

2022

## Perceptions of African American Girls Regarding Zero Tolerance Policies and Suspension or Expulsion

Ernethia Carter-Abernathy  
*Walden University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>

---

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu](mailto:ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu).

# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Ernethia Carter-Abernathy

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Carolyn Dennis, Committee Chairperson,  
Criminal Justice Faculty

Dr. Sean Grier, Committee Member,  
Criminal Justice Faculty

Dr. Tony Gaskew, University Reviewer,  
Criminal Justice Faculty

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

Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Perceptions of African American Girls Regarding Zero Tolerance Policies and

Suspension or Expulsion

by

Ernethia Carter-Abernathy

MA, University of Houston Clear Lake, 2016

BA, Our Lady of the Lake University, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

August 2022

## Abstract

The frequency and severity of discipline under zero tolerance policies are greater for African American female students than other cohorts. Although zero tolerance policies in schools have been found to increase the likelihood of suspension, expulsion, and entry into the juvenile justice system, there is limited research on their impact from the perspective of African American female students. Using the theory of change and critical race theory to ground this research, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to describe the impact that zero tolerance policies have on African American girls.

Interviews were conducted with 14 purposively sampled African American females who attended high school in the United States and had experienced expulsion or suspension as a result of the zero tolerance policy. The participants were recruited from a substance abuse treatment organization and the county probation department. Data were analyzed by generating codes and themes for the study. The analysis revealed six themes, which were (a) perception that the policy was related to race, (b) perception that punishment was not fair, (c) poor perceptions about themselves and prospects about their futures, (d) impacts of being out-of-school on education, (e) involvement in trouble and the criminal justice system, and (f) recommendations for policies that were fair and did not interfere with education. Overall, the results indicated that the policies negatively impacted participants' lives and long-term outcomes. The study may lead to positive social change by informing policy makers and school administration of the unintended consequences of zero tolerance policies on African American girls. With this knowledge, they may be able to implement alternative discipline approaches to stop this cycle of harm.

Perceptions of African American Girls Regarding Zero Tolerance Policies and  
Suspension or Expulsion

by

Ernethia Carter-Abernathy

MA, University of Houston Clear Lake, 2016

BA, Our Lady of the Lake University, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

August 2022

## Dedication

I thank God for seeing me through. “Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For his mercy endures forever.” 1 Chronicles 16:34. Amen.

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my parents, Ernest Carter and Wyetta Carter, and my brother Remmurd Le Von Carter. They are the cornerstone of my education. I was born and raised in a home where education was the key to my freedom to do whatever my heart desired and succeed in all my endeavors. I may not have realized it then, but I had been groomed to reach the highest degree possible. I want to take the time to say, “thank you, and I love you.” Even though you are not here with me, I feel your presence as you witness my achievement.

I would also like to thank my children, Terrelle Carter, Chrishanda Mott, and Erryn Carter, along with my husband, Lorenzo Abernathy Jr., and my seven grandchildren, for being patient with me during the times I was too busy working on this project.

## Acknowledgments

There is not nearly enough time and space to formally acknowledge all the educators, faculty, and organizations credited for my success. Therefore, I would like to mention those most influential to my success; however, note that many more are not listed by name. First on my list is my mother, Wyetta Carter, an English teacher who stayed on top of me throughout my schooling. Up until her death, she proofread and edited all my work. I must mention my brother, who spent endless hours working with me on my writing. I would like to acknowledge the professors who encouraged me and helped me along the way. Dr. Cynthia Phillips and Dr. Jiletta Kubena of Our Lady of the Lake University are dear to my heart. I appreciate the endless conversations we had and the guidance towards forming my future. I want to acknowledge Steve Huerta of All of Us or None, who provided new insight into the criminal justice system. Thank you for taking me under your wing and allowing me to participate in a meaningful way to promote positive social change. It is through Mr. Huerta that I was able to play a local part in the “ban the box” order that was signed into law by President Obama. Also, thank you for taking me to participate in the roundtables at the commissioner’s court. I want to acknowledge Dr. Everette Penn and Dr. William Hoston of the University of Houston Clear-Lake. You saw my potential and pushed me to be my best. Your doors were always open to me.

Last, I want to acknowledge the Walden university faculty and staff who got me across the finish line. To my chair, Dr. Carolyn Dennis, you are a God piece. Thank you for working with me and giving me courage through all my ups and downs. To my

second committee member, Dr. Sean Grier, thank you for all your input along the way. I would also like to recognize Dr. Tony Gaskew, my URR. And to the main people behind the scenes, I want to thank Yoshihiko Yohimine and La Tonya Johnson, my advisors. You are wonderful. You made it happen for me. You were always there to address any issue I had.



## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	v
List of Figures .....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	2
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Research Question .....	7
Theoretical Framework.....	8
Nature of the Study.....	9
Definitions.....	10
Assumptions.....	10
Scope and Delimitations .....	11
Limitations .....	12
Significance.....	12
Summary .....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	15
Introduction.....	15
Literature Search Strategy.....	18
Theoretical Framework.....	19
Development of Critical Race Theory and the Theory of Change .....	20
Critical Race Theory.....	26

Theory of Change .....	33
Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts.....	34
Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools.....	35
Zero -Tolerance Policies and Race .....	38
Criticism of Zero Tolerance Policy Application in Schools.....	42
Summary and Conclusions .....	58
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	60
Introduction.....	60
Research Design and Rationale .....	61
Role of the Researcher .....	61
Methodology .....	62
Participant Selection Logic.....	63
Instrumentation .....	64
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	65
Data Analysis Plan.....	66
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	69
Credibility .....	70
Transferability.....	70
Dependability.....	71
Confirmability.....	71
Ethical Procedures .....	72
Summary.....	74

Chapter 4: Results .....	76
Introduction.....	76
Demographics .....	76
Data Collection .....	77
Data Analysis .....	79
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	84
Results.....	86
Perception That the Zero Tolerance Policy Was Related to Race .....	87
Perception That the Punishment Was Not Fair.....	89
Poor Perceptions About Themselves and Prospects About Their Futures .....	91
Impacts of Being Out of School on Education .....	93
Involvement In Trouble and the Criminal Justice System.....	94
Recommendations for Policies That Are Fair and Do Not Interfere With	
Education .....	95
Summary.....	96
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	99
Introduction.....	99
Interpretation of the Findings.....	100
Perception That the Zero Tolerance Policy Was Related to Race .....	100
Perception That the Punishment Was Not Fair.....	102
Poor Perceptions of Themselves and Prospects About Their Futures .....	103
Impacts of Being Out of School on Education .....	105

Involvement in Trouble and the Criminal Justice System .....	106
Recommendations for Policies That Are Fair and Do Not Interfere With	
Education .....	107
Theoretical Framework .....	109
Limitations of the Study.....	112
Recommendations.....	113
Implications.....	114
Conclusion .....	115
References.....	116
Appendix: Codebook .....	132

List of Tables

Table 1. Secondary Codes, Their Definitions, and Preliminary Codes .....	81
Table 2. Overview of Themes.....	84

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Thematic Map.....	82
-----------------------------	----

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

African American female students' experiences in schools with zero tolerance policies for discipline differ from other students. The frequency and severity of discipline under zero tolerance policies are greater for African American female students than for other students (Ruiz, 2017). Zero tolerance policies require severe discipline for students who commit specific violations (Aldridge, 2018; McNeal, 2016). However, African American female students experience zero tolerance-based disciplinary actions with greater frequency than other students (Aldridge, 2018). This can lead African American female students to enter the "school-to-prison pipeline." This concept refers to students' arrest and entry into the juvenile justice system because of activities that occur in school (Aldridge, 2018). Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews and Woods (2020) noted that further research exploring the implications of a zero tolerance policy following discipline is essential. For these reasons, researchers should explore African American female students' experiences of being expelled or suspended based on a zero tolerance policy to understand those experiences. In the current study, I used critical race theory and the theory of change to understand the impacts of zero tolerance policies on African American female students.

The findings from this research may result in positive social changes. The findings describe the phenomenon of zero tolerance policy-based suspensions and expulsions from the perceptions of African American female students. The analysis of their lived experiences through the lens of the theoretical framework of the critical race theory and theory of change show African American females' experiences as deriving

from social structures facilitating greater punishment for individuals with less power and privilege. Hence, social change can emerge from this study's critical and transformative theoretical lens, where school leaders implementing zero tolerance policies may rely on restorative justice practices. The findings can also result in positive social change by describing African American female students' experiences in the school-to-prison pipeline. The analysis of lived experiences showed iterative experiences, where the behaviors that initially triggered discipline under zero tolerance policies worsened with time. With this knowledge, school officials and policy makers may implement measures to lessen the negative cumulative impacts and the likelihood that school-based discipline will lead to entry into the criminal justice system,

This chapter begins with background information on African American female students' experience of different discipline than other students based on zero tolerance policies. The background includes a summary of the research and the gap in knowledge that this study addressed. I discuss the problem of African American female student treatment and state the study purpose. The theoretical framework is also described. The critical race theory and theory of change were the frameworks through which the research was understood. The nature of this study as a qualitative phenomenological study is then described. Chapter 1 concludes with the assumptions, delimitations, scope, limitations, and significance of the study, followed by a transition to Chapter 2.

### **Background**

Reliance on zero tolerance policies has created a substantial risk that students who would typically not advance into the juvenile justice system will do so because of these



policies. Daly et al. (2016) described the risk as related to the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline involves students who commit offenses in school, then have their cases turned over to law enforcement for investigation and possible involvement with the court system. Daly et al. noted that the school-to-prison pipeline is detrimental to the growth and development of students, even students who engage in behaviors that might violate zero tolerance policies. Nance (2016) also discussed the prevalence of the school-to-prison pipeline and its impact on students. Nance noted that minority students were more likely to enter the school-to-prison pipeline. Nance's findings support the possibility that the school is not alone in the school-to-prison pipeline and that the presence of law enforcement in schools can support a greater likelihood that students will be referred to law enforcement. Hence, the school-to-prison pipeline problem appears to pose different issues.

These policies relate to how people experience discipline, with race and gender responsible for the greater impact of zero tolerance policies on African American female student punishment. Miller (2017) described the problem as responsible for the criminalization and dehumanization of African American female students. Further, Miller noted that the impact of school policy unfairly could result in greater discipline for African American female students associated with social and cultural differences in power, resulting in these students having a greater likelihood of entering the juvenile justice system. Slate et al. (2016) also discussed the lack of equity in disciplinary consequences related to the treatment of African American female students. Slate et al. explored the problem of a difference in treatment through the social cognitive theory,

noting that African American female students received exposure to different behaviors. The difference in exposure between African American female students and other students supports further exploration of the zero tolerance policy and African American female students.

Other research supports eliminating zero tolerance policies. Thompson (2016) discussed the approach to discipline in the Miami-Dade County public school system, where the approach deviates from the use of zero tolerance policies. Thompson relied on the critical race theory to explore the zero tolerance policy and the introduction of restorative justice practices. Tseng and Becker (2016) also supported reducing zero tolerance policy use and introducing alternatives to discipline. Restorative justice practices support the successful reduction of exclusionary disciplinary actions, such as expulsions and suspensions, as well as a lower likelihood of arrests (Tseng & Becker, 2016). Educational leaders who rely on restorative justice rather than a zero tolerance policy may fracture the school-to-prison pipeline and reduce the likelihood of school-related arrest while reducing perceptions of racial discrimination among minority students (Thompson, 2016). These findings support different solutions to the need for disciplinary action for students requiring discipline in public schools. Further, the analysis by Thompson (2016) also supports further analysis through critical race theory.

In conducting this study, I responded to previous researchers' call for additional investigation of the impacts of zero tolerance policies. Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) discussed the effects of zero tolerance policies on African American females, using critical race feminism to understand the impact of school discipline. The

researchers concluded that educational researchers must rely on critical theoretical frameworks that identify the intersection of race and gender in establishing negatively targeted identities, focusing on African American girls. Their suggestion highlights the importance of exploring the negative impact of a zero tolerance policy on African American girls and exploring their experiences separately from other races and genders.

This research addressed the gap noted by Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020). I applied the critical race theory to explore African American girls' experiences with zero tolerance policy discipline as unique from other genders and races. The call for further research by Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews was supported by Woods (2020). Both sets of researchers noted that further research exploring the implications of a zero tolerance policy following discipline is essential. Research focusing on African American female students is less frequent than on African American male students; African American female students are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline based on the zero tolerance policy. This study was needed because it may produce new knowledge related to African American females' experiences. The findings support a change to restorative justice policies from the current zero tolerance policy paradigm.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem in this current research is the lack of adequate knowledge on the impact of zero tolerance policy use on African American female students (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Woods, 2020). Findings from zero tolerance policy research show that in 95% of cases, suspensions were applied to nonviolent behaviors where alternative

discipline could be applied (Rodriguez, 2015; Ruiz 2017, p. 810); 48% of suspensions involved disobedience (Aldridge, 2018; McNeal, 2016), and 89.4% of the students were arrested or referred to juvenile proceedings. By applying an alternative discipline model, only 6.8% of students were disciplined after implementing the suggested model (Woods, 2020, p. 64). These findings provide evidence that zero tolerance policies are subjectively applied in several situations. Further, Johnson (2017) found that although African American students were only 19% of preschool students, they were 47% of out-of-school suspensions and had a 3 times greater risk of receiving out-of-school suspensions than their White peers (p. 62). These findings support the assumption that African American female students have a substantially greater likelihood of exclusionary discipline and being placed in the juvenile justice program. Hence, research should focus on further understanding African American female students' experiences of suspension, expulsion, or juvenile justice consequences associated with zero tolerance policies.

The gap in the literature was the need for further research focused on zero tolerance policy use and the impact it could have on African American female students. Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) and Woods (2020) have called for exploration of African American females' experiences with zero tolerance policy discipline because their experiences are unique from other genders and races. Woods also stated that further research involving the implications of a zero tolerance policy following discipline was essential, as research focusing on African American female students was less frequent than on African American male students. I responded to this call for research by

exploring zero tolerance policy use in the discipline of African American females through the theoretical lens of the critical race theory and theory of change.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the impact that zero tolerance policies had on African American girls. In this qualitative study, I used phenomenological research design conventions to explore the role of zero tolerance policies in the discipline of African American girls after suspension or expulsion from school. The research results provide information that stakeholders, including school administrators and policy makers, could use when determining guidelines for zero tolerance policies and the use of expulsion and suspension as punishment. The current literature addresses the impact of zero tolerance policies on African American girls and how the misuse or overuse of the policies impacted their lives. However, there is minimal literature with firsthand accounts of how African American girls' lives were impacted (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Woods, 2020). This study is important because it explores how zero tolerance policies have unintended consequences and reach beyond their original purpose. Furthermore, the lived experiences of African American girls may humanize the phenomenon beyond statistical data.

### **Research Question**

How does suspension or expulsion as a result of zero tolerance policies impact African American girls in Texas schools?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for the study included critical race theory and the theory of change. Critical race theory describes how society's structure supports the exploitation of individuals by others that hold power (Thompson, 2016). Critical race theory emerged from research involving the relationship between the law, race, and power in society, and how social structures support the continued exploitation of people based on race (Yosso, 2005). The seminal work on critical race theory is associated with Bell's criticism of how the law supports the lack of power held by African American individuals (see Bell, 1984, 1987; Bell et al., 1989). This study's research question is associated with how zero tolerance policies result in severe discipline and possible introduction to the criminal justice system for African American female students through the school-to-prison pipeline. Critical race theory is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. I discuss research showing that the discipline rendered under legally mandated zero tolerance policies has a greater impact on African American female students than other students.

The theoretical framework also included the theory of change. Theory of change supports understanding transformation methods and the development of strategy supporting change (Brest, 2010). I used the theory of change to support understanding how the system's current structure can transform to support fairness for African American female students. Theory of change and critical race theory fit together in this research because students' treatment was considered to be different based on race. This presumption was based on previous research findings indicating differences in the

application of exclusionary discipline between African American female students and other students (Hassan & Carter, 2020; B. G. Johnson, 2017; Thompson, 2016; Young et al., 2018). Critical race theory and the theory of change therefore provided a pertinent theoretical lens for this investigation.

