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# African American Mothers' Perceptions of Trust of Law Enforcement

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Caisha A. Wilkes

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

African American Mothers' Perceptions of Trust of Law Enforcement

by

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MPhil, Walden University, 2019

MS, Stevenson University, 2014

BS, Coppin State University, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

For many years, African American mothers have endured negative experiences with law enforcement (LE) involving themselves, their children, or both. These personal experiences with LE contribute to the lack of trust African American mothers have in LE. The purpose of this study was to explore African American mothers' perceptions of LE in terms of trust. Social conflict theory was used as the conceptual framework for this study. Eight African American mothers residing in the United States were recruited by means of snowball sampling to participate in semistructured interviews. The resulting interview transcripts were coded via the six-steps method, and the data were analyzed using the in-full method. From the analysis of the data, three main themes and nine subthemes emerged. The three main themes were contact with LE, perception of LE as it relates to trust, and hopelessness. The findings revealed the need to hold LE accountable for transgressions and crimes, give culturally appropriate training to LE, and increase benevolent policing in neighborhoods to increase rapport between LE and African American communities. This study can result in positive social change by contributing to the decrease in number of violent encounters and deaths associated with African Americans and LE.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Carmyn Reign, my father, Angelo Wilkes Sr. now deceased, my mother, Carolyn Watson, my sisters, Nicole Honeyblue and Kashiaya Watson, and two of my favorite cousins, Felicia Ross and Itiara Strachan, and most importantly, God. Everyone played a pivotal role in my life. To my daughter, thank you baby for always showering me with love, smiles, and your infectious laughter. To my dad, thank you for instilling in me what hard work means. Your tough love was not always wanted but needed. To my sisters, thank you for loving me unconditionally through it all. To my cousin, Felicia, thank you for reintroducing me back to my faith and being my biggest supporter. To my cousin, Itiara, thank you for listening to my rants and continuing to push me no matter the circumstances. To my mother, thank you for loving me and assisting me with my daughter to give me breaks. You have cheered me on even in the times that I was hard on myself. Their love and support are what kept me motivated and encouraged.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

For many years, African American mothers have been the main source of support for their children and those they love who encounter negative experiences with law enforcement. The Black Lives Matter Movement along with the Say Her Name Movement have all come from mothers whose children have experienced some sort of injustice at the hands of law enforcement (Black Lives Matter, 2019). These mothers have drawn attention to the racial and social injustice that African Americans face every day. There has been an abundance of distrust among African Americans toward law enforcement due to personal experiences. According to Bryant-Davis et al. (2017), mistrust is developing as a consequence of police brutality, particularly, for African American mothers, whose children regularly experience negative encounters with law enforcement. African Americans mothers' perceptions of law enforcement should be the subject of scholarly attention to understand from where the mistrust stems. Understanding these women's perceptions of law enforcement will help identify the root of the problem and ultimately be a first step toward building a rapport between the two groups.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study and explain why this study is essential to society. This chapter includes a discussion of the background, problem statement, purpose, conceptual framework, and research questions. I also present the nature of the study, definitions of key terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study.

## **Background**

African Americans have been at odds with law enforcement for many years now. According to Bryant-Davis et al. (2017), law enforcement's use of deadly force against African Americans increased in the 1960s because African Americans grew tired of the constant police brutality and started to protest and riot. Moore (2019) examined the perceptions of African American males regarding police officers, and Hayward et al. (2017) found that prior contact with law enforcement shaped the perceptions of African Americans today in a negative way. Moore (2019) found that African American men distrust LE because of their negative past experiences with LE. Jackson et al. (2017) provided information on how the effects of stress from predicted negative experiences between police and African American youth impact maternal mental health. According to Edwards et al. (2019), being killed by the police is one of the leading causes of death for men and women among all ethnic groups in the United States. Although African American men still have a higher risk than any other ethnic group to be killed by the police (Edwards et al., 2019), African American mothers are impacted by police violence and their perceptions are essential to this study. Understanding the perceptions of African American women and mothers regarding law enforcement can help elucidate African American mothers' experiences of police violence to support a gender-inclusive approach to racial injustice.

When it comes to how police brutality, receiving unfair treatment from law enforcement, and interactions with law enforcement affect the perceptions and distrust of African Americans, researchers have focused on African American men and fathers and

not African American mothers. African American mothers' experiences and perceptions of law enforcement have been overshadowed by the experiences and perceptions of African American men. Police brutality and the mistreatment of African American women were on the rise in 2015 (Jacobs, 2017). Jacobs (2017) studied police brutality against African American women and found that African American women encounter these fatal experiences with law enforcement just as much as African American men. The African American Policy Forum (2016) issued a report stating that society failing to hold law enforcement accountable for the countless lives of African American women lost over the past 20 years, leaves African American women defenseless in the face of continued vulnerability to racialized police. African American women became more defenseless when the violence from law enforcement extended to the children of African American mothers.

African American mothers, who often are the primary caregivers of their children, play a fundamental role in preparing their children for future encounters with law enforcement in a racist society. According to Bundy (2019), African American mothers who have lost children to gun violence by law enforcement engage in advocacy and activism by creating groups for other mothers for mutual healing to stand up against oppression; hence, how the Black Lives Matter and the Say Her Name movements developed.

African American mothers' perceptions come from race-based stress that often affects their parenting skills to inform their children on how to react when faced with law enforcement encounters. Joe et al. (2019) explained the experiences African American

mothers faced while raising their sons during the Black Lives Matter movement, finding that fear and anxiety were the primary feelings of these mothers. African American mothers drew their attention to their own sons when they heard stories about young African American men and boys killed by gun violence at the hands of law enforcement officers. Moreover, Kearns et al. (2020) examined how the public views legitimacy and trust in police officers. Kearns et al. (2020) found that ultimately trust and legitimacy means different things to different groups of people (pg. 190). In this study, I addressed the gap in knowledge regarding how African American mothers perceive law enforcement as it relates to trust.

### **Problem Statement**

People are more likely to respond positively to authority when those who enforce authority will also respond positively (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). African American men distrust police officers because of prior experiences of unfair treatment (Moore, 2019; President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing, 2015). To understand how African American perceptions, influence their ability to trust in police officers, how African Americans define trust must first be understood. According to Kearns et al. (2020), 25.1% of African Americans defined trust as having confidence in police officers, and 25.3% of African Americans defined trust and legitimacy as synonymous terms. However, Kearns et al. (2020) argued that race and other demographic factors influence how individuals define trust and legitimacy. African Americans are less likely to associate trust with the provision of protection because they

do not expect law enforcement to protect them (Kearns et al., 2020). Overall, African Americans define trust as having confidence in law enforcement.

It is no secret that for more than 100 years, African Americans have been at odds with law enforcement (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). According to Jacobs (2017), the Black Lives Matter movement increased the attention of the national media on instances in which the killing of Black men occurs at the hands of those who are to serve and protect. While much attention has been paid to the views of African American men, less attention has been paid to how African American mothers perceive and relate to law enforcement policies and officers (Bundy, 2019; Joe et al., 2019). African American women face the same deadly encounters with law enforcement as African American men (The African American Policy Forum, 2015); therefore, perceptions of African American mothers might be like those of African American men. According to Bryant-Davis (2016), African American females experience the same structural violence as African American males because they are also overpoliced and underprotected.

It is important to understand that when the police target one person or group of persons within a community, such as African American men, the entire community feels targeted; hence, the relevance of conducting a study to examine African American mothers' perceptions of police officers. African American mothers are raising their boys and girls, teenagers, and young men and women in an era in which they must constantly worry about the safety and potential mistreatment of their children by police officers (Joe et al., 2019). Incidents resulting in the death or severe injury of African American boys and men by police officers have given African American mothers every right to be



worried and concerned (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). African American mothers have a unique, powerful, and essential role in the lives of their children and their communities.

Parenting African American children can be overwhelming and stressful, which may lead to protective parenting. According to Joe et al. (2019), protective parenting behaviors of African American mothers include micromanaging their sons' lives, limiting their sons' movement, and being overprotective to prevent their sons from experiencing potentially tragic encounters with police officers. Mothers of African American males have raised awareness of social injustice between their sons and the police within their communities (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). Using their activism as a political tool, African American mothers strive to eliminate and resist the oppression of their Black boys and girls, teenagers, and young men and women.

Often because of personal loss, these mothers advocate for change, engage in activism, and create groups for mothers who have shared experiences (Joe et al., 2019). Public and violent losses experienced by African American mothers are relatable within the African American community because such losses happen frequently and thereby affect other African American women, even if they have not experienced such a loss personally (Joe et al., 2019). Outrage among the African American community about unnecessary deaths at the hand of the police also led to the #SayHerName campaign, which was launched in December of 2014 by African American mothers who lost their daughters to law enforcement violence (Crenshaw et al., 2016). African American mothers are the very foundation of African American communities, and the purpose of this study was to examine their perceptions of the police officers who serve their

communities and are therefore important to consider when studying trust and law enforcement. This study filled a gap in the literature by focusing on the perceptions of African American mothers regarding police officers and also exploring the topic of trust between African American mothers and police officers.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how African American mothers perceive law enforcement in terms of trusting police officers and ascertain what these mothers believe could help improve the relationship between African American mothers and law enforcement. For the purposes of this study, only mothers who had contact with the police were invited to take part. Contact was defined as African American mothers having a conversation with law enforcement regarding their child or themselves whether in a good or bad situation. The results of this study could encourage African American mothers to report their interactions, whether good or bad, with police officers which could lead to improved policies and procedures. Moore (2019) recommended researching African American mothers' experiences with police to examine their perceptions to support the development of more robust policies for policing. The results of this study may also lead to the development of new and improved strategies and training designed to build trust and relationships among African American mothers and law enforcement.

### **Research Question**

What are the experiences of African American mothers in terms of trusting the police?

## **Conceptual Framework**

Researchers utilize theory to guide their research as well as to predict, explain, and understand the relationships, behavior, or phenomenon of a research study (Adom et al., 2018). According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), a conceptual framework is a blueprint used to support and structure a study. Social conflict theory (SCT) was the framework used for this study. Karl Marx developed this theory to explain how conflict arises between two groups of people (Turner, 1975). Marx viewed the groups as capitalists, those who owned to obtain profit, and proletariats, those who work to obtain wages. In addition, Marx believed that the more imbalanced the distribution of limited resources within a society, the greater the conflict between the two groups of people (Turner, 1975). Furthermore, Weber expanded on this theory by asserting that groups are affected differently based on their race, gender, and education (Turner, 1975). The SCT focuses solely on a struggle between two groups of people over limited resources to maintain inequality. The tenets of SCT relate to the presence of unequal social order among groups within society and how this unequal social order can be changed (Delaney, 2017). Under the SCT, the unjust distribution of resources, status, and power results in conflict between groups within society (Simon, 2016).

## **Nature of the Study**

In this study, I employed the qualitative methodology with an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. To analyze the collected data, I used IPA to describe any patterns and or themes in the data. Researchers conducting IPA use data to understand how people perceive personal experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA is

used to understand how a particular person understands something in a particular setting and makes sense of a particular phenomenon. Researchers do not use IPA to make an educated guess; rather, the idea is to discover, openly and in detail, and address an issue at hand (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

When using IPA, the researcher must construct a question that will allow the participant to go into detail (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Researchers frame IPA questions broadly and openly to explore an area of concern and or issue Because IPA refutes general claims. Although there are many ways to obtain data in IPA, Smith and Osborn (2007) stated that IPA is best when conducting semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews allow the researcher and participant to engage in dialogue in which the researcher can inquire about important and intriguing information that may arise.

IPA was suitable for this research study because the purpose was to understand individuals' perceptions about situations. In this case, the use of IPA helped me to discover information related to the phenomenon of how African American mothers perceive police officers and how these mothers make sense of their personal and social world. Using IPA in this study will allow many people to understand the reality and experiences of African American mothers. Illuminating African American mothers' perceptions of law enforcement by using an IPA revealed the sources of mistrust in law enforcement.

### **Definition of Terms**

*African Americans*: A person or people who have origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (United States Census Bureau, 2020).

*African American mothers:* A person or people who have origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa who has a child or children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

*IPA:* A way to explore an individual's personal experience to get their perception of how they view a particular object or event (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

*SCT:* A theory that displays the presence of unequal social justice among groups in society (Delaney, 2017).

*White Americans:* A person or people having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

*Trust:* Having confidence in police (Kearns et al., 2020).

### **Assumptions**

Several assumptions informed the research study. One assumption was that African American mothers' experiences with law enforcement have been negative, which contributes to distrust in law enforcement. Although African American mothers were compensated with a \$20 Visa gift card, I also assumed that the participants agreed to participate in this study because they understood the importance of this underresearched topic and that change needs to occur for a rapport to develop between African Americans and law enforcement. Another assumption was that all participants would be honest about their personal lived experiences with law enforcement

### **Scope and Delimitations**

In this study, I examined the perceptions of African American mothers toward law enforcement in relation to trust. I used the perceptions of African American mothers to establish a basis of why African American mothers distrust law enforcement and how

their perceptions affect the relationship between the two groups. The participants provided recommendations on how to build rapport and increase trust between the two groups. Participants consented to share their personal experiences that have influenced their trust in law enforcement in several areas.

African American mothers who were excluded were those who had not had an experience with law enforcement that affected their trust in law enforcement. African American women who were not mothers, African American men, and those who identify as being White were also excluded from the study. This study did not include any participants that were my friends, coworkers, or family members.

### **Limitations**

One possible limitation for this study was that the data obtained could not be verified due to the questions being open ended. Another limitation was how the current COVID-19 pandemic affected the study, resulting in the inability for me to physically meet with the participants. This led me to be unable to read their body language to get a sense if whether the participants were uncomfortable with the line of questions because the interviews were conducted via Skype and Zoom.

Collecting data was time consuming. In studies that use open-ended questions, the volume of information can be overwhelming. To get the necessary answers, I had to step in and steer the conversation to the topic at hand. Often, the participant would get off topic and start to speak about things that were not relevant to the study. In addition, because I used Facebook to recruit participants, I may not have received as many responses from the older population in comparison to typical recruiting methods because

social media is often used by the younger population. My appearance on Zoom or Skype may have also influenced the way the participants answered the questions either in a positive or negative way. Participants had different types of contact with the police, and this may have influenced how they replied to the questions. The type of contact they had with police was not something I had control over. A mother who was beaten up by the police may have a very different story to tell than a mother who only had a very brief encounter with police that went okay. I hope this study will encourage other researchers to expand on these limitations and account for all races around the world.

