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Risks for African American Male Youth Involved in the Juvenile Justice System

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2020

Abstract

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by

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MSW, University of South Carolina, 2006

BSW, Winthrop University, 2004

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research study was to gain an understanding of the factors and risks that contribute to juvenile delinquency of African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Ecological systems theory was used to examine strategies used by social workers with this population and the effectiveness of those interventions. Individual interviews with 5 social workers recruited using nonprobability sampling were conducted. The interviews were audio-recorded, then manually transcribed. Responses were uploaded into the NVivo software system for coding. The software system was used to identify themes and patterns to substantiate the research question. The study focused on treatment strategies and experiences working with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. Findings were consistent with the social workers' knowledge of the strategies used to work with African American male youth effectively. Findings included strategies to promote positive change, engage youth families, and promote increased community involvement geared explicitly toward African American male youth. Recommendations were made to incorporate more culturally based treatment models and advocate for policy change. The findings were informative and can be used as a guide for further research expanding on specific policy changes needed. Social workers can contribute knowledge and best practices to promote social change and equality for all youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

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Dedication

I am dedicating this project to the women who has greatly impacted my life. All are deceased but will forever live in my heart. My mother, Margaret Cassandra, who always demonstrated strength and courage through all her health challenges. She never complained. She was my rock. My grandmothers' Margaret Gray and Idelia Neal, for their strength and unwavering faith. My great grandmother, Maggie Dixon for being the backbone of the family. I am who I am because of who they were.

I would also like to dedicate this project to my sister Tina. You have been my biggest cheerleader throughout this journey. I love you. Finally, I dedicate this project to my daughter Destani, my granddaughter Arya Michelle, and my goddaughter Mi'Kayla. The path has been made for you. I want you to know there is nothing you cannot do. Work hard and never give up. I love you!

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank God who is truly the head of my life. Without him none of this would have been possible. I want to thank my loving and supportive husband Andre for always encouraging me to keep going. Thank you for taking this journey with me, I could not have done it without you. You always believed in me even when I doubted myself. You were my strength when I felt weak.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

African American male youth entering the juvenile justice system has created a major social issue of concern. African American males are the most overrepresented group in the juvenile justice system (Voisin, Kim, Takahashi, Morotta & Bocanegra, 2017). There are social implications of African American male youth involvement in the juvenile correctional system (Ryan, Williams& Courtney, 2013). These implications include the potential risk of truancy, substance use, and gang involvement (Lucero, Barrett & Jensen, 2015). Not addressing those issues presents the danger of the youth offender later committing crimes as an adult, which creates the potential for more significant adverse outcomes (Barnette et al., 2015; Schlesinger, 2018).

In this study, I examined how social workers can be most effective in working with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system. The South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice (SCDJJ) provides direct services for youth and their families in the community for 46 counties, five secured, and ten camps across the state (SCDJJ, 2019). To better understand how social workers effectively work with this population, I used the action research methodology. Action research considers everyday experiences and focuses on the development of current knowledge while drawing upon varying perspectives and increasing awareness and fostering the improvement of practice (Coghlan, 2016; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). The outcome has the potential for social change by having social workers recognize their responsibilities in working with African American males in the juvenile justice system.

This section contains an introduction, problem statement, purpose statement and research question, nature of the doctoral project, significance of the study, theoretical frameworks, literature review, and summary.

Problem Statement

African American male youth entering the juvenile justice system has created a major social issue of concern because African American male youth come into the juvenile correctional system at a much higher rate than any other ethnic group (Mallet & Stoddard-Dare, 2010; Leiber & Fix, 2019). The incarceration of African American male youth has become a significant social problem, and several factors contribute to the problem. These factors include issues in the family (broken homes), poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence (Mallet & Stoddard-Dare, 2010). In addition to family issues, social influences such as school and neighborhood peer pressure contribute to juvenile delinquency. Therefore, there is a need to understand how effective social workers are in providing services to African American male youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system.

I work directly with many African American male youths who are involved in the juvenile justice system. Many of these youth penetrate deeper into the system for various reasons. Participating in social work team meetings, roundtable discussions, and attending public forums has shown me that there is need to address approaches to African American male youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. I conducted action research to learn how social workers in the Department of Juvenile Justice understand their level of effectiveness in providing services to African American male youth who are

involved in the juvenile justice system. This study's results can be beneficial for social workers by providing insight and understanding on how to be more effective when working with this population.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this action research study was to gain an understanding of the factors and risks that contribute to juvenile delinquency of African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system. A better understanding of how those factors and risks contribute to the high percentage of African American males with involvement in the juvenile justice system could help social workers be more effective in providing clinical services to this population.

Reviewing literature about factors and risks before exploring how social workers understand their effectiveness in providing services to African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system provided insight into the social worker's knowledge and skills when working with this population, helping to identify ways social workers can be most effective in working with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system.

The research question used to inform the analysis for this capstone project was:

RQ: What are the various strategies social workers employ to work effectively with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system?

I identified the need to understand better what factors contribute to African American male youth involvement with the SCDJJ Many researchers attribute delinquent behaviors to environmental, social, and familial issues (Marshall & Haight, 2014). Those

factors and previous juvenile justice involvement increase the youth's risk of falling deeper into the juvenile justice system (Mallet, 2014). Furthermore, research about how social workers try to reduce, deter, and intervene with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system will contribute to social work practice. With this capstone project, I hope to have helped social workers understand their effectiveness when working with African American male youth. Additionally, social workers will be able to use the knowledge gained from this project to help juveniles of other racial/ethnic groups and genders to help alleviate their involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Key Terms

Diversion: An alternative response to the traditional justice system (Loeb, Waung, & Sheeran, 2015)

Status offense: Conduct that is illegal because the child is underage (Siegel & Welsh, 2018)

Juvenile delinquency: "Illicit acts, whether criminal or status offenses, that are committed by youth under the age of 18" (Ajah & Ugwuoke, 2018, p.439).

Juvenile justice system: The court system and other institutions that deal with criminal or delinquent acts committed by minors (Siegel & Welsh, 2018)

Rehabilitation: Corrections programs for juveniles (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2019)

Nature of the Project

I used action research to examine social workers' effectiveness when working with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system. Action research is used

to consider everyday experiences that focus on developing current knowledge while drawing on varying perspectives (Coghlan, 2016). I have a personal interest in the juvenile delinquent population; action research allows the researcher to infuse their values to guide their actions (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). In addition to the researcher's experience and interest in the population, stakeholders have firsthand knowledge of the community researched. Stakeholders' contribution to the research process is invaluable because of their insight and experiences about the studied topic (Stringer, 2014).

Action research is both research and practice-based (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Action research promotes both social and cultural change. Further, action research holds stakeholders accountable for their roles in facilitating social and cultural change (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

Methodology

Action research was the methodology for this project. The findings will provide social workers working with African American male youth with juvenile justice involvement knowledge and skills to intervene with this population effectively. I collected data from existing literature and asked five social workers from the SCDJJ open-ended questions.

