

KEEP THE FAMILY CLOSE: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON
FAMILY SUPPORT AND SUCCESSFUL RE-ENTRY

by

Kerry L. Shipman, J.D., MPA

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

Latreace Flynt, Ph.D, Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to understand successful reintegration with positive family support for formerly incarcerated African American men in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. Individuals released from prison face challenges that result in the likelihood of recidivism. Previous studies regarding these individuals have focused on the requirements for their successful re-entry into society, including financial stability, housing, employment, and family support; however, there is a need to understand what forms of support are needed from families. The theory guiding the current study is the social support theory, as it explains that support from communities, social networks, and confiding partners prevents crime by providing these individuals an outlet to cope with hardship through non-criminal means. This study employed a qualitative methodology to highlight the experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men, which can then be used to inform and change programming and incentives pertaining to the re-entry process.

Keywords: re-entry/reintegration, family, family support, African American, males, recidivism, social bond theory

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Dedication

To my wife, Keyana Shyrer, the most selfless and caring soul I have ever known. Your sacrifices—both seen and unseen—are the foundation upon which this achievement stands. You have been my unwavering light in the darkest moments, my calm in the storm, my anchor when the weight of this journey felt unbearable. Through sleepless nights, long days, and the moments where I questioned if I had anything left to give, you never wavered. You carried me when I didn't have the strength to carry myself. You poured into me when I was empty. You loved me through the highs and the lows, through the frustration, exhaustion, and uncertainty. This is as much your victory as it is mine because without you, I would not have made it to this moment. Your love, your patience, and your belief in me have been my greatest gift, and I can only hope to show you the same unwavering support and love that you have given me.

To my son, Kerry Jr., and my brother, Koby, you both are the reason I have never given up. Kerry Jr., every sacrifice I have made, every long night, every challenge I have faced, has been with you in mind. I want you to see that no obstacle is too great, no dream too far out of reach. You are my legacy, and I hope that when you look back on my journey, you see a roadmap for your own path—one filled with resilience, determination, and faith.

Koby, my brother, we have walked through the fire together. Us against the world. When life hit us with loss, with hardship, with moments where the road felt too steep to climb, we stood together. You have been my greatest responsibility and my greatest motivation. I see so much of our mother's strength in you. She prepared us for this world, even when we didn't understand her lessons at the time. And here we are—standing, thriving, pushing forward because that's what she raised us to do.

To my Aunt Rebecca Shipman, your love has been a lifeline. In the moments when I needed family, you were there, a steady presence, lifting me up, reminding me that I was never alone. You carried the weight alongside us, and your sacrifices and unwavering support will never be forgotten.

And to my late mother, Shenise Shipman, the woman whose love, discipline, and strength made me who I am. You never let me settle. You never let me make excuses. You saw something in me before I saw it in myself. You pushed me to be more, to dream bigger, to reach higher. Even in your hardest moments, you put us first. I remember your voice, your lessons, the way you prepared me for a life you knew I would have to navigate without you. You may be gone, but you are with me in everything I do. Every step I take is in honor of you. I hope I have made you proud.

This dissertation is not just a degree—it is a battle won, a testament to love, sacrifice, and the people who refused to let me fall. It is proof that no matter how hard the journey, no matter how many obstacles stand in the way, we rise.

For Keyana—my support and strength.

For Kerry Jr.—my purpose and my legacy.

For Koby—my brother, my strength, my reminder that we never walk alone.

For Aunt Rebecca—who held us up when we needed it most.

For my mother, Shenise Shipman—who gave everything so that we could have a chance at something greater.

With every ounce of love, gratitude, and respect,

Kerry Shipman, J.D.,MPA

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To the Participants of This Study

To the Black men who took part in this study—I see you, I respect you, and I appreciate you. Many of you shared parts of your lives that were painful, parts that society often overlooks, and experiences that most people wouldn't understand unless they've lived it. You didn't just sit down for an interview—you relived moments of struggle, of setbacks, of fighting a system that wasn't designed for you to win.

You've been through doors slammed in your face, opportunities denied, and labels placed on you before you even had a chance to prove yourself. You've been told "no" more times than you can count. You've carried the weight of your past while trying to build a future. Some of you have faced incarceration, homelessness, addiction, job discrimination, and the daily battle of trying to rebuild your life while the world doubted you. And yet—you showed up anyway.

You showed up for this study the same way you show up for your families, your communities, and for yourselves—determined to change the narrative. That is why this research exists. Not just to talk about the barriers you've faced, but to highlight the resilience, the fight,

and the willpower that got you through it. You are proof that your past does not define you and that despite everything that was meant to break you, you are still here, still striving, still pushing forward.

I am honored that you trusted me with your stories. I don't take that lightly. This work is not just about statistics or theories—it's about real men, real struggles, and real perseverance. I hope that in some way, this study sheds light on your strength and resilience and serves as a reminder that your journey matters.

I also want to acknowledge my nonprofit, Resolute Charlotte Inc. The mission and vision of this organization fuel my passion for reentry work and community service, and this research is a reflection of that dedication. The lessons learned through this work will continue to shape the impact we make in the lives of those we serve.

This dissertation represents more than academic achievement—it is the result of perseverance, mentorship, and unwavering support. To every mentor, colleague, friend, and family member who has walked this journey with me, your belief in me has been my greatest source of strength. This moment is not just mine—it belongs to all of you. Thank you.

With deepest gratitude,

Kerry Shipman, J.D., MPA

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	3
Copyright Page	4
Dedication	5
Acknowledgments	7
List of Tables	14
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	15
Overview.....	15
Background.....	15
Historical Background	16
Social Background.....	16
Theoretical Background.....	17
Situation to Self.....	18
Ontological.....	18
Epistemological.....	19
Axiological.....	20
Problem Statement.....	20
Purpose Statement.....	23
Significance of the Study	24
Research Questions	26
Definitions.....	28
Summary	29
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	31

Overview	31
Theoretical Framework	32
Theoretical Gap.....	36
Related Literature.....	37
Racial History of Criminal Justice	38
Mass Incarceration of African Americans	41
Re-entry Challenges Faced by African American Men	49
The Role of Social Support in Re-entry	57
Summary	64
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	65
Overview	65
Design	65
Research Questions	69
Setting	69
Participants.....	70
Procedures	71
The Researcher's Role	71
Data Collection	74
Surveys.....	74
Interviews.....	75
Reflexive Journal	77
Data Analysis	78
Transcription	79

Naïve Reading.....	80
First Cycle Coding	80
Second Cycle Coding.....	81
Thematic Analysis	81
Interpretation.....	82
Trustworthiness.....	83
Credibility	83
Dependability and Confirmability	84
Transferability.....	84
Ethical Considerations	85
Summary	86
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	88
Overview.....	88
Participants.....	88
Brandon Carter.....	89
Jamal Richardson	90
David Thompson.....	90
Andre Watkins	90
Tyrone Maxwell.....	90
Jerome Daniels.....	91
Darryl Johnson	91
Christopher Bennett	91
Marcus Taylor.....	91

Elijah Stokes	91
Results	92
Theme Development	92
Thematic Analysis	93
Resolution to the Research Questions	109
Summary	111
CHAPTER FIVE:IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION	112
Overview	112
Summary of Findings	112
Discussion	114
Implications	116
Delimitations and Limitations	117
Recommendations for Future Direction	118
Conclusion	116
REFERENCES	120

List of Tables

Table 1 <i>Description of the Participants</i>	87
Table 2 <i>Frequency of Themes</i>	91
Table 3 <i>Emotional Support as a Stabilizing Factor</i>	92
Table 4 <i>Importance of Housing Stability</i>	96
Table 5 <i>Employment Barriers</i>	99
Table 6 <i>Family Influence on Decision-Making and Recidivism</i>	102
Table 7 <i>External Support Systems</i>	105
Table 8 <i>Long-Term Impact of Family Support</i>	107

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This chapter serves as an introduction to this hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological study, which aims to explore the experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who credit their successful reintegration into their communities to positive family support in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. This chapter presents a discussion on the gap in the current literature concerning family support and the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated African American men. Furthermore, the chapter details the purpose of this study, including its significance to current literature. Finally, the research questions are introduced, along with definitions of the key terms pertinent to the study.

Background

The U.S. has more than two million incarcerated individuals, with approximately five to seven million individuals under community supervision on parole and probation (Bradner et al., 2020). Approximately 600,000 incarcerated individuals are released yearly by state and federal correctional facilities (Zapryanova, 2020). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, African American men constitute 22% of the North Carolina population, but they account for 55% of the jail/prison population (Crutchfield, 2022). The large number of prisoners processed through the criminal justice system raises concerns revolving around mass incarceration and release from prison. Drawve and McNeeley (2021) explained that individuals returning from incarceration are more likely to reoffend due to them returning to the same neighborhood they committed the crime in. Furthermore, Drawve and McNeeley (2021) noted that parolees who return to different places than those they were living in before going to prison presented a substantially lower risk of reincarceration. Formerly incarcerated African Americans tend to have a higher recidivism rate

because they return to communities saturated with poverty, unemployment, and crime (Lewis, 2020). Anderson et al. (2020) explained that re-entry barriers pertain to education, employment, housing, and social services. According to their study, understanding how formerly incarcerated individuals define successful reintegration can lead to their needs being met by considering the uniqueness and complexity of their lives. The re-entry process is essential to them returning home, but it can result in recidivism that is influenced by societal and structural factors. This hermeneutic phenomenological study explores the experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who credit their successful reintegration into their communities to positive family support.

Historical background

Social support is considered a network-based social phenomenon that has become a focus of research in the past three decades (Li et al., 2021). Social support can be defined as a social network's provision of psychological and material resources in the form of structural, functional, emotional, and instrumental support to facilitate an individual's ability to cope with stress (Li et al., 2021). Mizel and Abrams (2020) explained that various contexts of support and re-entry needs have been examined in the literature, directing a plethora of changes to re-entry programs. For instance, Bares and Mowen (2020) examined the role of parole officers as support mechanisms during reentry. Sells et al. (2020) on the other hand, looked into the potential for community mentors to reduce recidivism rates. Yet, regardless of the context of the social support, the historical perspective aligns re-entry programs with support networks.

Social background

Previous research has focused on the requirements for successful re-entry, including financial stability, employment, and family support (Goger et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2021;

Mielitz & Marcum, 2020). Groger et al. (2021) indicated that the criminal justice system's collaborative efforts, besides those of institutions outside of correctional facilities, are required to assist formerly incarcerated individuals. Economic and social difficulties affect the lives of these individuals upon release. Sells et al. (2020) indicated that the relationships between social support, family, friends, and mentors are essential to the reintegration process. According to Harper et al. (2021), the provision of social and financial support during the re-entry process can yield successful outcomes such as lower drug use, more employment opportunities, and a reduced recidivism rate. Geeraert et al. (2021) raised an essential inquiry when trying to understand the role of family support in re-entry. They wanted to not only understand if family support exerts an impact on the re-entry process but also examine the factors that contribute to family support making a difference during re-entry such as communicating expectations and accountability.

Theoretical background

The theory guiding this study is Francis T Cullen's (1994) theory of social support. Sociologist Nan Lin (1986) defined social support as "the perceived or actual instrumental and expressive provisions supplied by the community, social networks, and confiding partners" (p. 18). Cullen's definition expounded on Lin's concept of social support in which he indicated social support can exist at multiple levels of society. Social support can be categorized into different forms such as expressive (emotional) and instrumental support. Expressive and instrumental social supports are provided in informal social relations with families and friends and through formal networks in workplaces, social programs, and governmental agencies involved with entities of the criminal justice system (Bernard et al., 2016). Research explains social support can be both instrumental and expressive (emotional), as it pertains to the re-entry

process (Mowen & Fisher, 2019; Mowen et al., 2019; Spjeldnes et al., 2012; Sugie & Augustine, 2020). Some studies have solely focused on emotional support (Naser & La Vigne, 2006; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2015; Taylor, 2016), whereas some have focused on instrumental support (Meyers et al., 2017; Taylor & Becker, 2015). Studies on re-entry and release have also discovered that social support and meaningful relationships with family, friends, peers, and mentors are critical to connecting offenders to their communities, which, in turn, promotes a successful reintegration process (Armstrong et al., 2016; Hussain & Sajid, 2024; Moles-López & Añaños, 2021 Valera et al., 2015; Valera et al., 2017). This study incorporates both expressive and instrumental support that have derived from family and external sources to understand the implications of these experiences on successful reentry following incarceration. Thus, Francis T Cullen's (1994) theory of social support informed the development of the research and interview questions as well as the identification and analysis of thematic codes.

Situation to Self

Ontological

As a Black man, a high school dropout, a defendant, a bail bondsman, a law clerk for the state prosecutor's office, a law clerk for the federal prosecutor's office, a judicial intern in both a state supreme court and U.S. federal courts, and a former magistrate judge, I have had the opportunity to witness the judiciary system in motion from several perspectives. An amalgamation of personal and professional experiences has shaped and engendered within me the desire to build my life's work to uplift the Black community. What introduced me to the world of law enforcement was my mother's occupation as a New York City correctional officer. While observing her, I developed a keen interest in the power and influence correctional officers wield. Harlem is a high-crime city, where I observed many people, especially the youth, being

arrested or detained by police. As a spectator, I began considering the legality and justification of each arrest and whether I could initiate a positive outcome in these or similar instances as these people's legal representative.

As a senior in college and a legal intern, I firsthand saw how lawyers handled their daily responsibilities by aggressively advocating for their clients. The attorneys' dedication cast a lasting impression on me and confirmed what I believed was my calling as an attorney of law and an advocate. My experience as a legal intern allowed me to encounter many minority youths in courthouse lobbies. Many of these youth offenders could have benefitted from good legal counsel and programs that would have prevented them from any further encounters with the criminal justice system. During the ten years I served as a licensed bail bondsman, I came into direct contact with people of color who required effective, dedicated, and compassionate legal representation. Earning a juris doctorate fostered in me the need to exert a lasting impact on my community by advocating for changes capable of improving the circumstances of socio-economically disadvantaged groups. This ontological assumption has allowed me to view the realities of others through different perspectives. Utilizing these varying perspectives, I developed themes best suited for this study.

Epistemological

I know the relationship between African American men and the criminal justice system raises a multitude of concerns due to the disparities in incarceration. Personal experiences of seeing family and friends come home from being incarcerated and not having appropriate opportunities for a continuous re-entry cycle have been the driving force behind my opting for this topic. As a former magistrate judge, I was often asked for advice by offenders regarding what they can do to have a better life that does not result in them reoffending. The commonality

among these individuals is the lack of resources and support that results in them reoffending. African American men are commonly perceived as criminals, and because of this preconceived notion, there is an unspoken perception that they commit criminal acts. This has led to a generational cycle within the Black community that has yet to be broken. Adopting an epistemological approach allowed me to gather information as an insider and understand the experiences of my participants.

Axiological

I believe that offenders can have a prosperous outlook toward life if they are provided with the same support as that given to those who are considered privileged. The criminal justice system is tasked with rehabilitating offenders, but they fail to do so. A misconception exists about the purpose of the criminal justice system. Our current perspective is that the system is designed to punish offending individuals, which is incorrect. The system's actual purpose is to rehabilitate offenders and deter others from future crimes. The lack of support and resources has an adverse impact on the likelihood of recidivism. My philosophical axiological assumption pertains to the values I bring to this study, namely integrity, honesty, and respect. I believe my values contributed to the work that must be done for the African American men within the criminal justice system.

Problem Statement

The problem is the lack of evidence-based research relating to how social support development during and after incarceration can improve re-entry outcomes for African American men. Research conducted on female offenders with a focus on family support and recidivism has highlighted that emotional and instrumental support are associated with a decline in the likelihood of reincarceration within five years of being released (Moles-López & Añaños, 2021).

Hussain and Sajid (2024) examined the role of emotional and instrumental support in preventing recidivism among juvenile offenders and found the support factors to be overlapping. Hussain and Sajid (2024) added that conditions in the home that impact instrumental support such as economic challenges can hinder emotional support. The current study aimed to fill a gap in the literature pertaining to forms of social support from the perspective of formerly incarcerated African American men to understand the role of family support in their successful reintegration. Establishing such an understanding can inform policies and programs to strengthen family and social support systems in preparation for the transition from prison to the community (Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). In fact, Solbakken and Wynn (2022) found that many conditions in the prison environment serve to disrupt family relationships due to barriers such as visitation schedules, the cost of phone usage, and inmate withdrawal due to mental health issues (Bardelli et al., 2023; Boppre et al., 2022; Raher, 2020). Highlighting the need for family support for successful reintegration into society could justify improvements in these conditions.

A deeper look into the conditions of imprisonment that hinder the development and sustainability of family relationships reveals opportunities for addressing these issues. For instance, Bardelli et al. (2023) found that the financial strain of being incarcerated hindered communications with family members. On average, the participants reported spending an average of \$164 per month of incarceration to use the phones (Bardelli et al., 2023). In fact, Raher (2020) found that some institutions have rates as high as \$25-60 per phone call. For individuals from lower socioeconomic status groups or without external financial support, such expenditures are not affordable. Secondly, while in-person visitations are not technically a financial consideration, transportation, time off work, childcare, and other factors can impede visitations (Boppre et al., 2022). For those who have the resources to visit, the conditions are not

necessarily conducive to family bonding. In fact, Boppre et al. (2022) found that the environment and processes for visitation often discourage family members, especially women, from visiting, resulting in only 40-75% of inmates receiving visitors. Furthermore, Boppre et al. (2022) noted that individuals who are Black and have longer sentences are less likely to have visitors than their peers. Finally, due to the stress of incarceration and pre-existing mental healthcare issues, many inmates become withdrawn from their family members and opt to not reach out or maintain relationships (Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). Instead, social support inside the prison is focused on fellow inmates to create a sense of belonging, creating a sense of loss of support upon reentry (Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). Establishing consistent support during and after incarceration in the current state of incarceration is seemingly impossible. Thus, emphasizing the importance of these relationships to preventing recidivism is critical to justify and promote policies that improve these conditions.