### **Significance**

The results of this research filled the gap in understanding by providing insight into the perceptions of African American mothers toward law enforcement as it relates to trust. This topic is important because the perceptions of African American mothers regarding law enforcement is an underresearched area. The results of this study may enhance and impact social change by being incorporated into the training for police officers to help establish a rapport between African American mothers and law enforcement. The findings of this study may also aid in promoting healthy relationships between African American mothers and law enforcement, which may decrease the number of criminal acts and fatal encounters amongst African Americans and police officers. In addition, the results of this study may encourage African American mothers to report their experiences and crimes to law enforcement. Last, as mentioned before, understanding African American mothers' experiences of police violence will support a gender-inclusive approach to racial injustice that will ultimately promote positive social

change. Individuals in society must protect one another by working together with law enforcement for this change to be effective.

### **Summary**

In this study, I explored African American mothers' perceptions toward law enforcement in terms of trust. I used snowball sampling to recruit the African American mother participants and collected from them through in-depth, semistructured interviews. Data from the interviews were transcribed, coded, noted, and analyzed manually to keep track of new trends or patterns. The results of this study could lead to the development of new and improved strategies and training designed to build trust and relationships among African American mothers and law enforcement.

In Chapter 1, I provided background information relevant to the study, a statement of the problem, the research question, the conceptual framework, the nature of the study, definitions of terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study before concluding with a summary. In the next chapter, I will present an overview of the purpose of the study, the literature review, and how the literature review relates to this study.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

To properly understand the relationship between African American mothers and police, the myriad challenges that African Americans have faced at the hands of United States society must be first understood. While the Black Lives Matter movement is a relatively recent phenomenon, which, through improved communications technology, has empowered African Americans to demonstrate the brutality of their struggle on their own terms, state violence against African Americans has been a constant throughout U.S. history (Watson, 2019).

The history of African Americans began with enslavement and has since been colored by perpetual oppression and struggle, which continues today (Jacobs, 2017). State violence against African American men, particularly, young African American men, is a well-documented, brutal phenomenon that has decimated many lives and families. The convergence of racism and sexism in U.S. society and academia has caused the study of African American women's challenges, successes, and perspectives to be perpetually minimized. One consequence of the subjugation of African American women is that African American motherhood is an underexamined phenomenon. Through this literature review, I (a) give an overview of the history of U.S. state violence against African Americans, with particular respect to its gendered nature; (b) explore the historical manifestations of generational trauma within the African American community and its implications for interpreting online activism, such as #BlackLivesMatter; and (c) discuss presently available phenomenological accounts of African American mothers' parenting in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

For this literature review, I located an established body of peer-reviewed articles concerning the greater cultural and historical context in which African American mothers and police forces interact and how they have come to perceive each other in the United States. As the body of research on the relationship between African American mothers and police forces is very limited, in this literature review I focus on the general ways in which the antagonistic positionality U.S. police have historically taken towards African American people influences African Americans' views of policing. This literature review includes an exploration of relevant topics related to African American mothers' perceptions of police forces, including police brutality against African American men, African American women's experiences with police, African American mothers' experiences of raising sons, the collective trauma borne of racialized police violence, and the effect of the Black Lives Matter movement on African American parenting.

I searched several research databases, including Sage Journals and ERIC, for this literature review. While older references were considered, I primarily focused on articles published between 2015 and 2022. The following keyword search terms were used:

*African American mothers, women Blacks, females, perceptions or opinions or views of attitudes, beliefs, trust, law enforcement, police legitimacy, police officers and cops, and mothers and Black Lives Matter.*

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this qualitative, phenomenological study, I used SCT (Turner, 1975) as a lens through which to understand and explore African American mothers' perceptions of law

enforcement. According to SCT, conflicts over systemic power disparities lead to violence, dominance, and oppression in society (Delaney, 2017). These power disparities include inequalities in resource accessibility, social status, and hierarchies of power (Simon, 2016). An example of SCT would be the Black Lives Matter movement that protests violence and mistreatment against African Americans by White American police officers because of the power the police officers possess. The SCT contains an explanation of how the dominance of the ruling group tries to maintain their power by overpowering the working class or poor.

The SCT was originally coined by Karl Marx in the mid-1800s to explain how conflict occurs between two social groups competing for limited resources (Marx & Engles 2001). As a result, this conflict contributes to human behavior or the way that people react to conflict. In this theory, the two social groups are the ruling class and the subject class. Marx named these two groups bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie are people who attempt to maintain social order through domination rather than consensus. The proletariat were defined as the laborers or the working class. In this theory, Marx contended that the bourgeoisie fight to maintain their wealth and power by oppressing the proletariat, while the proletariat will do what is necessary to obtain that same wealth and power. As a result, these two groups are in a constant power struggle over material and nonmaterial resources. According to Marx & Engles (2001), when the proletariat grows tired of the worsened conditions that the bourgeoisie enacted, they would build a collective consciousness of the inequality and find ways to raise awareness, potentially creating a revolt. If the revolt were to succeed in the proletariat's favor, the

conflict would then repeat itself, but in the opposite direction, with proletariats having all the wealth and power and the bourgeoisie grasping for their power structure to return. In this case, the bourgeoisie would become the aggressor and history would repeat itself; consequently, creating an unending power struggle between the two groups.

The tenets of SCT are the concepts of social inequality, the division of resources, and the conflicts that exist between different socioeconomic classes (Marx & Engles, 2001). According to modern SCT, there are four primary assumptions: competition, revolution, structural inequality, and war.

### **Competition**

Competition exists when there is a limited number of resources. An example of this is the injustice that African Americans receive within the criminal justice system. White Americans receive less punishment for the same crimes as lower-class individuals, African Americans. According to the Demographic Differences in Sentencing (2018), Blacks received sentences that are 19.1% longer than White Americans for the same crimes. This statistic goes beyond material resources and also refers to power and success.

### **Revolution**

Revolution exists when conflict between social classes arises to assume power to create social change. For an example, the Black Lives Matter movement was created to bring awareness of the inequality that African Americans face from law enforcement solely because of the color of their skin. The Say Her Name movement is another example of revolution because it was created to bring awareness to the numerous African

American woman killed unjustly by law enforcement as well. This is not gender specific because it happens to all African Americans. African Americans are killed by police officers 3 times more than White Americans (Lett et al., 2021).

### **Structural Inequality**

The concept of structural inequality assumes all human relationships face some sort of inequality of power and that some groups inherit this form of power more than others (Simon, 2016). As a result, they maintain this power by working harder at these social structures. For an example, African Americans will always face racial profiling as opposed to White Americans because of their skin color. According to Kaiser Family Foundation (2020), when asked what their interactions were with law enforcement during their lifetime, 4 in 10 (41%) African Americans say they have been stopped or detained by police because of their race, and 1 in 5 Black adults (21%), including 3 in 10 Black men, say they have been a victim of police violence. A third as many Hispanics (8%) and relatively few Whites (3%) reported such negative interactions with police over their lifetimes. In addition, Kincade and Fox (2022) reported that there is a tendency for African Americans to be treated unfairly, perceived poorly, and profiled and stopped unnecessarily (p. 224).

### **War**

War, much like revolution, is an outcome of conflict between two groups or social classes. However, war can ultimately bring societies together because it can eliminate traditions that existed between these two groups or social classes. For example, after mass media coverage of police brutality and the murders of African Americans, police

officers are now being charged and convicted. According to U.S Department of Justice (2022), in Louisville, Kentucky, a federal grand jury indicted officers regarding the death of Breonna Taylor who was shot and killed by law enforcement in her home on March 13, 2020.

In this study, I explored the unequal treatment of the African American community in matters of policing and, implicitly, in matters of representation in academic contexts. I used the SCT to demonstrate the extent to which power disparities in U.S. society have encouraged police violence against African Americans, the extent to which academia and the U.S. media have downplayed the plight of African American mothers, and contribute to a body of work that seeks to hold these institutions accountable for their injustices (see Delaney, 2017).

Through this literature review, I situate my argument in a proper sociopolitical context that demonstrates the plight of African American mothers in the United States. Since their forceful introduction to the United States, African Americans have historically been subject to greater state scrutiny and violence than their White counterparts (Kendi, 2017). High rates of police brutality act as a clear contemporary manifestation of this state-sponsored violence. Continual police violence against African Americans has created intergenerational trauma that profoundly influences their relationship to the society in which they live (Heberle et al., 2020). The perpetual marginalization of African Americans has led to their plight being underexamined in overwhelmingly White academic contexts. This is particularly the case for African American mothers, whose

intersection-oppressed identities have drastically limited their representation in academic contexts (Shavers & Moore, 2019).

In this qualitative, phenomenological study, I used interview-based research practices to contribute to a growing field of knowledge regarding African American mothers' experiences with and perspectives on motherhood, law enforcement, and improving the relationship between African American mothers and law enforcement. I sought to use the SCT's positionality to attempt to address harmful power imbalances that have repeatedly harmed African Americans (see Delaney, 2017).

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study was to explore how African American mothers perceive law enforcement in terms of trusting police officers. The following literature review consists of (a) the historical foundations of police violence against African Americans media representation and coverage of racial violence, (b) contemporary African American males' experiences with police violence, (c) African American women's experiences with police violence, (d) African American mothers and police violence (e) the ongoing impacts of ethnic-based intergenerational trauma, and (f) gaps in the literature.

#### **Historical Foundations of Police Violence Against African Americans**

Recently, police violence toward the African American community in the United States has become a global discussion point. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor reignited the fervor behind the Black Lives Matter movement, leading to worldwide protests and extensive public discussion of the ongoing impact police violence

has had on the African American community (Goldsby, 2020). Since being brought to the United States as slaves, African Americans have been policed by White men. Slave patrollers in the 18th and 19th centuries were groups of White men who monitored slave movement and behavior in areas throughout the South; their lack of public oversight empowered patrollers to treat enslaved African Americans with extreme hostility and violence (Adedoyin et al., 2019). After abolition, the enactment of “Black Codes” and the practice of “peonage” kept former slaves from socioeconomic flourishing (Adedoyin et al., 2019). Police and the court system picked up where slave patrollers left off and continued to work together to keep African American men controlled by wealthy Whites; for example, police would arrest African American men on exaggerated charges, impose large fines on them for their “misdeeds,” and then the men would be forced to work for a White employer who would pay off their fines (Adedoyin et al., 2019).

Violence against racial minority groups is legitimized by racial stereotypes, which portray Black and Brown Americans as disproportionately violent and aggressive, and by oppressive and biased laws (Jones, 2017). These biased laws, which include laws like stop and frisk, stand your ground, and three strike laws, increase the likelihood of specific groups being targeted for police intervention (Jones, 2017). Laws like stop and frisk disproportionately affect African Americans and spread the stereotype of Black people as dangerous, while laws like stand your ground legalizes fear as a defense in cases of lethal force (Jones, 2017).

The profound brutality of police violence against African Americans only became a publicly recognized issue in the 1960s, when police officers were brought into



control rioting during the Civil Rights movement (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). Police, empowered by their privileged understanding of themselves as “peacekeepers,” would regularly use force against African American citizens; officers would not report excessive or deadly use of force in an effort to preserve a narrative of legitimacy, peacekeeping, and community protection (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). Oftentimes, African Americans are killed when they are unarmed; many view this as slaughter, but for those perpetrating the crimes, unarmed folks do not pose a legitimate threat, which makes them easier targets because they cannot defend themselves or otherwise fight back (Jones, 2017).

Many people have argued that police brutality and violence is the result of a few racist police officers who actively choose violence to cover a racially motivated hatred of Black and Brown people; however, there is a deeper, more systemic cause of most police violence. Research has shown that most racial violence is not consciously perpetrated because of racial animosity (Carbado & Rock, 2016). According to Carbado and Rock’s (2016) model, there are a handful of potential factors that can increase the likelihood of police violence. African Americans are also somewhat more likely to produce insecurity in police officers, which is more likely to result in crime (Carbado & Rock, 2016). This is known as the “masculinity threat,” because a male officer may feel his masculinity, power, and authority are being threatened or challenged by an African American man due to racial stereotypes of African American men being violent and dangerous (Carbado & Rock, 2016). Continued police interactions, such as living in an overly policed neighborhood, can cause people to resist police authority, or otherwise confront officers, which could lead to violence (Carbado & Rock, 2016). While these are not the only ways

in which African Americans can face police violence, it is important to note that continued exposure to police presence is more likely to increase the risk of police violence, regardless of whether the officers are consciously racist or not (Carbado & Rock, 2016). Being African American in the United States is a risk factor in and of itself and the ways in which African American neighborhoods are underresourced and overpoliced due to stereotypes and systemic racism increases that risk.

While images of violence against African Americans have been an important element of the struggle for justice in America since the mid-19th century, the impact that televisual depictions of police violence against African Americans have had significant; particularly as it relates to contemporary discussion of #BlackLivesMatter and the media infrastructure which brought it to prominence (Watson, 2019). In an attempt to influence public opinion, Civil Rights leaders coordinated with television networks to organize programming which countered regressive distortions of the Civil Rights movement (Torres, 2003). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, coordinated with national television networks to ensure more complete coverage of his activities, scheduling media engagements with precision to maximize positive exposure of his protest activities (Torres, 2003). Networks attempting to cover the Civil Rights movement at the time utilized these sets of connections to help create fleshed-out television documentaries to further legitimize the televisual medium (Torres, 2003). *Sit-In*, a 1960s television documentary about the Civil Rights movement, focuses on the impacts of peaceful Civil Rights protesting, contrasting images of African American nonviolent protests with white police/civilian violence (Aufderheide, 2019). Through media coverage, images of police

attacking peacefully protesting African Americans with hoses, dogs, and nightsticks became deeply ingrained images associated with the Civil Rights movement (Torres, 2003).

Just as the changing role of the television medium brought police violence against African Americans into White America's cultural consciousness, the changing role of social media is making the ongoing brutality of American police violence against African Americans a point of international focus (Aufderheide, 2019). In many ways, the Rodney King tape acted as a precursor to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. In 1991, a tape of an African American man named Rodney King being assaulted by a group of police officers started off a national firestorm; the tape was perpetually played and discussed on 24-hour cable news networks, inundating Americans with the images of King's beating (Watson, 2019). This, of course, is a marked departure from the aforementioned media coverage of the Civil Rights movement. The grainy homemade video of King does not represent a well-funded Sit In-styled corporate media effort; rather, it demonstrates the commonplace nature of police violence and implicitly suggests that were video footage not available to corroborate King's story of injustice, he would be completely powerless (Watson, 2019). Ultimately, none of the police who beat King were ever charged with a crime (Watson, 2019). While the advent of cell phone camera technology has meant that photographic evidence of police violence is regularly provided and made public; tragically, violent law enforcement officers are still rarely prosecuted for their behavior (Watson, 2019). Moreover, how does this affect the way African American mothers will parent their children. According to Joyner (2018), one mother described that her views on

motherhood changed and that she would eventually have to come to terms with the thought of her son growing up and being seen as a person to fear.

