

2021

## California's Prisoner Rehabilitation Effort: Ex-Lifers' Perceptions on Achieving Sustainable Social Reintegration

Kimberly L. Martin  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Kimberly Lynn Martin

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## Review Committee

Dr. Dana-Marie Thomas, Committee Chairperson,  
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Karel Kurst-Swanger, Committee Member,  
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Michael Brewer, University Reviewer,  
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2021

Abstract

California's Prisoner Rehabilitation Effort: Ex-Lifers' Perceptions on Achieving  
Sustainable Social Reintegration

by

Kimberly Lynn Martin

MA, University of Phoenix, 1996

BS, Pepperdine University, 1991

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

August 2021

## Abstract

Prisoners sentenced to a life term in California's state prisons are being found suitable for parole at record-high rates. Although macro-level policy guides California's prisoner rehabilitation process, a specific policy does not exist to guide the rehabilitation of the lifer population. Research shows a compelling relationship between public safety resulting from reduced recidivism and an inmate's participation in rehabilitative programming during incarceration. There is a gap in the literature about ex-lifers and their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon release from incarceration. Ostrom's institutional analysis and development framework guided this study's examination of the gap in literature and the analysis of how institutional factors demonstrate adherence to existing policy. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 ex-lifers who served their life term in California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The data support findings that suggest California's prisoner rehabilitation effort is viable. The findings generated and analyzed within the context of this study delivered an enlightened message about the implication for social change. Holistic rehabilitative programming positively influenced ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon release from incarceration, thereby affecting public safety through the reduced threat of recidivism. Potential implications for positive social change arising out of this study's results include possible development of rehabilitation policies and procedures specific to this population and adaptation of current regulations guiding access to rehabilitation.

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Terry and Lucy Martin, who instilled in me the importance of living with a spirit of humility and a commitment to service. My parents allowed me to find my voice, and they patiently supported my growth as I wandered through life trying to figure out how to share my God-given talents with the universe. Because of my parents, I learned at a very young age that I was placed on this planet to serve others—most especially the underserved. This work is dedicated to my Uncle Robert, who was my first teacher and my lifelong mentor. Thank you for helping me glue my heart back together in 2016. Your support of my educational journey is heartfelt. Your positive influence on how I live my life cannot be expressed in words alone. This work is dedicated to GG. You are my light. Thank you for your unconditional love and support. Your existence is evidence of the power of courage, tenacity, humility, faith, and love. Thank you for the daily reminders that I am valued and deserving of everything spectacular in life. Lastly, this work is dedicated to the people serving life-term sentences. Be steadfast in your effort to rehabilitate. You will one day go home, and you need to be ready to hit the ground running.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to express my wholehearted gratitude to my committee chair, Dr. Dana-Marie Thomas, for support, patience, care, and guidance. When we first met, I was floundering, and I was on the verge of giving up my dream of academic achievement. On many occasions throughout our time together, I know she believed in me more than I believed in myself. She taught me how to be a scholar through honest interaction and heartfelt celebration. I am thankful to God for delivering her, my guardian angel, at a crucial time in my life. Thank you, Dr. Karel Kurst-Swanger, for agreeing to this journey. I remember asking her to be my second committee member, and she responded with a message of gratitude for the opportunity. From that moment, I knew she would be someone I could trust to be present for the long haul. I am grateful for her kindness, expertise, and genuine interest in helping me develop as a scholar. Thank you, Dr. Michael Brewer, for insight and the value brought to my committee as university research reviewer. I appreciate his willingness to oversee my development as a Ph.D. candidate and scholarly contributor to the fields of public policy and criminal justice. Thank you, Yoshi Yoshimine, for being the best student success advisor. When I struggled throughout my academic journey, I called him for support and guidance. He never gave up on me and never let me give up on myself.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Carceral punishments have existed in Western history since before American colonization. In the late 18th century, penal incarceration in prisons was introduced as punishment for those sentenced to long-term incarceration for their crime. Before penal incarceration, in the United States, jails were places to confine individuals considered social deviants, but not to house those convicted and sentenced to long-term confinement (Rubin, 2018). Since the inception and implementation of penal incarceration, U.S. citizens have grappled with meaningful prison reform. With the largest prison population globally, the United States faces the reality that nearly all incarcerated will one day be released and expected to reintegrate into a community (Ray et al., 2017). In the past 19 years, the United States has experienced a 400% growth in imprisonment rate (Chamberlain et al., 2017).

More than 1.5 million people in the United States are currently incarcerated in a public or private local, state, or federal facility (Chamberlain et al., 2017). Recent studies show that 93% of the nation's incarcerated population will one day reenter society. These people face challenges such as employability and employment struggles, health care concerns, housing restrictions, social and peer influence, and educational limitations (Gill & Wilson, 2016). The challenges faced by former offenders are relevant communal concerns because a former offender's unsuccessful social reintegration may lead to recidivism, which compromises public safety and creates local, state, and federal fiscal distress (Katsiyannis et al., 2018).

California's Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC, 2014) defines adult recidivism as "conviction of a new felony or misdemeanor committed within three years of release from custody or committed within three years of placement on supervision for a previous criminal conviction" (p. 2). Recidivism rates and rehabilitative programming are key variables in discussions of prison reform at local, state, and national levels. Rehabilitative programming during an inmate's incarceration term is essential to preparing them for reentry success (Powers et al., 2017). Rehabilitative programming includes the following areas: mental health, academic education, career and technology education, life skills development, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and support networking.

Many interventions, including policymaking, exist at the local, state, and federal levels to reduce recidivism rates. The federal government invested in prisoner reentry success by committing millions of dollars to fund the Second Chance Act of 2007, formalizing the authorization of crucial components of the Prison Reentry Initiative (PRI). Signed by President George W. Bush in 2008, following unanimous support from the Senate, the Second Chance Act of 2007 was enacted to support a former prisoner's reintegration into society. Funding from the Second Chance Act provides former prisoners access to drug treatment, academic education, career technical education, mentoring, job placement, and mental health services. With support from government agencies and nongovernment organizations, prisoners were provided opportunities to transition from incarceration to mainstream society.

The Second Chance Reauthorization Act of 2018, a bipartisan effort signed into law by President Donald Trump on December 21, 2018, enhances state and local efforts by providing \$100 million annually for programs supporting prisoner reentry success (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2021). In addition to federal government initiatives, former prisoners benefit from state and local social reintegration policies that support former offenders with rehabilitative services offered by nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations, nonprofit organizations, and faith-based organizations.

A gap in the literature exists on rehabilitation for California's cohort of *lifer inmates*, those offenders who received an indeterminate life sentence with the possibility of parole. While a substantial amount of research literature exists on the topic of rehabilitative programming and its relationship to public safety and reduced recidivism, evidence of scholarly research specific to rehabilitation for California's lifer population appears nonexistent. In this qualitative study, I explored holistic rehabilitative programming in California's state prisons and how ex-lifers perceive programming as an influence on their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration parolees.

Chapter 1 highlights the key research components explored in this inquiry, including background for the research problem, statement of the identified problem, the purpose for this research study, research question, and theoretical framework. Additionally, Chapter 1 provides insight on the viability of this research through the statement of the rationale for research design, description of the phenomenon, purposeful data collection and conscientious analysis, the definition of key



concepts and relevant terms, disclosure of assumptions, explanation of scope and delimitations, and acknowledgment of limitations. Lastly, this research study's significance as a potential contributor to the field of public policy and administration and the effect of rehabilitative programming on positive social change through criminal justice reform is discussed.

### **Background**

The United States' holistic attempt to strengthen its handle on crime has resulted in the dire situation in which state lawmakers are tasked with a reactive responsibility to decrease the prison population. As the United States embraces the inevitable reality that incarcerated citizens reclaim their place in society, policymakers and government officials grapple with best practices. Meaningful attention to recidivism reduction is important when considering (a) the humanitarian relevance of a former prisoner's survivorship as it pertains to positive social change; (b) the fiscal impact of mass incarceration on federal, state, and local constituents; and (c) the correlation between a former prisoners' successful reentry and public safety. In their study of the long-term effectiveness of a restorative intervention, Kennedy et al. (2018) reported that the rate of recidivism in the United States is 76.6%. Bohmert et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of rehabilitative efforts to reduce recidivism rates. Reentry preparation is a multifaceted topic that involves participation from various internal and external stakeholders. Reentry preparation thrives through rehabilitative programming relying on support streams, such as academic enrichment, career technical education, cognitive behavior therapy, and restorative justice programs. Creating an inmate's rehabilitative

program based on rehabilitative needs is not only intuitive, but imperative to maximize effectiveness.

California's governance continues to struggle with effective criminal justice policy. At one time, the state of California represented one of the largest percentages of the nation's prison population. The state's public prisons were designed to house a maximum of 79,858 inmates; however, in 2006, 173,000 inmates were housed there (Kubrin & Seron, 2016). In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Plata* that such overcrowding in the state's prisons was cruel and unusual. In response, California's governance put into place aggressive measures to systematically transform public state prisons through AB 109, also known as the Public Safety Realignment Act, a statewide initiative resulting in the rapid reduction of inmate populations (Kubrin & Seron, 2016). Moving lower-level felons from state custody to county custody was one aspect of California's realignment, entrusting counties with responsibility for supervision and rehabilitation of lower-level felons. California's realignment endeavor has been regarded "the biggest penal experiment in modern history" (Petersilia & Snyder, 2013, p. 268), and its effectiveness remains questionable as a viable policy guiding decarceration.

The commitment of California's governance to downsize mass incarceration in response to federal court mandate coupled with constituent-initiated votes for criminal justice reform (Krisberg, 2016) is evident in changes to policy beginning with California's Public Safety Realignment Act and revised sentencing guidelines implemented through Proposition 57, Senate Bill (SB) 260, SB 261, Assembly Bill (AB) 1308, and SB 394. California's state prison inmate population is experiencing the benefits

of reform under Proposition 57, which creates credit-earning opportunities that equate to the time of an offender's sentence. Additionally, criteria identifying California's youth offenders have been redefined under SB 260, SB261, AB 1308, and SB 394. With the changes in legislation, many Californian inmates sentenced to an indeterminate life term were recategorized as *youthful offenders*. A qualified inmate identified as a youth offender per the guidance of new legislation has new hope because their hearing date with the Board of Parole Hearings could occur sooner than expected.

These inmates sentenced to an indeterminate life sentence can prove to the Board of Parole Hearings (BPH) that they are suitable for parole because they are "not a current, unreasonable risk of danger to the public" (California's Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation [CDCR], 2021a). Before implementing California's Public Safety Realignment Act and legislation, such as Proposition 57, SB 260, SB261, AB 1308, and SB 394, offenders sentenced to an indeterminate life term had little expectation for parole suitability. Due largely to California's commitment to criminal justice reform evident in recent legislation, the BPH began finding lifers suitable for parole at an unprecedented rate. The changes in state policy and a nationwide attitude adjustment on criminal justice indicate a shift toward rehabilitation and reentry (Gerlinger & Turner, 2015).

A meaningful gap exists in the literature on the nexus between rehabilitative programming and an ex-lifer's achievement of sustainable social reintegration. This dissertation addresses one aspect of California's offender rehabilitation policy and its influence on public safety that has implications for positive social change.

## **Problem Statement**

Currently, a problem exists regarding the lack of a comprehensive, equitable policy guiding California's lifer population's rehabilitative process. Research shows a compelling relationship between public safety resulting from reduced recidivism and an inmate's participation in rehabilitative programming during incarceration (Powers et al., 2017). Constituents recognize recidivism as an impending threat to public safety. In contrast, former offenders recognize recidivism as a dark cloud hovering over attaining a holistic quality of life (Cuervo & Villanueva, 2014). When reintegrating, a former offender experiences challenges attributed to education, employability, housing, life skills support, and healthcare (Clark, 2016). As a former offender navigates the excitement of parole and freedom, they also face the reality of a period of adjustment that causes them stress, anxiety, and fear. Former offenders may also realize that although they are conditionally free from incarceration, they may not be free from the collateral consequences of their criminal past (Duwe & Clark, 2017).

Mass incarceration's debilitating effects are etched into an offender's being during their time served. When offenders are released from prison, those debilitating effects remain a permanent part of their existence (Connor, 2020). Evans et al. (2018) explored the challenges caused by "self-stigma associated with a criminal conviction" (p. 256). Education is one facet of rehabilitative programming that may positively impact public safety through recidivism reduction. How a former offender responds to his new realities directly impacts their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration and minimize the temptation to recidivate.

CDCR's (2021b) documented vision and mission is to enhance public safety by successfully reintegrating former offenders by providing opportunities for rehabilitation through restorative justice programs. CDCR (2021b) relies on the Roadmap to Rehabilitation, a macro-level articulation of how an offender is rehabilitated through programming while serving their incarceration term, to explain its policy on the rehabilitative process. The Roadmap to Rehabilitation is general and provides a basic illustration of CDCR's policy-driven rehabilitative process. However, CDCR's one-size-fits-all approach to rehabilitation fails to acknowledge the unique needs of a rapidly growing population of paroled lifers. The lifer population faces challenging conditions in CDCR's rehabilitative process because many, if not most, of California's lifers remain static for decades while serving a life term.

Although CDCR's (2021b) roadmap shows rehabilitative programming occurs from Day 90 of incarceration until up to 60 months left to serve, lifers are rarely enrolled in rehabilitative programming during the first several years of their sentence. During these early years of imprisonment, lifers must prove they are capable of good behavior to earn a spot in a rehabilitative program. While waiting for programming assignments, lifers confront the paradoxical challenges associated with rehabilitative programming and the mundaneness of an inefficacious environment replete with the persistent lure to satisfy the criminogenic need. CDCR's approach to rehabilitative programming for lifers contradicts the findings of several studies on the relationship between effective rehabilitation of inmates and recidivism reduction (Duwe, 2017; Clark, 2016; Gill & Wilson, 2016; Koo, 2015; Link & Williams, 2017) .

Labrecque and Smith (2019) found that offering an inmate rehabilitative programming at the beginning of a prison sentence is advantageous in the overall rehabilitation process and the eventual reduction of recidivism upon conditional release. Labrecque and Smith's findings are consistent with more than 100 meta-analyses in the current research literature on the topic of recidivism reduction and inmate rehabilitation. While CDCR's roadmap appears to be an intuitive research-based approach to prisoner rehabilitation, deficiencies exist in CDCR's current policy because it does not address lifers may one day be eligible for parole. Shammass (2019) cited growth in the number of lifers granted parole: 902 parole grants in 2014 compared to only 750 parole grants during 1978–2001.

A gap exists in the current research literature concerning the relationship between a lifer's participation in holistic rehabilitative programming and their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon parole. Lack of knowledge is problematic when viewed through a holistic lens focused on public safety because of the possibility that an inadequately prepared ex-lifer may recidivate. Koo (2015) acknowledged that various factors impact the likelihood that a former inmate recidivates, but one of the most important factors may be education. With a GED or high school diploma earned through correctional education, a former inmate may be more employable, contributing to the opportunity to enjoy a crime-free lifestyle (Koo, 2015).

California continues to grapple with the challenges associated with prison overcrowding. This is largely due to high recidivism rates stemming from the lack of rehabilitative programming available to inmates during incarceration (Mardirossian &

Esmail, 2017). While quantitative research on the general topic of former offender social reintegration is generally accessible, more qualitative literature is needed to understand how holistic rehabilitative programming influences an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Research from my study specific to how rehabilitative programming influences an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration adds to the knowledge of rehabilitative programming and reduced recidivism. Evans et al. (2018) posited that more research is necessary to understand better a former offender's postincarceration challenges and how those challenges could be mitigated through rehabilitative programming.

Public policy and criminal justice fields may be enlightened by acknowledging the gap in the literature identified for this study about California's lifer population is a unique phenomenon requiring access to rehabilitative programming to prepare them to achieve sustainable societal reintegration. This could lead to public policy to guide programming initiatives relevant and meaningful for the lifer population during incarceration. Public safety and achievement of sustainable living are implications of how social change can be positively impacted by public policy that guides CDCR's assignment of lifer inmates to rehabilitative programming opportunities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how ex-lifers perceive California's prisoner rehabilitation efforts. Through the articulation of lived experiences, ex-lifers share their perceptions relevant to prisoner rehabilitation and the extent to which it supports their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration.

This study has implications for providing insights that expand the breadth and depth of current research on reentry and recidivism by providing new data specific to the ex-lifer phenomenon. The policy implemented within the past decade creates new hope for the possibility of parole for lifers. Given the implementation of said policy and the rapidity of stakeholder action, a gap has been created in what is known about the influence of rehabilitative programming on the ex-lifer's ability to achieve successful reentry. In this qualitative research study, I explored the connection between rehabilitative programming and successful reentry through ex-lifers' shared lived experiences.

A relationship exists between rehabilitative programming, reduced recidivism, and public safety. Data collected and analyzed for this study may enlighten the development of rehabilitative programming in adult prisons. Additionally, this study may contribute to expanding the realm of recognized positive influencers associated with rehabilitative programming. Effective programming is known to include academic enrichment, career technical education, career and technology education, and substance abuse treatment, but the influence of prosocial relationships and mentorships on an ex-lifer's successful reentry have not yet been explored (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). Through consistent prosocial interaction, inmates could learn the soft skills associated with cultivating positive relationships directly related to self-efficacious behavior and meaningful action. While a plethora of mostly quantitative literature exists on rehabilitation, reentry, recidivism, and public safety, little research has been connected to address the ex-lifer population.