According to Ropes Berry et al. (2020), the reasons family support makes a positive difference in the re-entry process for African American males warrant exploration. Lumpkin (2020) addressed the critical need to further contextualize the role family plays in the reintegration processes of Black men. There is a need to further define what a successful re-entry experience means (Lumpkin, 2020). Data demonstrates that approximately 75% of incarcerated individuals are rearrested within five years after being released, while 44% are rearrested by the end of the first year following release (Ropes Berry et al., 2020). Furthermore, Ropes Berry et al. (2020) added that the percentage increases from 75% to 80% when considering only Black males. Recidivism can be attributed to bleak economic and social opportunities and poverty-stricken neighborhoods. African American men face the harshest stigma after incarceration. Though it may seem that recidivism is likely, the re-entry process also offers the likelihood of

success.

Evidence suggests success is possible for the formerly incarcerated individuals who have access to family and community resources. There is still a need to understand the dimensions of family reintegration that matter most and the processes or mechanisms through which they exert their impact (Goger et al., 2021). Social support is considered to play an integral role in re-entry. Yet, pathways for developing such support remain limited in the literature (Geeraert et al., 2022). Atkinson (2023) stated that family support comprises three factors, namely emotional, interactional, and instrumental support; however, they failed to explore other factors that may contribute to family support for formerly incarcerated African American men. An exploration of other forms of family support that lead to a successful post-incarceration life has significance. Understanding the role of family support will help provide the services needed to reduce recidivism rates, specifically among formerly incarcerated African American men, who make up most of those incarcerated population.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men regarding family support and re-entry. Former offenders in a voluntary re-entry services program in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina were the sample population for this study. The study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the re-entry experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men and the role of family support in their successful reintegration. A hermeneutic phenomenological research design was determined as appropriate for this study because it aims to describe formerly incarcerated African American men's lived and interpretative experiences of a shared phenomenon. Other designs were considered to justify this decision. According to Tomaszewski

et al. (2020), the design must align with the purpose of the study, research questions, and problem statement. A narrative inquiry was considered as it emphasizes storytelling and the social reality (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). However, the specificity of the research questions as related to family and social support indicated that this approach would not align with the research questions. Ethnography examines cultural context, which could be aligned with the population (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). However, the data collection involves extended observations which would not provide data relevant to the purpose of the research. The phenomenological approach focuses on the lived experience of individuals to establish what they experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Therefore, phenomenological design was best suited for the purpose of this study.

The theory guiding this study is the social support theory by Francis T. Cullen, which explains that support prevents crime by providing individuals an outlet to cope with hardships through noncriminal means (Schaefer et al., 2021). Social support theory is used to define the provision or perceived provision of assistance from communities, social networks, and confiding partners for meeting the instrumental and expressive needs of individuals (Schaefer et al., 2021). Cullen (1994) defined social support to include the perceived and actual exchange of support, instrumental and expressive elements, and formal and informal classifications. This social support theory helped us understand why and how family support reduces recidivism rates among formerly incarcerated African American men.

Significance of the Study

The literature points to strong family connections and networks as being beneficial to successful prisoner re-entry (Geeraert et al., 2021; Goger et al., 2022; Hussain & Sajid 2024). A vast majority of the extant literature has focused on the importance of social support; however,

few studies have addressed why it is important, especially within the Black community. This study bridged a gap in the literature by discussing the type of familial support required in the re-entry process (Geeraert et al., 2021; Goger et al., 2022; Hussain & Sajid 2024). This understanding may shift societal and structural perceptions regarding why formerly incarcerated African American men recommit crimes. The study provided insights into the services and resources needed for a successful reintegration process in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina.

Although many programs and opportunities are in place to help ex-offenders improve their lives after getting released from prison and minimize the chances of going back, the challenges they face often outweigh the support provided by these systems, which results in high recidivism. Formerly incarcerated African American men are faced with complex and intertwined consequences of their incarceration, including joblessness, homelessness, familial and psychological distress, poor health outcomes, and frequent recidivism (Ropes Berry et al., 2020).

Many studies have examined the impact of factors that assist formerly incarcerated individuals with the re-entry process (Goger et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2021; Mielitz & Marcum, 2020). Studies have demonstrated that to achieve successful re-entry, employment opportunities, help with mental health issues, housing, and support are required (Goger et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2021; Lumpkin, 2020; Mielitz & Marcum, 2020). For this study, the inquiry examines family support and its connection with the re-entry process. Reunification with family is among the various barriers formerly incarcerated individuals face. Even though incarceration can have consequences for the incarcerated individuals' families, it still remains an integral process for their reintegration (Geeraert et al., 2022; Hussain & Sajid, 2024).

This study has implications for policy recommendations and social change as it offers a deeper understanding of the re-entry process, and the tools required to provide adequate rehabilitative services. Sufficient resources from local and state agencies and nonprofit groups that offer social support, mental and physical health services, and educational programs help residents and reduce crime in their communities (Atkinson, 2023; Goger et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2021; Mielitz & Marcum, 2020). A successful reintegration process will help formerly incarcerated individuals change their behavior and develop the mentality to not commit crimes. Furthermore, it will dissolve the negative perceptions associated with being a formerly incarcerated individual. This research can provide critical stakeholders with best practices for the reintegration process.

Research Questions

To understand the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who credit their successful reintegration into their communities to positive family support, the current study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men regarding overcoming perceived barriers to successful post incarceration in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina?

The experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men and their re-entry have received limited research attention even though they recidivate at greater rates than other races (Ropes Berry et al., 2020). The aim of the first research question is to gather further information on the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who have overcome barriers to achieve successful reintegration into society. Williams et al. (2020) opined that understanding the voices of African American men and the experiences that they undergo when

navigating the process from prison to home is critical.

2. What are the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who have not reoffended regarding expressive provisions following reentry?

The literature indicates a need to better understand the various forms of support and specific mechanisms that influence family support during re-entry (Alward et al., 2020). The literature further indicates that formerly incarcerated individuals have detachments from family, friends, and larger social networks with greater needs for untreated substance abuse and mental illness conditions (Goger et al., 2021; Ropes Berry et al., 2020). Research has also indicated that family relationships can undergo strain during the reentry process leading to potential tension and stress among family members (Goger et al., 2021; Moles-López & Añaños, 2021). Furthermore, Moles-López and Añaños (2021) explained that families can be attributed to being a source of social support and that family support can reduce crime during re-entry. The second research question aims to understand the forms of expressive support essential to the successful re-entry of formerly incarcerated African American men.

3. What are the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who have not reoffended regarding instrumental provisions following reentry?

The literature highlights that incarceration results in the separation of individuals from their families and communities, imposing stringent limitations and controls on their interactions with society (Lumpkin, 2020). These limitations increase challenges in employment, housing, and accessing necessary services (Ropes Berry et al., 2020). The aim of the third research question is to understand the obstacles faced by African American men and their families during

the reentry process and their perspectives on how those obstacles are overcome through instrumental provisions.

Definitions

This section includes operational and conceptual definitions of the key terms for this qualitative study. The definitions of the key terms offer a more precise understanding of the context in which they are presented within the study.

1. *African American/Black*: This term refers to a person in the U.S. who has origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (United States Census Bureau, 2021).
2. *Male*: Within this paper, this term indicates any person who was born as a male and was formerly incarcerated (Morgenroth et al., 2021).
3. *Incarceration*: This term can be defined as involvement in the criminal justice system that resulted in one or more nights in either jail or prison (Cox, 2020; McCulloch & Scraton, 2023).
4. *Recidivism*: This term can be defined as any new contact with the criminal justice system that can lead to a petition, formally filed charge, re-referral, arrest, conviction, adjudication, or sentence following the initial arrest (O'Donnell, 2020; Ropes Berry et al., 2020).
5. *Prison/Jail*: Jails are locally operated short-term facilities that hold inmates awaiting trial or sentencing or both, besides inmates sentenced to a term of less than one year. Prisons are long-term facilities run by the state or the federal government that typically hold felons and persons with sentences of more than one year (Cox, 2020; McCulloch & Scraton, 2023).
6. *Re-entry/reintegration*: This term can be defined as an inevitable process that is designed

to help individuals transition from correctional confinement to successful reintegration into their families and communities (Christian & Walker, 2020; Lumpkin, 2020).

7. *Social Support*: Social support can be defined as any help or assistance, expressive or instrumental, that incarcerated individuals receive from community members, social networks, friends, and others (Schaefer et al., 2021; Zavala et al., 2020).
8. *Family*: For this study, the term goes beyond the traditional definition and expands to include friends, extended family, and kin networks (Christian, 2020).
9. *Family Support*: Family support can be viewed as being composed of various factors such as interactional (providing guidance and support), instrumental (providing housing and transportation), and emotional (providing love and belonging) support (Atkinson, 2023; Furstenberg et al., 2020).

Summary

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study explores how former offenders in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina explain their shared lived and interpretative experiences of overcoming perceived barriers as a result of their incarceration with the help of positive familial support, leading them toward becoming productive members of their communities. The study addressed a gap in the literature by understanding the re-entry experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men with a focus on why and how the role of family support aids in their successful reintegration. The role of family support was understood through the lens of Francis T Cullen's social support theory. Most studies on family support have focused on only emotional and instrumental support; however, it is relevant to study other forms of family support. This study contributes to the sparse literature on the experiences of African American men and their re-entry. Understanding which forms of family

support are more beneficial to successful reintegration will help with policies and procedures post incarceration.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter empirically explores the influence of support and relationship with family members on the recidivism of formerly incarcerated African American men. This section contains empirical literature pertaining to how the influence of family support and relationship came into focus. In the U.S., 2.2 million individuals are incarcerated within public and private facilities, 700,000 of which are released yearly, with half of them being rearrested within a year (Adams et al., 2020). People of color—specifically, African American and Hispanic populations—are over-represented in individuals who are incarcerated, on probation, or on parole (Nembhard & Robin, 2021). Exploring the historical background of the mass incarceration of African Americans helps one understand how mass incarceration has adversely affected families over time and African American youth with a history of incarceration in particular.

A comprehensive, systematic literature review was conducted on race, ethnicity, gender, and the criminal justice system to establish the connection with social support through Liberty University's Jerry Falwell Library and the Google Scholar online library databases. *JSTOR*, *Wiley*, *Springer*, *ResearchGate*, *HeinOnline*, *EBSCO*, *ProQuest*, and *SAGE Journals* were the databases employed to search for peer-reviewed articles. The following keywords were utilized for conducting this search: history of race in the criminal justice system, mass incarceration, social support theory, social support, re-entry, and experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men.

Family and close social support networks are critical in potentially mitigating the stressors and risks associated with the re-entry of formerly incarcerated individuals and reducing

the likelihood of recidivism (Lumpkin, 2020). Numerous factors can predict a formerly incarcerated person's likelihood of committing a crime, and an understanding of social relationship ties is crucial for preventing that. African American men encounter racial bias and discrimination within the criminal justice system, which is manifested in the high likelihood of policing, arrest, conviction, sentencing, and re-entry (Dogan et al., 2021). According to Ropes Berry et al. (2020), isolation, stress, and lack of social support intensify the frustration and desperation formerly incarcerated African American men feel, resulting in a systematic loop of criminal activity. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the main body of knowledge by analyzing the role of social support in the re-entry process of African American men. The following sections present a theoretical framework that situates how this research is viewed and a review of the literature that examines the racial history of the criminal justice system, mass incarceration of African American men, re-entry challenges of African American men, and role of social support.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is social support theory, which mentions the types of support required in the reintegration process of formerly incarcerated African American men. African American men face various barriers post incarceration; however, evidence suggests relationships with family and peers and the availability of social networks can play a significant role in protecting against or contributing to recidivism (Mahaffey et al., 2018). To explore relevant research and correctly evaluate the need for social support, adopting a relatable theoretical framework is imperative. There is a need to know, from the perspective of formerly incarcerated African American men, how social support contributes to a successful reintegration process.

Social support theory first emerged in fields outside of criminology to understand how relationships between individuals are related to stress, trauma, addiction, general health, and well-being (Meyers et al., 2017). Social support has received limited critical attention in criminology; however, Francis T. Cullen has been largely credited with developing the social support paradigm in the study of crime and social control (Martinez & Abrams, 2013). Cullen emphasized that the concept of social support should be centered in criminal justice and criminology because it plays a significant role in reducing crime and deviant behavior, besides mitigating victimization, fear of crime, and recidivism (Woo et al., 2016). Cullen's concept of social support is derived from the research of the Chicago School of Sociology and Nan Lin's theory of mental illness (Cao et al., 2009). The studies by the Chicago School of Sociology suggest that within the social support paradigm, organized networks of human relations can assist in meeting both expressive and instrumental needs of individuals, which, in turn, prevents crime (Colvin et al., 2002). Lin (1986) defined social support as the perceived or actual instrumental and expressive provisions supplied by the community, social networks, and confiding partners.

Cullen defined social support as the perceived and actual exchange of support pertaining to instrumental and expressive elements and provided formal and informal classifications of social support. Instrumental social support includes material and financial assistance and offering advice, guidance, and connections for positive social advancement in a legitimate society (Colvin et al., 2002). On the other hand, expressive social support includes the activities of sharing sentiments, ventilating frustrations, reaching an understanding of issues and problems, and affirming one's own as well as the other's dignity (Lin et al., 2013). Expressive social support, then, is related to an individual's emotional well-being, while instrumental social support is

focused on material and financial well-being. Cullen's definition indicates that social support can exist at multiple levels of society. Cullen (1994) distinguished between micro- and macro-level social supports. Micro-level social support can come from various social relationships, including relationships with family members and friends; a spouse, parent, child, neighbor, or close friend can provide social support. Intimate relationships can provide instrumental support, such as financial support or advice, and expressive support, such as companionship. On the other hand, macro-level support is provided by social networks, communities, and larger ecological units (Cullen, 1994). Cullen also discussed the delivery of social support by formal agencies and informal relations. Informal social support comes from social relationships with others who do not hold any official status relative to the individual, whereas formal social support would come from agencies such as government assistance programs (Cullen, 1994). Expressive and instrumental social support is provided by informal social relations with family members and friends and through formal networks in workplaces, social programs, and governmental agencies involved with the criminal justice system (Bernard et al., 2016).

Colvin et al. (2002) expanded social support theory to include the construct of coercion and highlighted that coercion causes deviance and criminal involvement because of the fear or anxiety of social-psychological deficits. Furthermore, coercion threatens to or does remove both expressive and instrumental social supports (Colvin et al., 2002). Colvin et al. also explored the delivery of social support in the context of reliability on others and its frequency, which ranges from consistent to erratic. Consistent social support is believed to build a stronger sense of trust between the receiver and the giver of social support, which, in turn, forges a solid social bond that becomes generalized into a strong moral commitment to others (Colvin et al., 2002; Kaur, 2023). On the other hand, with erratic social support, one cannot depend on receiving assistance.

Having this form of social support induces a moderate level of anger and low self-control because the provision of social support does not seem to be consistently elicited by one's behavior, which can lead to criminal behavior (Colvin et al., 2002). Chouhy (2019) explained that social support is deemed to reduce crime directly as well as indirectly by affecting criminogenic factors, including social control, social learning, or strain, and moderating their effect on crime. Curry and Zavala (2023) added that social support is associated with coercion whereas positive social relationships elicit positive prosocial behaviors. Accordingly, social support theory focuses on individuals' social environments and prosocial human relationships rather than the individuals themselves (Chouhy, 2019). According to Brezina and Azimi (2017), social support establishes a bond of trust between the recipient and the giver of support, fosters moral commitment and obligation within both parties, and discourages selfish behavior by facilitating the internalization of self-control. Curry and Zavala (2023) further noted that as social support enhances self-control, aggressive behaviors and the potential for criminal activities are significantly decreased.

Individuals with greater levels of social support show better outcomes than those who lack social support (Bares & Mowen, 2020; Curry & Zavala, 2023; Mowen & Boman, 2019). Previous studies have focused on family, peers, and broader social networks that provide social support for returning individuals (Bares & Mowen, 2020; Billings & Schnepel, 2022). Pettus-Davis et al. (2018) explored the differences in social support between formerly incarcerated men and women to find that men, overall, reported higher rates of negative social support, while women reported higher rates of both mixed and positive social support. Similarly, Billings & Schnepel (2022) examined the role of peer support in the context of returning to the same neighborhood following incarceration. The researchers found that males are likely to maintain

the same peer structure as before their incarceration. Kjellstrand et al. (2021) completed a qualitative study to understand the types of support received, who provided it, its perceived value, and how it assisted in the reintegration process. Their findings demonstrated that not only were family and friends significant for providing support, but secondary groups, including agency staff, correctional officers, therapists, self-help groups, coworkers, and religious groups, played critical roles as well. Such additional support could prove significant in countering the negative experiences discussed by both Billings & Schnepel (2022) and Davis et al. (2018). Mowen and Boman (2019) explored the difference between support from families and peers during the re-entry process of formerly incarcerated individuals. They found peer support, rather than family support, was related to lower levels of reincarceration. Previous studies have also focused on parole officers (Bares & Mowen, 2020) and religious networks (Stansfield et al., 2017) as forms of social support.

Research has demonstrated social support as being essential for the re-entry process. However, existing research has focused on family and peers as means of social support. But social support can also be received from others. This study examined other forms of support that can be beneficial to the success of formerly incarcerated individuals during their re-entry process.