Significance of the Study

African American male youth are punished more harshly for offenses than their male peers of other races (Marshall & Haight, 2014), and their punishments are more punitive than rehabilitative (Campbell et al., 2018). This practice contradicts the original intent for creating a juvenile justice system. The juvenile justice system was designed to

be rehabilitative based on the youth's ability to learn and conform to socially appropriate behaviors. I interviewed social workers from SCDJJ to capture their knowledge and experience of working with African American male youth with SCDJJ involvement. Understanding the challenges of providing services for this population from the social workers' perspective can be beneficial to policy makers and other social workers.

For this research project, I sought to explain social workers' understanding of their effectiveness when working with African American male youth involved with the juvenile justice system. In addition to defining social workers' efficacy, this study could also contribute to positive social change through policy implications for addressing disproportionate African American male youth involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

There are many perspectives from which to examine African American male youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. There is the differential association theory, which considers the youth offender's criminal behavior by addressing environmental influences. However, to better understand the issue from a systemic perspective, I chose to explore the problem from the ecological systems theory perspective. Ecological Systems Theory references environmental systems' influences on human development and behaviors of those affected (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The use of ecological systems theory helped me to identify where the breakdown between the juvenile justice system and families lies to provide insight to restructuring the system to reduce the racial disparity of youth incarceration. Norton (2012) discussed how the

environment of an individual impacts their behavior and contributes to their current situation.

The ecological theory was first developed by Bronfenbrenner in the early 1970s and has evolved greatly over the years. Bronfenbrenner examined how the environment and the changing person worked interchangeably (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Bronfenbrenner considered the micro-, macro-, and mesosystem levels of influence on human development. The microlevel of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory recognizes family/home and peer relationships factors that change behavior (Cross, 2017). Schools, churches, and neighborhoods are a part of the mesosystem; local, state, national governments, and social policies are part of macrosystems (Cross, 2017). Each level of systems influences the youth's beliefs and trust level concerning how they are perceived.

Values and Ethics

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) outlined the ethical and professional standards of service, social justice, integrity, competence, and worth of the person, which affirms helping those in need (NASW, 2017). Social workers' primary goal is to help those in need and address social problems. This principle aligns with challenging social injustice.

The NASW outlines the professional standard of competence and developing and enhancing a social worker's professional expertise is imperative to effectively work with delinquent youth (NASW, 2017). Competency in the practice area is essential for social workers in understanding their roles in the agency.

Social workers are faced with many ethical responsibilities. As a social worker working in the juvenile justice system and attempting to be a change agent, it is essential that I respect the client's right to self-determination (NASW, 2017). While it is difficult to watch the client continually make a poor decision, the process requires the social worker to guide and encourage change understanding that ultimately, the responsibility lies solely with the client.

Differing values present an ethical barrier that could compromise the ethical responsibilities of the social worker (Young, 2015). There are times when the social worker's responsibility towards the client may conflict with a policy, which could potentially harm the therapeutic relationship. Varying viewpoints about where the social worker's loyalty lies also could contribute to compromising ethical values (Young, 2015).

All ethical concerns that arose were addressed, including those related to storing collected data. Considering how closely the social workers work within the agency, ensuring anonymity was imperative. Another ethical issue considered was refraining from researcher bias based on my personal experience with this population.

Literature Review

Information for the literature review came from various sources. I used Walden University's library to find peer-reviewed articles and books. I used databases such as Social Work Abstracts, Soc-INDEX with full texts, and Psych INFO. I limited my research searches to publications from 2013 to the present. Key terms used for database searches were *African American male youth, juvenile justice system, juvenile delinquency, rehabilitation,* and *recidivism*. Historical information from the Office of

Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and SCDJJ were utilized to provide context for current concerns.

Juvenile Justice System

Before the first juvenile court system was established in 1889, children who committed crimes were sent to adult prisons. Children as young as the age of seven were considered competent and sentenced as adults. The conditions of those facilities were filthy and unsafe for habitation (Brownell & Roberts, 2002). Addams and Lathrop, who were pioneers and founders of the Settlement House Movement, understood the injustice of treating youth as adults in the judicial system and advocated for legislation that focused on rehabilitation versus punishment. They were also instrumental in establishing the first juvenile court system (Lundblad, 1995).

Many efforts have been made to create a separation between the adult justice system and the juvenile justice system. Either status or delinquent offenses categorize youth. Status offenses are minor charges, and delinquent offenses are criminal. The practice of classifying children based on such distinctions of behavior continues on a state-by-state basis, with South Carolina being one of three states to label status offenders as delinquent (Steinke & Martin, 2014).

During the 1960s, the Supreme Court considered the rights of accused youth in juvenile court hearings by ensuring they were provided rehabilitative services and protected from unfair incarceration (Grisso, Fountain, NeMoyer, & Thornton, (2019). However, during the 1980s to 1995, juvenile crime had significantly increased, and the focus was then on public safety, which led to more youth being incarcerated (Grisso et

al., 2019). According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2019) statistical report, the disparity in arrest rates between Caucasian youth and African American youth have increased in recent years. The data reflected that African American youth in 1995 were 2.1 times more likely to be arrested than their Caucasian peers; however, by 2018, this ratio increased to 2.6 times (OJJDP, 2019).

There are direct and indirect consequences of youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. More specifically, those youths who have been adjudicated delinquent are at higher risk of poor educational, employment, and income outcomes. African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system are more likely to enter into the adult system than those who are not. (Evangelist, Ryan, Victor, Moore & Perron, 2017).

Juvenile Delinquent

A youth who commits a crime and is adjudicated in juvenile court is considered a delinquent. South Carolina Children's law defines a juvenile or child as a person less than 17 years of age. However, it excludes a person sixteen years of age or older charged with a Class A, B, C, or D felony (South Carolina Children's Law, 2019). Juvenile delinquency has also been defined as "illegal acts, whether criminal or status offenses, which are committed by youth under the age of 18" (Ajah & Ugwuoke, 2018, p.439).

There has been ongoing conflict as to how the juvenile justice system should look. The back and forth debates and practices of restorative and punitive methods for addressing juvenile delinquency continues today. Unfortunately, how juvenile delinquency is resolved is based on the beliefs of those who make legislative decisions

(Rapp & Stewart, 2014). Research suggests gender and race are predictors of adolescent delinquency (Lucero et al., 2015). Hence, the disproportionately high rate of African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system may be caused by discriminatory, race-based practices by law enforcement and school officials (Lucero et al., 2015).

Siegel and Welsh (2018) described the social implications of not addressing juvenile delinquency. The consequences have a ripple effect through entire systems. Family and school systems are two indicators of this ripple effect. Family structure has implications for delinquency risks (Lucero et al., 2015). Research suggests children of single-parent households have more behavioral problems than children of two-parent households (Morrow, Villodas, & Cunius, 2019). Those youths may not be supervised appropriately or receive the necessary support, allowing them to engage in delinquent behaviors.