In this study, I used current research on rehabilitation, reentry, recidivism, and public safety as the foundation to support the expansion of study relevant to the relationship between rehabilitative programming and ex-lifers' successful reentry. I analyzed California's systematic approach to positively impacting public safety by reducing recidivism rates in part through meaningful rehabilitative programming, resulting in successful reintegration into society. The results of this study provide insight on how holistic rehabilitative programming can influence ex-lifers' reentry experiences and reintegration into society and how rehabilitation through rehabilitative programming contributes to positive social change.

### **Research Question**

The central research question that guided this study was: What are ex-lifers' perceptions of how holistic rehabilitative programming influences their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration?

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this qualitative research study, I used Elinor Ostrom's IAD framework to guide research to produce holistic enlightenment on the topic of ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Application of the IAD framework guided this study's theoretical analysis through relevant questioning and management of working assumptions (Ostrom, 2011). Ostrom's IAD framework was appropriate for the research topic because it is a methodology that fosters an analytical understanding of current policy by viewing the synergy created between actors, positions, actions, and outcomes through a systematic institutional lens. Data collected during face-to-face interviews in

this research study inform the fields of public policy and criminal justice about the perceived relationship between institutional programming and the achievement of sustainable social reintegration. The unique findings derived from this research study of institutional frameworks, theories, and models analyzed institutional programming's relevance when considering factors contributing to ex-lifers' likelihood of recidivating. A more detailed explanation of IAD as the framework for this study is in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of the study was a general qualitative design using in-depth interviews. Through in-depth interviews, I explored how meaning is determined and how people identify meaning through their lived experiences. Using a phenomenological approach to qualitative research, people's perspectives and their individual stories are the focal points of understanding how these perspectives influence life (Creswell, 2009). Following an informed consent agreement, the primary data collection technique was intended to be face-to-face interviews; however, as a secondary data collection plan, face-to-face contact was replaced with email, phone, video conference, or online format to collect data from participants. Videoconferencing includes Facetime, Zoom, Skype, and other similar applications. Study participants were former lifers currently on parole or recently released from parole who served their sentence in a California public state prison and are within their first 5 years of earning parole. Through the recruitment technique of purposeful sampling, I recruited a group of 10 parolees to participate in the interview process. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this study and provided an opportunity to collect comprehensive and relevant information despite a small sample size (Patton, 2015). If

necessary, additional study participants were available for data saturation, defined as data adequacy (Morse, 1995), which is achieved when it is obvious that new or additional information would not change a study's outcome.

Before the interviews, I asked participants for their first name and last initial to be used only for my reference and notes. I assigned them a participant number so that their name would not be part of my research study. The interviews allowed me to hear a firsthand narrative about the participants' lived experiences as life-term inmates and how rehabilitative programming has influenced their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration (Creswell, 2009). From the interviews conducted with each study participant, I identified common themes relevant to the relationship between rehabilitative programming and an ex-lifer's social reintegration. Each interview was scheduled for 30 minutes; however, I encouraged meaningful discussion relevant to this study for an unlimited time. Interview responses were recorded to document the discussion for future reference and verification. Coding and the data collection process were expected to last for 2 weeks.

### **Definition of Terms**

A list of definitions is provided below for the reader to understand terms used throughout this study.

*Board of Parole Hearings (BPH)*: Governor-appointed commissioners who conduct parole suitability hearings for adult inmates. California's 17 BPH commissioners are subject to senate confirmation. In addition to the commissioners, deputy commissioners, whom the governor does not appoint, also serve as BPH members. In

addition to parole suitability hearings for life-term inmates, the BPH is tasked with adjudicating hearings and conducting reviews as specified for those offenders under the jurisdiction of CDCR (CDCR, 2020a).

*CDCR population:* People sentenced by the court to the custody of CDCR. This population includes those prisoners incarcerated at institutions, camps, public community institutional facilities, community prisoner mother programs, state hospitals, alternative custody programs, medical parole, medically vulnerable release, community supervision, interstate cooperative case, non-CDCR jurisdiction, temporary release to court and hospital, and escaped prisoners (CDCR, 2020b).

*Custody designation:* CDCR custody designation is determined by the type of supervision required for an inmate. Custody designation is categorized as (a) maximum custody, (b) close custody, (c) Medium A and B custody, and (d) Minimum A and B custody (O'Neil, 2019).

*Decarceration:* The system-wide reduction of incarceration in state prisons and local jails (Verma, 2016).

*Department Operations Manual:* The manual is the reference guide containing policies and procedures for all CDCR stakeholders (CDCR, 2020c).

*Determinate sentencing law (DSL):* The presiding judge sentences offenders to serve a specific amount of time in one of California's state prisons. Depending on the crime(s), a judge may or may not have flexibility in considering an offender's circumstances when sentencing a convicted offender (CDCR, 2020b).

*Housing security level:* Male inmates are housed in one of four security levels of housing. Level I is the lowest, and Level IV is the highest (O'Neil, 2019).

*Indeterminate sentencing law (ISL):* The presiding judge sentences offenders to serve a life term with the possibility of parole in one of California's state prisons. Prisoners sentenced to a life term with the possibility of parole remain incarcerated until the BPH determines parole suitability based on the belief that the offender is prepared to return to society (CDCR, 2020b).

*Inmate classification system:* Inmates are categorized by housing security level and custody designation, both assigned by the inmate classification system. The inmate classification system is an algorithm used to place inmates in one of the CDCR prisons. The housing security level is a systematic approach to determining an inmate's housing assignment based on misconduct and potential escape risks. Inmates identified as higher risk are often placed in a higher security facility. Custody designation is the systematic approach to deciding any limitations associated with an inmate's daily movement throughout the prison, including prescribed supervision. The inmate classification system influences inmate movement. As an inmate's classification score decreases, they are likely to be moved to a less secure area of the prison or, in many cases, to a different prison (O'Neil, 2019).

*Institutional programming:* A broad array of services and interventions, including substance abuse treatment, educational programming, and sex offender treatment (Duwe, 2017).

*Lived experiences*: Developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through the subject's retelling of how they lived through a certain experience (Gardling et al., 2017).

*Parole*: A period of conditional community supervision following a prison term (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2020)

*Recidivism*: Criminal acts that result in the rearrest, reconviction, or return to prison with or without a new sentence during 3 years following a prisoner's release (BJS, 2020).

*Reentry*: Offenders' transition from a state or federal prison to community supervision (BJS, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

A critical aspect in developing meaningful qualitative research is ensuring a researcher eliminates personal bias, assumptions, judgment, and perception from the process to maintain clarity of thought and scholarly purpose (Patton, 2015). While it is acknowledged that a study's existence is largely due to a researcher's interest and passion for a topic, personal feelings must be suspended in the interest of quality research (Patton, 2015). A researcher must identify critical assumptions and present for discussion said assumptions during this phase of the research study.

First, this study was based on the general assumption that a qualitative phenomenological approach was the most meaningful way to holistically study ex-lifers as a phenomenon through articulating shared life experiences. Second, it was assumed that the participants would be honest and forthcoming in their responses to the interview

questions. Third, it was assumed that participants would ask for clarification if they experienced ambiguity during the interview process. Fourth, it was assumed that each participant agreed to participate in the study by their free will, absent duress from any individual. Fifth, the identified theoretical framework was assumed to be directly related to participants' reentry success rationale.

The participants shared their lived experiences as former lifers in California's state prisons through the interview process. I compiled these lived experiences to create a universal experience representative of this phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007). It was assumed that study participants would want to share their lived experiences so that others could learn from them. The purpose of this study was to add to the knowledge in the fields of public policy and administration and criminal justice by filling a gap in current literature about lifers' experiences with rehabilitative programming and their perceptions about how rehabilitative programming influences their ability to achieve sustainable societal reintegration. As a result of honest dialogue relative to participants' lived experiences, it was assumed the central research question guiding this study would be answered and the purpose of the study fulfilled.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study's scope only addressed the lack of policy guiding rehabilitation for California's lifer population. The study participants were limited to adult men who served a life term in CDCR and were currently on parole or recently released from parole. This study was focused on their lived experiences with incarceration, rehabilitative programming, and societal reintegration. Ex-lifers representing diversity in age, ethnicity,

socioeconomic background, and religious beliefs paroled within the past 5 years were recruited for this study. By general definition, recidivism occurs when a former offender reoffends within the first 3 years following release from custody (BJS, 2020). I intended to study the lifer population within the 5 years following their release from prison to analyze lived experiences relating to rehabilitative programming, social reintegration, and recidivism's potential impact. Ten adult male parolees who served a life sentence in one of California's public state prisons voluntarily participated in interviews comprised of open-ended questions designed to prompt thoughtful discussion and articulation of lived experiences.

The data collected through purposeful sampling were directly related to this study because of the participants' lived experiences as a term to life as a lifer inmate currently in the process of reentry. The results from this study will add to public policy and criminal justice knowledge and the data collected may provide meaningful insight into the topic of rehabilitation through rehabilitative programming and its relationship to successful reentry.

This study's delimitations include adult males who served a life sentence in a California public state prison. Ex-lifers offer a unique perspective on the influence rehabilitative programming has on achieving sustainable social reintegration and the likelihood of recidivism because of the length of time they spent in incarceration. Most lifers were incarcerated for more than half their natural life, and they were incarcerated before adulthood. What is known about recidivism for offenders who committed a lesser crime is not necessarily applicable to the lifer population because of the time the lifer



spent incarcerated (Liem et al., 2014). During their incarceration, they lived in various state prisons and experienced every security level in the California state prison system. They lived through the policy changes associated with California's Public Safety Realignment Act and youth offender sentencing guidelines. They achieved recognition for parole suitability because of their ability during a relatively brief session with the BPH to express to a panel of strangers how they have changed and why they deserve another chance at living.

This study is transferable because of its relevance to include but not be limited to the following topics: recidivism, reentry, societal reintegration, rehabilitative programming, career and technical education, cognitive behavioral therapy, and academic education. The selection of California and its ex-lifers has no adverse bearing on transferability or applicability to an alternate demographic.

### **Limitations**

Relevant limitations exist in this study. Acknowledging those limitations is necessary to mitigate preconceptions concerning the study's validity proactively. While 10 participants is a relatively small sample size, it is an acceptable sample because data saturation was met for this qualitative study. Also, credibility concerns related to the study participants were acknowledged. Although face-to-face interviewing is a widely accepted form of collecting data for a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2009), the lived experiences reported by a study participant cannot be corroborated for authenticity. Study participants might have experienced difficulty speaking about their lived experiences during and after incarceration. This was a manageable challenge, however,

given participant anonymity and this study's relevance to positive social change and the expectation that said change could bring to future inmates.

Additionally, study participants may have difficulty accessing and using technology for online interviews. For these participants, I accommodated their preferred method of communication. Lastly, this study was guided by the policies of a specific institution within a specific geographic area. Therefore, the findings are representative of the ex-lifers in the sample. However, this research study intends to offer evidence for transferability in criminal justice and the creation of public policy that aspires to impact social change through criminal offender rehabilitation positively.

### **Significance**

The results of this study contribute to the literature in public policy and administration and criminal justice fields by addressing a gap in the current literature on the relationship between holistic rehabilitative programming and an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Lifers are presumed to be preparing for successful reentry during their incarceration by participating in rehabilitative programming. However, the effectiveness and relevance of rehabilitative programming are unknown. Broadening the understanding of ex-lifers' challenges during the first 5 years postrelease directly impacts recidivism rates. A parolee encounters various challenges postrelease that can threaten their successful reentry. Still, research shows that the most impactful issue is postrelease employment (Duwe & Clark, 2017). Duwe (2017) noted that academic education and a prison record contribute to a parolee's difficulty securing gainful employment.

Although existing literature has shown a relationship between rehabilitative programming and a reduced recidivism rate, this study was conducted to address a literature gap on the specific rehabilitative needs of life-term inmates (Hsieh et al., 2016). The findings, analysis, and recommendations presented in this study may lead to comprehensive discussion impacting positive social change by developing meaningful public policy in criminal justice. The reduction of California's state prison population is a compilation of various factors, including the Public Safety Realignment Act, youth offender policy, changes in sentencing policy, and the significant increase in parole-eligible/suitable lifers. As lifers are being paroled at record-high rates, the question of their successful reentry is forefront. Each of the CDCR adult prisons offers rehabilitative programming. However, access to programs may be limited based on an individual's inmate classification system score. Further, each prison independently decides the type and amount of rehabilitative programming offered to inmates. For example, career technical education opportunities vary from prison to prison based on the program's logistical limitations. Inmates are limited to the rehabilitative programming offered at their specific facility.

Further, rehabilitative programming offered in the prisons is primarily in place to serve a purpose in the prison community and secondarily in place to rehabilitate inmates. Trades and vocations offered in prison that contribute to sustaining the prison community may not lead to gainful employment in society. This study's findings may help identify common themes for effective rehabilitative programming and, therefore, lead to a unified approach to rehabilitation throughout all CDCR institutions.

## Summary

This study's focus was on California ex-lifers, who are currently within their first 5 years of prison release. This qualitative phenomenological research study was conducted to explore rehabilitative programming's influence on an ex-lifers' reentry experiences and their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. In Chapter 1, I introduced the research topic, its background, and the rationale for selecting California's ex-lifers as the research population.

In Chapter 2, I provide a restatement of the research problem and purpose. Through a synopsis of the literature, I became more familiar with the research problem and the rationale for the theoretical framework choice. A literature review provides a basis for understanding the relationship between how rehabilitative programming influences an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration and public safety through recidivism reduction.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Currently there is a lack of a comprehensive, equitable policy guiding California's lifer population's rehabilitative process. Research shows a compelling relationship between public safety resulting from reduced recidivism and inmate participation in rehabilitative programming during incarceration (Powers et al., 2017). Constituents recognize recidivism as an impending threat to public safety. In contrast, former offenders recognize recidivism as a dark cloud hovering over attaining a holistic quality of life (Cuervo & Villanueva, 2014). When reintegrating, a former offender experiences challenges attributed to education, employability, housing, life skills support, and healthcare (Clark, 2016). As a former offender navigates the excitement of parole and freedom, they also face a period of adjustment that can cause stress, anxiety, and fear. They may also realize that although they are conditionally free from incarceration, they may not be free from their criminal past's collateral consequences (Duwe & Clark, 2017).

Mass incarceration's debilitating effects are etched into an offender's being during his time served. When inmates are released from the walls of confinement, those debilitating effects remain a permanent part of their existence (Connor, 2020). Evans et al. (2018) explored the challenges caused by "self-stigma associated with a criminal conviction" (p. 256). Education is one facet of rehabilitative programming that may positively impact public safety through recidivism reduction (Evans et al., 2018). How a former offender responds to new realities directly impacts their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration and minimize the temptation to recidivate.

CDCR's (2021b) documented vision and mission is to enhance public safety by successfully reintegrating former offenders by providing rehabilitation opportunities through restorative justice programs. To explain its policy on the rehabilitative process, CDCR relies on the Roadmap to Rehabilitation, a macro-level articulation of how an offender is rehabilitated through programming while serving an incarceration term. The Roadmap to Rehabilitation is general and provides a basic illustration of CDCR's policy-driven rehabilitative process. CDCR's one-size-fits-all approach to rehabilitation fails to acknowledge the unique needs of a rapidly growing population of ex-lifers.

The lifer population faces challenging conditions in CDCR's rehabilitative process because many, if not most, of California's lifers, remain static for decades while serving a life term. Although CDCR's (2021b) roadmap shows rehabilitative programming occurs from Day 90 of incarceration until up to 60 months left to serve, lifers are rarely enrolled in rehabilitative programming during the first several years of their sentence while they prove good behavior and earn a spot in a rehabilitative program. While waiting for programming assignments, lifers confront the paradoxical challenges associated with rehabilitative programming and the mundaneness of an inefficacious environment replete with the persistent lure to satisfy a criminogenic need. CDCR's approach to rehabilitative programming for lifers contradicts the findings of several present-day research-based studies on the relationship between effective rehabilitation of inmates and recidivism reduction.

Through their recent study of institutional disorder, Labrecque and Smith (2019) found that offering an inmate rehabilitative programming at the beginning of a prison

sentence is advantageous in the overall rehabilitation process and the eventual reduction of recidivism upon conditional release. While CDCR's roadmap appears to be an intuitive research-based approach to prisoner rehabilitation, deficiencies in the current policy on inmate rehabilitation emphasize the need for policy reform because the current policy does not specifically address the needs of life inmates. The number of recent parole grants indicates the urgency for rehabilitative policy reform for California's life inmates. Shammass (2019) cited the compelling population growth of the number of lifers granted parole: 902 parole grants in 2014 compared to only 750 parole grants during 1978–2001.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to address a gap in the current literature on the topic of sustainable social reintegration preparation for lifers. These inmates were indeterminately sentenced to life with the possibility of parole. While current research shows the compelling rationale for inmate social reintegration preparation, most of the research does not specifically address the population of inmates sentenced to life with the possibility of parole and had very little expectation of being found suitable for parole. Because of recent changes in California's sentencing policy, lifers are going home.

The importance of this study is that the data and subsequent analysis provides information that can (a) inform policymakers on the rehabilitative needs of California's lifers; (b) create an awareness of how holistic rehabilitative programming influences sustainable social reintegration for inmates who served a life term; (c) serve as an impetus for policy change in California's criminal justice system; (d) enlighten institutional stakeholders on the need to reassess the policy which guides inmate

assignments to rehabilitative programming; and (e) encourage dialogue amongst policymakers on equitable access to rehabilitative programming for life-term inmates.