### **Nature of the Study**

This research involved using a qualitative, phenomenological research methodology and design. I selected qualitative phenomenology for this research based on the purpose of the study and research question. The goal of the research was to describe the impact that zero tolerance policies had on African American girls. One of the most significant impacts of a zero tolerance policy may be the arrest of African American female students, which places them on the school-to-prison pipeline (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Johnson, 2017; Thompson, 2016; Young & Butler, 2018).

Phenomenological research involves studying the lived experience of individuals within a particular group (Paley, 2016). The lived experiences in this research were that of suspension or expulsion based on a zero tolerance policy, and the particular group was African American female students. The methodology in this research involved the logic for participant selection; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and the plan for data analysis. Selection of participants entailed using purposive sampling. I recruited African American female former students using social media and posting flyers with the county probation department and treatment organization. Semistructured, face-to-face interviews were used to collect data. Thematic analysis in the tradition of Braun and Clarke (2006) and relying on coding suggestions by

Saldana (2016) was used to interpret the data gathered. The instrumentation relied on semistructured interviews and a journal for recording reflexivity.

### **Definitions**

*Exclusionary discipline:* Disciplinary action taken in a school setting that separates a student from peers (Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

*Expulsion:* The complete removal of a student from registration in a school or school district (Skiba et al., 2016).

*School-to-prison pipeline:* A phenomenon that occurs where exclusionary disciplinary action results in students also entering the criminal justice system (Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

*Suspension:* Temporary exclusion of a student from the classroom setting (Skiba et al., 2016).

*Zero tolerance policy:* A policy that requires a minimal disciplinary action be applied when a student commits a specific action (Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

### **Assumptions**

I had several assumptions when conducting this research. My primary assumption was that there is not a substantial difference in the perceived experience of students who have returned to school following expulsion or suspension. Therefore, I included former students who had been suspended and expelled. I also assumed that individuals who had experienced expulsion or suspension could recollect and reflect on the experience and how the experience impacted their lives after becoming an adult. Hence, recruiting occurred outside the school setting, using former students who were over the age of



majority; no students who were currently in school were included in the study. Another assumption was that there would not be a substantial difference in responses between former students who had been suspended and those who have been expelled. The study included former students who had both experiences. It was also assumed that there was not a substantial difference in the perceptions of experience with suspension and expulsion based on grade level in high school when the discipline occurred. I included former students whose discipline occurred at all high school grades. These assumptions were necessary to ensure the feasibility of the study.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

A crucial delimitation to this research was that the study only included African American female former high school students. The scope of this research was limited to African American female students because their experience of suspension and expulsion occurred more often and for more reasons than male students (Woods, 2020). Another delimitation to this research was that the study focused on African American female students suspended or expelled because of zero tolerance policies. This delimitation was critical because it reduced the study to focus on a single rationale for suspension or expulsion. Another delimitation was that the study focused only on exclusionary disciplinary actions. These disciplines were the strictest that students could experience associated with introducing the criminal justice system. Therefore, the need to explore the experience with exclusionary disciplinary actions was the greatest.

### **Limitations**

This research also included multiple limitations. A key limitation of this research was that access to participants was limited to students who had returned to school following a suspension or expulsion. Recruiting occurred through social media. Hence, only students available for recruiting through social media were considered for the study. Another limitation was associated with possible bias in this research. The bias was associated with the research involving participants of the same gender and race as the primary investigator and bias against apparent discriminatory actions by school administrators against African American female students. Prior to the study, I worked with children who had been expelled from school. Therefore, my knowledge of expulsion could have created bias. This bias was checked by maintaining a reflexivity journal.

### **Significance**

In this qualitative study, I explored the effects of zero tolerance policies on African American girls, focusing on their lived experiences after being expelled or suspended. The study provides valuable information that stakeholders, policy makers, and school administration could use to better understand the unintended consequences of zero tolerance policies on African American girls. Considering African American girls' experiences when deciding how or whether to implement suspension or expulsion may make possible different formulation and enforcement of such policies. The current study also revealed the need to better understand universal definitions. According to Daley et al. (2016), zero tolerance policies are defined in various ways. Furthermore, policies

define weapons differently, with some nonlethal objects defined as guns. Zero tolerance policies were enacted to provide safety for students and faculty.

The original intention for these policies was not to be used as an easy fix for children to be exiled from school for certain behaviors that could be handled with in-school suspension (Miller, 2017). In some cases, alternative reasons are at the forefront for imposing harsh penalties for suspension. Public school leaders depend on federal funds and thus consider academic scores. When children are expelled or suspended, they miss certain qualifying tests needed to secure funding. As a result, low-scoring students are targeted and eliminated from the equation. African American girls with low academic ability may be affected by being suspended or expelled instead of receiving in-school suspension (Miller, 2017). This study may promote positive social change in how public school leaders in Texas apply zero tolerance policies to African American girls. These changes may have a positive social change globally, starting at the local level.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 1, I introduced the research problem, which was a lack of adequate knowledge on the impact of zero tolerance policy use on African American female students (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Woods, 2020). Such policies are associated with a greater likelihood of suspension, expulsion, and entry into the juvenile justice system (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Woods, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the impact that zero tolerance policies had on African American girls. The chapter continued with a description of the theoretical framework, which consisted of critical race theory and the theory of change. I

also presented the research question and described the nature of the study. The chapter concluded with the assumptions, delimitations, scope, limitations, and significance of the research.

Chapter 2 includes an exhaustive review of the extant literature associated with using zero tolerance policies in schools and the impact that zero tolerance policies have on African American female students. The chapter begins with a description of the methods used to complete the literature search. I also further discuss the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework includes both the critical race theory and theory of change. In the literature review that follows, I survey the literature on zero tolerance policy use in schools to address student behavior.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The initial implementation of zero tolerance policies began in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to social problems in U.S. schools concerning gang violence, drugs, and guns. Zero tolerance policies have evolved over time to become a social control mechanism, according to researchers. School officials and policy makers initially designed zero tolerance policies to act as a deterrent to disruptive students acting out violently and to curb drug use (Skiba et al., 2016). As Skiba et al. (2016) noted, the body of research related to zero tolerance policies shows that students are punished more severely for less serious and more subjective infractions than others. This problem impacts African American girls more so than other student populations because it affects their academic futures and because zero tolerance policies have a high probability of ending in arrests (Mallet, 2016). Currently, the use of resource officers by schools in Texas has the propensity to lead to arrests of students for behavioral problems that are not criminal and that could be addressed with in-school-suspensions.

Several possible factors have contributed to this problem, among which are policy makers, school administration, and faculty members losing sight of zero tolerance policies not being an overall fix for normal adolescent misbehavior. The policies are intended to provide a safe environment from criminal activities, such as guns, drugs, and gang violence in schools. Furthermore, Marx (1981) wrote that authorities often contributed to the deviance of kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) students they sought to control by subconsciously creating environments that reinforce inequality. According to

Skiba et al. (2016), zero tolerance policies presume that strong enforcement can act as a deterrent to other potentially disruptive students. The literature synthesized in this study supports a relationship between individual behavior and the way zero tolerance policies are enforced (Bell, 2015; Hoffman, 2014; Miller 2017). The literature reviewed does not address the impact of exclusionary discipline practices on African American girls following suspension or expulsion. This study addresses this gap by providing information to decision makers to formulate and or change policies on zero tolerance in Texas public schools.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research was to describe the impact that zero tolerance policies had on African American girls. Specifically, I used phenomenological methods to explore the effects zero tolerance policies had on African American girls after suspension or expulsion from school. The results of the research provide information that stakeholders, school administrators, and policy makers could use when determining guidelines for zero tolerance policies and the use of expulsion and suspension as punishment. The current literature addresses the impact of zero tolerance policies on African American girls and how the misuse or overuse of the policies impacts their lives. However, rarely does the literature address a firsthand account of how their lives are impacted (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Woods, 2020). This study is important because it explores how zero tolerance policies have unintended consequences and reach beyond its original purpose. Furthermore, the lived experiences of African American girls will humanize the phenomenon beyond statistical data.

This exhaustive review of extant literature on the topic of zero tolerance policy implementation in K-12 schools in the United States supports the existence of substantial differences in the treatment of students associated with student gender and race (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Johnson, 2017; Thompson, 2016; Young & Butler, 2018). The findings of current research on the use of zero tolerance policies show more significant punishment and a higher frequency of exclusionary disciplinary actions, such as suspensions and expulsions (Aldridge, 2018; McNeal, 2016; Ruiz, 2017). These findings demonstrate the existence of some differences between the treatment of African American students and non-African American (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Johnson, 2017; Thompson, 2016; Young & Butler, 2018), as well as differences in the treatment of African American female students and White female students. The findings of the research in this literature review support the importance of research aimed at a greater understanding of how the exclusionary disciplines that African American female students receive affect their educative development and preparation to be good citizens.

The literature review includes several sections that provide justification for this study. The literature review begins with a description of the theoretical framework of this study. The theoretical framework of this study included both the critical race theory and theory of change. The critical race theory is closely related to critical theory; it also evolved in tandem with critical legal studies. Hence, in the Theoretical Foundation subsection I discuss critical theory and critical legal studies to establish a robust understanding of critical race theory. The theory of change also shares some association with critical theory. Following the theoretical framework of the study is the literature

review. I discuss zero tolerance policy in schools, zero tolerance policy and race, criticism of zero tolerance policy application in schools, and criticism of zero tolerance policy use on African American female students. The chapter concludes with a summary of key points and a transition to Chapter 3.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

This review of scholarly literature was an exhaustive review including the extant literature on the topic of zero tolerance policy use and African American female students. I used several different scholarly search engines and academic databases to find pertinent literature. The multiple search engines and databases in the literature search included Google Scholar, JSTOR, and the Directory of Open Access Journals. Aside from the theoretical framework portion of the literature search, the search was constrained to include only scholarly journal articles from the 2016 to 2020 period. The search for the theoretical framework included the removal of this constraint to include the seminal research on the topic. In the case of the critical race theory, the theory emerged from work involving critical theory and critical legal studies, which are theories that have existed for several decades. Hence, removal of the constraints was necessary.

The literature search included several search terms and Boolean operators. The search terms were closely associated with critical theory, critical legal studies, critical race theory, theory of change, the application of zero tolerance policies in schools, and the differences in outcomes of zero tolerance policies associated with gender and race. The search terms included in the study were *critical theory*, *critical legal studies*, *critical race theory*, *theory of change*, *zero tolerance policy* AND *education*, *zero tolerance*



*policy AND education AND race, zero tolerance policy AND education AND gender, zero tolerance policy AND education AND critical theory, zero tolerance policy AND education AND critical race theory, and zero tolerance policy AND education AND theory of change.* These search terms were used consistently across the search engines and databases in the study. The number of studies on the topic became apparent during the first few searches. Therefore, the decision was made to include all search terms to ensure that an exhaustive review would be possible. Once a grouping of scholarly literature was obtained through the literature search, the fitness of studies was determined following a review of abstracts of studies. At the conclusion, the studies in the study were annotated. The annotations were used to support the synthesis of the literature and the write-up of the literature review.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework included two theories: the critical race theory and theory of change. These theories are related, to an extent, as the theory of change is a product of critical race theory (Moodie, 2017). The background for these theories extends even further, as the underlying concepts remain tied to critical theory (Dejours et al., 2018; How, 2017). In discussing the theoretical framework, I discuss the lineage of these two theories, including their connection to critical theory. The section also includes detailed information on each theory and how it provided a theoretical framework for this study.

## **Development of Critical Race Theory and the Theory of Change**

The critical race theory and theory of change are two theories that are quite similar in their development. However, there are distinctive qualities that support the delineation of one theory from another. The critical race theory and theory of change share a similar lineage in that both are connected to critical theory (Johnson, 2017). Although they have the same parent, they differ in certain ways. The theory of change is aimed at achieving transformation through the implementation of a novel intervention (Brest, 2010). The critical race theory remains consistent with the aims of critical theory to propose some form of critique of how structures impact society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). By using a theoretical framework that involved theory of change and critical race theory, I wanted to engender the possibility of developing thoughtful solutions to the social problem under investigation. The application of both theories, I surmised, might make significant transformations in political, social, and economic structures possible.

### ***Critical Theory***

Although the critical theory was not a theory included in the theoretical framework of the current research, the theory was the starting point from which the critical race theory and theory of change arose (Moodie, 2017; Sharp, 2019). The unique structure of critical theory delineates it from traditional theory (Brincat, 2016; Stoetzle, 2020). Understanding the critical theory and its contributions to the critical race theory and theory of change could support understanding how these theories worked together to comprise the theoretical framework for this study.

The critical theory remains distinctive from traditional scholastic theories.

Whereas traditional theory supports understanding how phenomena occur in society, the critical theory is based on the critique and transformation of society (Thompson, 2017). The critique of social phenomena shall then support determining the assumptions with which individuals socially agree to develop a robust understanding of society (Celikates, 2018). The history of the critical theory is traced to Marx (1981) and Horkheimer (1937). Marx's contribution involved critiquing economy and society to establish the theoretical relationship between economy and the ideological superstructure of society (Sim, 2004). Marx identified the economy, society, and social superstructure as the elements that would support the power and domination that individuals experienced because of the control held by individuals that control the mode of production (see also Sim, 2004). The critical theory supports identifying the power structures that support the domination and exploitation of individuals as units of labor and the establishment of how power structures could be challenged (Honneth, 1991). Critical theorists established several subsequent theories that can support the critique and transformation of society, including the critical race theory and theory of change.

Several other theories were born from the critical theory. Perhaps the first to follow Marx (1972) and Horkheimer (1937) was Lukács (1974; Lunn, 1984) and Gramsci (2000). Their works were instrumental in developing the critical theory; they relied on the work of Marx (1972, 1981), specifically the critical theory, to explore forces in society. Both researchers used it to understand how such forces acted as barriers to individuals understanding the way that power influenced their lives. The delineation between

traditional theories and critical theory hinges, in part, on the logical positivist nature of traditional theories encumbering the extent to which critique can occur and how it may serve to transform society. Additionally, Horkheimer (1937), contributed further support for the need to utilize the critical theory as a means of understanding and challenging structures within society. Later theories, such as the critical race theory and theory of change, would follow these traditions of critical theory.

The contemporaries of Lukács (1974) and Gramsci (2000) also relied on understanding the role of culture and ideological forces as elements that would support the exploitation of individuals. For example, some influential research in the Institute for Social Research was founded on the work completed on the critical theory at the University of Frankfurt (Feenberg, 2014). The scholarly work completed at the Frankfurt school was crucial toward the evolution of how critical theory would function in the future (Jay, 1984). The researchers followed the norm of critical theory that was initially established by Lukács (1974) and Gramsci (2000), where there was focus on the role of culture and ideological factors as influencing the exploitation of individuals through the superstructure of society by reducing humanity to economic units (Jay, 1984).

The work completed by the Frankfurt school utilized the critical theory to understand contemporary structure and problems to understand the role of structure as a factor influencing problems in society (Jay, 1984). The work included critique of the rise to power of the Nazi regime and the role of industrialism as an influencer of how individuals viewed politics, economy, and society (Neumann et al., 2013). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) discussed modern approaches to the application of the critical theory,

noting that it must situate within both cultural and historical contexts, but the researcher implicated themselves in the data collection and analysis processes. The pattern of the critical theory exploring problems because of social structures and culture rather than as individual problems remained a crucial theme as the critical theory continued to evolve.