School to Prison Pipeline

Siegel and Welsh (2018) described students with disciplinary and school-related behavioral problems who become more formally involved in the juvenile justice system due to their behaviors on the school to prison pipeline. Mendoza, Blake, Marchbanks, and Ragan (2020) suggested that African American males are 3 times more likely to be suspended from school than Caucasian males. Hirschfield (2018) discussed the correlation between a youth's school experience and future involvement in the juvenile justice system. Students of color, specifically African American male youth, were disproportionately represented in school discipline statistics (McCarter, 2017). According

to McCarter's study, 43% of African American students between the sixth and twelfth grade were suspended, more than the rate of Hispanic students (22%) and Caucasian students (16%). Schools inadvertently influence the disproportionality of African American male youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. Decisions regarding disciplinary actions have been perceived as biased (Hirschfield, 2018).

Since the implementation of zero tolerance policies in the early 1990s, there has been a significant increase in school suspensions and expulsions (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014). These policies were initially designed to address violence and drug use on school premises. Schiff (2018) stated there is no evidence of zero tolerance policies improving school safety. However, zero tolerance is imposed more on African American male youth than any other race or gender of the same age group, even for less severe offenses (Haight, Kayama, & Gibson, 2016). When studying this problem by state, Schiff (2018) reported that Florida leads the nation in suspensions, and South Carolina is one of the top states on the list for secondary school level suspensions. The perceived threat of aggression and violence influence school officials' decisions when disciplining those youths.

African American males are profiled more often and experience more school challenges than any other group (Watson, Washington, & Stepteau-Watson, 2015). This treatment usually results in African American male youth dealing with problems conforming socially (Watson, et al., 2015). Research also shows how language is used differently when describing African American male youths' behaviors versus their racial counterparts (Haight et al., 2016). The style of language is typically more criminal and

punitive in tone. This negatively impacts African American male youth in how they view their social status within the school community (Haight et al., 2016).

Disproportionate Minority Contact

African American male youth are historically treated more harshly and receive more punishments than any other ethnic group (Campbell et al., 2018). This overrepresentation of African American male youth is present throughout the entire juvenile justice system (Donnelly, 2018). This is known as disproportionate minority contact, the excessive number of minority youth with contact to the juvenile justice system compared to their representation in the general population (Gann, 2018). This phenomenon was first recognized as a significant problem in the 1980s by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Mallet, 2018).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2019) reported that counties with established diversion programs had disproportionally less minority juvenile justice department contact, and those with minimal support for youth diversionary programs experienced greater disproportionate minority contact (OJJDP, 2019).

Diversion

To deter involvement with the juvenile justice system, many courts redirect youth to diversion programs. Diversion programs were designed to be used as a preventive measure. Diversion programs were derived from the notion of juvenile justice involvement being more harmful to the youth and encouraging future delinquent behaviors (Abrams, 2013). Schlesinger (2018) suggested diversion programs are

beneficial in keeping offending youth from entering more deeper into the juvenile justice system. Schlesinger also discussed the advantages of providing diversionary programs in youth communities versus in the justice system. Butts (2016) described diversion programs as a way of helping youth and keeping them out of the juvenile justice system. Diversion programs are less formal ways of addressing minor offenses of first-time offenders with minimal bureaucracy and greater cost-effectiveness (Butts, 2016). According to Gann (2019), however, African American youth were significantly less likely to be diverted and more likely to be formally petitioned at intake than Caucasian youth.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitative services in the juvenile justice system were established to protect and help youth by providing them services within their communities to deter delinquent behaviors (Mears, Pickett, & Mancini, 2015). Abrams (2013) suggested the overuse of the juvenile justice system to be ineffective. Rehabilitation is used as an intervention tool to help the youth learn more socially appropriate ways of thinking and acting. Research has proven an adolescent's brain has not developed fully, and they may lack to ability to understand the long-term implications of short-term behaviors (Troutman, 2018). Cochran and Mears (2015) implied minority youth being less likely to receive rehabilitative interventions due to the perception of them being more threatening than nonminority youth and a bias of them being less treatable.

Summary

African American male youth entering the juvenile justice system is a major
social issue of concern. There are both short- and long-term social implications to
disproportionate African American youth involvement with the juvenile justice system.
The literature review provided insight into the historical context, scope, and depth of the
social justice problem.

For this research project, I focused on African American male youth involved in
the juvenile justice system. Rosa and Tudge (2013) discussed how environmental and
family issues impact juvenile delinquency. The problems of juvenile delinquency,
specifically with African American male youth, are systemic. Therefore, as I reviewed
the literature, one gap I encountered is the lack of research about how African American
male youth face institutional and racial discrimination and racism that other racial/ethnic
groups might not face and that impact them being involved in the juvenile justice system.
The ecological systems theory was used to provide support and understanding of the
problem. I conducted individual interviews with social workers from SCDJJ to seek
clarification and understanding of their effectiveness when working with African
American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

In Section 2, I discuss the research design, operational definitions, methodology,
participants, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis, and values and ethics.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Through my capstone project I aimed to understand how productive social workers are in providing services to African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. Therefore, with this study, I hope social workers will be informed about factors and risks that contribute to juvenile delinquency of African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system. I also hope to understand if the various strategies they use are effective when providing clinical services to this population. This section outlines the research design, methodology, data analysis, and ethical procedures used for conducting the individual interviews with social workers in South Carolina working with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Research Design

African American male youth involvement in the juvenile justice system is a social issue of concern (Leiber & Fix, 2019). I conducted action research through individual interviews with social workers who work in the juvenile justice system in South Carolina. I identified themes that impact the participants' experiences when working with African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The individual interviews delineated the skills of social workers when working with this population. I used the qualitative research design to explore social workers' experiences.

Qualitative research is used to improve programs through exploration of the more difficult fundamentals to measure without the constraints of more structured data

collection methods (Royse, Thyer, & Padgett, 2017). Babbie (2016) described research as a form of exploration. Thus, in this capstone, I explored the research question:

RQ: What are the various strategies social workers employed to work effectively with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system?

Looking at the data from a qualitative perspective, I explored challenges and barriers the social workers identified when working with African American male youth with Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) involvement.

Operational Definitions

Babbie (2016) explained the significance of providing clear and specific operational definitions when identifying variables and how they help eliminate the reader's potential for personal interpretation.

Juvenile delinquency: Illegal acts, whether criminal or status offenses, committed by youth under the age of 18" (Ajah & Ugwuoke, 2018, p. 439).

Juvenile justice system: The court system or institutions that deal with criminal or delinquent acts committed by minors (Siegel & Welsh, 2018)

Policy advocacy: Identifying policies in organizational, community, government and legislative settings that contribute to social problems that create further barriers for a designated population or group (Jansson 2014).

I used operational definitions for consistency and clarity of focus for this capstone. I created questions for the individual interviews that conformed to the construct of the operational definitions outlined.