The theoretical framework used for researching this topic, Ostrom's IAD framework, is discussed in this chapter. A review of the current literature on mass incarceration in California, offender social reintegration, rehabilitative programming, recidivism, and the relationship between rehabilitative programming and sustainable social reintegration is also presented in this chapter.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

This qualitative study was focused on CDCR's systematic approach to preparing prisoners for sustainable social reintegration. The literature search was focused on peer-reviewed articles published within the past 5 years. However, a few of the articles used were older than 5 years because of their relevance to the topic of recidivism and rehabilitative programming. An exhaustive strategic search of the literature was conducted for this study per Creswell's guidance (2012). The guidelines were (a) identification of key terms for the literature search; (b) an extensive review of scholarly databases including but not limited to Walden University's academic library and the internet; (c) development of a literature map that provided a visual representation of clusters of useful literature; and (d) a written literature review that presents the summarized research by highlighting relevant themes, discussing key concepts, and explaining how this study contributes to a literature gap.

Through Walden University's online academic library, an extensive comprehensive review of relevant literature was conducted in the following online



databases: Education Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Criminal Justice, and ProQuest Central. For this literature review, the key terms included *inmate, recidivism, parole, corrections, vocational training, career technology and education training, community, incarceration, education, prisons, jails, public safety, offender, reform, realignment, parole, parolee, probation, governance, criminogenic, risk-needs assessment, risk-needs-responsivity model, sentence, Second Chance Act, institutional programming, social reintegration, sustainable reentry, and rehabilitation.*

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The IAD framework is the theoretical foundation that was used in this research study. In the study and research of policy issues, highly regarded public policy theories are regularly used, such as Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's advocacy coalition framework, which guides people-centered policy development (Weible & Sabatier, 2018). Ostrom's IAD framework is a popular approach to understanding the policy process because of its conceptual simplicity and theoretical richness (Weible & Sabatier, 2018).

This research study contributes to institutional performance improvement and was focused on how institutional policy directly influences human behavior. Although the IAD framework has not been used specifically to analyze criminal justice policy problems, the IAD framework applies to the action situation and collective action problem central to this research study. CDCR is tasked with the immensely salient responsibility of rehabilitating criminals. Upon return to society, they positively impact public safety by achieving a sustainable existence and resisting the temptation to recidivate. CDCR takes a systematic approach to institutional programming. Therefore,

understanding the action situation and the desired outcomes is essential when analyzing the policy that guides CDCR's approach to rehabilitative programming and its relationship to an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration.

This qualitative research study was conducted to explore how public policy guides prisoner rehabilitation in the state of California. The IAD framework guided this research discovery and theoretical analysis of the general relationships between contributing factors to preparing life prisoners for achieving sustainable social reintegration. The IAD framework promotes a questioning process that can identify categorizable thematic variables supporting the development of correlations obtained from a metatheoretical analysis of this study's sample (Ostrom, 2011). A primary focus of this study was the discovery of key contributing factors to an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration; therefore, it was imperative to articulate findings from this research study that demonstrate the extent to which an inextricable link exists between rehabilitative programming and achievement of sustainable social reintegration.

The IAD framework is universally applicable because of its viability in any action situation that involves institutional phenomena regardless of a researcher's conceptual or methodological choice (Reggero et al., 2018). The IAD framework has been used to examine institutional functionality in economics, political science, sociology, and environmental science. The IAD framework is a conceptual map and theoretical framework used to document how an institution has developed and changed over time. The conceptual map shows the action arena, which includes the actors, rules, and outcomes. Yadav et al. (2020) used the IAD framework to explore the concept of smart

tourism through institutional theory because it allowed for simultaneous analyses of structural factors and human agency. The conceptual map documents how the working elements influence the institution's collective action patterns and outcomes. The IAD framework supports the analysis of patterns and outcomes that may produce meaningful policy reform.

Originally conceived in the 1980s, the IAD framework has evolved through several iterations and applications during the past four decades. Providing scholars and policymakers theoretical support for proposed policy changes was the impetus for the IAD framework. Ostrom and Kiser used game theory principles to present the IAD framework as user-friendly and intuitive in the early stages of its development. Heikkila and Andersson (2018) identified public policies as the game rules by which members of society interact with one another to provide services and goods and resolve social dilemmas. Early efforts to develop the IAD framework focused on variables that characterized situations pertaining to service provision (Ostrom, 2011). Through reference to game theory, scholars could create and use mathematical models to guide outcome prediction of a given situation by identifying the (a) actors, (b) actor's position, (c) the extent to which the actor is informed, (d) possible actions the actor could take in a given scenario, (e) intermediateness or finality of the actor's actions following a decision, (f) organizational effect of the actor's actions, and (g) cost-benefit analysis associated with the actor's actions and related outcomes.

Ostrom (2011) believed that game theory's use created a conceptual model to depict the working parts within an action situation. Game theory is applied when an

institution creates a venue for analyzing resource management components (i.e., actors, actions, rules, outcomes). The action situation created on game theory's premise became recognized as a viable framework in various situations. Through the IAD framework, Ostrom enlightened policymakers that an institution is an action situation. Therefore, the applicability and viability of the IAD framework are vast. According to Ostrom (2011), the IAD framework by design is a rules-based analytical tool that establishes the following:

- Boundary rules for identification of actors and their role and length of role in the action situation;
- Position rules for identification of positions and actors who fulfill the role of said position;
- Information rules to inform actors about communication and specific expectations for communicating;
- Authority rules identify actors who are recognized as central to the action situation;
- Aggregation rules guide action associated with actors' decisions;
- Scope rules that enlighten how actions affect outcomes; and
- Payoff rules associate a cost–benefit analysis to each actor in a specific position.

The IAD framework provides a lens to view CDCR's current prisoner rehabilitation model and its effectiveness. This theoretical approach can be used to dissect how actors in the current prisoner rehabilitation model abide by the stated rules and interact with one another to serve the mission associated with the policy-driven goals.

Ostrom's (2011) IAD framework is relevant to this study due to the (a) identification of structural variables; (b) recognition of how structural variables differ from one type of institution to another; (c) correlation between actions, interactions, and outcomes; and (d) use of IAD factors to analyze resulting patterns.

The entirety of an ex-lifer's journey through the criminal justice process is institutional. From the moment an offender is found guilty and sentenced to an indeterminate term of incarceration through the day of conditional release from prison, their life is dictated by the inner workings of the criminal justice system. The IAD framework enlightened the understanding of an ex-lifer's step-by-step journey. Specifically, for this study's purpose, the IAD framework explains the lifer's journey and how they are prepared for sustainable social reintegration following decades of incarceration. The IAD framework highlights the importance of resource identification and resource utilization as well as influences policymaking in a crisis, "events that are thought to be threatening to a society's economic and physical well-being" (Grossman, 2018, p. 3). This study sought to discover a correlation between an ex-lifer's identification and utilization of available resources and his sustainability post-incarceration viability. Additionally, this study sought to enlighten through clarification, viable sustainability relative to static existence outside incarceration. Lastly, this study explored the critical societal concern of recidivism and its relevance for the ex-lifer as it pertains to the influence of rehabilitative programming.

## **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts**

### **Recidivism**

The topic of recidivism must be considered to explore the relationship between positive social change through public safety and an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Recidivism is measured by an individual's relapse into criminal behavior within 3 years following release from incarceration (National Institute of Justice, 2020). A state's recidivism rate provides a quantifiable metric when evaluating effectiveness in policy changes aimed at meaningful correctional intervention and public safety. A focus on proven practices aimed at recidivism reduction is paramount when developing rehabilitative programming and identifying how said programming positively influences a former offender's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. A former offender's decision to recidivate is influenced by various factors that can be managed through knowledge development in rehabilitative target areas such as career and technology education, literacy education, housing procurement, vocational certification, and substance abuse education (Zhang et al., 2006). Andrews et al., (1990) posit that three characteristics of effective rehabilitation and recidivism reduction are risk, need, and responsivity.

The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model is the most relied upon framework for evaluating and implementing rehabilitation through rehabilitative programming (King & Heilbrun, 2020). An RNR assessment provides valuable insight when determining the level and type of rehabilitative services required for a specific offender. The RNR assessment reveals indicators relevant to offenders' risk of recidivism, criminogenic

need, and responsivity to rehabilitative efforts. The offender's RNR assessment guides the development of his rehabilitation plan and subsequent assignment to rehabilitative programming opportunities. RNR's applicability and viability are widely supported in the field of criminal justice, citing success such as a significant reduction in recidivism for youth who received services specifically matched to their needs (King & Heilbrun, 2020).

CDCR uses a needs assessment system identified by Andrews et al. known as the Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS), a robust algorithm designed to provide decision support for correctional rehabilitation based on criminogenic factors that are theoretically relevant to recidivism and recidivism reduction (Brennan et al., 2009). COMPAS risk models are accepted as generally reliable in predictive validity and generalizability in the following criminogenic needs categories: criminal involvement, history of violence, history of noncompliance, criminal associates, substance abuse, financial problems and poverty, occupational and education resources or human capital, family crime, high crime neighborhood, boredom and lack of constructive leisure activities, residential instability, social isolation versus social support, criminal attitude, and antisocial personality (Brennan et al., 2009). Each of the categories mentioned is relevant for consideration in the effort to reduce recidivism.

### **California's Public Safety Realignment and Decarceration**

By court mandate, the State of California was forced to reduce its state prison population in 2011. In the court case *Brown v. Plata* (2011), the U.S. Supreme Court rendered its decision that prison overcrowding is a violation of a prisoner's Eighth Amendment. At the time of *Brown v. Plata* (2011), California state prisons provided

housing for nearly double the intended capacity. California's Public Safety Realignment (Assembly Bill [AB] 109, 2011) was enacted in response to the Supreme Court's mandate to limit the prison population. Through the process of Public Safety Realignment, California governance successfully decreased the state prison population by relocating certain low-level offenders from state-run prisons to county-run prisons, in essence transferring control of policy implementation to the local level. When considering the RNR model, California's Public Safety Realignment appears to overlook the utilization of risk needs assessment to determine the likelihood an inmate recidivates. Current research on Public Safety Realignment accounts for how a low-level felon transferred to county custody is rehabilitated during incarceration. Rehabilitative services such as CBT, literacy education, and career and technical education (CTE) are typically offered as rehabilitative programming in state-run prisons.

While the Public Safety Realignment effort may appear to be a viable solution, it is a risky endeavor considering the overall impact of rethinking mass incarceration. Research shows jurisdictional inconsistencies and variations in incarceration is a national policy debate, and California's Public Safety Realignment "exploits this variation by design" (Verma, 2016, p. 108). The seemingly exploitive nature of Public Safety Realignment is directly linked to nationwide decarceration efforts, which are threefold and aspire to accomplish the following: significantly reduce the rate of incarceration in the United States, rectify disparities in the criminal justice system, and create communities where citizens can thrive and live together in harmonious existence (Epperson et al. , 2021). The topic of smart decarceration is of paramount importance in



the field of criminal justice reform because of the goal to reduce the rate of incarceration in the United States. Proponents of smart decarceration assert this goal's achievability when pursued by advancing reform to California policy on nonviolent offenses (Gottlieb et al., 2021).

Policy guiding California's Public Safety Realignment and decarceration efforts are relevant when exploring this research study topic's holistic nature. The purpose of this study is to understand better how rehabilitative programming influences an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. While it is recognized on a micro-level of exploration that lifers are not directly affected by Public Safety Realignment and decarceration efforts, the existence of competing policy priorities and the uncertainty surrounding opportunities for rehabilitation compel consideration when viewing these policies through a macro level lens of the IAD framework.

### **Rehabilitative Programming**

Current studies show that 4 out of 10 adult offenders recidivate within three years of prison release (Link & Williams, 2017). Research demonstrates that offender rehabilitation during incarceration contributes to positive outcomes relevant to reducing recidivism and improving public safety. Understanding how rehabilitative programming contributes to an offender's reentry experience presents an urgent need (Newsome & Cullen, 2017; Paille & van der Zeeuw, 2020). The CDCR takes a systematic approach to reduce recidivism and improve public safety by rehabilitating offenders through rehabilitative programming. CDCR uses the RNR model to identify an offender's rehabilitative needs based on the risk assessment level associated with his criminogenic

needs. Upon entry to a CDCR state prison, the offender must complete the COMPAS assessment to identify his high-risk needs. Throughout his incarceration, the offender has opportunities to re-take the COMPAS assessment. Hence, the needs assessment is current, and progress can be noted.

Rehabilitative programming is regarded as an essential proactive factor in the nationwide fight against recidivism. Extensive research shows that rehabilitating an offender's criminogenic needs reduces the likelihood they recidivate. A 2013 study reported on the effectiveness of correctional education programming, citing that offender participation in educational rehabilitation reduces the likelihood of recidivism by 43% (Duwe, 2017). The same study cited a direct connection between positive post-release employment outcomes and an offender's participation in educational programming; however, a specific finding of reduced recidivism was not indicated (Duwe, 2017). Rehabilitative programming focuses on offender rehabilitation in criminogenic needs such as academic enrichment, language and mathematics literacy, career and technology education, and cognitive behavioral therapy. By providing rehabilitation through programming in the target areas presented creates a holistic effort in the offender's rehabilitation.

### **Conclusion**

California's policies pertaining to the criminal justice system are ever-changing. The population of offenders within CDCR's custody is affected by the changes. With little access to communication and viable sources of information, inmates struggle to understand the policy that guides their future. While change remains constant, one facet

of criminal justice remains the same. That is California's commitment to offender rehabilitation to improve public safety through recidivism reduction. This study focuses on the fate of ex-lifers during their first five years post-parole in the state of California. To what extent do California's policies and commitments to offender rehabilitation contribute to ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration? Current policy does not exist to guide reintegration preparation efforts specifically for those sentenced to a life term. It seems negligent from the perspective of public safety and positive social change to presume a lifer's criminogenic needs are the same as those of a general population offender. Many, if not most, of California's lifers were incarcerated before the age of 26. They have been incarcerated for more than two decades. Given their age at incarceration, lifers have neither pre-incarceration work experience nor pre-incarceration educational experience, factors Duwe and Clark attribute to post-release successful social reintegration (2017). The lifer population creates a unique opportunity for scholarship and meaningful contribution to existing research on rehabilitative programming and its relationship to recidivism reduction.

Chapter 3 provides the research design and methodology, data collection and trustworthiness of this study. The appendix includes a copy of the data collection instrument, validated by authors Evans et al., when they used the interview protocol in their research article, "Education in Prison and the Self-Stigma: Empowerment Continuum," published in *Crime & Delinquency* (2018). Permission to use the interview as mentioned above protocol in this study was obtained from Doug Evans. Chapter 3 provides information about how the study was conducted.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of how rehabilitative programming influences ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. California's policy reform implemented within the past decade has created new hope for the possibility of parole for lifers. Given the implementation of said policy and the rapidity of stakeholder action, a gap has been created in what is known about the influence of rehabilitative programming on ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable societal reintegration. In this qualitative research study, I explored the connection between rehabilitative programming and sustainable societal reintegration through ex-lifers' shared lived experiences. Current research shows a correlation between rehabilitative programming, reduced recidivism, and public safety. Data collected for this study may lead to the development of rehabilitative programming in adult prisons.

Additionally, this study may contribute to discussion about expanding the realm of recognized positive influencers associated with rehabilitative programming. Effective programming is known to include academic enrichment, career and technology education, and substance abuse treatment, but the influence of prosocial relationships and mentorships on ex-lifers' successful reentry has not yet been explored (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). Through consistent prosocial interaction, inmates could learn the soft skills associated with cultivating positive relationships directly related to self-efficacious behavior and meaningful action.

While a plethora of mostly quantitative literature exists on rehabilitation, reentry, recidivism, and public safety, little research has been conducted to address the former lifer population. Current research on rehabilitation, reentry, recidivism, and public safety is the foundation that supports the expansion of study relevant to the relationship between rehabilitative programming and ex-lifers' perceptions of how rehabilitative programming influences their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. This research study provides insight into how California's lack of policy guiding rehabilitation for lifers could be addressed to influence positive social change in the state.

The central research question guiding this study was: What are ex-lifers' perceptions of how holistic rehabilitative programming influence their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration? This section contains a discussion about the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and issues of trustworthiness.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The nature of this study was a general qualitative design with a phenomenology approach to understanding how people interpret the meaning and how they determine what is meaningful in their lives (Patton 2015). During in-depth interviews with ex-lifers who shared their lived experiences, I gained valuable insight into their attitudes, feelings, and perceptions on their rehabilitative experiences during incarceration. Additionally, I explored how their rehabilitative experiences contribute to their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Using a phenomenological approach to qualitative research, people's perspectives and their individual stories are the focal points of

understanding how these perspectives influence life (Creswell, 2009). Following an informed consent agreement, I conducted interviews either in person or by telephone or by videoconference. Study participants were former lifers currently on parole or recently released from parole who served their sentence in a public California state prison who were within their first 5 years of earning parole.

Through the recruitment technique of purposeful sampling, I recruited a group of 10 parolees to participate in the interview process. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this study and provided an opportunity to collect comprehensive and relevant information to my study despite a small sample size (Patton, 2015). If necessary, additional study participants were available for data saturation, defined as data adequacy (Morse, 1995), which is achieved when it is obvious that new or additional information would not change the study's outcome.

