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Exploring the Challenges of Reentry Among Female Former Offenders

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Walden University

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Crystal McIver

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Exploring the Challenges of Reentry Among Female Former Offenders

By

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MA, Liberty University, 2015

BS, Fayetteville State University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

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Abstract

The incarceration rate of female in the United States is growing faster than the rate of male ex-offenders. This purpose of this generic qualitative study was to understand female ex-offenders' perceptions of reentry programs. The ecological system theory was used to explore how family support, federal and state financial support, and the economic conditions of the neighborhood ex-offenders were returning to influenced their return to society. Data were collected via semistructured interviews with female ex-offenders who had completed a reentry program and had not recidivated for 1 year. The use of Yin's 5-step process for data analysis provided the following structured approach: (a) compile the data, (b) dissemble the data, (c) reassemble the data, (d) interpret the meaning of the data, and (e) conclude the data. Data were coded to develop 8 common themes: family support, support of probation and parole officer, employment, reentry programs, faith, determination, accountability, and education. The results of this study can lead to positive social change by providing human service workers with information about female ex-offenders and what is needed to assist them with returning to society. When human service workers and providers understand the challenges faced by female exoffenders they will be able to provide programs that meet the needs of the population.

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Dedication

To my mom, Constance A. Harris, your love and passion and your willingness to never give up shaped me to be the woman I am today. Your love to me and for me has been the main reason I was able to complete this dissertation. Thank you for always reminding me that I could do it.

To my family and friends, you all were there to cheer me on during the good and bad times. I especially appreciate how you all expected me to finish more and more every day. Thank you for pushing me and at times carrying me; thank you for believing in me and for understanding when I had to say “no, not this time.”

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The growth rate of female incarceration in the United States is increasing. Nationwide, the number of females incarcerated in state prisons has increased by 834% over the past 40 years (Sawyer, 2018). There are 1.3 million females currently in the criminal justice system, which is 8 times higher than in 1980 (Bronson & Carson, 2019).

With the rising number of incarcerated women, administrators in the U.S. criminal justice system have acknowledged the need for rehabilitation and offender reentry programs that address the unmet needs of female offenders. Richie (2018) discovered that women who exited prison faced numerous barriers, such as substance abuse problems, lack of access to health care, mental health issues, posttraumatic stress disorder, inadequate educational and employment services, neighborhood conditions, community resources, public policies, and a lack of resources needed to obtain housing. Rice (2017) proposed that women ex-offenders need gender-responsive reentry programming to address the challenges they face after leaving prison. Female ex-offenders face unique challenges in preventing reentry into the criminal justice system that are different from male ex-offenders.

In this study, I explored female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities. The findings from this study may contribute to positive social change by providing

information from female ex-offenders' perspectives about whether current reentry programs prepare them for successful reintegration back into their communities.

This chapter includes a background section in which I present a brief summary of literature related to reentry programs for female ex-offenders and a description of the associated gap in the literature. This chapter also includes the problem statement and a discussion of why this research is significant within the discipline. In this chapter, I also present the purpose of the research, research questions, the conceptual framework, the nature of the study, definitions, scope, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions before concluding with a chapter summary.

Background

According to Martilik (2018), female ex-offenders are different from the male offender and have their own gender-specific needs. For instance, female offenders are more likely to have been victims of trauma or abuse prior to incarceration than males (Cruver, 2017). In addition, female offenders are more likely than male offenders to have mental health and substance abuse issues (Wesely & Dewey, 2018). There are many challenges that female offenders face, and most of these challenges are different from the challenges faced by the male offender.

Policy makers and program providers must understand female ex-offenders and what prevents recidivism after being released from prison. Richie (2018) indicated that the thoughts and perspectives of female ex-offenders who have reentered their communities must be considered in reentry program design. Gender-specific reentry

programs are needed (Beall, 2018; Martilik, 2018). When policy makers and program providers understand the gender-specific needs of female ex-offenders reentering society after incarceration, the appropriate services for this population are more likely to be provided.

Problem Statement

Little is known about female offenders who are the fastest growing segment within the criminal justice system (Beall, 2018). Both female and male crime rates have increased during the 20th century; however, female incarceration rates have increased twice as fast as their male counterparts, increasing by 700% between 1980 and 2015 (Beall, 2018). The increasing number of female ex-offenders is due to many factors, including a lack of reentry programs that address the unique challenges of this population (Berry, 2019).

Female offenders face many different challenges when they return to society after serving time in prison or jail. Females who return to their communities from prison face reentry challenges, such as regaining custody of minor children and finding safe and affordable housing, family planning, rebuilding child support social networks, and securing gainful employment (Nyaminthi et al., 2017). Researchers acknowledged that existing paradigms for offenders and programs founded on male models fail to consider that females face unique reentry challenges that are different from men (Larsen, 2017; Martilik, 2018). In addition, information on effective gender-specific reentry programming is needed to better understand the population (Day, Zahn, & Tichavsky,

2015). When policy makers understand the needs of the female exoffender population, they can create or improve services that could increase the effectiveness of reentry programs for females.

Purpose

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities. There is limited research on female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities (Garcia, 2016). The results of this study may provide recommendations for social workers and policy makers to help female ex-offenders with managing successful community reintegration.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was: What are female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities?

Conceptual Framework

In this qualitative study, I explored female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities. The framework that was used to guide this study was Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological system theory (EST). According to the premise of EST, the lifelong development and functioning of an individual are influenced by four connected

environmental systems with the individual existing at the center (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Those four systems are as follows: (a) the microsystem, which consists of the individual's primary environment made up of elements, such as family, friends, school, and church; (b) the mesosystem, which involves connections between the microsystem and the individual's family, church, or school; (c) the exosystem, which is composed of interactions between two or more social settings that impact the individual, neighborhood, or governmental agencies indirectly; and (d) the macrosystem, which is made up of the individual's cultural environment, including customs, beliefs, social systems, and resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). I used the EST as a lens through which to understand how female ex-offenders' experiences with reentry programs influenced their transition back into society.

The EST has been used to understand offenders in previous studies. Hagedorn (2014) used the ecological systems model to discuss prison reentry trends to gain insight into the challenges that former offenders face. Hagedorn highlighted the importance of the macrolevel in understanding the role of the criminal justice system in improving reentry outcomes and found that reentry programs that offered mesosystem-level solutions provided more effective positive outcomes for former offenders. Hagedorn also posited that basic human needs in reentry requires further research on the microlevel. I will provide more discussion of Bronfenbrenner's EST in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

In this research study, I employed a generic qualitative design. Qualitative methods aim to answer questions about the *how*, *what*, or *why* of a phenomenon (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Qualitative methods generally aim to understand the experiences and attitudes of the participants being studied (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). A generic qualitative method approach was appropriate for this study because I was interested in the female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities.

Generic qualitative research was the most appropriate approach for this study because I have prior knowledge of the population and the research questions will allow me to gain knowledge from the participants and not be biased by my own knowledge. In addition, Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) suggested that a researcher should use a generic qualitative approach when the researcher has prior knowledge or a categorical set of preunderstandings of the population. By using the qualitative method, I was able to gather rich and meaningful data through interview questions that encourage participants to voice their opinions in their own voices (see Dar, 2018). By using qualitative interviews to gather data from the participants, I was able to gain more knowledge about the female ex-offender population.

To participate in the study, individuals had to meet the following criteria: (a) be an 18- to 45-year-old female, (b) have been previously incarcerated in a North Carolina state prison (or halfway house) for a period of 2 to 5 years, (c) be a past or current

participant in a reentry program, and (d) have not have returned to prison within 3 years of her release. I recruited and interviewed 10 participants. Data were collected using semistructured, face-to-face interviews. More information about the design and methodology of this study will be provided in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

Although female ex-offenders are the fastest growing population in the criminal justice system, little is known about their experiences in participating in reentry programs. The results from this study could provide human services personnel, policy makers, and community leaders with information about the gender-specific needs of female ex-offenders who are reentering their communities so that targeted reentry programs can be developed and implemented that meet the needs of this population. The information obtained from this study could be used to promote positive social change by presenting empirical evidence to policy makers, human services professionals, and community leaders/organizations about the need for developing new policies and programs that work to address the unique needs of female ex-offenders.

Definitions

Criminogenic needs: Risk factors, such as antisocial, risk-taking, and impulsivity tendencies, that may heighten individuals' predilection to engage in criminal activity (Valentine & Redcross, 2015).

Ex-offender: An individual who was previously incarcerated and now released (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016).

Gender-specific offender programs: Programming that addresses the risks that may have affected female offenders (Day et al., 2015).

Reentry: A set of systems and processes designed to connect ex-offenders to the community through employment training, stable housing, and information on how to get involved with community-based organizations (Hunter, Lanza, Lawlor, Dyson, & Gordon, 2016).

Assumptions

The purpose of this study was to explore female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities. Because the targeted population was female ex-offenders, one of my assumptions was that there would be female ex-offenders who had participated in reentry programs who had not returned to prison within 3 years of being released. Another assumption I made was that female ex-offenders understand what contributes to their challenges after release. Lastly, I assumed that each participant would be willing to share her story and be truthful and honest in her responses and the examples that she shared.

Scope and Delimitations

In this generic qualitative research study, I explored the experiences of female ex-offenders who did not recidivate and had participated in reentry programs. One delimitation or boundary of this study was that only female ex-offenders who did not return to prison were recruited as participants; therefore, the results do not include information from females ex-offenders who did return to prison or jail. Furthermore,

because I recruited participants only from North Carolina, the general population of female ex-offenders nationwide may not be represented appropriately by this sample. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalized or transferred to other female ex-offender populations.

Other theories were considered for use in this study. For example, I also considered using Bandura's social learning theory. Burt (2018) used Bandura's social learning theory in a qualitative study to explore the perceptions of African American, male ex-offenders regarding the impact of a reentry program on their recidivism. According to Burt, social learning theory is helpful in observing how people learn by watching others and imitating what they see. Burt used the social learning theory to explore how after the male offenders were released from prison, they were able to learn about different resources to help them be self-sufficient. Burt found the male offenders had positive experiences after incarceration by learning from others and by using learned resources. Although authors such as Akers and Jennings (2015) suggested social learning theory is one of the core general theories of the criminal justice field, I used the EST, with a focus on the microsystem. I used this theory to further explore how female ex-offenders use components of the microsystems to increase their chances of not returning to jail or prison.

Limitations

There were several limitations within this study. According to LeFevre (2019), the researcher's bias could be a limitation of a qualitative study. I used a generic qualitative

research method to explore female ex-offenders' experiences with reentry programs. The limitation of a traditional qualitative method is that it only allows the researcher to explore participants' perceptions or experiences related to one phenomenon (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Because I wanted to understand the females' perceptions and experiences during reentry, I did not choose a traditional qualitative method design, such as ethnography, case study, grounded theory, or phenomenology. I used a generic qualitative method because my focus was outward on the content of the female ex-offender, their opinions on their actual world experiences, and the thoughtful descriptions of and reflections on their reentry experience.

As a human services professional, I have had opportunities to work with female ex-offenders; therefore, researcher bias was a limitation in this study. My preconceived ideas about this population came from teaching employability skills to a group of people at a community college. Some of the students were ex-offenders; however, the female students who were in that class did not participate in this study. During data collection, I used bracketing to mitigate the effects of my preconceptions. Bracketing entails researchers setting aside preconceived ideas about the topic and acting nonjudgmentally (Sorsa, Kiikkala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). Bracketing is a method used in qualitative research to decrease the preconceptions that may affect the research process. Additionally, my biases were acknowledged and eliminated by keeping a journal of my personal beliefs and ideas throughout the study. Lastly, there was a possibility that participants would not be willing or able to clearly communicate their experiences. There

was also a chance that participants may not have felt comfortable talking to a stranger about personal sensitive issues. I attempted to make the participants feel comfortable when they shared their experiences by selecting a safe environment and by explaining their rights to withdraw from the study at any time.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an introduction to the study. This chapter also included a description of the problem addressed by this study and the relevancy and significance of the study. Finally, I discussed how the theory relates to the study and presented the research questions, definitions, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study.

In Chapter 2, I will present the literature search strategy used. Chapter 2 will also provide a review of the literature identified about female ex-offenders and that addresses the theoretical framework chosen for this study. In Chapter 2, there will also be a discussion of transitional programs and the gap in the literature that supports the need for this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Female offenders are the fastest growing segment within the criminal justice system (Beall, 2018). Both female and male crime rates have increased during the 20th century; however, female incarceration rates have increased twice as fast as their male counterparts, increasing by 700% between 1980 and 2015 (Beall, 2018). In the first year after release, 35% of female prisoners were rearrested and 14% females paroled returned to jail because they failed to meet parole requirements (Alper, Durose, & Markman, 2018). Female offenders face many different challenges when they return to society after serving time in prison or jail.

