

# Contextualizing the Experiences of Black Women Arrested for Intimate Partner Violence in Canada

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## Abstract

This qualitative study was informed by critical race feminism and explored Black women's experiences with the police with a particular focus on how issues of race, racism, oppression, and subordination inform their experiences. It sought to answer three research questions: (1) What is known about Black women's experiences with the police in the context of intimate partner violence? (2) Given their experiences with the police, what is their perception of the police? and (3) To what extent do women construct counter-narratives of their experiences with the police and what does that involve? The sample was comprised of 25 participants, 15 of whom were arrested. The women were over the age of 18 and lived in the Greater Toronto Area and surrounding areas. Most women expressed that they had negative encounters with the police, which was influenced by the police's negative perceptions of them. Black women who called the police to intervene in an intimate partner violence incident were subjected to great scrutiny and vulnerable to racialized and gendered police violence. Consequently, women were fearful and distrustful of the police and were less likely to seek help from them in the future. The study answers the call for research that examines Black women's experiences with the police from their perspective. It has implications for social

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service providers and provides strategies to improve future police interactions with Black communities.

### **Keywords**

Black women, domestic violence, police, criminalization, cultural context

## **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of media coverage and increased scholarly focus on the disproportionate number of Black people in the criminal justice system (Chan & Chunn, 2014; Maynard, 2017; Mehler Paperny, 2021; Owusu-Bempah & Wortley, 2014; Rankin, 2021). The terms racial profiling (Henry & Tator, 2006a; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003), racialized policing (Comack, 2012), and racially biased policing (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005) have been used to refer to the differential treatment of Black, Indigenous, and racialized people in the criminal justice system and the complexities inherent in their encounters with the police. Similarly, the concepts of anti-Blackness or anti-Black racism have been used to conceptualize and articulate the manifestations of systemic racism (Benjamin, 2003). Evidence of racially biased policing and anti-Black racism have been documented by scholars (e.g., Barrett et al., 2011; Gabbidon et al., 2011; Kiedrowski et al., 2015; Maynard, 2017; Wortley & Jung, 2020; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011). When asked about their encounters with the police, a high percentage of Black people report being treated unfairly by the police (Brunson, 2007; Gabbidon et al., 2011; Najdowski et al., 2015). For example, research shows that Black people are frequently stopped, searched, arrested (Wortley & Jung, 2020; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011), and incarcerated at high rates in correctional facilities (Public Safety Canada, 2018). Using data from a 2007 survey of 1522 Black, Chinese, and white Toronto residents, Wortley and Owusu-Bempah (2011) sought to understand citizens' experiences of police stop-and-search practices. Among other findings in their study, they found that Black respondents (14%) were more likely to be stopped on three or more occasions by the police more frequently than white (5%) and Chinese (3%) respondents. The Uniform Crime Reports also showed evidence of higher arrest rates for Black people living in the U.S. In 2016, of the estimated 10,662, 252 arrests that year, Black people accounted for 26.9% compared to 18.4% of Hispanic or Latinos and 3.6% of individuals from other racialized groups (Uniform Crime Report, 2016). Other research has revealed troubling results, where many Black people have been injured or killed by the police (Ross et al., 2021; Wortley & Jung, 2020). In their report Wortley and Jung (2020) found that "Between 2013 and 2017, a Black person

in Toronto was nearly 20 times more likely than a White person to be involved in a fatal shooting by the TPS (Toronto Police Services)” (p. 8). Black people were involved in 28.8% of Special Investigations Unit (SIU) cases involving police use of force, 36% of police shootings, 36% of cases resulting in civilian death, and 70% resulting in police shooting deaths. Despite these findings, Toronto police officers are cleared of wrongdoing by SIU in over 95% of investigations ([Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018](#)). Racial disparities are also evident in other areas of the criminal justice system. Relative to their representation (3.5%) in the general population ([Statistics Canada, 2017](#)), Black people remain overrepresented in Canadian correctional facilities; between 2016 and 2017, they accounted for 7.5% of those incarcerated in a Correctional Service Canada (CSC) facility ([Public Safety Canada, 2018](#)). Black people are also more likely to receive longer sentences than members of other racialized groups ([Russell-Brown, 2009](#)). According to [Brown \(2012\)](#), “the disproportionate presence of law enforcement in communities of color and its disparate effect in convictions and sentencing leaves communities wary of police presence” (p. 48) and allude to ongoing tensions and conflicts that have characterized police-Black communities’ relations.

While this body of research is important in informing discussions of Black people’s experiences in the criminal justice system and specifically their encounters with the police, it has focused predominantly on the experiences of Black or racialized youth and men, contributing to the relative neglect of Black women’s experiences. Furthermore, this scholarship provides further context of how these relations may transfer into intimate partner violence (IPV) incidents in which the police intervene. However, there is a major gap in existing scholarship in terms of drawing on the narratives of Black women to understand their experiences of being charged for an IPV offense, and how they have been impacted following police intervention. Only a few studies have explored the context and experiences of women’s arrest from their perspectives ([Grace, 2019](#); [Leisenring, 2011](#); [Li et al., 2014](#); [Rajah et al., 2006](#); [West, 2007](#)). Even fewer examine the experiences of Black women (i.e., [Bundy, 2019](#); [Dichter, 2013](#); [Larance et al., 2019](#); [Potter, 2008](#); [Richie, 2012](#); [West, 2007](#)).