The development of critical theory continued through the 20th century, with the theorists of the Frankfurt School continuing to influence researchers to utilize critical theory as a means of understanding societal problems. Through the latter part of the century, Horkheimer (1982) became a leader in the continued efforts to establish critical theory and define it to support the work of subsequent scholars, as well as to enhance the purpose of the critical theory to hold a significant role in society. Horkheimer (1982) described noted that the definition of critical theory required the theory be normative, explanatory, and practical. In addition, the theory must explain the problems that exist in society, the solutions to these problems, and satisfy the critical norms in a field. The ends of the work in the critical theory must then serve to “liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave” (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). The critical theory in this research supported the theoretical framework as it was the parent theory to the theories used in the study. Hence, these elements of critical theory were used to support the research, as well as the discussion and conclusion of the findings.

### ***Critical Legal Studies***

Critical legal studies served as an element of establishing the critical race theory (Kelman, 1987). The seminal work on the critical race theory emerged from scholarly work based on a dispute involving faculty at Harvard Law school in the 1980s (Unger,

1983). The theory emerged from the dispute as a measure to address the conflict to articulate how racial diversity was violated by the actions of the school (Tushnet, 1991). Critical legal studies supported establishing the critical race theory through its relation to legal studies (Cole, 2017). Critical legal studies are law-relative approaches to understanding how the law is used as a tool to support the power structures in society and the nature of how law supports bias against marginalized groups in society (Hunt, 1986). Hence, the theory remains an important element in the description of the critical race theory and is an instrumental link to describing the influence of the critical theory on establishing the critical race theory.

Critical legal studies function similar to the critical theory. Although the critical theory is associated with understanding how the structure of society impacts individuals, critical legal studies remain focused on understanding how the legal system functions as a tool to achieve the goals of power and domination through codification in the legal system (Tushnet, 1986). Critique serves as the opportunity to challenge and propose possible alternatives to problems (Tushnet, 1986). Critical legal studies remain focused on understanding how preferential outcomes occur in the legal system when legal doctrine is often drafted to be rigid and support transparency and understanding of the legal system that undergird the system. Therefore, the abolition of the influence that class domination holds over legal outcomes, and the function of the legal system are crucial objectives of critical legal theory scholarship.

In some ways, critical legal studies can be understood as precursors to developing the critical race theory. Chronologically, critical legal studies emerged as a field of study

in the 1970s in the United States, in a period that followed movements toward racial and gender equality. Sparer (1984) noted that critical legal studies scholars engaged in research based on objectives aligned with the traditional critical theory, where social structures were explored to understand how they related to the law, as well as how the structure of law supported power structures that maintained a status quo of domination by the ruling class.

The field of critical legal studies is essentially defunct, as the work of scholars engaged in the field stopped in the 1980s, approximately at the time that the critical race theory began to form. Unger (2015), a leading scholar in critical legal studies, noted that the movement toward critical legal studies only lasted until the late 1980s and that “its life as a movement lasted for barely more than a decade” (p. 24). This element of critical legal studies is consistent with the critical race theory, where there is interest in how the law works to maintain control over minorities who largely lack the power to gain access to the power and influence of the ruling class.

The propositions made by critical legal studies ‘scholars are also applicable when understanding the critical race theory. One is that statute and case law are not the only legal materials responsible for the outcome of legal disputes. Although legal materials, such as statutes and case laws, create boundaries within which decisions can be made, the final decision in a case can be influenced by factors within these boundaries and still have a significant impact on legal decisions (Douzinas et al., 1994).

In addition, critical legal studies challenge the assumption that individuals are entirely autonomous, as people have several characteristics that create difficulty with

exercising complete agency (Douzinas et al., 1994). Race is one of the characteristics that bind individuals to communities where their autonomy is constrained. Another proposition involves the link between law and politics, where there is an inextricable link between the law and politics that shall have a substantial impact on how society is influenced (Douzinas et al., 1994).

The critical race theory involves the critique of the way in which social structure supports the exploitation and domination of people based on such characteristics as race (Delgado, 1988). These propositions involving critical legal studies are consistent with the critical race theory and illustrate the support that critical legal studies granted to critical race theory. As the critical legal studies movement began to slow in the late 1980s (Unger, 2015), the critical race theory began to grow.

### **Critical Race Theory**

The critical race theory delineates from critical theory due to a specific application of the theory to problems concerning race, most often, those in the venue of law and public policy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). The emergence of the critical race theory began in the United States in the early 1980s. The direction of the critical race theory toward law and public policy research is influenced by the initial work on the topic.

The seminal work on the critical race theory began in the 1980s in response to problematic activities restricting racial diversity in college curriculum at Harvard Law School (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). Students at the school observed a gap in faculty racial diversity crucial for some curriculum at the time (Brayboy, 2005). The conflict



focused on instruction of a course that focused on race relations, where the course instructor would be a White civil rights attorney rather than an African American civil rights attorney (Martinez, 2014). Students believed that the failure of the school to add African American faculty would be influencing learning and the focus of the course, as the previous instructor of the course was an African American professor who left his position at Harvard Law School to become the dean of the University of Oregon's School of Law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). As the school continued to ignore student requests that African American faculty be hired, the critical race theory was developed as a method of understanding, explaining, and critiquing Harvard Law School's failure to hire African American faculty (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007).

In previous studies, researchers used the critical race theory to understand zero tolerance policies and advocate for their elimination. Thompson (2016) considered the case of zero tolerance policy application in the Miami-Dade County public school district. The researcher noted that the application of zero tolerance policy in schools resulted in higher suspension and expulsion rates among students. However, African American students were more likely to experience suspension or expulsion as the structure of the system was such that minority students were disproportionately impacted by zero tolerance policies (Thompson, 2016). Scott et al. (2017) also explored the problem of linking school discipline to policing policies, noting that by doing so, there was specific harm done to students of color. Scott et al. utilized the critical race theory to determine the current approach taken by educators to engage in productive discourse with student about social context, violence, and discipline in schools while supporting law and

order. The researchers noted the persistence of the difficulty that student of color experienced based on systemic violence. Scott et al. suggested a shift from federal zero tolerance requirements to state and local actions to support the civil rights of students, particularly students of color.

Still, the current problem is that a pipeline exists, where the student is then placed on a trajectory where they are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system. J. Thompson (2016) described this issue as a function of systemic racism unequally influencing African American students. The researcher proposed that alternatives to zero tolerance policy should be used, noting that restorative justice would be more appropriate than a zero tolerance policy.

Yosso (2005) described critical race theory as existing at the intersection of race, power, and law, supporting a critical assessment of how these factors relate and are responsible for the continued impact of racism through society's structure. Particularly, the core of critical race theory is understanding how racism continues to permeate through social institutions. Critical race theory continues to remain closely associated with law and public policy, as its initial construction was based on emphasizing the racial elements of critical legal theory (Cole, 2017), as well as the prominence of Bell (1984, 1987, 1988) as a preeminent scholar associated with the theoretical framework. The emergence of critical race theory began in the U.S. in the early 1980s through Derrick Bell's work as a professor at Harvard Law and his subsequent exit for a position at the University of Oregon. The topic's initial work influenced the direction of critical race theory toward law and public policy research.

The seminal work on critical race theory began in the 1980s in response to problematic activities restricting racial diversity in college curriculum at Harvard Law School (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007) and Bell's (1984, 1987) writings following his exit from Harvard Law. Bell's (1984) role as a preeminent scholar supporting the emergence of critical race theory involved academic writing that involved his introspection on his own experience and the experience of other African American individuals in society, where their feelings of exploitation through the power of race was at the core of the discussion. This was the theme of Bell (1984), where Bell reflected on the lack of advancement for African American individuals and that those in power use symbols to assert the existence of African American advancement. Bell (1987) has also addressed the issue of a lack of advancement for African American individuals by addressing African Americans' status, how Whites benefit from civil rights litigation, and how racial limitations on African American individuals exist. Bell (1987) is a text that describes the way that litigation fails to prevent continued exploitation of African American people, supports individuals in power and privilege exploiting African American individuals by acting closely within the law, and the continued disadvantages of African Americanness in the eyes of the law. The text supports the importance of critical race theory to understand how race results in different treatment of individuals under the law.

Bell also supported the importance of critical race theory through discussing the benefits of being White. Bell (1988) discussed White superiority in the U.S., where social structures such as the law and economy became the focus of the discussion. He also described racism in the U.S. as existing from the creation of the nation to the present.

Bell (1988) discussed the conclusion of slavery, a critical point in history, where the interest of Whites was maintained in the concessions made to the previously enslaved African American individuals, and the economic status quo was maintained. He noted the lack of interest in maintaining other conventions and promises made as evidence of a lack of interest by individuals holding power in improving the conditions of the previously enslaved as an example.

These assertions are also supported by Bell et al. (1989) in their discussion of racial justice at the close of the 20th century. Bell et al. discussed the continued existence of differences between African American and White individuals where there is a lack of integration between African American and White culture, and that Whites continue to enforce a lack of equality, but that they are encouraged to because of the structure of law. Still, Bell (1988) contended that racial discrimination continues because of a lack of interest in challenging legal artifacts such as the U.S. Constitution, which he contends is used as a method of supporting the wealth, power, and property of those in power. The assertions made by Bell are further support for continued research using critical race theory as a theoretical framework because, as he contends, power is still used to exploit African American individuals and to mitigate their stake in economic prosperity in the United States.

Bell also used a narrative-style voice to engage in critical race discussion. Bell (1984) reflected Bell on symbols of African American freedom and the lack of advancement that remains common among African American individuals. The reflection took the form of a conversation between Bell and a taxicab driver. In his reflection, he

noted that power insists that racism is not used to reduce African American individuals' control over their life any longer because some African American individuals are now able to obtain success. However, the point is made that by the success of a few African American individuals, most experience because of their race is ignored because of the success obtained by others. Bell (1984) contended that holidays such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day are symbols of what is given to African American individuals, but that the structure of society still prevents African American individuals from holding freedom.

Students at the school observed a gap that emerged in faculty racial diversity that was crucial for some of the curricula at the time (Brayboy, 2005). The conflict focused on the instruction of a course focused on race relations, where the course instructor would be a White civil rights attorney, rather than an African American civil rights attorney (Martinez, 2014). Students believed that the failure of the school to add African American faculty would have an impact on learning and the focus of the course, as the previous instructor of the course was an African American professor who left his position at Harvard Law School to become the dean of the University of Oregon's School of Law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). As the school continued to ignore student requests that African American faculty be hired, critical race theory was developed to understand, explain, and critique problems such as Harvard Law School's failure to hire African American faculty (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). Thus, critical race theory is the consequence of scholars' experience with race, power, and law that the theory is designed to describe as a theoretical framework.

Previous researchers have used critical race theory to understand zero tolerance policies and advocate for their elimination. Thompson (2016) considered the case of zero tolerance policy application in the Miami-Dade County public school district. He noted that a zero tolerance policy in schools should result in higher suspension and expulsion rates among students. However, African American students are more likely to experience suspension or expulsion as the system's structure is such that minority students are disproportionately impacted by zero tolerance policies (Thompson, 2016).

Scott et al. (2017) also explored the problem of linking school discipline to policing policies, noting that there is specific harm done to students of color by doing so. Scott et al. (2017) utilized critical race theory to determine the current approach taken by educators to engage in productive discourse with students about social context, violence, and discipline in schools, while support law and order. They noted the persistence of the difficulty that students of color experienced based on systemic violence. Scott et al. (2017) suggested a shift from federal zero tolerance requirements to state and local actions to support students' civil rights, particularly students of color.

Still, the problem in this current research is that a pipeline exists where the student is then placed on a trajectory where they are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system. Thompson (2016) described this as a function of systemic racism that is unequally impactful to African American students. He proposed that alternatives to zero tolerance policy should be put in place, noting that restorative justice would be more appropriate than zero tolerance policy. This research supports applying the critical race theory in the current research because it highlights the damage that zero tolerance policy

does to African American students. However, it does not address the damage it poses for African American female students.

### **Theory of Change**

The theory of change is a theory that supports establishing a strategy to support social change. Through the theory of change, nonprofit and government organization leaders can design and implement changes through interventions that support positive outcomes for stakeholders (Brest, 2010). The history of the theory of change began in the field of management and organizational studies, with establishing management through objectives and goals satisfied by meeting objectives (Weiss, 1995). The theory of change continued to evolve over time to become associated with developing programs and program theory. Still, the theory of change remained associated with the establishment and successful completion of positive social change (Weiss, 1995). Over the course of time, the theory of change has grown to be associated with several different disciplines, escaping the domain of business and organizational studies to involve other social sciences.

The theory of change functions as a means of establishing new programs that can be implemented for positive benefits, particularly positive social change. The theory of change functions through establishing a series of small steps that shall culminate in achieving a higher order goal, with there being several checkpoints on the path to the accomplishment of goals (Kubisch et al., 1997). The theory of change also includes 3-point quality control criteria designed to consider how well the organization shall accomplish goals. The criteria include the plausibility, feasibility, and testability of

elements proposed for a change initiative (Kubisch et al., 1997). The theory of change functions along a pathway mapped out to achieve long-term goal. The quality criteria designed for the theory of change guides examining whether a strategy shall be implemented. Plausibility is associated with the logic undergirding the objectives and long-term goals where the steps associated with the roadmap will accomplish success. Feasibility is associated with whether the plan will achieve what the designers propose that the plan will achieve. Testability is associated with whether the plan is testable and measurable (Kubisch et al., 1997). Once implemented, the strategy must be monitored and evaluated to determine whether the strategy has worked as designed. Once completed, the implemented plan must then be evaluated to determine whether it accomplished what it was designed to accomplish.

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

The literature review herein involves a review of zero tolerance policies in U.S. schools and how they have disproportionately impacted African American female students. Several studies indicate that African American students continue to experience marginalization and unequal discipline, including suspensions, expulsions, and the criminal justice system (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Johnson, 2017; Thompson, 2016; Young & Butler, 2018). The experience of African American students becomes even more severe in terms of the experience that African American females experience, as they are more likely to be subjected to exclusionary disciplinary actions (Hassan & Carter, 2020). The literature review concludes by synthesizing studies critical to applying zero tolerance policies, especially for African American female students. The literature review supports



further study focused on the application of zero tolerance policies in schools and how these policies impact female students.

### **Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools**

Zero tolerance policies continue to grow as their impact continues to grow in depth. Zero tolerance policies began in the United States in the 1980s in response to the war on drugs (Stahl, 2016). At the time, school campuses were a crucial element of the war on drugs because of the prevalence of drug use among students in the K-12 system and the impact that early drug use would have on students if their drug use remained unchecked (Stahl, 2016). The application of zero tolerance policies continued to grow from drugs to school violence. One of the first major federal policies to take an approach aligned with the purpose of zero tolerance policies and violence was the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994. The Act was designed to support the security of K-12 school campuses. According to the act, a school is compelled to subject a student to immediate expulsion if the student is found to possess a firearm within 1,000 feet of campus (Aldridge, 2018). Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act supported the Gun Free Schools Act (Aldridge, 2018). The nature of the zero tolerance policy continued to change as time passed.

Ruiz (2017) noted that the expansion of zero tolerance policies substantially impacted students over time, especially students of color. Further, findings from zero tolerance policy research noted that in 95% of cases, suspensions were applied to non-violent behaviors where alternative discipline could be applied. These include truancy problems, tardiness, and leaving class, as well as boisterous behavior toward teachers and

dress code violations (Aldridge, 2018; Ruiz, 2017), and 48% of suspensions involved disobedience rather than behaviors that would be violent toward students or faculty (Aldridge, 2018; McNeal, 2016). Sellers and Arrigo (2018) explained the impact of the zero tolerance policy on marginalized youth in the United States, noting that the neoliberal construction of the economy and society had a substantial impact; there was the belief that intervention with marginalized individuals could have a benefit. However, zero tolerance policies are often damaging to the lifestyle of individuals. The prevalence of schools or districts that enforce zero tolerance discipline policies in their documented policies is relatively infrequent. Curran (2019) noted that an explicit zero tolerance policy existed in less than 14% of schools. However, mandatory expulsion policies are in effect in many schools and districts, as well as charter schools.