Females who return to their communities from prison face reentry challenges, including regaining custody of minor children, finding safe and affordable housing, family planning, rebuilding child-support social networks, and securing gainful employment (Nyaminthi et al., 2017). Researchers acknowledged that existing paradigms for offenders and programs founded on male models fail to consider that female ex-offenders face unique reentry challenges that are different from men (Larsen, 2017; Martilik, 2018). According to Wesely and Dewey (2018), information about female ex-offenders and their experiences with reentry programs is needed as well as information on effective gender-specific reentry programming. When policy makers understand the needs of the female exoffender population, they can create or improve services that could increase the effectiveness of reentry programs for females.

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities. Inquiry regarding the needs of female ex-offenders' treatment and reentry success is necessary so that professionals can better understand how to serve the female ex-offender population (Cale et al., 2019). There is limited research on female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities (Garcia, 2016). The results of this study may provide information for social workers and policy makers to use to help female ex-offenders with managing successful community reintegration.

In Chapter 2, I describe current literature. The chapter includes a review of literature that addresses the theoretical framework and methodology of the study. In Chapter 2, I discuss the gap in the literature and programs that are available for female exoffenders.

Literature Research Strategy

The literature search conducted for this study was mainly limited to research articles published within the last 5 years; however, I did use a few articles that were published more than 5 years ago because these articles provided relevant information to the history of my theory and research topic. I searched for literature for this study through the following databases and search engines: PsycINFO, EBSCO Host, Criminal Justice Periodicals, SocINDEX, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Sage. The following keyword search terms were used : *law enforcement, women, gender differences, incarcerated*

parents, prosocial networks, gendered pathways, female offenders, marginalization, criminal justice, reentry, employment, unemployment, ex-offenders, jobs, recidivism, exoffender, programs, barriers, disorder, mental health, behavioral health, community, probation, and parole. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2019 were the focus of my searches. I also obtained data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice website.

Theoretical Foundation

The EST, also referred to as the ecological model, was used to guide this study. I used EST as a lens through which to understand how factors in offenders' experiences after attending a reentry program influenced their transition back into society. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the EST is used to examine human development. In the EST, Bronfenbrenner suggested that life is affected by several social interactions throughout the ecological system. The EST was the most appropriate theoretical framework to use to explore how family support, federal and state financial support, and the economic conditions of the neighborhood ex-offenders are returning to influenced their return to society. I used the four systems of the EST (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) to explore how female ex-offenders' used reentry programs to reintegrate back into society.

Microsystem

At the microsystem level, individuals are studied in their immediate environment, such as neighborhood, church, family, work, and other areas that are considered

immediate connections for the individual (Bronfenbrenner 1977), In the microsystem level, female ex-offenders' interpersonal relationships are affected; for those in the reentry period, the microsystem level would include family, friends, and coworkers (Soto-Nevarez, 2018). Furthermore, lack of community resources, limited family support, or inadequate preparation of reintegration may add to female ex-offenders' challenges to reintegrate back into society (Valera, Brotzman, Wilson, & Reid, 2017). I focused on the female ex-offenders' microsystem to determine how they used social support while reintegrating after prison.

Female ex-offenders have more stressed relationships and more struggles with family than male ex-offenders (Beall, 2018). Supportive family and friends can offer hope and encouragement to those incarcerated (LeFevre, 2019). When programs, such as reentry programs, are provided in or near neighborhoods where ex-offenders live, ex-offenders are more likely to attend the program because it is geographically close to them (Valera et al., 2017). Most offenders face challenges attending required programming due to lack of transportation to and from programs (Yelderian, West, & Miller, 2018). Within the microsystem level, I explored how local reentry programs, or the lack of local reentry programs, play a part in female ex-offender reintegration back into society.

One of the critical challenges for ex-offenders is where to live. Success after prison often depends upon the neighborhood in which an ex-offender is released to; with whom he or she will live; and whether he or she will secure safe, secure, and affordable housing (Lutze & Lau, 2017). Neighborhoods are linked to the reintegration success of an

ex-offender (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015). On the microsystem level, the female ex-offenders' family support, social support, and communities and neighborhoods are important to examine because they are factors in the success of reentry.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem structure level includes how interpersonal relationships affect the success (Bronfenbrenner 1977). For the ex-offender, this might include a support group or therapy group. Female ex-offenders are more likely to attend treatment and reentry programs if childcare is provided (Soto-Nevarez, 2018). Mesosystems are the connections and links across microsystems that explain how school, church, work, and home life influence development for ex-offenders (Patten, La Rue, Caudill, Thomas, & Messer, 2018). When individuals come together in these systems to work towards the same goal, the offender has the support needed to either continue coming to reentry programs or meet other requirements set by the program.

Programs requirements, such as attending drug treatment classes or attending a vocational training skill builder for employment, are examples of the mesosystem working for ex-offenders. Other examples of the mesosystem working for ex-offenders is when offenders are sentenced to different types of services that structure social skills for the ex-offender. Patten et al. (2018) used premises of EST to capture perceptions of ex-offenders who had to have home visits from their probation officers. Patten et al. suggested that the home visits by probation officers, (PO) allowed the participants to feel supported and the officials to gain respect for the offender. Probation and parole officers

may serve as sources of social support for such women (Holmstrom, Adams, Morash, Smith, & Cobbina, 2017). Female ex-offenders who are able to work with multiple programs and have the help of family members and friends are able to network in society and reestablish their lives.

Exosystem

Exosystems include factors that influence an individual's development indirectly (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem refers to one or more settings that do not involve developing the person but affect or are affected by what happens in the setting containing the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem and it includes transportation, neighborhood, media, and other such nongovernmental organizations (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The exosystem is the layer where individuals are not directly involved but are affected by the settings that would include local politics and community-based resources. At the exosystem level, policy makers could prevent leasing agencies from renting housing to ex-offenders (Soto-Nevarez, 2018). One way that female ex-offenders are affected at the exosystem level is housing; however, other policies that affect female ex-offenders are also created at the exosystem level.

Macrosystem

Laws and systems are currently in place that prevent ex-offenders from successfully obtaining basic needs, like employment and housing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The macrosystem level is used to address the relationship between an individual

and “the system,” or how an individual is impacted by public policies, state or federal laws, culture, economic systems, and social conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The macrosystem refers to the cultural context that includes the broader culture, subculture, societal views, societal belief systems, cultural norms, policies, and laws that directly impact an individual (Brown, Howard, & Grek, 2018). The macrosystem consists of values and cultures that affect other settings for ex-offenders, such as employment and housing policies, within the micro-, meso-, and exosystems.

Literature Review

Female ex-offenders have different needs than male ex-offenders, particularly with regard to their different psychological and emotional needs. The experiences of female offenders are often misunderstood when applied to reentry programs (Holmstrom et al., 2017). Even with the efforts of correctional systems, there are many shortcomings of the system that have an impact on female ex-offenders (Brown, 2018). More research is necessary to better understand the needs of female offenders and how current reentry programs do not meet their needs (Vigesaa, Bergseth, & Richardson Jens, 2016). Reentry programs play a part in the process of reducing recidivism and preparing offenders for reentry to the community (Routh & Hamiltons, 2015). Female ex-offenders have unique needs that should be further explored to understand the population.

Little is known about how female ex-offenders feel about the reentry programs that they attend. According to Green et al. (2015), scholars lack knowledge related to female ex-offender reentry needs. Few studies exist on female ex-offenders and reentry

programs (Belknap et al., 2016). Although researchers have demonstrated that the needs of male and female offenders differ, correctional systems continue to use risk assessment tools developed for men to assess and treat female offenders (Brown, 2018). Female and male ex-offenders have different needs after being released from prison; consequently, for reentry programs to be effective for female offenders, more information is needed about what a female ex-offender needs to successfully reintegrate into society.

Scholars will continue to struggle to understand female ex-offender reentry programs needs until more is understood about their reintegration needs. Burden (2019) explored how reentry programs address the challenges faced by ex-offenders as they reintegrate into society, arguing that female offenders face issues different from men and that criminal justice professionals are not prepared or unable to effectively address the female offenders' needs. Female ex-offenders face a multitude of challenges that are not usually faced by male ex-offenders (Larsen 2017). Both female and male ex-offenders face challenges to reintegration that include mental health issues, addictions, lack of education, parenting skills, vocational preparation, and history of violence; however, females suffer from these issues at significantly higher rates than men (Wesely & Dewey, 2018). Female ex-offenders also experience more shame because of their criminal behaviors than the male ex-offenders, adding to their risk to reoffend (Valera et al., 2017).

Some female ex-offenders have suffered more trauma prior, during, and after prison than the male ex-offender, and they require healthy relationships with family and

social connections while going through the process of reentering society. According to Burden (2019), the most critical part of reentry for female ex-offenders is reconnection with their families. Brown (2018) also found that family reunification was critical for female ex-offenders. Burden found that family connections are a common criminological risk factor for female offenders. Female ex-offenders have challenges in areas that men ex-offenders may not be affected, such as providing for their children. Female ex-offenders are more likely than male ex-offenders to take care of their children after prison or jail (Ward, 2017). After being released from jail or prison, female ex-offenders who are mothers are challenged with continued parental duties (Brown, 2018). Female ex-offenders who are mothers are expected to care for their children after incarceration and are not usually offered family reunification assistance, such as childcare support or parenting strategy training (Thompson, Lutfy, Derkzen, & Bertrand, 2015). Female ex-offenders face challenges such as reunification with children and parental responsibilities.

Most female offenders follow a pathway from childhood trauma to the criminal justice system. According to Smith (2017), female offenders follow a path that includes childhood victimization and drug use, which eventually leads to the criminal justice system. Correctional interventions for female offenders require different strategies because the female pathway to crime is not the same as the pathway of a male offender (Gobeil, Blanchette, & Stewart, 2016). Female offenders and male offenders do not follow the same pathways to crime; therefore, the correctional interventions strategies for them should be different.

Policy makers and program providers can create programs that meet the unique needs of female ex-offenders once they have a clear understanding of what success means for female ex-offenders. According to Heidemann, Cederbaum, and Martinez (2016), it is critical to gain a better understanding of what success means to the female ex-offenders. Heidemann et al. suggested that avoiding recidivism is one aspect of success for female ex-offenders and some considered avoiding recidivism and living in society and not returning to prison as one aspect of success. According to Heidemann et al., other successful aspects shared by the females are being able to help family members; having their own place to live; and persevering through challenges, such as substance abuse, mental illness, trauma, and violence. Similarly, Nyamathi et al. (2016) suggested that successful reentry requires a reorientation of self. Larsen (2017) highlighted success stories of even female ex-offenders who participated in Exodus Ministries, a private, Christian-based, substance abuse treatment and reentry support program. Larsen suggested programs for the female offender that provided skill development effective parenting, strategies for coping with life changes, resources development, and how to transform identity aided in the success of the female ex-offenders. There are diverse ideas define a successful female ex-offender reentry programs

The mission of reentry programs is to address the needs of ex-offenders to make their transition back into mainstream society a success. Ex-offenders who leave jail and prison face challenges that make building stable lives and avoiding criminal activity difficult for them (Doleac, 2019). Reentry programs offered to offenders returning to

society are designed to assist ex-offenders work through transitions (Cohen, 2017; Hall, 2015). Reentry programs are offered to offenders who are returning to society to assist them with transition (Cohen 2017; Hall, 2015). Routh and Hamilton (2015) found that when offenders participated in work release programs, they were more successful at reentry into the community. Female ex-offenders could benefit from reentry programs that provide services that are specific to the female ex-offender.

Reentry Programs

Reentry programs are offered to ex-offenders by agencies and nonprofit organizations and are developed to improve or assist ex-offenders with reintegration outcomes. Reentry programs are intensive and often last up to 6 months; programs can start during incarceration but occur primarily in the community (Mizel & Abrams, 2019). Reentry programs that meet the challenges ex-offenders face can help them transition efficiently and remain in society (Burden, 2019). Productive reentry programs reduce the chance for an ex-offender to return to prison (Hopkins, 2017). It is important to create effective reentry programs because reentry programs help ex-offenders gain skills to reconnect with society and decrease the chance of going back to prison or jail.

When effective programs are developed for ex-offenders, criminal behaviors can be redirected to effect positive change for the ex-offender. Criminal behaviors can change with help. Congress passed the Second Chance Act, which established grant funding for programs to improve reentry services (Burden, 2019). The Second Chance Act granted provides funding to states that are approved to help develop and implement reentry

programs in communities (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2015). Policymakers are aware that effective reentry programs can make positive changes, so they provided grant funding to increase implementation of programming.

Reentry programs are developed to meet the needs of the ex-offender by helping to find solutions to challenges and to remain productive members of society. Understanding barriers to reintegration after incarceration is a crucial component of successful reentry programs (Burden, 2019). The increasing number of female ex-offenders is due to several factors, including a lack of reentry programming to teach them to reform and learn from their prior actions (Berry, 2019). With knowledge of effective strategies, reentry program administrators can develop offerings that will prevent female ex-offenders from recidivating.