In 2020, cell phone camera videos of the suffocation and murder of George Floyd at the hands of police sparked an international protest movement, including 15-26 million Americans (Buchanan et al., 2020). In many cases, overwhelmingly white parts of the country gathered to show their support for #BlackLivesMatter; nearly 75% of counties which hosted a #BlackLivesMatter protest were more than 75% White (Buchanan et al., 2020). While the successes and mass participations in #BlackLivesMatter protests are heartening, their ongoing efficacy regarding public policy and police accountability remains to be seen. African Americans continue to report worsened mental health around the times of police killings and violence, regardless of the movements taking place as a result (Boyd, 2018). George Floyd's murderer was charged with second-degree murder, and other involved officers were charged with being accessories to murder; however, Breonna Taylor's murderers merely faced a charge of "endangerment" (Samayeen et al., 2020). While the cycles of racist violence and apologia have a bigger audience, they have not been truly challenged. The next section of this chapter discusses how media influences the perceptions of African Americans.

### **Media Representation and Coverage of Racial Violence**

As mentioned above, the media has played an increasing role in awareness and protests of police violence toward African American men and women and other people of color groups. In an increasingly digital age, media can take the form of cell phone videos, like in George Floyd's case, or it can be more traditional coverage, such as by a news

station. However, the coverage by traditional media sources often portrays stereotypes of the men and women who have been harmed and killed (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). This coverage can have an impact on how the public views and responds to the violence.

In addition to receiving harsher treatment at the hands of law enforcement, African American men are also often viewed unsympathetically even when innocent. Dukes and Gaither (2017) studied the effects of media coverage on public sympathy and empathy for African American men who were victims of police violence. They found that, often, when African American men in particular are killed by police officers, coverage of their deaths is riddled with stereotypes, detailing past crimes or misdemeanors and pointing the blame at the men themselves (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). This can often lead to harsher punishments for similar crimes when committed by minorities as opposed to White people (Dukes & Gaither, 2017).

In a study of 475 participants, Dukes and Gaither (2017) shared a fictional crime report involving an African American man and a White man, then shared negative stereotypes or positive counterstereotypes with participants, in order to test whether positive or negative coverage affects personal opinions. The results showed that individuals who were given positive counter-stereotypical biographies of the fictional victim had a more positive view of the victim, a more negative view of the perpetrator, and blamed the victim less than the perpetrator, regardless of race (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). In relation to my study, African American mothers will form their own opinion of trust on police officers regardless of their race, it will solely be based on what they see, hear, and their personal experiences with law enforcement. Dukes and Gaither (2017)

concluded that that media coverage of racial violence and police violence toward minorities does have an effect on public opinion. Dukes and Gaither argued that when the media shares negative stereotypes, the public is more likely to blame the victim. Such negative representation has significant implications for how the media is implicated in perpetuating racist stereotypes of African Americans.

While negative images can encourage racism, positive images may be able to change public perception. In their study of protest images, Reinka and Leach (2017) found that African Americans are more likely to better understand protests and their causes, and to view them more positively than their white peers (Reinka & Leach, 2017). This further underscores the importance of sympathetic and accurate reporting of not only police violence toward African Americans, but also of the movements and protests that result from them. In a country with wide chasms in beliefs on the importance of African American lives, clear reporting can help lessen the gap between those who believe race is a factor in the killings of African Americans by police and those who do not (Reinka & Leach, 2017).

The first step to change is awareness: continued coverage of racial violence increases awareness. Research has shown that African American people are more likely to be familiar with police violence and victims of police brutality than White people; in order to increase public sympathy, more people must be familiar with the crimes (Reinka & Leach, 2017). Next, White people must continue to be educated on realities of being people of color. The same researchers found that many White Americans were surprised to learn of police brutality, while African American participants were already aware of

the problem (Reinka & Leach, 2017). Continuing to change and adapt media coverage to increase awareness, education, and sympathy is one step forward in addressing the problem of police violence. In order to continue the support and organizing around Black Lives Matter, the media must take responsibility for news coverage of police violence and stop sharing negative information. Rather, they should share less biased reports or positive information about the victims, so the public is more sympathetic, and the victim is more likely to receive justice.

### **Contemporary African American Males' Experiences With Police Violence**

Since the Civil Rights movement, American politicians have continually advocated for the use of racialized policing initiatives, often publicly coded as “law and order”-based leadership (Edwards et al., 2019). Edwards et al.’s (2019) statistical model of racialized police violence rates estimates that African American men are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than White men, and that 1 in 1,000 African American males will be killed by police (Edwards et al., 2019). Younger African American men are particularly at risk of fatal police violence; police violence accounts for nearly 2% of deaths in African American men ages 20-24 (Edwards et al., 2019). Additionally, African American men are more likely to interact with police than non-African American men, creating more opportunities for potentially violent encounters to take place (Adedoyin et al., 2019).

Subjective accounts of police behavior towards African American men demonstrate high levels of distrust and hostility. Fitzgerald et. al (2019) interviewed 40 Baltimore-based African American men, ages 18-22, about their experiences with police.

All 40 of the men interviewed had been detained by police in their lives, all described being regularly confronted by police when walking in the city, all made active efforts to avoid police confrontation, and most had been arrested, occasionally for minor infractions. This repeated targeting was described as a perpetual stressor for the young men (Fitzgerald et al., 2019).

Even nonlethal police encounters often result in violence for African American men. Stop-and-frisk policing practices commonly used with African American men are intrusive, violent, and often happen unexpectedly. Similarly, police often use forceful tactics not meant to kill, including chokeholds and nonlethal shootings (Bowleg et al., 2019). The threat of police violence perpetually follows young African American men and can turn any stray police interaction into a matter of life and death in an instant. Hence, African American mothers may distrust law enforcement (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). These women feel powerless up against law enforcement and they choose to fight back by advocating and protesting, which develops into movements such as: #Mothersofthemovement, #Sayhername, and #Blacklivesmatter, to shed light on incidents that has never made it to mainstream media to try to eliminate the threat.

### **African American Women's Experiences With Police Violence**

To truly understand African American women's experience with police brutality, one must use an intersectional lens (Amuchie, 2016). For African American men experiencing violence from white men, race is one of the primary distinguishing features. For African American women, however, there are issues of race and gender that must be considered. The violence African American women experience at the hands of police is



different from the violence African American men experience at the hands of police, and different from the violence white women experience at the hands of police; we must consider the ways in which the unique identity of an African American woman makes her vulnerable (Amuchie, 2016). This unique intersection of identities, or intersectionalities, leaves African American women particularly vulnerable, but is not identified by the law, leaving them no additional opportunities for recourse or justice when they are harmed in ways that are unique to them (Amuchie, 2016).

While the history of struggle between African American women and police has not been as widely discussed or studied as the history between African American men and police, their arcs are similarly violent (Jacobs, 2017). Early cultural conceptions of African American women in America were highly sexualized, animalistic, and often characterized African American women as liars; they were regularly raped by their white masters in order to produce more slaves, and had no recourse in their subjugation (Jacobs, 2017). Sojourner Truth spoke at length about the intersectional challenges African American women faced during the suffrage movement, when African American women were denied the right to vote, despite African American men and white women having secured that right, in her “Ain’t I A Woman?” speech (Amuchie, 2016).

Today, African American women face police violence alongside their male peers, and they disproportionately face other crimes against women when compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Jones, 2016). Violence against women has many definitions but is widely understood and defined to be violence of a physical, psychological, and/or sexual nature perpetrated and/or condoned by institutional processes and figures

(Amuchie, 2016). This dovetails with stereotypes of African American women, who are often categorized in one of three ways: the “Mammy” figure, who is a mothering, nurturing figure who will go to great lengths for those around her, which derives from a matriarchal slave figure; the “Jezebel” figure, who is sexualized and promiscuous, which derived to provide a scapegoat for the rape and pregnancy of African American slave women; and the “Sapphire” figure, who is angry, abrasive, quick to react, and bold, which stems from more modern interpretations of Black women as aggressive and not deserving of chivalry or gentleness (Amuchie, 2016, p. 636). These stereotypes leave African American women with little options in the way of being unique and multifaceted individuals in the eyes of society; no matter what they do, they are often reduced to one of these figures, which then dictates how they are treated and expected to react (Amuchie, 2016).

In contemporary society, coverage of African American women’s mistreatment at the hands of police is rarely discussed, partially owing to African American women’s reluctance to formally challenge police tactics out of fear of retribution, partially owing to a cultural conception of African American women as liars, and partially owing to limited study of police violence against African American women (Jacobs, 2017; Jones, 2016). Some African American mothers fear that publicizing their stories and making their pain known will take attention away from the violence African American men face, rather than add to it; to best address the problem of police violence toward African Americans, though, the two movements must be seen as one movement against structural racism and violence, and against interpersonal harm (Jones, 2016).

While statistical information regarding police violence toward African American women is limited, and there is no one comprehensive list of the African American women who have been victims of crime at the hands of police, some policing-related statistics pertaining to African American women do exist (Amuchie, 2016). The arrest rate of African American women is 2.8 times the arrest rate of White women (Jacobs, 2017). While according to Adedoyin et al. (2019) the number of African American women who have been killed by police is similarly difficult to determine due to limited data collection, Edwards et al.'s (2019) statistical model of racialized police violence rates estimates that African American women are 1.4 times more likely than White women to be killed by police. Since 2015, 250 African American women were fatally shot and of the 250, 89 African American women were killed by police officers in their homes (Lati et. al, 2020).

Part of the challenge in discussing of African American women's distrust of police is that institutionalized racism and sexism has marginalized African American women's experiences to such an extreme degree that many collective traumas go virtually undiscussed. African American women are, functionally, invisible in society, unless they are being objectified, vilified, or otherwise harmed (Amuchie, 2016). It is extremely difficult to keep the public aware of the violence against African American women because it rarely makes mainstream media due to complex self-censure (Jacobs, 2017). As a result, African American women refuse to report crimes and they rather blame themselves for their trauma and or victimization. A study on domestic violence rates after the Violence Against Women Act found that fear of bringing additional police forces into

African American communities has dissuaded African American women from reporting instances of intimate partner violence to police (Broussard, 2013). This both suggests how dire a threat over policing is to African American communities and demonstrates African American women and mothers' profound distrust in the criminal justice system.

While women are significantly less likely to be killed by police than men, police rape is a massively understudied phenomenon which disproportionately affects women (Edwards et al., 2019; Jacobs, 2017). As African American women live in areas disproportionately patrolled by police, Jacobs (2017) argued that African American women are the victims of many police rapes which have gone widely unreported (Adedoyin et al., 2019). Recent stories about the rapes of African American women by police officers in Chicago, Washington, D.C, and Oklahoma have been massively underreported on in the news media; additionally, statistics on police rape as published by the Cato Institute's National Police Misconduct Reporting Project have conspicuously not included racial demographic statistics about victims (Jacobs, 2017). In both of these cases, African American women's traumas are silenced by the looming threat of police retaliation. For African American women, there is virtually no opportunity for state-aided justice. African American women who defend themselves against their abusers are twice as likely to face felony assault or murder convictions than white women (Jacobs, 2017).

Although the brutal history of African American women's experiences with police have been massively underacknowledged, there is positive progress being made in the fight for greater representation. The most widely visible example of this is the #SayHerName movement, which foregrounds the experiences of African American

women who have been the victims of police violence (Ritchie, 2017). This movement has gained significant traction and attention due to the Breonna Taylor case. Taylor was shot eight times by police during an unannounced late-night drug raid on her home; as police did not announce their entry into the home, Taylor's boyfriend was convinced that a home invasion was taking place and fired shots at the police officers (Goldsby, 2020). Police returned fire, repeatedly shooting Taylor, then asleep; drugs were not found on Taylor's property (Goldsby, 2020). While the Taylor case renewed interest in #SayHerName and may help draw attention to more stories of contemporary African American women's experiences with police violence, the historical subjugation of African American women has effectively destroyed an extensive library of similar historical grievances.

Which brings me to my next section, African American mothers and police violence. Interviews of Tamika Palmer; Breonna Taylor's mother; was extremely hard to watch. The U.S. Department of Justice publishes several articles that show that the presence of law enforcement in communities will minimize crime, build a rapport with its residents, and eventually build that trust between African Americans and law enforcement. According to the Mentel (2012), there are many complex challenges within the African American communities if I look at the particular traumas that they have faced; however, this could only be resolved internally meaning that the two groups will have to work together to build that relationship and trust in order to effectively reduce crime. However, it is the complete opposite; African Americans mothers may be hesitant to call the law enforcement even if they were in trouble out of fear of what can be done to

their children. As a mother, I would not risk inviting law enforcement into my community if it meant that my children and other people's children's lives were on the line.

### **African American Mothers and Police Violence**

While the impact that decades of police violence has had on African American mothers—particularly, mothers of males—cannot be overstated, conspicuously little academic work has been done on the topic. Joe et al. (2019) performed a phenomenological study in which 19 African American mothers raising young men (i.e., under the age of 25) were interviewed about their experience raising African American sons in the era of Black Lives Matter. Interviewees were asked about the experience of raising an African American son in the United States, about their affective experiences with media portrayals of violence against African American men, and about the state of their mental health (Joe et al., 2019). It is worth mentioning that over half of the population the researchers surveyed were suburban, had an advanced degree, and lived in two-parent households, with over 40% of participants having a household income of over \$100,000 a year; this is significant because African American mothers from low-income families in urban areas, where many of these police shootings have taken place, experience higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder and live in more overpoliced areas than suburbanites (Joe et al., 2019).

All the interviewed African American mothers described experiencing acute psychological distress from perpetually worrying about their sons' potential police interactions; this stress was thought to be aggravated by the constant exposure to these

violent images the mothers received on television and online (Joe et al., 2019). The interviewed African American mothers have felt the impacts of this anxiety physically; many participants indicated that they experienced nausea, sleeping problems, chest tightness, and rapid heartbeats (Joe et al., 2019). To mitigate anxieties surrounding their sons' well-being, many of the interviewed African American African American mothers became more protective and overbearing parents to exercise some measure of control over the situation (Joe et al., 2019). The interviewed African American mothers also had regular conversations with their sons about how to act if stopped by police and how to make responsible decisions outside the home in order to ensure police do not needlessly interact with them (Joe et al., 2019).

African America' women's understanding of police injustice towards African American children is another reason African American mothers distrust police. Because African American mothers are often understood as adults earlier in their lives, they are treated as adults by police at younger ages (Epstein et al., 2017). This attack on African American childhood has been at work since slavery, when African American children were punished for exhibiting childlike behavior, likely to push African American children into more complete servitude at a younger age (Jacobs, 2017). Studies have shown that African American children are regularly understood as older than they are by members of the public; as such, the actions of African American children are understood as actions of fully developed and autonomous adults (Epstein et al., 2017). This is problematic, as it expects African American children to have a capacity for self-control advanced far

beyond that of their White peers and empowers authority figures to act against African American children with extreme hostility (Jacobs, 2017).