This study examines Black women’s experiences with the police in the context of IPV from their perspectives and the meanings they attach to these experiences. Issues of race, racism, oppression, subordination, and their intersections with Black women’s experiences of IPV and their encounters with the police will be explored. Drawing on critical race feminism (CRF), the study highlights the ways in which racism and other forms of social oppression manifest in and affect Black women’s experiences with the police. The findings presented contribute to the limited Canadian research that examines the experiences of Black women who have been charged by the police with perpetrating non-fatal IPV against their partners.

## Literature Review

Canada does not officially collect race-based data on incidences of IPV except for data on Indigenous people. However, existing United States (U.S.) data show that Black people are over-represented as victims of IPV (Bredling et al., 2014) and arrested frequently for perpetrating violence against an intimate partner (Lipsky et al., 2012). In many instances, previous research documenting the prevalence of IPV (Black et al., 2011; Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Truman & Morgan, 2014) has provided little or no explanation for variations among couples from different racial groups. However, according to Hampton et al. (2003), “the situational context in which intimate partner violence occurs among African Americans is, in many ways, a product of the various structural forces (e.g., institutional racism, cycles of chronic under-employment and unemployment, poverty, etc.) that constrict the lives of African Americans” (p. 542). In fact, there are several risk factors that have been shown to contribute to higher rates of victimization among Black people, including age, gender, income, discrimination, and prior exposure to violence (Holliday et al., 2020; West, 2016). Poverty has also been shown to be a risk factor for IPV in Black communities (Gillum, 2019). Furthermore, according to Nash (2005) chronic racism may impact how Black women construct abuse in their intimate relationships. It may also affect how they respond to their partner’s violent or abusive behaviors (Campbell et al., 2002).

*Reporting Incidents of Intimate Partner Violence to the Police.* There is a plethora of research documenting women’s IPV reporting practices and experiences with the police and the criminal justice system (i.e., Bell et al., 2011; Bonomi et al., 2006; Davies et al., 2007; Dichter & Gelles, 2012; Saxton et al., 2021). According to Saxton and colleagues, police and criminal justice interventions, “when effective... can have a vital role in ensuring safety for the victim and accountability for the perpetrator; when ineffective, they can do significant harm” (p. 2025). The likelihood of Black women reporting incidents of IPV to the police is mixed. Several studies suggest that Black women who are victims of IPV are more likely to report to the police (Anyikwa, 2015; Hollenshead et al., 2006; Holliday et al., 2020; Lipsky et al., 2009; Pearlman et al., 2003). Anyikwa’s (2015) study examined the experiences of a community and shelter sample of 110 Black women. According to her findings, 66.4% of women who sought formal support reported seeking support from the police (66.4%) and were more likely to do so in adverse circumstances. Similarly, Lipsky et al. (2009) and Holliday et al. (2020), both of which examined racial/ethnic differences in self-reporting IPV to the police, report that Black women were twice as likely as white women to report IPV to the police. In contrast, some researchers have shown Black women’s reluctance to report their victimization to the police (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Davies et al., 2007; Gover et al.,

2013; Hairston & Williams, 2006; Nash, 2005). For example, Hairston and Williams (2006) noted that Black women were reluctant to call the police when they experienced violence because they believed the police officers were often disrespectful, did not pay attention to their complaints, and either did not arrest the abusive partner or arrived after the partner had left. Other research has shown Black women's reluctance to contact the police may be influenced by their communities overt or covert message around disclosing the abuse (Decker et al., 2019; Richie, 2012; Waldron et al., 2021). Some women may believe that the situation does not warrant police intervention and/or fear that police may mistreat their partners or send them to jail (Davies et al., 2007; Hairston & Williams, 2006). Black women may fear further retaliation from their partners (Davies et al., 2007; Taylor, 2013), distrust the criminal justice system (Petersen et al., 2004), or are dissatisfied with police intervention (Gover et al., 2013; Stewart et al., 2013).

*Police Intervention and Criminalization of Black Women.* Black women's experiences with the police are rooted in larger social issues and systemic racism. They are often subjected to increased police surveillance (Maynard, 2017; Sudbury, 2016) and wrongly arrested (Pollack et al., 2005; Rajah et al., 2006; West, 2007). In addition, research has shown that in some instances, police intervention does little to remedy Black women's vulnerable circumstances. For example, police officers have been found to not fully comprehend the complexities of violence in women's lives (DeJong et al., 2008) who often have histories of prior victimization (Richie, 1996, 2012) and use force in response to their partner's violence (Potter, 2008). West (2007) examined Black women's experiences as victim-defendants of IPV. One participant believed that her race played a role in the police's decision to arrest her. The respondent tried to explain the incident to the police by stating, "Y'all got it all wrong, he attacked me!" She concluded, "I'm being arrested because I'm a Black woman!" The police denied racial discrimination and told her that "color had nothing to do with it" (p. 107). In Dichter's (2013) study, Black women expressed that their experience of getting arrested was "traumatizing, degrading, and shocking" (p. 87). Other women reported that the consequences of getting arrested were severe (e.g., involvement of child protection, loss of financial support/employment, and incurred legal fees). Research has also shown that Black women are subjected to excessive police use of force and/or brutality (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015; Maynard, 2017; Richie, 1996, 2012). Indeed, there is evidence that indicates a disproportionate number of Black women have been beaten, sexually assaulted, and killed by the police (Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015; Maynard, 2017; Richie, 2012; Ritchie, 2017; Ritchie & Ritchie, 2006). Black women's experiences with the police may also be complicated by derogatory stereotypes held by the police that construct them as aggressive and violent (Maynard,