Theoretical gap

Social support theory is considered an essential theoretical concept for understanding the influence of individual criminal behavior and the likelihood of individuals engaging in crime (Chouhy et al., 2020; Kort-Butler, 2017). Social support has received more attention in research revolving around juvenile delinquency and offending (Brezina & Azimi, 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Quinn et al., 2021; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Furthermore, social support has been utilized to

examine protective factors during prisoner re-entry, with a focus on physical and mental health problems (Fahmy & Wallace, 2019; Wolff & Caravaca Sánchez, 2019). Social support theory has been insufficiently utilized to examine the successful re-entry of African American men within the last five years. Pettus-Davis et al. (2018) conducted a study exploring gender differences in social support among formerly incarcerated men and women. Their study employed a mixed-method approach with surveys and interviews, and they carried out a varying comparison between samples to investigate the differences in the experienced social support and the anticipation of social support upon being released. Pettus-Davis et al. (2018) also asserted more research is warranted to understand the quality and differential amounts of social support to be provided on the basis of gender and race. To bridge this gap in the literature, this study aims to understand the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who credit their successful reintegration into their communities to positive social support.

Related Literature

The purpose of this section is to provide a tight synthesis of the existing knowledge on the experiences of Black men, the criminal justice systems, and factors contributing to recidivism. As the aim of this study is to understand the expressive and instrumental support factors that contribute to successful reentry, the literature explores historical and contemporary contexts associated with continued adverse interactions with the criminal justice system. There is a plethora of literature regarding the racial history of criminal justice, mass incarceration, and the challenges of reentry. Furthermore, the literature search identified a significant interest in social support as a means to improve the reentry process. However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the role of social support specifically for overcoming the unique challenges experienced by formerly incarcerated African American males. Therefore, the review of the

related literature presents the context for connecting these areas of discourse to achieve the objectives of this study.

Racial history of criminal justice

A criminal justice system comprises various public agencies, including professional police forces, courts, and prisons at the state and federal levels. While the criminal justice system has interactions with members from all races, there is a history of racialization that helps to understand why Black males experience significant disparities in incarceration and recidivism. The criminal justice system in the U.S. dates back to the colonial era, when people were subjected to the rules and laws of the British (Green, 2020). In 1776, the U.S. declared independence from Britain through the Declaration of Independence. The American Revolution brought about a radical change wherein the colonies were able to regain freedom from the British Empire's rule of power and replace it with self-governance, appointing delegates selected by the citizens to govern according to the will of the people. Two fundamental issues at the core of the American Revolution were the position of the colonies, as it related to their and the government's power dynamic, and the proper organization and distribution of governmental power in the polity (Green, 2020). A pattern of ideas, assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs shaped the opposition elements in English politics, where individuals perceived themselves through the outlook of a moral purpose (Green, 2020). The Continental Congress was a governing body of delegates called together from the thirteen colonies. The Continental Congress created The Articles of Confederation in 1777, which was designed to be the collective sovereign of the thirteen colonies (Beilla & Clark, 2020). The Articles of Confederation, which were considered the first constitution of the U.S., provided each colony with independence and granted an insignificant amount of power to the central government. The Articles of Confederation would

be considered a document that failed and was succeeded by the Constitution.

In 1788, the U.S. Constitution was ratified, and Article VI (Supremacy Clause) was established as the most critical principle of U.S. law (Hamza, 2024). The Judiciary Act of 1789, formally titled “An Act to Establish the Judicial Courts of the United States,” was signed into law and established a Supreme Court, leaving Congress with the authority to create lower federal courts as needed (Feldt, 2020). A structure of district courts, circuit courts, and the Supreme Court was established. In the 1830s, the idea of a centralized municipal police department first emerged in the U.S., with Boston being the first to establish a police force in 1838. By the 1880s, all major U.S. cities had municipal police forces in place (Go, 2020). The foundation for parole, corrections, and probation of criminals was established during the same period.

The 13th and 14th Amendments of the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery in 1865. With the abolishment of slavery and the expansion of the rights of African Americans, southern states created new criminal laws and penal systems that were a means to control African Americans (Hinton & Cook, 2020). Black Codes were restrictive laws applicable to African Americans that limited their freedom. The purpose of Black Codes was “to keep the Negro exactly what he was: a property less rural laborer under strict controls, without political rights, and with inferior legal rights” (Roussel, 2021, p. 139). These laws led to the imprisonment and subsequent sentencing of African Americans to the convict lease system, which was an economical substitute for slavery (Roussel, 2021). To justify the enslavement of Black people, Blackness was associated with bondage, social death, the uncivilized, and the inferior (Roussel, 2021). Furthermore, enslaved Blacks were depicted as animalistic, aggressive, violent, and dangerous (Baines, 2020). Within the northern states, policymakers employed the criminal justice system to enforce various laws against “suspicious characters,” who were free African Americans, resulting in new forms

of surveillance and punishment (Roussel, 2021). In 1916, the Bureau of Census published a report entitled “The Negro Population.” It was reported that African Americans constituted only 11% of the U.S. population but accounted for 22% of the inmates of prisons, jails, reform schools, and workforces (Cummings & Hill, 1918). “Law and Order” was the rhetoric and legislation enacted in the late 1950s to generate and mobilize White opposition to the Civil Rights Movement (Alexander, 2020). Higher rates of incarceration within the U.S. can be attributed to the political and racial challenges of viewing minorities as being responsible for crimes; an increase in aggressive policing of minorities; and an increase in monetary and institutional support for law enforcement and tougher laws (Parker & Perez-Brumer, 2024; Ropes Berry et al., 2020). By the late 1960s, African Americans were seven times more likely to be in prison or jail than Whites (Hinton & Cook, 2021).

The War on Drugs, a phrase coined by Richard Nixon in 1971, was a government initiative to stop illegal drug use, distribution, and trade by increasing and enforcing penalties for offenders (Cheliotis, 2024; Hinton & Cook, 2021). President Ronald Reagan pressed forward the War on Drugs agenda in 1982 when he declared illegal drugs a threat to U.S. National Security (Cummings & Ramirez, 2021; Frymire, 2024). Furthermore, Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which created highly punitive, weight-based mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses (Cummings & Ramirez, 2021; Frymire, 2024). During the 1990s, President Bill Clinton preserved and extended the punitive measures from the Reagan Administration to reassure the public that the justice system was being tough on crime, increasing the number of incarcerated individuals from 50,000 to 400,000 (Cummings & Ramirez, 2021; Frymire, 2024). The data from 1980 to 2000 reveals the national drug arrest rate for Whites rose from approximately 3.5 to 4.6 per 1000 persons, while that for Blacks rose from 6.5 to 29.1 per 1000

persons, despite evidence that Whites were more likely to use drugs (Cummings & Ramirez, 2021).

The current criminal justice system is characterized by racial inequalities and racial disparities (Hinton & Cook, 2021; Parker & Perez-Brumer, 2024). African Americans are more likely to be incarcerated compared with Whites and other ethnic and racial groups in the U.S. The U.S. Department of Justice reported that Black people represented 28.7% of all adult arrests in the U.S. while accounting for only 13.4% of the population (Cooper et al., 2020; Parker & Perez-Brumer, 2024). Studies have found that Black men, in comparison with White men, are incarcerated six times and two and a half times more than Latino men in federal and state prisons (Muller, 2021). Therefore, despite the changes in the criminal justice system, inequalities and racial disparities continue to affect African Americans, specifically men. Thus, it is understood that, due to the racialization of the criminal justice system, African American males experience incarceration and reentry differently than their White counterparts.

Mass incarceration of African Americans

While early history influenced the pattern of racialization in the criminal justice system, more modern legislation and political measures have led to the continuation of mass incarceration. Through this literature, it becomes evident why African Americans are disproportionately represented in the prisons and, as a result, have a higher rate of recidivism than their White counterparts. According to Adams et al. (2020), the U.S. incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world, with over 2 million individuals imprisoned and 5 to 7 million under community supervision on parole and probation. At the end of 2017, it was reported that within the U.S., out of every 100,000 citizens, 568 individuals are incarcerated with a sentence of more than one year (Adams et al., 2020). Furthermore, existing literature has

demonstrated that people of color are immensely over-represented within the U.S. criminal justice system compared with their White peers (Cooper et al., 2020; Muller, 2021). In fact, one in three Black men and one in six Latino men are likely to spend time in prison in their lifetime, as compared with one in seventeen White men (Muller, 2021). As it relates to new admission to prison, African Americans are admitted to prison at a rate of almost six times higher than Whites, and the rate is two times higher and four times higher for Hispanics and Native Americans, respectively (Muller, 2021; Muller & Roehrkasse, 2022).

From 1980 to 2001, the overall U.S. incarceration rate increased significantly, and by 2001, the penal system had incarcerated approximately 1.96 million prison and jail inmates (Cummings & Ramirez, 2021). The protests and riots of the 1960s led to growing racial tensions and civil unrest, which led to the endorsement of tough-on-crime color-blind policies as major agenda items in election campaigns. This resulted in future support for policies leading to the mass incarceration of primarily Black men (Cummings & Ramirez, 2021; Muller, 2021; Nembhard & Robin, 2021). Other reasons for the over-representation of African American men in the criminal justice system include economic instability (Muller, 2021), employment discrimination (Bhuller et al., 2020), institutionalized racism in arrest rates (Nembhard & Robin, 2021), and the issuing of longer sentences than Whites for similar crimes (Exum, 2021; Nembhard & Robin, 2021; Kenthirarajah et al., 2023). Racial disparities within the criminal justice system activate implicit stereotypical bias that links Blackness to aggression, crime, and violence (Nembhard & Robin, 2021). Kenthirarajah et al. (2023) found that this implicit bias extends to characteristics as simple as having a stereotypical black name increases the risk of a more punitive outcome with the criminal justice system. Exum (2021) argued that mass incarceration of African Americans was a result of a revision in criminal sentences that

implemented long and mandatory periods of confinement for violent offenses and repeat offenders. Additionally, penalties and prosecution for drug crimes and parole supervision increased through the 1990s, when parolees were readmitted for violating the conditions of their supervision, increasing the tendency for recidivism (Exum, 2021). Besides social and criminal justice policies, major contributors to mass incarceration include mandatory sentencing laws, the deinstitutionalization of people with mental illnesses, and the War on Drugs (Exum, 2021).

The dehumanization of Black people is integral to their continued marginalization in society and the presence of racism within law enforcement agencies, engendering experiences that trigger crime within African American communities (Baines, 2020). Furthermore, throughout history, police officers have possessed the legal authority to control African American men through traffic stops, stop-and-frisks, and zero-tolerance policies (Hinton & Cook, 2021). Various cases can be cited where courts allowed race to be a determining factor in policing. In 1968, the Supreme Court ruled that police pat-downs could be conducted on a reasonable suspicion that a person on the street was armed, dangerous, and involved in criminal activity (Davidson, 2023). *Whren et al. v. United States*, 517 U.S. 806 (1996) is a precedent case where the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the use of race as a basis for a police officer to stop an individual, as long as other factors were motivating the stop (Kerr, 2020). Furthermore, in *Brown v. Oneonta*, 221 F. 3d 329 (2000), a federal district court permitted the use of race as a search criterion if the suspect had an explicit racial description (Lewis, 2021).

Race continues to be a controversial practice in policing that facilitates the mass incarceration of African Americans. Various police departments across the country employ a policy called stop-and-frisk, with New York City being the best known for its extensive use of this policy (Ly, 2021). Stop-and-frisk is a policy that allows police to use a minor illicit activity

as a basis to question and search an individual of interest about a suspected criminal activity (Di Carlo, 2023; Rios et al., 2020). Overwhelmingly, the evidence shows that individuals of color were more likely to be subjected to stop-and-frisk practices than their White counterparts (Ly, 2021). Furthermore, the courts determined that the stop-and-frisk policy was intentional race discrimination in violation of the 14th Amendment (Barrett, 2020). Interestingly, black men are more likely to be targets of stop-and-frisk searches even though White men, when stopped, are more likely to be found with weapons (Bowleg et al., 2020).

Although explicit racial profiling and discrimination continues to be addressed through judicial processes, the actualization of these practices can be identified through a number of seemingly justified measures. For instance, Johnson (2020) examined the role of the gang databases in racial profiling, maintaining logs of association, and impacting sentencing decisions even where affiliation is only suspected. Furthermore, Johnson (2020) found that, while many jurisdictions maintain gang databases, transparency is lacking in major metropolitan areas regarding placement on the database. Johnson (2020) argued that this allowed for officers to place individuals at a greater risk of longer sentences and continued involvement with the criminal justice system based on their race or neighborhood. Granted, Holper (2023) explained that the databases are discussed by criminal justice decision makers as a means to prevent and protect, but the application of the association logs is where one can observe the racial profiling. Holper (2023) went on to state that racial minority youth have their relationships examined under a microscope by the police, earning them ‘points’ which validate their placement on the gang database. However, such relationships are not monitored or analyzed in communities that are predominantly White or affluent. Thus, a simple scuffle on the playground, according to Holper (2023) would be overlooked in the White neighborhood but a cause for earning points and

increasing interactions with law enforcement in the Black community. In brief, these police practices and legislative actions have increased the prevalence of arrests among Black males, both prior to and after their initial interaction with the criminal justice system.

Adding to the mass incarceration has been the political measure of the war on drugs. The term War on Drugs originated from a speech by President Nixon; however, President Regan expanded it in 1982. The War on Drugs was a response to deteriorating neighborhoods and an increase in narcotics deaths between the 1960s and 1970s (Hinton & Cook, 2021; Cheliotis, 2024). The War on Drugs has been explained to have emerged as a product of the competition among elected officials seeking to establish tough-on-drug credentials in the 1980s and 1990s (Beckett & Brydolf-Horwitz, 2020; Cheliotis, 2024). There was an establishment of federal funding, besides the enactment of asset penalization laws that incentivize and fund drug law enforcement (Beckett & Brydolf-Horwitz, 2020). Rather than employing preventive measures such as treatment, the War on Drugs involved the use or threat of physical force, including militaristic policing and severe inflexible prison sentencing, in the interest of enforcing drug prohibition laws, reducing drug use, and disrupting the drug trade (Cheliotis, 2024; Cummings & Ramirez, 2021; Frymire, 2024). Harris and Martin (2021) suggested the War on Drugs was a means to exploit and perpetuate White resentment over integration and civil rights by constructing drugs and crime as a problem of the urban poor and minority communities. Furthermore, an increase was observed in the arrest of non-violent drug offenders, resulting in overcrowding prisons (Cheliotis, 2024; Cummings & Ramirez, 2021; Frymire, 2024). During Ronald Reagan's presidency, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 was enacted, which required mandatory minimum penalties for cocaine-related offenses based on the quantity and type of drug, such as crack and powder cocaine (Cheliotis, 2024; Cummings & Ramirez, 2021; Frymire,

2024). The mandatory minimum penalties engendered racial disparities, especially in the sentencing of offenders charged with crack and cocaine. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 was credited with contributing to the high rates of the incarceration of Black people for nonviolent drug offenses due to the notion that approximately 80% of crack users were Black and the majority of cocaine users were White (Frymire, 2024; Ghosh, 2020).

Yet, substance use does not occur on a racial divide. In fact, according to Drake et al. (2020), African Americans and Whites use illicit drugs at similar rates; however, African Americans are 10 times more likely to be incarcerated for drug crimes. The arrest rates for African Americans and Whites are quite different. Mastro (2021) reported that roughly 828 of every 100,000 African Americans were arrested for a drug offense, whereas the figure for Whites was 339 of every 100,000. Additionally, drug arrest figures for Blacks are three to six times higher than those for Whites (Mastro, 2021). A quarter of all drug arrests and almost a third of the defendants incarcerated for drug possession alone involve African Americans (Donnelly et al., 2021). Consequently, the data indicates that while the likelihood of drug use among different racial groups is common, the likelihood of arrest among different racial groups is highly skewed.

Once arrested, the racial line becomes more evident in terms of socioeconomic status and racial bias regarding bail decisions. Bail is defined as the temporary release of an arrested individual that is secured by a monetary payment and is contingent upon the individual's appearance at future court hearings (Coggins, 2020). Historically, the federal bail system was premised on a defendant's right to bail for all non-capital offenses dependent on financial resources (Coggins, 2020). The disparities in this first federal bail system led to the Bail Reform Act of 1966, which sought to revise the practices of the bail system to assure all people, regardless of financial status, that they were saved from detention due to it not serving the

purpose of justice or public interest (Coggins, 2020). The Bail Reform Act of 1966 favored pretrial release and maintained that people be denied bail only if there was a chance they would not appear for trial. The act encouraged judges to release defendants on their own recognizance unless they were inclined to flee (Carroll, 2020; Mayson & Funk, 2024). Furthermore, the act was significant on the premise that release on personal recognizance should be the normal method of release rather than an unusual or exceptional procedure (Mayson & Funk, 2024; Thomas, 2020). Additionally, the act forbade judges from treating a defendant's dangerousness or risk to public safety as a reason for detention if it was for capital cases and for those already convicted (Thomas, 2020). An increase in rising crime led to an amendment in 1966 that led to the Bail Reform Act of 1984 (Elshiekh, 2020; Gottlieb, 2024). According to Olszewski (2022), the Bail Reform Act of 1984 ensured a defendant would appear in court and not endanger the safety of any other person in the community pending a trial.

After arrest, an offender is subject to a bail hearing or pretrial release by a judicial officer. Bail hearings or pretrial release are set in place to decide whether bail should be granted, determine the appropriate amount, and set conditions of release (Carroll, 2020; Gottlieb, 2024). Pretrial release decisions require judicial officers to balance the potential threat to communities with arrested individuals' liberty and maintain equality and equity in decision-making (Olszewski, 2022). As a result of a bail hearing, a defendant can be held without bail, released on personal recognizance, or given bail in the form of a secured bond, an unsecured bond, or cash (Carroll, 2020; Coggins, 2020; Gottlieb, 2024). A secured bond requires a person to pay a certain amount of money to be released from jail, which is returned to them if they attend all court hearings (Carroll, 2020; Coggins, 2020). An unsecured bond is an amount of money owed to the court if the defendant fails to appear for their court date; however, no money is required for

release (Carroll, 2020; Coggins, 2020). Furthermore, those who are released on their own recognizance must appear at trial when scheduled.