By having current information about what processes work for ex-offenders, providers such as human case workers can create reentry programs that help ex-offenders increase their skill set and navigate life after incarceration. Successful reentry for ex-offenders is a challenge for social workers, scholars, and policy makers (Hlavka, Wheelock, & Jones, 2015), and they need more information about effective reentry strategies. Hlavka et al. (2015) found that ex-offenders face a range of challenges to reentry, such as finding stable housing, employment in poor economic conditions, and substance abuse treatment. James (2015) also found that offenders' ability to reintegrate successfully is hindered by numerous obstacles, such as difficulty in obtaining employment, finding housing, and obtaining higher education. Ex-offenders also face

challenges such as limited education, limited work experience, high rates of mental illness emotional trauma, and high rates of substance abuse (Doleac, 2016, 2018). Ex-offenders face different challenges reintegrating back into society, and successful reentry programs will depend on meeting these unique challenges.

Employment

Upon release from prison or jail, ex-offenders are challenged with finding employment because of their criminal records. Many ex-offenders experience unsuccessful attempts at securing suitable employment, and many of them never become gainfully employed, due to their criminal history (Cantora, 2015; Routh & Hamilton, 2015). Those who have a history of criminal activities and drug addiction are considered by many employers and companies to be dangerous and unproductive members of society (Lutman, Lynch, & Monk-Turner, 2015). Because ex-offenders have a criminal history, it is challenging for them to find employment.

Ex-offenders seek employment so that they can pay required restitution fees, live successfully in society, and avoid return to prison or jail. Snodgrass, Jenkins, and Tate (2017) suggested that an ex-offender who finds a job is less likely to reoffend. Oliver (2017) found that unemployment could negatively affect offenders' health, confidence, and sense of self, thus increasing the likelihood that they will reoffend. Employment for ex-offenders could mean that the ex-offender will not return to prison, but also it could be a source of increased self-esteem and enhanced health for the ex-offender.

Policy makers are aware of some challenges that offenders face while looking for employment. More than 150 cities and counties and 35 states across the United States have adopted Ban the Box (BTB) legislation (Avery, 2019). BTB restricts prospective employers from asking job applicants about their criminal history record (Avery, 2019). BTB ensures that ex-offenders are not rejected at the application phase of employment (Rose, 2017). BTB aims at removing the check box that asks applicants about their criminal history, which encourages employers to assess the qualifications of the individual and not focus on the criminal history.

Researchers have found that when ex-offenders participate in employment reentry programs, they have a chance of employment. Ex-offenders face challenges obtaining employment. Duwe and Clark (2017) examined the predictors of post release employment outcomes for 15,111 prisoners released from Minnesota prisons between 2007 and 2010 and found that the number of interventions that prisoners participated in improved their chances of finding employment. In addition, Rotem and Irit (2017) showed a connection between lack of employment and involvement in crime. Ex-offenders who are employed are less likely to be involved in further criminal activities than those who are unemployed.

Programs that assist ex-offenders in reconnecting to community must include skills to allow for growth in the offenders' life geared to increase their knowledge of how to navigate systems in society. Shivy, Guion, Green, and Wingate (2019) evaluated the career-related needs of female ex-offenders in reentry by looking at the 13-week INTUIT

program, a career-related intervention for female offenders in reentry. INTUIT participants focused on how to communicate effectively, and they learned how to complete job applications and role-played responses to difficult interview questions and “on-the-job” scenarios, including how to respond to discrimination responses (Shivy et al., 2019). The program included (a) working with female offenders who had limited exposure to the legitimate labor force, (b) helping them to explore the stigma of incarceration, and (c) addressing the issue of a felony conviction during workforce reentry. Shivy et al. indicated that offenders did not understand their rights and lacked skills sets for employment and education opportunities. Hall (2015) also found that barriers in obtaining employment after incarceration are due to a lack of education or skills. Programs that assist ex-offenders in navigating the workforce for employment help ex-offenders gain educational skill and training that could address the challenges that decrease employment opportunities.

Probation and Parole

Probation and parole are required service programs that provide social support and guidelines for ex-offenders. Ex-offenders under community supervision after incarceration are most commonly on parole or probation (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). Probation and parole officers (POs) may serve as sources of social support, thus decreasing both recidivism and relapse to substance use (Holmstrom et al., 2017). Offenders sentenced to probation after being released from prison are expected to conform to requirements, such as paying fines; securing approved housing; and attending

substance treatment, educational, and job preparation programs (Morash, Kashy, Smith, & Cobbina, 2019). Probation and parole programs are used to provide ex-offenders with supportive guidelines and requirements.

Offenders who are drug users use the support from their POs to help them return successfully to society. Most female ex-offenders who have drug convictions face unique barriers to reentry (Anderson, Nava, & Cortez, 2018). Morash, Smith, and Cobbina (2017) conducted a study of 284 female offenders who recalled supportive messages from their POs regarding substance use avoidance and found that informational support is most likely to be provided by POs, whereas tangible and network support were reported infrequently. In another study, Wilfong (2018) examined the effect that substance treatment services have on females on probation and found that when parole and probation work together with substance abuse treatment programs, ex-offenders are more successful with staying sober. Morash et al. (2019) explored the effects of punitive or treatment responses by POs to 385 women on probation and parole and revealed that regardless of the females' high or low risk for recidivism, the number of treatment responses to drug-related technical violations was unrelated to recidivism. Probation and parole programs assist ex-offenders once they are released from prison or jail to overcome challenges such as substance abuse to fulfill requirements from the justice system.

Parole and probation help ex-offenders develop social connections and skills to reintegrate into the community. Pennsylvania's Board of Probation & Parole (PBPP)

made progress related to helping ex-offender reintegration back into society, including developing an offender reentry program (Zortman et al., 2016). Zortman et al. (2016) examined findings gathered from 261 surveys and 226 interviews from participants of the program and revealed improvement among the ex-offender in the following areas: attitudes, behaviors for illicit substance use, and antisocial associations. Most of the participants increased their independence by moving out of the homes of their family members and into their own homes (Zortman et al., 2016). When participants had a respect for reentry program staff, their chance of completing the program increased (Zortman et al., 2016). Scott, Dennis, and Lurigio (2017) found that the females who received treatment were significantly more likely to abstain from alcohol or other drug use than those who received none. James (2015) found that successful reentry is a difficult goal for most ex-offenders but added that substance abuse and mental health treatment are identified as critical keys to successful reentry. Mental health and substance abuse treatment are both essential programs for ex-offenders who are addicted to drugs and who suffer from mental health challenges.

Mental Health Care and Substance Challenges

Female ex-offenders with mental health and substance addictions need more complex services than men ex-offenders to ensure successful reentry into society. Female ex-offender with cooccurring mental health and substance disorders face complex challenges to abstain from alcohol or other drug use when they reenter their communities (Johnson, 2015). Amongst female offenders, drug and alcohol abuse rates are high,

surpassing the rates of their male counterparts (Nicholls, Cruise, Grieg, & Hinz, 2015).

Wu and Ming-Chi (2019) also found that the manifestations of recovery involving females are different from men, particularly related to mental and physical health risks. Female ex-offenders have higher rates of drug use and mental health problems than male ex-offenders.

There are mixed findings about ex-offenders using programs that focus on healthcare and who use counseling services to reduce recidivism. Duwe and Clark (2017) found that a collaboration between healthcare and counseling services for ex-offenders, with physical or mental health challenges or substance dependency to be beneficial in reducing recidivism rates. Gunnison and Helfgott (2017) found that ex-offenders need assistance in navigating services to help with the hindrances they encounter in substance abuse and mental health treatment during the reentry process. Ex-offenders who are dependent on substance and those who have mental health challenges have unique needs with navigating services to increase successful reintegration back into society.

Females in the criminal justice system often may have endured childhood trauma, and in many cases, their drug use causes them to make choices that lead them to incarceration. In addition, incarcerated females are more likely than male ex-offenders to experience illnesses related to substance abuse (Oser, Bunting, Pullen, & Stevens-Watkins, 2016). Female substance users have suffered from traumatic experiences such as dysfunctional family, sexual abuse, and domestic violence in their early childhood more than male substance users (Wu & Ming-Chi, 2019). Luckey (2016) established the

importance of effective reentry plans for ex-offenders to increase their chances of accessing mental health or substance abuse treatment. Luckey found the following themes: barriers to access and adherence to mental health or substance abuse treatment, having positive experiences with providers and adhering to treatment postrelease, impact of a positive support system during the reentry process, and the impact that stigmatization has on the treatment decision-making process. Female ex-offenders face many traumas prior to incarceration that increase their mental health needs; when these barriers to services are not addressed, effective reentry is challenging for this population.

Education Challenges

When female ex-offenders return home after incarceration, some of them lack the education or training to obtain employment. Job readiness and educational preparation are essential for ex-offenders to be productive in society (Burden, 2016). Snodgrass et al. (2017) found that individuals who are involved in criminal activities often lack the necessary skills or education to take advantage of employment opportunities. According to Lutman et al. (2015), 70% of ex-offenders are high school dropouts. Alós, Esteban, Jódar, and Miguélez (2015) also found that ex-offenders with high levels of education tend to have more skilled jobs and performed better in employment. Education is an essential tool for ex-offenders and is needed to obtain employment.

If ex-offenders are able to gain training in specific areas and learn a skill, they increase their chances of being employed. When ex-offenders participate in education training, employers are more likely to hire them (South, Bagnall, & Woodall, 2017). Hall

(2015) explored the relationship between correctional education and recidivism and concluded that correctional education reduced recidivism and linked to gainful employment. Hall argued that education is a significant component to rehabilitation for ex-offenders. Ex-offenders who increase their skills by gaining a trade and a degree decrease their chances of returning to incarceration.

Qualitative Studies Related to Topic

In a qualitative study, Martilik (2018) used semistructured interviews with eight women who were formerly incarcerated to explore the perceptions of these women who reintegrated successfully into their communities. Each of the women served 9 months in prison and had no arrest up to 3 years after being released. Martilik looked at their experiences before, during, and after incarceration. The main theme and recommendation that emerged from this study was the need for the implementation of gender-specific programs and services for incarcerated and newly released women. Although the females had different life experiences and opinions, Martilik shared that participants were consistent in their perceptions of what it takes for a female ex-offender to be successful after release from incarceration. According to Martilik, for female ex-offender to be successful when they reenter the community after incarceration, reentry services are needed that serve them and their children, such as family support and parenting classes and space where women and men are separate and not together for treatment.

Brown (2018) conducted a qualitative study to better understand the experiences of reintegration for female offenders as told by five female ex-offenders. Brown explored

the women's experiences during and after incarceration, challenges with facilitators, barriers to successful reintegration, and resilience. All of the women from the study received services from the Elizabeth Fry Society of Saskatchewan and shared different challenges due to many factors such as lack of relevant programming, mental health support, family reunification matters such as, custody of their children, restoring relationships, and or parenting strategies. Brown suggested providing female ex-offenders with information about connections to community resources to assist with securing employment, finding housing, and overcoming mental health and addictions prior to leaving prison or jail. Brown suggested various services, such as one-on-one services, child advocacy, and concrete release planning, which may lead to improved support for female offenders during and after incarceration.

Larsen (2017) conducted a qualitative study to explore female ex-offenders' successful reentry into their communities. Larsen found that success, rather than failure, to be a gap in reentry literature. Larsen interviewed seven female ex-offenders who attended Exodus Ministries reentry program. The females shared that successful reentry meant motherhood, setting and achieving goals, maintaining sobriety, being stable in work and personal life, and relying on God. According to Larsen, all of the females agreed that reentry programs such as Exodus Ministries provided a supportive network of females with similar life situations, gave them a sense of security and safety, and encouraged spiritual growth; these programs factors were the reasons for their successful reconnecting back to their communities. Larsen indicated that reentry programs that

provided preparation for life events as motherhood, religion, fundamental life changes, identity transformation, and the effective use of available resources are an essential part of successful reentry into the community upon release from incarceration.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I provided a review of the literature about the challenges faced by ex-offenders as they reconnect back into society. The purpose of the literature review was to summarize research that will be needed to determine the needs of ex-offenders. I examined research around the topic of male and female ex-offenders and focused on the female population.

Female offenders are more likely to have suffered domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and to have a higher rate of mental illness and reported higher incidences of drug use than their male counterparts (Carson, 2015). Stanley (2016) also found that female ex-offender experience many factors such as history of sexual and physical abuse, substance abuse and mental illness, and economic disadvantage, which may lead to incarceration and challenging reentry. Female ex-offender face different and unique challenges from male ex-offenders and have been found to experience more disadvantages than the male ex-offender.

Reintegration for female ex-offenders is currently a focus of the criminal justice system, as well as health care and social services providers. Efforts that reduce recidivism, especially for females, are essential (Stanley, 2016). Failure to understand the needs of female ex-offenders may result in increased recidivism among females who are

unable to connect to supportive community services. Reentry programs are used to address barriers to reentry by providing targeted services such as educational tools, job training, and a resource support system.