2017; Richie, 2012) Because higher rates of IPV are often perceived to be linked to cultural traits (Bubricki-McKenzie & Jasinski, 2014), Black women may be subjected to these stereotypes. Black women who do not conform to the “good victim” stereotype run the risk of having their victimization undermined and being classified as an accomplice (Harrison & Esqueda, 1999). Consequently, Black women who believe that they have been unfairly treated by the police are more likely to view the police less favorably, contributing to a lack of trust and confidence in the police (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). The lack of trust that Black women have in the police may also increase tension (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Lai & Zhao, 2010) and further unravels and exacerbates an already problematic relationship between the police and Black communities.

### *Theoretical Framework*

CRF is an offshoot of critical race theory and was developed by legal scholars in response to exclusionary theorizing that failed to recognize the differential experiences and treatment of racialized women within the criminal justice system (Wing, 1996). These theorists maintained that existing theories did not accurately reflect racialized women’s intersecting identities of race, class, and gender (Wing, 1996). CRF is premised on several tenets: a) racism is endemic in society; b) the law is not neutral or objective; c) Black women’s voices and experiences have merit and should be positioned at the forefront of discussions; and d) Black women have intersecting and overlapping identities that influence their everyday experiences (Crenshaw, 1995; Wing, 1996). CRF theorists also interrogate issues of power and authority as they relate to race, voice, and representation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). They use counter-storytelling to legitimize the voices of Black women while exposing, disrupting, and analyzing dominant discourses and practices that negate their experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The act of disrupting dominant or master narratives is known as creating counter-narratives. Counter-storytelling is used as a tool to extend the personal narratives of Black women to illustrate and underscore larger social issues and legal principles regarding race and racial/social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2013). CRF is best suited to explore Black women’s experiences with the police in the context of IPV because it not only offers an analytic that recognizes that their experiences have merit but situates their experiences at the center of analysis. It also enables an interrogation of how issues of race, power, and various forms of racism and oppression intersect in Black women’s lives. Naming racism as it relates to Black women places attention “on the distinctiveness of this form of racial oppression, as perpetrated by dominant and hegemonic powers and institutions” (Benjamin, 2003, p. 87).

## Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of Black women's experiences with the police. Data collection occurred over a 7-month period, between June 2018 and January 2019. Upon receiving ethics approval from the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board, participants were recruited from various communities across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and surrounding areas and were screened by the researcher to ensure they met the criteria for inclusion. The inclusion criteria were, participants must self-identify as Black, be over the age of 18, and have had a recent encounter with the police in which they were arrested or charged for abusing an intimate male partner. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and snowball sampling. An initial contact (i.e., email or phone) was made with social service agencies across the GTA and surrounding areas that provided services to Black women. A recruitment script, flyer, and an approval letter from the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board were provided to the agencies through both email and mail. In addition, I used snowball sampling to access additional participants when other avenues had been exhausted (Noy, 2008). Specifically, this process allowed me to speak with one or more individuals and ask that person to nominate someone else that they believed would make a positive contribution to the research. Subsequently, the sample snowballs as new people are recruited and refer other participants (Denscombe, 2010).

Interviews took place either at a local public library, in the participant's home or at a community agency. Interviews lasted for about two hours and were audio-recorded. Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews. Women were also asked to complete a demographic questionnaire that included questions about their age, race, level of education, employment, and religious affiliation. During the interviews, participants were asked questions that centered around the ways in which they were criminalized. In this study, criminalization was conceptualized as the processes through which Black women are surveilled and their behaviors and actions criminalized, leading to harsh and punitive treatment by the police and other criminal justice personnel. These processes are characterized by the tactics some police may use to shame, isolate, and ostracize Black women. Participants were asked questions that centered on events leading up to their contact with the police in which there was an investigation. Some of these questions were, "What were your reasons for calling the police?" "Did you have any previous involvement with the police prior to the most recent encounter? If so, please describe." "What were the reasons for their involvement in the past?" They were also asked "How would you describe your most recent encounter with the police?" which gave them a chance to share their account of what happened when they called the police, and what transpired during their encounter with the police.

Asking participants to discuss whether they or their partners were charged and how their experience with the police impacted them provided important insights into the type of interactions women had with the police, the charges that ensued, and the consequences of their arrest.