Many individuals awaiting trial remain imprisoned until their cases are resolved because of the lack of resources to afford bail (Coggins, 2020; Wadley, 2024). This can increase the length of time that incarcerated individuals are away from their family members as well as the economic burden of incarceration. Two-thirds of the 740,000 incarcerated people are yet to be convicted of a crime; however, they remain incarcerated because they are unable to pay bail (Hernandez, 2021). Detention before a trial occurs when it is lawful, reasonable, and necessary. The purpose of pretrial detention is to protect the public from serious safety risks and ensure defendants appear in court (Carroll, 2020; Coggins, 2020). Pretrial detention occurs when an accused person fails to post bail or is denied bail during the pretrial process. Bail bonds make fair representation in the criminal justice system nearly impossible due to the discriminatory practice against certain races and low-income individuals. The majority of individuals who face pretrial detention are people of color and those considered poor (Coggins, 2020; Hernandez, 2021; Wadley, 2024). People of color and low-income individuals have to remain incarcerated as they await trial even though they fit the requirements of bail, such as low flight risk and not being a threat to society. Furthermore, limited evidence supports the efficacy of monetary bail in achieving the goal of reducing harm to the community and increasing court appearances (Ouss & Stevenson, 2023). Page and Scott-Hayward (2022) posited that since the 1990s, pretrial detention rates have risen by 72%, with the number of inmates in U.S. jails increasing by 59%. This has significantly contributed to the high incarceration rates in the U.S. and is responsible for 99% of the total increase in the jail population. Page and Scott-Hayward (2022) explained that

individuals were often forced to either remain incarcerated until their trial or pay for a commercial surety to gain pretrial release.

African Americans are detained in jail five times more than White people and three times more than Hispanic people (Nembhard & Robin, 2021). Bail and pretrial detention decisions have serious consequences for later criminal processing decisions and have contributed to Black and White defendants, resulting in inequalities within the criminal justice system (Coggins, 2020; Nembhard & Robin, 2021; Wadley, 2024). Elshiekh (2020) discovered 41.6% of African American defendants are detained prior to trial in comparison with 34.3% of White defendants. Casey et al. (2024) argued that this creates a system in which affluent White defendants are afforded pretrial release for serious crimes while marginalized populations experience lengthy pretrial incarceration, often for minor crimes or a later verdict of not guilty.

Re-entry challenges faced by African American men

African American men are more disproportionately represented in the incarcerated population in the U.S. than any other race and ethnicity (Cooper et al., 2021). Statistics related to the color of mass incarcerated individuals have varied over the years. One out of nine African American men gets incarcerated between the ages of 20 and 34 (Gilmore & Bettis, 2021). Additionally, African American men aged 30–34 years have the highest incarceration rate among any race, ethnicity, gender, and age combined (Gilmore & Bettis, 2021). Cooper et al. (2020) examined the perceptions of different racial and ethnic backgrounds regarding the role of racial discrimination in the over-representation of Black people in the U.S. prison system. Their findings highlighted that Black people believe the criminal justice system targets them because of race. This negative belief results in a negative perception toward the judicial system, including police, courts, and judges. If judges perceive Black defendants as being more dangerous and

more likely to recidivate than White defendants, they will issue a judgment, either consciously or subconsciously, punishing Black defendants more severely than similar White defendants (Lang & Spitzer, 2021).

For formerly incarcerated African American men, recidivism depends on the individual's experience when reintegrating into society upon release (Bhuller et al., 2020). Recidivism is defined as any new contact with the criminal justice system, which could include a petition or formally filed charge, re-referral, arrest, conviction, and adjudication or sentence within a given time frame (Cohen et al., 2024; O'Donnell, 2020; Ropes Berry et al., 2020). Recidivism rate for those re-entering the community is approximately two-thirds of offenders rearrested for a new offense within three years of release and three-fourths of those rearrested within five years (Durose & Antenangel, 2021). Furthermore, the highest risk was observed within one year of release, with more than 50% being rearrested during the one-year timeframe (Durose & Antenangel, 2021). African Americans have an 81% likelihood of reoffending within five years of being released (Durose & Antenangel, 2021). These statistics point to the need for a closer look to explore which forces place African American men back into prison once they are released.

Racial disparities within the criminal justice system continue even after individuals are released from incarceration and create perilous barriers in the re-entry process of African American men. Ropes Berry et al. (2020) explained that racial profiling increases for many Black ex-offenders as they have become known to the police and other officers of the criminal justice system. Similarly, Bowleg et al. (2020) found that former Black inmates are more likely to exhibit police avoidance mechanisms, which often leads to isolation and increased depression. While Ropes Berry et al. (2020) suggested that African Americans are more likely to return to

their old neighborhoods and social circles due to socioeconomic reasons, Bowleg et al. (2020) explained that police avoidance often prevents Black men from fully reentering society, even to the extent of decreasing the opportunities for employment. Thus, as the depressive symptoms increase, the potential for returning to criminal activity follows the same pattern. This aligns with the findings presented by Solbakken and Wynn (2022), who noted that the sense of belonging in prison does not transition during reentry. Li (2022) added that the expectations of reentry and the shifting from set schedules to self-directed activities can increase stress levels significantly among former inmates. Among those expectations is the pressure to avoid negative encounters with the police (Li, 2022). Therefore, mental health often declines during the reentry process, which is further complicated by negative police encounters (Bowleg et al., 2020; Li, 2022; Solbakken & Wynn, 2022).

Though departure from incarceration can be a success for individuals, re-entering society can be a challenge for those returning to certain communities. An individual's residential location is a substantial factor in shaping the likelihood of involvement in illegal activities (Billings & Schnepel, 2022; Ropes Berry et al., 2020). Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay developed a theory of social disorganization that purports that specific neighborhood characteristics, most notably poverty, residential instability, and racial heterogeneity, can lead to social disorganization, resulting in crime (Antunes & Manasse, 2021). Their argument highlighted that impoverished people who live in racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods and frequently move have trouble establishing and maintaining healthy social relationships (Billings & Schnepel, 2022; McDowell & Reinhard, 2023). Furthermore, these neighborhoods facilitate high poverty, high racial and ethnic heterogeneity, and high residential mobility, resulting in higher rates of crime (McDowell & Reinhard, 2023). Social disorganization theory

points to the notion that a person is not born a criminal but becomes one over time based on their social environment. Additionally, disorganized communities often have reduced social control, reduced access to social support, and increased access to delinquent peer networks—all of which promote future criminal behavior (Billings & Schnepel, 2022; D’Amato et al., 2020). African American men who are released from incarceration have to return to the same environments in which they committed their criminal activities. These formerly incarcerated individuals return to communities to live alongside other former prisoners, which carries implications for competition for scarce resources, criminal opportunities, and the effectiveness of formal and informal social control (D’Amato et al., 2020). Leverentz (2020) stated that returning to the same neighborhood with the same social networks and to disadvantaged neighborhoods lacking in resources contributes to recidivism and continued offending.

Alexander (2021) indicated that African American men face challenges in re-entry that restrict access to employment and housing, cause mental health issues, and limit social support. Referring to barriers as the new Jim Crow, Alexander (2021) specified the existence of laws, administrative sanctions, and penalties that prevent individuals with criminal records from accessing certain necessities in life. These include full labor market participation and access to public welfare benefits such as affordable housing, educational grant and loans, and food subsidies (Alexander, 2021). Without adequate support, formerly incarcerated individuals are more than likely to return to prison. Thus, the following subsections examine the literature specific to the known barriers for successful reentry for African Americans males.

Employment

Being employed can promote the financial stability required to reduce the rate of recidivism. Race plays a part in the employment of Black men, regardless of whether they have a

criminal record or not; however, their changes decline if they have a record (Rodgers, 2019). The U.S. Justice Department reported that around 60% to 75% of released offenders cannot find employment in their first year after being released (Mielitz & Marcum, 2020). Cohen et al. (2024) found that 55% of former inmates are able to find employment during the first year, but that only 20% of those who find employment earn more than \$15,000 per year. These differences in statistics could be due to sampling or temporal variations. Nonetheless, both studies demonstrate the challenges former inmates face in employment during their first year. Obatusin et al. (2019) found one-third of ex-convicts are rearrested because they lack employment. Looney and Turner (2018) explored the relationship between employment opportunities and work before and after incarceration. The findings demonstrated that ex-prisoners struggle to gain employment in the labor market after being released from prison. The study further established that during the first year of being released, only 55% of ex-prisoners had secured employment and reported having earnings. Not having a sense of security in terms of employment can promote recidivism in formerly incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, the median annual earning of those with jobs was reported to be \$10,090, and only 20% of the employed population earned more than \$15,000 in the same year (Looney & Turner, 2018). Not earning a higher income can result in formerly incarcerated individuals returning to criminal activities to achieve financial security. Zakaria et al. (2018) noted that employment barriers after incarceration include legal limitations; lack of social support and trust; and limited skills, training, and education. Securing employment can significantly reduce recidivism and improve the economic well-being of ex-offenders.

Racial and ethnic inequalities in employment after incarceration are linked to networking and discrimination by potential employers. Formerly incarcerated White people have stronger

employment ties and face less discrimination than formerly incarcerated Black people (Western & Sirois, 2017). Palmer and Christian (2019) completed a qualitative study on the resilience of formerly incarcerated African American and Hispanic men in searching for and maintaining employment. Their findings highlighted a perception that formerly incarcerated men were not willing to accept low-wage occupations; furthermore, formerly incarcerated men were found to be willing to secure and maintain low-wage work for future opportunities and a chance to exhibit their robust work ethic and responsibility even though their earnings did not cover living expenses or provide for their families. Brehmer et al. (2024) found that there is a strong correlation between self-confidence, which could be impacted by social support. Having a place of employment can assist formerly incarcerated individuals by providing them with a new network to be around, which is better than being associated with those they may have been criminally involved with. Employment creates a sense of self-worth and security in the future that can lead to successful and positive participation within the community.

Housing

Metraux et al. (2020) identified that unstable housing of formerly incarcerated individuals increases the risk of recidivism. Additionally, not finding stable housing leads formerly incarcerated individuals to move into areas with high crime and poverty rates, limiting or lowering their paying employment options and placing them in the vicinity of prior criminal connections (Metraux et al., 2020). Housing access represents an essential foundation for those returning from prison, with stable housing predicting improved well-being and reduced recidivism (Keene et al., 2018). However, formerly incarcerated individuals have difficulty finding suitable housing upon release due to a lack of money to buy or rent a residence or because their criminal history prevents them from accessing public, private, and federally funded

housing (Evans et al., 2019). Keene et al. (2018) examined the perspectives of formerly incarcerated individuals in search of housing after incarceration. Their findings showed that association with incarceration, the criminal justice system, and substance abuse were barriers to housing access.

Research indicates having a criminal record makes obtaining housing difficult, and being a racial minority, especially African American, creates negative experiences when trying to secure housing (Evans et al., 2019). Walter et al. (2020) explored the internal factors of formerly incarcerated individuals and their relationship with housing stability once they are released. The researchers used a model created to measure readiness for change through five themes, namely problem and need recognition, action, socials, bonds, and self-efficacy. Their findings indicated that formerly incarcerated individuals were ready for change owing to the desire to be independent. Additionally, various barriers prevented achieving housing stability, such as the lack of financial resources and denial from landlords because of criminal histories (Walter et al., 2020).

Mental Health

The U.S. Department of Justice found that over 50% of incarcerated adults have mental health issues, compared with 11% of adults within the general population (Tadros, 2021). Furthermore, mental health issues remain largely untreated during incarceration. Additionally, one in three individuals in prison and one in six individuals in jail reported receiving mental health services (Tadros, 2021). Issues that promote mental health disorders within correctional facilities include the environment, daily stressors, overcrowding, and low treatment rates (Dalbir et al., 2024; Tyler & Brockmann, 2018). Mahaffey et al. (2018) examined various socio-behavioral factors and mental health of formerly incarcerated African American men to find that

those with a history of mental health problems were more likely to develop psychological or emotional problems within a year of release (Dalbir et al., 2024; Mahaffey et al., 2018).

Furthermore, those more likely to report mental health problems have experienced a lack of mental health services during incarceration, have serious conflicts with members of a social support system, use alcohol heavily, and are unemployed (Dalbir et al., 2024; Mahaffey et al., 2018). Galletta et al. (2021) examined re-entry challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals with mental illness. Depending on the severity of the mental illness, these individuals are more likely to recidivate (Bales et al., 2017; Dalbir et al., 2024; Galletta, 2021). Additionally, individuals with mental illness are more likely to be homeless due to a lack of adequate community-based treatment programs, difficulty obtaining employment, psychotic symptoms, and substance abuse (Galletta et al., 2021).

Brine et al. (2021) explored the positive factors that led to successful outcomes for formerly White incarcerated men who identified as having mental health issues, revealing that volunteering in the community, social support, and access to mental health services aided in successful re-entry. In comparison, Assari et al. (2018) explored the association between incarceration, discrimination, and mental health of African American men, highlighting those African American men reported higher perceived discrimination with the likelihood of experiencing unsafe environments and police brutality due to being formerly incarcerated. According to Assari et al. (2018), racial discrimination is a form of racialized social control over African American men through means such as stop-and-frisk; driving while Black; and racial disparities in arrest, incarceration, conviction severity, and sentencing. Additionally, perceived discrimination is linked with incarceration and increased psychological distress and depressive symptoms in African American men.

The role of social support in re-entry

Social support is considered critical for re-entry because it emphasizes the use of networks and resources to address problems and challenges related to reintegration (Edison, 2024; Kras, 2019; Tucker et al., 2024). While this knowledge is evident throughout the literature, it is not specifically directed towards the experiences of African American men. Social support can include tangible and psychological support that can be provided by a wide range of entities such as family, peers, social networks, governmental agencies, and communities (Bares & Mowen, 2020). Previous research has described supportive social relationships as a protective factor against externalizing behavior in sociological, criminological, and psychological theories of offending (Houtepen et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2024). Furthermore, externalizing behavior can be categorized as oppositional, hostile, or intrusive, besides more severe antisocial behaviors such as aggression and offending behavior (Houtepen et al., 2019).

Social support can be utilized as a predictor of risky behaviors, where an increase in the quality of an offender's social support decreases their engagement in risky behaviors (Spohr et al., 2019). Additionally, social support can be divided into two constructs: positive and negative social interactions; positive social interactions refer to constructive exchanges between people, and negative social interactions indicate destructive exchanges between individuals. Similarly, social support can promote healthy and appropriate coping strategies when confronted with difficulty, and those who receive consistent social support would desist from criminal activity (Mowen et al., 2019). Social support can stem from various sources such as families, friends, and neighbors (Edison, 2024; Terry & Townley, 2019). Social support has conceptually been categorized into four traditional types: informational (information provided to another during a time of stress); instrumental (provision of tangible goods, services, and aid); appraisal-based

(communication of information relevant for self-evaluation rather than problem-solving); and emotional (the provision of care, empathy, love, and trust; Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2018). Social support can serve as a protective factor that mitigates the effects of stressful life events, including life transitions, through the supportive actions of others (Praherso et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2024). An individual released from incarceration needs positive social support, which is considered a protective factor from criminal behavior (Pettus-Davis et al., 2018).

Religious and Spiritual Support

Yelderman et al. (2018) asserted that religious communities are of significance to formerly incarcerated individuals due to them promoting acceptance, focusing on forgiveness, and providing group-based programs such as prayer and recovery groups. Stansfield et al. (2017) addressed the relationship between religion and recidivism through a mixed-effect longitudinal analysis and demonstrated that spiritual support is beneficial for conditioning one's consciousness to prosocial life; bolstering emotional coping competencies; and helping people remain attached to their community, friends, and family. Notably, Bares et al. (2024) noted that spiritual or religious support prior to and post incarceration are significant predictors of seeking such support during reentry, which could have implications for faith-based programs within the prison facilities.

In a related study, Banfield (2019) furthered the examination of the role clergy and pastoral clinicians play in restorative integration. The study utilized a case study approach for a psycho-educational training series designed to explore the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals. Religion and spirituality were found to be of central importance in the lives of the majority of African Americans, with 97% of them reporting the existence of God or a higher power and its importance of it (Butler-Barnes & Martin, 2023). Furthermore, the findings

indicated that changing thought patterns and attitudes and building coping mechanisms can aid in the successful navigation of re-entry challenges. Similarly, Valera and Boyas (2019) surveyed formerly incarcerated men of color on mental health and types of support and discussed the role religion and spirituality play as essential mediators between negative experiences and mental health outcomes. Their results suggested that increased social support, community support, and spiritual support were significantly associated with lower levels of psychological morbidity; furthermore, religious support was associated with reduced psychological morbidity because it instilled intrinsic motivation in formerly incarcerated men. Since formerly incarcerated African American men tend to face various issues during re-entry, the current study seeks to highlight the role of religious support in promoting better mental health outcomes so that men of color can transition to mainstream society.

Prison staff and parole officers' support

Prison staff and parole officers who particularly work toward re-entry and community reintegration have assisted with recidivism prevention. They have done so by addressing obstacles such as locating jobs and housing, identifying healthcare resources, and providing aid with other relevant issues (Bares & Mowen, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2018; Cid et al., 2021). Parole officers serve a critical role for inmates who are re-entering society by monitoring the transitional and rehabilitation process post incarceration (Hughes & Bense, 2021). Chamberlain et al. (2018) assessed the perceptions of parolees and their relationships with parole officers using the Serious and Violent Offender Re-entry Initiative (SVORI) dataset. The participants were all men who were interviewed one month prior to being released and three, nine, and fifteen months after being released. In addition, the study employed a discrete hazard model with a random intercept for predicting the likelihood of re-incarceration. Their findings demonstrated

that parolees with a positive relationship with their parole officers had a lower likelihood of recidivating, whereas those with a negative relationship with their parole officers had higher recidivism rates.