African American children accused of misbehavior are often treated as misbehaving adults by disciplinary bodies, be they a school principal or a police officer (Epstein et al., 2017). This positionality creates an antagonistic relationship between police officers and African American women from a young age, which continues to develop as African American mothers age and become responsible for African American children. African American girls' negative encounters with police officers lead them, as future mothers, to view police power as illegitimate. These negative interactions inform their understanding of police as they grow older. African American mothers who understand police as inherently unfair to African American children deeply internalize the fear of police attacking their children for baseless reasons (Jacobs, 2017).

In a study of 30 African American mothers from various socioeconomic backgrounds, researchers analyzed the ways in which mothers discuss the concepts of race and gender with their children through the "police talk" (Malone Gonzalez, 2019). The police talk is a phrase used to describe how African American parents talk to their children about the inherent danger police pose to them as African American children. Malone Gonzalez (2019) found that most African American mothers emphasize the importance of "making it home," over the danger posed by police; however, the danger is implied in the argument being made (p. 363). African American boys are more often given the police talk as potential victims; while African American girls are taught that their male peers are more likely to be victims, and them to be collateral damage (Malone



Gonzalez, 2019). In this case, African American mothers themselves are diminishing the dangers posed by police toward African Americans because they are advocating for their children which in turn exposes law enforcement's unfair behavior. However, they are doing so out of protection, love, and fear for their daughters and sons. These discussions and conversations shape how African Americans interact not only with police, but also with each other; examples of this have been growing in popular media, in stories and movies such as "The Hate U Give."

### **Ongoing Impacts of Ethnic-Based Intergenerational Trauma**

Trauma is a psychological reaction a person has to an emotionally or physically damaging experience (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). Incidents in which an individual experiences racist violence can have a profound impact on their lives with respect to trauma. Institutional racism through resource deprivation puts many minority communities in states of general ill health and stereotype-inflicted self-perceptions make minority communities less mentally well; consequently, racist experiences involving significant threats to bodily harm can be exacerbated by these already fragile conditions, and make the experience more distressing (Carter et al., 2020). While not all racist experiences are traumatic ones, the extent to which racist encounters can psychologically impact members of underrepresented groups can be extremely pronounced.

Intergenerational trauma is a set of negative social, emotional, and behavioral conditions which are passed on between generations of families or populations which have experienced ongoing or historical instances of oppression or violence (Storey, 2019). Storey (2019) conducted semistructured interviews with 10 African Americans

ages 37-90 about intergenerational trauma and its impacts; 40% of those surveyed understood being “taught to know their place” as an example of their internalized generational trauma, and 50% of those surveyed understood they were taught to accept racial discrimination as an example of their internalized generational trauma. In both cases, the African Americans interviewed by Storey (2019) were taught by their elders to understand the society they inhabited as one essentially hostile to them, which sought to limit their abilities to succeed. Here, a transmission of trauma occurs: an older group of African Americans who have had extensive traumatic experiences navigating a racist society pass on their trauma to a younger generation in the hopes that knowledge of these social conditions and their potential consequences may make them (i.e., the younger generation) better equipped to handle the pains of subjugation (Storey, 2019).

These experiences echo those of the African American mothers discussing the safety measures their sons must take in public to ensure that they are not put in a potentially life-threatening police encounter (Joe et al., 2019). Here, centuries of exposure to police violence against African American men has created intergenerational trauma; in order to properly protect their sons from a society which has repeatedly violently subjugated African American men, African American mothers must make their sons recognize that the state is violently hostile towards them (Joe et al., 2019). While this indoctrination is done for well-founded reasons and with good intentions, it demands that new generations of African Americans inherit generational trauma (Joe et al., 2019).

Stephens (2018) discussed how #BlackLivesMatter functions as a translation of African American trauma for the millennial generation, many of whom came of age

during the “postracial”-posturing Obama years. Stephens (2018) also discussed how, while #BlackLivesMatter and the present media ecology creates a highly traumatic mechanism for exposure to African American death via social media “feed” functions, they also give contemporary African Americans a greater sense of autonomy in contextualizing their narratives on their own terms. To obtain the necessary momentum and output to sustain interest in such a fast-moving media ecology, the #BlackLivesMatter movement demands the constant, unfiltered sharing of images of African American death (Stephens, 2018). In response, cycles of outrage, trauma, and nonaction are perpetually agitated but never truly resolved; while these displays of state violence and may cumulatively create a sense of profound hopelessness, social media’s narrative affordances allow African Americans to display the truths of their American experience without the whitewashed framing of traditional news media outlets (Stephens, 2018). Although, this vividly displays the truth behind the death of African Americans, it is never a sight that African American mothers should see among their children, but it is necessary to bring awareness of the injustice among African Americans and to expose their encounters with law enforcement. As a result, this shapes the way African American mothers’ parent their children in the event they children are faced with an encounter with law enforcement. According to Joe et al., (2019), parenting behaviors have since changed; African American mothers reported the following behaviors: hypervigilant, overprotective, micromanaging their children’s lives and hovering over their children’s every move. The very thought of these incidents happening to their child is disheartening,

and these mothers have expressed that although these behaviors may limit their child's social life, they know they will be safe and alive.

While younger African Americans can use these images of African American death and discussions of African American subjugation to recognize how the convergences of historical violence impact them, this is admittedly a less than ideal framing mechanism. As Tanksley (2019) discussed through her study of African American women who engage in online activism, exposure to online videos of African American death can be dehumanizing, and conversations with unsympathetic individuals/entities online can be emotionally exhausting. If African American women can become emotionally exhausted by the lack of care, imagine the physical and mental well-being of African American mothers who fear that this could one day be their reality. According to Joe et al., (2019), fear and anxiety was expressed by African American mothers the most upon hearing about African American men being killed either by police officers or other citizens. In addition, most thought of their own children. It is worth questioning how older African American social media users react to and compartmentalize the images of African American death shared online.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Centuries of institutionalized racism have robbed African American mothers of opportunities to create autonomous channels for theoretical and experiential discussion. As Jacobs (2017) discussed in-depth, African American women are severely understudied in academia, leading many limitations with regards to statistical data centering around police violence against African American women. While some

statistical data regarding the experiences African American women have had with police, such as rates of police interaction with African American women relative to other demographic groups, is available, there are certain hardships African American women experience at the hands of police, which cannot be adequately paid respect to without a radical reframing of academia and its aims (Jacobs, 2017). While it is easy to point to gaps in quantitative data collection as emblematic of the limited opportunities for knowledge creation that have been afforded to African American women, it would be a misnomer to say that to fill in these gaps characterizes a proper restorative measure.

Contemporary studies utilized in this literature review appear to represent skewed populations of African Americans. Storey (2019) and Joe et al.'s (2019) studies both included highly educated populations of African Americans, which has income-based implications. For example, 85% of the participants in Storey's study had a doctoral degree, and nearly half of Joe et al.'s participants had an income of over \$100,000 a year. While the experiences of these participants are certainly valid and are meaningful contributions to discourse surrounding the African American experience, these studies leave out significant populations within the African American community, particularly those who are most at risk of experiencing police violence, African Americans in impoverished, overpoliced, urban areas (Joe et al., 2019).

Tanksley's (2019) study of millennial African American women engaged in online activism raises interesting questions about the nature of older African American women's engagements with social media in their broader contextual understanding. Specifically, it is worth interrogating how older African American social media users

react to and compartmentalize the images of African American death shared online; older African Americans' understandings of the intersections of social media engagement, #BlackLivesMatter, generational trauma, and parenting only begin to be discussed in Joe et al. (2019). The generational differences in social media-based engagement with news material may factor significantly into the types of conversations contemporary African American mothers may have with their children. Different social media platforms utilized by people of different ages lead to significantly different user experiences; varying degrees of anonymity, formality, content moderation policies, and online literacy levels may significantly impact how African Americans of different age groups read and interpret discourse pertinent to #BlackLivesMatter and the extent to which they are exposed to traumatic images. These factors may significantly impact the way in which police, police violence, public opinion of police, public opinion of #BlackLivesMatter, and the political efficacy granted by social media are perceived by study participants.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The oppression of African Americans at the hands of the American state started during 17th century slavery and have continued through the present. While progress in the fight for freedom has gradually occurred, calcified centuries of intergenerational trauma have loomed large over the psyches of many African Americans (Adedoyin et al., 2019). African American men, particularly, young men, have been violently vilified at the hands of the state and subjected to repeated violence, indignity, and murder. Years of racist conditioning has led the public to understand African American men as a pressing threat to public safety and has socialized police officers to treat them as such. The remarkably

high rates of police violence against African American men create a culture of earned hostility towards police in the African American community (Adedoyin et al., 2019). Understanding the historical and contemporary sources of distrust that African Americans feel towards law enforcement officers and agencies is an important step toward eliminating racial bias and anti-African American violence from law enforcement.

African American women's struggles with police have been massively underemphasized. While African American men have been disproportionately targeted as enemies of the state throughout American history, the experiences, and challenges of African American mothers have been repeatedly downplayed and gone unspoken (Jacobs, 2017). Although recent activism has given the public greater exposure to the plight of African American mothers, the mostly undocumented history of violence against African American women at the hands of American police has made a great impact on their ability to collectively theorize about, discuss, and heal from their ongoing struggles.

An impact of the role of African American mothers has been underdiscussed in academia (Jacobs, 2017). In a contemporary context, the roles of African American mothers are particularly complex, particularly when considered in conversation with the media ecosphere borne of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. African American mothers are tasked with helping their children interpret the complexities of African American life and identity, particularly as it relates to negotiating generational trauma and its meanings. At the same time, the means through which young African Americans interpret and become aware of their identities is increasingly through social media (Tanksley, 2019).

The #BlackLivesMatter movement has interpolated a generation of Black Americans raised during the postracial-posturing Obama years into a profound, sobering cognizance of their inherited generational trauma and the unsafe conditions in which they live (Stephens, 2018). While young African Americans are repeatedly exposed to traumatizing images of African American death, African American mothers, whose relationships with online spaces are radically different from that of their children, are to help their sons and daughters craft an understanding of the material status of African Americans in an extremely polarized, volatile online context which they are often only beginning to understand (Joe et al., 2019). In chapter 3, I will discuss the methodology and design, the population sample, instrumentation, and the analysis that is used for this study as a means to facilitate understanding, this study will interview African American mothers to reveal how a history of violence against African American mothers by the police causes trauma.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how African American mothers perceive law enforcement in terms of trusting police officers. The results of this study could lead to the development of new and improved strategies and training designed to build trust and relationships among African American mothers and law enforcement. In this chapter, I describe the setting, research method and design, and the role of the researcher. The methodology and procedures for data collection are also presented. Additionally, I discuss the data analysis, the study's strengths and limitations, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The primary research question that guided this this study was: What are the experiences of African American mothers with law enforcement in terms of trusting the police?

#### **Phenomenon of the Study**

The phenomenon of the study was African American mothers' perceptions of law enforcement in terms of trusting police officers. I obtained an in-depth understanding of these perceptions of African American mothers to bring awareness to those groups in hopes of creating positive social change.

#### **Research Tradition**

Researchers can use three research methods to conduct a study: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. For this study, I conducted a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore African American mothers' perceptions of

the police in terms of trust. In the case of this study, quantitative and mixed methods were not appropriate because I was interested in explaining in detail how the participants perceive things and people. The qualitative method obtains information by conducting interviews, narratives, and stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In this subsection, I discuss why I chose the qualitative method and explain in detail how the qualitative method aligned with the goals of this study.

The qualitative method differs from the quantitative method because it examines characteristics, descriptions, and opinions. The quantitative method is used to examine measurable data, usually numerical data. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In the qualitative approach, the unfiltered data shared by individuals are based on their lived experiences and collected through interviews, participant observations, and open-ended responses as opposed to understanding participants' experiences through quantitative data techniques that utilize structured and validated data-collection instruments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The qualitative method was suitable to use for this study because it seeks to interpret a particular phenomenon and bring meaning to it. The approach also provides a deeper understanding as to how people comprehend their experiences in society, while a quantitative method seeks to verify a hypothesis in a statistical manner (Levitt et al., 2018).

There are also differences between the methods in how data are analyzed and gathered. Qualitative studies offer more subjective data from an individual's point of view rather than objective data that observes and measures data in quantitative studies

(Levitt et al, 2018). In qualitative studies, data are obtained from a smaller group of participants than quantitative studies, and the data obtained from qualitative studies are detailed and heavily contextualized descriptions from each participant (Levitt et al., 2018). The data in qualitative studies are significant because they provide a deeper understanding than data generated with the quantitative method. Instead of predicting characteristics associated with a particular population, the qualitative method reveals the meaning of a phenomenon for participants involved (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

A mixed-method approach merges both the qualitative and quantitative methods into one study. I considered using a quantitative approach for this study because it would have provided a statistical analysis; however, it would not have allowed for the participants to provide detailed responses regarding their perceptions. Because I was focused on how a particular group perceives something or someone, neither quantitative nor mixed methods would have been suitable for this study. For this study, I chose to use a qualitative method with a phenomenology approach because it provided a deep and comprehensive understanding of why African American mothers perceive police officers the way they do.

For this study, I chose to use the IPA design. IPA does not test a hypothesis; rather, its focus is on exploring an area of concern (Smith, 2018). IPA is intended to understand the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon and is an attempt to understand and explore a person's experiences and how that person perceives a particular object or an event (Smith, 2018). IPA involves a double hermeneutic by either identifying

or empathizing the understanding of how one perceives or makes sense of something (Smith, 2018).

When using IPA, the researcher interprets their own meaning of what is being said by the participants; hence, why it is important for a researcher to understand their personal biases so that they can ensure that they do not interfere with the results of the study (Smith, 2018). According to Smith (2018), IPA is conducted on small sample sizes because participants' responses are used to develop an in-depth understanding of how an individual perceives a particular object and or an event, which can be time consuming when it comes to transcribing the information. A small sample size also makes it much easier for the researcher to find patterns across the participants' responses.

In IPA, the goal is to obtain detailed information on how an individual perceives and make sense of their personal and social world; therefore, a flexible data collection instrument, such as semistructured interviews, should be used to allow both the researcher and participant to engage in dialogue (Smith, 2018). This allows the researcher to ask questions to understand rather than make general claims or assumptions as to what the participant means. The goal of the researcher during a semistructured interview is to guide and ease the interview instead of commanding what should occur during the interview (Smith, 2018).

I also considered thematic analysis and a case study design for this study. Thematic analysis (TA) is a technique used for collecting and analyzing data, whereas IPA is a framework for how to conduct research. TA would not have been suitable for this study because in TA, the researcher chooses the themes, whereas in IPA analysis of

the data results in the emergence of themes across participants (Smith et al., 2009). The case study design is a detailed investigation on a single person, event, and or situation, whereas IPA is a means to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of participants, meaning more than one individual (Zainal, 2007). In other words, case studies provide little basis for a wider population (Zainal, 2007). Therefore, IPA was a more suitable design for this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher is as a facilitator to collect and analyze data from participants without any bias (Karagiozis, 2018). Within this study, I assumed the role of primary researcher and was, therefore, the main instrument used to obtain data for this study. I collected, coded, and analyzed the data gathered during virtual interviews with participants to reveal their local experiences and perceptions. Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and my desire to conduct an ethical study, I conducted all interviews via a video messaging service, such as Zoom or Skype, to protect my safety and that of the participants.