Methodology

I collected data through individual interviews with five social workers who had at least 2 years of working experience with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. I received permission to conduct individual interviews from the DSW coordinator for the following reasons: I wanted to increase the probability of more participation and more honest responses to the research questions. From the perspective of more engagement, the agency's social workers are located all over the state. It would have been difficult scheduling/coordinating a group to come together. I believed the social workers participating in this study would be more candid when responding to the interview questions. This method of collecting data also increased my ability to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

Siegel and Welsh (2018) discussed the social implications of not addressing juvenile delinquency. Thus, I hoped to understand how effective social workers are in providing services to African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

Participants

I selected five licensed social workers from the state of South Carolina with at least 2 years of experience working with African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system to participate in the study. I used nonprobability sampling for qualitative analysis to select participants that met specific criteria essential for the research topic (see Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2013). I sought to examine

how social workers can be most effective in working with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system.

The recruitment process involved sending e-mails to all social workers from the SCDJJ. The pool of potential participants was identified through the agency e-mail. The agency granted prior approval through the letter of cooperation. This was done because I work in the same agency from which I was seeking participation. However, it is essential to note the participants worked with in different areas of the agency. These areas included the community, evaluation centers, and long-term/commitment facilities. Participants were required to have at least 2 years of experience working with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system in South Carolina and hold a Master of Social Work degree. The first e-mail was an invitation e-mail, which included a brief description of the study, its purpose, and how it would be conducted. My contact information was also provided. Those who expressed interest received a follow-up e-mail that contained the consent form and instructions on responding with "I consent" if they agreed to participate. The purpose of using e-mail for recruitment was for consistency and tracking.

The e-mail was sent to 28 potential participants. Of those 28, only eight responded. The first five participants who met participant criteria and expressed interest in the study were selected. The five participants were all females, three were African American, and the other two were Caucasian, and their ages ranged from 32-66. The years of experience was between 4 to 15 years. Additionally, their expertise was

extensive in working in the community, evaluation and treatment facilities, and secured facilities where African American male youth were committed.

Instruments

I used open-ended questions during the individual interviews allowing participants to respond in their own words without limitations from me and to give their opinion about what was being asked (see Babbie, 2016). At the beginning of each interview, I asked the participants demographic questions, followed by guided open-ended questions. This process allowed the social worker to share information about themselves first and then their thoughts about working with African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. To better understand the social worker's experience working with this population, the questions used to guide the discussion included:

- What has been your experience working with African American male youth with DJJ involvement?

- What have been some challenging situations you have faced when working with African American male youth?

- In your role, how do you think this population can be better served?

Data Collection Procedures

I conducted face to face interviews with five master's level social workers from the SCDJJ who each had a minimum of 2 years' experience working with African American male youth. Each participant was allocated an hour for their interview; however, the average length was 45 minutes. Each interview began with thanking the

participant, discussing the study's purpose, going over informed consent, reminding participants that the interview was voluntary, and discussed confidentiality. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure participant responses were accurately notated and later transcribed.

The interviews also consisted of the participants answering demographic questions. The questions included them providing their names for identification purposes, their age, the number of years as a social worker, and the number of years each worked with African American male youth with DJJ involvement.

Data Analysis

The collected data were coded and analyzed for content, themes, and patterns to ensure the research questions were answered (see McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). For clarity, the responses were categorized by topics. This process helped with ensuring the reliability of responses. The data was recorded through an audio system. I recorded the interviews and manually transcribed the responses for accuracy. The participants were provided with a copy of the transcribed interview to ensure responses were translated as intended. This form of member checking is a quality control measure to ensure transparency, credibility, and accuracy (Stringer, 2007).

I later inserted the transcribed interviews into the NVivo software system for coding and identifying themes and patterns. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software used by researchers globally (QSR International, 2019).

Ethical Procedures

Before conducting my study, I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), 05-15-20-0614280, which expires on May 14, 2021. All guidelines outlined in the IRB application were followed to ensure ethical responsibility. Each participant received an e-mail copy of the informed consent before the scheduled interviews that explained the study's goals, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were informed that the interviews were voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any point. To further ensure participant confidentiality, each participant was given a number code connected to their responses to the interview questions. The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of 5 years, after which will be shredded.

Summary

In this section of the study, I discussed the plan used for collecting data through individual interviews, the recruitment of participants, and how contact was made. Ethical concerns were also addressed, including confidentiality and storing information for a minimum of 5 years. By conducting the individual interviews with the five master's level social workers, I explored the social worker's experiences when working with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. The interviews were audio-recorded then transcribed into a written format, coded, and analyzed based on the research questions. The next section presents the findings from the interviews.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this action research study was to gain an understanding of the factors and risks that contribute to juvenile delinquency of African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Having worked with incarcerated youth and provided community-based services to African American youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system, I identified the need for this study to explore the effectiveness of the strategies used with this population. Action research is collaborative; gaining knowledge of other participants' experiences can contribute to social and cultural transformation (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). I used individual interviews to explore ways of working effectively with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. The research question that guided this study was:

RQ: What are the various strategies social workers employed to work effectively with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system?

I interviewed five master's level social workers with a minimum of 2 years' experience working with African American male youth with DJJ involvement. The interviews were audio-recorded, then manually transcribed. I uploaded responses into the NVivo software system for coding. I used the software system to identify themes and patterns to answer the research question. In this section, I discuss the analysis techniques, validation procedures, limitations, and findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

Upon obtaining IRB approval, I began the recruitment process of social workers by sending e-mails to all social workers in the SCDJJ. The agency granted prior approval

through a letter of cooperation. The e-mail was sent to 28 potential participants. Of the 28, eight responded. The first five participants who met participant criteria and expressed interest in the study were selected. I scheduled interviews based on the participant's availability and conducted within one week of selecting the participants. To ensure confidentiality, I assigned participants a number. Each participant was given an hour for their interview. However, the average length of time for each interview was 45 minutes.

At the beginning of the interview, I asked participants demographic questions that helped me learn more about my sample population. The participants included three African American and two Caucasian females, ages ranged from 32-66, and years of experience were 4 to 15. Each interview began with going over the background and purpose of the research project. Afterward, I reviewed the consent form and highlighted the mandated reporting portion if any unethical behavior was disclosed. The participants were asked to respond via e-mail "I consent" after receiving the formal invitation e-mail to participate in the study. It stated, "If you understand the study well enough to participate, you can reply to this e-mail with the words 'I consent.'" For responses to unclear questions, clarification was sought to ensure what the participant said was conveyed accurately. I thanked participants for their participation in the study and reminded them that they would receive a copy of their transcribed interview because this was a form of member checking to ensure accuracy of their responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). At the end of the interview, I gave each participant a $25 Visa gift card for their participation.