Supportive rapport is based on trust, helpfulness, and professionalism (Chamberlain et al., 2018). Once parolees perceive a supportive rapport with their parole officers, their likelihood of recidivating decreases (Chamberlain et al., 2018). Since the SVORI does not measure types of communication with parole officers, future research is needed to examine the alternate forms of contact between parole officers and parolees to determine what would increase rapport and reduce recidivism. Taylor et al. (2024) explained that the workplace environment can significantly affect the parole officers' motivation for making a difference, thus their capacity to do so. However, many parole officers were found to have limited knowledge on forming therapeutic relationships, which could hinder their ability to meet the specific needs of the former inmates.

Liu (2020) examined the support of parole officers based on the location of the neighborhoods of released ex-offenders. Using data from "Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry"—a multistate, longitudinal study conducted by the Urban Institute from 2002 to 2005—the researcher tested the correlation between parole support and neighborhood conditions. The study's findings indicated that ex-offenders from communities that were considered well-ordered received a higher level of parole officer support, whereas individuals from socially marginalized communities or disorganized neighborhoods received less support (Liu, 2020). Furthermore, not receiving positive support from parole officers increased the likelihood of reoffending and failing to return to prison (Liu, 2020). A recommendation of

this study was to explore re-entry outcomes among individuals who reside in metropolitan areas due to them being gentrified communities.

Family and Peer Support

When formerly incarcerated individuals are released from imprisonment, they rely on family support. Research has acknowledged that having a stable family and partner relationship is key to reducing reoffending (Clancy & Maguire, 2021; Condry & Smith, 2019; Roberts et al., 2017). Family members provide both strong affectionate bonds through emotional support and attachment and critical social support mechanisms such as housing, transportation, and financial support to the returning individual that serve to reduce recidivism and promote successful re-entry outcomes (Mowen et al., 2019). Due to the needs of individuals during the re-entry process, the delivery of support involves shifting relationship dynamics that often broadens the definition of family to include extended and fictive kin, friends, and acquaintances (Christian, 2020). The social context of the family provides a means through which the returning individual can engage in identity transformation toward a prosocial, post-incarceration identity (Boman & Mowen, 2017). Social support from family and friends is considered a key component in preventing recidivism and promoting social integration (Sugie & Augustine, 2020). Furthermore, research has suggested that individuals who are frequently visited by family and friends during incarceration may receive greater support after their release (Casey et al., 2021; Folk et al., 2019; Hickert et al., 2019; McNeeley & Duwe, 2019). Maintaining social ties with and support from family and friends can improve in-prison behavior and reduce recidivism (Baker et al., 2021). Furthermore, positive support from visits includes guidance, emotional support, hope for the future, positive news, and instrumental support (Baker et al., 2021). This increased support

facilitates access to the resources required to successfully transition back into society (Casey et al., 2021).

Research has suggested that family may serve two roles during the re-entry process, namely being supportive or causing conflict and tension (Mowen & Boman, 2019). According to Boman and Mowen (2017), supportive families can assist the formerly incarcerated with steering clear of recidivism, but they can also enable individuals to get involved in illegal and unhealthy behaviors, leading to them reoffending. The data for the study came from the “Serious and Violent Offender Re-entry” study, in which individuals were interviewed approximately 30 days prior to release and then in waves three to fifteen months post release. A mixed-effects longitudinal model was employed to examine how family support and the influence of criminal peers relate to substance abuse and criminal offending across time. The study assessed the relationship between family support and criminal offending and substance abuse during re-entry but failed to examine the family’s influence on re-entry outcomes. Formerly incarcerated individuals face difficulties in rebuilding broken family ties when re-entering society. Not being able to navigate these issues can lead ex-offenders to associate with the same individuals who were instrumental in causing previous incarceration (Boman & Mowen, 2017). Findings suggest peer support is just as critical or more crucial than family support.

Incarceration can be a stressor to the family system, owing to factors such as economic burdens faced by incarcerated individuals due to reduced earnings and employment, with financial costs often assumed by family members (Stansfield et al., 2020). Mowen and Boman (2018) discussed how family conflict is related to the risk of recidivism along with increased substance abuse and mental health concerns. Liu and Visser (2019) examined the strain between formerly incarcerated individuals and their family members during reunification after being

released. Forms of strain that family members face when offenders return home include the financial burden of providing basic necessities to former prisoners, adjustment in roles, and trust issues (Liu & Visser, 2019). Furthermore, high levels of strain between family members and ex-offenders result in negative emotions and deviant coping acts for both groups (Liu & Visser, 2019). Understanding the elements that bring about negative aspects that may hinder the reception of positive social support is essential.

Mowen and Boman (2019) utilized a mixed-effects model using data from the SVORI to examine the influence of family conflict, peer offending, family support, and peer support as it relates to reoffending for men. They revealed that family conflict was more significant for reincarceration than peer criminality. Family conflict enables peer criminality. Additionally, they suggested that family conflict may drive formerly incarcerated individuals from family aid to supportive peers during the re-entry process. A limitation of their study is that the data from SVORI do not contain peer measures of emotional support. Thus, further research is needed to examine the impact of other forms of peer support on re-entry outcomes.

Mowen and Boman (2018) examined the role of peer crime and peer support on the recidivism of formerly incarcerated individuals during the re-entry process using a mixed-method inquiry. Their findings demonstrated that peer support was significantly related to lower odds of recidivism and that peers can influence individuals in both positive and negative ways. Sugie and Augustine (2020) argued that formerly incarcerated individuals' social interactions were the most positive experiences of their day, which include just valuing the time spent with family and friends. The participants of their study were randomly selected from a census of men on parole using the Newark Smartphone Re-entry Project. A quantitative approach was employed where participants had to complete surveys about social support during re-entry over

three months. Sugie and Augustine (2020) explored social support systems after recidivism to find that close friends and family members provided formerly incarcerated individuals with validation of self-esteem that equipped them to handle stressful situations and crises. Additionally, they found that effective and positive communication, cooperation, and mutual respect can provide formerly incarcerated individuals with coping mechanisms. A limitation of their study concerns the methodological approach of data collection using surveys. A suggestion for further research is to use a qualitative approach in which missing data and incomprehensible answers can be further interpreted by participants.

Summary

This section discussed the various themes, findings, and the contribution of various literature as it relates to social support received by and re-entry of African American men. This review provided an overview of the racial history of the U.S., mass incarceration, re-entry challenges faced by African Americans, and the social support they receive. African Americans, specifically African American men, are disproportionately over-represented within the criminal justice system. Despite the reviewed literature focusing on the barriers to re-entry, this study focused on how social support enables successful integration. This study addressed a gap in the literature on African American men and social support and focus on the various forms of social support that formerly incarcerated African American men consider to be most helpful in achieving successful reintegration.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This qualitative study explored the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who credit their successful reintegration into their communities to positive social support in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. A hermeneutic phenomenological research design was appropriate for this study because it aims to describe formerly incarcerated African American men's lived and interpretative experiences of a shared phenomenon. This chapter provides a detailed description of the research design, and the sampling strategy employed in this study. The data collection methods, data analysis strategy, and the researcher's role are also addressed in this chapter. In addition, a description of the trustworthiness of the study and ethical considerations are provided.

Design

This qualitative study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who credit their successful reintegration into their communities to positive social support in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. According to Travers (2013), a higher percentage of research in criminology and criminal justice employs a quantitative method. However, there is a growing interest in using qualitative methods in criminology and criminal justice research (Travers, 2019). Qualitative research is flexible and exploratory in nature, wherein participants are afforded opportunities to share their experiences, and researchers listen without preconceived hypotheses (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). Within the qualitative framework, the researcher can understand how people make sense of things and how they experience them personally. A quantitative approach is not appropriate for this study because it seeks to explain a phenomenon

by collecting numerical data analyzed using mathematically based methods (Wrench, 2017). Quantitative research utilizes probability sampling and relies on larger sample sizes (Khalid et al., 2012). A qualitative approach allows the researcher to study a smaller number of individuals and glean the individuality of each participant to perform a better analysis.

Daher et al. (2017) explain that qualitative research is a branch of inquiry of phenomena in the social sciences that focuses on the experience of an individual and its meaning. Furthermore, qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to understand or interpret a phenomenon in terms of the meanings people ascribe to them (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Whereas quantitative research employs numerical data, qualitative research provides in-depth insights and an understanding of real-world problems by collecting rich narrative materials (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Furthermore, qualitative research enables researchers to conduct their studies in the settings in which the phenomenon they are interested in occurs and interpret the phenomenon on the basis of their own direct experiences and those of the participants who are affected by them (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021). This approach affords researchers access to insights that may not be available if other research methodologies are used.

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that explores people's everyday life experiences and is used when the study is about life experiences pertaining to a concept or phenomenon experienced by one or more individuals (Mohajan, 2018). The goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of experiences, both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019). Mihas (2019) defined phenomenology as an approach designed to focus on the lived experiences of those profoundly familiar with a phenomenon and how they experience the phenomenon as they are going through it before it is categorized and

conceptualized. Phenomenology is derived from philosophy, drawing from the two major approaches posited by philosophers Edmund Husserl, the founder, and Martin Heidegger in the 20th century (Dodgson, 2017). Husserl's approach is descriptive, wherein the researcher makes every attempt to disengage their feelings, experiences, and knowledge when interacting with the study participant (Christensen et al., 2017; Dodgson, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). The interpretive approach from Heidegger, on the other hand, assumes that researchers can never disengage from their feelings, experiences, and knowledge and should refrain from doing so (Benner, 1994; Dodgson, 2017).

A hermeneutic phenomenological research design was determined as appropriate for this study because it aims to describe formerly incarcerated African American men's lived and interpretative experiences of a shared phenomenon. Other designs were considered to justify this decision. According to Tomaszewski et al. (2020), the design must align with the purpose of the study, research questions, and problem statement. A narrative inquiry was considered as it emphasizes storytelling and the social reality (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). However, the specificity of the research questions as related to family and social support indicated that this approach would not align with the research questions. Ethnography examines cultural context, which could be aligned with the population (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). However, the data collection involves extended observations which would not provide data relevant to the purpose of the research. The phenomenological approach focuses on the lived experience of individuals to establish what they experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Through alignment with the theoretical foundations of the study and the research questions, the study interprets the perceptions of expressive and instrumental provisions as experienced through the experience of reentry following incarceration. Therefore,

phenomenological design was best suited for the purpose of this study.

Neubauer et al. (2019) highlighted that phenomenology research has different approaches, each rooted in different ways of conceiving the *what* and *how* of human experience, with the most common divide being between transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology. Furthermore, the two approaches differ, with transcendental phenomenology taking on a descriptive approach and hermeneutic phenomenology taking on a more interpretive approach (Neubauer et al., 2019). Transcendental phenomenology refers to a researcher examining a phenomenon by adopting a deeper, more conscious perspective in which everything is perceived freshly as though it is being perceived for the first time (Patton, 2020; Moustakas, 1994). Sloan and Rose (2014) asserted that in transcendental phenomenology, the researcher transcends the phenomenon being studied and meanings being investigated to adopt a global view of the essences discovered without moving to a fine-grained view of the essences and phenomenon under investigation. On the other hand, with hermeneutic phenomenology, the researchers cannot remove themselves from the process of the phenomenon (Sloan & Rose, 2014). A phenomenological approach effectively describes a phenomenon, and the interpretation makes research more interesting and meaningful for understanding social structures, policies, and practices from the personal perspectives of those in the research study (Qutoshi, 2020).

Crowther et al. (2017) indicated that hermeneutic researchers seek to reveal aspects of phenomena rarely noticed, described, or accounted for, thus allowing researchers the opportunity to analyze human experience with further thinking. Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with individuals' personalized lived experiences and interpretations (Ramsook, 2018). This study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to explore the lived

experience of formerly incarcerated African American men to make meaning of the role of social support in successful reintegration into their communities.

Research Questions

To explore the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who credit their successful reintegration into their communities to positive social support, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men regarding overcoming perceived barriers to successful post incarceration in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina?
2. What are the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who have not reoffended regarding expressive provisions following reentry?
3. What are the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who have not reoffended regarding instrumental provisions following reentry?

Setting

The setting for this study is a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. As mentioned in Chapter One, I worked in the judicial system within North Carolina. This provided me the opportunity to observe who was involved in the criminal justice system, which were primarily African American men. Jones (2018) mentioned that North Carolina has an incarceration rate of 639 per 100,000 people, with approximately 67,000 of its residents incarcerated within prisons, jails, and other various facilities. Furthermore, a 2010 U.S. Census reported that African American men comprised 22% of the North Carolina population but accounted for 55% of the jail or prison population (Jones, 2018). The U.S. Census Bureau (2019) further mentioned that the major metropolitan city in North Carolina had an estimated population of 1.1 million in July

2019). The demographic constitution of the major metropolitan city is 57.3% White, 33% Black or African American, 13.8 % Hispanic, and 6.3 % Asian, with other racial groups accounting for less than 1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Given those demographics, the major metropolitan city is considered one of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S. (Yonto & Thill, 2020). Furthermore, the major metropolitan city has one of the highest rates of poverty and one of the single lowest rates of upward mobility observed in any city within the U.S. (Whiteman et al., 2018).

Participants

Ramsook (2018) stated that when conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study, it is imperative to select participants with real experiences and intimate knowledge about the phenomenon being studied. Furthermore, purposive sampling should be utilized in the data-gathering process (Ramsook, 2018). Purposive sampling is used in qualitative research to identify and select cases rich in information (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2014). Purposive sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups that are especially knowledgeable about or have experienced a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano, 2011). Purposive sampling is characterized by incorporating specific criteria that are to be met by participants at selection (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Moser and Korstjens (2018) highlighted that phenomenology studies employ criterion sampling, wherein researchers look for participants who have shared an experience but vary in characteristics and their individual experiences. Furthermore, criterion sampling is significant when selecting individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied and meet the inclusion criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Qualitative research has a smaller sample size than quantitative research to facilitate a more in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and sharpen the focus on making meaning of

various topics (Boddy, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Roberts et al., 2019). Qualitative sample sizes should be large enough to allow for a new and rich understanding of the phenomenon but small enough to perform a deep, case-oriented analysis (Sandelowski, 1995; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Creswell (2007) suggested a sample size of 10 and emphasized the importance of describing the meaning of the phenomenon through a small number of individuals who have experienced it. For this study, the initial sample size was 15 participants who meet the criterion of being an African American man formerly incarcerated in the criminal justice system. However, interviews were conducted with 10 individuals. Creswell and Poth (2016) stated that participants may be located at a single site in a phenomenological study. The participants of this study were former adult offenders in a voluntary re-entry services program in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina.

Procedures

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) will be obtained from Liberty University before collecting any data. The IRB approval ensures the rights and welfare of the participants are adequately protected in the pursuit of the proposed research study (Grady, 2015). Once IRB approval has been obtained, recruitment communication will be provided to a re-entry service program in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. The recruitment communication will include an email and flyer that will be sent to the participants of the re-entry program, with contact information provided by the program facilitators. The individuals can confirm their participation verbally or through email. Once they have provided verbal or written consent to participate in the study, a consent form with additional information will be provided to them. The consent form will be sent electronically through Google Forms.

After the consent form is completed, the participants will be contacted to schedule an interview. During the call, the participants will be advised that a survey will be sent prior to the interview with demographic-related and open-ended questions. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, interviews will be completed virtually unless another option is needed for a participant. Sah et al. (2020) mention that during the COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative interviews have been conducted through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Zoom will be the audio/video conferencing software used to conduct the interviews in the proposed study. Zoom has a recording component that will be utilized during the interview process. Furthermore, with Zoom, only the researcher must download the program, which is convenient for the participants who may not want to download the application (Gray et al., 2020). The interviews will be semi-structured with predetermined questions; however, the order of the questions can be modified based on the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A semi-structured interview affords the interviewer the freedom to ask questions that have not been anticipated in the interview outline and engage in a more informal conversation.

To transcribe and subsequently analyze the presented information, all the interviews will be audio/video recorded using Zoom, and notes will be taken. Matheson (2007) stated that transcribing interview data is a time-consuming task for which researchers have begun to use automated transcription processes with digital recordings and voice recognition software. Automated transcription allows researchers to carefully listen and deeply think about the recorded interviews and their context (Matheson, 2007). Otter.ai software will be used to transcribe all interviews. The researcher will verify the accuracy of this transcription software by listening to each interview twice and correcting any errors to ensure accuracy. After the

transcription is complete, member checking will be conducted, where each participant will be able to review the transcripts of their interviews. The interviewees' participation in the transcription process serves as a means of validating the transcripts by correcting them if necessary and clarifying unclear issues (Mero-Jaffe, 2011).

The Researcher's Role

Clark and Vealé (2018) indicated that in qualitative research, the researcher's role is participatory. Furthermore, qualitative researchers are allowed access to participants' natural environment, and the participants are the main research instrument to collect and analyze data (Clark & Vealé, 2018). A researcher's role in qualitative research is to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of the participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). However, in conveying detailed, accurate accounts of the participants' social world, researchers are responsible for protecting their identities (Kaiser, 2009).

I worked in the judicial system, where I gained first-hand experience of observing individuals offending, be released, and then recidivate. This first-hand experience led me to develop an interest in the field of criminal justice and former offenders. I identified a gap in knowledge, academic assumptions, and professional practices to obtain a clear purpose for research in the criminal justice field (Ratan et al., 2019). I chose an approach that would be more effective in answering the research questions for the study and one that would be aligned with the purpose of this study. In qualitative research, the researcher examines why events occur, what happens, and what those events mean to the participants being studied (Teherani et al., 2015). Adopting hermeneutic phenomenology, a qualitative method, allows the researcher to study individuals' narratives to understand what they experience in their daily lives (Neubauer et al., 2019). The researcher should decide on the data collection procedures from the four primary

producers in qualitative research: observations, interviews, documents, and audio/visual materials (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study utilized semi-structured interviews that ensured key areas of data were being discussed while allowing participants the flexibility to bring their personalities and perceptions to the interview (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

Neubauer et al. (2019) stated that during data analysis, the researcher reflects on essential themes of participants' experiences with the phenomenon while simultaneously reflecting on their own experiences. Researchers using a hermeneutic phenomenology approach should openly acknowledge their preconceptions and reflect on how their subjectivity is part of the analysis process (Neubauer et al., 2019). As a former member of the judicial system who identifies as being an African American man, I realize that assumptions and biases pertaining to African American men exist within the criminal justice system. As a researcher, there is an understanding that the responsibility to tell authentic stories of the population being studied has to be shouldered.

