. The program brings together incarcerated learners (inside students) and non-incarcerated students and professors (outside students) to study post-secondary courses in jails, prisons, or community settings across Canada. W2B integrates Indigenous pedagogies emphasizing relational learning, self-reflection, and community connection. As equal learners in the program, participants engage in experiential and self-reflexive learning that provides an intersectional lens to understand the dynamics of criminalization and punishment. Classes are credit courses taught within correctional and community settings and offered through partner universities and colleges. All students who complete the course receive a post-secondary credit. Although the program does not focus exclusively on adult women, given Rai's research and experience working with incarcerated women, her analysis integrates a gendered lens to address the unique experiences of racialized women transitioning from incarceration.

Historically, W2B was founded based on inspiration from the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program in the United States. It began in Canada under the leadership of Dr. Simone Weil Davis who co-founded the program in 2011 under the name Inside-Out Canada. In 2012, the national W2B Hub was established within the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University in Kitchener, Ontario. In 2014 under the directorship of Dr. Shoshana Pollack, W2B established its own autonomous Canadian based program. The first course at Wilfrid Laurier was offered in partnership with GVI led by Dr. Pollack. Upon conclusion of the course incarcerated and non-incarcerated students formed a 'collective' and within one year created the W2B Collective which established the National W2B Instructor Training Institute (Walls to Bridges, n.d.). The institute hosts a five-day training course for university, college, and community educators each summer reinforcing their pedagogies to teach others how to effectively facilitate W2B programs in other communities and jurisdictions characterized by collaborative discussion, decision-making, self-reflection, and sharing of work. In addition, the Walls-to-Bridges Ontario Community Collective (W2BOCC) works to provide support and foster encouragement, empowerment, and opportunities for individuals post-release to access higher education and opportunities for sustainable employment. Overall, by offering educational programs within correctional facilities, W2B facilitates the development of critical thinking and vocational skills, equipping participants for sustainable employment post-release. Rai has had the pleasure of being a member of the W2BOCC since 2017.

One of the foundational elements germane to the W2B program is the focus on examining how state-imbued carceral logics are often embedded in programming behind bars. For example, the language of the state (e.g., inmate, recidivism, prosocial, culturally responsive) used in correctional programming is a veiled reminder of the Canadian state's power, control, and subjugation of those under its jurisdiction and

surveillance. W2B intentionally refuses the language of the state in its pedagogical practice. Prison, as a site of cultural representation, shapes the social understanding of *who* inhabits that space versus the *reality* of that space. Stuart Hall (1997) reminds us that language is a medium of representation and there is an element of coding and decoding that is used for how language produces meaning. For this reason, W2B's refusal to use the language of the state is an act of agitation and disruption in the procuring of resistance against carceral logics. To decolonize reintegration is to decolonize the language that is used when providing educational support to incarcerated individuals and post-release. To decolonize reintegration is to also recognize reliance on mainstream messaging and narratives about incarcerated people which often position them as incapable of change.

Rai created a questionnaire and sought responses from several W2BOCC members which had nine formerly federally incarcerated members and all but one identifying as a woman. The purpose was to ascertain some of the programming challenges faced by people who have been incarcerated and post-release, and to gather an understanding of how a program like W2B fostered a critical role in social-sustainability, support, and community re-entry. The questionnaire garnered responses from six W2BOCC members and provided a unique opportunity to apply a gendered lens to examining the impact and relevance of correctional programming within prisons designated for women.

When asked whether they had access to relevant programming and, more specifically, post-release programming (not W2B) that would support their community re-entry, respondents expressed the following:

> *Programs offered through CSC was not at all relevant to re-entry. I experienced CSC's mandated programs as unhelpful – just the mere fact that they were 'mandated' programs in and of itself, meant that folks were doing the programs because they were compulsory versus something they enjoyed. The programs lacked depth, substance, and value, instead they were obsessed with furthering blame, shame, and my belief in myself as undeserving. As well the programs seemed to be from a cookie-cutter era, where one crime fits all; they were not crime specific and deeply riveted in anger management and substance use*.
> Lorraine, Black, incarcerated for 1.5 years

> *The required CSC programming I completed was not helpful and did nothing to support my community re-entry. This was especially true for the post-release required program I had to complete during my first couple of months on parole. I had already completed the identical program in prison, and if anything, it was a barrier to my re-entry. It was time-consuming, redundant, focused on individual responsibilization, and did nothing to help my transition to the community. It was just extra time and requirements when I was*