Transcribed interviews were then imported into NVivo for Mac (version 12.3) (QSR International, n.d.). CRF was used as an analytical tool to uncover the themes that emerged from the women's narratives. Deductive approaches were utilized during the data analysis phase to develop a codebook with recurring themes. Deductive approaches begin with an existing theory which is then applied to the data to test a phenomenon (Roberts et al., 2019). The data was systematically analyzed for thematic patterns based on CRF tenets (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020; Mensah, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I was able to expose the myriad ways in which structural and institutional racism influenced Black women's experiences with the police. These themes were informed by issues around race, racism, oppression, and subordination. Another key aspect of utilizing CRF as a methodology is the use of counter-story or counter-narratives. Black women were encouraged to disrupt dominant or majoritarian narratives that construct them as angry, hostile, aggressive, argumentative, and uncooperative.

While positivist epistemology focuses on objectivity and eliminating the impact of the subjectivity of the researcher, feminist and critical race methodology consider researchers' experiences and perspectives as valid and sources of knowledge (Davis & Craven, 2016; DeVault, 1999). As a Black woman critical race scholar, I was reflexive of my own positionality throughout the research process (Davis & Craven, 2016) and considered the ways in which my intersecting identities and personal history shaped how I made sense of events and circumstances during the research process. Engaging in a reflexive process allowed me to improve the rigor of the research by [assessing and continuously reassessing my] "positionality, subjectivities, and guiding assumptions as they directly relate with and shape [my] research" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 1169). Coded data, recurring themes, and data analysis were also shared with my dissertation committee who have expertise in qualitative data analysis (Noble & Smith, 2015). Through ongoing dialog, members of the committee evaluated my coding decisions and interpretations. This collaborative process allowed me to refine the coding frame, when necessary, which enhanced the consistency and accuracy of my interpretations and analysis.

## Findings

### *Participants*

The sample is part of a larger study of 25 Black women and focuses on the 15 women who were arrested and charged with an IPV-related offense. There were 14 women recruited through purposive sampling and one through



snowball sampling. All the women were in heterosexual common-law or marital relationships during their encounters with the police. However, at the time of the interview, 14 of the 15 women shared that they were estranged from their spouse or common-law partner and one woman was still living with her spouse. The women ranged from age 29–57 years old with an average age of 39. Women’s level of educational attainment was diverse, ranging from less than high school to university. Most of the women were employed either part-time or full-time with earnings of less than \$34,999. Some of the women received financial support from the government; four received support from Ontario Works and three received support from the Ontario Disability Support Program.

Findings from this study focused on criminalized Black women’s experiences with the police and the meanings they attach to these experiences. There were several emerging themes: (a) not feeling heard; (b) police aggression, excessive use of force, and injury to Black women; (c) negative constructs of Black people and women; and (d) Black women’s fear and distrust of the police.

### *Not Feeling Heard*

Women expressed that they used force in response to their partner’s violence, however, when the police intervened, some believed the police did not take the time to listen to them or explain why they were being charged. Some participants indicated that the police were suspicious of them and constructed them as future suspects. In many instances, the women believed they were wrongfully charged and arrested for something they did not do.

Desiree said she pleaded with the police, hoping they would look closer at the evidence but was disappointed that her efforts were futile. As she explained, “I think if they just listen to what I was just saying for a sec, to say, ‘I didn’t do it. Just follow those clues and you’ll see that there’s just no way.’ They did not listen to me.” Tia shared that she wanted a chance to exonerate herself, but did not have an opportunity to provide her account of the events that transpired that day:

I wanted them to listen. At least give me a chance to say what I had to say. They didn’t. They didn’t ask any questions. They just took me in the room. They didn’t question me, nothing, they just laid charges based on somebody else’s side of the story.

Similarly, Evelyn stated, “They wouldn’t even listen to a damn thing I said. There wasn’t a Black police officer. They didn’t listen to any shit I had to say.” For Evelyn, the consequence of not being heard or having an officer that she

could identify with based on race had serious consequences, in particular, the risk of not being treated fairly.

Dixie's situation was slightly different from the other women, as both she and her partner were charged. Dixie felt that the police were indifferent, as she maintained:

As far as the police were concerned, I can't say they were exceptionally rude or mean. They were just doing their job. That's kind of how I felt it was. They were completely unsympathetic mind you, about anything I had to say or anything I'd been through.

Unlike other women interviewed, Melanie said that the police asked her to explain what happened. Reflecting on her experience with two Black male officers, she stated that they were not rude, and they listened to both her and her husband:

I've never been in a situation where police came and took me. And especially, um, when they put me into the vehicle, they weren't rude. They weren't rough. They just said, "Well, I'm sorry ma'am, your husband called and said this has happened." They asked me what happened. They were very, very nice. It was two Black men, two Black police officers.

Except for a few, most of the women believed they did not have an opportunity to tell their side of the story or provide an alternate narrative. Some also shared that they were coerced to accept their partner's version of the events that transpired. Melanie's relatively positive interaction with the two Black male police officers was an exception when compared to other women in the study. Also, it did not appear that her race negatively influenced her experience with the police.

### ***Police Aggression, Excessive Use of Force, and Injury to Black Women***

Another important theme that was evident in this study was the police's harsh treatment of Black women; in some instances, the police used aggression and/or excessive force which caused injuries to women. Six of the 15 women stated that the police were aggressive or used excessive force during their encounter with them. However, the diversity of women's experiences with the police should not be understated; not all participants described experiencing aggression or excessive use of force in their encounters with the police.