Before the interviews, I asked the participant for their first name and last initial to be used only for my reference and notes. I assigned a respondent code so that their name was not part of the study. The interviews allowed me to hear a firsthand narrative about the participants' lived experiences as life-term inmates and how rehabilitative programming influenced them (Creswell, 2009). From the interviews conducted with each study participant, I identified common themes for initial thematic analysis relevant to the relationship between rehabilitative programming and ex-lifers' reintegration into society (Saldana, 2016). Each interview was scheduled for 60 minutes. However, I encouraged meaningful discussion relevant to this study for an unlimited time. Interview

responses were recorded to document the discussion for future reference and verification. The coding and the data collection process were expected to last for 2 weeks.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In-depth interviewing is how I participated in my qualitative research. Through this social interaction, I had the opportunity to share the study participants' lived experiences and construct the story with them (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I expected participants to share important details about their experiences in the most honest, genuine way possible. As the researcher leading this process, it was my responsibility and obligation to ensure the participant felt safe and confident that their valuable experiences were protected. The in-depth qualitative interview is more than an ordinary conversation; it is a probing discussion centered around concepts and specific topics (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Throughout the research experience, it was essential that I continually developed and applied logical thinking to the process of conceptual and theoretical creation and maintained a mode of practicality by systematically following the research process (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). My role in this research study was strictly that of scholarship. I did not know any of the study participants personally or professionally.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants, Recruitment, and Data Collection**

Epp and Otnes (2020) identify three criteria as indicators of high-quality qualitative research: relevant, rigorous, and responsive. This qualitative research study included former lifers who were currently on parole in the state of California. Participant selection was a thoughtful, methodical process in which a purposively selected sample

was recruited because they contributed relevant insight given their firsthand experiences of the study phenomenon (Campbell et al., 2020). The plan for recruitment of study participants included my contact who has access to the population being studied. My contact's only involvement in this study supported the recruitment process by facilitating introductions between prospective study participants and me. Following my contact's brief verbal or virtual introduction and with permission from prospective study participants, I made direct contact to introduce myself and discuss participant viability based on established criteria.

I planned to interview 10 study participants who met the following criteria: adult, male, parolee, served a term to a life sentence in a California public state prison, and had not recidivated. My primary data collection technique was face-to-face interviews; however, as a secondary data collection plan, I replaced face-to-face contact with email, phone, video conference, or online format to collect data from participants. During the interview, I recorded the discussion and maintained copious notes. This phenomenological study drew its philosophical strength from study participants' lived experiences (Creswell et al., 2007). Through thematic clustering, the essence of the participants' experiences was synthesized into a universal experience representative of the lifer population and the influence of rehabilitative programming on ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. A sample of 10 participants seemed sufficient for the scope of this research study. However, I planned to recruit as many participants as necessary to reach data saturation, the point at which information/observation obtained was not new (Gill, 2020).



## **Instrumentation**

A validated interview protocol used for this study consisted of 13 open-ended questions (see Appendix A). The protocol was validated because of its use in the 2018 peer-reviewed article “Education in Prison and the Self-Stigma: Empowerment Continuum,” written by Evans et al. published in *Crime & Delinquency*. Permission to use the interview protocol was obtained from Doug Evans. Evans et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study of former inmates who participated in educational programming during incarceration. To better understand how educational programming influences a former inmate’s ability to reenter society, Evans et al. (2018) explored self-stigma associated with incarceration by interviewing former inmates who participated in education during incarceration. The study participants shared their perceptions of how education reduced their stigmatization by strengthening their feelings of empowerment and motivation to overcome negativity. The interview protocol used by Evans et al. (2018) was relevant to this study because it was written to elicit shared experiences from study participants who could provide insight into rehabilitative programming and its perceived influence on an ex-lifer’s ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Deviations from the pro forma interview questions occurred when clarification is necessary. However, given the nature of the in-depth interview and my realization that going off-script was acceptable, I encouraged study participants to feel comfortable sharing what they felt was relevant to the discussion (Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

To ensure all the shared information was collected for future analysis, I recorded each interview. The participants were made aware of the recording, and I did not proceed

without informed consent. Upon completing the interview, I acknowledged participants for their time and offered to answer any topic-related questions. Additionally, I asked permission to contact participants if I need to clarify any portion of the interview, and I offered a copy of my finished study when it published.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis process relies on high-quality, valid input. I used field notes during the interview process, which is an effective method for supplementing data collection with specific details about the interview experience (Saldana, 2016). Additionally, immediately following each interview, I uploaded the narrative into a spreadsheet for initial housing and tracking. Both paper notes and digital notes were housed securely. As the researcher, it was my responsibility to ensure alignment throughout this process to demonstrate content validity. The production of quality data analysis was essential to proving believability, relevance, transferability, and validity.

The interviews were recorded via a recording device and subsequently transcribed via a transcription service. Thematic analysis was accomplished by recognizing emerging themes of the IAD theoretical framework. Although hand coding was a viable option for this study, given the relatively small sample size, I used the Qualitative Data Analysis Software NVivo to transcribe data, house collected data, code data, and streamline my data analytical process through critical thinking (Saldana, 2016). My expectation in using NVivo was that a vivid picture would begin to form through the data analysis, showing the trajectory for positive social change. NVivo appeared to be user-friendly and robust in capability (Saldana, 2016).

## **Trustworthiness**

The 12 strategic qualitative principles explained by Patton (2015) emphasize the importance of creating an authentic, trustworthy research study. Patton (2015) provides a strategic template to guide qualitative research in a meaningful, productive way through strategic qualitative principles. For this qualitative inquiry, I relied on reflexivity to gain awareness and understanding for perspective through in-depth study and analysis. Interview questions were strategically developed through triangulated inquiry, and the questions were reflexive. Through this deliberate process, I was able to better ensure the trustworthiness of my study.

### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research is related to internal consistency. Throughout a qualitative study, the researcher must ensure a rigorous approach to research and a clear articulation of how this was accomplished (Morrow, 2005). Ethical research with participants was required, which included written informed consent, verbal discussion about anonymity, and a validated interview protocol. The validated interview protocol encourages academic rigor because prolonged engagement with study participants creates opportunities to explore the population through lived experiences. Thematic analysis was used to ensure data sufficiency and credibility were achieved when data saturation was reached.

### **Transferability**

The test of trustworthiness as it pertains to external validity is in the form of transferability. Through thick description, a detailed description of the data and clear

articulation of the context, readers can make informed comparisons by transferring relevant contextual factors (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This qualitative study engaged a heterogeneous population that is varied in selection. Although I am not handpicking the participants, I ensured heterogeneity. The findings presented in this study were generalized to establish transferability by the individual reading the study.

### **Dependability**

Dependability was addressed through triangulation, acknowledging consistency with varying data sources within the same study method. Triangulation was performed to verify consistency by comparing interview responses within the sample. Recognizing the possibility that inconsistencies appear, I acknowledged the inconsistency by considering it an opportunity for additional research (Patton, 2015).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the expectation that qualitative research is neutral and free of unacknowledged bias, which is accomplished through explicit reporting of interpretations derived from the research findings and data. Qualitative researchers must subject themselves to systematic challenges throughout the research process. The use of “triangulation strategies, researcher reflexivity processes, and external audits” supports an accurate and clear articulation of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 190). While it is impractical to vie for a completely bias-free inquiry, the qualitative researcher must consistently mitigate how personal values and preconceptions influence data and reported findings (Patton, 2015). Confirmability was achieved in this research study by a rigorous collection of field notes and data compilation through interviews with the study

participants. Consistent attention was given to accuracy during data collection, and follow-up questions were asked to clarify areas of confusion. Additionally, study participants are encouraged to ensure data collection accuracy when he is asked to verify his responses to interview questions.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to contribute to a growing understanding of how rehabilitative programming influences ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Through this study of ex-lifers, policymakers have access to a unique lens to view the relationship between rehabilitative programming and recidivism, which is a facet of public safety. This topic's qualitative approach generates unique insight captured by in-depth interviews and reported through lived experiences. The thematic analysis of data was applied to answer the central research question guiding this study within the IAD theoretical framework.

This study contributes to the existing gap in the research literature by demonstrating how the lack of rehabilitative policy for California's lifers influences their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Further, findings articulated in this study promote thoughtful reflection on the topic of how positive social change is influenced by reduced recidivism resulting from rehabilitation for lifers before they go home.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this study provide results from the interview, including information about the participants (demographics), sample size, and lived experiences. The thematic analysis presented supports analysis relevant to rehabilitative

programming's perceived influence on a lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Additionally, I interpreted the study's findings and any limitations I experience during the data collection process. To conclude, I provide recommendations for future study and positive social change implications based on this research study's findings.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

Through interviewing and interacting with research study participants, data were generated for this qualitative research study. Data generation and collection is of utmost importance because it is the aspect of research that demonstrates the rigor of study and validity of findings as they pertain to the scope of the central research question guiding this study developed to enlighten a gap in the existing literature. Study participants are recognized as experts of their own lived experiences. Through sharing their contextualized experiences, they help lead to a better understanding of a larger phenomenon.

In this study, I sought to explore how ex-lifers perceive California's prisoner rehabilitation efforts through holistic programming. Current research shows a relationship exists between rehabilitative programming, reduced recidivism, and public safety. The central research question guiding this study was: What are ex-lifers' perceptions of how holistic rehabilitative programming influences their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration? In this chapter, I discuss the setting for the study, the participant demographics and characteristics relevant to the sample population, the data collection process, data reporting and analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the results of the study.

### **Setting**

Data collection for this research study was exclusively conducted by telephone. Because of the local, national, and worldwide impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-

person communication with non-household members was not recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The study participants did not articulate any personal conditions that influenced their experience at the time of study that may have influenced the interpretation of the study results.

### **Demographics**

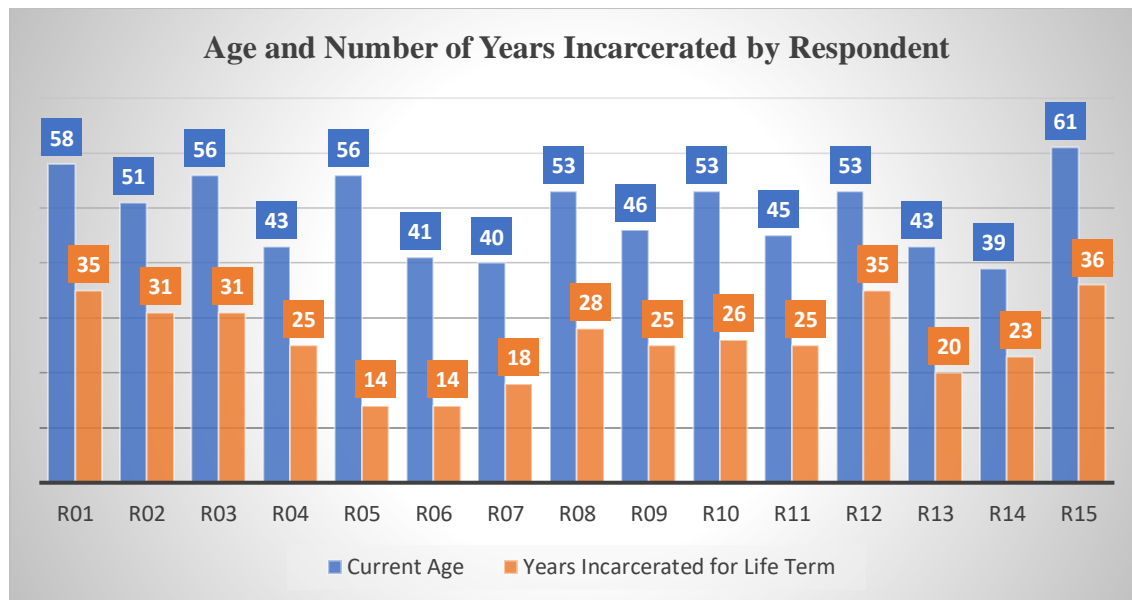
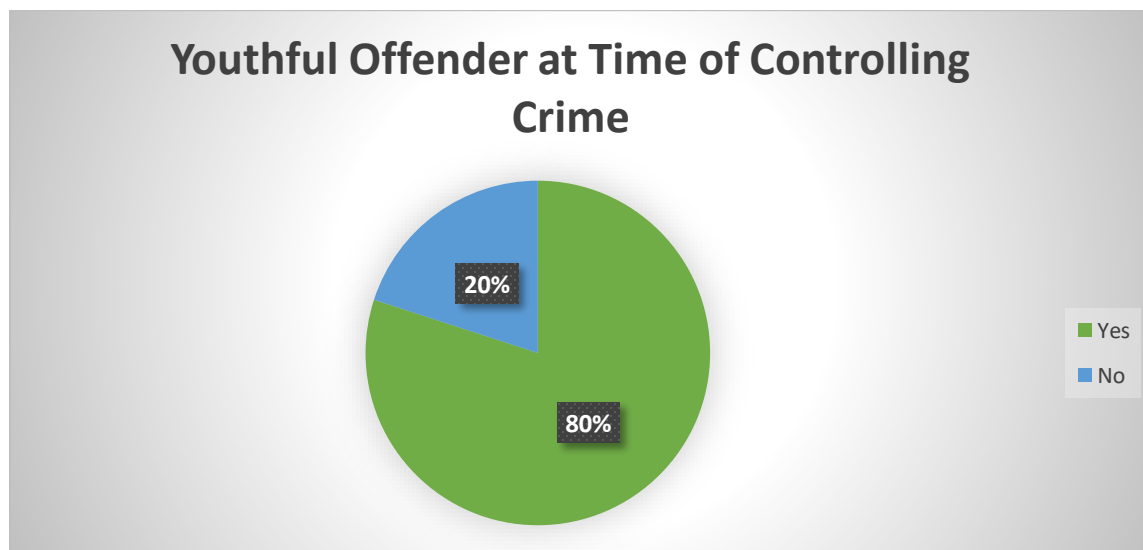
This research study included telephone interviews with 15 voluntary participants, and the duration of each interview was 45–60 minutes. Each of the participants served a life term in CDCR and was on parole or recently discharged from parole. Each of the participants served their time in adult male institutions in California under the supervision of CDCR.

The mean age for this sample was 49.1 years at the time of data collection (Figure 1). The mean number of years served for the life term was 25.7 years, and the median number of years served for the life term was 25 years (Figure 1). In this sample, 80% of the participants were youthful offenders, and 100% of the participants' controlling offense was murder (Figure 2). According to CDCR (2021a), a youthful offender is defined as someone who committed their controlling offense before 26 years old.

Study participants served their life sentence term in various prisons throughout the state of California. All CDCR prisons offer programming opportunities for academic education, which provide high school and college enrichment. Of the 15 participants interviewed, 11 participants earned a high school diploma or equivalent during their incarceration. Of the 15 participants interviewed, 4 earned their high school diploma or equivalent before incarceration for the life term (Figure 3).

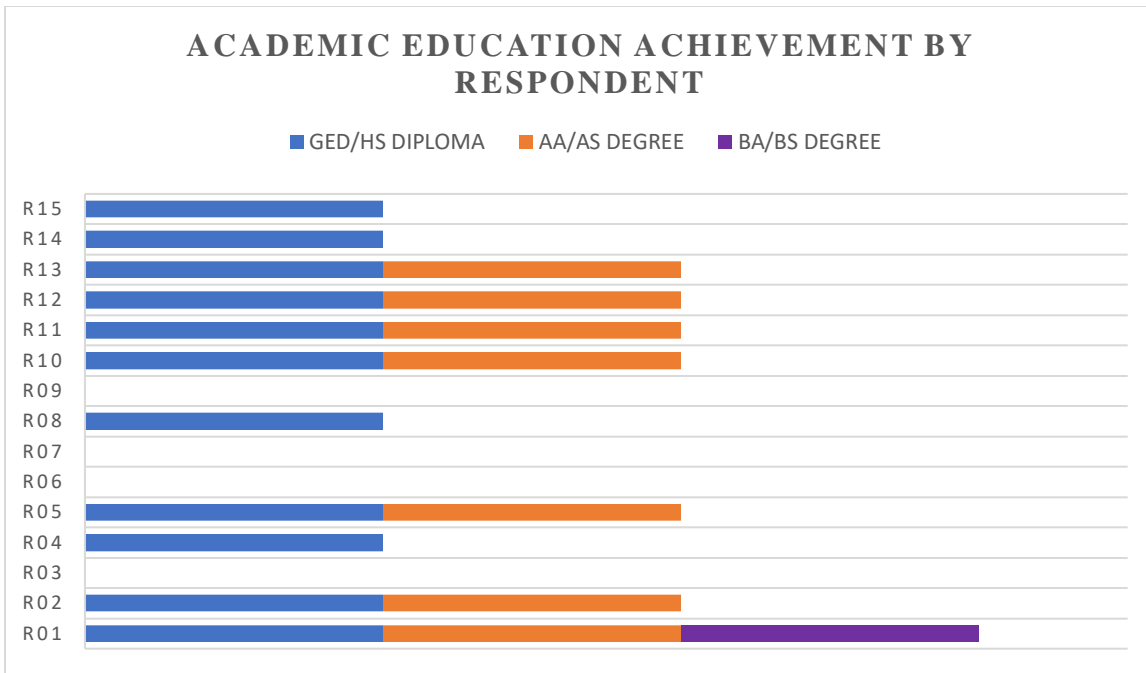


In addition to academic education, CDCR provides career technical education (CTE) programming opportunities. Eligible inmates are encouraged to learn trades that help secure gainful employment upon release from incarceration. Of the 15 participants interviewed, 13 participants completed technical training in one or more of CDCR's CTE programs (Figure 4). CDCR also provides offender rehabilitation support through inmate-facilitated self-help groups, CBT, and inmate employment opportunities throughout the prison, including CALPIA (California Prison Industry Authority). CALPIA oversees more than 100 manufacturing, service, and consumable industries within CDCR's 35 institutions. Many of the CTE-trained inmates work for CALPIA upon certification in their trade. Upon parole release, two of the 15 study participants secured a place in their local carpenters' union due largely to their skills while incarcerated. Every participant in the study was currently employed (Figure 5). CDCR also supports offender rehabilitation through certification programs where inmates can learn how to be drug and alcohol counselors with a career path to a licensed counselor. Of the 15 participants interviewed, three were currently working as certificated/licensed counselors specializing in addiction recovery in the fields of mental and public health.