Some characteristics delineate mandatory expulsion policies from zero tolerance policies worthy of supporting the rationale for including only zero tolerance policies in this research rather than zero tolerance policies and mandatory expulsion policies (Curran, 2016a). One critical difference involves the nature of the rules under these two approaches to discipline. In the case of mandatory expulsion policies, the district or school shall develop their approaches to school discipline, especially regarding the application of suspension and expulsion (Curran, 2016a). These were applied in the case of certain offenses.

Zero tolerance policies were aligned with the law and applied to a broad set of federal statutes while remaining consistent with state law (Curran, 2016b). Sellers and Arrigo (2018) discussed how the application of zero tolerance policies relates to social

control, particularly in the case of marginalized youth, noting that the application of zero tolerance policies remains inconsistent. Curran (2016a) noted that mandatory expulsion was more frequent in urban areas and charter schools, with mandatory expulsion more frequent for minority students than for Caucasian students. These findings indicate that zero tolerance and mandatory expulsion policies impact students. However, the nature of the experience is different in terms of the impact and types of rules applied.

Attitudes toward zero tolerance policies continue to sour. Stahl (2016) discussed the application of zero tolerance policies as mandates that required specific punishments, focusing on the transformation that zero tolerance policies had experienced, where they encompassed more offenses and are used with greater frequency. Although adults do not support students taking drugs or guns to school, the vision of zero tolerance policies is that the changes applied over time require that school faculty and administrators apply harsh, one-size-fits-all punishments. Stahl proposed that significant events, such as the Columbine High School shooting, motivated increased severity and greater restrictions on students.

Zero tolerance policies are detrimental to student development, research shows. Although they were originally constructed with the safety and security of learners in mind, the nature of the policies has grown robust enough that they are detrimental to all students' intellectual growth and development. Marginalized students shall experience substantially greater impacts because of applying zero tolerance policies (Alnaim, 2018). Alnaim (2018) noted that zero tolerance policies had originally been developed to support teachers with the discipline of students in the classroom and the removal of students from

the school who posed a threat or danger to other students. The goal of the policy was to establish safe learning environments. However, as time progressed, applying the zero tolerance policy became more frequent and more subjective (Aldridge, 2018). Alnaim (2018) noted that because of the application of zero tolerance policies according to several different activities that had not been applied before, students who should not receive disciplinary action would be suspended or expelled. Students with learning or emotional disabilities and those with behavioral disorders became predisposed to expulsions and suspensions. These findings are further evidence of the damage that a zero tolerance policy can hold in the development of students.

### **Zero Tolerance Policies and Race**

Zero tolerance policies represent a form of exclusionary school discipline that functions in such a manner that the outcomes are racially disproportionate (Young & Butler, 2018) and place a student on the trajectory toward the criminal justice system (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Rodriguez, 2015; Thompson, 2016). The impact of race on the likelihood of disciplinary actions being taken toward a student is 2.58 times greater for African American students than White students, with the disproportionate impact remaining constant throughout the K-12 system. (Young & Butler, 2018). These findings coincide with a prior study by researchers utilizing the critical race theory in education focused on understanding the barriers that prevent moving toward racial equity. The researchers found White fragility and color-blind culture silencing racial talk, contesting definitions obscuring the racialized nature of the problem and the impact of zero tolerance policies where restorative justice could be successful (Wilson et al., 2020). The

failure to address these factors has supported the continued problem of disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in K-12 schools.

Zero tolerance policies continue to grow in size and scope as attitudes toward discipline continue to shift in the direction of discipline. Aldridge (2018) discussed the issues of criminalization and discrimination in schools, focusing on the experience of African American girls. The researchers noted that U.S. African American girls faced greater punishment and discipline in school settings, reflecting on statistics reported for the 2011 to 2012 school year. African American males were three times as likely to receive a suspension as White peers; African American females were six times as likely to receive a suspension in New York City schools, and African American females were found to be expelled 53 times more frequently (Aldridge, 2018). These findings were supported by Young and Butler (2018), who found that African American students are more likely to be disciplined than White students. Johnson (2017) also discussed using zero tolerance policies in schools, noting several differences between African American and White students. Johnson found that although African American students are only 19% of preschool students, they were 47% of out-of-school suspensions and had a three times greater risk of receiving an out-of-school suspension than their White peers. These statistics describe the problem of African American girls receiving discipline under zero tolerance policies as occurring substantially more frequently than their White peers or even their African American male cohorts. Hence, the frequency supports the urgency of investigating the problem.

A critical element of the impact of zero tolerance school discipline on females is how it can impact low-income mothers of students in disciplinary alternative education programs. Dunning-Lozano (2018) described how the fallout of zero tolerance programs could also negatively impact the parents of children experiencing discipline under zero tolerance policies. Dunning-Lozano discovered that African American and Latina mothers experienced a form of discipline, as they faced disciplinary practices along with their children. These practices included participating in requests for parent-staff meetings, parents attending mandatory orientation sessions, and addressing the logistics of their children attending night classes (Dunning-Lozano, 2018). These findings were especially applicable to understanding the current research because White parents did not have these secondary disciplines applied. Rather, the zero tolerance policy impact was related to the parents' races, classes, and genders and was not neutrally applied to all parents. These findings were important because they exposed the degree to which zero tolerance programs could influence children and their families.

The problem of a difference in zero tolerance policy application may be linked to differences in zero tolerance laws. Curran (2019) examined the application of zero tolerance discipline policies, focusing on differences in racial discipline gaps. Curran found that while zero tolerance laws can result in a difference in the percentage of frequency at which zero tolerance discipline is applied, principal perceptions of problem behaviors appear to remain consistent. In addition, Curran discovered that laws are a significant predictor of increased suspension rates for African Americans than Whites. These findings illustrate a significant difference in the treatment of African American

students over White students where a zero tolerance policy is applied. Hence, understanding the impact of the zero tolerance policy on African American students, especially African American female students, can support understanding the problem with greater specificity.

The problem of systemic racism in school discipline practices is not constrained to schools that are primarily White or where there is a mix of student races. Camacho and Krezmien (2020) examined the implementation of school discipline policies concerning the suspension practices of schools. The researchers found that schools with higher percentages of African American students had a greater risk of student suspension. As the number of African American students in a school increase, so does the proportion of students that will be suspended from school. Thus, researchers posited using some theoretical frameworks as a successful means of transforming the problem from one where the problem would continue to gain momentum to one where there was a lower likelihood in which students were disciplined using exclusionary measures, such as suspension or expulsion (Okilwa & Robert, 2017).

A common theme in zero tolerance application in schools is that minorities are more likely to be disciplined under a zero tolerance policy than White students. Curran (2016a, 2016b) discussed this difference as one of racial disproportionality in discipline. He found that zero tolerance policies are responsible for a significant difference in the application of punishment, where racial disparities play a role in the difference in the use of discipline, particularly in the case of expulsions. Curran (2016a, 2016b) is supported by Ramsay-Smith (2016), who found differences in application and outcomes for

students in schools where zero tolerance policies are applied and not applied. Race is a crucial factor in applying zero tolerance policy and must be included in further research exploring zero tolerance policy outcomes and application.

### **Criticism of Zero Tolerance Policy Application in Schools**

The current body of research between 2016 to 2020 is abundant, with studies that challenge using zero tolerance policies. A crucial problem with zero tolerance policy application in schools is associated with the inconsistent nature. The zero tolerance policy can result in harsh and unfair punishment for students, especially minority students (Ramsay-Smith, 2016). Ramsay-Smith (2016) noted that zero tolerance policies were often vague and inconsistent in the application. However, they can result in harsh outcomes for students when subjectivity is involved, and the policies are partly responsible for poor relationships between students and teachers.

Just as damaging to students can be applying a zero tolerance policy in the classroom strictly, entirely consistently. DeMitchell and Hambacher (2016) explored zero tolerance policies and their approach to threats, even those that are not genuine. The researchers noted that the application of the zero tolerance policy was used in cases of innocuous behavior such as students mimicking the shooting of a gun with their fingers and making laser noises as being grounds for discipline. The disproportionate response to incidents creates a scenario where a zero tolerance policy becomes detrimental to the classroom because of the disruptions that could be possible for students whose infractions were minor (DeMitchell & Hambacher, 2016).



Ramsay-Smith (2016) examined the difference in student perceptions of discrimination, student-teacher relationships, and student aspirations between schools where there was the application of zero tolerance school policies and those where there was no zero tolerance policy in place. The findings supported a difference in the three factors of student perceptions of discrimination, student-teacher relationships, and student aspirations, where zero tolerance schools were significantly lower. These differences were further magnified and stronger in cases where respondents were LGBPQ, students of color, or in special education. These findings contribute to the evidence that zero tolerance policies can have a detrimental impact on several aspects of student education and support this research focusing on students of color in zero tolerance schools.

Attitudes toward zero tolerance policies continue to move in the direction of limited or constraining their application in some form. One way to reduce the application of zero tolerance policies is to increase educators' role in preventing student suspension or expulsion. Moreno and Scaletta (2018) noted the importance of moving away from zero tolerance policies through educator preparedness. The case was based on the outcome of Illinois Senate Bill 100. The bill restricted the application of zero tolerance discipline to the point where it would not be possible to address student behavior. The solution was based on greater professional development for faculty to achieve greater classroom management. Moreno and Scaletta (2018) supported the approach taken by the Illinois State Senate because the rationale for suspension and expulsion was more frequently based on subjectivity rather than because students were found with contraband. This finding was consistent with Ruiz (2017), who noted that most

expulsions were not because of violence, but because of other issues that could be addressed with alternative disciplinary methods. These findings support a critical approach to exploring the problem of zero tolerance policy application. However, some research has supported focusing on female minorities.

Other research also supports reducing the application of zero tolerance policies in schools to improve student outcomes. Lacoë and Steinberg (2018) noted that many districts have concluded that applying zero tolerance policies has been too extreme and have committed to actions such as rolling back zero tolerance discipline. Like Aldridge (2018) and Ruiz (2017), Lacoë and Steinberg (2018) found that using zero tolerance discipline in nonviolent scenarios was unproductive. Reducing the zero tolerance policy not to include nonviolent offenses would decrease suspensions (Lacoë & Steinberg, 2018). However, Lacoë and Steinberg (2018) also found that truancy increased while Math and English achievement declined. Based on these findings, care should be taken when transforming the code for disciplinary action to reduce the role of zero tolerance policies.

The problem of zero tolerance policies appears to disproportionately impact minorities, especially female minorities (Aldridge, 2018). Therefore, research should be critical of the application of zero tolerance policies and the intersectional nature of how they impact racialized minorities and female students. The frequency of zero tolerance policy application in the U.S. K-12 school system continues to rise. Students are arrested, suspended, restrained by police, and arrested by police in growing proportions (Rambo, 2020). However, the proportion of students is not balanced. Rambo (2020) noted

significant disproportionality in the increase, where minorities would experience outcomes of greater severity than Caucasian peers, supporting the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline. Rodriguez (2015) also discussed the issue of the preschool-to-prison pipeline, where early interaction with police officers can support the establishment of a longer-term relationship with police and eventually prison. The reason is that the students become accustomed to the criminal justice system based on their interactions.

Some research supports alternatives to discipline that could be useful in reducing the frequency at which African American students are subject to discipline under zero tolerance rules to break the pattern observed in the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is a trend in which students who receive exclusionary discipline in schools will subsequently be subject to interaction with the criminal justice system (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Rodriguez, 2015; Thompson, 2016). Woods (2020) examined the use of a juvenile detention alternative, noting the high frequency of student arrests and referrals for arrest. Woods noted a disproportionate number of in-school arrests and referrals for African American students, further establishing the school-to-prison pipeline among the northwest Georgia middle schools included in the research. Woods found that African American students represented 89.4% of the students arrested or referred to juvenile proceedings, but that by applying an alternative discipline model, only 6.8% of students occurred following the implementation of the model (Woods, 2020). These findings support the importance of implementing alternatives to zero tolerance discipline in schools to reduce the frequency in which students are subjected to exclusion from the school system and that they would be subject to criminal proceedings. Woods (2020) also

supported implementing restorative practices as a discipline and behavior correction method in the school system.

Skrzypek et al. (2020) explored restorative practices from students' perspectives. They noted that using restorative practices was a promising alternative to zero tolerance policies because of their non-punitive nature. There are some limitations to the application of restorative practices. Skrzypek et al. found significant differences in the feelings toward restorative practices between male and female students, where African American male students believed that restorative practices supported the use of nonviolent problem-solving skills. In contrast, African American female students did not support restorative practices as a method of learning to solve problems without violence or changing their behavior. Still, the use of restorative practices was important because it would promote communication and the expression of thoughts and feelings among African American male and female students (Skrzypek et al., 2020). In addition to African American students supporting restorative justice practices, teachers preferred the use of restorative justice in favor of using zero tolerance policies. Monell (2018) examined the use of zero tolerance and restorative justice policies in the classroom. The researcher found that teachers supported restorative justice practices. Teachers preferred a humane means of dealing with disciplinary problems rather than methods that would punitively discipline students or result in students experiencing discipline that was largely detrimental to their development and growth. The inconsistency in how African American girls are disciplined compared to peers or even how African American boys are disciplined is a possible motivating factor.

The use of restorative justice instead of zero tolerance policies has been a common theme of several studies where the negative impact of exclusionary discipline was a motivating factor for the research. Wilson et al. (2020) explored the issue of disproportionate discipline in an urban school district, reflecting on race's role in the differences in disciplinary behaviors. Wilson et al. were critical of using zero tolerance policies in urban schools, where there is racial disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions. Students of color experienced most of these disciplinary actions. They noted that there was an alternative restorative justice program present in the school. However, administrators and faculty remained dependent on exclusionary discipline methods. In related research, Kyere et al. (2020) explored the implementation of alternatives to zero tolerance policies and the use of suspensions as a disciplinary measure. Kyere et al. noted that zero tolerance policies were created to support safe school environments, but their implementation had resulted in an uneven number of students being excluded from school. Their findings support the impact of zero tolerance policies as being far-reaching and robust, where students are not the only individuals impacted by the policies. Zero tolerance policies negatively impact their families, social workers, and advocates. These findings further support the implementation of restorative justice practices.

The application of restorative justice should be aimed at disrupting the current paradigm where African American children are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system. Schiff (2018) explored the use of restorative justice to break the current trend with the school-to-prison pipeline. Schiff described zero tolerance policies and related policies that result in harsh exclusionary discipline as having a detrimental impact

on the development of students, noting that there is an abundance of research that notes that there is a significantly greater rate of African American and other racialized minority students being suspended or expelled than White students. Schiff supported restorative justice because it could reduce the number of African American and other racialized minority students continuing to enter the school-to-prison pipeline. Schiff noted that restorative justice could be used to break the trend of institutional racism and punitive discipline while overcoming racial disciplinary inequity. There is some criticism of the application of restorative justice. O'Brien and Nygreen (2020) noted that when viewing a shift from zero tolerance to restorative justice in the school environment, the extent to which it was disruptive would be relatively limited because the punitive nature of how schools maintain control and order could persist—accepting restorative justice results in an inadequate transformation to public policy regarding discipline in education.

The K-12 public school experience of African American girls is substantially different from that of African American boys (Wun, 2016). Wun (2016) discussed the experience of African American girls and non-African American girls of color as one where their intersectional experience is one where they experience violence and discipline that results in feelings of anger and resistance to violence. The intersectional nature of the violence shapes their perceptions, and personal experiences lead to greater anger (Wun, 2016). Hardaway et al. (2019) discussed the experience of African American girls and women, reviewing their experiences in the P to 20 education system (the preschool system through college). Hardaway et al. relied on an African American feminist theoretical lens; thus, their discussion was consistent with the findings from

Wun (2016) and Skrzypek et al. (2020). Hardaway et al. (2019) noted substantial differences in response to violence experienced by African American girls and women. The response to violence performed by African American girls and women exposed inconsistencies that revictimized African American girls and women at all levels of education. Hence, Skrzypek et al. (2020) found differences in how restorative practices impacted African American boys and girls from the lack of agency that African American girls experienced and their perceptions that they must resist violence, resulting in their different views on restorative practice.