In the literature review I provided information about factors that affect females who are involved with the criminal justice system. Finally, I provided information on the EST and how it will be used to identify challenges faced by ex-offenders when they are released from prison or jail. Chapter 3 will include the research design and methodology used to guide and the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities. Inquiry regarding the needs of female ex-offenders' treatment and reentry experience is necessary so that professionals can better understand how to serve the female ex-offender population (Cale et al., 2019). There is limited research on female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities (Garcia, 2016). The results of this study may provide recommendations for social workers and policy makers to help female ex-offenders with managing successful community reintegration.

In this chapter, I provide information on the research design and the rationale behind that choice. Information about the role of the researcher, the procedures used for participant recruitment, instruments for data collection, plan for data collection and analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures is also provided.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was the following: What are female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities?

Research Design and Rationale

Because I wanted to understand the experience of the female ex-offenders, I selected a qualitative research approach. Qualitative researchers seek to understand the opinion of the participant by giving the participants the chance to express their experiences (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained that a qualitative research approach focuses on exploring the experiences of a particular group of individuals. By using qualitative method, I was able to focus on the quality of experiences of the females.

I did not choose a quantitative method or mixed methods for this study because I wanted to explore the experience of the phenomenon and to learn from the individuals. Quantitative research is used to quantify the problem by generating numerical data and is more structured than qualitative methods (Almalki, 2016). Mixed methods refer to an approach that mixes quantitative and qualitative data within a single investigation of inquiry (Almalki, 2016). Neither the quantitative approach nor mixed methods would be appropriate for this study because they both focus on numerical data, and in this study I wanted to understand the perceptions of the female ex-offenders.

Because I wanted to explore the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and the reflections of the experiences of female ex-offenders, I chose a generic design for this study. Basic qualitative designs focus on drawing meaning from the experiences and opinions of participants (Almalki, 2016). A basic qualitative design was not used for this research study because it would have limited me to using one method. I was interested in

exploring the female ex-offenders' experiences and did not want to be limited to one method approach; a generic qualitative approach allowed me more flexibility in attempting to understand what attributed to the female ex-offenders' reintegration success. I chose a generic qualitative research because my focus was on the opinions, the real-world experiences, and the descriptions and reflections of the female ex-offenders related to reentry programs.

I also considered other qualitative research designs for this study. A phenomenological design is used to examine social experiences through the descriptions provided by the participants (Van Wyk & Taole, 2015). This design would have limited the study because phenomenological designs are used to describe the lived experiences of the participants. I wanted to understand the female ex-offenders' perceptions and experiences during reentry, so I did not choose a phenomenological design, which would limited the study to only lived experiences. I also considered a narrative design. Scholars use the narrative design to increase the understanding of issues related to teaching and learning through the telling and retelling of participants' stories (Van Wyk & Taole, 2015). I chose not to use the narrative design because it would have limited me to only exploring the life stories of participants. I chose a generic qualitative design because it allowed me to look at all aspects of the female ex-offenders' experiences during reentry.

Role of Researcher

There are layers of responsibility involved when taking on the role of researcher. The qualitative researcher is the main instrument of the research (Newham & Terry,

2017). As the researcher, I was responsible for collecting data from the group of participants recruited for this study. Researchers are called upon to be objective, impartial, and explicit about their participants (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). As the researcher, I was impartial as I collected data and used semistructured interview questions to gather data from each participant to gain an understanding of their experiences by analyzing the meaning of their words through coding their responses.

In my professional experience as a life and emotion coach for over 20 years, I have coached female and male ex-offenders. My preconceived ideas about this topic include the following: (a) there are many unknown factors about female ex-offenders and (b) female ex-offenders have emotional challenges different from male ex-offenders. The participants for the study were not individuals that I have coached. As the researcher, I developed a strategy to mitigate any potential bias to ensure the validity of the study. Scholars can use reflexivity, reflection, journaling, or bracketing to improve the quality and validity of their results (Vicary, Young, & Hicks, 2017). To mitigate bias, I remained focused and nonjudgmental and made an effort to build trust with the participants (see Sorsa et al., 2015). I used bracketing to limit the effects of using my own perspectives during data collection. Procedures to mitigate bias in qualitative traditions include the use of bracketing where researchers set aside ideas that might interfere with or inappropriately guide data collection (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017). I also managed my biases by being aware of them and using reflective journaling to help identify my assumptions and the ways they might influence the data.

I provided each participant with a \$5.00 Visa gift card to thank them for participating in the study. Per Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) policy, a token gift can be provided to the participants as a “thank you” in appreciation for participating in a study. As the researcher, I explained that participation in the study was voluntary and that the participant could opt out at any time during the research process. I followed Walden’s guidelines for any other ethical challenges or concerns for this study.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The participants for this study were female ex-offenders 18 years old or older with a felony background who had completed at least 1 year of a prison sentence and attended a reentry program. The participants must not have returned to prison within 3 years of being released. I recruited participants who met these criteria because this group was knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon being studied.

The sampling strategies used for this study were purposeful and snowball sampling. I used purposeful sampling to identify individuals who met the study participation criteria. Purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are knowledgeable about or have experience with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). I also used a snowball sampling strategy to recruit participants for this study because ex-offenders with no other criminal justice requirements could be considered a population who feels marginalized and could be hard

to locate (see LeFevre, 2019). Snowball sampling is used when the researcher is trying to find a hidden population (Waters, 2015). Snowballing requires participants to recruit other participants for the study. Snowball sampling is a two-step process, which consists of identifying potential participants and then having those participants recruit others; this process is repeated until the needed sample size is recruited (Waters, 2015).

I decided to recruit a sample of 10 participants for this study and interviewed participants until I reached data saturation. The number 10 was chosen as the sample size for this research study because according to Percy et al. (2015), the sample size for generic qualitative studies varies and occasionally are small. By interviewing 10 participants, I reached data saturation. Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi (2017) also considered sample size in relation to saturation. In a qualitative study, Martilik (2018) reached saturation with eight female ex-offenders, and Brown (2018) conducted a qualitative study to better understand the experiences of reintegration for female offenders and reached saturation with five participants. Saturation is a guiding principle to determine sample size in qualitative research and is reached when there is no new information from the participants (Ness, 2015). Fusch and Ness (2015) noted that data saturation is reached when no new data are collected and no new themes emerge. Data saturation is a way to identify that there are no new themes; I ensured data saturation by interviewing participants until I did not receive any new ideas or information from the participants.

I set a date and time for interviews and identified a safe location to discuss the study with the participants and answer any questions they had about the study. After approval was received from Walden University IRB, interviews were scheduled. Each participant who volunteered for the study received a letter of invitation and was informed that participation was strictly voluntary. The informed consent form was reviewed in its entirety with each participant before the interview began. All interviews were held in a secure location to protect the participant and me.

Instrumentation

As the researcher, I was considered the instrument for this study. I developed the interview protocol. According to Patton (2015), an interview protocol is prepared to ensure that the researcher is saying the exact same thing to each participant in the study. The interview protocol included the time, date, and location for the interview and consisted of the semistructured questions asked of each participant (see Appendix A). I chose to use semistructured interviews to collect data for this study so I could concentrate on the phenomenon that is being studied and gather rich information. The semistructured interview questions were prestructured, based on my preknowledge, which allowed the participants the chance to express their experience in their own words, but still left opportunities for the asking of follow-up questions (see Percy et al., 2015).

I developed the interview questions for this study based on the literature reviewed. The content validity of the instrument was established by expert reviews. I

asked two outside experts who had experience in the field to review the questions to ensure content validity.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After I obtained authorization from the Walden IRB, I recruited female ex-offenders to participate in the study through social media and the local newspaper. I created a flyer that explained the study and asked for participation from individuals who met the study criteria requirements. I sent potential participants a letter that explained the study and asked them to return their consent forms directly to me through the e-mail address provided. The letter also contained an outline of the benefits of the study and the anticipated duration of the study. The recruitment flyer included my contact information. Individuals were instructed to contact me via telephone or e-mail if they wished to participate in the study.

The following steps occurred when participants contacted me and expressed an interest in participating in my study:

- I explained the purpose of the study.
- I informed the participant of confidentiality and that there would be one audio-recorded interview.
- I informed participants that they would receive a \$5 gas gift card for participating in the interview.
- Individuals who agree to participate in the study were prescreened for eligibility using a short questionnaire. This short questionnaire contained a set

of questions designed to ensure that participants met the inclusion criteria for participating in the study.

- Once participants were deemed appropriate, an interview was scheduled at a local location, date, and time convenient to them.
- Finally, I provided the consent form and obtained their signature.

At the beginning of each interview, I informed the participants that I was interested in their experiences with reentry programs. During the interviews, I asked the participants the approved interview questions, and then they had time to speak freely without interruption. When it became evident that a participant was finished answering the questions from the interview protocol, I asked the question, “Is there anything else you would like to add?” By asking this question, the participant could think about their response and make changes as desired.

I informed the participants about the anticipated completion and exit strategy for the research. I ended the interview with a sincere thank you and offered my contact number to the participants for any follow-up conversation. According Harris and Atkinson (2015), the researcher maintains the protection of the participants from potential risk by providing information and the consent forms. I assured the participants that they will receive a copy of the study via email so they may provide feedback if needed. I also shared the follow-up procedures with the participants.

Follow-up may be needed if a participant wants to discuss more about her experiences with reentry programs, or if the participant wants to add to the information

that she wants to share. Follow-up is also used if I observed issues or I had further questions and need to schedule a follow-up conversation to obtain clarity from a participant. Participants are informed in the informed consent section that follow-up interview may be required.

Data Analysis Plan

In this study, I used face-to-face, semistructured interviews to gather data to answer the research question. Generic qualitative research requires semi or fully structured interviews, questionnaires, or activity-specific participant observation (Percy et al., 2015). According to Percy et al. (2015), generic qualitative data collection includes information from representative samples of people about real-world events, processes, or about their experiences to provide rich information about the topic. I had two data collection points: once in the initial semi-structured interview and once during member checking.

I coded the data to understand the experiences of the female ex-offender participants. Coding is a process of arranging qualitative data in a systematic order by segregating, grouping, and linking the data in order to facilitate formulation of meaning and explanation (Chen, Drouhard, Kocielnik, Suh, & Aragon, 2018). Coding is a process of identifying a passage in the text or other data items to search and identify concepts and find relationships between them (Pokorny et al., 2018). During the first step in compiling the data, I read the transcripts for descriptive statements, I then group the data into categorical themes until no new themes emerge. Coders are instructed to divide all

themes that express single ideas and aspects (Castillo, Castellanos, & VanderMeer, 2019). The themes will be clustered and assigned phrases to describe the meaning that underpinned the theme. Then I reorganize and code statements into descriptive themes until no new themes emerge. An audio recorder will be used during the interview as a way to reduce error. I did not use any other software to code the data; I coded the data manually.

Sometimes during data analysis, researchers might identify a discrepant case. Discrepant cases are those that are outliers from collective data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In the analysis, the discrepant cases will be used as a means of describing cases that do not fit accruing themes or patterns expressed in other participant interviews (Hoard, 2019). Data that do not fit pattern themes were reported to the study participant for clarification and were recorded in the study results and may be used for further research.

I followed Yin's (2014) 5-step process to provide analyze my data, which is (a) compile the data, (b) disassemble the data, (c) reassemble the data, (d) interpret the meaning of the data, and (e) conclude the data. During the first step, I compiled the data, and I recorded the interview to capture all of the interviewee's details. I trascribe the interviews in a Word document under each interviewee's pseudonym. During the second step, I will disassemble the data manually. I used a manual, hand coding process to code the data. According to Yin, coding is a step in qualitative data analysis used to breake the data down into manageable parts, which the researcher then reconstructs. During the third step, I reassemble the data analysis during trascription to find themes. I focused on

identifying keywords and phrases of the themes on the participants' strategies used for successful reentry processes. During the fourth step, I interpreted the meaning of the data. During the fifth step to conclude the data, I critically analyze the data and identified significance of my study and for the use of the findings tied to social change.

Issues of Trustworthiness

It was important that I developed a trustworthy relationship with the female participants. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that the components of trustworthiness in qualitative research are transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Researchers establish rigor in qualitative studies by spending more time on data collection in a particular setting, which provides time for establishing trust with participants, resulting in increased validity of the data (Morse, 2015). By gaining trust from the participants, they will be more comfortable to open up and share their experience, and I was able to gather more valid data.