**Figure 1***Current Age and Years Served***Figure 2***Youthful Offender*

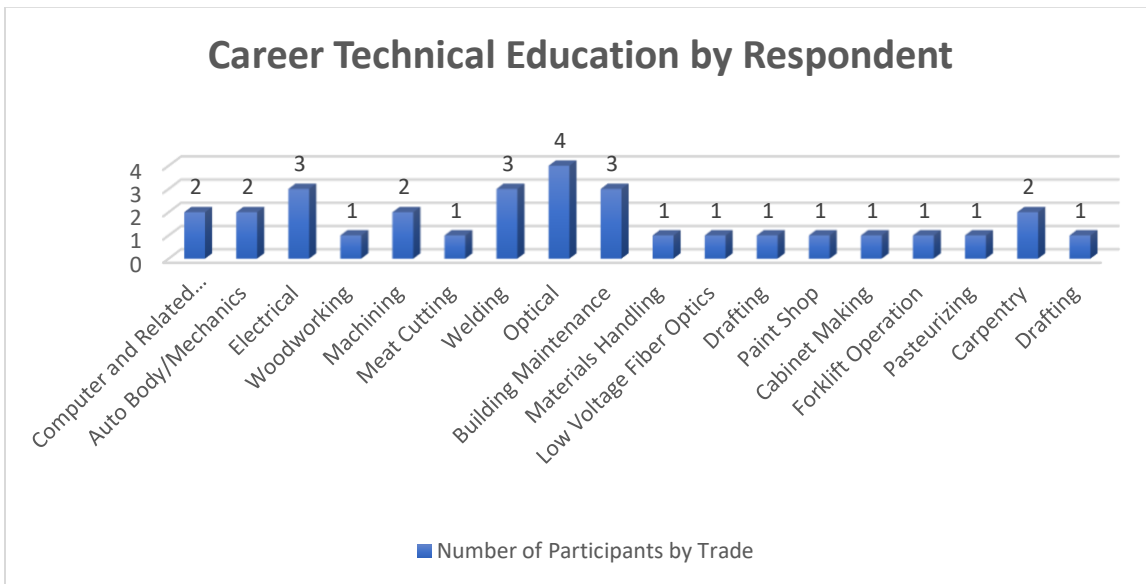
**Figure 3**

*Academic Education*



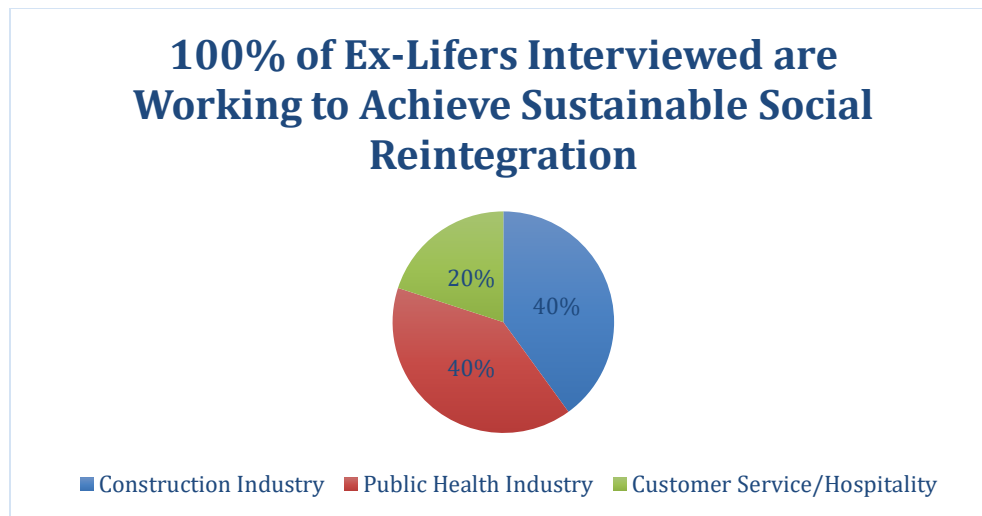
**Figure 4**

*Career Technical Education*



**Figure 5**

*Working to Achieve Sustainable Social Reintegration*



### **Data Collection**

#### **Number of Participants**

This research study included 15 voluntary participants who identified themselves as ex-lifers either still on parole or recently discharged from parole. This sample was generated through purposeful sampling. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the sample size was unknown at the time of participant recruitment because data saturation would not be realized until the occurrence of informational redundancy following data collection and analysis (Patton, 2015).

#### **Location, Frequency, and Duration of Data Collection**

Data generation and collection for this research study were conducted via telephone. Each participant received an email containing a brief introduction and the Walden University consent form. In response to the email, the participant indicated their willingness to participate in the interview and their telephone number. The data

generation and collection comprised a 45–60-minute telephone conversations between the participant and me. The telephone conversation was formally guided by a 13-question interview protocol (see Appendix A) that was adapted from the published research of Evans et al. (2018).

Further, the conversation was informally influenced by the discussion that naturally developed during the interview. Participants voluntarily shared information and I sought clarification or elaboration as needed. Each participant was interviewed one time, and I provided frequent summaries throughout the interview to ensure clarity and understanding. The interviews were conducted during June 2021 and scheduled at times that were mutually acceptable for both the participant and me.

### **How the Data Were Recorded**

Prospective study participants were invited via email to participate in the interview process. The email contained a brief introduction about my research study (see Appendix B) and the Walden University consent form (see Appendix C). Two participants requested the interview questions before agreeing to participate in the interview, so I provided said information in a follow-up email. In the invitation, as mentioned earlier, I asked prospective participants to respond to my email if they were willing to participate. Of the 20 participants invited, 15 agreed to participate in the study. When I received notification of their willingness to participate in the study, I immediately contacted the individual to confirm the interview and schedule a day for the 45-60 minutes interview. During our conversation, I reassured the prospective participant that I would make every effort to ensure anonymity as described in the Walden University

consent form. On the day of the interview, I contacted the study participant at the telephone number provided when I confirmed the interview.

Each interview was conducted via telephone and recorded utilizing the Rev recording and transcribing services. Recording participant interviews was accomplished by engaging the recording function of the Rev application downloaded to my mobile telephone. Before choosing this recording method, I conducted extensive research to identify the best solution for my research effort. I selected Rev because of its reputation for reliability and its ease of use in recording to transcription. In addition to recording the interview, I maintained notes on a paper copy of the interview questions for each interaction with a study participant. The notes were used during the interview to support the natural progression of follow-up questions, document the participant's responses to ensure quality through accuracy, and track details for summarization during the interview.

### **Variations in Data Collection and Unusual Circumstances**

Chapter 3 of this research study described the proposed data collection methodology; neither variations nor unusual circumstances were experienced during the data collection process. The contact referenced in Chapter 3 was reliable in supporting the recruitment process by facilitating email introductions between myself and prospective study participants. In addition to recruitment support from my contact, I received support from 2 of the study participants who provided additional contacts as prospective study participants. The data collection procedure was the same for each participant, including reading a brief formal statement about the research study. The

study participant's verbal consent, "I consent," for the recorded interview, and a final check ensured voluntary participation. Each participant was reminded that they could pass on questions that they were uncomfortable answering. All of the participants answered all of the formal and informal questions.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Process for Coding and Identification of Themes**

Following each interview, the recording was uploaded to Rev for transcription. Depending on the interview length, transcription of the interview was received within 12 hours with an accuracy rate of 99%. Rev transcription was conducted by a human being which was my method of choice. Although artificial intelligence transcription was a more cost-effective and timely option, I decided to engage a human in this process. I confirmed the accuracy of the transcription by listening to each recorded interview while following the printed transcript. Except for specialized terms or acronyms, the Rev transcription required minimal revision.

The transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to house collected data and support data analysis through electronic coding. While NVivo is a robust tool for qualitative analysis, I instead chose to code this study's data manually. Manual coding allowed me to bond with the in-depth interviews resulting in the opportunity to truly understand and relate to the themes which emerged from the data gathering experience. Through the process of in vivo coding, I developed a scholarly rapport with the participants through their lived experiences, and this rapport supported my analytical ability as a researcher.

In vivo coding is a manual coding process that is particularly effective in qualitative studies that highlight and honor the voice of each study participant (Saldana, 2016). In vivo, coding is appropriate for the first cycle of data analysis and the sole method of data analysis because this is a relatively small-scale study. I assigned a participant code of DG01 through DG15 for each study participant. For example, “DG01” represents participant number 1, “DG02” represents participant number 2, and “DG15” represents participant number 15. Throughout the reading of interview transcripts, I attuned myself to words and phrases/sentences that prompted me to underline, highlight, annotate, and numerically code. Examples of coded phrases/sentences in the interviews are, “I motivated myself,” “I changed,” “I wanted to be better,” “It’s whom you know,” and “no hope.” After the initial coding of the interview transcripts, I manually placed the In vivo codes into clusters that created an outline for categories of belonging and a chronological and hierarchical organization system. At this phase of the data analysis procedure, I observed numbers and codes emerging as themes. The themes with definitions and number of references are shown in Table 1.



**Table 1***Themes, References, and Definitions*

Theme	References	Definitions
Holistic programming	161	This refers to CDCR sanctioned activities including but not limited to self-help groups, cognitive behavioral therapy, academic education, career technology education, and inmate employment opportunities.
Equitable access	72	This refers to a participant's reference to how inmates access programming based on factors such as security level, course offerings, and external political climate. For this study, participants associated this term with the institutional procedures of a specific prison during a specific time period.
Self-efficacy	153	This refers to the participant's perception of motivation and how they rehabilitated through CDCR sanctioned programming as well as how they use rehabilitative programming to achieve sustainable social reintegration following life-term incarceration.
Community	58	This refers to the participant's recognition of fellow inmates as a support system throughout incarceration. Inmates rely on one another for support in navigating the daily challenges of life incarceration.
Policy	69	This refers to the participant's perception of the inner workings of the prison and the formal/informal rules that guide an inmate's ability to participate in the rehabilitative process.
Life	114	This refers to the participants' expressed concerns about being incarcerated for decades during their life term and how the world changed while they remained static. 80% of this study's sample are youthful offenders, which means they committed their controlling crime before 26 years old.

## **Discrepant Cases**

Although this study revealed three instances of discrepancies, non-confirming data was not present in this study. The discrepancies previously described did not directly relate to the central research question guiding this study within the context of the IAD framework, the theoretical framework guiding this study. As previously mentioned, the participants who articulated a discrepancy offered meaningful, relevant insight when answering the interview questions. The responses were factored into the analysis without bias or omission.

## **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research is related to the idea of internal consistency in a quantitative study. Throughout the qualitative study, the researcher must ensure a rigorous approach to research and a clear articulation of how this was accomplished (Morrow, 2005).

Interview participants were required to participate in ethical research, including written informed consent, verbal discussion about anonymity, and a validated interview protocol. This research study used a validated interview protocol that encouraged academic rigor and dynamic, an authentic discussion between the researcher and the participants. Chapter 3 of this study outlined the credibility strategies, and there were no deviations from said strategies. Data saturation was achieved after 8 interviews. However, a total of 15 interviews were completed to increase the credibility of the results.

**Transferability**

The test of trustworthiness as it pertains to external validity comes in the form of transferability. Through thick description, a detailed description of the data and clear articulation of the context, readers can make informed comparisons by transferring relevant contextual factors (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This qualitative study engaged a heterogeneous population varied in the selection. The methodology for transferability was adhered to, as presented in Chapter 3. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with ex-lifers who served their term in CDCR. The shared life experiences articulated by the ex-lifers were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Access to the ex-lifer population is one of the perceived challenges associated with this study. A researcher who has access to the population should not have difficulty replicating this research study in California or another state. The findings presented in this study were generalized to establish transferability by the individual reading the study.

**Dependability**

Dependability is addressed through triangulation, acknowledging consistency with varying data sources within the same study method. Triangulation was performed to verify consistency by comparing interview responses within the sample. In this study, participants were provided a unique respondent code unrelated to any of their identifying characteristics. To create an enlightened experience with data coding and analysis, the decision was made to manually code and analyze data instead of utilizing data analysis software. Through manual coding and analysis, holistic insight and understanding of the ex-lifer population and their lived experience were developed without bias.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the expectation that qualitative research is neutral and free of unacknowledged bias, which is accomplished through explicit reporting of interpretations derived from the research findings and data. As stated in the proposed methodology in Chapter 3, Confirmability was achieved in this research study by a rigorous collection of field notes and data gathering through interviews with the study participants. Throughout the interviews, I engaged in discussion with each participant to ensure my accurate understanding of the responses to the interview questions. Consistent attention was given to accuracy during data collection, and follow-up questions were asked to clarify areas of confusion. Additionally, study participants were encouraged to ensure the accuracy of data collection when asked to verify responses to interview questions.

## **Results**

This study was conducted to answer the central research question guiding this study: What is the ex-lifer's perception of how holistic rehabilitative programming influences his ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration? The frequency of words and phrases identifies the themes that emerged from the data during the interview. This study sought to understand the ex-lifer's perception of how holistic rehabilitative programming during incarceration influences their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. This section of the study is a presentation of the results of my data analysis. The themes and their respective definitions which emerged from this research study in response to the central research question guiding this study and as a result of the

interview questions are shown in Table 2 as follows (a) holistic programming, (b) equitable access, (c) self-efficacy, (d) community, (e) policy, and (f) life.

**Table 2***Themes and Definitions*

Theme	Definitions
Holistic programming	This refers to CDCR sanctioned activities including but not limited to self-help groups, cognitive behavioral therapy, academic education, career technology education, and inmate employment opportunities.
Equitable access	This refers to a participant's reference to how inmates access programming based on factors such as security level, course offerings, and external political climate. For this study, participants associated this term with the institutional procedures of a specific prison during a specific time period.
Self-efficacy	This refers to the participant's perception of motivation and how they rehabilitated through CDCR sanctioned programming as well as how they use rehabilitative programming to achieve sustainable social reintegration following life-term incarceration.
Community	This refers to the participant's recognition of fellow inmates as a support system throughout incarceration. Inmates rely on one another for support in navigating the daily challenges of life incarceration.
Policy	This refers to the participant's perception of the inner workings of the prison and the formal/informal rules that guide an inmate's ability to participate in the rehabilitative process.
Life	This refers to the participants' expressed concerns about being incarcerated for decades during their life term and how the world changed while they remained static. 80% of this study's sample are youthful offenders, which means they committed their controlling crime before 26 years old.

## **Holistic Programming**

Study participants were asked to share their experiences with rehabilitative programming as it pertains to their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. All of the study participants acknowledged the rehabilitative power that results from the inextricable bond between self-help groups, cognitive behavioral therapy, inmate employment, academic education, and career technical education.

The data generated and collected for this study is evidence that a holistic approach to rehabilitative programming positively influences an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Through participation in various forms of rehabilitative programming, an inmate can gain useful pro-social skills that apply to all aspects of life. DG10 summarized the rehabilitative programming experience, "It gave us more to stand on when we came out." All of the study participants articulated how they use the skills they acquired during their life term. For example, many of the participants shared how they apply the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to their work environment and their relationships by working the steps to "control their temper" and "make good choices." Participants also discussed the post-incarceration relevance of their experiences and the training acquired in self-help groups such as Criminal and Gang Members Anonymous (CGA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), anger management, and the Alternative to Violence Project (AVP). Participant DG11 shared that participation in groups such as CGA "helped me become a better person because it gave me more compassion for other people and be able to understand how my actions affect other people, where I never really thought about it in the past." DG12 shared, "My involvement in self-help helps me to see

people and realize where they're at in life. And not have unreasonable expectations of them, either in the workplace or in the community, even in my home, because everyone hasn't had the experience that you had. Everyone has to learn things."

Participants who earned their high school diploma or equivalent, clinical certification, career technical education certification, and or (a) college degree(s) shared that their education is an integral part of post-incarceration success. Study participant DG08 who earned certification while incarcerated said, "I am a drug and alcohol counselor at a men's residential facility, the same men's residential facility that I went into when I came out of prison. I was a client for two years, and now I have been a staff member for three years." DG09 referred to the education received in prison as, "it's a part of why I ended up earning my freedom." DG05 described earning the GED during incarceration said, "And when I got my GED in 20XX, that was the beginning of my quest for sobriety because you gather information. You don't even know it. Subconsciously you're gathering your information because you're making a change, and it takes a while." DG14 shared, "I'm working at a sheltering place helping out the unfortunate people. The homeless people don't have a place to stay. So, they go into hotel rooms, and I basically help them get whatever they need. I feel great about it knowing that I am giving back because I took from a lot of people when I was younger. And knowing that I'm giving back today, at my new job, it helps me better myself as a person, and it builds my character."

