

The Violent Erasure of Missing Black Women & Girls

This paper, based on my larger study of missing and murdered Black women and girls, probes society's erasure of missing Black women and girls, how their dehumanization contributes to their victimization, and what we lose when we do not believe they are victims. Going beyond the usual probe of the missing white woman syndrome, this paper also provides a critical analysis of the "violence of silence" that leaves Black women and girls vulnerable when the media does not cover their stories.

Carlee Russell's kidnapping hoax impacted the plight of missing Black women and girls. Her disappearance prompted a rallying cry on social media, with people calling on police to look for the missing Black woman with the same intensity as they do for missing White women. After the hoax was uncovered, some people claimed Carlee made it harder for Black women and girls to be believed when they were legitimately victimized. Carlee's case did not make it worse for Black women, but it did highlight the prevalence of missing Black women and girls: more than 97,000 Black women were reported missing in 2022, according to the National Crime Information Center.

The chatter about missing Black women and girls eventually quieted across social media platforms, and people moved on to the next cause célèbres. Missing Black women and girls returned to being an afterthought, which highlights the true issue: some people are vocal about Black women when it's time to berate them for making the Black community "look bad." I argue that a Black woman's hoax about her kidnapping did not create this problem; a racist and sexist society and criminal legal system did.

The victimization and dehumanization of missing Black women and girls are often neglected in critical criminological discourses. This paradox of the hyper-invisibility of Black

women and girls means they simultaneously exist and do not exist in criminal legal and social systems where they are often seen as problems to be dealt with but not victims worthy of being helped. This systemic silencing of Black women and girls is violent.

I use Black Feminist Criminology as my primary theoretical framework to contextualize the multiple ways Black women are marginalized and victimized in the criminal legal system. Using a critical victimology lens, this paper contextualizes what happens when Black women and girls are not believed, and how the violence of this erasure places them at a higher risk of further victimization. I argue that society is not structured to place Black women in any position of value, thus contributing to their repeated degradation and victimization in the criminal legal system. This allows the carceral state to keep Black women and girls stuck in a place where there is no space for them to be believed and protected. The “strong Black woman” trope is wielded recklessly against Black women, who are seen as impervious to pain and perpetually trapped in a place where, no matter how hard they cry for help, no one will hear them because the default is to not believe Black women.