Transcription of the interviews was done manually and typed in a Microsoft Word document. Manually transcribing the interviews allowed me to become more immersed in the research study and focus on emerging themes (see Babbie, 2016). Completion of transcribing occurred within 1 week after conducting the individual interviews. During each interview, I took notes of keywords and phrases and carefully listened to each interview to ensure accurate transcription to identify themes and patterns gathered from the responses. The amount of time it took to transcribe an interview was 3 to 5 hours.

Upon completion of the transcription process, data were coded by importing transcriptions into NVivo for analysis. The data analysis software helped identify categories and themes to support the research question. I provide a description of the findings that will help understand the research question and themes emerging from the data in this section.

Findings

With having personal experience working with this population in both the community and institutional settings of the juvenile justice system, I observed a disproportionate number of African American male youth were incarcerated compared to the male youth of other races. I focused on understanding different social workers' experiences working with this population in the community and in the institutional setting. I also explored various strategies used by social workers and their effectiveness with this population. In addition to defining social workers' efficiency, which includes rapport building and family involvement, I addressed policy implications that impact the disproportionate African American male youth involvement in the juvenile justice

system. Further gaining knowledge related to the social worker's challenges and experiences, I focused on the effectiveness and clinical services provided.

Findings from the study were enlightening about how social workers described their experiences working with African American male youth with DJJ involvement. I focused on the strategies the social workers used and the effectiveness of those strategies when working with this population and on unexpected findings. In the coming section, I provide an in-depth discussion of the results.

Sample Characteristics

The demographic questions focus was on the age, ethnicity, and gender of each participant. The questions also consisted of addressing years of experience as a social worker, years working with the juvenile delinquent population and, specifically, African American male youth at the SCDJJ. I asked each participant to list their credentials and certifications.

The characteristics of the participants were five female social workers between 32 and 66 years of age. The sample consisted of three African American females and two Caucasian females. The participants' years of experience ranged from 4 to 15 years. All participants were licensed master's level social workers, with two working on their independent licensure. The participants' experience varied from working in the community, evaluation and treatment facilities, and secured facilities.

<div align="center">

Themes

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This study was based on exploring the various strategies social workers employed to work effectively with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system. I

constructed interview questions to explore social workers' experience, knowledge, and skills when engaging with this population. Additionally, I sought to explore the barriers and challenges social workers faced when working with this population. From the response to the questions asked, twelve themes emerged, which were consolidated into six identified themes and two subthemes. These themes directly correlated with the research questions in the study. The identified themes were: (a) experiences/challenges, (b) family involvement/relationships, (c) clinical/treatment services, (d) cultural competency, (e) resource availability, and (f) policy changes. When discussing the findings, I used number coding to maintain the confidentiality of participants. When discussing the findings, participants were identified by the number to maintain confidentiality.

The first two questions were designed to gain more specific background information related to the knowledge and experience of the social worker working with African American male youth with DJJ involvement than the demographic questions. Each participant actively engaged during the interview process. However, when participants would give vague responses or deviate from the questions asked, I would either use reflective phrases or repeat the question to gain clarity.

Experiences/Challenges

Participants expressed having a good working relationship with African American males with involvement in the juvenile justice system. However, the Caucasian social workers described having the most positive experience working with this population. The social workers described having a more positive experience working with the youth and

felt they were more receptive to interventions than Caucasian families. Participant 3 stated, "I feel my experience is positive because I treat all my families the same. I encourage the families to be honest with me no matter if they think it will hurt my feelings." Participant 4 responded, "I don't think my experience has been that different than working with anyone else. To me they are just kids, that I have worked with them." She went on to say, "I work much better I think, although that might be open to discussion, with African American male youth, than I do with entitled White youth, they are the ones I have the biggest problems with."

Two of the three African American social workers expressed feeling disheartened when working with this population in part due to the lack of family support and involvement with the youth. Participant 1 expressed:

> So, as it relates to my experience with the African American male population, I would say that I was disheartened a lot because I can remember, you know, even talking to the ones as they would come into the detention center a cop was bringing him in and he was boasting and bragging about how the cop came to his house and allowed him to finish smoking some of his marijuana before hitting it out of his hand.

She went on to say:

> And so, at that point one of them was like wow you are really glorifying that life, so I literally had to talk to him, and was like hey man that's not cool and that's not good that he allowed you to do something like that.

Participant 5 stated:

> I'll say it has been interesting and rewarding at the same time. I think most of the
> difficult part is working with the families. 'Cause a lot of the kids are a product of
> their family and right now there is a lack of supervision with the kids we have
> today versus when I first started. When I first started around 15 years ago, we had
> more of the hard-core criminals that had major charges like murder, armed
> robbery, yet they were respectful especially to African American females, females
> in general, and if you were to contact their families, a lot of times, even though
> their father probably weren't involved, the moms would actually get on their kids.
> But nowadays, the kids we have now have a lack of regard for humans for people
> in general.

Overall, each participant expressed having positive experiences with this population.

Challenging situations faced when working with African American male
youth. Three social workers identified family involvement and support as a challenge
when working with African American male youth with juvenile justice involvement. As
it relates to family involvement Participant 1 expressed:

> To buy in cause we can do all we can do when we got them, but if they don't
> carry them out or put the interventions in place even for the kids who weren't in
> the system that were walk ins, I would go out and put a whole plan in place. She
> did take him to drug treatment, but as far as expectations, have rules, that was
> another one . . . But you not following through.

Participant 2 stated: "The youth did not have the support they needed, and they did not have appropriate outlets and were often stigmatized." She went on to explain the challenges she faced as, "their frustrations, their lack of education, lack of knowledge of resources, broken, lack of confidence and wanting to fit in and belong which leads to gang involvement which leads to further criminal activity."

Participant 3 shared an experience early in her career when she was told there was nothing she could do to help an African American because she was White. She shared how that statement was not made by the youth, but an African American adult. She went on to say how that was discouraging to hear but she had to respect his feelings. From that experience, Participant 3 shared how she always encourages her youth to be honest with her no matter what. Participant 4 explained:

I don't want to over simplify this, but and I don't think I am denial when I say this. But I don't think my experience has been that different than working with anyone else. Too me they are just kids that I have worked with them. I think I probably have more empathy in a lot of ways for them in a lot of ways. I feel like they have the deck stacked against them, feel like they don't have a level playing field. I feel like they need every possible advantage that we can give them, encouraging words we can give them.

Participant 5 reflected:

Getting the family on board, and being able, having the families realize that supervision is important at home. Training is important at home, actually spending time with your kid and talking to them that part is important at home.

She went on to say, "I've had situations where I was frustrated with getting referrals from the school and things like that."

Family Involvement

Social workers understand the importance of family involvement when working with the youth. Unfortunately, social workers identified family involvement to be a barrier when working with African American male youth. Participant 1 shared an experience with a family who regularly spoke negatively to and about their son. She went on to describe how she attempted to work with the parents on positive engagement. Participant 1 also discussed challenges with parents following through with treatment recommendations. Participant 2 stated, "There is a greater chance for a positive outcome when the family is supportive and willing to work through the process with the youth." Participant 5 elaborated:

Getting the family on board, and being able, having the families realize that supervision is important at home. Training is important at home, actually spending time with your kid and talking to them that part is important at home. A lot of kids these days are more left to fend for themselves to kind of take care of themselves a lot of parents have to work two and three jobs. So, a lot of times kids are left home with older siblings. And they are not really going to listen to their older siblings like that. And the streets are actually raising them which results in the number of AA kids we have here at DJJ.