> *trying to find housing, employment, and adjust to life in the community.*
> Rachel, white, incarcerated for 3.5 years

Alternatively, when asked how the W2B program and pedagogy has informed or benefited their life post-incarceration, in the immediate aftermath and currently, one respondent shared that, "Just having the pedagogy which I know so well gives me a safe place to be silent. I am able to listen and gain more understanding when people talk" (Melissa, Black, incarcerated for 7 years). Similarly, when asked to discuss a key learning from the W2B program, Latasha who is Black and incarcerated for 3.5 years responded, "It has led to me being accountable for myself and pushing myself through school without many resources, knowing that this will better me once I am outside". Further, the importance of W2B in establishing and maintaining social stability and how the program fosters a sense of community post-release was evident in respondent's strength-based responses:

> *It was my W2B sisters who came to my rescue when most family members were suspicious of what brought me to GVI in the first place and their trepidation of the impact of my prison life. It was W2B sisters who gifted me with a well-needed computer, and emotional and mental support.*
> DenDen, Black, incarcerated for 4 years.

> *I have been connected with W2B post-release since June 2017. The main reason I stay connected is because of the inherent value to the work, the sense of community and camaraderie, and opportunities to engage in conferences, public speaking, workshops and trainings, which built my capacity and confidence as a teacher and learner. It's also been a great opportunity to meet new people, including former prisoners and educators across Canada and beyond.*
> Rachel

Lorraine, who has been affiliated with W2B for 12 years and serves as the Coordinator for the W2BOCC, also emphasized how one of the key drivers that keeps her connected to W2B was learned while incarcerated:

> *I still adhere to most of the key drivers practiced inside; mutual learning in W2B classrooms as liberatory practice; feminist movements and practices helps us create new ways of being and relating with each other; acknowledging the W2B classroom as a place where long-term connections are forged and we can be who we are – no pretense; the raising awareness/advocacy piece; the far-reaching arms of W2B (people are curious about the program), and willing to spread the details of the program to others; uprising of*

grassroots connections; the potential for the international/national growth of the program.

Overall, all respondents emphasized how the scaffolded self-reflective learning and fostering of empowerment and advocacy strengthened their resolve upon community re-entry. As a theme, the response highlighted the importance of relevant educational programming and more specifically post-release programming that is necessary for social-sustainability, support, and community re-entry. The women indicated that access to education provided a sense of empowerment foundational to gaining social skills that they felt were transferable upon release. Strength-based programming where participants were treated as equal learners fostered self-acceptance, instilled a positive work ethic, and sense of accomplishment (See https://wallstobridges.ca/readings-reports-media/ for more reports outlining the impact of W2B programs and services).

Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE: https://yaaace.com/)

Similarly, YAAACE applies strength-based and empowering language and pedagogies to refer to people who are or previously incarcerated. YAAACE was founded in 2007, by educator and community activist Devon Jones, to mitigate the existing polarization between north and south of Finch in the Jane and Finch community in northwest Toronto by providing access to structured programs. Since its creation as a Black-led, Black-focused, and Black-serving organization it has created access to opportunities that would meet the needs of the community and mitigate systemic inequities, including access to culturally responsive programs and services for youth and adults who become legal-system involved through TO Wards Peace and New Narrative.

YAAACE applies a public health approach (City of Toronto, 2019) to violence prevention and intervention. The public health approach to violence prevention and intervention views violence as a preventable social and health issue, focusing on addressing root causes, risk factors, and protective factors through evidence-based, multi-sectoral, and community-driven strategies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; City of Toronto, 2019). Below are descriptions of violence prevention and intervention programs offered by YAAACE that facilitate effective community re-entry through a public health approach:

1) New Narrative funded by Public Safety Canada is a violence prevention and intervention initiative rooted in upstream approaches. The program engages youth, families, and communities in culturally responsive prevention and intervention programs to address the opportunity gap, healing from trauma, facilitate building resilience, and interrupt the conditions that foster cycles of violence. It targets children and adults ranging from 6 to 29 years old. For legal-system involved individuals and

their families, clients are supported by case managers with relevant lived experience in the role of Community Resource Engagement Workers (CREW). These are staff with relevant lived experiences who are directly impacted by violence or previously incarcerated that now support other Black identities with their needs as part of community re-entry, with a focus on providing system navigation while addressing anti-Black racism through advocacy. This model leverages the lived experience of affected communities to offer access to wraparound support services in areas related to housing, employment, access to counselling, and education. In 2024, 87 individuals at high risk (previously involved in violence and/or incarcerated) received personalized support from YAAACE as part of their community re-entry plans. 75 out of the 87 were not reincarcerated which represents an 86% effectiveness for the program in mitigating recidivism.