Data Collection

A hermeneutic phenomenological study utilizes multiple methods to gather participants' experiences, interpretations, and understandings (Ramsook, 2018). An approach to add depth to the collected data is triangulation, which involves multiple data sources to reduce bias (Fusch et al., 2018). Triangulation can be performed by employing various methods or data sources with the goal of considering a single point from at least three different and autonomous sources to corroborate the topic under investigation (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). In this study, the participant data were gathered through a variety of data sources including, a survey, semi-structured interviews, and a reflexive journal.

Surveys

Qualitative surveys seek to harness potential qualitative data to achieve nuanced, in-depth, and new understandings of social issues (Braun et al., 2020). Surveys are designed to generate quantitative data; however, open-ended questions allow for the generation and analysis of qualitative data (Williams, 2019). Allen (2017) indicated that open-ended questions provide respondents with more opportunities to provide a narrative on the subject matter. This allows the researcher to take a holistic and comprehensive look at the information provided, adding more diversity to the data, which would not be possible with a closed-question survey (Allen, 2017). Individuals who expressed interest in participating in the study were asked to complete a survey through Google Docs before their scheduled interview. The survey comprised closed-ended questions related to demographic and personal background information, and the open-ended questions related to the research questions.

Interviews

An interview is a process through which a researcher and a participant engage in dialogue focused on questions related to a research study (Gilbert & Mayfield-Johnson, 2017). Interviews originated as a research tool in the fields of psychology and psychiatry and are one of the most widely used methods in qualitative research (Ragab & Arisha, 2018). In addition, interviews are the most employed data collection method, with the semi-structured format being the most frequently used interview technique in qualitative research (Kallio et al., 2016). Semi-structured interviews provide an outline of what an interviewer plans to cover while also awarding the flexibility to adjust the interview to topics arising in the conversation (Haenssger, 2019). Semi-structured interviews are characterized by open-ended questions with pre-defined topics in the interview guide that can be derived from previous research or a preliminary data collection method such as the survey (Busetto et al., 2020).

Some standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions are as follows:

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. How long has it been since you were released?
3. Can you tell me about your current situation?
4. Are you employed?
5. Do you have any children?
6. How would you describe the community where you reside?
7. Can you describe what re-entering society was like for you?
8. What are some of the re-entry challenges you faced after being released from incarceration?
9. What challenges do you perceive formerly incarcerated African American men face that may differ from the challenges faced by other racial or ethnic groups?
10. What experiences did you have during re-entry that you perceive as contributing to your success after release?
11. What resources did you find most useful to you in re-entering society post incarceration and avoiding reoffences?
12. How would you describe the support you received during incarceration?
13. How would you describe the support you received after being incarcerated?
14. Which individuals provided the most support once you were released?
15. Which individuals you wished would provide support but did not?
16. In general, can you describe factors that help African American men re-enter successfully and those that threaten their success?

17. How can prison programs, re-entry programs, and community resources better assist African American men when re-entering society?

18. What have I not asked you today that you think is important for me to know?

The study utilized a semi-structured interview format. Semi-structured interviews begin with standardized questions that are considered an organized conversation and are guided by new information obtained as the interactive discussion progresses (Ahlin, 2019). Questions one through four served as introductory questions to build rapport and obtain background and biographical information about each participant. Building rapport, trust, and respect within the interview is critical for the researcher to create a safe place for sharing personal insights and experiences (Roberts, 2020). Questions five through ten relate to the participants' descriptions of their experiences of overcoming perceived barriers to successful post-incarceration. Williams et al. (2019) argued that the re-entry of African American men is a societal crisis on the basis of the disproportionate number of Black men returning from prison to disadvantaged communities with minimal resources to promote successful reintegration. Therefore, these questions aimed to explore perceived barriers and how African American men overcome them. Questions 11 through 15 are designed to explain what forms of social support are critically important to a successful re-entry process. Pettus et al. (2018) suggested the need to examine the difference in support in terms of gender and race and who is providing social support. Questions 16 through 18 are closing questions. Closing questions can be utilized to generate data to inform future topics of inquiry and modify interview guides (Sowicz et al., 2019).

Reflexive journal

Reflexivity is a crucial cognitive practice in qualitative research that is utilized to legitimize and validate research procedures (Mortari, 2015). Reflexivity is generally understood

as an awareness of the researcher's influence on the people or topic being studied while simultaneously recognizing how the research experience is affecting the researcher (Probst, 2015). Self-reflective journals are written records by the researcher that are used to examine personal assumptions, goals, individual belief systems, and subjectivities (Ortlipp, 2008; Russell & Kelly, 2002). Furthermore, memos and journals help researchers not forget or distort what took place in the earlier stages of a research study and serve as a reminder to keep an open mind (Probst, 2015). Researchers' experiences of a phenomenon may provide them clues for orienting themselves to the phenomenon and all the other stages of phenomenological research (Van Manen, 2016). Hermeneutic research demands self-reflexivity, and the use of a reflective journal is one way in which a hermeneutic circle can be engaged by moving back and forth between the parts and the whole of the text (Lavery, 2003). Reflexive journaling was employed in the study to make meaning of the research process and analysis. Reflexive journaling was performed from the initial call to prospective participants and all through the interviewing and data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research is employed to support a researcher in achieving a deep and nuanced understanding of a given phenomenon (Lester et al., 2020). Qualitative research involves a rich collection of data from various sources to understand individual participants, including their opinions, perspectives, and attitudes (Nassaji, 2015). The processes of analyzing qualitative data are intuitive and inductive, where the researcher attempts to gain a deeper understanding of what they have studied and continually refine their interpretations (Taylor et al., 2015). Patton (2014) highlighted that qualitative data analysis involves making sense of huge amounts of data by reducing the volume of raw information by identifying significant patterns and drawing meaning

from data to create a logical chain of evidence. While conducting data analysis, the researcher maintains a journal to reflect on subjectivities, emotions, and questions and make sense of the data in relation to the study framework (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Data analysis for a hermeneutic phenomenology study is performed by applying the hermeneutic cycle that comprises reading, reflective writing, and interpretation (Lavery, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology requires researchers to examine the text, reflect on the content, and discover themes to interpret the meaning of the participants' lived experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Furthermore, researchers read the data, construct a vague understanding, engage in reflective writing, and finally re-engage with the text with revised understandings (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Transcription

Transcription, the process of converting raw interview data into a text-based form, is a significant contributor to the analysis process in qualitative research (Eaton et al., 2019). The critical aspects of transcribing include focusing on the participants' words, transcribing all parts of the audio, carefully revisiting the audio file, and re-reading the transcript (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In this study, interviews were conducted through Zoom Video Communications. Zoom has the capacity to record videos with password protection for confidentiality (Gray et al., 2020). Furthermore, I saved the recordings on a private and secure computer to enhance participant confidentiality. Once the interviews were recorded and downloaded, they were synced to Otter.ai for automatic transcription. Otter.ai is a speech-to-text conversion program that offers voice recording and transcription (Chia et al., 2020; Otter.ai, 2021). Otter.ai offers various file options for exporting transcriptions, such as MP3, TXT, PDF, and DOCX, with the capability of adding customized vocabulary (Otter.ai, 2021). Otter.ai's transcriptions are well-known for accuracy and

automatically inserting punctuation, besides providing breaks between phrases and different speakers (Verge & Crowell, 2021). As it pertains to the confidentiality of use, Otter.ai takes reasonable and appropriate precautions, considering the risks involved, to protect information from loss, misuse, and unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, and destruction (Otter.ai, 2021). I reviewed and edited the transcription provided by the software to ensure accuracy.

Naïve Reading

During the initial immersion into the data, a naïve reading of the interview provided a holistic sense of meaning and an understanding of African American men's perspective of social support by re-reading the transcriptions several times (Hansen et al., 2014). Simonÿ (2018) stated that naïve reading helps researchers achieve an initial understanding and allows for recognizing the text's meaning as a whole. Furthermore, researchers must be open-minded when reading the text and note immediate impressions (Simonÿ et al., 2018). Finally, researchers read the text to become familiar with it and formulate thoughts about its meaning for further analysis (Charalambous, 2014).

First cycle coding

Creswell and Báez (2020) defined coding as the process of analyzing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful manner. Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning to information compiled during a study (Miles et al., 2014). The qualitative analytic process is cyclic and requires researchers to return repeatedly to the data and the coding process through the analytic process (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The first cycle of coding occurs during the initial coding of the data (Rogers, 2018). The first cycle coding is more descriptive with low inference codes, which is helpful in summarizing segments of data (Elliott, 2018). In this study, the first cycle coding was performed using the in

vivo coding approach, a form of qualitative data analysis that emphasizes the participants' actual spoken words (Manning, 2017; Saldaña, 2016). In vivo coding ensures the researcher is analyzing the true essence of their participants (Meagher, 2020). When performing in vivo coding, researchers read through the data and name codes based on words and phrases utilized by the participants (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Second cycle coding

Rogers (2018) explains that second cycle coding methods are not necessary for every study, but they serve as a way to reorganize and reanalyze data coded in the first cycle coding. The second cycle coding employs a pattern code to sort the codes from the first cycle into smaller condensed categories and themes (Saldaña, 2021). Furthermore, pattern codes, called meta-codes, are explanatory or inferential, and they pull together a lot of material from the first-cycle coding into more meaningful units of analysis (Saldaña, 2021).

Thematic analysis

In hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, thematic analysis is a popular interpretive strategy for identifying themes in transcribed interviews (Benner & Wrubel, 1989; Ho et al., 2017; Van Manen, 2016). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Thematic analysis is considered the most appropriate analysis for a study that seeks to employ interpretations (Alhojailan, 2012). A thematic analysis draws from substantial textual data; therefore, software programs are available to facilitate the organization process (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In addition, software programs for thematic analysis support an easier capturing of the researcher's coding and construction of meaning (Williams & Moser, 2019). The most used Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software (CAQDAS) include NVivo, MAXQDA, and ATLAS.ti

(Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The CAQDAS that was utilized in this study is the MAXQDA software. Silver and Lewins (2014) stated that MAXQDA supports qualitative data analysis while being focused on coding, memoing, and working with a framework of categories iteratively developed during the research process. Furthermore, MAXQDA can assist with the analysis of all forms of data, such as videos, interviews, articles, media, and surveys (Silver & Lewins, 2014). MAXQDA has the capacity to identify core information with different codes through regular codes, colors, symbols, or emoticons by automatic coding (Marjaei et al., 2019). MAXQDA was utilized during the final phase of reviewing and reorganizing themes. Thematic analysis is useful for summarizing key features of a large data set, where it assists the researcher in producing a clear and organized final report (Nowell et al., 2017).

Interpretation

The true essence of qualitative research is to put oneself in another person's shoes and view the world from that person's perspective by being true to the participant (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Within this hermeneutic phenomenological study, it is the researcher's responsibility to interpret what formerly incarcerated African American men deem as positive social support and how it facilitates their successful reintegration into their communities. To interpret the data for this study, triangulation was employed, using multiple methods or data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014; Patton, 1999). To achieve triangulation, data were analyzed from surveys, semi-structured interviews, and a reflexive journal. Furthermore, I reflected on the possible meanings of the phenomenon and what they mean to the participants (Giorgi, 1997; Willis et al., 2016). The approach of the hermeneutic circle is embodied in the interpretation of data through reading and consistently reflecting on the process.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is concerned with exploring, describing, explaining, and understanding human phenomena by analyzing and interpreting participants' narratives and lived experiences (Daniel, 2019; Sharts-Hopko, 2002). Qualitative research is perceived as lacking rigor compared with quantitative research, which uses experimental, objective methods (Cope, 2014). To ensure that the study is considered rigorous in academia, the researcher must produce a trustworthy body of literature. Trustworthiness constitutes a qualitative inquiry that aims to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the criteria to establish trustworthiness include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Glesne, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The strategies that were adopted to ensure trustworthiness in this study include member checks, peer debriefing, triangulation, and reflective journaling.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined credibility as the extent to which the researcher has developed and articulated an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. A method of promoting credibility is through the various processes of triangulation, which involves using several sources of information from the field repeatedly to establish identifiable patterns (Stahl & King, 2020). To enhance credibility, I conducted member checks and peer debriefings and wrote in a reflective journal. Member checking occurs when the researcher asks participants to review and confirm the data collected from the interview process, besides the researcher's interpretations of the data (Charmaz, 2006). Using the process of member checking ensured that the researcher uses the participants' authentic voices and fills any gaps in their interviews. Peer debriefing involves a review by someone familiar with the phenomenon being researched

(Creswell & Miller, 2000). By keeping a reflective journal, I recorded any personal assumptions, individual belief systems, and subjectivities to ensure they did not hinder the observation of the phenomenon being studied.

Dependability and confirmability

Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the research findings and the degree to which research procedures are documented, thus allowing someone from outside the research to follow, audit, and critique the research process (Moon et al., 2016). To achieve confirmability, the researcher must demonstrate that the interpretation of the data is not based on their preferences and viewpoints but rather grounded in the data, which can be followed, processed, and replicated (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Moon et al., 2016). A strategy for increasing dependability is by providing a rich description of the study methods (Forero et al., 2018). For this study, I provided information regarding data collection and the reasoning for its employment within the study. Reflexivity and triangulation are strategies for increasing confirmability (Forero et al., 2018). A reflexive journal was utilized to address concerns and provide continuous reflection throughout the analysis process.

Transferability

Transferability is concerned with the extent to which the findings from a study can apply to other contexts and settings (Lemmon & Hayes et al., 2020). A qualitative study is considered transferable if the findings have meaning to individuals not involved in the study or the readers of the research who can associate the findings with their own experiences (Daniel, 2019). Qualitative researchers employ thick descriptions of real-life settings and understandings of participants to achieve transferability (Ospina et al., 2018). There is a lack of research on the proposed phenomenon of the role of positive support for formerly incarcerated African American

men who successfully reintegrated back into their communities. Providing detailed information on the participants and setting can provide data that can be transferred to other populations with similar lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

This study explored the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who credit their successful reintegration into their communities to positive social support in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. Sensitive information was provided in the study regarding self, family, community, and officials within the criminal justice system. Due to the nature of the information provided, each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their privacy. I served as a judicial member in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. Therefore, I had to ensure no incidents occur that would violate ethical or legal rules of conducting research with participants within the same city. Furthermore, participants were not identified in my former capacity as a judicial member to prevent unethical practices. To ensure the participants' lived and interpretative experiences were expressed in the findings with accuracy and relevance while adhering to ethical standards, the following measures were taken regarding researcher bias, confidentiality, informed consent, and participant protection.

Researcher bias

Researcher bias is a significant concern during qualitative research, which can stem from assumptions or expected findings. To mitigate these concerns, a reflexive journal was maintained, allowing for reflection on each decision during the research process. Member checking was then utilized to further ensure that the analysis and thematic coding decisions accurately reflected the participants' voices.

Confidentiality

Interviews were conducted online to ensure the confidentiality of participants. All electronic materials were stored on a personal laptop with password protection. All electronic applications on the laptop such as MAXQDA and Otter.ai were password protected. Participants were identified by a pseudo name during analysis and when presenting the findings of the study.

Informed Consent

Participants confirmed their participation verbally or through email. Once they provided verbal or written consent to participate in the study, a consent form with additional information was provided to them. The consent form was sent electronically through Google Forms (see Appendix B). The consent form explained the voluntary nature of the study, the purpose of the study, and informed the participants that withdrawal from the study would have no negative implications.

Participant protection

Experiences associated with incarceration and challenges during reentry can trigger negative emotions or memories. When working with human participants during research, it is important to mitigate these risks to protect the participants. The participants were informed that they could omit any questions or leave the interview at any time if the questions evoked negative feelings. Additionally, the participants were asked if they needed to talk to someone regarding the interview. All participants declined.

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic qualitative study is to explore the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who credit their successful reintegration into their communities to positive social support in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. This chapter provided a discussion on the research design, the

researcher's role within the study, participant selection, data collection procedures, and the analysis process. The chapter concluded with a discussion on the trustworthiness of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This qualitative study sought to explore the role of family support in the re-entry process and its impact on reducing recidivism among formerly incarcerated African American men in Mecklenburg County. Data for this research was collected through one-on-one interviews with ten participants who had been released from incarceration within the last five years. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and insights from the participants' experiences, including the challenges they faced, the support they received, and the strategies that contributed to their successful reintegration into society. This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the study's findings. It begins with an overview of participant recruitment and data collection methods, followed by a detailed summary of each participant's background. Next, emerging themes are discussed, using direct quotes from the participants to illustrate key findings. The chapter concludes with a summary of the results and their implications for re-entry programs and policies.

Participants

The study included interviews with ten formerly incarcerated African American men who were released from incarceration within the last five years. Participants came from various backgrounds, each facing unique challenges during their re-entry process. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. The following section provides a brief summary of each participant's history, their experience with family support, and their re-entry journey. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' descriptions and backgrounds.