Credibility

In qualitative research, the credibility of the researcher is essential because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained that credibility refers to internal validity, and it connects the instrumentation and data in the qualitative study. According to Patton (2015), techniques that are used to establish credibility are prolonged engagement with participants, persistent observation if appropriate to the study, data saturation, peer-debriefing, member-checking, and reflective journaling. In this study, I established credibility by

ensuring data saturation. Data saturation was reached when no new information was discovered (Saldaña, 2015). I used a reflective journal to track my personal thoughts for credibility. According to Connelly (2016), researchers use a reflective journal to keep a record of their personal thoughts and feelings during research. Finally, I established credibility and confirm the accuracy of the data collected by member checking. Researchers use member checking to support credibility by ensuring accuracy and completion of information received from the participants (Morse, 2015). Member checking is used to ensure the accuracy of the data recorded (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used member checking by sharing the transcription of the interview with the participants to ensure that all gathered information from the interviews is accurate. During member checking I asked the participants if there is anything further she would like to add to the transcript. I also conduct transcript review by asking the participants to check spelling and interpretation of information from the interview before data analysis begins.

Transferability

Transferability allows the researcher to apply the study findings in other situations and context beyond the scope of my study. Brooks and Normore (2015) noted that establishing rigor in qualitative studies leads to transferability. Transferability is the length that others can transfer or apply the results of the study to another situation (Connelly, 2016). According to Cornelissen (2017), a researcher uses thick description when focused on providing detailed information of concrete settings, beliefs,

relationships, and emotions. I provided the readers with findings applicable to the participant situations, times, and populations.

Dependability

I established dependability for this study by documenting the process of activities that are involved with the study. Dependability is established if the same results can be found by another researcher using the same parameters of the study (Morse, 2015). Korstjens and Moser (2018) explained that researchers can use an audit trail to ensure dependability and confirmability. An audit trail is a complete set of notes on decisions made during the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I maintained an audit trail. I maintained the interview notes, interview recordings, and transcribed data used in the study in a password-protected computer. I am the only person with access to these files.

Confirmability

Researchers should remain objective, and the interpretation of data should not be based on the researcher's personal viewpoints. Confirmability is the researcher's ability to remain objective (Morse, 2015). This will allow the researcher to note the responses from the participants who express their experiences with the phenomenon (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Connelly (2016) noted that qualitative researchers keep detailed notes of decisions and analysis as the research progresses. Korstjens and Moser (2018) noted that researchers should include interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and all analytical data with their reflexive notes. I used bracketing and reflecting to assist in the confirmability of my study.

Ethical Procedures

Minimizing the risk to participants by using procedures that do not expose participants to risk is the researcher's primary concern when conducting a study. It is important that scholars are aware that research designs establish quality and rigor (Brooks & Normore, 2015). The American Psychological Association's (2017b) ethical guidelines are set forth by for researchers in the field of psychology to protect live subjects and require certain precautions. I followed the procedures and guidance for dissertations through the IRB at Walden University. Each of my participants received an informed consent form that shares Walden procedures concerning the following: (a) the purpose of the study, (b) the responsibilities of the researcher, (c) confidentiality procedures, and (d) the role of the participants.

After I received approval from Walden University's IRB, I started collected data. I asked participants to sign the consent form before collecting data after IRB approval. The consent form included information such as compensation and withdrawal procedures. I began scheduling interviews once I received approval by the IRB. My final study will include the Walden IRB approved number. I conceal the identity of participants by using pseudonyms instead of their names. I made participants aware that a coding system will be used to identify their interviews rather than their name. I recorded data on an audio recording device and transfer the data to my computer after each interview. I stored collected data from the research in a file on my computer protected by

a password. All participants understood the confidentiality process of the study. I will destroy all data after 5 years by deleting files from my computer.

During the course of the study, the research procedure might reveal or create an acute psychological state that necessitates referral. In order to manage this, information of affordable mental health counseling and psychological services will be provided. This information provides participants with resources about free or low-cost counseling and a hotline to call if they become distressed as a result of participating in this study.

Summary

The purpose of this generic, qualitative study is to add to existing literature on female ex-offenders who attended reentry programs and who did not return to prison or jail. In Chapter 3, I defined the research study design and explained details related to the females being studied. The research questions were reviewed, and I outlined my methodological choices and possible issues of trustworthiness. My role as the researcher, potential research bias, and any researcher influence that could change the data were discussed. An explanation of the procedures used to collect the data for this study was discussed. Finally, ethical considerations were discussed.

In Chapter 4, an analysis of all data collected is shared.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of female ex-offenders about their experience with the reentry program they attended. This study addressed the gap in knowledge related to female ex-offenders' experiences in reentry programs. The following research question was used to guide this study: What are female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities? In this chapter, I expound on the setting of the data collection and outline the relevant participant demographics, data collection and data analysis procedures, and evidence of the trustworthiness of the results. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Setting

In accordance with the IRB's direction and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I changed the interviews from face-to-face meetings to telephone interviews. I asked each participant to find a quiet and safe location to conduct the telephone interview from. I also found a safe and private environment to conduct telephone interviews with each participant.

Participant Demographics

The participants for this study were female ex-offenders who were 18 years or older. Each participant had a conviction, had completed at least 1 year of her prison

sentence, and had attended a reentry program. The participants also had not returned to prison within 3 years of being released.

After her release from prison, Participant 1 participated in drug rehabilitation due to a relapse into addiction. She participated in a reentry program designed for female ex-offenders, where she resided in a reentry home for 3 years. During that time, she worked with families and women with life challenges. Participant 1 had no children and was working on an associate's degree in human services.

Participant 2 lived in a halfway house after prison and found a job working at a restaurant. She paid fines for school and court requirements. She was working on an associate's degree in human services at the time of the study.

Participant 3 attended Goodwill after prison release. She also attended parole, did not have a legal job, and was supported by her mother.

Participant 4 only attended probation. She paid court fines, had supportive family and friends, and was an unemployed mother of three children.

Participant 5 is a mother of six children and attended a women's reentry halfway house. She lost the support of her family, has an issue with authority figures, and worked various part-time jobs.

Participant 6 attended alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs as well as probation. She had paid fines, did not have children, and was unemployed at the time of the study.

Participant 7 lived in a halfway house and had a probation officer. She attended a reentry program. Participant 7 had the support of her family and was employed sporadically.

Participant 8 attended probation and paid fines. She had supportive family members and worked part time.

Participant 9 had a probation officer and paid court fines. She had a supportive family and was a mother of three children. Participant 9 was employed as needed at a bar.

Participant 10 had probation after being released from prison. She had family support and was employed working temporary assignments.

Data Collection

I collected data for this study from 10 female ex-offenders who participated in reentry programs after being released from incarceration. The participants volunteered to be in the study. I recruited participants by posting an advertisement on social media. Participants indicated interest in the study by sending me an e-mail message or by providing their telephone numbers to individuals from whom they received information about the study and invited me to contact them. I conducted a telephone interview session with each participant at a mutually agreed upon date and time. Semistructured telephone interviews were conducted with each participant and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. I used the interview guide to notate significant information mentioned by participants during the interviews.

The data collection procedures did not deviate from the plan presented in Chapter 3. Although I felt that data saturation may have been reached at Interview 8, I continued to interview all 10 participants to be sure that I had, in fact, reached data saturation as presented in the plan in Chapter 3. Follow-up questions were used as needed during each interview to gain further understanding or clarification from the participants about their experiences as female ex-offenders in North Carolina. I used a digital recorder to audio record the interviews. The digital recorder, interview transcripts, interview summaries, and other materials relating to the study are stored and backed up in a location on my personal computer that is password protected. I am the only person with access to these files. I summarized and provided each interview transcript to the participants by e-mail for member checking.

Data Analysis

Throughout the processes of data collection and analysis, I engaged in bracketing by journaling my thoughts, beliefs, and prejudgments to monitor my own developing interpretations and constructions. Bracketing includes researchers setting aside preconceived ideas about the topic (Sorsa et al., 2015). I repeatedly listened to the interview recordings; reread interview transcripts; and noted any personal assumptions, preconceptions, and biases that I had. Through this process, I was able to maintain an open mind and focus on each participant's true perspective and experiences regarding participating in a reentry program.

Next, I followed Yin's (2014) five-step process for data analysis, which provided the following structured approach: (a) compile the data, (b) disassemble the data, (c) reassemble the data, (d) interpret the meaning of the data, and (e) conclude the data. To compile the data, I read the transcripts for descriptive statements and then grouped the data into categorical themes until no new themes emerged. I reread the transcripts several times and highlighted descriptive statements. Using an open-coding approach, I identified and created codes for recurring words and phrases. I then reorganized and coded statements into descriptive themes until no new themes emerged. The data coding process was completed manually.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability are all crucial components when establishing trustworthiness within research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researchers establish rigor in qualitative studies by spending more time on data collection in a particular setting, which provides time for establishing trust with participants and results in increased validity of the data (Morse, 2015). I followed the criteria established in Chapter 3 to evaluate the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of this study.

Credibility

In qualitative research, the researcher's credibility is essential because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained that credibility refers to internal validity, and it connects the

instrumentation and data in the qualitative study. According to Patton (2015), techniques that are used to establish credibility are prolonged engagement with participants, persistent observation if appropriate to the study, data saturation, peer debriefing, member checking, and reflective journaling. In this study, I established credibility by ensuring data saturation was reached when no new information was discovered (see Saldaña, 2015). I used a reflective journal to track my personal thoughts for credibility. According to Connelly (2016), researchers use a reflective journal to keep a record of their personal thoughts and feelings during research. Finally, I established credibility and confirmed the accuracy of the data collected by member checking. Researchers use member checking to support credibility by ensuring the accuracy and completion of information received from the participants (Morse, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used member checking by sharing the transcription of each participant's interview with her to ensure that all gathered information from the interviews was accurate. During member checking, I asked the participants if there was anything further they would like to add to the transcript. I also conducted transcript review by asking the participants to check the spelling and interpretation of information from their interview before data analysis began.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which others can transfer or apply the results of the study to another situation (Connelly, 2016). According to Cornelissen (2017), to achieve transferability a researcher uses thick description when focused on providing detailed information of concrete settings, beliefs, relationships, and emotions. Transferability was

achieved in this study by obtaining detailed and thick descriptions from each participant. I provided the readers with thick descriptions by providing plenty of participant quotes, which allowed for the findings to be applicable to other researchers' studies.

Dependability

I established dependability for this study by documenting the process of activities that were involved with the study. I adhered to Walden University guidelines for researching human subjects. In addition, dependability was achieved in this study by using an audio recorder to record each interview and then transcribing each interview. I then used member checking to ensure the accuracy of data. I also maintained an audit trail by storing the interview notes, interview recordings, and transcribed data used in the study in a password-protected computer. I am the only person with access to these files.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the researcher's ability to remain objective (Morse, 2015). It allows the researcher to note the responses from the participants who express their experiences with the phenomenon (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Connelly (2016) noted that qualitative researchers keep detailed notes of decisions and analysis as the research progresses. I achieved confirmability by keeping reflective notes, reviewing the interview transcripts, and listening to the interview recordings. I also used bracketing and reflection to assist in the confirmability of the study. By limiting the effects of using my own perspectives during data collection, I set aside ideas that might have interfered with or inappropriately guided data collection, which improved the credibility of this study.

Results of Data Analysis

When exploring the perceptions of 10 female ex-offenders about reentry programs, eight major themes emerged: family support, support of probation and parole officer, employment, reentry programs, faith, determination, accountability, and education. All the study participants were considered successful because they did not return to prison after 3 years of being released and beyond. Nine participants attributed their success to other reasons beyond the reentry programs they attended.

Nine participants suggested that the reentry services they were assigned to or attended could even be considered a part of the problems that female ex-offenders face after being released from prison. For example, during probation, seven participants were required to attend probation meetings and to be home at required times. If they did not abide by the rules or even if there was a misunderstanding, the females shared that they were subject to returning to prison or even sentenced to house arrest. One participant was ordered to wear an ankle alarm that detected activity once she stepped away from home because she had missed scheduled meetings.

Theme 1: Family Support

Participants in the study discussed how family made a difference in their lives after they were released from prison. Family support played a major part in the success of participants as they returned to life in their communities. Six of the participants received financial support from their family members to help pay court fines; purchase personal

need items, such as food; and pay for childcare. Eight participants reported receiving emotional support from family members when they were released from prison.

Eight participants shared that having family to support them after prison was important. Participant 4 stated, “It was the support from my family that made the transition work for me.” Participant 4 also claimed, “Everything had changed, I didn’t have a driver’s license and I didn’t recognize anything when I got out. I needed my mom to drive for me.” Participant 3 stated, “Family support is very important. I am very grateful for my family. I would not have found out about reentry services if it wasn’t for my mom.” Participant 10 stated, “If you don’t have some kind of family support, and the system is all you’re depending on, you are lost. I asked my mother if she could help pay my fines because I did not have a job.” Participant 4 shared that “I actually had enough supporters and friends and family that love me so much that I had my own place within two weeks of being home.” When female ex-offenders have family support after being released from prison, they are more likely to stay out of prison.