Study participants employed as inmate workers in various jobs throughout the prison attribute their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration to the work ethic

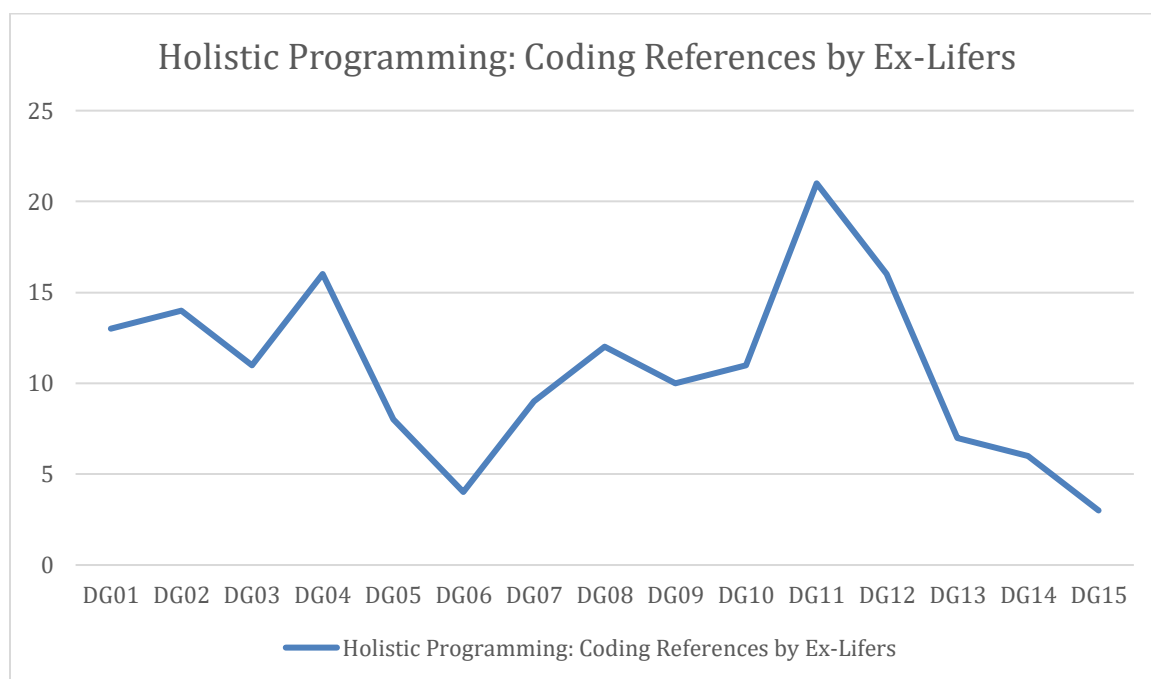


and self-efficacy they developed during incarceration. DG01 shared, “I was the first ex-offender they ever hired. And all the ex-offenders, including myself, did better work than anybody in there because we’re the only ones that showed up for work every day. We never called off, and we just took pride in the work we were doing.” DG03 said, “I show up every day to work, and I know what I’m doing. I’ve done it long enough, so I know what I’m doing. Whatever you got for me, I’ll figure it out.”

When asked what he would recommend to current life term inmates, study participant DG05 said, “Do not just focus upon AA itself or NA, or any one aspect, but to get a well-rounded education completely in like. It means some schooling, some AA... You need to be well-rounded all the way around, not just hyperly focused on one aspect. You need to be hyperly focused on all the aspects.”

### Figure 6

*Holistic Programming: Coding References by Ex-Lifers*



## **Equitable Access**

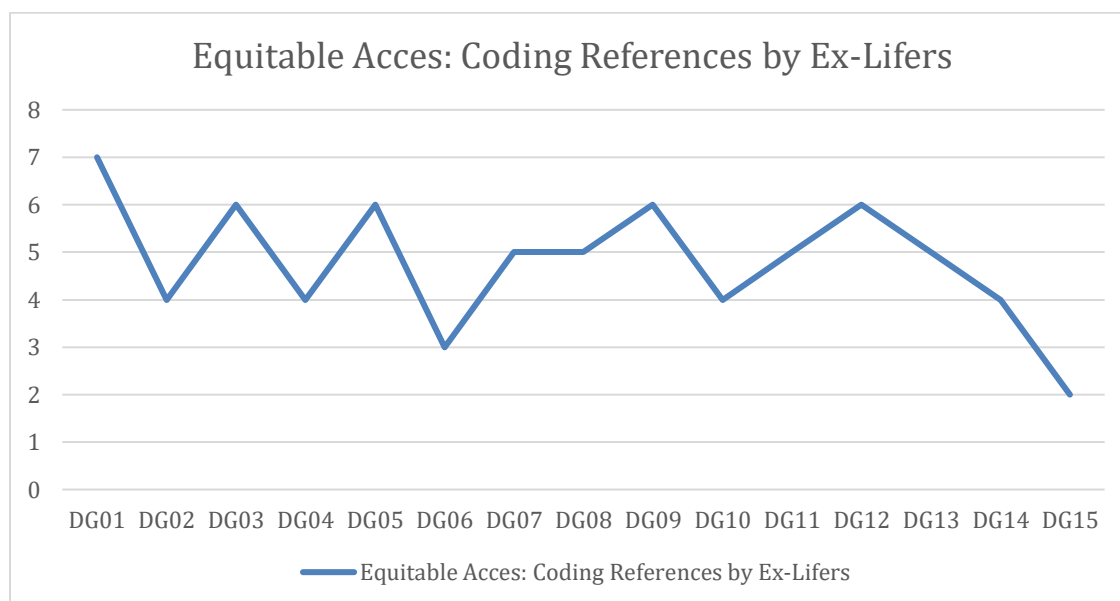
The theme of equitable access that emerged from this study relates to the availability of rehabilitative programming on higher level security facilities when compared to lower security level facilities. This is an important aspect of lifer rehabilitation because lifers usually start their life term on a high security level facility. Each of the 15 study participants shared their experiences about accessing rehabilitative programming. Discussions about access to programming were framed in the form of a timeline that detailed the participant's life term incarceration. More than half of the participants began their lifetime incarceration on a security level 4 facility, which provides the highest level of inmate oversight. Security level 4 facilities provide minimal rehabilitative programming opportunities such as academic enrichment, cognitive behavioral therapy, and self-help groups. By nature, security level 4 facilities are often plagued by security issues that cause disruption to consistent programming efforts.

Survey participant DG08 recalls programming as non-existent, "There was pretty much no programming until I'd say the last 10 years I was in prison. There was no program at level 4 at all, it was basically warehousing." Participant DG09 shared, "On the level 4, it wasn't at that time readily available just because of the programming lockdowns and things that were taking place. A lot of lockdowns, a lot of things that take place, a little bit more restrictive as you move to different institutions that go from 180 to 270." Participant DG13 had a similar experience on a security level 4 facility, "So, back when I was on a level 4, it was between 2000 and 2003 or so and there wasn't a lot of programming in a lot of places in the prison system. So, it was very difficult to get in.

You didn't see any self-help programming really. There was a few voc's and that was just about it." Participant DG11, who was originally sentenced to a life term without parole and was later re-sentenced to an indeterminant sentence, was 17 years old when he arrived at the security level 4 facility to begin his life term. He recalls, "I was in level 4, so there wasn't really any programs, but there was a couple of times where they forced me to go to school, even though I had a GED, and it was just to fill the seats in the classroom. I didn't want to be there. Nobody really wanted to be there, but they were making us go to class and all it was, sometimes all it was, is junior high school work that we were doing."

### Figure 7

*Equitable Access: Coding References by Ex-Lifers*



### Self-Efficacy

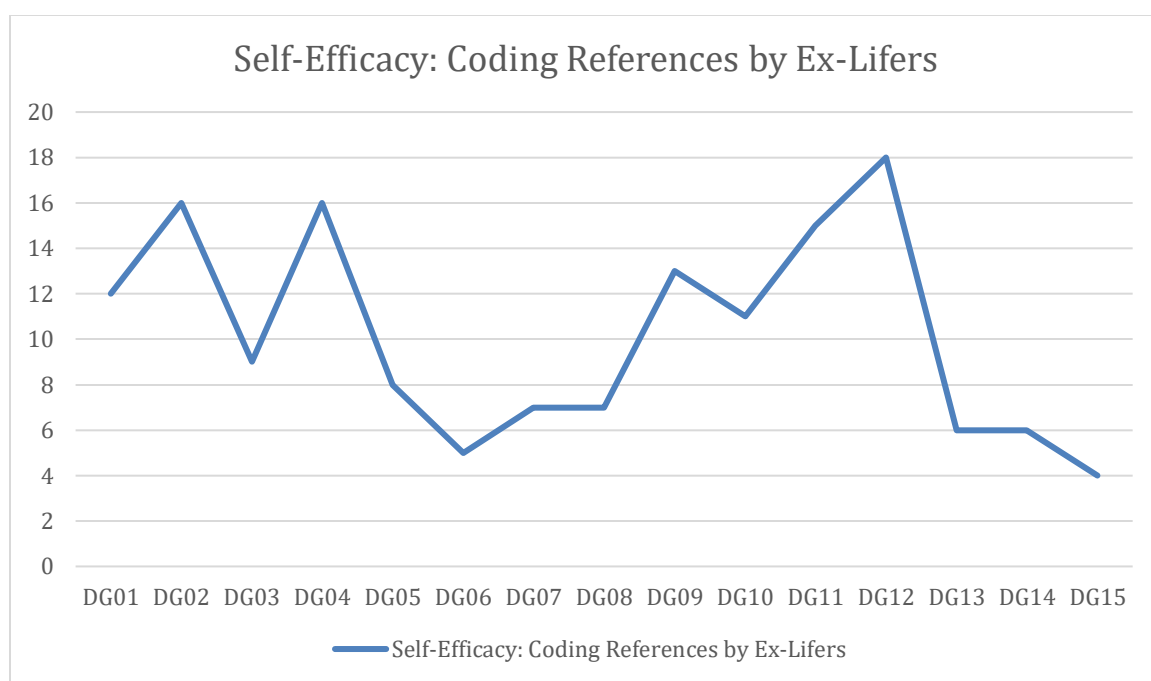
In this study, 12 of the 15 participants are youthful offenders which means they committed their controlling crime before the age of 26 years old. Each of the participants discussed self-motivation as the driving force behind their rehabilitation during

incarceration and current success in achieving sustainable social reintegration. When asked to describe their programming experiences as either mandatory or voluntary, all but 1 study participant affirmed voluntary participation in his successful rehabilitation. The study participant who spoke of mandatory programming provided the disclaimer that their initial experience was mandatory, but all programming that followed was voluntary. Study participant DG04 shared his mandatory to voluntary experiences, “There was always these different avenues of rehabilitation there. Just my lifestyle, gang culture, prevented me from seeing that they were actually rehabilitative efforts going forward. When I did get into it in 2012 was when I really started engaging I self-help and submerging myself in that. I gained a lot of different skills.” DG04 went on to share that he became a member of one of CDCR’s pilot rehabilitative programs and he said, “Here’s an opportunity to never look back. Here’s an opportunity for you to earn money, take care of your family, continue in your own recovery, and reinforce your own recovery.” Participant DG02 was 16 years old when he committed the crimes of murder and robbery which led to his life term incarceration. DG02 attributes his success to self-motivation and his passion for rehabilitation, “For me as a lifer, it was always voluntary. Some of the stuff started making sense and other things took place and I got it. Then I started wanting to get involved. And then it became almost a feeling where it was like, oh this is so great, and I just want more.” Participant DG12 began his incarceration at age 17 after being found guilty of murder in the first degree. DG12 recalls his change of heart through the years about programming, “If a person has any aspirations of returning to society, returning to their families, returning to their friends, then they’re going to have

that dialogue with themselves, and they are going to start making better decisions. And they are going to start seeking out the programs that are going to help them to accomplish their goals.” DG11 spoke of self-motivation, “One thing that I know for lifers, for any individual, is they have to actually want it and they have to engage in it for it to really become effective.”

### Figure 8

*Self-Efficacy: Coding References by Ex-Lifers*



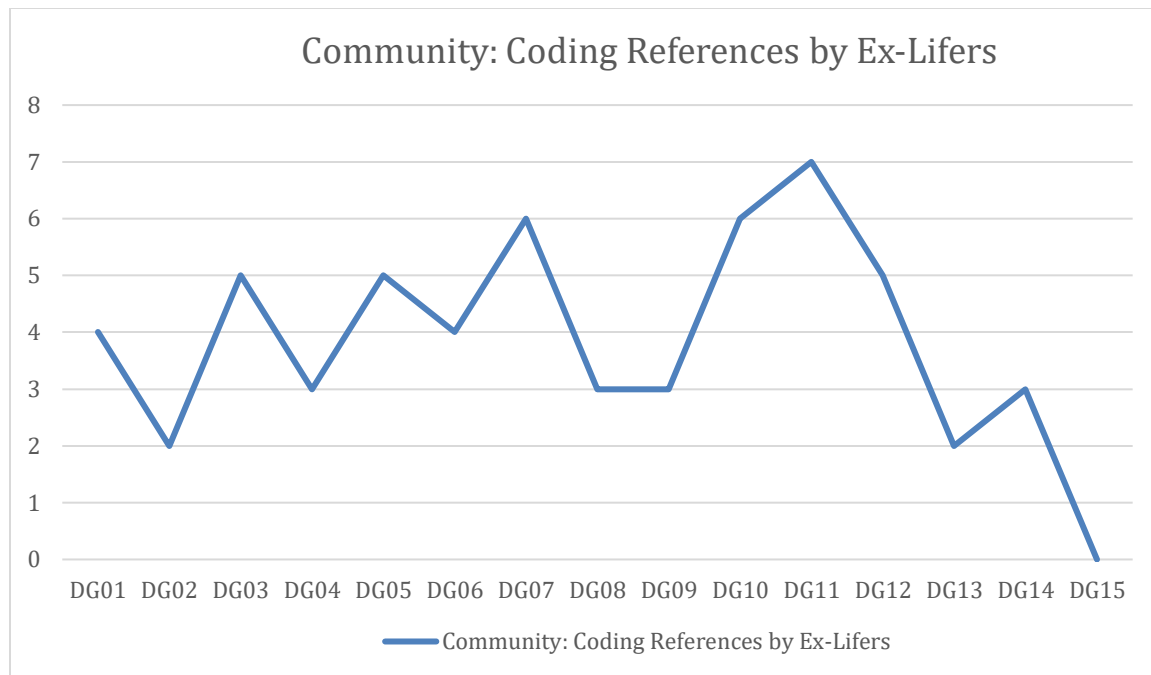
### Community

When study participants were asked to describe their experiences with equitable access to rehabilitative programming, all responded with statements that included community. While the CDCR official policy on rehabilitation describes a formalized process for rehabilitation, the ex-lifers interviewed for this study share the process is more informal than formal; it is heavily influenced by leveraging relationships with other

inmates. Additionally, a familial-like relationship develops among the life-term inmates which promotes a support network for rehabilitation and pro-social rapport. Each participant described relationships with other inmates as integral to access to rehabilitative programming opportunities. DG03 exposed the reality of getting what you need in person, including access to rehabilitative programming, "Sometimes you've got to pull strings. Sometimes you get favors, I mean, I am not going to lie. There is a lot of that in there." DG07 described community support and rehabilitative programming, "There was a lot of positive influences in my incarceration and these people were very genuine and they only had my best interests at heart and they were very encouraging whenever there was times when I felt that I wasn't able to do something they would encourage me and help me and nudge me in the right direction. And I'm very thankful for that." Study participant DG06 described his rehabilitative experience as, "Self-driven and driven by other inmates. Other inmates are usually the ones who teach the other inmates how to do things." When asked how he was able to get a job DG06 stated, "It's easier if you know people and they put in a word for you, especially in PIA." DG13 shared his experience with substance abuse treatment, "There were always a counselor from the street in there, and there was also inmate counselors, they were called mentors. So, they were very helpful, very supportive, that was a great program that I went through."

**Figure 9**

*Community: Coding References by Ex-Lifers*



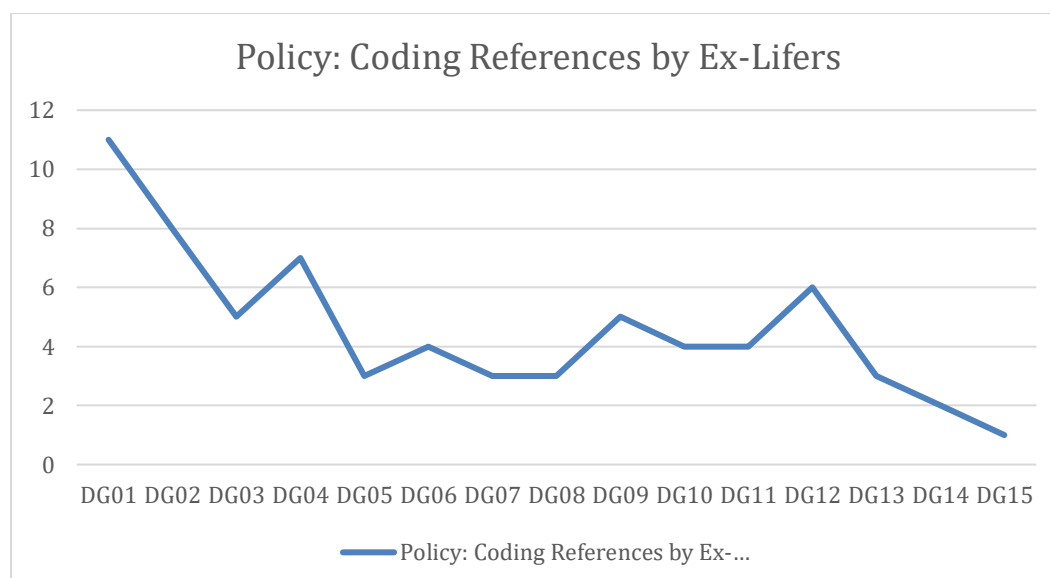
## **Policy**

At a macro level of analysis, prisoner rehabilitation is guided by policy. CDCR's Roadmap to Rehabilitation is an articulation of the department's policy to rehabilitate prisoners during incarceration. The policy appears to be an intuitive process and it clearly articulates a limitation of its generality because each offender is individually affected by their specific variables. Study participants were asked to share their perceptions about the policy driven prisoner rehabilitation process as it pertains to their specific experiences. Step 3 of the prisoner rehabilitation policy states a prisoner should be programming from day 90 of incarceration through 60 months left to serve. DG14 described his experiences in the early stage of his incarceration, "There was no program at all. When I first came to prison, they would never give us actual program. There was no program up in XX prison

at that time.” DG07 shared his experience, “My perception is at first I wasn’t allowed to really participate in vocation programs because I was under this thing called closed custody status where they restricted my clearance level to go to vocational programs until my custody level was lowered. Then I was able to go vocation because I was not able to go the first seven years.” DG10, who began his life term at a security level 4 facility, described his experience, “Okay, so in the beginning when I first started my time, the only thing that there was available at that time was just AA, NA, and then Anger Management. So, those are the only three classes that were really offered on the level 4.” DG01 expressed his concern with the process, “I guess around 2013 they started offering programs for the level 3, but not all prisons are like that. So, if somebody has 50 something points and he’s stuck in a level 3, he’s never going to be able to get out of prison because he doesn’t have access to programming.”