Other alternative measures can result in students having a lower likelihood of disciplinary outcomes. One such measure is the use of same-race teachers. Lindsay and Hart (2017) discovered that exposure to same-race teachers positively impacts student disciplinary outcomes among African American students. Their research, performed using secondary data collected in North Carolina, involved examining whether African American students were less likely to experience exclusionary discipline (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Exclusionary discipline in their study included out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, and expulsion (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). They found that by matching teachers and students by race, there were reduced rates of exclusionary discipline for African American students and that the outcome was consistent among students at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels of public schools and was consistent among male and female students (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

Zero tolerance policies can have a detrimental impact on the health and wellness of students; therefore, alternative solutions are necessary to support positive outcomes for

students with detrimental behaviors. Rambo (2020) was critical of applying zero tolerance policies in public schools because of the detrimental impact they can have on an individual's future and because there are alternative methods of discipline that successfully address the behavior. One method of addressing the problem is restorative justice (Rambo, 2020). Restorative justice allows an offending student to correct their behaviors and confront the victimization that may have occurred because of their behaviors. In addition, restorative justice can support change that will reduce exclusion in schools and the marginalization that students become subject, partly because of zero tolerance policies (Rambo, 2020). The application of restorative justice can have negative implications. Lustick (2017) discussed the use of restorative justice in small schools with locked-down buildings. The researcher noted that the use of restorative practices is responsible for replicating racial inequality, where discipline was partly dependent on an association with zero tolerance policies.

Related is the use of alternative disciplinary features. Crosby et al. (2018) discussed using an alternative disciplinary intervention called the Monarch Room (MR). The MR is a method of discipline that involves the recognition of trauma among African American female students. The program was found to have positive perceptions among students and increased use. Lustick (2017) stated that these policies are responsible for improving school climate; they function as a measure that further legitimizes the zero tolerance policy. The use of restorative justice instead of a zero tolerance policy is also supported as a strategy to reduce the number of African American girls suspended or expelled from school (Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020). The following section shall



further discuss the use of zero tolerance policy in the discipline of African American female students.

### ***Criticism of Zero Tolerance Policy Use on African American Female Students***

The effect of zero tolerance policies in the K-12 system remains the most significant for African American girls. Camera (2017) noted that the problem extended to preschool, where African American girls constituted 20% of students enrolled, but 54% of the girls were suspended from preschool. Clark-Louque and Sullivan (2020) explored the discipline that African American girls received in school, noting that the treatment of African American girls was inequitable and exclusionary because of institutional and systemic factors. Institutional racism, intersectionality, and the stereotypes attached to African American femininity were noted as crucial factors that result in African American females experiencing greater zero tolerance discipline than other peers.

Research supports the existence of a phenomenon where African American girl students are subjected to a push-out from the school system where their retention is not a priority. Poole (2019) described the existence of push-out in the school systems of Pennsylvania through school disciplinary policies inextricably linked to the criminal justice system. However, exclusionary disciplines, such as suspension and expulsion, are prioritized (Morris, 2016). Martin and Smith (2017) discussed the discipline experienced by African American girl students, finding that even when conditions such as family factors, school quality, and teacher quality are controlled for, there are significant differences between African American girls and their peers in terms of dropout rates. Martin and Smith noted that subjective discipline and informal reports of discipline

problems substantially influenced African American girls to drop out of school. These findings contribute further evidence that while not all students may become victims of the school-to-prison pipeline, there are common outcomes that result in students leaving school because of the difference in treatment they experience.

The problems of push-out and the school-to-prison pipeline remain significant as they disparate impact African American girls. White (2017) examined the problem in which African American girls remain more likely to experience interaction with the criminal justice system or that they are more likely to be removed from school. White discussed the problem as relating, in part, to the stigma that follows African American girls. The researcher noted that African American girls are often perceived as defiant, unruly, unsophisticated, and have poor attitudes. The stigma that African American girls experience results in differential treatment in the classroom by teachers and harsh judgment and punishment in the criminal justice system. White noted that these factors place African American girls in a position distinct from African American boys, but the repercussions were different regarding how they impacted the education and opportunity of African American girls later in life. Although African American girls experience the negative stigma that follows the intersection of their gender and race, they also experience violence and criminalization because of how the classroom is structured. Hines and Wilmot (2018) described the school as a dangerous, hyperviolent space for African American students, especially African American girls, because of the impact of racial microaggression and anti-African Americanness. Hines and Wilmot (2018) described the experience of being an African American girl in school as one where they

“continue to be adultified, criminalized, and spirit-murdered by educators who enact racially discriminatory school disciplinary policies” (p. 62). Hence, the experience that African American girls experience in the public school system is one where their identity is formed in a largely negative manner, and their social development is one where they have been stigmatized and marginalized based on the school system's structure.

The problem is in-depth and multifaceted, with some differences according to the nature of color. Blake et al. (2017) described colorism as a factor that impacts the difference in exclusionary disciplinary action. The researchers noted that although the differences between White girls and African American girls in the likelihood of exclusionary discipline are significant, there was another level of how the system reproduced racism. Blake et al. (2017) found that even when individual and school-level characteristics, student-teacher relationships, discipline history, and school size and type were controlled, African American females with darker complexions had two times the likelihood of receiving out-of-school suspensions than White females. The difference between light complexion African American females and White females was insignificant.

The impact of zero tolerance policies is especially detrimental to African American female students, not only because of the frequency at which the policy is applied and the greater and more detrimental damage the policy has on African American females but also how the policies work to reduce the personhood of African American females systemically. Clark-Louque and Sullivan (2020) noted that factors such as institutional racism, intersectionality, and stereotyping are each factor that holds a role in

the damage done by zero tolerance policies. Morris (2016) discussed the issue of cultural belief, policy, and practices as factors contributing to the criminalization and dehumanization of African American girls in U.S. schools. The researcher noted that African American girls experienced a degrading by several institutions, such as the judicial and education system, and African American girls were misunderstood and highly judged by individuals who held power over the trajectory of their lives.

The impact of how this power is wielded is substantial. Morris (2016) noted a crucial reason for the expeditious growth of the number of African American girls in the juvenile justice system. Morris supported the existence of systemic problems unique to African American girls' experiences in education, as zero tolerance policies function in such a way that they linked the possible trajectory of the lives of African American girls to whether they would be subject to the experience of the juvenile justice system. The discussion illustrates the importance of understanding the unique nature of how zero tolerance policy relates to the education experience of African American girls. I sought to address the gap in the literature by conducting this study, for which I used critical race theory as part of the theoretical framework.

Prior research includes studies where the critical and derivative theories are associated with critical theory to explore the effect of zero tolerance policies on African American girls. Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) explored the use of a zero tolerance policy through the theoretical lens of critical race feminism to understand how school discipline differs for African American girl students from other students. Although African American girls are more likely to experience expulsion or suspension, Hines-

Datiri and Carter Andrews described zero tolerance policies as an exclusionary discipline that African American girls experienced with greater frequency than other female peers. Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews identified the difference in discipline between African American girls and other females as detrimental to developing African American girl students' racial and gender identities while perpetuating the perception that anti-African American discipline existed. Hassan and Carter (2020) supported the findings of Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020), noting the disproportionate discipline of African American female students compared to White female students in the K-12 system. Camera (2017) and Clark-Louque and Sullivan (2020) found that the discipline of African American girl students in comparison with other peers occurred significantly more frequently, even at the level of preschool education. Hence, the systemic nature of the difference in treatment between African American girl students and peers appears to begin at the earliest point of education, continuing throughout public school education.

U.S. African American girls' experiences in K-12 public schools appear to contain anti-African American racism and punitive punishment. Wun (2018) discussed the problem of punishment in schools, noting that race and racism remain at the center of the treatment that African American girl students experience. Wun noted uneven rates of suspension, expulsion, and arrest, stating that these discrepancies remained frequent; young African American girls experienced punishment in the school system. Although Wun noted that African American girls were structurally vulnerable to punishment and discipline, they were subject to these by adults and peers. Therefore, the social experience of schooling for African American girls is one where their experience is anti-African

American, and how they are treated frequently involves punitive punishment measures. Similarly, Wun et al. (2020) discussed the role of school, criminal justice system, and school-to-prison pipeline in establishing anti-African American girlhoods. Critical race feminism was utilized as the theoretical framework for the study, where the researchers noted that the school system's structure resulted in an institution that marginalized African American girls, especially those placed in alternative schools. According to Hines and Young, alternative schools lacked academic and socioemotional support for African American girls. Hence, their removal from traditional schools was supported by the rules of schools and resulted in placement in a learning institution where they were less likely to be successful and more likely to be marginalized than before.

The school-to-prison pipeline is the end-product of the current paradigm of school discipline for several African American female students, where zero tolerance policies act as a legal mechanism to support the systematic victimization of African American female students. Hassan and Carter (2020) described the school-to-prison pipeline as the phenomenon of students being pushed out of public schools and into the juvenile or adult criminal justice system. Hassan and Carter noted that the rate at which this situation occurred was significantly greater for African American female than White female students in the K-12 public school system. African American female students were disproportionately suspended compared to White female students and disproportionately arrested (Hassan & Carter, 2020). Roberson (2019) supported these findings, defining race and gender as significant predictors of whether a student would be found to have violated zero tolerance policies. Clark-Louque and Sullivan (2020) noted that African

American girls experienced suspension and expulsion at higher rates than other peers, contributing to the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline; however, alternatives (e.g., restorative practices) existed, but they were not implemented.

In addition to the school-to-prison pipeline impacting the development of African American females, its frequency is disturbing as well. Poole (2019) discussed the role of the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of African American girl identity in the structure of public schools in Pennsylvania. The result of policies is that African American girls are pushed out of schools and into the criminal justice system (Poole, 2019). The school-to-prison pipeline problem is also important because African American females shall be suspended or expelled with greater frequency than White females (Hassan & Carter, 2020). Hill (2018) elaborated on the disparity in the frequency of out-of-school suspensions between African American girls and White girls. Hill stated that African American girls received out-of-school suspensions in seven times more frequent cases than White girls, and African American girls were the fastest-growing demographic in terms of arrest and incarceration. Johnson (2017) also supported the role of the school-to-prison pipeline as a phenomenon more frequent among African American female students than other students. The critical race theory was used to support exploring this problem with greater depth while critiquing the system in which the problem existed to determine possible solutions that could result in positive outcomes for African American female students.

## Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 included an exhaustive review of the extant literature on zero tolerance policy application in the K-12 U.S. school system. The review focused on implementing the policy on African American students, particularly African American female students. The review began by describing the theoretical framework, where the theoretical including the critical race theory and theory of change. The review of literature on the theoretical foundation of the study also included some discussion of the critical theory and critical legal studies because of their roles in the lineage of the critical race theory (Bernal, 2002; Brayboy, 2005; Brincat, 2016; Cole, 2017). The literature review continued with a review of research primarily from the 2016 to 2020 period involving the zero tolerance policy and its impact on African American students (Aldridge, 2018; Alnaim, 2018; Camacho & Krezmien, 2020; Camera, 2017), especially African American female students (Blake et al., 2017; Crosby et al., 2018; Curran, 2016a, 2016b). The findings from the reviewed literature supported further research on the topic of the zero tolerance policy and its impact on African American female students.

Chapter 3 includes the methodology used for this qualitative phenomenological study. The chapter commences with the research design and rationale for the study. The chapter continues with a description of the role of the researcher. The role of the researcher was critical, as this study was qualitative. Chapter 3 continues with a description of the methodology, entailing the participant selection of the study, as well as the instrumentation, recruitment, participation, and data collection procedures. The



chapter concludes with a description of the thematic analysis in the data analysis plan and addresses the issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures in the study.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the impact that zero tolerance policies had on African American girls. I used phenomenological research design conventions to explore the role of zero tolerance policies in the discipline of African American girls after suspension or expulsion from school. The research results provide information that stakeholders, school administrators, and policy makers could use when determining guidelines for zero tolerance policies and the use of expulsion and suspension as punishment. The current literature addresses the impact of zero tolerance policies on African American girls and how the misuse or overuse of the policies impacted their lives. However, the literature rarely includes a firsthand account of how their lives were impacted. This study is important because it explores how zero tolerance policies have unintended consequences and reach beyond their original purposes. Furthermore, the lived experiences of African American girls humanize the phenomenon beyond statistical data.

Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of this study's research method and design. The chapter begins with a description of the research method and the role of the researcher. It then continues with a description of the methodology. The methodology includes the selection logic for participants; instrumentation; and procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. In the chapter, I also present the plan for thematic data analysis. The chapter concludes with discussion of issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I sought to answer the following research question: How does suspension or expulsion as a result of zero tolerance policies impact African American girls in Texas schools? The phenomenon at the core of this study was the use of exclusionary disciplinary action toward African American female students. In previous research on exclusionary disciplinary action use, researchers found that African American female students receive suspensions and expulsions from school in greater frequencies than male students and students from other races/ethnicities (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Johnson, 2017; Thompson, 2016; Young & Butler, 2018). The findings also indicate that African American female students received disciplinary action in more cases than other students. Therefore, the exclusionary disciplinary experiences of African American female students differ from other students.

I used a qualitative phenomenological research method and design to explore the study phenomenon. A qualitative phenomenological research method and design were selected because of the focus on the lived experiences of people in a group (Paley, 2016). Therefore, there was consistency between the purpose of the research, which involving understanding African American female students' lived experiences of receiving exclusionary disciplinary action, and the research tradition of phenomenological research.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as the researcher was to interview and personally interact with participants. The participants engaged in semistructured interviews that I conducted. Questions and follow-up questions that were previously unplanned might have resulted in

changes to the research reflected in the data analysis. Therefore, data collection was influenced to some degree by my preconceived notions and unconscious bias.

I also explored both verbal and nonverbal communication to confirm that participants remained capable of participating in the research. The topic might have resulted in participants reflecting on traumatic events. Hence, as the researcher I needed to observe participants' reactions beyond the responses given in the study.

I did not have any personal or professional relationships that could threaten my role as the researcher. I did not have a position of power over participants. Biases on my part could have affected my conduct of the study and interpretation of findings, which would have constituted critical limitations to the study. One such bias was the belief that African American female students who received exclusionary discipline often did not deserve the discipline. I also had experience working with young African American women who had experienced suspension or expulsion because of zero tolerance policies. This experience could be the cause of bias in this research. To manage the potential for bias, I recorded my feelings in a reflexivity journal. Using a reflexivity journal allowed me to make conscious notes on my preconceived notions and biases and mitigate their impact where possible. No other ethical issues appeared present.

### **Methodology**

The Methodology section of this chapter includes a description of the research strategy. The section covers the logic for participant selection; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and the plan for data analysis. Participant selection included using purposive sampling. Instrumentation

included using semistructured interviews and a journal for recording reflexivity. The procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection entailed recruiting African American female former students through social media and using semistructured, face-to-face interviews to collect data. Thematic analysis in the tradition of Braun and Clarke (2006) and relying on coding suggestions by Saldana (2016) was used to interpret the gathered data.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The population for this research included African American females who attended high school in the United States. This research included African American female students from the local treatment organization and county probation department. The sampling strategy utilized was purposive, convenience sampling. Individuals on probation are not protected individuals. Thus, the inclusion of individuals on probation for research, such as this study, is acceptable. The treatment organization and county probation department was selected because these agencies served women who fit the inclusion and exclusion criteria of this study. I was not involved with these agencies. Leaders of both agencies provided consent for the completion of this project. I used a purposive, convenience sampling approach to ensure that inclusion was restricted to participants who were African American female former high school students who had been expelled or suspended. Participant criteria were based on the focus of the study remaining on African American female former students who had experienced suspension or expulsion.

Prior researchers have found that African American female students have distinct experiences from other students. They are more likely to experience exclusionary disciplinary action such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion (Aldridge, 2018; McNeal, 2016; Ruiz, 2017). Therefore, this research was focused on understanding their lived experiences with these disciplinary actions. When potential participants contacted me, I used social media to advertise the current study. Interested students contacted me using the contact information on advertising materials. I had a brief conversation with them to determine whether they fit the eligibility criteria for the study. The number of participants was also decided by reaching the point of data saturation.

