

Black Trans Invisibility in The Criminal Justice System by Dorcas Adedoja

Coverage on racial injustice and policing tends to focus on cisgender (non-trans) black men. Society's default to cis (non-trans) masculinity explains the constricting ways police brutality is discussed, and it is imperative we do better. #SayHerName brought glimpses of the experiences of cisgender (non-trans) women into conversations surrounding hyper-policing in black communities. However, the black trans experience interacting with police has continuously been an afterthought. The infamous cases of CeCe McDonald and Mya Hallalong with Laverne Cox's portrayal of an incarcerated black trans woman in the hit series "Orange is the New Black" brought the hyper-criminalization black trans women face at the hands of the police to national attention. Despite this, there was a collective failure to establish a communal literacy about how police violence impacts black trans life at large. Both transfeminine and transmasculine people were left without their needs met, and community learned visibility is not enough to spark understanding of black trans reality. It also can be argued that Black transmasculine and/or gender non-conforming people were largely missing from the national conversation of policing in black communities outside of Poussey's infamous death in the "Orange is the New Black" series.

Ky Peterson's case thrust the black transmasculine experience of criminalization into the national scope. Ky, a black transman, was arrested and imprisoned after murdering his rapist. A rape kit performed on Ky tested positive, yet he was still unjustly incarcerated. Ky's case was riveting due to the combination of racial and gender-based violence he experienced. Activists had to sit with the reality that transmasculine people are sexually assaulted and slapped with serious jail time for defending themselves. In fact, transmasculine people tend to experience sexual and domestic violence at higher rates than their cis counterparts. This emphasized that the nuances surrounding black transmasculine identity are pivotal aspects that can no longer be swept under

the rug. Although Ky's case briefly shook the nation, reports on police failing black transmasculine people went back into the shadows after the wave of sensationalism calmed. Fast forward to now, and it is clear the epidemic of police violence against black transmasculine people around the nation never ended. Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality framework can be utilized to explain the phenomenon, however, it is important to elaborate on what "intersectionality" is.

Crenshaw argued some members of society experience a multiplicity of oppressions simultaneously because of who they are, creating an entirely new oppressive experience because of systemic inability to effectively address the nuances that exist within marginalized groups. This is the case for transmasculine black people in the correctional system. The status of being black and transmasculine alone drastically increases the likelihood of police interaction in the lifetime as studies have shown the following:

- Black people are disproportionately targeted by the police for stop-and-frisk sequences along with traffic stops.
- Black people are given disproportionately lengthier sentences than their white counterparts for the same crimes.
- Trans people are more likely to experience domestic, physical, verbal, sexual, and emotional violence compared to their cisgender (non-trans) counterparts.
- Trans people face higher levels unemployment, employment discrimination, and homelessness

The constant exposure to acute violence while possessing a skin color systemically hunted by the state creates a new dimension of oppression for black transmasculine people. There are a variety of ways black transmasculine community members end up in the hands of law enforcement rightfully defending themselves against a bigot, traffic ticket encounters gone wrong, or persistent life stress that pushes them into a mental health crisis the police are called to address. All of this is aggravated by society's limited understanding of trans masculinity as trans people do not have the same needs as cis ones. Other aspects of personhood, such as having a disability or being undocumented, can also exacerbate the oppressive conditions our members must navigate. As a

result, this group often goes without their needs met. Black transmasculine people need new, innovative movement strategies that hold space for their experiences. Black transmasculine people especially need resources that enable them to improve their quality of life (i.e. housing, employment environments where they can thrive).

Trans(forming) works to provide our community, with the resources they need through our Prison Project, monthly membership meetings, and Trans(forming) House. Each week members of the Trans(forming) leadership team meet with community members behind bars and execute affirming programming. Monthly membership meetings are for our members who are not incarcerated and serve as an opportunity for community to be in fellowship with each other and discuss tough topics in a safe environment (Ex. dating, surgery, etc.). While we are currently searching for a new location for the Trans(forming) House, it is a space for community members in need of short-term housing and our answer to the systemic housing crisis trans people are consistently placed in. Trans(forming)'s organizational model has supported community members in prison, seen them through to their release, and provided the holistic care needed until they could be on their feet again.

Trans(forming) wants people to know transmasculine, gender non-conforming, and non-binary people have value regardless of the way police, horrible family members, or co-workers from hell treat them. We are living in hard and heavy times, but we still have each other.