Four females in this study placed a great deal of importance on their ability to stay out of prison and to provide for their children. They described how their children motivated them to remain out of prison. Participant 9 stated,

I have 3 children who stayed with my mom while I was locked down. Family support has been found to be essential for females who are released from prison and could play a part in the success of female ex-offenders.

Participant 5 shared,

I have raised six children going in and out of prison. I never had my kids taken away from me because of family. But my kids almost turned on me and told me if I went back to prison, I would lose them forever this time. after the third time of visiting prison I knew I could no longer go back because I wanted to stay out of prison to raise my children.

Female ex-offenders who have children are motivated by their children to stay out of prison.

Theme 2: Support of Probation and Parole Officer

The support of PO's emerged as a second theme among participants. After being released from prison, some ex-offenders are under community supervision of parole or probation (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). The participants who had probation officers shared the challenges they faced when trying to comply with requirements such as paying fines, securing approved housing, attending substance treatment, and either getting a job or attending job preparation programs. Although many of the participants did not have good relationships with their probation officers, they all noted that the program made them stay focused on their goals after prison.

Probation and parole are required service programs that provide social support and guidelines for ex-offenders. Participant 6 was the only participant who felt that working with her female probation officer was beneficial: "If my probation officer was a guy, things could have been different. Even when you have to take a drug test, like you have to pee in front of the officer." Participant 6 shared that she gained a positive

relationship with her probation officer. She shared that connecting with her parole officer in this positive way made a difference in her return to her community. Participant 6 stated,

I feel like I had more connection with my probation officer than others did, but I know if you don't connect with your parole officer, things won't work out. When a participant has a good relationship with her probation officer, they work together to reach the goal of reconnecting to society.

Participants 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10 all shared experiences different from Participant 6. All had challenges with their parole officers. Participant 3 stated, "Honestly, I feel that the parole officer or probation officer should be more than an officer. Yes, we understand that you are doing your job. But give us more resources, encouragement, and/or motivation so we don't reenter prison." Participant 4 stated,

Probation did not help me. I ended up with an ankle bracelet because my parole officer got mad because I was working and we could not get a time set for visits. I didn't get off till 10 pm. She said I need to be home by 9 pm, I told her to work with me on my schedule, but she did not. But it is a rocky road when you are dealing with your parole officer. You know I had one who wanted to throw an ankle monitor on me. A lot of these people don't look at you coming home and doing right; they are looking for failure. They want you to fail. That's how they are. They throw things on you so you can fail, especially with the fines. And it's really hard on us. Especially after you are in the system. You are labeled as

something. I mean you got me paying \$200, \$300, \$400 fines a month and I just came home. What if I did not get a job? Then a month goes by and I get a lot of no's before yes due to my record.

The study participants shared that probation was a difficult task. They even suggested the program came with an expense such as fines that they were not often able to pay.

The participants explained that a lack of support from their probation officers made the transition from prison to community a challenge. Participant 9 shared, "My probation officer just did the minimum he could. He did not have any suggestions or resources that I could have used. Especially for work." Participant 10 shared that her parole officer did not like her, and his actions made her uncomfortable. Participant 10 stated,

I told him, look, I don't want to be in this place just like you don't want me to be in this place. If we work together, I can get the hell out of your face. So, we decided to work together. I got a job and we made it happen.

Female ex-offenders were challenged with building relationships with their probation officers, and they shared that if the relationship with the probation officer was not a good relationship, the task of connecting with society was a greater challenge.

Theme 3: Employment

The females in this study found that finding employment after their release helped them to stay focused but admitted that it was a challenge. According Cantora (2015), ex-offenders experience unsuccessful attempts with finding suitable employment, and due to

their criminal backgrounds, many of them never become gainfully employed. Participant 1 came out of prison and struggled with previous addiction. She was sent to a detox center after prison and was determined to become employed after she was released from the detox center. She stated,

I came right out and got a job 3 days after detox. I was working in a hardware store making \$8 an hour, and I thought about it. I said, what do I really want to do with myself? That's when I decided I want to go into social work. I want to help people who are like I am. Now, I work with single women and men and women with children and families. I am able to help other people from all walks of life such as domestic violence survivors, and one lady from a different country who is now going through immigration.

When female ex-offenders found employment, they were able to pay for necessities, and they became law abiding citizens; however, finding employment was a challenge.

Finding employment allows participants the chance to pay off debts and to create the mindset of a citizen and not a prisoner. Participant 2 shared that she owed school fines and, by paying off her fines, she was able to continue her education. Participant 2 stated,

I wanted to pay my school fines but I didn't know who to call. I got a job, and they knew my situation. I wanted to get a car. I started working at Coaches about 5 months after leaving the halfway house.

When asked what she found most challenging about the employment process, Participant 2 said “the background check.” Female ex-offenders who find employment are able to set goals and feel good about themselves. Employment helps the female ex-offenders feel like they are connecting back to society.

When an exoffender is released from prison, employment is essential due to the need to make money and to make an honest way of living. When asked what services are needed to best serve females after being released from prison, Participant 3 stated,

I feel that they need to do more than giving us a list of companies that will hire felons. Nine out of 10 will not hire you. I have been through that several times. At companies such as Wendy’s, I did not get hired. I feel like there should be more programs and jobs that are targeted for women who have been incarcerated. There should be more jobs instead of them giving us a piece of paper.

She shared that she learned to create a resume and communication skills and to value those skills. Additionally, Participant 3 stated, “I actually had a job within the first 2 days of being released, but it was not legal.” Finding legal employment was a challenge for the females after being released from prison.

Finding employment was a difficult task for female ex-offenders with children. Participant 4 described her experience after leaving prison and shared that getting a job was essential for her success and for her children. Participant 4 stated,

I walked out happy, I was thinking I was going to my mother’s house and surprise my kids. Thinking I would be like, hey I’m home and they would be like we are

going school shopping. But instead, the social worker pulled up and was like ‘we didn’t know you were coming home. We have an order to take the kids. So, me coming out and not knowing I did not have a home to live in and my kids being taken and now I am focusing on the fact that I need a job. I did what I needed to do to get my kids back. I got a job. The state of North Carolina said they never saw anyone work so hard to get their kids back.

Finding employment was essential; most female ex-offenders had responsibilities after being released from prison, such as taking care of their children, paying fines, and supporting their lifestyle.

Some females found other ways to make money if they did not become employed. Participant 7 shared that she chose to sell drugs because she could not find a job but had to pay her fines for court and probation, which added up to \$200.00 dollars per month. She stated,

They gave you a list of jobs to call and I got hired, but it was how they treated you. It’s like when you have a felony as a woman, you have to really take jobs and work like a man. How do they expect you to get your life on track when you are hit immediately with a fine to pay the parole officer? Where the hell do they think you will get the money? I sold drugs, food, and I even had to sell my body.

It was rough. Three years of that and you think I feel like I’m not still locked up.

Finding employment was necessary for the female exoffender so that she could have financial stability to continue to live in society and not return to prison.

Theme 4: Reentry Programs

The fourth theme for this study was reentry programs. As a requirement of this study, all of the participants attended some type of reentry program. All participants discussed their reentry program experiences. The programs the participants attended were either court-ordered or were equivalent to completing the terms of their prison sentences. Halfway house residency is an example of this equivalency. Many of the participants felt that their reentry programs were not beneficial. Some even believed that the required programs and processes after prison created more challenges for them than completing the prison term.

Participant 1 participated in several reentry programs, including detox; at a home for individuals released from prison; and a program called the Reentry Program for Women. She was able to receive assistance through the workforce innovation opportunity act and received funding to go to college. When asked how this reentry program helped her, Participant 1 shared, “They were nice...They treat you like a person...They give you compliments and make you want to do better, and it makes you want to do better and be self-sufficient.” However, when asked what services are needed to best serve females after being released from prison, she stated,

I think that now all the reentry programs are based on the men... The men are learning lots of trades... I feel they should put reentry in the female prisons...If they put it in the female prison then the females can have things in place and they will not feel lost...They can get self-sufficient in prison...They need counseling

on how to be better parents and how to be better employees and how to build their self-esteem and to get clean and knowing that they can get health care...When people get turned down...it breaks their spirit and makes them not want to try any more.

Additionally, Participant 1 shared,

I just got my first car...never owned a car before. The program has been able to now allow me to work with them. Now I have my own office. That was so exciting... I get emails from the people who use to serve me and now I feel important... I have purpose now and even if I can help a person with one resource it feels good now. It's a good feeling that I can take care of myself. I can pay my bills and people don't look at me like they used to. They look at me different.

Participant 2 described her experience of attending the halfway house as not a reward for good behavior but a negative experience instead. Participant 2 stated,

I don't feel like staying in the halfway house helped me reach my goals at all. It was a waste of 6 months. I was just sitting somewhere else for 6 months. Those 6 months ... just allowed me to get out of prison 6 months early. The program did not help me... It wasn't a house... I went to a building that looked like an office, not a building to live in. We just sat in the room and watched TV. They fed me if I did not have my own money. It was livable arrangements. We had to sit in a room all day long unless you had a pass to go somewhere.

Regarding her experiences, Participant 3 stated,

The reentry program did help me in a way because it wasn't me just coming home and not knowing what to do and how to effectively communicate with people.

The program helped me learn to communicate. But I did not learn how to get a job... They helped me learn how to communicate and how to create a resume.

When asked how they learned about the reentry programs they attended, many of the participants shared that the programs were also a part of their requirements; yet, after leaving prison, they were not free. The females in this study found the attended reentry programs to be a waste of their time, and some did not find the value in the services.

Many of the participants attended reentry programs not because they found them beneficial, but rather because the programs were court ordered. The females in this study shared that the choice to attend a reentry program was already decided for them prior to leaving prison. Participant 8 stated,

My lawyer and the courts ordered my attendance when I got out of prison. I had to get with my lawyer and then I had court. I wanted to get a job. I got out with \$400.00 in fines. As I left court the judge hit me with fines and I had to pay the probation too so I needed to get a job. I feel like I already went to prison and did my time and this made me feel like I was still in prison.

Participant 5 shared that from prison, she was expected to write letters and use money that she worked for in prison for paper and stamps to send letters to halfway houses to see if they would accept her after prison. She shared that the halfway house was a way of letting her out of prison early for good behavior and that is was an order from the courts.

Participant 5 also shared that the program she attended was a reentry house for women.

When asked if the reentry program helped, she stated,

The reentry, I tried it. I tried the women's housing. I did everything they asked me to do. Then I asked for a weekend pass. I came back early and some of my stuff was missing. I understand you put a bunch of women in a room and you will get some taking without asking. Some of the girls had been there longer than I had and when you first get there you have to be with a group for up to 30 days... You always have to have a senior with you. Sometimes you were not with the best senior and you have to do their dirt and that got you in trouble. Let's just say it was horrible.

Participant 7 shared:

It did not help me. I hope you write that. I met good people but I did not find a good job. It did not help me and probation, if that is a reentry program, it has to be the worst system out there. The officers are bullies and they treat you like you are nothing.

The females in this study found that the reentry programs added more stress to their lives and did not add value.

Theme 5: Faith

Faith refers to the belief a person has in God, and the actions of a person who has faith. The study participants found that having faith in God helped them cope with the

challenges of returning to life outside of prison. When asked what services were most important to her, Participant 5 responded,

The spirituals. We got up every morning and read the bible, but a lot of them did not participate. The house manager was not strict on the others. But I knew God before prison and I knew God was the one who was going to help me out of that mess.

The participants shared that using their faith in God allowed them to reach goals of keeping their mindset. Participant 3 stated,

I wanted to increase my relationship with God. I feel like I gave up on God. I became closer to God and really even now it's God that's keeping me from losing my mind. They still treat you like a criminal, but God always wakes me up and shows me a new day.

Participant 6 stated,

I really liked the 12 promises. They had this poster on the wall and one of the 12 steps declared we would not regret the past. I feel that. That has always stuck with me. It was like reminding me to keep the faith that everything had its purpose and by keeping the faith I was able to stop doing the negative things that were affecting my progress. The 12 steps helped me remember God. Not like he wasn't already in my life but I kind of would say it helped me stay focused on my goals and my faith in myself grew.

Participant 10 said,

I feel it was the prayer, and the church that helped me. I feel that females coming right out of prison should already have a church family to sponsor them. It's like the church is there to give you unconditional love. They have people who are passionate and they teach you how to have more hope for yourself. When you learn that God still loves you even if you don't feel love from your own family, the church reminds you that there's a bigger purpose. Having faith helped the female ex-offenders, they were able to use their faith in God to remember their larger purpose in life.

Faith was a coping mechanism used by many of the participants after incarceration to be more positive.

Theme 6: Determination

The participants discussed needing motivation to help them complete their reentry programs successfully and avoid returning to prison. Many participants shared that they were "determined" not to return to prison and gave different examples for their determination. Participant 1 stated,

I got into the program and I knew I had to do the foot work. I had to have the determination to do it. I was introduced to lots of new things and new beginnings. It felt good because I was surrounded by lots of people who were just like me. That made a difference because no one was judging me.