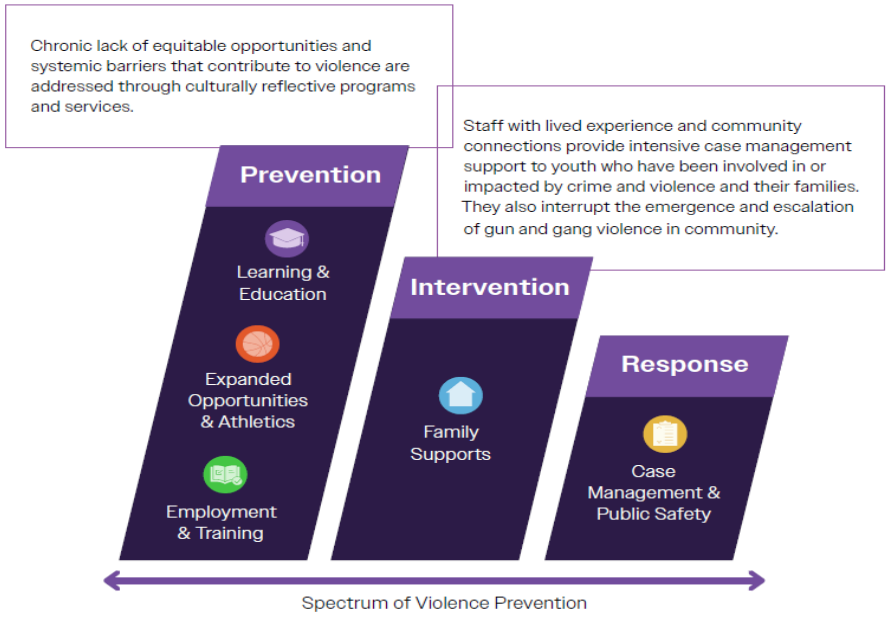
2) TO Wards Peace (TWP) funded by the City of Toronto focuses on community safety and violence intervention by supporting people aged 12 to 29 impacted by gun violence. The objective is to equip people with leadership skills, conflict resolution training, and pathways to education and employment led by case managers with relevant lived experience in the role of Violence Disruption Workers (VDWs). The staff actively engage youth at risk of being involved in or impacted by gun violence and supports them through proactive intervention strategies and peer mentorship. TWP contributes to the advancement of action 2.1 of the SafeTO: A Community Safety and Well-Being Plan. It focuses on the collaborative efforts between community groups, local grassroots organizations (Think 2wice in Rexdale), community health centres (Rexdale Community Health Centre), hospitals (BRAVE program) and the City of Toronto to advance actions for the interruption and intervention of gun violence in the city.

3) YAAACE also offers Fresh Start Diversion Program in partnership with Kids with Incarcerated Parents (KIP) funded by the City of Toronto Youth Violence Prevention multi-year grant. Fresh Start is a strengths-based, trauma-informed and restorative justice program for youth who are at risk of being involved in the legal system or currently facing criminal charges prior to the age of 18. This diversion initiative provides individualized support, a rehabilitative workbook that youth complete, and follow-up mentoring to build protective factors and foster resilience in program participants. Upon entry into the program, youth are assessed for their strengths and needs, and assigned a mentor who collaboratively works with a caseworker to provide individualized support and create an action plan for each participant.

For all the programs, referrals are received from other community organizations as well as probation, parole, Toronto Police Service, and youth justice centres. Participants are paired with trained case managers and mentors who provide one-on-one guidance to navigate challenges such as

securing housing, accessing mental health support, finding employment, and rebuilding family relationships. Each member of staff has a caseload of up to 20 clients and weekly check-ins occur where goals are set with each client to support their immediate needs and long-term goals. Culturally responsive counseling services are also offered, including access to seeing a Black social worker free of cost to address the emotional and psychological impacts of trauma, incarceration, and helping participants heal and develop positive coping mechanisms (Eizadirad et al., 2024).