### **Instrumentation**

The primary instrument used for data collection in this study was the interview protocol. The interview protocol consisted of semistructured interview questions. I based the semistructured interview questions on the study's theoretical framework and research question. The question was developed based on prior literature on exclusionary discipline for African American female students and the utilization of the theoretical frameworks of the critical race theory and theory of change. The instrument supported videotaped data collection coded in the data analysis process.

A reflexivity journal was another form of instrumentation in the data collection process. Reflexivity journals support data collection and analysis, especially when a researcher is completing a qualitative, phenomenological study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I

used the reflexivity journal notes to support coding and establish themes during thematic analysis.

The interview protocol and the reflexivity journal were sufficient for collecting data for this study's research question. The research question involved understanding the lived experiences of those interview participants with receiving exclusionary discipline. According to Smith and Bowers-Brown (2010), other forms of data, such as archived data or observation, could not sufficiently result in understanding their perceptions. Focus groups might have possibly supported understanding their perceptions. However, an individual interview using semistructured questions would have resulted in a greater focus on individual experience. Further, focus groups would have resulted in less privacy, and the topic was sensitive (Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010).

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

I asked former students who fit the criteria and who were interested in participating in the study to contact me. Selected participants took part in an interview. Each participant participated in only one face-to-face interview, but each was contacted following data analysis to complete member checking. The length of interviews was 15-20 minutes. Data were recorded by using Open Broadcaster Software. Participants received a \$10 Walmart gift card for participation in the interview process.

Recruitment for interview participants began by posting information about the study and sending flyers with a call for participants to the local treatment organization and county probation department. My contact information was included in the post and in the flyers. I arranged a meeting with interested students and their parent or guardian to

describe what was required. The interview dates and times were arranged if the former student was selected for participation. The selection was based on whether the former student fit the criteria for participation and the number of participants already selected for the study.

I continued recruitment until the predefined number of participants was reached. If the predefined number was not reached or additional participants were needed to reach the point of data saturation, additional posts were made on social media. I thanked participants exiting the study and provided them with my contact information and that of a therapist, in case the participant required any further information or experienced traumatic feelings as a result of their study participation.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The plan for data analysis involved thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis were utilized in this research, and coding was performed following the suggestions from Saldana (2016) regarding coding and analysis relying on computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Saldana described the procedures and mechanics for coding and how coding should be supported through CAQDAS. Hence, Saldana wrote a manual about how coding should supplement the description of the thematic analysis associated with the research question. Although coding in this research occurred by manual coding of interviews, further analysis of data and codes occurred using a CAQDAS program designed specifically for qualitative analysis. NVivo 12.0 was used to support data analysis. In cases where discrepant findings were found, discrepancies were noted but not speculated upon in the write-up of



findings. However, speculation on reflection of any prior associated literature was used to support greater understanding in discrepant cases.

The first phase of data analysis involved preliminary coding. Preliminary codes were established by reading over the transcripts of interviews multiple times. Codes were established based on the transcripts and recorded in the reflexivity journal. A description of codes and their sources were recorded in the journal as well (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Saldana (2016) supported researchers using personal judgment when coding but noted that codes could be applied to just about any data found through the analysis process and should be performed in conjunction with the angle through which the researcher sought to understand the phenomenon. Therefore, the theoretical framework of the critical race studies and theory of change functioned as the theoretical lens through which coding occurred. Reflecting on the codes and the data at this point supported the affirmation that the point of data saturation was reached.

The second phase of thematic analysis involved establishing a comprehensive list of codes specifically related to the research question. Although coding was done in the first phase, additional review to establish a concise list of codes occurred in the second phase. In this phase, the initial codes related to thematic analysis in the study occurred, where initial, similar codes were combined with extensive similarity. At this point, greater definition and meaning were applied to codes, and the codes had greater relationships with the research question rather than existing independent of them.

The third phase involved combining codes into themes. At this point, the codes were collapsed into themes that encapsulated some elements of the phenomenon through

the lens of the theoretical framework and angle of the research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that themes must be described in terms of what they meant, how they fit together, and what appeared missing. The reflexivity journal should include notes on interpreting codes and how they were combined (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Saldana (2016) noted that collapsing codes into themes involved deep synthesizing codes and how they fit together. Saldana noted that subthemes might also emerge. These subthemes were recorded in the reflexivity journal.

The fourth phase involved reflecting on the themes and data fit to understand the overarching theoretical perspective. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that analysis at this point involved understanding the patterns underlying themes and how they fit together while understanding points at which themes were incomplete or inconsistent. The fourth phase was, to an extent, a point at which quality checks occurred. Saldana (2016) supported researchers going back through their data and recoding and recategorizing if necessary to support thorough data analysis. This phase was recorded in the reflexivity journal in terms of the notes needed for understanding themes and how themes fit with codes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The entry in the reflexivity journal was used to understand how themes fit together with codes and note how the themes supported a data-driven response to research questions (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). After Phase 4, I was prepared to describe the patterns underlying how themes in the data fit together (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 5 involved defining themes and showing how themes were salient. Braun and Clarke (2006) pointed to Phase 5 as the point where comprehensive analysis

occurred, involving the analysis of themes and how they supported understanding the description of the phenomenon by interview participants. Themes in the data were described in the reflexivity journal with greater specificity at this point (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The product was a comprehensive analysis of the data.

The final phase was the point at which the findings were prepared for a write-up, and the interpretation of the data was reviewed by member checking. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that member checking must be performed after analysis to confirm that interpretations of data by the primary investigator are consistent with the meaning described by interview participants. Saldana (2016) supported using member checking to support the validity of findings. Thus, interview participants were contacted and asked to participate in member checking to confirm an accurate representation of what they meant to say. If not, changes might have occurred through recoding and recategorizing (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following member checking, I prepared the findings of the research. A description of theme decisions and contributions follows.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability remained especially critical in this qualitative research. They were used to support the internal and external validity of research and the nature of reliability and objectivity. There were several strategies used to support addressing these issues of trustworthiness. Some strategies were connected across different trustworthiness issues, but they were each crucial to the qualitative research process.

**Credibility**

Multiple strategies supported achieving credibility in this research. The study's internal validity was accomplished by using strategies, such as member checking, saturation, and peer review. This qualitative phenomenological research involved interviewing participants who had experienced a similar phenomenon, but their responses to questions associated with understanding their perceptions of their experience could have differed. The objective was to reach the point where further data collection would likely result in redundant responses, which was the point of data saturation (see Guest et al., 2020). Predicting the saturation point was difficult and could never be done with complete precision. However, qualitative research experts suggested a range for qualitative data collection (Guest et al., 2020). Therefore, the predetermined number of interviews was 14, but an iterative review of responses was used to support changing the number of interviews to meet the point of data saturation.

This phenomenological research used Braun and Clarke's (2006) strategy for thematic analysis. I completed the analysis using member checking. Member checking was performed to support the credibility of the research by establishing the findings from the analysis as consistent with the meaning of responses by participants. The dissertation chair and committee reviewed the write-up of this research. This review supported the research receiving peer review.

**Transferability**

The issue of transferability was associated with external validity in the research. Transferability was limited in this study because of the precise nature of the population

and sample being bound by race and gender. This research did not intentionally bind transferability based on participant variation of geographic location and the former grade level of participants. However, these binds resulted from data collection, including participants no longer in school. Therefore, there was a low level of external validity in this study.

### **Dependability**

This qualitative phenomenological research did not include triangulation. Triangulation in field work associated with exclusionary discipline for individuals in schools would have presented significant barriers that could threaten the feasibility of the research. Obtaining permission to observe any activities associated with exclusionary disciplines, such as in-school suspensions, would likely be impossible because it would involve participants in observation who did not agree to participate in the research. Document access might have violated students' privacy in ways that could not be accounted for before document receipts. Therefore, the establishment of dependability depended on an external audit of the research findings. Outside research consulting firm was contacted to use for an external audit of the data analysis and findings.

### **Confirmability**

The confirmability of this research is related to the issue of objectivity. Confirmability in this research was supported by reflexivity. Reflexivity involves the attitude of the primary investigator while collecting and analyzing data (Thurairajah, 2018). As the investigator, I was responsible for reflecting on how my background affected the way that I conducted the research (Thurairajah, 2018). Reflexivity in this

study was supported using a reflexive journal. Using the journal, I recorded my thoughts throughout the data collection and analysis process.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The ethical procedures related to the issues of trustworthiness must be noted. A critical ethical procedure to note was the agreement to gain access to participants. The treatment of human subjects in this research was especially critical to review as the research included human subjects reflecting on disciplinary actions. The topic was one with the potential to create a mental strain because of the potential line of questioning. I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (approval no. 07-16-21-0671376) before undertaking the field work for this research. Informed consent was received from the former students before beginning an interview by obtaining their signatures.

Research must do the least harm possible, and exceptional care must be taken to reduce the risk of harm (Al Tajir, 2018). Therefore, participants in this research were protected in several ways. One method was to remind participants multiple times that they were not responsible for answering each question or continuing participation in the interview; if they wanted to stop their participation, they were allowed to at any time. I also maintained constant review of the verbal and nonverbal cues given by the participant that suggested discomfort. Another method of protection involved a review of the open-ended questions. The questions must be tightly related to the research and not provoke negative emotions. However, the research was associated with a negative experience. Questions and questioning had to remain sensitive to these factors. I was prepared to

support the participant by connecting the participant with a counselor if the line of questioning caused mental distress.

Ethical procedures related to the treatment of data were considered. The data collected in this research were associated with participants who had experienced discipline. Therefore, care was taken to protect the anonymity of participants. Participants remained anonymous through data collection only involving the collection of names on informed consent forms and notations made on data collection files. The need for strict anonymity needs to be balanced with an acknowledgement of the importance of member checking, which requires knowledge of participants' identities. I used the contact information that I collected to contact participants to confirm that the findings conformed with what they meant during the interviews. These responses were labeled by number (e.g., "Participant 1," "Participant 2," and "Participant 3"). A separate document was used to connect the participants' number to contact information. Participants were contacted to member check. Once member checking was concluded, the document was destroyed. The analysis and reporting of these findings continued to follow a pattern of anonymity from data collection to the write-up of findings and reporting in the completed dissertation manuscript.

The protection of data was used to support the confidentiality of data. The audio recordings from participants were the critical form of data collected in this study. The audio recordings were transcribed, and the audio recordings were saved on an encrypted thumb drive. Any other copies of the recordings were deleted from any other drives. The

transcriptions were saved on the same drive. The transcriptions were used for analysis, with data and codes explored through the NVivo 12.0 CAQDAS program.

For analysis, data were stored on a secured computer. Files from the analysis were saved on the encrypted thumb drive. Once the analysis was complete and member checking confirmed that the reporting of findings conformed with interpretations of their responses, the data loaded into the CAQDAS were destroyed, as was the document containing participant contact information. The data and analysis files will then be stored on the encrypted thumb drive for 5 years. The stored data may support possible future research associated with my research agenda. The goal was also to grant Walden University the ability to audit the data collection and analysis process if the dissertation chair, committee, or school administration decided that the research must be audited. The only other party who had access to the data was an external auditor supporting the dependability of the results. The encrypted thumb drive shall be stored in a locked filing cabinet. The encrypted thumb drive will then be destroyed once 5 years pass, using fire to melt the drive and placing the drive in the trash.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 began with a discussion of the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research. African American females' lived experiences of being suspended or expelled from high school were explored to understand how zero tolerance discipline led to experiences with the juvenile and criminal justice system. The research design was then supported because of the consistency in phenomenological research (see Paley, 2016). African American female students' experiences were described as unique



from students at other gender and racial intersections because of the greater frequency and breadth of zero tolerance policies (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Johnson, 2017; Thompson, 2016; Young & Butler, 2018).

In Chapter 3, I also described my role as the researcher. I was responsible for reflexivity while interviewing. I noted the potential for because I held a job position that included African American females who had been suspended and expelled in the past. The chapter included a description of the methodology, including the use of purposive sampling. Instrumentation consisted of semistructured interviews and a reflexivity journal. Procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection entailed recruiting African American female former students through social media and using semistructured, face-to-face interviews to collect data. I used thematic analysis to interpret the data that I gathered. Chapters 4 and 5 include the findings of data analysis and the discussion and conclusions of this research.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I present the study results with the aim of providing insights about the problem of African American female students' experiences with zero tolerance policies in schools that result in a greater likelihood of suspension, expulsion, and entering the juvenile justice system. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the impact that zero tolerance policies had on African American girls. The research question for this study was, How does suspension or expulsion as a result of zero tolerance policies impact African American girls in Texas schools?

The presentation of the results includes a brief description of the sample of 14 African American females who attended high school in the United States and were recruited from the local treatment organization and county probation department. I also describe the data collection method, data analysis procedures, and trustworthiness techniques applied to the data. The results are presented in the form of themes that answer the research question.

### **Demographics**

The sample of the study consisted of 14 purposively selected African American females who attended high school in the United States. The participants were from a local organization providing substance abuse treatment for women and the county probation department. All of the participants experience expulsion, suspension, or both while they were in high school as a result of the zero tolerance policy. Consequently, the participants experienced disruptions in their education from missing classes while expelled or

suspended. Only four of the 14 participants were current college students, two of whom were expected to graduate in the next 2 years. Of the four college students, one participant obtained a general equivalency diploma (GED) while three participants had a high school diploma. Two other participants had a GED with one of them having graduated from a vocational course and the other one not yet having pursued further education. One participant had plans of getting a GED in 2022. The other seven participants did not have a high school diploma or GED. At least two of the seven participants were confirmed to be homeless at the time of the interview, while one was suspected as homeless.

When describing themselves, several participants stated that they were good students in that they got good grades and did not get into trouble. Some participants believed that they were implicated and accused of breaking school rules when they were not involved. Some participants stated that they got involved in altercations for defending themselves from bullies. They shared that they were not given a chance to explain themselves and that school authorities did not take the time to investigate what really happened.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted individual semistructured interviews to gather data on the impact of suspension or expulsion as a result of zero tolerance policies on African American girls. The target participants were African American female former high school students who had been expelled or suspended in Texas schools. Recruitment of the target participants of this involved advertising on social media and posting information about the study and

a call for participants on flyers sent to the local treatment organization and the county probation department. Former students in schools from Texas who expressed their willingness and interest to participate in the study had a brief conversation with me to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria of the study. I thanked those who showed an interest in participating but later decided against it. They were also provided with my contact information and that of a therapist in case they needed any more information or experienced traumatic feelings as a result of their study participation.

Using the purposive convenience sampling technique, I recruited 14 participants for individual semistructured interviews to be conducted in a face-to-face setting. Before the start of the interview, I made sure to seek the approval of the participants by having them sign the informed consent form. Participants were also assured of strict confidentiality and privacy wherein the information gathered from them would be treated as privileged and confidential. They were informed that only I as the researcher would have access to the collected data and that no other individuals would have access to it without the participant's express written agreement.

I used a self-developed interview protocol based on the study's review of related literature and research questions. Each individual face-to-face interview lasted for about 30 to 45 minutes. With the consent and approval of the participant, I audio-recorded the interviews using the Open Broadcaster Software. I also engaged in reflexive journaling to process my reactions to the questions and, likewise, to support the coding process and establishment of themes during data analysis. Upon reaching the final participant's interview, data saturation was achieved since the information provided had already been

mentioned by all participants in the previous interviews. The participants received a \$10 Walmart gift card from me after participating in the interview process.

After all the interviews were done, I immediately verified the audio recordings and produced verbatim transcripts of the interviews. I conducted member checking by contacting the participants to review their responses in the interview transcript to ensure the accuracy of the gathered data. After checking, no concerns were raised with transcriptions, and these were prepared for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

I processed the data gathered during the semistructured interviews for analysis. Thematic analysis was performed to examine the responses of African American female students on the impact of suspension or expulsion because of zero tolerance policies. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to generate the themes for the study, and coding was done according to Saldana's (2016) recommendations using CAQDAS. The data analysis was also completed with the support of NVivo software in organizing and categorizing the data to facilitate the coding process.