As the primary researcher, I aimed to be objective and unbiased in the study while knowing that true objectivity is unachievable (see Levitt et al., 2018). However, to be aware of my biases, I stated potential biases I believe could have arisen over the course of my research. One potential bias was my personal investment in this topic. My research topic was inspired by my own experiences with African American mothers who have trouble trusting law enforcement officials and police officers. Though this could have been a bias, it could also have been beneficial to the study because my personal

experience allowed me to ask relevant and thought-provoking follow-up questions to gather more information, identify other patterns, and add depth to my research. I also addressed this potential bias by solely interviewing participants I did not know personally, so my personal relationships could not alter the data; however, I too identify as an African American mother. As I brought my own view of the police to this study, I was aware of my bias and aimed to curb it so that I could be more, rather than less, objective.

During this study, I conducted myself professionally. I did not falsify or fabricate data and did not coach or coerce participants to give answers that I felt would improve my research in a specific way. All participants were asked for permission to create an audio recording of their interview and informed that the audio recording was transcribed for record-keeping purposes without any identifying data. Participants who were unwilling to be recorded were thanked for their participation and replaced. To provide evidence of this, I kept detailed, legible notes as documentation of my procedures, objectivity, and professionalism.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

I conducted this study virtually, but the participants were within the United States. During the time frame of this study, the United States was experiencing ongoing police brutality and issues associated with trust among African American toward law enforcement. Specifically, this study focused on the African American mothers' perceptions of law enforcement and how their trust is impacted by contact with LE.

For this study, I recruited participants through snowball sampling, which is also referred to as chain/referral sampling. This sampling method is known as chain/referral sampling because individuals refer others they know who meet the characteristics and requirements of the study, and those people refer others, and so on, and then participants are selected from those people (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). This is a type of purposeful sampling that is used in qualitative research because it allows researchers to access a particular population that they may not otherwise have access to or be able to reach. This includes people who experience a certain phenomenon and have specific characteristics. To obtain the best possible results in a study that utilizes snowball sampling, researchers continue finding new participants until they reach data saturation, which when the final number of participants is determined (Yin, 2018). Ideally, researchers using a snowball sampling method should continue gathering data until they no longer gain new information from each new participant (Yin, 2018). For this study, I aimed to reach as many participants as possible until I met the saturation for this study.

A nonprobability sample, in this case from purposive, snowball sampling, can be used to establish which characteristics are essential for participants to have to be included in the sample. In this study, the inclusion criteria included (a) being an African American mother with a child or children; (b) who resided in the United States; (c) had a conversation with law enforcement regarding their child or themselves, whether a good or bad situation; and (d) were 18 years old or older. In this study, the exclusion criteria included (a) women who are of a different race other than African America, (b) African American women without children, (c) African American women under the age of 18

years old, (d) African American mothers who have not had contact with police regarding themselves or their children, and (e) African American women who were currently in counseling because of their experiences with law enforcement.

To recruit participants, I posted flyers on Facebook and Instagram. On Facebook, I obtained permission to post my flyer in closed groups of African American mothers to obtain an increased number of participants. With the help of snowball sampling, I asked those participants who responded to my flyers if they knew anyone who fit the inclusion criteria who would want to participate in this study as well. Using the strategy of snowball sampling allowed the participants to share my flyer with others, which increased the number of possible participants to select from.

### **Instrumentation**

For data collection, I primarily used semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews help researchers gather information on participants' personal experiences and perceptions. Semistructured interviews also allowed me to gather open-ended data from interviewees regarding their personal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs related to law enforcement and trust. I used an interview protocol to guide my interviews and the open-ended questions asked. This type of interview also allowed me to have in-depth conversations with African American mothers on their experiences with law enforcement.

Hancock and Algozzine (2017) stated that the advantages of semistructured interviews included the ability to ask new questions when new information arises, obtain or share candid and independent thoughts and beliefs, and speak freely. On the other



hand, the disadvantages of semistructured interviews are that they can be labor intensive and can take a great deal of time (Yin, 2018). I did what was in my power to do to minimize these disadvantages.

In the following interview questions, I attempted to explore how the personal experiences of some African American mothers influenced how they trust and perceive law enforcement. To explore this topic, this study was guided by one research question: What are the experiences of African American mothers with law enforcement in terms of trusting the police? The interview questions were:

1. Can you tell me about your interaction/contact with law enforcement (contact is defined as African American mothers having a conversation with law enforcement regarding their child or themselves whether a good or bad situation)?
2. During your encounter with law enforcement, what were you thinking in that moment?
3. After your encounter, how did you perceive law enforcement?
4. What does trust mean to you?
5. What does poor trust mean to you?
6. After your encounter with law enforcement, how was your trust impacted?
7. How has the media of shootings of unarmed African American men and women affected your trust?
8. If you are a mother and your child has had an encounter with law enforcement, did you have the conversation about what to do if your child

comes in contact with law enforcement? If so, what exactly did you tell your child to do?

9. After explaining to your child or children, how did your child or children react?
10. How did your child's reaction make you feel?
11. What does it mean to you to have your child react this way?
12. How does this affect your trust in law enforcement?
13. How does your child now view law enforcement?
14. How does your child's view of law enforcement impact how you perceive law enforcement?
15. If you were treated unfairly by law enforcement, did you report it?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. How did your perception of law enforcement impact your decision to report/not to report?

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

For this study, I began by obtaining approval from Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once I have approval, I began contacting African American mothers who have expressed they have had contact with law enforcement as well those women who have encountered some contact with law enforcement related to their child or children. I advertised for my study by posting flyers on social media. I used Facebook and Instagram as my primary resources in obtaining participants. I asked for permission of the many Facebook groups of African American mothers that I am a part of to post flyers about my

study to see if anyone was interested, and allowed participants to pass the flyers onto other potential participants, thus using snowball sampling.

My flyer directed people to call or email if they were interested. Once I started to receive calls or emails, I ensured that each participant met the criteria for this study. The criteria for this study were that (a) all participants must be an African American mother with a child or children, (b) mothers who reside in the United States (c) African American mothers having a conversation with law enforcement regarding their child or themselves whether a good or bad situation (d) are 18 years old or older, (e) and cannot currently be in any sort of counseling for the experiences with law enforcement. All participants must have had some contact with law enforcement whether it was the women themselves or their children. Contact is being defined as African American mothers who have expressed that they have had contact with law enforcement and have had some contact with law enforcement related to their child or children. All participants must want to share their experiences with law enforcement and therefore should not feel forced to participate. Because I want to be careful to not retraumatize the participant, I asked that if participants are actively in treatment for counseling services that they do not participate in the study. This was done to ensure that I do not trigger anyone and eliminate the possibility of the participant reliving the incident. In addition, if participants have completed treatment, they were allowed to participate.

After I checked that potential participants meet the criteria for this study, I sent them a formal letter and consent form inviting them to participate in my study. The consent form explained the procedures and ethical considerations of this study, including

how I planned to maintain their privacy and confidentiality. It also confirmed that each participant was participating voluntarily and willingly, identify any possible risks, and provide some background on the study. The consent form also informed participants they will receive a \$20 Visa gift card for their participation as well as resources if they are distressed after the interview. Each participant was told that their interview will likely take around 1 hour, and the interview would be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Before emailing their consent forms with electronic signature, I gave participants the opportunity to ask any questions or voice any concerns, and I answered or addressed them to the best of my ability. To reduce potential bias, none of the participants were people I know, such as family members, friends, or peers.

Once participants sent me back their consent form and I confirmed that the participant fits the criteria, I scheduled the participant a date and time for their interview. Following the interview, I asked participants to mention this study to their contacts who might want to take part. According to Yin (2018), 10-12 participants is sufficient to reach data saturation in qualitative studies. Given the challenges that COVID-19 poses, many researchers are conducting research virtually (Toquero, 2020). To ensure participants' health and safety amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and to conduct an ethical study, all interviews were conducted by phone or a video call service, such as Skype or Zoom. The semistructured interviews were conducted via telephone or Skype due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. In these interviews, I explored the perceptions and personal experiences of African American mothers' with law enforcement regarding trust. Each

question that was asked during the semistructured interviews was worded so that each participant would clearly understand what they were being asked.

At the beginning of each interview, I reminded each participant of their ability to pause or end their interview if they need, such as if the conversation becomes too emotionally painful or fraught. I also reminded them that their participation was voluntary, and they can leave the study at any point if they so choose. After each interview, I thanked the participant for their participation and sent them their Visa gift card either by mail or virtually. I quickly began to transcribe the audio recording of the interview and write down my additional notes. At that point, I contacted the participants again to ask if they would like a summary of the transcript I created to review and correct, clarify, or confirm. This was a step in my member checking process and helped me to ensure that each participant was comfortable with the ways in which I represented their answers. This ensured accuracy and trustworthiness.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

To begin data analysis plan, I transcribed the interview data on my own. Once all interviews were complete, I began a preliminary assessment of the responses received. I used the preliminary assessment to unveil any patterns and relationships between any of the participant interviews. Then I compared all data to see if common themes arose. The themes that I find were used to understand the experiences of African American mothers regarding their children in the United States.

To analyze data, I coded all interview transcripts and my own field interview notes using open coding to create initial codes, then used a triangulation strategy to

analyze the data I find in the interviews and documents. I coded and evaluated the data myself primarily. If I found interviews that do not align with the codes I have assigned; I reassessed my coding. If there was a small number of discrepancies, I made a note of them to address them in my discussion, but if there was a discrepancy that reappeared multiple times, I added it to my coding schema. My data will be organized quickly after it is obtained and as a priority, in order to avoid challenges. For example, if I was unable to find a specific piece of data, I was not able to share a certain finding or idea that it supports. This is in line with Stewart et al.'s (2017) belief that researchers must conduct their research using as much raw data as possible. Having an organizational system for data will ease the difficulties of finding data amid a large amount of information (Stewart et al., 2017). I organized data in computer files by participant number and date of interview, so both pieces of information can be used to find data. The themes that arose from the interviews demonstrated the feelings of African American mothers toward their children, their communities, and the police. That data was then assessed using IPA design, to create a wide and in-depth understanding of the feelings of African American mothers toward law enforcement, while being able to incorporate other feelings that can affect those toward police.

I based my coding strategy off Smith's (2018) six steps method. The first step is reading and rereading the information, ensuring that you are familiarizing yourself with the information. The second step is initial noting meaning to develop words or descriptive phrases that will give a significant meaning to the content given. In addition, it is important for the researcher to focus on the actual language use such as repetitions and or

metaphors. The third step is developing emergent themes or transforming your notes from step two into themes which is a good example of the hermeneutic circle. In this step, the researcher is making the information more concise from the initial notes to conceptualize the phenomena being investigated. The fourth step is searching for connections among the themes in the third step. In this step, it involves clustering the themes and assigning a descriptive label. Some researchers find it useful to color code the information or even map the information to create a visual of the connections. The fifth step is moving to the next case, which simply means to individualize each participant and the uniqueness of their experience of the phenomena being investigated by repeating all steps one through four. In the last step, the sixth step, the researcher analyzes the information for patterns across all cases to establish a final set of themes for the final report. I used the six steps method to complete this study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is an important aspect of qualitative research that can be used to support researchers in incorporating tactics to examine and support the discovery of similar results using similar processes (Mohajan, 2017). Researchers who emphasize trustworthiness in their work can ensure the integrity of their results and conclusions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). There are four primary criteria used to certify trustworthiness: confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability (Carminati, 2018).

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the degree to which findings can be confirmed or corroborated by others based solely on the responses of participants, rather than on personal biases or motivations of the researcher (Belotto, 2018). This ensures the study has findings that are grounded in data and fact, and not affected by personal motive or bias (Cope, 2014). Confirmability allows others to trust the information presented by the qualitative researcher and allows the research to be used to further the study on a topic (Carminati, 2018). Research that does not have confirmability may not be useful because unaddressed biases may affect the findings heavily (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019). Reflexivity is one way researchers can improve confirmability, as it ensures that a researcher's biases or desire to have a certain outcome do not affect the ways participants' responses are interpreted (Palaganas et al., 2017). Semistructured interviews are one potential way to practice reflexivity, address and avoid potential bias, and increase a study's confirmability (Weller, 2017).

Another way to improve confirmability is to utilize a reflexive journal, which researchers can use to detail and describe each step of the research and data analysis processes and explain their rationale for various decisions they have made (Belotto, 2018; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). A reflexive journal can provide evidence that a research study has accurately represented participants' beliefs. I used a reflexive journal throughout my research process to provide rationale for my decision-making process and to detail and document the processes used to check data throughout the study.



## **Credibility**

Credibility is viewed as the degree of confidence a researcher has in the truth of the findings of their qualitative research (Stewart et al., 2017). The criteria to prove credibility includes ensuring that the qualitative research results are viewed as credible, or believable, from the perspective of those who participated in the study or research (Rallis & Lawrence, 2017). Ensuring a study's trustworthiness is one way to demonstrate credibility. By using proven data collection practices, which have been established to be valuable and acceptable in research and academic fields, researchers can show credibility (Stewart et al., 2017).

Data saturation is the practice of checking and rechecking data, interpretations, and themes repeatedly in order to ensure the information that has been gathered is relevant and credible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). When no more new information was forthcoming from the participants, I assumed I reached data saturation.

Member checking is the process of providing research participants to provide feedback and input on the data collected on them and incorporating their input to ensure credibility (Fusch et al., 2018). To utilize member checking, I provided interviewees with the opportunity to read my notes and interpretations from their interviews. They were given the opportunity to confirm, correct, or clarify their states to ensure their beliefs and statements are being represented accurately and truthfully. I also used participants' validation to check the credibility of my interview transcripts by providing interviewees with a copy of my transcripts of their interviews (Thomas, 2017).

Reflexivity is the process of ensuring researcher biases do not affect the results of a study (Palaganas et al., 2017). I continuously checked and was mindful of my own biases as a person and researcher and take steps to address any biases I believed may affect my results. Triangulation can be used as a method to ensure trustworthiness when obtaining data from different sources (Varpio et al., 2017).