Participant 4 stated,

Determination helped me when they took my kids because I had to do right. It really put me back on the straight and narrow path. It took that one time and I said I refuse to lose my kids again. I did not want my kids to endure what I had to endure. I am going to do things the right way. I am going to work and do what is needed to be done to stay out of prison and to be there for my children.

Participant 4 also had concerns about her children's safety while she was incarcerated. Her children were in the care of her mom, who had allowed her stepfather to molest her. As a result, Participant 4's stepfather was the father of her children. She explained that her motivation was to be out of prison so that she could protect her children from going through what she had endured. Participant 9 stated,

A female exoffender's success is determined by her self-motivation. Honestly, when I left prison, the guards made a bet that I would return. They actually stood in my face and said "let's take a bet that she will be back." I decided right then and there that I was not returning to prison. I told myself that this was not going to happen again. I was not coming back to prison. I realized at that moment that this was going to be all on me it was up to me to stay out of prison.

When a female exoffender was determined, she was able to do what was necessary to accomplish what was necessary to stay out of prison.

Theme 7: Accountability

Personal accountability was discussed by many of the participants as a motivator for success after their release from prison. Participant 1 stated, "I haven't owned up to my

past, but now I want to own up to it. I cannot be ashamed anymore. My record is the person I was then and not the person I am now.” Participant 6 stated,

I mean, just having restrictions gave me motivation to want to do more. Since I was on probation and could not leave the state, it made me want to travel. While on supervised probation for like a year, I could not leave the state. So just knowing I couldn’t leave the state made me realize that I had done something that caused me not to be able to go out of town. At first, I fought the system. I could not understand why I could not go out of town. But the more I accepted my mistakes the more I was able to follow the rules. I’m not going to lie: as long as I said it wasn’t my fault, I continued to break the law.

Participant 9 stated,

I kept going back to prison because I wouldn’t pay my fines and I would not abide by the rules set by my probation officer. But let me say this. If you want to stay out you got to stop complaining about what ain’t fair and just do what you are told. I was in my own way. There was a time when I did not comply. I just couldn’t do what was required. I didn’t find it necessary. But when I learned to comply, I did not go back to prison.

When females released from prison maintained personal accountability, it helped them to do what was needed to avoid returning to prison.

Some females used the programs that they attended to hold themselves accountable. Participant 10 shared that having a probation officer made her more

accountable. She shared that she had been to prison before, but the difference this time was she wanted to make herself proud. She shared that her probation terms and her probation officer helped her decide that it was time for her to make a change in her life. She stated that probation and her acceptance of her own responsibility made her go to work and stick with the job. Participant 10 also shared,

I knew my parole officer was not playing with me. He was tough. I think he didn't like me, but we had to work together. I told him, 'Look I don't want to be in this place just like you don't want me to be in this place. If we work together, I can get the hell out your face. So we decided to work together. I took responsibility and got a job.

When the females were accountable, they were freer to accept their mistakes and move towards success.

Theme 8: Education

The participants deemed education as a contributor to their reentry success. Educational preparation is essential for ex-offenders entering society (Burden, 2016). The participants stated that having a trade certificate and attending college for training opened doors to nonstrenuous labor jobs. Participant 1 stated,

I am working on my second year of school through a Community College. I work with single women and men, women with children, and families and now I am able to help other people from all walks of life such as domestic violence. One lady is from a different country and she is now going through integration. When

female ex-offenders obtain education, they are more qualified for opportunities such as better paid jobs.

Participant 2 shared,

I am so grateful that I was able to pay my school fines off and return to school. I am working and going to school. I am going to the community college and working on a 2-year human services degree. Once I finish school, I can help other people who are coming out of prison like I did. I want to also continue after this 2-year degree. My student advisor thinks I can get a 4-year degree. When female ex-offenders are educated, there is a greater chance that they are employed and can keep the job that they obtain.

For the participants in this study, education lead to more earning and a better sense of pride. Participant 9 stated that she looked for services that would help her stay out of prison, something that would help her get a good paying job. Participant 9 stated, “Some kind of training...I don’t want to go to college, but I don’t mind having some kind of education because all I have is a high school diploma.” According to South, et al. (2017), ex-offenders who participate in education training are more likely to be hired. When female ex-offenders are educated, there is a greater chance that they are employed and can keep the job that they obtain.

Summary

Eight major themes emerged from this study for reentry success: family support, support from probation or parole officer, employment, reentry programs, faith,

determination, accountability, and education. All themes included in this section were related to the research question, “What are female ex-offenders’ perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities”?

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the interpretation of the results by comparing the findings to the literature review. I will provide information on how the results of this study confirmed and extended the knowledge in the area of female prison reentry programs. The limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for positive social change are also discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore female ex-offenders' perceptions of how reentry programs contributed to their successful reintegration back into their communities. There is limited research on female ex-offenders' perceptions about how reentry programs contributed to their reintegration back into their communities (Garcia, 2016). The data analysis in this study revealed eight themes based on the different experiences that the participants had in their reentry programs: family support, support of probation and parole officer, employment, reentry programs, faith, determination, accountability, and education. The themes are interpreted in the following section.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, each theme is discussed within the broader context of the literature review in Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework for the study. I interpret the results to determine how these reentry programs played a role in the participants' ability to become productive members of society after returning to their communities as well as how the themes aligned with the conceptual framework and the literature review.

Theme 1: Family Support

The study participants shared that family support was essential to their success for many reasons. Family support is important to female ex-offenders because, when they leave prison, they often need someone to help them become stable. Participants in this

study stressed the importance of having family support during the time of release and how it alleviated stress and emotional challenges. Participant 4 stated, “It was the support from my family that made the transition work for me.” Several participants revealed that they needed financial support from their families to pay fines and bills from their incarceration and afterward. Participants with children shared that their families supported them by taking care of their children while they looked for work. Study participants also discussed getting mental and emotional support from their families.

The theme of family support aligns with current literature, confirming that family support is critical for females who are exiting prison. Brown (2018) found that family connection was important for female ex-offenders. According to Smith (2017), female offenders follow a path that includes childhood victimization and drug use, which eventually leads to being involved in the criminal justice system. Correctional interventions for female offenders require different strategies because the female pathway to crime is not the same as the pathway of a male offender (Gobeil et al., 2016). Eight participants in this study shared that family support helped them reconnect to society.

The theme of family support aligned with the EST on the microsystem level. Each participant had some type of family connection, whether it was caused by positive relationships or the lack of relationships due to prison or other circumstances. Female ex-offenders are affected on the microsystem level, which includes family, friends, and coworkers (Soto-Nevarez, 2018). Supportive family and friends can offer hope and

encouragement to those incarcerated (LeFevre, 2019). I found that the support of family increased the likelihood of positive outcomes for the female participants of this study.

Theme 2: Support of Probation Officer

The participants in this study shared that their probation officer was one main reason they stayed out of prison. Although many of the participants shared that they did not have positive relationships with their probation officers, they did agree that, without the structure and the guidelines provided by their probation programs and the leadership of their probation officers, they may not have completed the terms of probation. The study participants stated that the support and guidelines of their probation officers enabled them to move forward and reconnect with society.

The study participants shared that once they decided to work effectively with their probation officers, they were able to reconnect positively to society. This finding is in agreement with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. When ex-offenders respect reentry program staff, their chances of completing the program increases (Zortman et al., 2016). POs may serve as sources of social support for female ex-offenders (Holmstrom et al., 2017). When the females from this study connected with their probation officers, they found that following the rules and requirements helped them stay on task and they were able to complete the reentry program.

The theme of probation officers also aligns with the EST. Program requirements, such as probation, are effective on the mesosystem level for ex-offenders as well as the macrosystem level. Mesosystem includes the interaction between two microsystems, such

as the relation between the ex-offender's home life and the requirements of probation. The mesosystem also works for ex-offenders when they are sentenced to different types of services that structure their social skills (Patten et al., 2018). The macrosystem level is used to address the relationship between an individual and "the system," or how an individual is impacted by public policies, state or federal laws, culture, economic systems, and social conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Connecting with society is a shared effort between the female ex-offender and her probation officer.

Theme 3: Employment

When an offender is released from prison or jail, she is challenged with finding employment. One participant shared that she had to do illegal work to make money to pay her fines. Participant 7 shared "I chose to sell drugs because I could not find a job but I had to pay fines for court and probation, which added up to \$200.00 dollars per month." Participant 3 stated,

I feel that they need to do more than giving us a list of companies that will hire felons. Nine out of 10 will not hire you. I have been through that several times. At companies such as Wendy's, I did not get hired. I feel like there should be more programs and jobs that are targeted for women who have been incarcerated.

After an ex-offender is released from prison, employment is essential. When an ex-offender is employed, she is able to pay required fines and have self-worth.

The theme of employment aligned with the results of the literature review. Ex-offenders often experience unsuccessful attempts at securing suitable employment, and

many never become employed due to their criminal records (Cantora, 2015; Routh & Hamilton, 2015). Those who have a history of criminal activities and drug addiction are considered by many employers and companies to be dangerous and unproductive members of society (Lutman et al., 2015). The findings from this study revealed that employment is key for ex-offenders who do not want to return to prison.

The theme of employment aligned with the theory of EST on the mesosystem and exosystem levels. Program requirements, such as attending drug treatment classes or attending vocational training skill builders for employment, are examples of the mesosystem working for ex-offenders. The mesosystem works for ex-offenders when they use two types of services to work together to structure their social skills (Patten et al., 2018). The exosystem is the layer of the EST in which individuals are affected by the local policies that restrict or provide employment laws for ex-offenders and community-based resources (Soto-Nevarez, 2018). When a female ex-offender is employed, she is more willing to attend programs because she has the ability to support herself and is better equipped to meet the requirements of paying fines and taking care of herself.

Theme 4: Reentry Programs

Reentry programs are designed to help ex-offenders to reintegrate back into society in a positive way. The participants in this study discussed having limited options for participating in meaningful reentry programs. Participant 2 described her experience of attending the halfway house as not a reward for good behavior but a negative experience instead, stating, “I don’t feel like staying in the halfway house helped me

reach my goals at all. It was a waste of 6 months. I was just sitting somewhere else for 6 months.” Services that were beneficial for the participants in this study were not reentry programs, and they were also not able to participate in nearby reentry programs that they found more meaningful. Participant 7 shared,

It did not help me. I hope you write that. I met good people, but I did not find a good job. It did not help me and probation, if that is a reentry program, it has to be the worst system out there. The officers are bullies, and they treat you like you are nothing.

The theme of reentry programs did align with the literature review. Reentry programs are offered to ex-offenders by agencies and nonprofit organizations and are developed to improve the probability that ex-offenders will reintegrate successfully (Cohen, 2017; Hall, 2015). The increasing recidivism of female ex-offenders is due to a lack of reentry programming to teach them to reform (Berry, 2019). All the participants in the current study shared that the reentry programs that they attended were court appointed and did not start until they left prison.

The theme of reentry programs aligned with the EST in the microsystem and the exosystem layers. In the microsystem layer, the female ex-offenders’ family support, social support, communities, and neighborhoods are observed. Most offenders face challenges attending required programming due to lack of transportation to and from programs (Yelderman et al., 2018). The exosystem level includes other people and places that may have no direct interaction with the ex-offenders’ life, such as policy makers who

create programs that affect female ex-offenders (Soto-Nevarez, 2018). Many of the participants revealed that in addition to unavailable transportation, their communities lacked useful reentry programs altogether.

Theme 5: Faith

The participants in this study used faith to cope with the grief of being incarcerated and trying to reenter society. Five participants turned to their faith to gain courage and strength during reentry. Participant 10 said,

I feel it was the prayer, and the church that helped me. I feel that females coming right out of prison should already have a church family to sponsor them. It's like the church is there to give you unconditional love.

Participant 3 stated, "I wanted to increase my relationship with God. I feel like I gave up on God. I became closer to God and really even now it's God that's keeping me from losing my mind." Participant 6 stated,

I really liked the 12 promises. They had this poster on the wall and one of the 12 steps declared we would not regret the past. I feel that. That has always stuck with me. It was like reminding me to keep the faith that everything had its purpose and by keeping the faith I was able to stop doing the negative things that were affecting my progress.

Participants shared that having faith allowed them to feel more comfortable during hard times.

The theme faith of also aligned with the extant literature in the field. Larsen (2017) found that successful reentry meant so many different things to the female ex-offenders; however, relying on God and experiencing spiritual growth were the reasons identified for their successful reconnection to their communities. Similarly, Nyamathi et al. (2016) suggested that successful reentry requires a reorientation of self. With faith and church support, five participants in the current study were successful and remained positive throughout the challenges they faced during reentry.

The theme of faith aligned with the EST on the mesosystem level. Mesosystems are the connections and links across microsystems that explain how school, church, work, and home life influence the development of ex-offenders (Patten et al., 2018). The mesosystem level includes how interpersonal relationships affect the offenders' success (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The participants in this study shared that they used faith to maintain their mindsets and that the ability to have faith allowed them to successfully complete requirements needed to reenter into society.