Table 1*Description of the Participants*

Pseudonym	Years Incarcerated	Current Employment	Primary Support System
Brandon Carter	6 years	Certified Nursing Assistant	Mother, Grandmother
Jamal Richardson	4 years	Warehouse Worker	Family (Emotional)
David Thompson	5 years	Maintenance Technician	Parents, Siblings
Andre Watkins	8 years	HVAC Apprentice	Grandmother
Tyrone Maxwell	7 years	Construction Worker	Sister
Jerome Daniels	6 years	Logistics	Cousin
Darryl Johnson	5 years	Food Service	Uncle
Christopher Bennett	4 years	Plumbing Apprentice	Mother
Marcus Taylor	10 years	Re-Entry Program Staff	Community Organizations
Elijah Stokes	6 years	Janitorial Services	Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services

Brandon Carter

Brandon Carter was incarcerated for six years and credited his success to his mother and grandmother. The participant energetically stated that “My family was the backbone of my success after I got out. My mother and grandmother were my biggest supporters. They made sure I had everything I needed—a place to stay, clothes, food—but more than that, they provided

emotional support.” Brandon is now employed as a certified nursing assistant after his mother encouraged him to take the course and pursue a career.

Jamal Richardson

Jamal Richardson was incarcerated for four years and has since gained employment in a warehouse. Jamal explained that his family “gave me a sense of stability and motivation to stay on the right path.” The participant did not identify specific family members, but rather spoke collectively about his family’s role in his success.

David Thompson

David Thompson, a maintenance technician, was incarcerated for five years. He explained that his family was important during the reentry process. David explained that “ they told me I needed to get a job, stay away from old friends, and leave my past habits behind. They helped me get transportation so I could get to interviews and move around. They encouraged me to focus on myself, to be at home more, and to make better choices.”

Andre Watkins

Andre Watkins was incarcerated for eight years and is now an apprentice in HVAC service. Andre stated that his father was out of the picture prior to incarceration and that his mother was in no shape to help him. However, his grandmother welcomed him home and provided him with the stability he needed to succeed.

Tyrone Maxwell

Tyrone Maxwell was incarcerated for seven years and has gained employment in the construction sector. Tyrone explained that his sister was instrumental in keeping him motivated and on the right path. He noted that his mother was supportive but more hesitant. Tyrone added that his sister encouraged him to go to therapy, which has helped significantly.

Jerome Daniels

Jerome Daniels was incarcerated for six years and now works in logistics. The participant credits his success to his cousin's support. Jerome stated that he moved in with his aunt and his cousin helped him to get his identification and new clothing. Jerome said that was important "so I wouldn't be out here looking like I just walked out of prison."

Darryl Johnson

Darryl Johnson was incarcerated for five years. Darryl noted that his mother and sister were very supportive. He explained that his uncle was instrumental in keeping him busy through work. Darryl now works in food service and credits his success to both family and the re-entry services in Mecklenburg County.

Christopher Bennett

Christopher Bennett, a plumbing apprentice, was incarcerated for four years. Christopher explained that his mother ensured that he had a place to live but "set some boundaries, which honestly helped me establish structure." Christopher also noted that his sister helped him to navigate the changes such as online banking and job applications. The participant stated that this support helped to reduce the stress of getting his life back on track.

Marcus Taylor

Marcus Taylor was incarcerated for ten years and now works within the community system for re-entry services. Marcus explained that his mother passed away while he was incarcerated and other family members had moved on. He credits his successful re-entry to the Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services.

Elijah Stokes

Elijah Stokes was incarcerated for six years and is now employed in janitorial services. Although Elijah explained that his family was an important area of support, he explained that Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services was instrumental to his success. Elijah stated of the organization, “They didn’t just give me info—they actually followed up to make sure I was good.”

Results

This qualitative study sought to explore the role of family support in the re-entry process and its impact on reducing recidivism among formerly incarcerated African American men in Mecklenburg County. Formal approval was obtained from Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services to recruit participants for this study, as documented in Appendix A. The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved a recruitment flyer (Appendix B) which were utilized to contact potential participants. All ten participants met the screening criteria outlined in the IRB-approved Informed Consent Form (Appendix C). Each participant was contacted via email and provided a consent form to sign electronically via DocuSign. Once consent was obtained, the participants agreed to be video recorded for data collection purposes.

Each interview was conducted via Microsoft Teams, following the guidelines established by the Liberty University IRB. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams' automated transcription feature. After transcription, each participant was given the opportunity to review their transcript for verification and correction. This process ensured accuracy in capturing participants' lived experiences and perspectives. All participants reviewed and approved their transcripts before analysis began.

Theme development

The development of themes followed the process of first and second cycle coding. Initial codes were developed through the interviewees' own words, omitting preconceptions and assumptions. Initially, 7 themes were identified to include emotional support as a stabilizing factor, importance of housing stability, overcoming employment barriers, family influence on decision making and recidivism, family expectations and accountability, role of external support systems, and long-term impact of family support. These responses were then categorized under core. Saturation was achieved as no new themes emerged and all first cycle codes were aligned with decisions in the second cycle coding. However, MAXQDA was utilized during the final phase of reviewing and reorganizing themes, resulting in the removal of redundancies. This left the remaining 6 themes presented in Table 2. Member checking was used to confirm the code assignments and thematic analysis. No significant outliers were identified as each theme was representative by a frequency of at least four.

Table 2

Frequency of Themes

Theme	Frequency
Emotional Support as a Stabilizing Factor	8
Importance of Housing Stability	7
Overcoming Employment Barriers	9
Family Influence on Decision-Making and Recidivism	6
Role of External Support Systems	6
Long-Term Impact of Family Support	5

Thematic analysis.

Emotional support as a stabilizing factor. Emotional support played a crucial role in preventing recidivism. Many participants emphasized the importance of having a support system

that consistently encouraged them as shown in Table 3. Andre Watkins explained “My grandma kept me going. Any time I got discouraged, she’d hit me with, ‘God got a plan for you, don’t let this world tell you otherwise.’” Tyrone also noted the importance of encouragement by stating “Having someone to push me. My sister wasn’t about to let me sit around and feel sorry for myself.”

Several participants expressed that knowing they had people who believed in them helped maintain their motivation. Jamal Richardson shared, “Just knowing they were there. Even when I was locked up, they answered my calls. They made sure I never felt alone, and that mattered. And when I got out, they didn’t look at me like I was a lost cause—they still believed in me.” Similarly, Christopher Bennett noted “My family didn’t treat me like I was still the person who went to prison—they saw the person I was becoming, and that belief in me gave me confidence.”

On the other hand, Marcus, who did not have family support stated “When you got family, you got a safety net. If you fall, somebody’s there to catch you. I ain’t have that. One wrong move, and I was done. That’s why I had to be extra careful—no slip-ups, no second chances,” when asked if this made it more difficult.

Emotional support fosters resilience and self-worth, reducing the likelihood of returning to crime. Having people who believe in them helps formerly incarcerated individuals develop a positive self-image and stay on a constructive path.

Table 3

Emotional Support as a Stabilizing Factor

Participant	Interview Excerpt
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Andre Watkins	My grandma kept me going. Any time I got discouraged, she'd hit me with, 'God got a plan for you, don't let this world tell you otherwise.'
Tyrone Maxwell	Having someone to push me. My sister wasn't about to let me sit around and feel sorry for myself
Jamal Richardson	Just knowing they were there. Even when I was locked up, they answered my calls. They made sure I never felt alone, and that mattered. And when I got out, they didn't look at me like I was a lost cause—they still believed in me
Christopher Bennett	My family didn't treat me like I was still the person who went to prison—they saw the person I was becoming, and that belief in me gave me confidence
Marcus Taylor	When you got family, you got a safety net. If you fall, somebody's there to catch you. I ain't have that. One wrong move, and I was done. That's why I had to be extra careful—no slip-ups, no second chances
Brandon Carter	They kept reminding me that my past didn't define me and that I had the chance to rebuild my life. That kind of encouragement kept me grounded.

David Thomson	My family was clear from the beginning—they told me I needed to get a job, stay away from old friends, and leave my past habits behind
Darryl Johnson	Man, when I first got out, it was rough. I ain't have no money, no job, and the world moved on without me. But my moms? She let me stay with her, no questions asked. That alone saved me 'cause without that, I don't know where I'd be.

Importance of Housing Stability

Participants with stable housing had a significantly easier time reintegrating. Having a place to stay reduced stress and allowed them to focus on finding employment and building their future as highlighted in Table 4. Elijah provided unique insight into the experience of gaining housing stability:

At first, I ain't even wanna go back home. I had too much pride, like I had to figure it out on my own. But my pops, he wasn't having that. He told me straight up, *"You ain't gotta do this by yourself."* So I moved back in with him and my stepmom. They gave me a place to sleep, a fridge full of food—just took that pressure off.

This allowed him to focus on other aspects of reentry.

Andre also expressed the importance of stability:

Just knowing I had somewhere to go every night without having to look over my shoulder? That changed everything. 'Cause when you ain't got that, it's real easy to fall back into the same cycle. And she (grandmother) made sure I stayed

busy—took me to church with her, introduced me to people, kept me from just sitting around feeling lost.

Stopping this cycle through housing stability was critical for preventing recidivism.

Christopher highlighted the need for structure in the housing conditions, which was provided by his mother. He discussed this significance as follows:

When I was released, my biggest concern was where I would go and how I would rebuild my life. My mother was the first to step in—she made it clear that I had a home to return to, but with certain expectations. She wanted to see me stay on the right path, so she set some boundaries, which honestly helped me establish structure.

However, those without stable housing struggled immensely. Marcus Taylor, who lacked family support, relied on Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services for transitional housing. He stated, “I walked out of those gates with a bus ticket and whatever was left in my inmate account. No family waiting, no place to go, just me trying to figure it out.”.

Without stable housing, the risk of reoffending increases. Family-provided housing reduces stress, allowing individuals to focus on employment, skill-building, and mental health recovery.

Table 4
Importance of Housing Stability

Participant	Interview Excerpt
Elijah Stokes	At first, I ain’t even wanna go back home. I had too much pride, like I had to figure it out on my own. But my pops, he wasn’t having that. He told

	me straight up, "You ain't gotta do this by yourself." So I moved back in with him and my stepmom. They gave me a place to sleep, a fridge full of food—just took that pressure off.
Andre Watkins	Just knowing I had somewhere to go every night without having to look over my shoulder? That changed everything. 'Cause when you ain't got that, it's real easy to fall back into the same cycle. And she (grandmother) made sure I stayed busy—took me to church with her, introduced me to people, kept me from just sitting around feeling lost.
Darryl Johnson	Having somewhere to lay my head without stress—that was number one. A lot of dudes I knew went right back in 'cause they ain't have a stable spot to stay.
Christopher Bennett	When I was released, my biggest concern was where I would go and how I would rebuild my life. My mother was the first to step in—she made it clear that I had a home to return to, but with certain expectations. She wanted to see me stay on the right path, so she set some boundaries, which honestly helped me establish structure. Having a stable place to stay, without a doubt. I know a lot of people who come home and don't

	have that safety net, and they end up making desperate decisions just to survive. Knowing I had a roof over my head and food to eat took away a lot of stress and allowed me to focus on moving forward.
Marcus Taylor	I walked out of those gates with a bus ticket and whatever was left in my inmate account. No family waiting, no place to go, just me trying to figure it out
Brandon Carter	My family was the backbone of my success after I got out. My mother and grandmother were my biggest supporters. They made sure I had everything I needed—a place to stay, clothes, food
Tyrone Maxwell	My sister was the first person to step up. She told me, "You got a fresh start, but you gotta want it." She let me crash on her couch and helped me get my ID and paperwork together.

Overcoming Employment Barriers

Having instrumental support to overcome barriers to employment, which were numerous as shown in Table 5. Many participants faced discrimination due to their criminal records. David Thompson shared, “Finding stable employment was tough. I even looked into the military, but that didn’t work out either.” Christopher had a similar experience noting “Employment was the most difficult. Despite being qualified for certain positions, the moment my background check

came up, opportunities disappeared. It was discouraging, to say the least.” Jamal added a detailed description of these experiences as follows:

Employment was definitely the biggest challenge. I got interviews, but as soon as they ran my background check, everything stopped. That was frustrating because I was willing to work, but my record kept shutting doors on me. My family couldn’t fix that, but they encouraged me to keep trying and not get discouraged.

Although Jamal stated that his family was unable to help him with employment, others relied on family connections. For instance, Darryll explained that “My sister, she stayed on me about applying for jobs, and my uncle put me to work under the table so I could keep some money in my pocket.” Similarly, Jerome explained that “My cousin came through big time. He worked at a warehouse and put in a word for me. They ain’t ask too many questions, just told me to show up on time and do my job.” Brandon’s explained his mother’s encouragement helped him to gain employment. More specifically, the participant stated, “My mom encouraged me to take a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) class so I could get a certification and have a real career path” (Brandon Carter).

Participants with family assistance secured jobs faster, leading to financial independence and long-term stability. Employment not only provides income but also restores a sense of purpose and dignity.

Table 5

Employment Barriers

Participant	Interview Excerpt
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Elijah Stokes	Finding work was <i>hell</i> . I applied everywhere, but as soon as they saw that felony, it was like, " <i>Nah, we good.</i> "
Andre Watkins	And my uncle? He came through too. He used to run a moving company, and he let me ride with him. At first, I was just lifting boxes, but he taught me how to talk to customers, handle business. That gave me confidence.
Darryl Johnson	My sister, she stayed on me about applying for jobs, and my uncle put me to work under the table so I could keep some money in my pocket
Christopher Bennett	Employment was the most difficult. Despite being qualified for certain positions, the moment my background check came up, opportunities disappeared. It was discouraging, to say the least
Brandon Carter	My mom encouraged me to take a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) class so I could get a certification and have a real career path.
Tyrone Maxwell	Then there was the job hunt. Soon as they ran my background, it was a wrap. It felt like nobody wanted to give me a chance.
Jamal Richardson	Employment was definitely the biggest challenge. I got interviews, but as soon as they ran my background check, everything stopped. That was frustrating because I was willing to work, but my

	record kept shutting doors on me. My family couldn't fix that, but they encouraged me to keep trying and not get discouraged.
David Thompson	Finding stable employment was tough. I even looked into the military, but that didn't work out either.
Jerome Daniels	My cousin came through big time. He worked at a warehouse and put in a word for me. They ain't ask too many questions, just told me to show up on time and do my job

Family influence on decision-making and recidivism

Expressive support was notably influential on decision making as shown in Table 6. Several participants acknowledged that family expectations and accountability played a major role in their decision to stay out of trouble. For instance, David Thompson stated, "they told me I needed to get a job, stay away from old friends, and leave my past habits behind." Brandon Carter had similar conversations with his family, noting that "Without a doubt. It's easy to fall back into old habits when you don't have direction, but my family made sure I stayed focused. They reminded me every day that I had too much to lose by making bad choices."

Andre provided a similar account of family preventing recidivism in the following:

No doubt. I had moments where I was tempted to go back to what I knew. Fast money sound real good when you broke and hungry. But my grandma? She wasn't having it. Told me straight up, *"If you go back, I ain't coming to visit. I*

ain't writing letters. You gotta decide who you wanna be." That hit me different. I ain't wanna let her down.

Tyrone provided insight on the role of incorporating both family and community support systems for accountability and preventing recidivism. The participant provided the following honest and transparent response:

100%. I ain't gonna lie, I had moments where I thought about going back to the streets. I had days where I felt like I wasn't getting nowhere, and the fast money seemed like the only option. But my sister kept me grounded. She'd remind me, *"You worked too hard to go back. You ain't built for that life no more."* And my therapist? He helped me see I wasn't just fighting the system—I was fighting myself. That changed everything for me. (Tyrone)

Those without strong family ties were more likely to rely on community-based organizations for guidance, independently. For instance, Marcus was very open about his advice regarding community-based organizations in the following:

First, accept it for what it is. Don't waste time being mad about who ain't there—focus on who *is*. Even if that's just *you* in the beginning. Second, find a program. The streets ain't the answer, and trying to do it all alone will break you. Find people who've been through it and can guide you. And last, don't let nobody make you feel like you don't deserve a second chance. 'Cause you do.

This demonstrates the importance of support programs to prevent recidivism. However, the primary finding is that family acts as an accountability system, reinforcing positive choices and long-term goals. Knowing that their actions affect others helps individuals remain focused on success.

Table 6*Family Influence on Decision-Making and Recidivism*

Participant	Interview Excerpt
Andre Watkins	No doubt. I had moments where I was tempted to go back to what I knew. Fast money sound real good when you broke and hungry. But my grandma? She wasn't having it. Told me straight up, "If you go back, I ain't coming to visit. I ain't writing letters. You gotta decide who you wanna be." That hit me different. I ain't wanna let her down.
Brandon Carter	Without a doubt. It's easy to fall back into old habits when you don't have direction, but my family made sure I stayed focused. They reminded me every day that I had too much to lose by making bad choices
Tyrone Maxwell	100%. I ain't gonna lie, I had moments where I thought about going back to the streets. I had days where I felt like I wasn't getting nowhere, and the fast money seemed like the only option. But my sister kept me grounded. She'd remind me, "You worked too hard to go back. You ain't built for that life no more." And my therapist? He helped me see I wasn't just fighting the system—I was fighting myself. That changed everything for me.

Jamal Richardson	They were positive, but they also kept it real with me. They reminded me of why I got locked up in the first place and made sure I didn't forget the consequences of my past mistakes. Every conversation was a chance to steer me in the right direction. They'd remind me that hanging around the wrong people wouldn't end well. They didn't sugarcoat anything—they just wanted me to make better choices.
David Thompson	They told me I needed to get a job, stay away from old friends, and leave my past habits behind
Marcus Taylor	First, accept it for what it is. Don't waste time being mad about who ain't there—focus on who is. Even if that's just you in the beginning. Second, find a program. The streets ain't the answer, and trying to do it all alone will break you. Find people who've been through it and can guide you. And last, don't let nobody make you feel like you don't deserve a second chance. 'Cause you do..

Role of external support systems. External supports were significant for participants with and without family support as shown in Table 7. For participants with limited or no family support, community organizations played a crucial role. Elijah shared, “Take the help. Don't let pride mess you up. And if you don't got family, find a mentor, a program, *somebody* who can

hold you accountable. ‘Cause trying to do this on your own? It’s a setup.” Marcus Taylor added “It didn’t fix everything overnight, but it gave me a chance to breathe. They helped me find stable housing and put me in a counseling program. I had never even thought about therapy before, but I needed it. I was carrying a lot of anger, and I was ready to explode at any moment.” Even with family support, the external systems were important to Christopher who stated, “And honestly, therapy helped too. My family encouraged me to seek counseling through Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services, and that allowed me to process the anxiety and frustration I was dealing with.”