Janice had recently moved to Canada from the Caribbean and was enrolled in college. Her white husband's excessive drinking resulted in unintentional injuries to himself, often occurring outside of the home. After being out all night, Janice's partner returned home the next morning with injuries and

blood-stained clothes. When asked about his injuries and stained clothes, Janice stated that her husband lied to her. She left shortly after their conversation to attend her classes at college. To her astonishment, the police showed up at her school, accusing her of assaulting her husband. She shared that the police aggressively handcuffed and mistreated her. As she conveyed,

I couldn't say anything. Like, the way they just handled me, like, "Just put your hands behind your back." Even the handcuff, it was so tight. Like, I'm crying. I said, "This thing is squeezing my hands." Like, they wouldn't release it. They said, "You're not allowed to say anything. Why are you talking?" When they take me to the station, another officer came out and he was taking me in, and I begged him to release it and he released it for me. It was like branding my hand.

Crystal believed that she was abused by her husband then revictimized by the police. She had been separated from her husband when they got into a physical altercation. While they were out in public, he tried to take one of their children from her. She said he pushed her after she attempted to get the baby back. She was motivated to speak up because there were people around, so she said she grabbed him and said, "Listen, it ends today." She said she was very proud of herself but then her partner accused her of scratching him and said, "Watch what I'm going to do to you." And that's when he called the police. When the police showed up at her house later that day, she was preparing a lunch for her young children, which she had planned to drop off at the school. As Crystal asserted,

This guy [police officer] wasn't even listening to me and he's like, "That's it. You're not listening." Box my hand, box the lunch and everything out of my hand, pushed me against the wall and I'm like, "What is happening here? I respectfully said to you, give me some time and let me drop it off and I'll come back. I'm not running from you. I live here. I work here. I have three little kids waiting for me." The school, everybody called me. They couldn't get me because the police had my phone. They took the keys away for evidence to see if they can scan to see if I stabbed him with my key. "Like, what is happening?"

A few women alluded to the gendered and racialized nature inherent in policing practices. They believed they were treated more harshly by white female officers than their white male counterparts. These women shared they experienced female officers as more forceful, uncompromising, and authoritative than male officers. As Ruth shared:

I was treated like garbage and by a woman, by a white woman.... I hated her. She was very arrogant and thank God there was a guy that pulled up in his own cruiser as well and he pulled her aside and said, "Is this necessary? I think we're okay. Just ask her to drive herself to the police station."

In some instances, Black women reported that they sustained injuries, including broken bones. Serena described her experience with police violence. She had made numerous attempts to keep herself and her children safe from an abusive partner, who is white, by moving multiple times. Although she filed various police reports, she believed they did very little to remedy the situation. When her ex-partner continued to harass her, she felt she had no choice but to protect herself. When the police responded to a call from a concerned neighbor, she said they had difficulties defusing the situation. The last thing Serena said she remembered was six “giant men” (police officers) running at her. She expressed her frustration with the encounter by saying:

My nose was broken, my wrist was broken. They broke my wrist to get me in handcuffs. Like, I was pretty off the hinges. I was out of line, but really, they should have tased me. They should not have knuckled up with me. They should not have done what they did. Then I could have saved my nose and probably could have saved your face had you guys just done what you were supposed to do.

Black women who fought back against their abusive partners shared the police used aggressive tactics to restrain and detain them. However, not all Black women participants expressed experiencing excessive police use of force.

### *Negative Constructs of Black People and Black Women*

Black women were asked questions about the meanings they attached to their encounters with the police. Issues of race, racism, class, and power permeated their responses. In fact, many Black women regarded the police and the criminal justice system in general, as racist. Some women were of the belief that their negative experiences with the police were influenced by the negative stereotypes endorsed by the police about Black people in general, and of Black women, which resulted in differential treatment from the police and their decision to charge them.

Serena’s view of the police speaks to Black people’s everyday experiences of racism. As she stated, “There are some racist peckerwoods around here. These fools . . . police are notoriously racist. That’s not a new memo. That’s old news.” In Tia’s opinion, Black people are often constructed as criminals, which might be used to justify police aggression or brutality:

I think for police they have the “shoot first ask questions later” mentality when it comes to Black [people]. I don’t know why, but I have seen, and I know not just domestic violence, just violence in a whole. They always assume it’s a Black person that’s doing the violence and sometimes it’s the most quiet, upstanding person that’s doing it, right?

Similarly, Zoe's impression of police perception of Black people reflected both an anti-Black and an anti-Jamaican discourse. As she recounted:

It's that misconception. They just feel like everybody's cut from the same cloth. It's like when they say every Black person's Jamaican, every Black person is a criminal. I just don't believe that the police see there are different types of Black women just like there are different types of white people. We're all painted with the same brush. At the end of the day when you are within the system, you're all criminals. We are all criminals no matter what.

Most of the women did not believe the police perceived Black women in a positive way and believed that their race was a factor in being charged. Serena postulated that Black women are perceived as loud, aggressive, and poor:

We are perceived as loud and this and that and aggressive and so on and so on. Poor, loud, arrogance, you know, there's a whole list of things that they automatically assume if you're Black and in this city. You got to be on welfare if you're Black.