The first phase of data analysis was preliminary coding. During this phase, I connected with the data from data gathering to repeated reading of each of the 14 interview transcripts. By reading and rereading the interview transcripts, I was able to gain general information about the full data set from which the preliminary codes were taken and noted in the reflexivity journal. In the journal, I recorded my insights about the participants' education, career, and housing. As the interviews were conducted face-to-face, I was also able to observe and document the participants' expressions and

appearance. Participant 9 was the most well spoken and somber, based on my observation. A recurring pattern among the responses of older participants was that the punishment they received as a result of the zero tolerance policy was harsher than they deserved. This recurring pattern was one of the 61 preliminary codes that were generated from the data. Generating the codes involved the use of NVivo. All 14 transcripts were imported to NVivo. I read and reread each line of the transcripts and highlighted texts relevant to expulsion, suspension, and their impacts on the participants. The highlighted texts were assigned with short descriptive phrases to serve as the preliminary codes. A list of all the codes is provided in the appendix.

The second phase of the data analysis process was to develop a comprehensive list of codes related to the research question. I examined the preliminary codes in search of similarities and differences. Similarities and differences among the codes were observed through the development of definitions of what each secondary code entailed. The 61 preliminary codes were merged into 13 secondary codes, as shown in Table 1 and in the appendix.

**Table 1***Secondary Codes, Their Definitions, and Preliminary Codes*

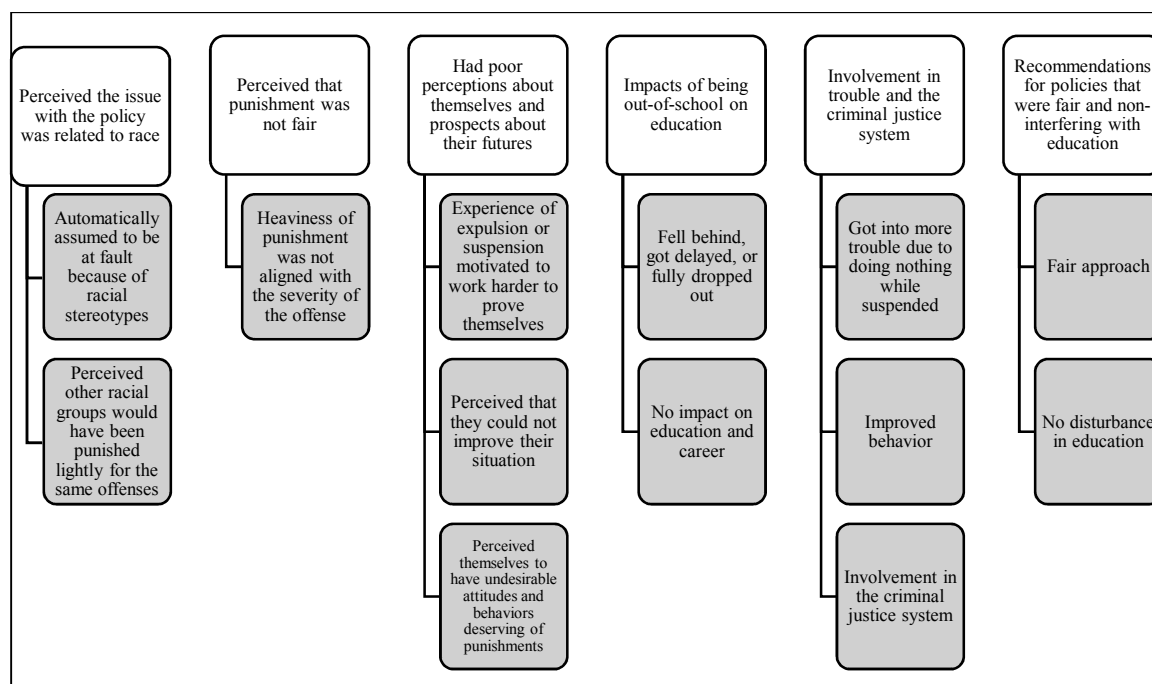
Secondary code	Definition	Preliminary code
Automatically assumed to be at fault because of racial stereotypes	Perceptions that African American students were blamed and punished for any trouble	Immediately suspended them, no investigation, believe in stories, they did not start the fight or been in trouble prior to fight, punished despite video evidence.
No tolerance only for African American students	Perceived other racial groups would have been punished lightly for the same offenses	School with predominantly White students
Harsh punishment	Heaviness of punishment was not aligned with the severity of the offense.	Does not see how the school could have punished them differently, immediately punished heavily, arrested because of being 18, not a favorite, perceived they were only one punished.
Experience of expulsion or suspension motivated to work harder	Desire to prove themselves after expulsion or suspension	Moved to a different school for a new start, persisted to finish high school
Perceived that they could not improve their situation	Negative outlook on their future	Believed that racism was adamant, could not get a professional job or go to college, got pregnant, few job choices, homeless, low self-esteem, sent to juvenile detention, forever on their record, 6years of youth spent locked up
Perceived that they deserved the punishments	Negative perceptions of themselves	Not because of race, perceived adverse events as the cause of their attitude problem, heavier punishment than necessary
Fell behind, got delayed, or fully dropped out	Missed schoolwork after expulsion or suspension which impacted graduation from high school	Behind schoolwork, fully dropped out of school, did not want to go to school, missed classes, delayed graduation, GED and military, vocational studies, minimal impact
No impact on education and career	Continued schoolwork while expelled or suspended	Doing schoolwork while suspended, no impact on education, continued while in detention
Got into more trouble	Caused trouble after being expelled or suspended	No supervision at home, reduced patience and attention span
Improved behavior	Avoided altercations	Did not get involved in fights anymore
Involvement in the criminal justice system	Violations and offenses after being expelled or suspended	Arrested once or multiple times, cases dismissed, fighting, implicated as a student or adult, jailed, none, traffic violation, was on probation
Fair approach	Recommendations for inquisitive approach	Fairness for all races, investigate before accusing students, talk to the students first
No disturbance in education	Recommendations for setting the time for punishment outside of class hours	After school program

*Note.* GED = general equivalency diploma.

Next, the third phase of the analysis involved combining the secondary codes into themes. The initial themes derived in this phase were identified by their strong link to the reviewed sources of literature specifically through the lens of the theoretical framework of this study. I used the reflexivity journal to draw a thematic map to show the links among the themes and the research question. The thematic map is shown in Figure 1. Six themes regarding the impact of zero tolerance policies on African American girls emerged upon interpreting and analyzing the comprehensive list of codes.

**Figure 1**

*Thematic Map*



I reflected on the initial themes and raw data to understand the overarching theoretical perspective. Quality checking was done at this phase of data analysis to identify and understand the patterns underlying the themes and how they fit together as



well as to understand the points at which themes were incomplete or inconsistent. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher utilized the reflexivity journal to understand how themes fit together with the codes generated and to note how the themes supported a data-driven response to the research questions.

To guarantee that no themes overlapped with one another, the finalized themes were given a name and a short description for every theme. The researcher also conducted member checking as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) and supported by Saldana (2016) to support the validity of the findings. Participants confirmed the accuracy of the themes generated from their gathered responses; hence, no changes were made. A report on the themes is provided in the next subsections, while Table 2 provides an overview of the themes, their definitions, the number of contributing individuals, and the number of coded texts.

**Table 2***Overview of Themes*

Theme	Definition	No. of contributing participants	No. of coded text items
Perception that the issue with the policy was related to race	Critiques about the racial disparities impacting African American women when implementing zero tolerance (Aldridge, 2018)	12	30
Perception that punishment was not fair	Critiques about the harsh and inconsistent nature of the zero tolerance policy (Ramsay-Smith, 2016)	9	12
Poor perceptions about themselves and prospects about their futures	The zero tolerance policy having detrimental impacts on student outcomes (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018)	10	28
Impacts of being out of school on education	The zero tolerance policy having detrimental impacts on education (DeMitchell & Hambacher, 2016)	11	28
Involvement in trouble and the criminal justice system	The zero tolerance policy having impacts on the school-to-prison trend among African American women (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Rodriguez, 2015; Thompson, 2016)	12	21
Recommendations for policies that are fair and do not interfere with education	Perceptions of alternative policies that could result in better outcomes for African American women (Weiss, 1995)	5	7

**Evidence of Trustworthiness**

I made sure to address the issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this study by establishing the internal and external validity of the research study as well as the nature of reliability and \ through various strategies and techniques. The credibility of this study, which refers to the degree of accuracy and truthfulness of the findings of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), was demonstrated and supported by conducting member checking, saturation, and peer review. Member checking was conducted by providing the interview transcripts to the participants by sending them to their emails for validation and correction of their responses during the

interviews, and transcription. None of the participants made changes to the data gathered; thus, the member-checked transcripts were utilized for data analysis. The participants also confirmed and agreed on the themes that I identified and later reported after receiving this validation. On the other hand, data saturation was also addressed during the conductance of the study, notably during data collection, to ensure that extensive and comprehensive data was obtained for data analysis. Furthermore, the dissertation chair and committee assessed the research write-up gaining peer review for the study.

Issues on transferability in this study were addressed by demonstrating the external validity of the research study and focusing on the extent to which the findings of a research are valuable to other academics in related subjects and areas of expertise (Connelly, 2016). I explained and offered a detailed explanation of the methodology utilized in the study specifically the inclusion criteria, participant selection, sampling, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis to guarantee the transferability of this study. However, I noted that the transferability of this study was limited due to the race and gender of the target participants.

The dependability of this study was also established to ensure that the research findings have a high degree of consistency throughout time (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). I sought the help of independent research consulting firm to conduct an external audit of the data analysis and findings to strengthen the study's dependability. Moreover, thick explanations of the complete research technique and a clear justification for the actions used in the methodology have been provided in this study to improve the reliability of the findings. This was done by offering detailed explanations of how the data was obtained

and analyzed to maximize the possibility that other future researchers would find the same themes in their study.

Confirmability describes the objectivity and reliability of the research study (Noble & Smith, 2015). In this study, I engaged in reflexivity by using a reflexive journal in which I recorded my thoughts throughout the data collection and analysis process. Also, a detailed description of the procedures and processes involved during data gathering and analysis was documented and provided in every phase of conducting the study to address issues of confirmability.

### **Results**

This section contains the presentation of the themes that resulted from the thematic analysis process. The themes were derived from the 14 interview transcripts collected from purposively sample African American females who attended high school in the United States, who experienced expulsion or suspension as a result of the zero tolerance policy, and who were from the local substance abuse treatment organization or county probation department. Six themes emerged from the analysis, which were (a) perception that the policy was related to race, (b) perception that punishment was not fair, (c) poor perceptions about themselves and prospects about their futures, (d) impacts of being out-of-school on education, (e) involvement in trouble and the criminal justice system, and (f) recommendations for policies that were fair and did not interfere with education.

### **Perception That the Zero Tolerance Policy Was Related to Race**

One of the participants' critiques about the zero tolerance policy was the issue of marginalizing African American students. Specifically, eight participants perceived that the people of authority automatically assumed that they, as African American individuals, were automatically at fault. Participant Nine shared, "As soon as they see us, they think that we are already doing wrong...They automatically think we're doing wrong, We're not smart."

Seven participants disclosed that they were suspended or expelled despite not being the ones to start the fight. Participant 10 shared that her peers were "kinda on the rude side," but that she did not engage and "stayed out of trouble." Participant 10 still got suspended for being implicated in a fight. The participant stated, "I had been suspended from altercation that I did not start with a non-African American female...But I've never been in trouble before this." Participant 8 was suspended when she got involved in a fight after defending herself from a bully, "Most [of the] time I was being bullied or picked on and talked about so I never was the aggressor."

However, Participant 7 shared that people of authority did not care to investigate the cause of the fight. Participant 7 perceived that people of authority only listened to one side of the story. The participant described:

They wouldn't really research to see what was going on. Really, they go by what they hear too much, instead of knowing what actually happens...I just felt like they don't...treat us how we're supposed to be treated as far as when it concerns of how individuals doing or if they do unwell or something they want to bother

somebody that's not doing wrong instead of getting the people that that are doing stuff that they're not supposed to be doing.

Five participants shared that when individuals from other racial groups, not necessarily Whites, got involved in a similar trouble they were involved in, they received a lighter punishment despite the zero tolerance policy. Participant 1 attended a predominantly Hispanic school where the majority of Mexicans “looked out for each other.” Participant 1 believed, “I felt like because there were like their own race.” Participants 4 and 14 experienced being suspended while the other people involved in the same fight received lighter punishments. Participant 4 believed that because the people of authority were often Whites or Hispanics, they did not want to heavily punish White and Hispanic students. Participant 4 elaborated:

Caucasians [and] Hispanics...they didn't get sent to jail or expelled from school where they can't demonstrate education or, you know, they don't want to see they don't want to see their race not having an education. It's always a melanin skin, that they don't want [us] to succeed in the world today.

On the contrary, Participant 12 attended a predominantly White school with the former principal being White and the more recent principal being African American. Regardless of the principal's race, Participant 12 disclosed that the majority of the students who were expelled were African American students. Participant 12 described the phenomenon as “crazy.”

Participant 6 perceived that African American girls received harsher punishments immediately after being involved in trouble because of the stereotype that African American individuals were aggressive. Participant 6 stated:

I think that might have played a part just because, you know, as a female that as African American, females were deemed as, oh, she has an attitude that you know, African American females are aggressive. So we need to give them you know, harsher terms or harsh, harsher punishments or, you know, anything that matters.

### **Perception That the Punishment Was Not Fair**

Another critique about the implementation of the zero tolerance policy was that the punishments were not fair. This theme was somewhat related to race in which the participants perceived that they were given harsh punishments for being African American. However, to distinguish from the first theme, this theme was defined as the inconsistent and misaligned implementation of the zero tolerance policy. The participants perceived that people of authority did not have a written basis of the appropriate punishments for the severity of the offenses. Nine participants perceived that they were harshly punished for offenses that were not severe. Participant 4 was involved in a fight shortly after she turned 18. As a legal adult, she was arrested for her offense. Participant 4 expressed, “Considering I'm a Black female, they always wanna send us straight to the big house instead of giving us a chance. Considering that I had just barely turned 18.”

A common experience among three participants was that they thought a harsh punishment was not necessary for the offense they committed. Participant 2 shared her

experience of being involved in a fight. In addition to being suspended along with all the other participants of the riot, they were also sent to juvenile detention, which the participant perceived was “too much” considering that they were young and that the riot did not cause severe harm to anyone. Participant 2 stated:

They took us to juvenile [detention]. I felt like we're kids you know. You know we've got suspended and got written up. The juvenile was kind of extra. Nobody was like seriously hurt to the point where they should just like throw us all in juvenile. You know, we were kids. I felt like that was too much.

Participant 6 also perceived that sending African American high school girls to “court” and do community service was “extra.” The participant believed that the punishment was unfair because people of authority did not have a standard basis for dictating the punishment. The punishment was based on what the people of authority felt about them. Participant 6 explained:

I do know a little extra as far as me like having to go to court and do community service. Like I said, just because they feel like oh, you know you need to learn how to do this, control yourself or...just to you know, because we already being like we have an attitude. Or we're aggressive So, let's just make it a harsher, you know, give her a harsher punishment.

Participants 1, 9, 10, and 12 perceived that the implementation of the zero tolerance was not fair because several students were committing the same offenses, but they were the only ones who were punished with suspension or expulsion. Participant 10 explicitly stated, “Unfair because I was the only one that got suspended.” Participant 1



disclosed, “I felt like I was singled out because everybody else was skipping and not going to class and even fighting.” Participant 9 perceived that people of authority had “favorites” and that she got punished because she was not a favorite. Participant 9 stated, “They had certain favorites that they gave more time with...For me, I guess they felt like I wasn't one of the special ones.”