The multi-sectoral community-driven, direct intervention supports offered by YAAACE focuses on key areas that serve as protective factors to reduce or eliminate cycles of (re)incarceration or involvement in the legal system in alignment with Public Safety Canada's Federal Framework to Reduce Recidivism and recommendations from the Black Justice Strategy (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Eizadirad, 2020; Owusu-Bempah & Jones, 2023; Public Safety Canada, 2022). These include the pillars of learning and education, expanded opportunities and athletics, employment and training, family support, and case management and public safety.



Key pillars of community re-entry support offered by YAAACE through prevention, intervention, and response.

YAAACE's employment programs and capacity-building workshops under its Labour Market Initiative, funded by the Black Youth Action Plan in the Ministry of Citizenship and Multiculturalism, further equip participants with the skills needed to increase their chances of securing jobs in sectors they are under-represented. Partnerships with local businesses and corporate and post-secondary institutions provide access to training, job placements, and mentorship opportunities. Academic programs, including tutoring, March Break camp, robotics, and the seven-week Summer Institute are offered to support individuals and their children

with their educational needs. Family counseling, mediation services, and systemic navigation are offered to rebuild trust and support families navigating the legal system, fostering more effective community re-entry. Additionally, recreational and leadership programs, including sports and arts, offer constructive outlets for participants to develop discipline, teamwork, and transferable life skills. Together, these holistic services offered without any costs, in the low-income, racialized community of Jane and Finch create a supportive ecosystem for previously incarcerated individuals and their families to overcome systemic barriers and thrive.

YAAACE has expanded extensively in recent years and now includes 22 full-time staff as a non-profit, charitable organization offering a range of trauma-informed and culturally responsive programs and services. The integrated approach focuses on violence prevention, intervention, and interruption through access to holistic supports and systemic navigation. It offers participants the tools to resist oppressive systems and overcome systemic barriers by connecting them with resources, people, and opportunities to meet their immediate needs. This model also challenges the commodification of education by emphasizing dialogue, mutual respect, and collective learning involving elders and respective leaders from the community. By centering the lived experiences of Black individuals and being intentional with mitigating barriers they experience as part of re-entry, YAAACE seeks to disrupt cycles of (re)incarceration (See https://yaaace.com/programs/comSafety?tab=nn for more reports outlining the impact of YAAACE community safety programs and services).

Discussion and Findings: Impact of Relevant and Strength-Based Programming for Effective Community Re-Entry During Incarceration and Post-Release

When examining the financial and social implications of incarceration versus community supervision programs, the data is clear. In Canada, the annual average cost of keeping an individual incarcerated was $159,115 in 2021–2022 which is up from $125,466 in 2017–2018 (Public Safety Canada, 2025). The disparity is even greater in women's institutions, where the average cost reached $284,157 per year, compared to $152,704 for men. In contrast, supervising an individual in the community costs significantly less at $41,519 per year or nearly 74% lower than incarceration with higher effectiveness rates (Public Safety Canada, 2025). These figures emphasize the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of investing in community-led re-entry programs, such as W2B and YAAACE's TWP and New Narrative initiatives, which not only reduce recidivism and foster safer communities, but also deliver far greater value for taxpayer dollars by investing in prevention, intervention, and holistic support rather than costly incarceration.

By positioning YAAACE and W2B as examples of strength-based programs that resist blaming individuals through deficit logic, we highlight

the possibilities for equitable and inclusive community-led programming that honors lived experiences and voices of marginalized populations to decolonize community re-entry and reduce (re)incarceration and cycles of legal system-involvement (Lorde, 2017; Waller, 2019). Trauma-informed approaches prioritize addressing the psychological, spiritual, and emotional impacts of trauma, ensuring that participants feel supported and empowered to heal and grow. Culturally relevant programming recognizes the unique experiences, values, and needs of diverse communities, creating tailored interventions that resonate with participants and foster trust. When asked how culturally relevant programing would have been beneficial, racialized respondents in the W2BOCC survey noted:

> *There were many missing components from the inception of arrest to the court process and ultimately release. Knowing Canada is a so-called multinational settler space, Black and Indigenous women are over-represented in the carceral space despite our small population. It was obvious to even staff that the offenses that landed Black and Indigenous women medium to lengthy stays in GVI, did not apply to Anglo-European women. While incarcerated it was obvious in the number of staff that were of European stock. For a seemingly diverse country, Grand Valley did not have any counselors, parole-officers, correctional officers with backgrounds in Black cultural, lived experiences that engaged with us residents on the compound. Trust was obviously an issue. If we were granted the opportunity to have at least officers, parole officers, correctional officers who bore resemblance to us, we would have been better able to buffer the extra stigma of being Black, plus criminalization.* DenDen, Black, incarcerated for 4 years

Both W2B and YAAACE apply trauma-informed, culturally responsive approaches to provide mentorship and systemic navigation to clients and connect formerly incarcerated people with the tools and resources they need to overcome risk factors in key areas associated with housing, employment, education, and access to mental health services. As part of effective community re-entry, access to stable housing is foundational for individuals transitioning from legal-system involvement or other high-risk circumstances, providing the stability needed to focus on personal growth and family reunification. Similarly, employment and educational opportunities equip participants with the financial independence and sense of purpose required to rebuild their lives and break cycles of poverty and criminalization by obtaining a stable income. Having a well-paid job can deter folks from reengaging in street activities oftentimes as a means for survival. By addressing these interconnected factors, W2B and YAAACE provide holistic ecosystems of support that not only enhances individual outcomes but also contributes to stronger, safer, and more thriving communities. These findings underscore the need for

multi-sectoral collaboration in these critical areas as part of broader efforts to reduce violence by offering holistic community re-entry supports through greater access to education and culturally responsive programs.

Furthermore, W2B's focus on incarcerated adults and YAAACE's work with Black youth, young adults, and their families demonstrate the transformative potential of educational interventions and wraparound supports designed with an intersectional understanding of the unique challenges these populations face during community re-entry. This aligns with research that shows programs that employ culturally responsive case management and mentorship, particularly those led by individuals with lived experiences, reduce recidivism and foster a sense of agency among participants (Parsaud, 2021; Government of Canada, 2022; Waller, 2019). Both W2B and YAAACE demonstrate the transformative potential of trauma-informed, culturally responsive programming in providing legal-system-involved individuals with the tools to resist oppressive systems and envision futures beyond deficit thinking and criminalized identities led by staff with relevant lived and professional experiences (Eizadirad, 2024). By addressing systemic inequities through community-led initiatives, W2B and YAAACE highlight how decolonized re-entry programs and services can facilitate effective pathways that promote healing, rebuild social bonds, foster self-determination, and create collective community care. Statistics further support the efficacy of decolonized approaches. Programs that incorporate self-reflexivity and trauma-informed practices have shown significant promise in reducing (re)incarceration and cycles of legal-system involvement (Waller, 2019). For instance, participants in restorative justice programs rooted in Indigenous traditions reported higher rates of satisfaction and lower (re)incarceration rates compared to those in conventional correctional systems. Ultimately, decolonizing community re-entry calls for a systemic shift in how the criminal legal system operates. It requires policymakers, educators, and community leaders to prioritize collaborative, culturally relevant frameworks that honor the lived experiences of marginalized populations to rebuild their lives and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

From insights shared by W2B participants and effectiveness of re-entry programs and services offered by YAAACE, several themes emerge. Firstly, intentional efforts to reduce disproportionality and over-representation in the legal system are crucial with a focus on supporting Indigenous, Black, and other equity-denied groups who are disproportionately impacted by incarceration. Secondly, fostering a sense of inclusion in marginalized, underserved communities experiencing disproportionality in incarceration requires transformational justice initiatives offered in community settings in ways that are easily accessible. This would involve offering well-being social and emotional support that are culturally responsive led by community organizations. Thirdly, in the case of YAAACE, enhancing the sharing of information across institutions (education/schools and incarceration facilities) can provide holistic support

to clients, ensuring their needs are met comprehensively and more efficiencly. For W2B, partnering with community organizations, colleges, and universities willing to provide mentorship, apprenticeship, or educational pathways for previously incarcerated individuals is invaluable to self-esteem, empowerment, and re-entry success.