In my research, I used triangulation to avoid errors in and threats to my findings. Triangulation can also confirm credibility by comparing information received from participants, and Abdalla et al. (2018) considered methodological triangulation to be the most common form of triangulation used in research. Researchers who utilize an interview protocol are understood to do so to support and guarantee adherence to standard rules and procedures used in conducting research (Fusch et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). I used methodological triangulation in my research and used triangulation to gather data from a variety of sources, as I had multiple participants.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is considered to have been achieved when the data and findings of a study are consistent and able to be repeated (Carminati, 2018). When research findings have consistent findings and stable results and are able to be followed by future researchers looking to utilize a similar framework or find similar results, the researchers have ensured dependability (Yin, 2018). In my research, I ensured dependability by using member checking before I coded the findings. Member checking is the process of the researcher providing a summary of their data and interpretations to the participants, so the

participants can confirm or edit the interpretations for validation and confirmation (Belotto, 2018).

Conducting a follow-up interview for member checking can ensure dependability and can help the researcher achieve data saturation by helping gather in-depth information and enhance the study's rigor (Tran et al., 2017). Member checking allows participants to correct, clarify, or confirm their responses and the interpretations of them, before the researcher continues their study and analyzes and codes the data (Varpio et al., 2017). This improves the trust between participant and researcher, increasing the trustworthiness of the results, and improves the efficacy of the researcher's process (Thomas, 2017). For member checking, I offered participants the opportunity to read my interview notes and interpretations and gave them each the chance to validate my interpretations of their interviews for accuracy and completeness. I then incorporated participant notes and feedback in order to correct any errors in my interpretations and undergo another member checking process with those affected.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is the ways in which the researcher in a qualitative study can demonstrate that their findings can be applied to similar situations, populations, or phenomena (Graneheim et al., 2017). Transferability is important to research because it can provide a framework for future research, applications of research, and testing of research (Cope, 2014). If a study has transferability, its results can be applied elsewhere, which can allow future researchers to further the research on the topic, or otherwise find solutions to specific challenges addressed by the original study (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Ensuring transferability is largely the responsibility of the original researcher (Mohajan, 2017). In my research, I addressed transferability by providing detailed descriptions of my research procedure.

Readers of a study should be able to compare research and collection methods to similar situations and obtain similar results in a different setting (Mohajan, 2017). The person responsible for transferring the research findings and collection methods to an alternative setting or context is the person who is able to determine whether or not the transfer was sensible. Qualitative researchers can increase the transferability of their findings by using rich descriptions of their findings in order to demonstrate that they can be transferred to alternative circumstances, contexts, or situations (Carminati, 2018). To increase the transferability of my research, I be provided thick descriptions of my findings, so other researchers and readers can identify opportunities for transferability in the future.

### **Data Saturation**

Data saturation is defined as the versatility and flexibility for researchers to obtain sufficient data to respond to their research question (Thomas, 2017). Data saturation is achieved when reassessing the data does not provide new evidence or themes (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation can be achieved in a case when no new information, themes, or evidence related to the research question can be found (Tran et al., 2017). To test for data saturation, I asked each interviewee five questions and compared the responses to one another until no new information arises. If I did not reach data saturation using my

initial sample population, I would refer to my original population to select additional participants.

### **Ethical Procedures**

To protect participants, I closely followed the ethical research rules dictated by *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The ethical research rules provided by *The Belmont Report* include guidance on protecting participants, ethical recruitment practices, necessary privacy measures, ways to ensure participants' rights are protected, and the steps of an informed consent process (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). I followed *The Belmont Report's* ethical principles of (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice to ensure the participants are aware of their rights and treated fairly. In addition, I assured participants of my intention to keep their data confidential, ensuring they were aware that their participation is optional, and utilizing an informed consent process. The informed consent process ensured participants understand the study goals, study process, proposed application of the findings, and their rights within the study, then confirming they will still be willing to participate (Farrugia, 2019). In addition, I made sure that each participant understood that although their information is confidential, I have a mandated duty to report any suspected abuse among a child, elderly adult and or someone who is mentally challenged or if they mention they want to harm themselves. Any additional information to be included in the study was solely to be used for research

purposes, and to further the findings of the study. I made every reasonable effort to ensure my study was as ethical as possible.

To protect participant data and confidentiality, I be used several procedures, including following the standards set forth by the IRB, assigning each interviewee a participant number to add an additional layer of confidentiality distinguishing them from their responses, and locking my data when I was not actively using it. By locking up participant data, the chance that participant identities are discovered, and the research is compromised is lower (Rallis & Lawrence, 2017). My aim was to protect the participants' identities first and foremost as noted by researchers Dooly et al. (2017). In addition to using participant numbers to protect interviewees' identities, I changed names and identifying characteristics in quotes and cited materials. I had sole access to documentation of which participant number was assigned to which interviewee, and that material was locked up when I was not using it. Additional information I gathered as part of my research was kept in another locked location, separate from identifying participant data, that only I had access to. I will destroy all data to include transcripts, notes, and recordings after 2 years. If for any reason a participant experienced distress during the interview, I stopped the interview immediately and suggested a free support service. In addition, the consent that each participant had a copy of included a list of free resources they could access if they felt distressed after the interview.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I described the research method that I used to explore how African American mothers perceive law enforcement in terms of their trust in and of police

offices. I will interview participants using open-ended questions and code the answers, then find trends to form my conclusions. I used this method to gather personal experiences, feelings, and beliefs from community members. As the researcher, I was careful to analyze the research while staying as neutral and unbiased as possible. My study was subject to several tactics to improve and ensure trustworthiness and ethics. By conducting this study in this way, I hope to find trends that can be used to develop and improve strategies to build trust and relationships between African American community members, especially mothers, and law enforcement.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore the perceptions, specifically in relation to trust, of African American mothers toward law enforcement. This study was guided by I Marx's SCT and the following research question: What are the experiences of African American mothers in terms of trusting the police?

In this study, I used a qualitative phenomenological research design. The data collection process was completed through asking participants semi structured, open-ended interview questions. Each question was asked to obtain the participant's individual perceptions of law enforcement, feelings about these perceptions, and personal experiences with law enforcement.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the settings in which the study took place, participant demographics, how data were collected, and the data analysis procedures. In addition, the results of the study are provided. I conclude the chapter with a summary of the information presented in the chapter.

### **Setting**

I obtained data for this study through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with African American mothers. I conducted interviews with participants via FaceTime and Zoom, and each interview lasted approximately 20 to 35 minutes. Interviews were short because most of my questions that dealt with African American children did not apply because the children were too young to have had an encounter with law enforcement. At the end of each interview, the participant was given the opportunity to ask any additional



questions or express any concerns they may have had. All participants were asked the same interview questions.

I interviewed eight African American mothers in this study. The number of interviews reached saturation (see Guest et al., 2020). None of the interviews were face-to-face due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One interview was conducted via FaceTime, while the other seven were conducted via Zoom. This individual's other devices were not operating properly, and she requested to do a FaceTime call instead. While all participants were asked to ensure that they were in a quiet and safe area to speak, each participant chose their own location for their interview. During each interview, I was alone in my home office with the door closed to ensure that no one could hear the interviews.

### **Demographics**

Eight African American mothers who had previous contact with law enforcement, whether good or bad, and had their trust of police affected by this prior experience participated in this study. Each participant met the inclusion criteria for this study. At the time of the interviews, the participants for this study resided in the following states: Georgia, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Washington. The age range of the participants was 27 to 47 years old, with the average age being 37 years old. To ensure each participant's identity was not disclosed and maintain confidentiality, I assigned and referred to all participants by a letter (i.e., Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, etc.).

## Data Collection

Data collection began once I received final approval from the Walden University IRB (Approval No. 11-01-21-0623528) on November 01, 2021. Recruitment flyers were placed in nail salons and hair salons as well as posted on Facebook. Due to COVID-19 limitations, I was unable to place any flyers in libraries, local stores, and laundromats due to them being closed. National mandates, social distancing, and the progression transmission of different strands of COVID-19 had forced institutions to reconsider how research data are collected (Sah et al., 2020). Because I did not receive any responses to the flyer, I opted to use Walden University's participant pool to obtain participants. I also used snowball sampling to recruit participants.

Individuals who wanted to participate in the study contacted me via email after reviewing a document that highlighted the purpose of the study. During my interactions with the participants, I assessed each participant to ensure they met the inclusion criteria of being an African American mother, 18 years of age or older, who had contact with law enforcement/police (either themselves or children), and who had their trust of law enforcement impacted by the contact. There were two volunteers who did not fit the inclusion criteria for the study, so they were excluded. In addition, I made sure that none of my participants were currently in trauma therapy or counseling. Three volunteers were deemed ineligible for the study due to currently being in counseling.

After confirming that a participant met the inclusion criteria, I sent that individual a consent form to review and send back to me via email with the words, "I consent," typed into the email. Once I received a completed consent email from them, I scheduled a

date and time to meet with each participant virtually. To schedule virtual meetings, I emailed each participant my availability and asked them to schedule a date and time to meet on either FaceTime, Zoom, Skype, or a platform of their choice. I also asked each participant to share my flyer and contact information with other African American mothers who they believed would meet the criteria to be a part of the study in an attempt to snowball sample.

I began interviews on February 5, 2022 and continued conducting interviews until March 26, 2022. At the end of each interview, I reminded each participant that the consent form detailed a list of local, free or low-cost counseling services that they could use if they began to feel distressed following the interview. I conducted semistructured interviews with a total of eight African American mothers for this study. The interviews were scheduled for 30 to 65 minutes; however, they ended up lasting between 20 and 35 minutes. During the 9-week data collection period, one participant was interviewed Week 1, four participants were interviewed Week 2, no participants were interviewed the Weeks 3 or 4, one participant was interviewed Week 5, and one participant was interviewed Week 6. No participants were interviewed during Weeks 7 or 8. Finally, two participants were interviewed Week 9.

I conducted all interviews in my home office. I advised the participants to participate in the interview while in a place where they felt safe to talk. Each participant chose where they wanted to be during the interview. All participants consented to interviews being recorded on a voice recorder app called Temi (see Rev.com, 2017). Following the interviews, Temi was able to transcribe five interviews for a fee. Three

interviews could not be transcribed by Temi due, according to the app, to an accent barrier. I transcribed these three interviews by hand.

Once each interview was complete, I uploaded the digital audio recording to my password-protected home computer. All recordings and transcripts are stored on my home computer in an encrypted file that is also password protected. I am the only person who has the password to this encrypted file. After transcribing each transcript or receiving the transcription from Temi, I read them while listened to the audio recording of the interview to make sure there were no errors.

Following my readings of the transcripts, I conducted member checks by emailing each participant asking if they would like a copy of their transcript to check it for accuracy. Four participants responded and stated they had no need to check for accuracy. No feedback was provided by the other four participants. Several attempts were made to contact the four participants not providing responses, but I received no response to any attempt.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze my data, I used the IPA method. This type of analysis is a detailed examination of how an individual perceives their personal experiences of an object or an event (Smith & Osborn, 2017). I used short, descriptive words and phrases to code the data in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I discovered three main themes and nine subthemes by using the IPA steps.

The IPA steps are (Smith & Osborn, 2017):

1. Read and re-read transcripts,

2. Initial noting phrases to develop words or descriptive phrases,
3. Develop emergent themes,
4. Search for connections among the themes,
5. Move to the next case, and
6. Analyze the information for patterns across all cases.

After reading and re-reading the transcripts numerous times, I documented the phrases and words I heard the most by highlighting them in the transcripts. Next, I started to develop themes and subthemes and found connections between them by clustering the highlighted terms. Three core themes emerged from the data analysis process: contact with law enforcement, perception of law enforcement as it relates to trust, and hopelessness. From these three main themes, I generated nine subthemes related to the participants' perceptions of law enforcement and experiences (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Themes and Subthemes*

Contact with law enforcement	Perception of law enforcement as it relates to trust	Hopelessness
Feeling they were treated unfairly	Feeling officers were biased	Feeling no need to report bad interactions with law enforcement
Feeling they were racially profiled	Feeling law enforcement officers were untrustworthy	Believing the treatment received was normal
Feeling the police officers improperly trained	Feeling unsafe, nervous, or fearful of law enforcement	Teaching their children how to avoid confrontation to remain safe

**Evidence of Trustworthiness****Credibility**

To test my credibility, I used data saturation, member checking, and reflexivity. Saturation was reached when I noticed that many of the themes, phrases, and responses were being repeated. After coding the data on my own many times, I realized that I reached saturation after the eighth participant's interview. I utilized member checking as a tool to give my participants the opportunity to confirm, correct, or clarify their statements to ensure their beliefs and experiences were represented accurately and truthfully in the data. I did so by emailing each participant and asking them whether they wanted a copy of my notes and their transcript to review. In addition, I also advised them that they could email me if they had any questions and concerns. Regarding reflexivity, I was mindful of my own biases and developed steps to prevent my biases from affecting the results. The steps taken were to jot down notes while the interview was taking place and write memos regarding my thoughts and feelings directly after the interview.

**Transferability**

Transferability is the replicability of the study by another researcher or the usefulness of the study to another researcher as they create their own study using the same framework to demonstrate their findings for a phenomenon of their choosing (Graneheim et al., 2017). Transferability is the ways in which the researcher in a qualitative study can demonstrate that their findings can be applied to similar situations, populations, or phenomena (Graneheim et al., 2017). I have provided thick descriptions of the findings so other researchers and readers can identify and compare opportunities for transferability in the future.

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to ensuring that the study can be replicated by other researchers with consistent findings (Stenfors et al., 2020). To ensure dependability within this study, I utilized member checking and detailed notetaking. Member checking is the process of the researcher providing their data and interpretations to the participants, so the participants can confirm or edit the researcher's interpretations for validation and confirmation (Belotto, 2018). I offered each participant the opportunity to read my interview notes and interpretations and gave them the chance to validate my interpretations of their interviews for accuracy and completeness.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the corroboration of the findings based on participants' detailed responses rather than the personal biases of the researcher (Belotto, 2018). Within this study, a reflexive journal was used to ensure confirmability. In the reflexive

journal, I documented and described in detail the data analysis process followed to ensure that the participants' beliefs were not misrepresented throughout the study.

## **Results**

Once the data were analyzed and shown to have evidence of trustworthiness, I sorted the participant responses according to the themes displayed. I came up with three themes and nine subthemes. Discussions of each theme and participant examples demonstrating each subtheme appear in the following subsections.

### **Theme 1: Contact With Law Enforcement**

Each participant had some form of previous contact, whether good or bad, with law enforcement. In this study, 7 of the 8 participants had a negative experience with law enforcement. One participant had a positive experience. There were three subthemes identified under the main theme of contact with law enforcement: feeling they were treated unfairly or being harassed, feeling they were racially profiled, and feeling law enforcement officers were improperly trained.

#### ***Subtheme 1.1: Feeling They Were Treated Unfairly or Being Harassed***

Seven of the participants stated they were treated unfairly during their contact with law enforcement. Participant A described a situation where she was in her car at a light, was hit by another car full of people who left the scene, and called the police:

And I don't have many experiences like that. So, I called the police, and they came out and basically didn't do anything for me... I was just hit, you know, and um, he basically kind of laughed at me. When I would say stuff. He was like, you



know, you should have called earlier, or you should have called while they were here. There's nothing we can do for you.