Jocelyn shared that her race and her unwillingness to incriminate her partner influenced the way she was treated by the police. As she acknowledged, "To me, I felt that my race, and the fact that I refuse to say anything for them to get somebody to arrest, that was what made them react the way they did." Melanie believed that Black women are more likely to be surveilled compared to white people, which she explains is a result of racist police practices:

I don't think justice has been done properly, especially with us. I'm not racist, please don't think I am, they don't check out the white folks as much as they check us out. It's because of the colour of our skin why they are treating us like that.

Gabby was of the view that the police treated her poorly because of her race, gender, class, and neighborhood:

When he came and stuff, it's a co-op building, I think, to him, he's like, "Oh, these two Black persons and she's a Black woman and oh, the baby is in care and stuff." Based on what the partner said, he's branded me a certain way. Like, "She's a lady living in the projects, living in a co-op building and government facilities."

A few women were with white partners at the time the police got involved. While some of these women were ambivalent about the extent to which race

influenced their interactions with the police, others believed that their race in relation to their partners' race added an additional barrier. For example, they believed that the police may have been more suspicious of them and assumed more culpability in relation to their white partners. Janice was one of the few women who had a white partner. She believed that her race, gender, and the difference in age between her and her partner contributed to expeditious charges and police excessive use of aggression towards her.

I think that because [he] is white and he's older than I am, at that time he was 57. Like, I think that's just it. I feel that they look at me like this young Black girl taking advantage of this old white man. Like, that's how I feel. Yeah. Because that's exactly how they made me feel.

It is important to highlight the ways in which Black women's intersecting identities of race, gender, and class influenced their encounters with the police and their interpretation of their experiences. From the women's perspectives, stereotypes and biases endorsed by the police reify the belief that Black women, and Black people in general, are subordinate or inferior, more aggressive, more violent, and more prone to crime than their white counterparts. Consequently, according to these women, police officers who have these perceptions may minimize the seriousness of male partner violence and justify police revictimization and criminalization of Black women.

### *Black Women's Fear and Distrust of the Police*

Women were asked to assess their interactions with the police. Some of the women expressed fear following police intervention. Ruth shared that her experience with the police was traumatic and made her fearful of future police encounters. As she stated, "I hated police in general. I couldn't drive my car or be in the street and hear a siren without panicking because I always think they are coming after me. And I hated it." Other women were fearful that despite their history of abuse, should they call the police for help in the future, they would not be viewed as credible victims. As Sarah commented:

I hope to hear some resolution where women are safer and they're confident that they call the police to get help when they're abused, and it does not affect them eventually. Because that's the fear and I actually believe that's why a lot of murder and crime is going on in this world. Because men, they study the system, and they recognize that it can go anyway, even if the woman is innocent.

Black women disclosed fear following negative encounters with the police. Black women's experiences also exemplify the myriad ways in which they believe the criminal justice system continues to ignore Black women's

precarious circumstances, reinforcing commonly held beliefs that they are insignificant, and what happens to them is irrelevant.

Women's narratives also indicated a general distrust of the police. Specifically, some women who believed they were not protected by the police or wrongfully accused were less likely to trust them. Janice, for example, shared that she lost trust in the police because when she went to them prior to being charged, they did not help her. Subsequently, she was wrongfully accused of assaulting her partner. She described her reason for not trusting the police: "I just don't, because of what I went through and because of my experience with them, I can't say I trust the police. I don't know if I can." Similarly, Desiree asserted that she did not trust the police and the criminal justice system in general. She disclosed that she was coerced into accepting a plea for a crime that she did not commit. While crying uncontrollably during the interview, she remarked, "I didn't trust the system enough to fight it. I just didn't." For Anna, her lack of trust in the police was informed by her own experience as well as witnessing police abuse of power. She presumed that it would take time to trust the police:

It's something that would take time ... I don't want to feel like I have to protect myself. I don't want to feel like the law is against me when there's laws in place, and then people abuse the laws because they're the holders of the law.

## Discussion

Despite their experiences of ongoing victimization, many Black women, particularly those whose partners were Black, were reluctant to call the police. Other researchers (i.e., [Bent-Goodley, 2001](#); [Gover et al., 2013](#); [Lanthier, 2008](#); [Moss et al., 1997](#); [Nash, 2005](#)) have documented women's reluctance to notify the police in IPV incidences. In their study, [Moss et al. \(1997\)](#) found that most Black women did not rely on police intervention in IPV incidents. This also echoes findings in other studies that revealed that racial loyalty and protecting Black males from racism influenced women's reporting of IPV (i.e., [Bent-Goodley, 2001](#); [Nash, 2005](#); [Richie, 1996](#)). For many women, their families may act as a refuge from discrimination, racism, and other forms of oppression. However, their reluctance to report incidents of IPV increases their vulnerability for further victimization and subsequent criminalization ([Dasgupta, 2001](#); [Richie, 2012](#)). [Richie, 2012](#) problematizes racial loyalty as a "trap" by arguing that it leads women to conceal their victimization, avoid support or intervention when they need it most, and turn their backs on other women and their children. This trap also makes it difficult to address the effects of patriarchy and gender oppression in Black communities ([Richie, 1996, 2012](#)).