Overall, utilizing various mediums for advocacy and activism are pivotal in driving systemic changes and ensuring a more effective and sustainable community re-entry process for all. If programming is designed to measure "success rates" for community re-entry based exclusively on prisoner (re)incarceration rates, and cycles of justice-system involvement, the picture is incomplete. This mode of measurement does not consider the struggles associated with poverty, abuse, stigma, unemployment, and disconnect from family and friends that incarcerated individuals face upon their release, with particular unique challenges for women. Given the increasing number of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in jails and prison, when women do not return to prison, this does not mean that they have achieved economic and social parity with more privileged counterparts relative to socio-economic status and other factors. Although many women make different choices to not return to prison, they still experience social hardships, magnified by the fact that they have a criminal record. Programming, then, should work to facilitate and equip women with the tools to navigate these dilemmas, and be designed in concert with the input of women with lived and living experiences of incarceration.

In Canada, the Federal Framework to Reduce Recidivism (Government of Canada, 2022) emphasizes the importance of addressing systemic barriers such as access to education, housing, and employment which disproportionately affect racialized individuals and those living in poverty. However, this framework does not adequately address the root causes of criminalization including poverty, systemic racism, and colonial legacies (Maynard, 2017). The Black Justice Strategy (2023) further expands on this emphasizing the need for community-led initiatives to combat the disproportionate incarceration rates of Black Canadians with a focus on addressing socio-economic inequities and systemic biases in policing, sentencing, and corrections. The literature also reveals growing concerns involving other institutions such as education that perpetuates the "school-to-prison pipeline," where racialized youth are funneled into the criminal legal system from an early age due to discriminatory practices in education and law enforcement (Black Legal Action Centre, 2022; Maynard, 2022). By addressing the systemic barriers that disproportionately impact racialized and gendered communities, innovative community re-entry solutions such as those offered by YAAACE and W2B hold the potential to transform the current landscape of community safety and the legal system. The findings speak to the need for a paradigm shift in how re-entry is envisioned, approached, and enacted. Rather than viewing re-entry as a linear process of resettlement, it must be understood as a holistic, complex journey that involves support across multiple sectors, particularly

related to housing, employment, and access to culturally responsive programs and services. This requires collaborative efforts among policymakers, educators, and community organizations to create inclusive pathways for re-entry based on the unique needs of each individual and the community they are returning to. Furthermore, scaling these models requires policy reforms and sustained multi-year investment, resources, and funding.

Conclusion, Next Steps, and Future Areas for Research

The findings about innovative and effective re-entry programs and services have significant implications for policy and practice. To enhance reintegration outcomes, policymakers must prioritize addressing systemic biases in sentencing and reintegration planning. Policymakers must recognize the systemic inequities that perpetuate cycles of (re)incarceration and therefore prioritize investments in trauma-informed, culturally responsive community-led programs, particularly those that support Indigenous and Black identities who are disproportionately incarcerated. Educational institutions must adopt culturally responsive pedagogies and curriculum content which through a holistic and data-driven manner works to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline (Black Legal Action Centre, 2022; Eizadirad et al., 2022; Waller, 2019). Practitioners across all institutions must embrace trauma-informed approaches that acknowledge the intersecting oppressions faced by justice-involved individuals. Additionally, investments in affordable housing and equitable employment opportunities are critical. Community-based organizations must be adequately funded, in a sustainable and multi-year manner, to provide trauma-informed support services that meet the diverse needs of justice-involved individuals. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of community-based programs that provide peer-to-peer, experiential learning, and culturally responsive programs and services. Furthermore, longitudinal studies examining the intersections of race, gender, class, and disability in community re-entry experiences are particularly needed to inform more inclusive policies and practices in Canada and internationally.

Overall, findings from this article highlight innovative community programs and services offered by W2B and YAAACE that have shown to effectively support community re-entry and reduce (re)incarceration and cycles of legal-system involvement. They emphasize the importance of addressing systemic barriers to re-entry for equity-denied individuals in Canada, particularly in areas related to education, housing, employment, and accessing networks of care. Investing in decolonized, community-driven models for community re-entry disrupts cycles of incarceration while fostering safer, healthier, and more equitable communities across Canada. It also proves to be a more cost-effective approach than incarceration.

Conflict of Interest
None to declare.

Informed Consent
All research participants were provided with informed consent as part of participating in data collection.

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