These external support systems provided resources such as job placement, counseling, and mentorship, which significantly helped individuals transition back into society. Re-entry programs fill the gap for individuals who lack family support or need support that the family cannot provide, offering stability, counseling, and employment assistance.

Table 7

External Support Systems

Participant	Interview Excerpt
Elijah Stokes	Take the help. Don’t let pride mess you up. And if you don’t got family, find a mentor, a program, <i>somebody</i> who can hold you accountable. ‘Cause trying to do this on your own? It’s a setup
Christopher Bennett	And honestly, therapy helped too. My family encouraged me to seek counseling through Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services, and that allowed me to process the anxiety and frustration I was dealing with

Tyrone Maxwell	The counseling I got through Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services helped me figure out how to handle my emotions without blowing up.
Marcus Taylor	It didn't fix everything overnight, but it gave me a chance to breathe. They helped me find stable housing and put me in a counseling program. I had never even thought about therapy before, but I needed it. I was carrying a lot of anger, and I was ready to explode at any moment

Long-term impact of family support

The long-term impact of family support was identified through the future plans these participants shared as shown in Table 8. For instance, Darryll stated that “It made me want better for myself. I got a full-time job now, and I’m looking into taking some classes. I wanna show my people that their faith in me wasn’t wasted.” Similarly, Brandon, who has earned his CNA, noted of family support, “It’s made me want to keep growing and give back. I’ve been working at the hospital for over a year now, and I’m looking into continuing my education in the medical field. I also mentor young men who are going through re-entry, just to show them that success is possible.” Jerome also credits family support as “It made me wanna build something real. Now, I’m working steady, saving money, thinking about going back to school for HVAC. My cousin told me, *“If you gon’ work, learn a trade and make some real money.”* So that’s what I’m looking into now.” Family-supported individuals are more likely to achieve long-term stability, reinforcing the importance of multi-faceted support systems.

Table 8

Long-Term Impact of Family Support

Participant	Interview Excerpt
Andre Watkins	I started thinking about consequences. Before, I ain't care—I just reacted. But now, I think like, <i>"What would Grandma say? How would my little brother feel?"</i> Having people who care about you makes you move different.
Darryl Johnson	It made me want better for myself. I got a full-time job now, and I'm looking into taking some classes. I wanna show my people that their faith in me wasn't wasted.
Brandon Carter	It's made me want to keep growing and give back. I've been working at the hospital for over a year now, and I'm looking into continuing my education in the medical field. I also mentor young men who are going through re-entry, just to show them that success is possible.
David Thompson	They'll always be my emotional support system. They're the people I turn to when I need guidance, love, or just someone to talk to. That's something I didn't always appreciate before, but now I do.
Jerome Daniels	It made me wanna build something real. Now, I'm working steady, saving money, thinking about

	going back to school for HVAC. My cousin told me, <i>"If you gon' work, learn a trade and make some real money."</i> So that's what I'm looking into now.
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Resolution to the Research Questions

1. What are the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men regarding overcoming perceived barriers to successful post incarceration in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina?

Participants shared their experiences of expressive and instrumental support in overcoming barriers to reentry. For instance, many participants discussed the mental health challenges associated with reentry. Christopher identified both family and community support as “my family encouraged me to seek counseling through Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services, and that allowed me to process the anxiety and frustration I was dealing with.” Tyrone also acknowledged this significance as “The counseling I got through Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services helped me figure out how to handle my emotions without blowing up.” Brandon stated, “My family reassured me that I wasn’t alone, that I had people who believed in me.” Jamal provided insight as to how support created a new perspective for him as “Yeah, I surrounded myself with good people—mentors, professionals—people who had knowledge and experiences that could help me grow. Seeing successful people who had been in my position made me realize I could turn things around, too.”

2. What are the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who have not reoffended regarding expressive provisions

following reentry?

Expressive support provisions were discussed as helping with mental health, motivation, and determination to not reoffend. Most participants noted positive maintenance of family support during the reentry process, with an emphasis on wanting to prove their value to the family. For instance, Darryll stated, “I wanna show my people that their faith in me wasn’t wasted.” Jamal provided a more detailed explanation as follows:

Honestly, going to jail repeatedly takes a toll on your family. After a while, they get tired of it. They start expecting you to mess up again. You lose some of the support you once had because it seems like you’re not learning. That’s why I had to show them through my actions that I was serious about changing.

While most discussed the understanding that they had to earn family trust again, Andre acknowledged “I know it’s hard to trust after being locked up, but you ain’t gotta do it alone. And if you don’t got family, find somebody—mentor, program, anybody who can guide you. ‘Cause trying to do this by yourself? That’s a setup.” In short, reestablishing trust through consistency and accountability are critical to maintaining family relationships and support during reentry.

3. What are the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who have not reoffended regarding instrumental provisions following reentry?

The participants identified support needs such as housing, employment, and reintegration into society, including technological and transportation use. Important areas of instrumental support provisions were found in both family and community organizations. For instance, David Thompson stated that family “helped me get transportation so I could get to interviews and move

around,” which provided him the support necessary to gain employment. Marcus Taylor stated that the Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services “They helped me find stable housing and put me in a counseling program.” Yet, Marcus also pointed out the importance of self-accountability by noting “I started setting small goals for myself: get a stable job, save enough for a deposit on a room, work on my mental health. It wasn’t about proving anything to anybody else. It was about proving to myself that I could do it.”

Summary

The findings from this study reinforce the critical role of family support in successful re-entry. Emotional encouragement, stable housing, employment assistance, and accountability were all linked to positive outcomes. However, not all participants had strong family support, highlighting the need for external programs to fill in these gaps. The data suggest that fostering strong family ties, in conjunction with structured re-entry programs, can significantly reduce recidivism rates and improve post-incarceration success. These findings will inform the discussion and implications presented in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men regarding family support and re-entry. Former offenders in a voluntary re-entry services program in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina were the sample population for this study. The study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the re-entry experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men and the role of family support in their successful reintegration. A hermeneutic phenomenological research design was determined as appropriate for this study because it aims to describe formerly incarcerated African American men's lived and interpretative experiences of a shared phenomenon. Ten formerly incarcerated African American males provided insight through semi-structured interviews as to their lived experiences with expressive and instrumental supports through family and external supports during reentry. Chapter Five presents a summary of the findings as well as a discussion of the findings in light of relevant literature and theory. The Chapter then provides a discussion of the implications, both methodological and practical, followed by the delimitations and limitations of the study. Finally, the Chapter concludes with recommendations for further research and a brief summary.

Summary of Findings

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the lived and interpretative experiences of African American men who were previously incarcerated but have not recidivated regarding the obstacles they faced and the role of expressive and instrumental supports in overcoming these challenges. After the first and second cycle coding and reorganization, six themes emerged from the transcripts to include emotional support as a stabilizing factor,

importance of housing stability, overcoming employment barriers, family influence on decision making and recidivism, role of external support systems, and long-term impact of family support. These themes were then aligned with the three research questions to resolve the research questions and inform recommendations for practice and further research.

The first research question aimed to understand the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men regarding overcoming perceived barriers to successful post incarceration in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina. Participants shared their experiences of expressive and instrumental support in overcoming barriers to reentry. Primary challenges that were discussed included mental health, employment, and housing. Emotional support as a stabilizing factor and the role of external support systems were closely aligned with overcoming mental health challenges. Family influence on decision making and recidivism, role of external support systems, and long-term impact of family support were aligned with employment challenges. The importance of housing stability and the role of external support systems were aligned with overcoming housing challenges.

The second research question sought to understand the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who have not reoffended regarding expressive provisions following reentry. Expressive support provisions were discussed as helping with mental health, motivation, and determination to not reoffend. Emotional support as a stabilizing factor was critical for many participants while some regarded expressive support provisions from external support systems. Family influence on decision making and recidivism as well as the long-term impact of family support were critical to overcoming barriers following incarceration.

The third research question focused on the lived and interpretative experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who have not reoffended regarding instrumental provisions following reentry. The participants identified support needs such as housing, employment, and reintegration into society, including technological and transportation use. Important areas of instrumental support provisions were found in both family and community organizations. Housing stability and assistance with overcoming employment barriers as well as external support systems and long-term influences of family support were aligned to resolve this final research question.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

Social support theory has been insufficiently utilized to examine the successful re-entry of African American men within the last five years. Although there has been extensive research to align the expressive and instrumental support provisions as a general understanding of reentry or for particular groups (Brezina & Azimi, 2018; Hill et al., 2018; Quinn et al., 2021; Pettus-Davis et al., 2018; Varga & Zaff, 2018), these applications of the theory did not highlight the significance of challenges faced by African American men who have reentered society following incarceration. Among studies that have incorporated social support theory, the provisions of support were often focused on traditional family and peers rather than extended family definitions and external support systems, which have been shown as significant for the African American community. Many programs have emphasized the role of either expressive or instrumental support provisions. However, this study looked at the whole in relation to Cullen's (1994) differentiation with expressive social support being related to an individual's emotional well-being, while instrumental social support is focused on material and financial well-being. In

light of the racial biasness in the criminal justice system and limitations of support for many formerly incarcerated African American males, it is necessary to consider, not only the whole of the support needs, but also the extent of both micro and macro support systems.

Relationship to the Literature

The purpose of this section is to discuss the study findings in relationship to the literature examined in Chapter Two. Participants in the study reported challenges with mental health, housing, and employment, in addition to transitional challenges such as transportation and technology use. Regarding mental health, the literature supported the anxiety and depressive symptoms aligned with a belief that the criminal justice system is biased, increasing the likelihood of recidivating (Bowleg et al., 2020; Cooper et al., 2020; Li, 2022; Solbakken & Wynn, 2022). The participants highlighted the importance of seeking counseling and acknowledging how these perceptions affect their mental health. Participants also expressed gratitude that their family members helped them to avoid returning to their old peer groups, which aligned with the literature stating that many African Americans return to the same neighborhoods and criminal behaviors (Billings & Schnepel, 2022; D'Amato et al., 2020).

Employment barriers were discussed significantly during the interviews, were evident in the literature reviewed. Participants repeatedly stated that their criminal record made it more difficult to gain employment. While this could be true for any former inmate, the higher rate of incarceration among African American males, along with racial bias, creates a more difficult transition into the workforce (Cohen et al., 2024; Mielitz & Marcum, 2020). Even among those employed, earnings remain low, which coincided with statements of odd jobs and working for family members discussed by the participants (Looney & Turner, 2018).

Concerns regarding housing were discussed, even among the participants who were housed immediately following release. Statements regarding what could happen without a place to live expressed their understanding of the impact of housing insecurity on recidivism. Lack of money, unemployment, and a criminal record often combine to make it seemingly insurmountable for former inmates to be accepted for housing (Evans et al., 2019; alter et al., 2020). The participants acknowledged that their outcomes might have been significantly more negative if they had not received family and external support for housing security following their release.

Implications

Throughout this study, the literature reviewed explained that African American males are more likely to be incarcerated and recidivate than their White counterparts. Additionally, it was shown through the participant responses that family support and external support systems, both expressive and instrumental, must be available upon release to overcome the barriers of mental health challenges, employment, housing, and transitional elements. However, it was also noted that, due to the financial burden of incarceration, these longer sentences often create distance between the inmate and their support systems, making the transition back into society more difficult than for those who were able to maintain close contact with their families. For these participants, accessing expressive and instrumental support provisions was critical to overcoming their challenges. However, such access is often limited to African American males due to their length of sentence and socioeconomic backgrounds. For most participants, the family was prepared to stand strong against recidivism, but it is unknown if other African American families have the knowledge and ability to provide such supports upon the release of their loved ones. Thus, the following recommendations should be considered:

- For criminal justice and prison administrators, programs should be implemented to facilitate regular communication and visits between inmates and their family members to maintain appropriate bonds without significant financial burden.
- For criminal justice and prison administrators, programs to help inmates with transitional needs such as using technology and transportation services should be incorporated prior to their release.
- For community service providers and parole officers, family members should receive support prior to and following the reentry process to prepare them to access and provide expressive and instrumental support provisions.
- For soon to be or recently release African American inmates, a toolkit should be provided to ensure access to all available services is understood and available.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher makes to limit or define the boundaries of the study. To ensure the study had relevance to the target population and to inform the role of family support on overcoming challenges during reentry, the study only include African American males over the age of 18 who had been released from prison but not recidivated. The study was also positioned within a single Metropolitan area due to accessibility. While this could limit the generalization of the study, this provided insight into the lived and interpretative experiences where equal external resources were available. Finally, the participants selected had not reoffended, which did not provide for a comparison of outcomes.

Limitations are potential weaknesses of the study that cannot be controlled. Qualitative research studies inherently are limited by the interpretation by the researcher and the self-reporting nature of the data collection methods. However, the aims of this study necessitated that

these limitations be accepted and mitigated to the greatest extent possible. The researcher utilized member checking to verify the interpretations and ensured the confidentiality of the participants to mitigate any hesitation during the interviews.

Recommendations for Future Direction

In consideration of the study findings, limitations, and the delimitations placed on the study, continued research is recommended to further reduce the disparities in the criminal justice outcomes. Firstly, the study should be repeated in other areas, both metropolitan and urban, to determine the implications of available external support sources. In this study, the researcher was aware of the services provided by the Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services, but it is unclear if these service provisions are accessible to all African Americans during reentry. Secondly, the majority of the participants positively experienced family support, while all participants noted their expressive and instrumental support needs were met. Thus, it has been concluded that these support provisions have contributed to the lack of reoffending. However, it is not known whether other African American males who have recidivated also had access to these support provisions. Thus, a similar study should be conducted to include African American males who have reoffended. Finally, the study focused on African American males, with an understanding of the disparities in representation in the criminal justice system and racial bias upon reentry. This understanding was further understood through the return to the same neighborhoods, often with lower socioeconomic status. It is not known if these support provisions are effective at points of intersection such as African American females or Caucasians who return to a lower socioeconomic status group. To further extend the importance of the policy and practice recommendations, these gaps in knowledge should be addressed with further research.

Conclusion

African American males have experienced significant negative outcomes with criminal justice encounters throughout the nation's history, including higher rates of incarceration and recidivism. While some focus has been given to the role of police bias and profiling, preventing recidivism is found in the access to support following incarceration. Thus, it is important to turn the attention on the programs and policies that can help African American men transition back into society without reoffending. Facilitating consistent family bonding during incarceration, without financial restrictions, preparing inmates for the challenges in transition, and providing expressive and instrumental support information to both releasees and their families prior to and following release can help to change the pattern of recidivism among African American males.

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Appendix A: Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services Approval



MECKLENBURG COUNTY Criminal Justice Services

January 18, 2024

Kerry L. Shipman, MPA, J.D.
Doctoral Candidate
kshipman@liberty.edu

Dear Kerry Shipman,

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Keep the family close: a phenomenological study on Family support and successful re-entry, we have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

- ☒ We will provide our participants list to Kerry L. Shipman and Kerry L. Shipman may use the list to contact our participants to invite them to participate in his research study.
- ☒ We grant permission for Kerry L. Shipman to contact Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services participants to invite them to participate in his research study.

Sincerely,

Latoshia A. Young, MS
Program Manager
Mecklenburg County Re-Entry Services
715 E.4th Street
Charlotte, NC 28202

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www.mecklenburgcountync.gov

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

Keep the family close: a phenomenological study on Family support and successful re-entry

**Are you a formerly Incarcerated African American Male?
Have you been released from jail/prison in the last 5 years?
Do you currently live in the Charlotte, NC area?
Have you received support from family and/or friends
during your re-entry process?**

If you answered yes to each of the questions listed above, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the shared lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina who have successfully reintegrated into society with the support of their families.

Participants will be asked to do the following:

- **One-on-One audio- and video-recorded Zoom Interview:** 30-45 minutes discussing re-entry experiences.

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

A consent document will be emailed to you if you meet the study criteria, before the interview.

Kerry L. Shipman, a doctoral candidate in the Helm School of Government at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

For more information to participate please contact the researcher at klshipman@liberty.edu

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Keep the family close: a phenomenological study on Family support and successful re-entry

Principal Investigator: Kerry L. Shipman, Doctoral Candidate, Helms School of Government, Liberty University

Key Information about the Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a formerly Incarcerated African American male, that has been released from jail/prison in the last 5 years, who is currently living in the Charlotte, NC area, and you must have received support from family and/or friends during your re-entry process.

Things you should know:

1. The purpose of the study is to explore the shared lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African-American men in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina who have successfully reintegrated into their communities due to positive familial support. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an audio- and videorecorded web-based video interview, utilizing video conferencing services such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, that will take 30-45 minutes, and review interview transcript to ensure accuracy, make corrections, and clarify answers.
- Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to explore the shared lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African-American men in a major metropolitan city in North Carolina who have successfully reintegrated into their communities due to positive familial support.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

2. Participate in an audio- and video-recorded web-based video interview, utilizing video conferencing services such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, that will take 30-45 minutes.
3. Review interview transcript to ensure accuracy, make corrections, and clarify answers.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the potential to provide insights into the challenges and successes experienced by formerly incarcerated African American men during their reintegration into society. By highlighting the role of family support in reducing recidivism and promoting successful re-entry, the study may inform policies and programs designed to support this population more effectively. The findings could contribute to reducing recidivism rates, promoting social justice, and improving the overall well-being of formerly incarcerated individuals, ultimately leading to safer and more inclusive communities.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?
--

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?
--

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and her faculty chair will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Electronic data will be stored on a password-locked computer and hardcopy data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all paper copies will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then deleted. Only the researcher and her faculty chair will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Kerry L. Shipman. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at klshipman@liberty.edu.

You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, **Latreace Flynt**, at lflynt@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date