Clinical/Treatment Services

Social workers understand the need for appropriate clinical services/treatment to work with African American male youth effectively. The social workers discussed providing individual, group, and family counseling. Individual counseling focuses on decision-making, anger management, impulse control, communication skills, and healthy relationships/boundaries, to name a few. Participant 2 described the effectiveness of individual counseling as: "Individual counseling has been effective because it allows identifying needs, to be heard, and to understand they have someone to advocate for them and give them the knowledge they need to overcome obstacles and barriers."

Group counseling consisted of anger management, victim impact, and independent living skills. All five participants stated they use cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) when working with the identified population. Two of the participants discussed the benefits of motivational interviews. When discussing motivational interviewing, Participant 4 shared:

> The one I use the most is motivational interviewing and just trying to talk with them about what their goals are and where they would like to see themselves and how what they are doing now works into that and whether that is working well for them and whether they thought they need or want to make any changes and what I can do maybe to support them in doing that. So, I think just about without a doubt that is what I use the most.

Participant 4 also discussed doing additional work with the youth, including victim impact and diversion work. She stated, " I have them write apology letters and I have

them write papers on how to handle something different the next time and what's their plan for the next time this comes up, I make them be real specific."

Two participants discussed using trauma-focused therapy. Participant 2 discussed the benefits of trauma-focused therapy by stating, " Families are exhausted. TF-CBT is also effective because it focuses on their trauma and normalizes some of the things they have experienced." However, three of the participants found trauma-focused therapy to be ineffective with African American male youth in the system. Participant 5 stated: "Everyone is looking for the outcome. Solution-focused therapy and CBT were the most effective with African American male youth." She further stated:

> Everybody wants a positive outcome so in order to get a positive outcome, there are some things you have to change and one of those things you have to change is your thought process and how you do business and that is what I use with our African American men in order to get that reward that desire that you want, there are some things on the front end that you have to change. And that's how you think. I kind of mix that with solution focus therapy. Because the solution for all the kids I work with is to get back home. So, to get back home what are some things you have to do to get back home. I kind of focus on the end first versus why you are here.

Skills needed. Social workers understand the importance of building rapport with the youth. With rapport building, establishing trust was also a critical skill needed by social workers. The social workers discussed the importance of listening and displaying empathy. The social workers also expressed being culturally aware as a skill needed

when working with African American males and their families. Participant 2 explained, "Knowledge about different interventions, knowledge about different populations, respect the cultural differences, support and guidance, integrity, and the ability to have self-care" as important skills needed when working with this population.

Participant 3 stated:

I hate to be a broken record but its the rapport building, that is huge, getting a kid to trust you and feel like they can come to you with their problems and really open to you, so that is really huge for me and also just kind of being fair and respectful you know, and knowing that it is okay to talk about difficult things. If a kid were to kind of say, you know, you don't understand because you are a different race.

Participant 4 elaborated:

I think they need to be willing to, and I am saying this like I do all this which I don't, but I think they need to be willing to help develop new programs if needs are identified. They need to be able to network with other people in the community other professionals in the community, build relationships with other agencies.

Participant 4 also shared:

It was okay to let the families know that you may not be able to relate directly with their situation, but you can still learn to understand through them. Both participants' three and four expressed the value in showing empathy and how that extends into demonstrating cultural competency.

Participant 5 went on to state that "being humble is a skill needed by social workers." Social workers understand their roles when providing treatment services to African American male youth involved in the juvenile system as it relates to demonstrating cultural competency.

Cultural Competency

Social workers understand their roles when providing treatment services to African American male youth involved in the juvenile system related to demonstrating cultural competency. Participant 3 discussed cultural competency by sharing, "But, I try to be understanding of any cultural you know, differences and that kind of stuff if it comes to that. But at the end of the day, I kind of look at the issue at hand."
Participant 4 stated:

> It was okay to let the families know that you may not be able to relate directly with their situation but you can still learn to understand through them. Both participants' three and four expressed the value in showing empathy and how that extends into demonstrating cultural competency.

Participant 5 expressed, "Get familiar with what they are going through," as another way of demonstrating cultural competency.

Rapport building. Social workers understand the importance of rapport building when working with African American male youth. Social workers stated being honest and transparent were essential to maintain rapport with African American male youth. The common theme among the social workers when building rapport was respect. Three of the five participants stated self-disclosure, when appropriate, was beneficial in

building rapport with African American male youth. Participant 1 stated, "Social workers can maintain rapport by being honest and being yourself." She continued saying, "the youth can pick out when you are pretending." Participant 2 communicated, "Honesty, transparency, do what you say, acknowledge your limits." Participant 3 stated, " She built rapport by making the youth feel comfortable and letting them know they can talk to her. She went on to say that they respond better when she is direct and to the point." Participant 4 discussed the value, "To listen, to refrain from making judgments. And I guess I always try to develop some rapport before I go into intake and the risk assessment and all that." Participant 5 elaborated by saying:

> The basic skills that you learn in Social Work 101. Active listening. To me to listen more and talk less. Because if you listen more and talk less you can get to the bottom of it, you can get to the problem. And that way you are able to help them. A lot of times we put goals on what we want them to do but it has to be something they want to do in order for them to buy into it.

In addition, to the skills identified by Participant 5 they shared:

> I would say get familiar with what's going on in the world today. I am not going to say get on their level. But listen to the music they are listening to. Try listening to the music they are listening to see to see what they are listening to. Talk to them. Get familiar with what they are going through. Learn the new trends. Continue to do more research. A lot of times we take what we learned in school 20 and 30 years ago and try to apply it to young people today and that doesn't work. I would say be personable especially with AA guys they'll be like I cant

talk to her she is uppity. You have to make them comfortable enough to talk to you if you are really trying to help them.

Resource Availability

Social workers identified the availability of resources to serve African American male youth as a challenge. Participant 1 expressed, "The limited amount of resources in the community presents a barrier when working with those youths."

Participant 4 said, "There being a saturation of resources in the community which other agencies also utilize which limits the availability of service providers." Participant 5 discussed the importance of more current and relevant curriculum to better serve African American male youth with DJJ involvement.

Policy Changes

The participants agreed that policy changes were needed. However, those changes varied. Some of the participants expressed policy needed changing systemically. Participant 1 shared:

I definitely had some issues with when it came to probation and violation and things of that nature because I think they took a lot of that power away from probation officers who knows the children and so when you have other people making decisions as to what should happen.