The significance of race was also apparent for women in interracial relationships. These women believed they received disparate treatment from the police compared to their white male partners. Indeed, Black women in interracial relationships may also be reluctant to report the abuse because they may fear being penalized more severely by the police. These findings suggest that Black women in interracial relationships may experience unique barriers which may elevate their risk of IPV (Brownridge, 2016). Previous research has also found that the racial composition of couples impact the likelihood of an arrest (e.g., Dichter et al., 2011; McCormack & Hirschel, 2021). In their study Dichter et al. (2011) found that Black females were more likely to be arrested if their male partners were white. They posit that racial bias may impact police arrest decisions.

Despite their attempts to provide their account of the incident leading up to contact with the police, many women did not believe that the police listened to them. In many scenarios the officers were predominantly white, which women believe increased the likelihood of a negative encounter. From these women's perspectives, police officers who attribute characteristics that construct Black people as aggressive, violent, and criminals may utilize racially biased policing practices (Maynard, 2017; Richie, 2012). Implicit or explicit racially biased policing practices may cause the police to treat Black people with suspicion and question their credibility (Comack, 2012). It may also result in the over surveillance and criminalization of Black people (Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011). Considering that many women shared that they did not believe the police listened to them, it is not surprising that so many women claimed they were wrongfully charged. Consequently, for these women, they were simultaneously victimized and criminalized by a criminal justice system that failed to protect them from their abusers.

The distinctive classifications and mutually exclusive categorizations of victim/offender are evident in the criminal justice system. However, this dichotomous classification fails to consider the racialized, gendered, and classed dynamics inherent in Black women's experiences of IPV. It also overlooks the fact that many Black women engage in defensive actions in response to ongoing victimization. From my interviews with Black women, it was evident that they rejected criminal justice-ascribed categorizations that constructed them as offenders and deemed them complicit in their experience of male partner violence. The women did not believe that police understood them as victims. It was also evident that Black women's actions were mostly defensive (Larance & Miller, 2017); yet they stated they were less likely than their male counterparts to be constructed as credible victims. These women did not fit within the stereotypical images of femininity and "stray from the path of 'true' (passive, controlled, and constrained) womanhood" (Chesney-Lind, 2006, p. 11). Black communities hold oppressed statuses in society; however, the tendency for some police officers to not always hold Black men



accountable for their actions minimizes the effects of violence in Black women's lives and reinforces gendered violence against Black women (Richie, 1996).

It is highly probable that police officers who endorse racist patriarchal attitudes and beliefs towards Black women may engage in victim blaming, as identified in Crystal's case. The officer's aggressive actions reinforced patriarchal structures inherent in society and the criminal justice system. By asserting power and control over her, the police officer rendered her powerless to male authority and male violence. These results are consistent with those documented by DeJong et al. (2008). In their study exploring police perception of IPV, the authors found that officers who engage in victim blaming usually state that victims "deserve or are partially responsible for their abuse" (p. 688). As was indicated in the current study, many Black women believed that police officers often trivialized and discounted their victimization while masculinizing their use of force against their partners. In fact, police's denial of Black women's victimhood and characterization of their actions as criminal reflect anti-Black racist beliefs and attitudes held by some of the police alongside pervasive and deeply embedded negative stereotypes about Black people in Canadian society. Stereotypical beliefs that associate Blackness with crime and criminality (Chan & Chunn, 2014; Maynard, 2017) or vilify Black women as innately violent also place them in a precarious position and increase their risk of male violence. These findings further indicate that the demonization of Black women in this regard means that they are not afforded the same level of protection as other women, and police violence and brutality against them are justified.

Another significant finding in the study is police use of force and excessive violence against Black women. As Maynard (2017) asserts, since Blackness is often associated with criminality, "policing of Black people extends quickly into bodily harm" (p. 250). Some of the women experienced dangerous encounters with the police where they were disrespected, denigrated, and abused. Some police officers were more likely to assert their dominance, use aggression, and reinforce violence against Black women whom they characterized as assertive, aggressive, violent, or resistant to police authority. The masculinization of aggression or force used by Black women was a deliberate tactic by some of the police officers to justify their violence against them. These results support observations made by Maynard (2017) who stated that Black women who called the police to intervene in an IPV incident were vulnerable to racialized and gendered police violence against them. Black women were more likely to be scrutinized and targeted by police. The use of police force and brutality was also supported by a recent study conducted by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2018). In their study, they found that the Toronto police are more likely to use physical force against Black people than white people.

We certainly cannot ignore the gendered nature of policing (Belknap, 2014), for example, recognizing the challenges that female officers may face when working in a male-dominated environment (Garcia, 2003; Morash & Haarr, 2012; Rabe-Hemp, 2009). It is also possible that when Black women encounter some female officers, they may expect that female officers will exhibit more understanding or be more receptive to their situation than male officers. However, when there is a contradiction between expected gendered approaches (i.e., nurturing, caring, emotional, and gentle), some Black women may be more resentful of female police officers who do not abide by these expectations.