Like Participant A, Participant H had a negative experience with law enforcement that involved cars. Unlike Participant A, Participant H had unwanted and unnecessary, in their opinion, attention put upon them. Participant H expressed,

Halfway to campus, we get pulled over by like 10 cops. 10 cop cars, 10 cop cars surrounded us. Um, we are freaking out in the car because we don't know what just happen. What's going on. They come out, guns drawn, ordering us out the car, pulling us out the car. We, we on the ground, they pat us down. They're really not telling us anything. They just immediately start searching us, searching the car.

Participant F had a negative experience with law enforcement at her home after their neighbors called the police and stated that Participant F's daughter was harassing them. Participant F knew that the neighbors' statements were untrue, and she felt that law enforcement treatment of her family was unfair. Participant F stated,

I was in shock. I was like, I can't believe they got all this manpower out here for one, for a 14-year-old kid. Like I'm thinking a girl at that cause, and I'm saying, we got harassed a lot. That's ridiculous. The resources wasted over a lie. And this is what I was in shock. But you know, at the same time I was pissed.

### ***Subtheme 1.2: Feeling They Were Racially Profiled***

Participants C, E, and H reported that during their contact with law enforcement they felt profiled because of their race. Participant E shared, "There was a strike going on

outside and I had nothing to do with it, but the White police officers thought I was a part of the strike and confronted me and they were very rude.” Participant H shared that they were contacted by law enforcement and told that their car matched the vehicle description of one involved in a robbery. Participant H felt racially profiled because, “Later on, we watched the news later on and the people that ended up doing it, car didn’t look anything like ours, they were looking for like two people. We were rolling five, six deep.”

***Sub-theme 1.3: Feeling Law Enforcement Officers Were Improperly Trained***

Four of the eight participants believed that officers improperly trained. Participant E commented, “There should be a little more focus on the rights of Black Americans and minorities, it is very necessary in the training of law enforcement.” Participant F described their confusion and frustration related to citizens dying in police custody. Participant F stated,

I got a military background, so they always told you to shoot to disable. Yeah, leg will be jacked up but he'll live another day. It's like why do people die often with these encounters? You know what happened to just shoot someone, not kill them. But hurt them. But I do think that the police are not well trained to understand.

**Theme 2: Perception of Law Enforcement as it Relates to Trust**

Each participant’s perception comes from either a personal experience with law enforcement or from the media showing unarmed African Americans being killed by law enforcement. There were three subthemes that emerged from this theme of perception of law enforcement: (2a) feeling law enforcement officers are biased, (2b) feeling law

enforcement officers are untrustworthy, and (2c) feeling unsafe, nervous, or fearful of law enforcement.

***Subtheme 2.1: Feeling Like Law Enforcement Officers Were Biased***

Participant C witnessed their teenage sons being questioned by police when the boys were getting into a car in front of their own home. When the police asked Participant C's children, "Who car are you breaking into?" About that incident, Participant C declared, "I perceived them [law enforcement] as being biased, to be honest with you. And stereotypical." When Participant H was pulled over by a large number of law enforcement as they were driving to their campus, Participant H felt that law enforcement was not impartial in their actions during the encounter. Participant H stated,

Having their own biases be the driving force of how they enforce the law. I have an issue with that. You know what I mean? You shouldn't allow your bias to be your guide. Especially in law enforcement. And it was clear that their bias was their guide.

Participant F voiced that they saw bias when neighbors of the majority race in their community called law enforcement and said that Participant F's daughter was harassing the neighbors. Participant F was shocked when eight law enforcement officers arrived for a single call about a teenage girl purportedly harassing some older women. Participant F described what happened when they got involved,

So, you know, the cops are, trying to basically tell me and my husband, we need to calm down. I had called my daughter outside. I said, the person that they called on is 14 years old. She's a kid. So, I had pulled like, pulled out my phone and I

showed them the footage of what really happened. After that, after the police watched the footage, their whole demeanor change, everything changed now. It's well, how about you guys? Just agree to disagree. Ooh. You know, just, they stay on their side of the street. You stay on your side of the street. But before when they thought that they were responding to a harassment complaint. Because they were reacting first. And if it wasn't for me having the cameras put up, I think it would've escalated to a lot worse because whatever they called and complained about must have been bad that they sent that many people.

***Sub-theme 2.2: Feeling Law Enforcement Officers Are Untrustworthy***

Seven of the eight participants' trust in law enforcement has either decreased due to past experiences, or they have never trusted law enforcement. After Participant A was the victim in a hit-and-run accident and law enforcement did not appear to take their situation seriously, Participant A shared,

I feel like it has made me think about any potential situations that might happen. It's made me want to just kind of handle things on my own because that's what I had to do in that situation. And it's just like, if you're not gonna help me when I need you, like you're supposed to, you know, why even bother calling.

Numerous participants were direct and succinct in expressing their views of law enforcement trustworthiness. Participant B declared, "My trust has decreased in them." Participant G shared, "So I was a very trusting person. So, it wasn't just that one incident that I would say kind of change you know, my trust, especially with law enforcement. But other incidents as well." Participant H stated, "My trust was greatly impacted

because if we can't trust the people that are supposed to be serving and protecting us, then who can we trust?"

***Subtheme 2.3: Feeling Unsafe, Nervous, or Fearful of Law Enforcement***

Six of the eight participants felt either fearful, nervous, or unsafe during their encounter with law enforcement. After Participant A was hit by another vehicle, they called law enforcement. Despite being the person reporting an incident, Participant A reported that when law enforcement arrived,

I was very nervous because I already have like my feelings towards law enforcement. Um, because of things that are happening in the media, even though it was like broad daylight, I still wanted to, you know, make sure I said the right things behaved in the, in the right way. So, I was a bit nervous.

Participant G expressed that they were nervous after having been pulled over. Participant G explained,

I think in the moment I was just more afraid of like, like what's going to happen. Cause again, I never had a situation where I had been pulled over and, um, I remember I became emotional. So, I remember crying. Cause I just didn't understand or know what was happening. And I remember thinking like, am I in trouble? Like, I didn't do anything.

When asked how they feel about law enforcement, Participant B stated directly, "I fear them."

### **Theme 3: Hopelessness**

Seven of the mothers felt as if there was no hope when dealing with law enforcement. When asked, “If you were treated unfairly, did you report it?”, six mothers out of eight stated that they did not report the incident. One mother reported her experience to the mayor and one mother did not report because her experience with law enforcement was positive. There were three subthemes that emerged from this main theme of feeling hopeless: (3a) feeling no need to report bad interactions with law enforcement, (3b) believing the treatment given was normal, and (3c) teaching their children how to avoid confrontation to remain safe.

#### ***Sub-theme 3.1: Feeling No Need to Report Bad Interactions With Law Enforcement***

When asked, “If you were treated unfairly by law enforcement, did you report it? Why or why not?” Participant A expressed,

I did not. I should have, but I didn't. I have a friend who was in law enforcement and then I have an uncle who was in law enforcement. I kind of talked to them and they were giving me like conflicting information on whether it was right, or what he [law enforcement] did was it wrong, you know.

For Participant F, it was not a case of feeling that there was no need to report law enforcement Participant F felt that law enforcement was wrong in how they handled a false complaint about a teenager, but Participant F was hopeless that anything would happen if they were to report the incident. Participant F stated,

“I didn't report it because I didn't think anything was gonna be done about it.”

#### ***Subtheme 3.2: Believing the Treatment Given Was Normal***

When participants were asked one of two questions about their thoughts during their encounter with law enforcement or the impact of media coverage of shootings of unarmed African Americans on trust of law enforcement, the following responses were given. Participant H spoke about shootings of unarmed African Americans and the relating media coverage and stated,

I mean, unfortunately, I'm not surprised, it didn't surprise me at all. I just think we just hear, hear about 'em more often than we would have in the past. You know what I mean? With social media and just 24-hour media cycles, we just know more, but this ain't new.

Participant G reflected on their own experience being pulled over and the possibility of their son being in a similar situation and commented,

My husband and I we've talked to our son about, about law enforcement interactions and because he's a teenage boy that is in driver's ed and is about to be driving soon, he needs to know what it means and what it looks like.

***Subtheme 3.3: Teaching Their Children how to Avoid Confrontation to Remain Safe.***

Four of the eight participants had a conversation with their children advising them what to do when confronted with law enforcement. Participants were asked, "If you are a mother, and your child has had an encounter with law enforcement, did you have a conversation about what to do if your child encounters law enforcement? If so, what exactly did you tell your child to do?" Participant C responded,

“I always told them, if you’re ever pulled over by the cops, keep your hands on the steering wheel and look forward, speak loudly and ask the cop. What is it that he needs from you?”

Participant F answered the same question as Participant C. Participant F’s response shows that participants speak to their children of both genders about what to do if the child encounters law enforcement. Participant F replied to the question,

And with my daughter being 19, I had to have a conversation with her about the police. And I said, the law don't work the same to you as it does for them. They could be in the wrong, but because they are White people, they are often favored. So, they will flip things and make it about you. You will be wrong all the way. You can have a valid point, but that's not the way they're gonna see it.

Participant G stated,

Don't do anything that's going to cause anything to happen, but if you're doing something you're supposed to be doing and you still have some sort of interaction with law enforcement, for whatever reason, um, then you know, at that point, understand that the way that a black man is treated is going to be a little bit different.

Participant G went on to describe how they tell their son to always be honest about where they are going and go to/from only the places they have said they are going. Participant G expressed worry that if their son was late and they did not know exactly where the young man was supposed to be then they would have less chance of finding or helping them if there was trouble. Like Participant G, Participant H does not limit their conversations



about how to live as an African American in the United States to only situations involving law enforcement. Participant H commented,

We have those conversations all the time. Just regular conversation. We, we try not to make it like a big talk because cuz you know, unfortunately this is life. It could come up at any given moment. You know, if we see something on TV, then we, you know, we just continue the conversation. Um, but yeah, we talk about racial biases. We talk about gender biases. We talk about all kinds of biases and how that can even show up in law enforcement and what you should do if you feel like that's, what's happening.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American mothers toward law enforcement as relating to trust. The data collection that was used was semi-structured interviews with each participant. The perceptions and experiences of African American mothers that were described in the themes and subthemes were from the following states: Georgia, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Washington state. Semistructured interviews were obtained by using Zoom and FaceTime. During the interviews, three main themes and nine subthemes emerged from the experiences of the participants to answer the research questions. The main themes were contact with law enforcement, perception of law enforcement as it relates to trust, and hopelessness. In Chapter 5, an interpretation of the findings is provided, the limitation of the study are discussed; recommendations going forward and the implication for positive social change are provided.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

For this study, I used IPA to explore the perceptions of African American mothers toward law enforcement related to trust. There have not been many previous studies that solely focused on African American mothers' perceptions of law enforcement; hence, this study was appropriate and necessary to shed light on this phenomenon and understand the perceptions of African American mothers in greater depth. IPA was the most appropriate qualitative approach for this study because it allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions.

I was able to identify three themes and nine subthemes from my analysis of the interview data. The three themes that emerged were contact with law enforcement, perception of law enforcement as it relates to trust, and hopelessness. Examining the participants' perceptions of their contact with law enforcement allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of what contributes to African American mothers' perceptions of law enforcement. Contact with law enforcement caused feelings of hopelessness; African American mothers feel no need to report bad interactions with law enforcement, believing that the negative treatment received is the norm; however, they felt there is a need to teach their children how to interact with law enforcement so that they will remain unharmed. These feelings of hopelessness resulted in African American mothers not having trust in law enforcement. In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings of the study as they relate to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, limitations of the study, my recommendations for further study, and implications for social change.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In the literature review of this study, I focused on the history of U.S. state violence against African Americans with respect to its gendered nature and the historical manifestations of generational trauma within the African American community. I also discussed the implications of interpreting online activism, such as #BlackLivesMatter, and discussed phenomenological accounts of African American mothers' parenting in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. This study expanded upon Gabbidon et al.'s (2011) research examining how the experiences of African American mothers and children impact their trust in law enforcement. The findings of this study have solidified that contact with law enforcement has greatly impacted African American mothers' trust in law enforcement.

#### **Finding 1: Contact With Law Enforcement**

The first finding was that all but one participant had at least one negative contact with law enforcement. The seven participants who reported negative contact described the type of contact as either physical, verbal, and/or unpleasant. The participants described their contact with law enforcement, saying it made them feel like law enforcement were being unfair, racially profiling them, and that law enforcement lack proper training. The participants expressed, based on their conversation and/or contact with law enforcement, that they felt law enforcement treated them like they were already guilty; some even felt that there was a hidden agenda once law enforcement arrived on the scene. One participant described their experience as "super traumatic." She stated they were pulled out of their vehicle by 10 law enforcement officers with guns drawn,

and they were put on the ground while law enforcement patted them down. The experiences of these individuals align with the literature, such as Nadal et al. (2017), Bundy (2019), and Brunson and Wade (2019). Negative contact with law enforcement is common within the African American community, indicating there is a need for culturally sensitive professional training for law enforcement.

Black men in the United States, 65% of whom reported a history of incarceration, frequently recounted negative encounters with police, most typically hyper-policing, stop and frisk, harassment, and violence (Bowleg et al., 2019). Though the focus of Bowleg et al.'s (2019) study was African American men, the participants also spoke about how negative encounters with law enforcement, such as racial profiling, stop and frisk, police harassment, arrests, hyper-policing, aggressive policing, police brutality (e.g., chokeholds), and both lethal and nonlethal police shootings, are often experienced by African American girls, women, and transgender people as well. The current study confirms these findings. Participants' perceptions of law enforcement come from their personal experiences, their children's experiences, encounters they hear about from friends and family, and actual footage of encounters posted on social media and news outlets. These negative experiences cause African American mothers to feel as though they or the person involved in the incident were treated unfairly, that they or the person involved in the incident were racially profiled, and that the law enforcement involved was improperly trained. These findings have been noted previously in the literature (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; Jacobs, 2017; Joe et al., 2019) and align with what participants in the current study shared. Negative feelings toward law enforcement contribute to African

American mothers' mistrust toward law enforcement and guides them to generally avoid law enforcement while teaching their children to do the same.

**Finding 2: Perception of Law Enforcement as it Relates to Trust**

This finding relates to how African American mothers see trust among members of law enforcement and African Americans. All participants stated that their perception of law enforcement, whether it was good or bad, came from either personal experience and/or the media. Joe et al. (2019) found that African American mothers endure constant exposure to violent imagery of African Americans' interactions with law enforcement on television and online, leading to acute psychological distress because they are perpetually worrying about their children's potential police interactions. Additionally, 7 out of the 8 mothers in the current study stated that recorded videos, personal experiences, and experiences shared with them by others, such as children, friends, and family, were the main reasons why they do not trust law enforcement. Participants in this study reported that they believe law enforcement was biased; untrustworthy; and that they felt unsafe, nervous, and fearful of law enforcement.