### Figure 10

*Policy: Coding References by Ex-Lifers*





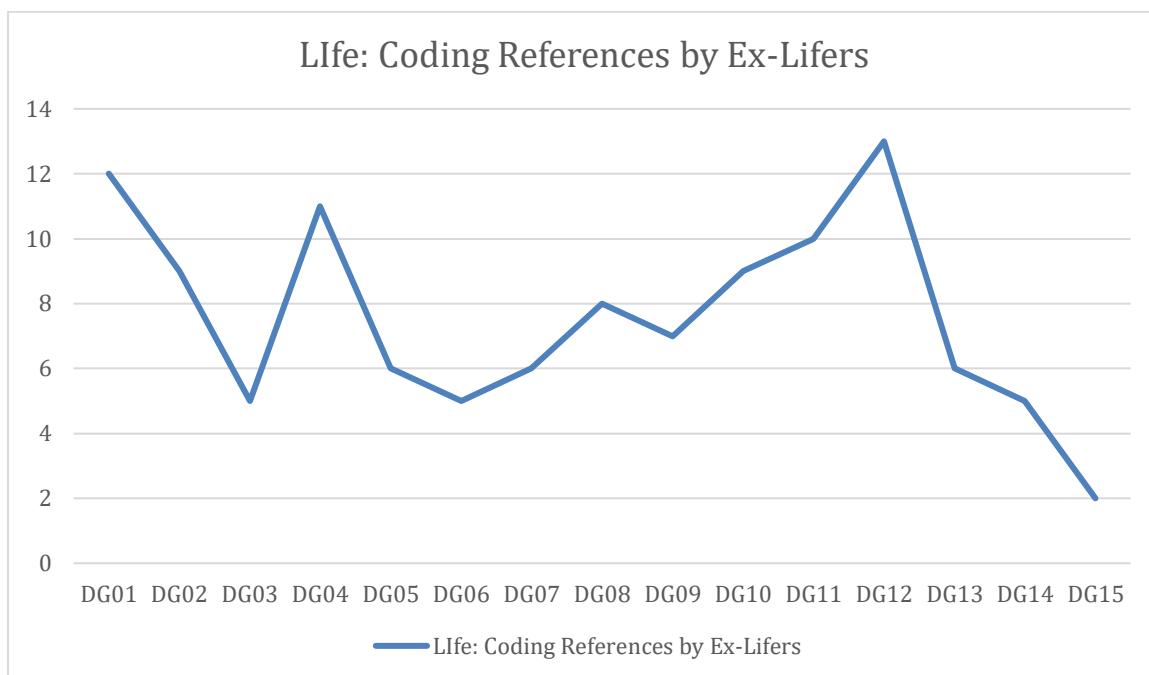
**Life**

Study participants were asked to share their perceptions about their reentry experiences following life term incarceration. DG04 talked about struggles upon parole, “This is the only thing I didn’t like about being paroled. I didn’t have my birth certificate. I didn’t have a social security card. I never had any of that stuff. So, that was just like this great big hurdle for me. And I don’t think men should have to leave that place without those things.” DG03 highlighted technology advancement as a struggle, “They were still in the stone age. Some of the biggest struggles I’ve had has not been dealing with other people, has not even been financial.” “But, learning to use a cell phone, learning to use a computer, I still don’t know how to use a computer.” “So, I had to learn from guys that were also learning themselves. And so it was the blind leading the blind.” DG08 also spoke about technology, “Folks are coming out, they don’t know how to use a phone, they don’t know how to use a computer, and those things are ingrained in just about every single job you have outside.” DG06 said, “Well, the number of years is detrimental because you’re so behind on technology.” DG09 shared, “I’m not free, but I’m free to incorporate the things I’ve learned.” DG10 describes his reentry as a scary time, “It’s not so much where I’m at in my life, it’s the fact that I’m scared to death to go back to prison.” “After spending so much time in prison, after spending 26 years, you’re never going to be prepared. You’re never going to be totally prepared to get out. And what I mean is that time has changed. Things have changed after 26 years.” DG02 feels successful, “Life is great. I just live with gratitude and humility every day. Every day is a blessing.” DG07 is applying what he learned through rehabilitative programming,

“Everything had to work or else I would’ve come back or something, but all the stuff that I learned in prison and my new perspective everything came and worked at the right time.”

### Figure 11

*Life: Coding References by Ex-Lifers*



### Supporting Data

The themes that emerged from this study through data generation, collection, and analysis when viewed through the lens of the IAD framework indicate California’s ex-lifer’s perceive holistic rehabilitative programming as essential to their ability to achieve sustainable reintegration upon release from prison. The findings indicate an emphasis on a holistic approach to rehabilitative programming. All of the study participants acknowledged the rehabilitative power that results from the inextricable bond between self-help groups, cognitive behavioral therapy, inmate employment, academic education,

and career technical education. While study participants embrace rehabilitative programming as essential to sustainable social reintegration, recognizing the power within oneself to change is equally important. Through policy-driven efforts to continue the growth of CDCR's programming opportunities for lifers, the state of California has the potential to improve public safety through the reduced threat of recidivism.

The data generated and collected for this study is evidence that a holistic approach to rehabilitative programming positively influences an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Through participation in various forms of rehabilitative programming, an inmate can gain useful pro-social skills that apply to all aspects of life. Key observations derived from the themes that emerged through data gathering, collection, and analysis are presented in Table 2.

**Table 3***Observations Derived from Themes*

Theme	Observation
Holistic programming	While the scope of the study did not intentionally seek a comparison between the perceived influence of rehabilitative programming and the perceived influence of holistic rehabilitative programming, the data suggests a holistic approach to rehabilitative programming is most influential when preparing an ex-lifer for sustainable social reintegration.
Equitable access	All of the participants perceive rehabilitative programming as a mostly equitable process. Except for high school education, study participants reported they were not forced to participate in rehabilitative programming. Clear policy does not exist which shows how lifers are assigned to prison/security level. Data collected for this study shows inequity in the process which is detrimental to lifer rehabilitation.
Self-efficacy	Self-efficacious behavior can be learned and applied to all aspects of life. The data gathered and analyzed shows pride, effort, dependability, and self-motivation are key characteristics of the ex-lifer's work ethic. The byproduct of said work ethic is the achievement of sustainable social reintegration.
Community	The community was established and developed amongst the inmates. Serving a life sentence creates a realization that the inmates around you are your family. Except for 2 study participants, reference to biological family was absent in the discussion about support and motivation during the life term incarceration. Participants discussed the importance of leveraging relationships with other inmates to procure programming assignments. Additionally, the inmate relationships became valuable support networks that promoted pro-social interaction. It should also be noted that study participants disclosed the ongoing concern of overfamiliarity between inmates and prison staff. For this reason, participants said they deliberately avoided asking for help from custody or free staff.
Policy	CDCR policy is document in the Department Operations Manual (DOM). The DOM is an articulation of CDCR's policies and provisions concerning offender rehabilitation. The DOM addresses CDCR policy at a macro level. The data collected for this study reflects a perception that each prison operates autonomously, which creates a perception of inconsistency and inequity. CDCR's commitment to prisoner rehabilitation is documented on its website as the Roadmap to Rehabilitation. Although CDCR acknowledges the unique variables affecting the rehabilitation path for each offender, it is misleading to imply that this roadmap applies to lifers. The data collected for this study shows that lifers do not usually have equitable access to programming for approximately the first 5 years of their prison term.
Life	Offenders sentenced to a life term are incarcerated on average for 25 years. Many of California's lifers are youthful offenders which means they committed their controlling offense before the age of 26. In this sample, 80% of the participants were youthful offenders who were in the teens when they began their life term sentence and they entered prison without certification of a high school education, work experience, and/or relevant life experiences. They faced an unrecognizable society when they were paroled. The data collected for this study shows holistic rehabilitative programming positively influences an ex-lifers ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon release from incarceration.

### **Discrepant Cases**

This research study showed evidence of discrepancies in the participant responses. In one case, the study participant struggled with the perceived implication that rehabilitative programming influences one's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. The participant felt programming was mostly to satisfy the expectations of the BPH during a lifer's hearing for parole suitability instead of an indicator of an ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. This participant was (self-reported as) an accomplished programmer, having earned 4 AA/AS degrees in addition to several CBT and self-help certifications. This participant offered meaningful, relevant insight when answering the interviewer's questions. The responses were factored into the analysis without omission.

Additionally, one of the study participants articulated a discrepancy regarding the general use of the term rehabilitation. The participant shared that they were not habilitated as a child and adolescent, which made them vulnerable to a life of crime. The participant's perception is that rehabilitation should be changed to habilitation because one cannot re-learn something they were never taught. This participant's insightful perception is relevant to this study and the relationship between rehabilitative programming and sustainable social reintegration. While the participant's perception may appear to be one of semantics, it is indicative of California's current plight to develop strategies for action in support of rehabilitation for youthful offenders. This participant offered meaningful, relevant insight when answering the interview questions, and the responses were factored into the analysis without omission.

Another discrepancy was noted with the final question of the interview because it prompted a wide range of responses – most of which were unrelated to one another. Participants were asked to recommend improving rehabilitative programming for lifers who are still incarcerated. Although participants indicated an understanding of the question, their responses were unexpectedly vague. In 2 cases, the participants shared their surprise by the question because they were not accustomed to being asked their opinion or recommendation. Responses to this question were factored into the analysis through coding and categorizing. While the responses were vastly different, they were still aligned with the scope of the research study.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of this qualitative research study in response to the central research question guiding this study concerning the influence of holistic rehabilitative programming on ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration when paroled. The data gathered and analyzed for this study results from in-depth interviews. Ex-lifers shared their lived experiences to promote growth through learning and understanding. The data shared in this chapter shows support for CDCR's investment in rehabilitative programming for lifers because it has proven influential in supporting ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration.

Chapter 5 includes (a) concise reiteration of the purpose and nature of the study and why it was conducted; (b) summary of key findings; (c) interpretation of the findings; (d) limitations of the study; (e) recommendations for further research; and (f) discussion about implications for positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how ex-lifers perceive California's prisoner rehabilitation effort. Through the articulation of lived experiences, ex-lifers shared their perceptions relevant to prisoner rehabilitation and the extent to which it supports their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon release. This study has potential implications for providing insight to expand current research on reentry and recidivism and providing new data specific to the ex-lifer population. California's reformed criminal justice policies implemented within the past decade have created new hope for the possibility of parole for lifers. Given the implementation of said policy and the rapidity of stakeholder action, a gap has been created in what is known about the influence of rehabilitative programming on ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable reentry.

The nature of this study was a general qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to understanding how people interpret the meaning and how they determine what is meaningful in their lives (Patton 2015). During in-depth interviews with ex-lifers who shared their lived experiences, I gained valuable insight into their attitudes, feelings, and perceptions pertaining to their rehabilitative experiences during incarceration and how their rehabilitation influenced their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration.

The themes that emerged from this study through data generation, collection, and analysis when viewed through the lens of the IAD theoretical framework indicate California's ex-lifers perceive holistic rehabilitative programming as influential in

achieving sustainable development reintegration upon release from prison. The findings indicate an emphasis on a holistic approach to rehabilitative programming.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

#### **Extension of Knowledge in Prisoner Rehabilitation**

This study's findings confirm the need for additional research in prisoner rehabilitation to impact public safety through recidivism reduction. The gap in the literature identified by Koo (2015) and Evans et al. (2017) pertaining to the various factors that impact the likelihood of recidivism was confirmed by this study. While a gap in the literature exists, this study's findings have the potential to extend what is known about the ex-lifer phenomenon and the extent to which holistic rehabilitative programming influences ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon release from prison. The data gathered and collected for this study support current literature relevant to the importance of a holistic approach to prisoner rehabilitation (Duwe, 2017).

The urgent need to understand how rehabilitative programming contributes to an offender's reentry experience is recognized in the literature (Newsome & Cullen, 2017; Paulle & van der Zeeuw, 2020). A holistic approach to rehabilitation is one aspect of meeting the needs of ex-offenders because they experience challenges attributed to education, employability, housing, life skills, and healthcare (Clark, 2016). Data collected for this study confirm current knowledge about prisoner rehabilitation and overwhelmingly support the relevance of holistic programming. 100% of the study participants shared that their postincarceration experiences were positively influenced by



the skills developed during programming while incarcerated. Each study participant spoke of a wide array of life skills that they use every day, including (a) addiction management, (b) steps for maintaining sobriety, (c) anger management, (d) conflict resolution, (e) decision making, (f) marriage and family, (g) CTE including vocational trades, (h) academic enrichment, and (i) on-the-job work experience. The data conclusively show that holistic programming influences ex-lifers' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration.

Data collected for this study reveal a general perception that access to programming opportunities is relatively equitable, although dependent on an individual's specific circumstances as specified in CDCR's Roadmap to Rehabilitation. The Roadmap to Rehabilitation is CDCR's articulation of policy guiding prisoner rehabilitation. This finding extends knowledge in the fields of public policy and criminal justice because current literature does not address concerns regarding accessibility to rehabilitative programming.

Upon receipt into CDCR custody, most of California's lifers are assigned to prison with security Level 4 housing for a stipulated minimum number of years. Data from this study revealed that lifers served 5 years or more at the beginning of their life term on a security Level 4 facility. Many lifers who do not go to a Level 4 facility at the start of their term are assigned to a Level 3 facility with close custody supervision. The rationale for assignments is that lifers are high-security offenders (indicated by CDCR's point system) requiring stringent oversight. Inmates are incentivized by the opportunity to move to a lower level of security following consistent demonstration of compliance

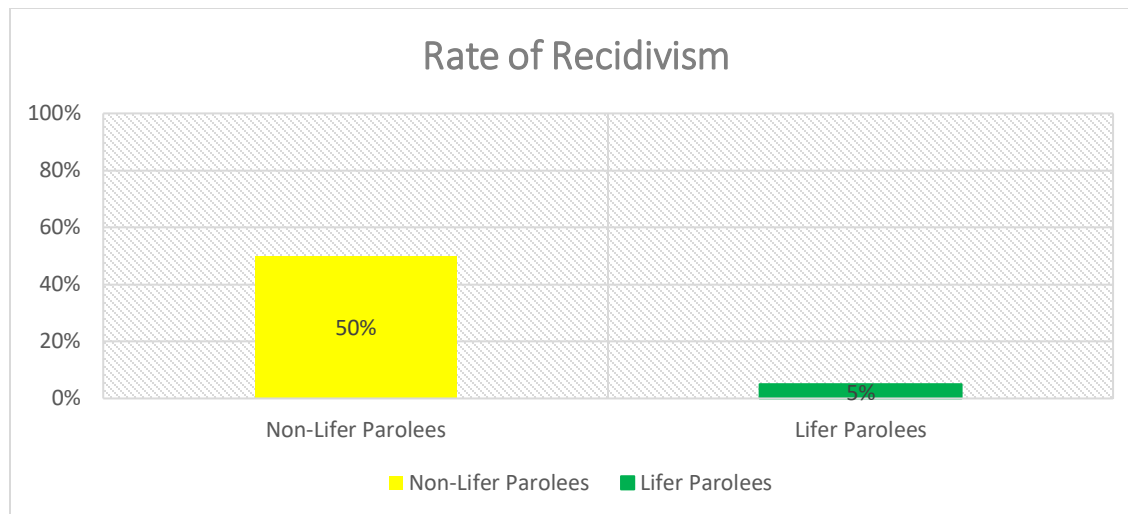
(indicated by CDCR's point system). CDCR designees are tasked with making the most subjective decision to move an inmate to a lower security level. The concise policy does not seem to exist concerning the factors guiding inmate classification to a lower level of security.

Data collected for this study reveals decisions concerning inmate classification to a lower level of security are made without deference to equity or consistency. While it is recognized that security and safety are priorities, the assignment of inmates to facilities associated with specific security protocols is not policy-driven, which is demonstrated by the inconsistency of the process. The seemingly arbitrary assignment of lifers is shortsighted and detrimental to their rehabilitation path due to the lack of programming opportunities on high-security yards and close custody supervision. Current research shows that offering an inmate rehabilitative programming at the beginning of their prison sentence has advantages in the overall rehabilitation process and the eventual reduction of recidivism upon conditional release (Labrecque & Smith, 2019).

Current studies show that 4 out of 10 adult offenders recidivate within 3 years of prison release (Link & Williams, 2017). Research demonstrates that offender rehabilitation during incarceration contributes to positive outcomes relevant to reducing recidivism and improving public safety. Current data are not generally available regarding recidivism for the lifer population. However, a 2013 report published by the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs cited data from a CDCR study comparing recidivism rates between determinately sentenced prisoners (non-lifers) and indeterminately sentenced prisoners (lifers).