This study further reveals that following their contact with the police, Black women were generally fearful of the police, more apprehensive to call them for help, and report future victimization. Their fear that the police may discredit their victimization, mistreat, or arrest them in the future (Miller & Becker, 2019) has deleterious emotional and psychological consequences for Black women. Many women also expressed a lack of trust in the police; this finding aligns with other research documenting Black people's negative perception or mistrust of the police (Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Henry & Tator, 2005; Lai & Zhao, 2010; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2009). This lack of trust reflects Black communities' ongoing experiences of injustices and racism in the criminal justice system (Cole, 2020; Henry & Tator, 2006b; Maynard, 2017).

## **Implications and Conclusion**

Canadian research that examines Black women's experiences with the police, particularly in the context of IPV and from their perspectives, is sparse. Their experiences have largely been dismissed or rendered insignificant (Maynard, 2017). The lack of race-based data that focus explicitly on the experiences of Black women creates significant barriers in chronicling police mistreatment of and violence against them. Subsequently, it is difficult to understand the extent of the problem, making public policy and interventions inadequate (Richie, 2012, p. 23). Thus, this study is timely and contributes to the small amount of research in this area with its inclusion of a gendered and racialized analysis, as well as its focus on IPV. It also has the potential to enhance practice and policy initiatives by informing knowledge of Black women's experiences.

Existing research shows that Black women are disproportionately impacted by IPV (Black et al., 2011; Lipsky et al., 2012; Truman & Morgan, 2014). Women deciding whether to call the police to intervene in an abusive situation must not only negotiate their safety and subsequent retaliation from an abusive partner, but also contemplate how stereotypes and discriminatory police practices may influence their experiences (Richie, 2012). Women who believe their safety is compromised may use force to protect themselves (Nash, 2005;

Swan & Snow, 2006). These factors underscore the complexities of violence in their lives. Criminalizing Black women who have been victimized by an intimate partner increases their risk of subsequent violence. It reduces the likelihood of them contacting the police and prevents them from receiving appropriate support. There is an overreliance on criminal justice approaches to hold women who use force in their relationship accountable, with little evidence supporting their effectiveness (Goodmark, 2017). Additionally, these approaches overlook the context of women's actions and treat all acts of violence as equivalent regardless of motivation, intent, or impact (Larance & Miller, 2017). They also fail to recognize the intersections between Black women's criminalization, victimization, and institutional racism (Richie, 2012). There is an urgent need to move beyond criminal justice responses to IPV (Decker et al., 2019; Potter, 2007). Non-legal supports and interventions such as community-based programs that address the complexity of violence in Black women's lives must be considered. These interventions must address structural causes as well as the "harms created by IPV and deter further violence and abuse" (Goodmark, 2017, p. 112).

Police responses to incidents involving Black women and their intimate partners may result in negative outcomes. As was evident from the women's narratives, they believed the police treated them unfairly because they were Black. Therefore, enhanced training is required to assist police officers to effectively respond to IPV (Ruff, 2012) and identify the primary aggressor in IPV incidents (Gover et al., 2011). It is strongly recommended that police receive appropriate anti-Black racism training that allows them to grapple with issues around anti-Blackness. Police training should include discussions around implicit/explicit biases, and how these influence their perception and treatment of Black women who are accused of perpetrating violence against an intimate partner.

This study also offers valuable insights for social service agencies and provides front-line workers with an analytic to challenge social inequality, particularly for those who live at the margins of society. Racism and systemic barriers exacerbate Black women's experiences of IPV (Nnawulezi & West, 2018). Black women who experience discrimination and racism may distrust and not access needed supports. Women reluctant to seek support may physically fight back against an abusive partner. However, resorting to violence should not be the only option for women who struggle to protect themselves and their children. The findings advance a social justice trajectory by increasing awareness of the various ways violence unfolds in Black women's lives. It also has the capacity to shape interventions by providing tools for front-line workers to identify and critique color-blind or neutral approaches that prevail in service delivery. It encourages front-line workers to advocate for Black women from micro through macro contexts by questioning stereotypes and negative constructs that depict Black women as angry or aggressive. In addition, findings from the study help service providers to

understand the interconnections between victimization and criminalization. Thus, service providers must implement trauma-informed approaches, multiple and non-traditional healing modalities, and develop long-term structural supports for Black women (Nnawulezi & West, 2018). Social service agencies should also continue to diversify frontline staff so that there is a higher representation of Black service providers. This increased representation may be welcomed by Black women who are reluctant to speak with staff who are not Black or racialized.

More research is needed that positions the experiences of Black and other racialized women at the forefront of IPV research. Specifically, researchers must place a greater emphasis on conducting research that explores how Black women's intersecting identities of race, gender, and class influence their experiences of IPV (Decker et al., 2019). Future research on male partner violence perpetuated against Black women, can be greatly enhanced by "situating intimate partner violence in the context of other forms of violence [i.e., historical trauma, structural violence, institutional violence, community violence, cultural violence, and family violence] and widening the research focus to include protective factors and resilience" (West, 2021, p. 756). In addition, research that focuses on Black women's experiences with the police helps to enhance understanding of relations between Black communities and the police, the effects of police violence, the ways in which police violence reinforce structural marginality, and to reaffirm that Black lives matter (Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015). Although the study sample included Black women from different ethnic backgrounds, a future investigation is needed that examines variations across different cultural and ethnic groups (West, 2004) and how these differences influence Black women's experiences with the police.

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