She went on to express," Policy need to change, DJJ structure needs to change. We talk about rehabilitation; how can we rehabilitate anyone if they don't have a fighting chance." Participant 2 concluded:

Policy needs to change, the structure altogether is flawed, there are no policies to protect these children. There are no policies to protect African American males, there are no policies to give preventative services and they are often charged with the same charges as a Caucasian American and then they get a severe time. For example, two kids with criminal sexual conduct (CSC) charges one goes home and one gets three to six years or detained until he is 21. That is a disadvantage when policy does not, there is no equality in the policy. Stakeholders that participate in policy and make policy do not take into consideration that policy itself is hurting the black man. Policy has set them up to go from DJJ to prison.

Participant 3 reflected on policy change by stating:

I mean I think, you know, I think just looking at history, looking at you know, the statistics on treatment outcomes and the approaches on how kids come out on the other side of the juvenile justice system. I think we have made good strides but I think we could also improve a lot.

She went on to say:

I just think it's important that as the times change we change with it. And that means constantly meeting and discussing and making sure that what we are doing is having some kind of positive outcome for AA males and if it's not working, say you know what, this is not working and try something that does work.

Participant 4 stated:

I think policy changes are needed to serve every youth in the juvenile justice system. But yea, predominately what I saw at the detention center were African

American youth and that concerned me, much more so than what I see in the county, because in the county we are about equally divided between our Caucasian youth and African American youth any youth in our three counties. But yes, my experience quote on quote at JDC opened my eyes to that, it did. It did a far greater rate.

Participant 5 as it related to policy changes stated:

As far as the treatment aspect of it, we need some more best practice curriculum geared towards African Americans because most of the African Americans, I mean here at DJJ here in Columbia because most of the population is 80/20 or 70/30 that's with the 80 being African American and the other 20% being others. But the curriculum they want us to use is not geared towards those African American boys. Further: In reference to the system part and security part: I believe they need to be more flexible with the visitation hours and the juvenile family contact. Right now, it is pretty much written in stone that only mother, father, sister and brother and siblings and if the juvenile is a parent, they have to have a birth certificate for their child. I think it needs to be more flexible because we don't really have traditional families anymore. There was belief that the juvenile justice system needed a complete overhaul.

Two of the participants stated the policies were outdated and were not designed to meet the needs of African American male youth in the current cultural climate. Some expressed more current policies, and treatment models were needed, specifically for African American males. Three of the social workers stated the structure of the entire

juvenile justice system was flawed and needed to be changed. Two social workers expressed decision-makers (stakeholders, leadership) were out of touch with the needs of African American male youth. The participants acknowledged the lack of equality in the current policies, which by the account of three of the five participants, stated did not protect the youth and set them up for further failure.

Unexpected Findings

Data collected for this research study was geared toward exploring strategies social workers used when working with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. After an in-depth review of the findings, the current strategies could be used when working with any youth who has involvement in the juvenile justice system. An unexpected finding was that the African American social workers found it more challenging to obtain family support and cooperation with treatment recommendations than the two Caucasian social workers. The African American social workers described family participation to be a challenge due to work schedule conflict and a distrust of the system. The African American social workers found the families to be more defensive and uncooperative. This went back to the idea of the families feeling distrustful and judged. Whereas the Caucasian social workers felt the families were more cooperative. The Caucasian social workers expressed their transparency about their lack of personal knowledge of their experiences, making it easier for them to work with their families. Another unexpected finding is that African American social workers referenced the youth as men and Caucasian social workers did not. The setting in which the social worker was assigned to work influenced their

perceptions when working with African American male youth. For example, those social workers who only worked in the community did not describe experiencing the same challenges as those who work with African American male youth in secured facilities. Those who worked more closely with the youth in facilities described the difficulties of obtaining family support as being a barrier.

Summary

This study explored various social workers' strategies to work effectively with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system. I focused on the social worker's experience working with this population. Findings were consistent with the social worker's knowledge of the strategies used to be effective with African American male youth. Specific strategies used were discussed in depth. From the discussions, the social workers were able to identify which treatment models to be more effective with African American male youth. The most effective treatment models identified were solution-focused and cognitive-behavioral models. The social workers recognized those youths responded better to treatment that provided results in a shorter timeframe.

The social workers also identified being good listeners and having open and honest communication as skills needed to be useful when working with African American male youth. The participants discussed the importance of family involvement with treatment, which at times, presents barriers. From experience, the social workers identified more positive outcomes for the youth when the family was engaged. This perspective aligns with the systems theory. Additionally, social workers discussed the importance of being culturally competent and building rapport to gain the youth's trust.

        In addition to being culturally competent, participants acknowledged the need for policy changes to reflect the needs of African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. Those changes should include more community-based resources and updated treatment models. The social workers noted the importance of having those with direct experience working with this population in the discussions and implementations of those policy changes. The identified strategies and outcomes of the findings will provide more insight and awareness to help social workers be more effective when working with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system.

        Section 4 will provide insight to the application of the findings that emerged from this section. More specifically, application to professional practice and implications for social change and application for professional ethics in social work practice. Section 4 will also include recommendations for social work practice and the implications of social change.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this action research study was to gain an understanding of the factors and risks that contribute to juvenile delinquency of African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system. A better understanding of how those factors and risks contribute to the disproportionate African American male youth involvement in the juvenile justice system could help social workers be more effective in providing clinical services to this population. I used action research for this study, and I conducted individual interviews to gather data. The social workers identified a need for policy changes to better serve African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. More current policies to reflect equity for all youth represented within the system were also mentioned. The social workers were knowledgeable about the strategies they used with African American male youth and identified effective and ineffective interventions.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

The NASW outlines the ethical and professional standards of service, competence, integrity, importance of human relationships, social justice, and dignity and worth of the person (NASW, 2017). Social workers' primary goal is to help those in need and address social problems.

This study's participants highlighted services provided to African American male youth with DJJ involvement that were evidence-based. The services included individual, group, and family counseling. Evidence-based practice requires training and a higher level of competence. The NASW outlines the professional standard of competence and

posits developing and enhancing professional expertise as imperative to effectively

working with delinquent youth (NASW, 2017). Competency in the practice area is

essential for social workers in understanding their roles in the agency. The participants

demonstrated skills as they related the services provided to African American male

youth.

The social workers expressed an understanding of the importance of integrity

when working with African American male youth. Throughout the interviews, each

participant discussed the importance of being honest and transparent with the youth and

their families. The participants recognized exhibiting integrity was imperative to building

rapport and demonstrating cultural competency. Additionally, displaying integrity also

builds healthy relationships. Establishing healthy working relationships with the families

promotes buy-in from the families.

The participants also discussed the need for policy change to promote equity and

fairness related to the treatment of African American male youth entering the juvenile

justice system. African American male youth, by the participants' accounts, were

overrepresented in the facilities of the juvenile justice system. This principle aligns with

challenging social injustice that African American male youth encounter through the

juvenile justice system. A way of addressing social injustice is through advocacy.