The mistrust of law enforcement by African American mothers stems from deeply rooted societal stigmas. African Americans, particularly African American females, are often understood as adults earlier in their lives, causing them to generally have increased interaction with law enforcement earlier in their lives than their White peers (Epstein et al., 2017). This increased interaction with law enforcement at earlier ages then causes the expectation that African Americans have an advanced capacity for self-control compared to their White peers; the perception of an advanced capacity for self-control empowers

authority figures, such as law enforcement, to act against African American children with extreme hostility as they would toward an African American adult (Jacobs, 2017). More than half of the participants in this study reported that they have come to the rescue of their child(ren) from law enforcement in attempts to de-escalate the situation before it became physical, demonstrating that the stigma that African American children behave more maturely is still alive and contributing to African American mothers' mistrust of law enforcement.

### **Finding 3: Hopelessness**

Most participants in the study described a feeling of hopelessness regarding law enforcement violence against African Americans. All but one participant felt no need to report their bad interactions with law enforcement; they believed that the treatment was given by law enforcement was normal, and they taught their children how to avoid confrontation with law enforcement to remain unharmed. "The Talk," a routine conversation in which Black parents educate their children, typically sons, about how to minimize the chance of injury and/or death if stopped by police, accentuates the ubiquity of Black people's negative interactions with police (Bowleg et al., 2019). According to Bowleg et al. (2019), some of the strategies typically used by African American mothers during "The Talk" include using harsh realities, self-monitoring and regulation, reframing negative schemas, and accessing support networks. "The Talk" is necessary for African American children because as Edwards et al. (2019) pointed out, African American men are 2.5 times more likely than White men to be killed by police, meaning 1 out of every 1,000 African American men will be killed by police. In addition, using a statistical

model of radicalized police violence, Edwards et al. (2019) estimated that African American women are 1.4 times more likely than White women to be killed by police. In this study, half of the participants said that they had “The Talk” with their children to avoid harm by law enforcement. The participants expressed that, although it may have seemed to others that they were overparenting, they knew that if their children followed the strict instructions given during “The Talk,” they would be safe from harm by law enforcement. “The Talk” also typically involves how to avoid confrontation with law enforcement.

In a study of 40 Baltimore-based African American men of ages 18-22, all had regularly been confronted by law enforcement while walking in the city, and all had made active efforts to avoid confrontation (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Fitzgerald et al.’s (2019) findings align with Theme 3 of this study: Hopelessness. Participants in this study were hopeless about the possibility of change regarding the disproportionate amount of police interactions with and violence toward African Americans, so they were teaching their children how to avoid confrontation with law enforcement for their safety. As reported by Fitzgerald et al., however, confrontation with law enforcement cannot always be avoided even when actively attempting to avoid it.

Participants in the current study expressed hopelessness by discussing the things they do to prepare their children for law enforcement encounters, including educating their children on the types of cars they drive and law enforcement cars’ features. One mother expressed that she would not allow her son to get tinted windows on his new car because it is one of the ways that African Americans are profiled. She also stated that the

added profiling of tinted windows would only increase the already high possibility of her son being involved in an unnecessary traffic stop, which are frequent among Black men and can become deadly. Lowrey-Kinberg (2017) echoed these sentiments, helping to validate what emerged from the data collected in the current study.

### **Link to the Conceptual Framework of the SCT**

The conceptual framework for this study was Marx & Engles' (2001) SCT. The tenets of the SCT relate to the presence of unequal social order among groups within society. Under the SCT, the unjust distribution of resources, status, and power results in conflict between groups within society, ultimately causing revolution or even war (Simon, 2016). Structural inequality contributes to the perceptions that African American mothers have of law enforcement often bringing feelings that lead to conflict, revolution, and/or war.

Competition exists when there is a limited number of resources, and there are limited resources in society. Due to social inequality, African American mothers know that their African American children are already at a disadvantage compared to their White counterparts because of their race. For example, the arrest rate of African American women is 2.8 times that of White women (Jacobs, 2017), and police violence accounts for nearly 2% of deaths in African American men aged 20–24 (Edwards et al., 2019). Because of the statistical discrepancies of police violence and interaction between White people and African American people due to an unequal distribution of societal equality, African American mothers evidently worry about their children's encounters with law enforcement more than White mothers do. According to Marx & Engles' (2001)



SCT, African American mothers compete for the same equality given to children of White mothers and frequently do not receive it, as noted by the participants' responses in this study. Seven participants in this study said that they had been treated unfairly by law enforcement, and one participant described being pulled over by about 10 police cars with guns drawn and subsequently being pulled out of the car to the ground for a pat down. Unfair treatment like most of the mothers in this study have experienced in relation to Subtheme 1.1 shows how African American mothers and their children are competing for the same equality given to White mothers and their children.

Revolution exists when conflict between social classes arise, and a group assumes the power to create social change. The Black Lives Matter movement is an example of the revolution needed to remedy African American mothers' mistrust in law enforcement as illustrated by the findings of the study. Black Lives Matter (2019) has effectively assumed social power to create and advocate for change with the use of social media campaigns, protests, and the creation of principles to form a decentralized global network. In response to social inequality comes conflict, if not outright war. The revolution brought about by African American conflicts with law enforcement is directly in response to the feelings and perceptions of the participants in this study who have shared their stories of unfair, aggressive treatment by law enforcement. The responses of the participants interviewed in this study indicated that they felt they have been treated unfairly by law enforcement, that they were racially profiled, and that law enforcement was improperly trained. In addition, the mothers felt like officers were biased, untrustworthy, and that they felt unsafe, nervous, and even fearful of law enforcement.

The participants also reported feeling hopeless about the possibility of their perceptions changing, that there was no need to report bad interactions with law enforcement, that the poor treatment they received was normal, and that they simply needed to teach their children how to stay safe by avoiding confrontation with law enforcement.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations of this study. The first limitation was a difficulty in recruiting participants. The COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to recruit participants by posting flyers because many establishments, such as hair salons, nail shops, and laundromats, were closed. As a result, social media and the Walden University participant pool were my primary sources of recruiting participants for this study. Recruiting participants this way excluded those who were currently not enrolled at Walden University and those who do not utilize social media; thus, I may have missed a population of women who are not technology savvy.

Another limitation is, because of COVID-19, I was unable to conduct face-to-face interviews; instead, all interviews were conducted via Zoom or FaceTime. Conducting interviews virtually limited my ability to see or document body language that could have suggested that certain words may have been triggers or difficult for the participants to speak about. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic made it especially hard for some participants to join their interviews in a private, quiet, uninterrupted place because kids were out of school and some adults were out of work. The conversation may have been limited due to the added distractions or due to participants not feeling comfortable

enough to speak openly and freely about their interaction with law enforcement in front of others.

Finally, I did not include an age requirement for the children of the participants within my inclusion criteria for this study. This limited the data because about half of the participants had children who were too young (i.e., from 2–12 years old) to have a conversation about interacting with law enforcement as an African American or to have had any contact with law enforcement. This limitation caused some interviews to be brief because most of the questions did not apply to these participants.

### **Recommendations**

I conducted this study to explore the perceptions of African American mothers related to trust in law enforcement. There has previously been little research done on African American mothers' perceptions; however, Gabbidon et al. (2011) stated that after conducting research on the negative experiences that African American men and women have with law enforcement, they found that there are very minimal differences between African American men and women and that women tend to have similar experiences with law enforcement to African American men.

Since the media coverage is directed primarily toward African American men's experiences with law enforcement, one recommendation would be for research to be conducted on African American fathers' parenting styles compared to the parenting styles of African American mothers. I believe that, because there is much awareness on the interaction of African American men and their contact with law enforcement, it would be beneficial to know if fathers take a different approach when it comes to "The Talk" than

mothers. While further studies could also be conducted involving African American mothers and “The Talk” due to this study’s participants having children who were not yet old enough to hear “The Talk,” the way African American mothers pose “The Talk” and teach their children how to interact with law enforcement may be different from how African American fathers teach their children. For example, the mothers included in this study expressed hopelessness when it came to teaching their children how to interact with law enforcement in order to keep them safe and that the poor treatment was normal; African American fathers may not feel the same hopelessness.

A second recommendation is that this study be replicated with African American mothers and fathers with children who are 16 years of age or older in order to obtain information that may not have been included in my study due to the lack of an age limitation for the children. Because I did not restrict the ages of the children in this study, some participants provided very little information because their children had not had any experience with law enforcement as they were too young. This limitation also caused some interviews to be very brief as most of the questions did not apply to the participants with young children. Although I have gathered some valid information, there may still be more information to capture from African American mothers who have teenage and older children. The current study’s findings lacked information on Theme 3 (hopelessness) and the Subtheme 3.3 (teaching their children how to avoid confrontation with law enforcement to remain safe) since some mothers in the population sample did not have children who were old enough to interact with law enforcement. An additional study or multiple additional studies on the same research question in which participants include

African American mothers with children aged 16 or older would help to address the gaps in information left by the current study.

A third recommendation would be to hold law enforcement accountable.

Concerns of mistrust among African Americans mothers and law enforcement can be addressed by holding law enforcement accountable for their wrongdoing in altercations that could have been avoided and for covering up altercations. For example, had the protests to charge Breonna Taylor's killers not occurred, the Department of Justice would not have pursued the investigation leading to their federal charges (Goldsby, 2020).

Breonna Taylor's case and cases similar to hers are why African American mothers have mistrust for law enforcement and feel as though the treatment they receive is normal, thus there is no need to report it. Law enforcement must be held accountable in some way by shifting public policy and the enforcing consequences for wrongdoings, either via reports from those involved or via protests.

Finally, finding new ways to create rapport and to increase the trust between African American mothers and law enforcement. Building trust and rapport could come through community level or grassroots efforts. One example could be increasing community policing in neighborhoods to increase rapport between law enforcement and communities. According to Mentel (2012), the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services was created for this very reason—to build relationships while creating problem-solving techniques to address crime rates, social disorder, and fear of crime with related to individuals who encounter these issues daily. Building trust within communities with law enforcement will open a dialogue to explain what factors contribute to crime and the

ways that the communities feel may be the best way to address these issues. As a result, there would be a decrease in crime, more understanding from both African Americans and law enforcement, and most importantly, effective strategies when law enforcement is presented with an unfamiliar situation (e.g., during mental health crisis).

### **Implications**

For many years, African Americans have been racially profiled, physically brutalized, discriminated against, and killed by law enforcement (Edwards et al., 2019). These experiences have caused African Americans to have little to no trust in law enforcement. At the very forefront of the racially profiled, brutalized, discriminated against, and the killed are the African American mothers. As a result, African American mothers' perceptions of law enforcement have been negatively impacted, and they generally do not trust law enforcement. The findings from this study bring forth a number of implications.

The first implication is that despite #Blacklivesmatter, there is a continued need for African American mothers' and their children's perceptions of law enforcement to change in a positive direction as law enforcement shifts their perceptions. Examples of positive changes in perception could be educating law enforcement with adequate training to understand different cultures. Implementing practices that help diminish the number of fatalities and violent encounters between law enforcement and African Americans, particularly African American mothers and their children, is critical. The first thing to consider when onboarding new law enforcement officers, and/or implementing adequate training, would be to discover how the new officers view racism. According to

Mentel (2012), “millennial officers are more likely to display unintentional bias as opposed to individual or intentional racism” (p. 10). Mentel argued stated that newer law enforcement officers lack the following: historical context and interpersonal racism. Therefore, there is a continued need for law enforcement to shifts their perceptions.

A second implication relates to the using (SCT). Through the three main and six subthemes that emerged from this study African American mothers, and their children, have a deep mistrust of law enforcement. These findings are clear based on the structural inequality and uneven power distribution, as seen in police violence toward African Americans, and lead to protests such as #BlackLivesMatter. In this study, I used SCT to establish that the power disparities in American society have encouraged police violence against African Americans, validate the extent to which academia and the American media have downplayed the predicament of African American mothers, and contribute to a body of work which seeks to hold these institutions accountable. As this study sought to explore the unequal treatment of the African American community in matters of policing and, implicitly, in matters of representation in academic contexts, SCT can be posited as a valid construct with which to understand power distribution and inequality.

The final implication is that more research is needed on this topic. Conducting studies with more participants may provide valuable information and using a quantitative design may give a broader view of the problem. In addition, research studies conducted in other countries using African American girls or women who have had interactions with law enforcement would be informative. Additional studies with different populations of African American men and women of different ages could reveal more information on

this topic. As it is possible that COVID-19 may have hindered my study by limiting me to obtain participants. Most places were closed and restricted by COVID-19 policies, making it difficult to access those who live in both suburban and urban areas. Conducting research in a non-COVID-19 environment will allow for more studies to be conducted on this subject with a wider array of participants. Exploring the perceptions of people who live in different environments may be revealing based on types of neighborhoods, education level, earning capacity, and whether resources are limited.

### **Conclusion**

Through my qualitative, phenomenological study, I used interview-based research to contribute to a growing field of knowledge concerning African American mothers' experiences with and perspectives on motherhood, law enforcement, and improving the relationship between African American mothers and law enforcement. The interviews conducted provided ample information on the subject and aligned with the literature found on this topic.

For Theme 1: Contact with law enforcement responses produced three subthemes; feeling they were treated unfairly or being harassed, feeling they were racially profiled, and feeling law enforcement officers were improperly. Responses that generated Theme 2: Perception of law enforcement as it relates to trust, also produced three subthemes: feeling law enforcement officers are biased; feeling law officers were untrustworthy, feeling unsafe, nervous, or fearful of law enforcement. For Theme 3: Hopelessness; three subthemes also emerged: feeling no need to report bad interactions with law enforcement



believing the treatment received was normal, and teaching their children how to avoid confrontation to remain safe. All the themes discovered in this study

Karl Marx's SCT was used to connect the study's themes of contact with law enforcement, perception of law enforcement as it relates to trust, and hopelessness. Marx's widely known social theory was also related to other information such as competition, revolution, and structural inequality. Results of the study indicated that African American mothers, or their children, have generally had at least one negative experience with law enforcement, that they do not trust law enforcement, and that they feel hopeless about the phenomenon of law enforcement violence against African Americans.

Since being enslaved and brought to the United States, African Americans have been subject to greater state/federal scrutiny and violence than their White counterparts (Kendi, 2017). High rates of police violence are contemporary manifestation of state-sponsored violence, and persistent police violence against African Americans has produced intergenerational trauma that while painful, has also created a new round of revolution in #Blacklivesmatter. Holding law enforcement accountable for their transgressions and crimes, giving culturally appropriate training to law enforcement, and increasing benevolent policing in neighborhoods to increase rapport between law enforcement and communities can help reduce the number of violent encounters and deaths between African Americans and law enforcement.

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