Theme 6: Determination

The personal determination to succeed affects female ex-offenders' ability to reintegrate back into society successfully. The participants in this study commented on the need to be determined and focused on becoming employed to provide for themselves and to avoid returning to prison. Participant 4 stated, "Determination helped me when they took my kids because I had to do right. It really put me back on the straight and narrow path." Participant 9 stated, "A female ex-offender's success is determined by her

self-motivation.” The participants shared that they were determined to do what was necessary to stay motivated to complete postincarceration requirements and to connect back to their community.

The theme of determination did align with the literature review. Zortman et al. (2016) found that when study participants improved their attitudes and behaviors and increased their respect for reentry programs and staff, their chance of completing such programs increased. Similarly, Nyamathi et al. (2016) suggested that successful reentry requires a reorientation of self. Larsen (2017) suggested programs for the female offender should provide skill development effective for coping with life changes, Determination was used to help` female ex-offenders from this study to make choices and fulfill requirements that increased their chances to reconnect successfully to society.

The theme of determination aligned with the EST at the macrosystem level. The macrosystem level is used to address the relationship between an individual and the system, or the impact of an individual by public policies, state or federal laws, and social conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). According to Brown et al. (2018), the macrosystem refers to the cultural context or societal views, societal belief systems, cultural norms, policies, and laws that directly impact an individual. Participants in this study used determination to rebuild relationships in areas of their lives, such as returning to school finding employment and developing the skills needed to reconnect to their community.

Theme 7: Accountable

Study participants agreed that being accountable for their lives led them to be responsible for their actions and willing to move forward. Participant 10 shared that having a probation officer made her more accountable. She shared “I’ve been to prison before, but the difference this time is I want to make herself proud.” Participant 1 stated, “I haven’t owned up to my past, but now I want to own up to it. I cannot be ashamed anymore.” Accountable female ex-offenders realized that they had more control. The study participants learned that being accountable contributed to their reentry success; accountability was a personal choice that helped them reintegrate back into their communities.

The theme of accountability did align with the literature review. Female ex-offenders experience more shame because of their criminal behaviors than male ex-offenders; thus, they are more likely to reoffend (Valera et al., 2017). According to Heidemann et al. (2016), other successful aspects shared by the females are being able to help family members; having their own place to live; and persevering through challenges, such as substance abuse, mental illness, trauma, and violence. When female ex-offenders are not making excuses for their criminal behavior and taking accountability for their actions, they are able to develop networks that are useful towards their success with reintegration.

The theme of accountability aligned with the theory EST on the mesosystem structure level. The mesosystem level includes how interpersonal relationships affect the

offenders' success (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The mesosystem level affects ex-offenders while they attend different types of services that structure social skills (Patten et al., 2018). Female ex-offenders' interpersonal relationships and they decided to make positive changes to their ways of thinking.

Theme 8: Education

When a female exoffender exits prison, having some type of education or training eases her transition back into society. Participant 9 stated, "Some kind of training...I don't want to go to college, but I don't mind having some kind of education because all I have is a high school diploma." Participant 2 shared,

I am so grateful that I was able to pay my school fines off and return to school. I am working and going to school. I am going to the community college and working on a two-year human services degree. Once I finish school, I can help other people who are coming out of prison like I did.

The more education the female exoffender has, the better off she will be during her search for employment and is likely to not return to prison.

The theme of employment aligned with the literature review. Employers are more likely to hire ex-offenders who are educated (South et al., 2017). According to Hall (2015), education or training is connected to employment, and employers are more willing to hire educated ex-offenders. I found that when a female ex-offender is educated, she is able to find better opportunities for employment.

The theme of education did align with the theory EST. Program requirements, such as attending drug treatment classes or attending a vocational training skill builder for employment, are examples of the macro system level. The macrosystem encompasses the cultural environment that a person lives and other systems that affect them. (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The macrosystem refers to the cultural context that include policies, and laws that directly impact female ex-offenders (Brown et al., 2018). Participants in this study shared the value of attending effective reentry programs, such as those designed for ex-offenders to become employable and enrolling in programs that assist with funding for education or training.

Limitations of the Study

This generic, qualitative study was designed to increase understanding of female ex-offenders' experiences as they return to society and transition through reentry programs after being released from prison. I used a generic, qualitative method because my focus was on understanding the perceptions of the female ex-offender, her opinions, and reflection of her reentry experience. As discussed in Chapter 2, there is limited research available about female ex-offenders and reentry programs.

A limitation in this study is the geographic location, because this study only included the experiences of female ex-offenders from North Carolina. The limitation of a traditional qualitative method is it would only allow me to explore participants' perceptions or experiences of one phenomenon (see Collins & Stockton, 2018). The experiences of other participants in other states could have produced different findings

because each state may have different factors and structures in their reentry process. Therefore, future studies should look into other geographic locations to understand population similarities and differences in female reentry programs.

The second limitation of this study was the inability to detect the participants' body language (nonverbal signals) accurately. In accordance with the IRB's direction, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were changed from face-to-face meetings to telephone interviews. The semistructured interview questions were prestructured, which allowed the participants the chance to express their experience in their own words (Percy et al., 2015). To mitigate the limitations of phone interviews, I confirmed the accuracy of the data collected by performing member checking. Member checking is used by researchers to support credibility by ensuring accuracy and completion of information received from the participants (Morse, 2015). I used member checking by sharing the transcription of the interview with the participants to ensure that all gathered information from the interviews was accurate.

The third limitation was that I only interviewed females who were successful and who did not return to prison after 3 years of release. I only explored the participants' perceptions or experiences of one phenomenon, which is only females who were successful in their reentry into society (see Collins & Stockton, 2018). These qualifying characteristics limited my research to the challenges that the female ex-offenders faced and overcame, and the reentry programs they used. I did not have information from female ex-offenders who faced challenges and did not overcome them. The limited

sample group used in this study prevented an understanding of the experiences of female ex-offenders who were not successful once returning to society. Further research should be conducted to gain perspectives about female offenders who exit prison and do not overcome their challenges successfully.

Recommendations

I conducted this study to understand the perceptions of female ex-offenders who had not returned to prison for up to 3 years after their release from prison and who attended reentry programs. The 10 female ex-offenders in this study shared their own experiences with the reentry programs that they attended and the services provided to them.

Future research is needed on the current programs that are working for female ex-offenders in states other than North Carolina. As shared in the literature review, more research is essential to understand the needs of female offenders and how current reentry programs do not meet their specific needs (Vigesaa et al., 2016). Researchers also found that the experiences of female offenders are often misunderstood when applied to reentry programs (Holmstrom et al. 2017). According to research, there are many shortcomings of the system that have a negative impact on female ex-offenders (Brown, 2018). By understanding the perceptions of other female ex-offenders, researchers can compare and contrast components of programs from different states. In addition, job placement must include education and employability training programs. Findings from this study indicate Human service providers should be prepared to provide resources to female ex-offenders,

such as child care, transportation vouchers, relationship building training, and self-love and determination skill building activities that increases the likelihood that their reentry into society will be successful.

Implications

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) EST was used as the theoretical framework in developing the questions that the female participants were asked during the interview process. EST was used as the lens to understand the perceptions of female ex-offenders' experience with reentry programs and their transition back into society after completing reentry programs. There are many implications for social change as a result of this study. The findings of this study contribute to the research about the perceptions of female ex-offenders. According to previous research, some reentry challenges faced by female ex-offenders include regaining custody of minor children and finding safe and affordable housing, family planning, rebuilding child-support social networks, and securing gainful employment (Nyaminthi et al., 2017). Existing paradigms for programs founded on male models fail to consider that female face unique reentry challenges that are different from men (Larsen, 2017; Martilik, 2018). By gaining knowledge from the female ex-offenders, a program can be developed to assist female ex-offenders in building networks and support systems that assist them with their unique challenges to reconnect to society. Results from this study can effect positive social change by educating families about the difficulties female ex-offenders face such as finding employment, education, childcare, or transportation as they transition from institutional life back to the community. When

families understand that returning to society is not always easy for female ex-offenders, they understand the importance of providing emotional support during reentry. The results of this study can also help new female ex-offenders and their families learn strategies for life after prison.

Reentry programs should begin while the female exoffender is in prison and continue once the exoffender has been released into the community. The reentry program should be required of all prisoners who are about to be released, and it provided to ex-offenders during the first months after their release from prison. The findings of this study indicate that positive social change could happen for female ex-offenders if organizations and human service field workers could create programs that meet the unique needs of female ex-offenders. Human service providers could improve the overall impact of reentry programs for female ex-offenders, and providers can be more aware of needs of female ex-offenders in North Carolina.

Reentry programs are designed to help returning citizens reenter society successfully following their incarceration, thereby reducing recidivism, making the community safe, and saving money a successful ex-offenders become tax-paying citizens. These females have served their time and paid their debts to society. The findings from this study will impact society when government and policy makers see clear evidence that female ex-offenders are positively reintegrated back into society. These reintegrated citizens will be prepared to support their children; find employment, education, and stable housing; and will be ready to contribute to society.

Human service providers and organizations serving ex-offenders will learn from this study that each female ex-offender has unique needs and is best served when resources and programs are customized and designed with the correct partnerships. Effective reentry programs for female ex-offenders are a challenge for human service workers and policy makers (Hlavka et al., 2015); therefore, more effective reentry strategies are needed. Guided by current information about the processes that work for female ex-offenders, organizational providers and human service workers can create reentry programs that help ex-offenders increase their life skills. James (2015) found that ex-offenders face challenges in many areas in their lives after incarceration, such as obtaining employment, finding housing, and obtaining higher education. As a result of this study, human service workers can learn about strategies that worked for the participants in this study and learn ways to help female ex-offenders face challenges after prison and while reentering society. The findings of this study can pave the way for positive social change when human service providers and organizations provide reentry programs that meet the unique needs of female ex-offenders.

Conclusion

The purpose of this generic, qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of female ex-offenders who reentered society successfully with the help of reentry programs that they attended. According to research, existing programs for offenders are founded on male models and fail to consider the unique reentry challenges faced by female ex-offenders (Larsen, 2017; Martilik, 2018). Previous

researchers suggested that the needs of female ex-offenders' treatment and reentry success need to be understood so that professionals can better serve the female ex-offender population (Cale et al., 2019). This study will provide human service workers, providers, community leaders, stakeholders, and family members with a better understanding of the reentry process and its challenges for female ex-offenders as they attempt to adjust to life after being released from prison.

The findings of this study addressed the gap in literature by providing an understanding of female ex-offenders' perceptions of reentry programs and their reentry process. Richie (2018) indicated that the thoughts and perspectives of female ex-offenders who have reentered their communities must be considered in reentry program design. Gender-specific reentry programs are needed (Beall, 2018; Martilik, 2018). I interviewed 10 female ex-offenders and received an in-depth description of their perceptions and experience with reentry programs, services, and processes. The findings of this study revealed that females attributed other reasons besides reentry programs for their success.

The females of this study shared the need to have more programs to meet their specific needs such as employment, transportation, or childcare. Rice (2017) suggested that female ex-offenders need gender-responsive reentry programming to address the challenges they face after leaving prison. When policy makers and program providers understand the gender-specific needs of female ex-offenders reentering society after incarceration, the appropriate services for this population are more likely to be provided.

For female ex-offenders to create a foundation to reintegrate successfully back into society, continued research is needed to understand how to decrease the constant growth of the female ex-offender population.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

I am a graduate student at Walden University. I am conducting a research study on the variables that influence successful reentry into society for female ex-offenders. You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as a female exoffender who participated in a reentry program after prison, and who did not return to prison after release.

Before we begin, the interview I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. The purpose of this interview is to hear how your life has been since your release from incarceration. The researcher is interested in your reentry process and reentry participation with support services reintegrating back into the community and society. The researcher is interested in your feelings and opinions; there are no right or wrong answer, feel free to tell your story.

Your identity and the confidentiality of your answers will be secured and protected. To facilitate note taking, I audio taped our conversations today. Please let me know if you need to stop or would like to stop the interview at any time. If you would prefer not to answer a question, please let me know. Do you have any questions?

Interview Questions

1. What type of reentry program did you attend?
2. How did you find out about this reentry program that you attended?
3. What services are most important for you? Why?
4. What were your goals after prison and how did you think attending this reentry program would help you reach your goals?
5. How did this reentry program help you?
6. In your opinion, what services are needed to best serve females after being released from prison?

This concludes our interview today. Thank you for participation in this research. Within 2 weeks from today, I will provide you with a copy of the transcribed interview questions and responses via email for your review. Please review the transcription and let me know if there is anything that needs editing from today's interview. I use your information in my study. Feel free to contact me if you have any concerns. I will contact you, if we need to follow up for further discuss about any of your answers again, thank you.