The dignity and worth of the person were also discussed during the interviews.

The participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of listening, being respectful, and

being honest with the juvenile throughout the interviews. The participants understood

how self-preservation and autonomy supported respecting the youth and their families'

dignity and worth. The participants also demonstrated an understanding of the need to display cultural sensitivity when establishing rapport with the juvenile to build a positive relationship.

<div align="center">**Recommendations for Social Work Practice**</div>

The DJJ's focus is that of prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. The social workers demonstrated an understanding of their roles when working with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. However, the implementation and resource availability differ based on how deep the juvenile has entered the system. Once the youth becomes involved with the juvenile justice system, the family does as well. Social workers work from a holistic perspective with emphasis on the individual, family, and the community. A lack of support and engagement on any of those levels increases the juvenile's risk of being involved in the juvenile justice system. This study's outcomes highlight the importance of continued research in social work to develop treatment services culturally specific to the needs of African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system.

An action step would be for social workers to advocate for more culturally based services to better serve the client's needs for more positive outcomes. A few social workers expressed the ineffectiveness of specific treatment models when used with African American male youth; however, they were required to implement them because they were evidence-based. Evidenced-based programs are appropriate and necessary for validation and funding; however, continued research for newer programs to address

African American male youths' specific needs to deter delinquent behavior would be beneficial.

The second action step would be to advocate for policy change. This policy change should reflect equality for African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system. Continued discussions between stakeholders, social workers, and others with direct contact with African American male youth to improve relationships and perceptions of the youth would be beneficial. The policy changes should address how to engage African American male youth. A cultural competency curriculum that is relevant to this population should be included. Partnership with other social workers, school officials, law enforcement, and court officials to develop policies with less punitive implications may be preventive and rehabilitative. The juvenile justice system has made strides over the years and has imposed less disciplinary infractions upon African American youth during recent years. However, African American male youth are still the most overrepresented group in the juvenile justice system for less serious offenses.

There are three limitations I observed from this study. The first limitation was the sample size and characteristics of the study. There were only five participants in the study, and all were female. Larger sample size and male participation would help future research gain more insight into social workers' experiences and challenges working with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system. It would also be helpful to know if male participants shared the same or similar experiences as female participants.

Another limitation was the use of individual interviews. At times, this method presented challenges due to keeping participants on the topic while not influencing their responses. There were concerns about conducting group interviews around getting participants in the same location because of participants working across the state. There was also the issue of maintaining the confidentiality and honest dialogue from the participants in a group setting. I had to demonstrate self-awareness throughout the interview process by carefully monitoring my body language and reflective tone to ensure that I did not influence the participant's responses. Having personal experience working with this population and refraining from adding or leading the participants in responding was challenging. Though the participants do not know me personally, their knowledge of my experience could have unintentionally influenced their responses.

The third limitation of the study was the structure of the questions. Though the questions were open-ended and designed to encourage elaboration on the subject topic, I found some of the questions were somewhat restrictive. Further research to explore the responses in more depth could provide a more thorough look into the underlying issue of policy change to promote positive social change. The study focused on exploring the various strategies social workers employed to work effectively with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system.

Implications for Social Change

This study focused on engaging social workers with experience at the microlevel with youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The microlevel system focuses on the individual and their needs. The SCDJJ uses evidenced-based treatment models to address

the needs of youth offenders. However, evidence-based models are not necessarily the most effective when working with African American male youth. Understanding cultural norms and incorporating culturally-based treatment models can be an added resource and perhaps essential to treatment effectiveness. Additionally, social workers understand the benefits of skill development for youth. For example, crucial critical thinking skills to promote improved judgment are beneficial in addressing juvenile delinquency.

Family support is also critical to the success of the youth offender. Engaging families in the treatment process can promote positive change for the youth and strengthen the family bond. Hence, not acknowledging those norms and working to engage family can reinforce the delinquent behavior. The participants discussed the significance of family support in the success of the youth. The social workers from secured facilities addressed the problem of getting families involved and keeping them engaged. The families have limited contact with the youth due to facility policies and parent schedules.

Community-based social workers found it easier to engage families; however, meeting around the families' work schedules presented a challenge. Many of the youth represented are from single-parent households with parents working during business hours. The community-based social workers are assigned to a specific county, making it easier for them to see the youth in the schools and their natural environment. In comparison, social workers in the secured facilities must work within the institutional guidelines, which sometimes interferes with treatment. Those social workers described

security taking priority over treatment, which is a barrier. In addition to the institutional barriers, the youth are faced with the environmental influences of their peers.

The social workers understood the importance of mezzo level intervention. Community-based resources are limited to this population. Social workers acknowledged many African American male youths with DJJ involvement live in neighborhoods infested with poverty and negative peer influences. Those youths also often have negative experiences with school and are habitually truant. Social workers' presence in schools would be advantageous in urban neighborhoods. Social workers can be the liaison between families and schools. Social programs to promote positive outcomes are limited or nonexistent in those neighborhoods in large part due to the lack of funding.

At times, policies create barriers that make it difficult for social workers to work with families effectively. The macrolevel is where managers, policymakers, and those who make legislative decisions can review current policies. These same policymakers and stakeholders' dictate funding. Social workers describe programming that produces positive outcomes that are usually the first ones to be eliminated from budgets. Policies that include investing resources into urban communities, recreational programs, tutoring and mentoring programs, and rehabilitation services that are culturally based can positively impact African American male youth on the macro level.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the various strategies social workers employed to work effectively with African American male youth in the juvenile justice system. The focus was on social workers' experiences working with this population.

Findings from this research indicated that social workers were knowledgeable and competent regarding strategies for working with the identified population. The participants highlighted the importance of establishing rapport, being a good listener, and demonstrating respect and cultural sensitivity as essential skills when working with African American male youth with involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Some participants identified challenges with family involvement and getting parents to buy in to treatment plans. Another point of concern was policy changes. The participants agreed that policy changes were needed to be more reflective and inclusive of African American male youth needs. There was a consensus among the participants that current policies were outdated and biased.

These findings are limited based on the small sample of participants for the study. However, the data collected was informative and can be used as a guide for further research expanding on specific policy changes needed. Including social workers and those directly impacted by policies in discussions can provide a clearer picture of the needs. Social workers can contribute knowledge and best practices to promote social change and equality for all youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

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Appendix: Guided Interview Questions for Interviews

Risks for African American Male Youth Involved in the Juvenile Justice System

1. Please state your name.

2. How many years have you worked with the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice (SCDJJ)?

3. What has been your experience working with African American male youth with SCDJJ involvement?

4. What has been some challenging situations you have faced when working with African American male youth?

5. What clinical services have you used and have been effective or ineffective when working with this population?

6. What skills do you think social workers need to work with this population?

7. How do you think social workers can maintain rapport with this population?

8. Do you think policy changes are needed to better serve African American male youth involved in the juvenile justice system? Why or why not?

9. Please share anything else you feel is essential to add.