In the CDCR study, the rate of recidivism for determinately sentenced parolees was 50% compared to the rate of recidivism for indeterminately sentenced parolees, which was 5% (see Figure 6). While the data are not relatively current, they do present an opportunity to extend knowledge about the lifer population. Data collected for this study indicate that lifers have accumulated skills through rehabilitative programming that they apply to every day.

After decades of incarceration and endurance through the process of proving parole suitability to BPH, ex-lifers seem rehabilitated to a level of confidence in their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. In doing so, public safety is positively influenced by a reduced rate of recidivism. Of equal importance, rehabilitated ex-lifers positively contribute to society through gainful employment and their cultivation of benevolence and spirit of altruism. Data generated and collected for this study reveal ex-lifers developed a strong sense of self-efficacy during their lifetime incarceration. Rehabilitative programming was the daily practice of self-efficacious behavior.

**Figure 12***Rate of Recidivism*

*Source:* Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2013

Another key finding in this study was community relevance in developing holistic rehabilitation. Researchers have identified career and technology education, literacy education, housing procurement, vocational certification, and substance abuse education as influences affecting likelihood to recidivate (Zhang et al., 2006). This study shows that the relevance of the prosocial community is also a viable component of an ex-lifer's rehabilitation; each of the study participants described the importance of other inmates on the journey to parole. For most in this sample, friendships with other inmates were leveraged to procure employment within the prison and assignment to coveted programs. Many described other inmates as family. By sharing their lived experiences, study participants spoke in detail about their value on the familial-like relationships established with other inmates. While researchers have expressed caution concerning rapport among inmates, such caution applies to antisocial situations. The sample recruited for this study

spoke of rapport building with other inmates through self-help groups and accountability partnerships to build healthy dynamics.

The finding in this study pertaining to the community is twofold because it offers an opportunity for knowledge extension in the areas of public policy development and rehabilitative programming development. Data from this study highlights the relevance of community as part of the holistic nature of rehabilitative programming. Study participants shared their reluctance and fear to engage with prison staff (e.g., custody, free staff, volunteers) because of policy-driven guidance concerning overfamiliarity between inmates and prison staff.

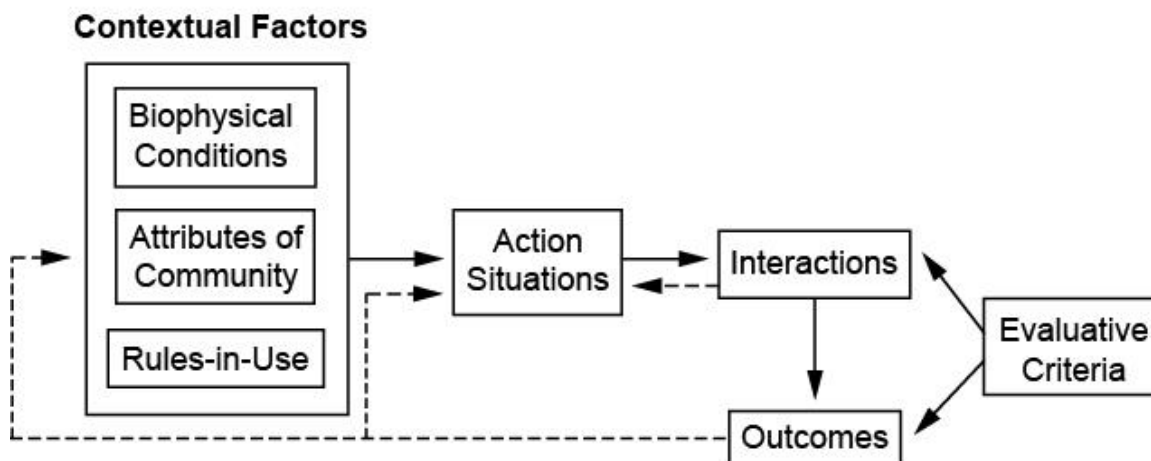
Overfamiliarity is an ever-present threat from prison staff because it is a subjective accusation that can cause severe consequences for both inmates and staff. An extension of research is an opportunity to define overfamiliarity further and provide enlightened training for stakeholders. Effective programming is known to include (a) academic enrichment, (b) career technical education, (c) career and technology education, and (d) substance abuse treatment, but what is not yet fully explored is the influence of prosocial relationships and mentorships on ex-lifers' successful reentry (Duwe & Johnson, 2016). A holistic approach to rehabilitative programming includes humane respectful interaction, which in many cases is facilitated through engagement.

### **Interpretation of the Findings within the Context of IAD**

The findings produced by this study suggest that this sample of ex-lifers perceive holistic rehabilitative programming positively influences their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration post-incarceration. Further, this sample of ex-lifers

attribute effective rehabilitative programming with their ability to change for the better and gain/sustain their current freedom. Study participants articulate perceptions that are universally shared and perceptions pertaining to unique individual experiences within this study's construct. Universally, the sample recognizes characteristics of rehabilitation such as growth, change, betterment, selflessness, humility, and personal value. Individually, study participants recognize academic enlightenment, trade certification, mental health development, and forward-thinking attitude as characteristics of their quest for rehabilitation. Although each study participant experiences sustainable social reintegration in their way, data from this study reveals rehabilitative programming is both the foundation for success and the springboard for growth.

This research study was guided by Ostrom's IAD theoretical framework (Figure 7). This study was developed with thoughtful deference for institutional variances at national, state, and local levels in the area of public policy and criminal justice. The IAD framework guided this study's theoretical analysis through relevant questioning and management of working assumptions (Ostrom, 2011). Ostrom's IAD framework is appropriate for the research topic because it is a methodology that fosters an analytical understanding of current policy by viewing the synergy created between actors, positions, actions, and outcomes through a systematic institutional lens.

**Figure 13***IAD Framework*

From its inception, the focus of this study was to discover the rehabilitative needs of life-term prisoners to support their ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon parole. Doing so strengthens California's effort to impact public safety through recidivism reduction positively. CDCR takes a systematic approach to prisoner rehabilitation. Data collected for this study confirms the process is systematic by design but not necessarily through implementation. For this discussion, Figure 6 serves as a blueprint to analyze and interpret this study's findings in the context of the IAD framework.

Within the IAD framework, CDCR is the institution analyzed for this study of prisoner rehabilitation. CDCR operates 35 adult prisons within the state of California, and while data from this study indicate some autonomy, the prisons' operations appear universal and aligned with policy. Each of the 15 participants disclosed residency at

various CDCR state prisons during their life term incarceration; therefore, the biophysical aspect of the IAD framework is recognized as all the prisons within CDCR's network.

Community attributes are both a strength and an area for growth within CDCR because it is an essential part of holistic rehabilitation. As previously discussed, lifers need access to pro-social communication and humane respectful interaction. While the primary role of custody staff is to ensure public safety within the prison, a balance must be discovered and encouraged as it pertains to interpersonal skill development. Lifers spend decades in prison, and many lifers begin their term at a young age and likely without many pro-social lived experiences. Holistic preparation for lifers includes their exposure and inclusion in healthy pro-social dialogue. Custody staff is in an ideal position to support holistic rehabilitation through meaningful communication with inmates. The strength of community is demonstrated through inmate camaraderie and the development of lifelong friendships akin to a family dynamic. The rift between custody staff and inmates ignites an adversarial biophysical condition, thereby creating the need for life-altering bonds between inmates. Often, the bonds transcend traditional societal barriers pertaining to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion. Through these bonds, inmates become pro-social accountability partners and support one another through survival and success.

Data from this study revealed that CDCR operates by formal and informal rules. Universally, CDCR's rules-in-use are documented as policies and procedures in the DOM. Detailed and robust, the DOM is a formal articulation for all stakeholders of how things are done in CDCR. The other rules are the informal rules, and data from this study



shows these rules are most meaningful to the inmates. One of the most ironic findings from this study is the inmate's depth and breadth of knowledge pertaining to the rules on how to access rehabilitative programming. Procuring employment as an inmate worker, or getting assigned to a self-help group, or getting into vocational education, can be accomplished in many cases if you know another inmate who knows the right people. While not guided by policy or equity, data from this study reveals this is typically how rehabilitative programming works for lifers.

A prisoner rehabilitative process specifically for lifers does not currently exist; the same policy guides lifer rehabilitation as non-lifers. Within the context of this study, the lifer rehabilitative process is inconsistent at best which is likely the result of CDCR's lack of attention on all the working parts within the institution. In theory, the CDCR prison system allows compliant hardworking inmates the opportunity to participate in rehabilitative programming. A CDCR staff member, who relies on various inmate reports and sometimes by special request from another staff member, assigns the inmate to an area of rehabilitation. In most cases, inmates are typically limited to one daytime programming opportunity (excluding college courses and self-help programs). Through successful completion of rehabilitative programming (action situation) and demonstration of change to the Board of Parole Hearings (interactions), the life inmate is determined suitable or not yet suitable for parole. Through the lens of IAD, the process mentioned above is viable, and it can produce positive outcomes. Data from this study reveals that CDCR's rehabilitative process works - if the inmate works. 100% of the sample spoke of self-motivation as the non-negotiable characteristic of success and it is self-motivation

that sustains the ex-lifer's social reintegration. Data collected for this study shows the rehabilitative opportunities exist, and it is up to the individual to take an assertive active role in their rehabilitation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Relevant limitations existed in this study. It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations to mitigate preconceptions concerning the study's validity proactively. It was expected and understood that a study participant might have trouble speaking about their lived experiences during and after incarceration. Given the guarantee of participant anonymity, this study's relevance to positive social change, and the expectation said change brings future inmates; this challenge was effectively managed through mutual trust developed during the interview.

This study examines the policies of a specific institution (CDCR) within a specific geographic area (California). A limitation of this research study is that it was conducted in one state and may or may not represent the national lifer population. The state of California has a reputation as a national leader in criminal justice reform and prisoner rehabilitation through programming excellence; therefore, the state's commitment to prisoner rehabilitation may not be indicative of a national commitment. Further, data collected from this study shows inconsistencies in prisoner rehabilitation because CDCR does not offer the same programming options at all the facilities. Although programming inconsistencies are noted, it should also be clearly stated that the data collected for this study supports the notion that said inconsistencies do not indicate a lesser commitment to prisoner rehabilitation.

## **Recommendations**

Future research is recommended based on discoveries made during the literature review and the findings produced by data collected for this study. As discussed, a gap in current literature pertaining to the rehabilitative needs of lifers requires in-depth exploration. Data from this study and the 2013 Department of Justice report on lifer recidivism show that ex-lifers are significantly less likely to recidivate when compared to non-lifers. The rationale for said finding is compelling and relevant to the topic of prisoner rehabilitation.

Another area for future study is a cost-benefit analysis to explore whether a rehabilitation path designed specifically for lifers would be advantageous. Data produced from this study indicates CDCR developed Long Term Offender Programs (LTOP) exclusively for lifers. Still, soon after implementation, the programs expanded to include non-lifers. While the LTOP endeavor is admirable, more research should be conducted to develop programs exclusively for lifers due to their unique needs. As previously mentioned in the demographic description of the study participants, 80% of the sample identified as youthful offenders. California's youthful offenders are those who committed their controlling crime before the age of 26 years old. A reasonable inference can be made that lifers, especially youthful offenders, require extensive cognitive behavioral therapy given their youth at the time of incarceration.

Lastly, deep-dive analysis and attention to inmate assignments are recommended to ensure all lifers experience equity to the best of CDCR's ability. This study shows a

perception that inmates are inconsistently assigned to housing, security levels, and rehabilitative programming opportunities.

### **Implications**

This study's potential impact for positive social change is evident in the data collected, revealing California's prisoner rehabilitative effort positively influences the ex-lifer's ability to achieve sustainable reintegration upon release from incarceration. The participants in this study universally agreed that a holistic approach to rehabilitation is most effective, evidenced by their acknowledgment of its continued usefulness and practical application in daily living. Data from this study support the participants' assertion that their rehabilitative programming successes are why they are now free from the confines of prison. Further, data reveals compelling rationale supporting the participants' ability to sustain their social reintegration. As a result of the participants' continued achievement of sustainable social reintegration, society, in general, can be positively impacted. The reduced threat of recidivism can positively influence public safety. California's economy can be positively impacted by decreasing the number of inmates housed in state prisons. The families of the ex-lifers benefit from the presence of a healthy rehabilitated individual. This study can positively impact social change because it is a message of hope supported by data.

The theoretical implication for this study is that the IAD theoretical framework was adapted for application to a very important aspect of the criminal justice system. Ostrom's IAD theoretical framework was selected for this study because of its conceptual simplicity and theoretical richness (Weible & Sabatier, 2018). CDCR is tasked with the

immensely salient responsibility of rehabilitating criminals. Upon returning to society, they can positively impact public safety by achieving a sustainable existence and resisting the temptation to recidivate. CDCR is a complex institution for study. However, the utilization of the IAD framework provided a lens for easy viewing and accurate analysis. This study has provided insight into CDCR's process for prisoner rehabilitation and the policy supporting prisoner rehabilitation. Data from this study enlightens stakeholders about the strengths and growth areas concerning CDCR's adherence to its policies. Within the context of the IAD framework, this study serves to inform current and future policy to support lifers in their quest to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon release from incarceration.

### **Conclusion**

As a society – local, state, national – we live by a set of rules established for the greater good and to protect the well-being of all we hold dear. Without permission, persuasion, or provocation, public policy is present in every aspect of life. For those of us who have been raised in the democratic splendor of the United States of America, we have done so under the protection of the women and men who sacrifice themselves to support adherence to public policy – for the greater good. Adherence to public policy is mostly non-negotiable, and many regard it as innate as breathing. This study presented an opportunity to enlighten a gap in the current literature on sustainable social reintegration preparation for life-term prisoners. Scholarly enlightenment on this topic would be impossible without a clear understanding of how it is influenced by public policy.

Because of this journey to enlightenment, I met the most remarkable individuals during data collection who graciously volunteered their lived experiences, providing a voice for prisoner rehabilitation during incarceration. The lived experiences detailed by study participants who shared their memories of life term incarceration in CDCR provided a data-rich foundation that supported meaningful analysis and context-centered recommendations. After the data collection process, I had assembled a tapestry of lived experiences, and public policy was the invisible thread that bound. Research specific to the rehabilitation of life-term prisoners is rare and current literature is mostly silent. This study can enlighten stakeholders in the fields of public policy and criminal justice on the relevance of holistic rehabilitative programming as it pertains to life term inmates preparing for the achievement of sustainable social reintegration upon release from prison.

Utilizing Ostrom's IAD theoretical framework, I created a blueprint of CDCR's public policy relating to prisoner rehabilitation. The simplicity and adaptability of the IAD framework supported growth in depth and breadth of knowledge because it picturized the inner workings of CDCR policy pertaining to prisoner rehabilitation. Through the lens of the IAD framework, I could see the contextual factors come to life (a) biophysical conditions, (b) attributes of community, (c) rules-in-use, action situations, (d) interactions, (e) outcomes, and (f) evaluative criteria. Combining the contextual factors identified by the IAD framework with the lived experiences collected from study participants allowed me to see prisoner rehabilitation policy at work within CDCR. During this journey to enlightenment, I discovered the state of California's commitment

to prisoner rehabilitation is real and, based on this study's sample, it works. Data collected from the 15 ex-lifers who participated in this study supports the finding that CDCR's prisoner rehabilitation policy is viable and supports lifers in their quest to demonstrate parole suitability and achieve sustainable social reintegration. Data collected from this study reveal the system is imperfect and the implementation is flawed; however, holistic rehabilitative programming positively influences a lifer's ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon release from incarceration.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Place:

Respondent Code:

Description of Project: This interview is to collect data about your experiences in CDCR during your life term incarceration within the context of your experiences with rehabilitative programming and your perceptions about how rehabilitative programming influences your ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration. Rehabilitative programming includes academic enrichment, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), career technology education (CTE), vocational skills, and self-help groups. Your responses to these questions are confidential. You have been provided a respondent code that is not associated with any of your individual characteristics.

Question Categories:

### Background

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Year paroled: \_\_\_\_\_ Youth Offender: Yes/No
2. Number of years incarcerated for Life Term:
3. What was your crime(s) that led to your indeterminate sentence?
4. Highest level of academic education completed prior to life term/post life term?
5. What kind of employment did you have prior to the life term?

### Personal effects of rehabilitative programming

6. What skills and/or certifications did you develop/earn as a result of programming while incarcerated?
7. How did your teachers/mentors/supervisors motivate you (at different times during your life term – beginning, middle, end)?
8. How easy or difficult was it to get assigned to programming during your life term?
9. Why did you start programming? Was it mandatory or voluntary?
10. Was parole eligibility/suitability a factor in your decision to program? If so, please explain.

### Reentry

11. How did programming help you prepare for parole?
12. What jobs have you had since you paroled and how has programming helped you in these jobs?
13. What would you recommend to improve programming for those lifers who are still incarcerated?

## Appendix B: Invitation to Study Participant

Hello,

Thank you for the opportunity to contact you regarding my research study.

I am a PhD candidate in Walden University's School of Public Policy and Administration. My specialization is Criminal Justice, and I have chosen to do a research study on how ex-lifers perceive CDCR's rehabilitative effort through programming (academic, vocational, CBT, etc.).

Attached to this email, please find the informed consent form which provides you detailed information about the ethical standards of my study and my commitment to you of anonymity.

I hope you will agree to participate in this research study by spending a few minutes with me for a telephone interview containing 13 questions. I will provide you the questions in advance so you have an idea of what we will be discussing.

I look forward to hearing from you and scheduling a time to talk. Please respond to this email with a few days/times that are best for you and I will confirm a scheduled day/time.

Respectfully,

Kimberly Martin