### **Poor Perceptions About Themselves and Prospects About Their Futures**

Ten participants shared their experiences of the impacts of their suspension or expulsion on their perceptions on themselves and their future prospects. Five participants stated that they perceived themselves to have undesirable attitudes and behaviors, and that they deserved the punishments. Participant 14 stated, “I was getting suspended every week or so. My attitude. I don't get along with a lot of people.” Participant 5 believed herself to be “rowdy.” Participant 10 displayed low self-esteem when she perceived that she was not capable of what other people were doing. Participant 10 stated, “It will just have me like realize that I can't do certain things other people do or I'll have to like think before I act.”

Seven participants believed that after experiencing suspension or expulsion under the zero tolerance policy, they were bound to experience adverse situations. The participants' narratives involved either having their suspension or expulsion lead to juvenile detention which was on their record permanently or that they were arrested multiple times. Either way, the participants generally experienced disruption in their high school education. Eight participants did not finish high school and had no GED at the time of this study. As a result, five participants shared that they had difficulty finding a

stable job with a decent income. Participant 9 explained how the lack of education resulted in unemployment and homelessness, “I don't have no GED. I don't have no diploma and it is hard for me to get a job... I'm homeless. You have no education to get a job.” Participant 9 and three other participants perceived that the disruption to their high school education hindered them from attending college and from achieving their dream professions. Participant 12 shared:

[Suspension] has impacted [my life] lot because I'm here because of the theft charges and my criminal history. It really ain't too many jobs I can get so I got to settle for fast food at 39...Because I had a lot of stuff I wanted to do in my future. I wanted to you know, do computer tech and all that and now that I have like theft charges on me a lot of companies ain't gonna let you do nothing dealing with computers or anybody's information and all that stuff. Like I was lucky to get a job here for cashier knowing I got a felony theft case.

Participant 4 perceived that she has less opportunities than girls who were not suspended or expelled. Participant 4 shared, “I would say because if I had got an opportunity to continue education and not become a felon, I probably would have been an orthodontist somewhere or a doctor.” However, Participant 4 also believed that her career path was merely diverted and that her experiences did not mean that she could not strive in her current job. Participant 4 stated, “It just made me choose a different field and go harder in that field, even though it's not my passion.”

### **Impacts of Being Out of School on Education**

Eight participants disclosed that their experiences of suspension or expulsion led to missing classes, lessons, and assignments. The participants generally experienced falling behind on their school work. Participant 13 shared, “I missed like a week or two... I had to catch up in school and then I had to get back on track with the missing days and then extra homework.”

For Participants 2, 6, and 9, their suspension had minimal impact on their education, as they were able to catch up on the assignments they missed. They did their school work while they were suspended. Participant 6 stated, “I was able to graduate. Well, that honestly didn't do any harm to that, but I was able to like catch up on my schoolwork while I was suspended.”

Five participants reported that falling behind school work resulted in delayed graduation. However, the participants perceived that their experiences had minimal impact on their education and career. Participant 5 stated, “I'm doing okay. I still got a job.” Participants 1, 12, and 13 shared that they got a GED while Participant 3 was working on getting a GED. Participant 1 perceived her experiences as a “setback.” Participant 1 stated, “It just set me back as far as timeline and when I finished graduating... I was still able to go on and have a successful college career.”

Four participants revealed that they fully dropped out from high school. Participant 11 shared that she felt demotivated to go to school after being suspended and missing several classes. Participant 11 stated, “It made me like not want to go to school.”

### **Involvement In Trouble and the Criminal Justice System**

The majority of the participants were involved in trouble and the criminal justice system after their experience of expulsion or suspension. Participant 1 shared that during suspension, she was out of school, had nothing to do, and had no adults to supervise her which was the reasons she “ran the streets” and got into more trouble. Participant 8 perceived that her experience of being suspended in accordance with the zero tolerance policy, she also became non-tolerant of “ignorance.” However, Participant 8 also perceived that she was merely implicated in trouble when she was a student but got punished for it. As an adult, she suffered from “abuse” and had been arrested multiple times for offenses she did not commit. Participant 8 stated, “I’ve been arrested... And not my fault and not by far...I’ve been used I’ve been abused and right now I’m going through it right now at the age of 48.” Participants 9, 12, and 13 also experienced being arrested more than once as adults. Participant 13 stated, “It was a long-term impact going back and forth to jail.” One of the reasons Participant 13 was arrested was due to being involved in a fight with family members. Participant 9 was similarly charged with assault of a family member. Participant 12 was on probation following an arrest, “I ended up going to state jail for 6 months and I just got off a 3-year probation last month.”

Participant 1 was charged with assault and possession of an illegal substance, but the cases were dismissed. Participant 1 shared, “I have an assault charge and a marijuana possession of marijuana arrest. Both were dismissed.” Participant 14 was held in jail, but also had the case dismissed. She later on had a traffic violation and had no other records within the criminal justice system.

Five of the participants emphasized that they did not get into trouble after their experience of suspension or expulsion. Participant 10 disclosed tending to keep to herself, while Participant 6 “stayed out of trouble” after learning from her mistakes. Participant 6 shared, “I definitely learned my lesson...remember my mistakes. Stay out of trouble basically.” Participant 2 also learned from her experience and reported improving her behavior following her suspension. Participant 2 narrated:

I went back to school I wasn't fighting anymore like I used to have fights like every week, but after I got in trouble with the law, that's whenever it just completely stopped. That was my last time ever getting suspended for fighting again.

### **Recommendations for Policies That Are Fair and Do Not Interfere With Education**

After the experience of suspension or expulsion as a result of the zero tolerance policy, five participants voiced out their recommendations for implementation changes that would remove the disadvantage for any racial group. The participants suggested a consistent and fair approach which should involve talking to the students and conducting an investigation of the situation. Participant 7 stated:

I just feel that people need to do their research and like I was saying, like, be able to know the real facts and what's going on. Instead of just pointing fingers at people about stuff that they don't know.

Participant 4 perceived that an investigation should involve examining both sides of the story instead of automatically blaming on person because of their skin color. Participant 4

shared, “When you look at the situation, look at it from both sides. Don't look at it one way because you see a color.”

The second recommendation for change was developing an alternative to the expulsion and suspension policy. The participants generally perceived that suspension and expulsion resulted in missing lessons and assignments that make students fall behind in their classes. Some students have difficulty catching up while some students completely lose interest in education. Participants 9 and 14 suggested an after-school program to prevent students in trouble from missing classes. Participant 14 specified:

After-school instead of actually being kicked out...I feel like they shouldn't even have ISS or suspension if they have after school suspension. Why we couldn't be able to do it after school and keep up with classes and keep up with my classes and my grades.

Participant 9 further recommended to have one-on-one counseling during after-school programs to help students in trouble. Participant 9 relayed her own experience, and thought, “Maybe they should have tried to work with me a little bit more than what they did.” Participant 1 had similar perceptions, “I feel like they should have just sat us [down] and told us not to fight.”

### **Summary**

This chapter contained the results that addressed the purpose of describing the impact that zero tolerance policies had on African American girls. The results were developed from the thematic analysis of the individual interview transcripts collected from 14 purposively sample African American females who attended high school in the

United States, who experienced expulsion or suspension as a result of the zero tolerance policy, and who were from the local substance abuse treatment organization or county probation department. The analysis revealed six themes, which were (a) perception that the policy was related to race, (b) perception that punishment was not fair, (c) poor perceptions about themselves and prospects about their futures, (d) impacts of being out-of-school on education, (e) involvement in trouble and the criminal justice system, and (f) recommendations for policies that were fair and non-interfering with education.

The participants' lived experiences of the expulsion or suspension as a result of the zero tolerance policy revealed the essence that African American females in Texas high schools may generally be unfairly and harshly punished for involvement or implication in altercations or other school offenses. Consequently, the African American females' high school education is disrupted, causing missed assignments and lessons. Some students lost their drive to catch up to their school work and perceived that they, as African American individuals, had little hope of experiencing life without getting into trouble. Some participants fully dropped out of school and could not find a stable job and stable income. Some participants got repeatedly involved in trouble and experienced being arrested at least once after their expulsion or suspension. Some participants experienced an increase in their motivation to do well to prove themselves to the people of authority who punished them unfairly. Several participants perceived that changes to the implementation of the zero tolerance policy was needed and recommended fairer approach to punishments.

The study findings were interpreted and discussed in the next chapter. The discussion involved the interpretation of the results through the lenses of the critical race theory and the theory of change. The implications, limitations, recommendations, and conclusions of the study are also provided in the next chapter.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The findings of current research on the use of zero tolerance policies support the existence of more significant punishment and a higher frequency of the use of exclusionary disciplinary actions, such as suspensions and expulsions, among African American female students (Aldridge, 2018; McNeal, 2016; Ruiz, 2017). African American female students also enter the school-to-prison pipeline (i.e., being arrested and entering the criminal justice system because of activities occurring in school) more than any other group of students (Aldridge, 2018). Therefore, there is a need for more research aimed at better understanding how the exclusionary disciplines that African American female students receive have negatively impacted their educative development and preparation to be good citizens.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to contribute the empirical literature to better understand the negative impact that zero tolerance policies have on African American girls. Specifically, I used phenomenological methods to explore the effects zero tolerance policies have on these students after suspension or expulsion from school. The participants were all African American female former Texas high school students who had been expelled or suspended. I interviewed participants using semistructured questions that I based on the research question, How does suspension or expulsion as a result of zero tolerance policies impact African American girls in Texas schools? Key findings from this study indicate that the lived experiences of the participants of expulsion or suspension as a result of the zero tolerance policy may

generally be unfair and that they were harshly punished for involvement or implication in altercations or other school offenses, also causing their high school education to be disrupted. The findings of this study further revealed six underlying themes of the participants' lived experiences, which were (a) perception that the policy was related to race, (b) perception that punishment was not fair, (c) poor perceptions about themselves and prospects about their futures, (d) impacts of being out-of-school on education, (e) involvement in trouble and the criminal justice system, and (f) recommendations for policies that were fair and non-interfering with education.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In this section, I will compare the key findings of this study and discuss to the extent that these findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend the knowledge in the peer-reviewed literature. In the process, the six underlying themes will be compared and contrasted with the main concepts in the literature review. These concepts include zero tolerance policy in schools, zero tolerance policy and race, criticism toward zero tolerance policy, and direct impacts of zero tolerance policies on African American female students. Then, an analysis of these findings will be provided in the context of the theoretical framework, which was comprised of critical race theory and theory of change.

#### **Perception That the Zero Tolerance Policy Was Related to Race**

One critique among study participants about the zero tolerance policy was the marginalization of African American students. Eight of the 14 participants perceived that the people in authority assumed that they, as African American individuals, were automatically at fault. These findings confirm previous findings in the literature involving

the zero tolerance policy and its impact on African American students (Alnaim, 2018; Camacho & Krezmien, 2020; Curran, 2019, 2016a, 2016b; Ruiz, 2017; Wilson et al., 2020), especially African American female students (Aldridge, 2018; Camera, 2017; Hill, 2018; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020).

Specifically, Alnaim (2018) determined that marginalized students experienced substantially greater impacts due to zero tolerance policies, while Camacho and Krezmien (2020) further determined that as the number of African American students in a school increased, so did the proportion of students who be suspended from school. Wilson et al. (2020) was critical of using zero tolerance policies in urban schools and determined that there was racial disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions because students of color experienced most of these disciplinary actions. Ruiz (2017) also found that the expansion of zero tolerance policies substantially impacted students over time, especially students of color, with Curran (2019) specifically concurring that zero tolerance policies were a significant predictor of greater suspension rates for African Americans than Whites. The additional findings of Curran (2016a, 2016b) further support that zero tolerance policies are responsible for a significant difference in the application of punishment, where racial disparities did play a role in the difference in the use of discipline, particularly in the case of expulsions.

Regarding a focus on African American female students, Aldridge (2018) noted that U.S. African American girls faced greater punishment and discipline in school settings, and African American females were 6 times more likely to receive a suspension in New York City schools and 53 times more likely to be expelled than other students.

Hill (2018) elaborated on this disparity in the frequency of out-of-school suspensions between African American girls and White girls by finding that African American girls received out-of-school suspensions seven times more frequently than White girls, and African American girls were the fastest-growing demographic in terms of arrest and incarceration. Camera (2017) further determined that this problem extended to preschool, where African American girls constituted 20% of students enrolled, but 54% of the girls who were suspended from preschool. The effect of zero tolerance policies in the K-12 system remains the most significant for African American girls, this research shows.

Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) concurred that African American girls experienced exclusionary zero tolerance policies that resulted in suspension or expulsion with greater frequency than other female peers. Therefore, the existing literature concurs with the findings of this study that race is a significant factor in zero tolerance policy implementation that negatively impacts African American students, especially female students.

### **Perception That the Punishment Was Not Fair**

Another critique participants had about the implementation of the zero tolerance policy was that the punishments were not fair. This theme was somewhat related to the previous theme of race. However, this theme was defined as the inconsistent and misaligned implementation of the zero tolerance policy, with participants perceiving that people of authority did not have a written basis to determine appropriate punishments for the severity of the offenses. Specifically, nine participants perceived that they were harshly punished for offenses that were not severe. These findings also confirm previous

findings in the literature pertaining to zero tolerance policies that the implementation of these policies is not based on clear written guidelines and is therefore subjective and inconsistent (Aldridge, 2018; Curran, 2019; Ramsay-Smith, 2016; Sellers & Arrigo, 2018). Curran (2019) determined that an explicit zero tolerance policy existed in less than 14% of schools. Sellers and Arrigo (2018) discussed how the application of zero tolerance policies related to social control, particularly in the case of marginalized youth, and determined that the application of zero tolerance policies remained inconsistent, with Ramsay-Smith (2016) concurring that zero tolerance policies were often vague and inconsistent in their application. Aldridge (2018) further concurred that as time progressed, applying the zero tolerance policy became more frequent and more subjective. The perception of the participants of this study that zero tolerance policies were unfair is therefore also supported in the literature.

### **Poor Perceptions of Themselves and Prospects About Their Futures**

Ten participants shared their experiences of the impacts of their suspension or expulsion on their perceptions of themselves and their future prospects. Five participants sharing they perceived themselves to have undesirable attitudes and behaviors, and that they deserved the punishments. These same five participants also believed that after experiencing suspension or expulsion under the zero tolerance policy, they were bound to experience adverse situations such as juvenile detention, involvement with the criminal justice system, disruption in their high school education, noncompletion of their high school education, and difficulty finding a job with a stable income.

Multiple studies in the literature confirm these specific findings of the negative impacts of zero tolerance policies among African American female students pertaining to poor perceptions of themselves and their future prospects of being involved with the criminal justice system (Hines & Wilmot, 2018; Hines & Young, 2020; Morris, 2016; White, 2017; Wun, 2018). White (2017) found that African American girls were more likely to be removed from school and experience interaction with the criminal justice system. These outcomes were related to the stigma that African American girls are defiant, unruly, unsophisticated, and have poor attitudes that result in differential treatment by teachers and harsh punishment in the criminal justice system. Hines and Wilmot (2018) also found that the public school environment is a dangerous, hyperviolent space for African American students, especially African American girls, because of the impact of racial microaggression and anti-African American attitudes. Their identity is formed in a largely negative manner as a result, and their social development is one where they have been stigmatized and marginalized based on the school system's structure and policies. Wun (2018) also concurred that the social experience of schooling for African American girls is one where they experience anti-African American and punitive punishment measures.

Morris (2016) discussed the issue of cultural belief, policy, and practices as factors contributing to the criminalization and dehumanization of African American girls in U.S. schools. Morris found that African American girls experienced being stigmatized and degraded by the education and criminal justice system, and they were often misunderstood and unfairly judged by individuals who held power over the trajectory of

their lives. Hines and Young (2020) further concurred that school system structures resulted in the marginalization of African American girls, especially those placed in alternative schools, due to a lack of academic and socioemotional support. Their removal from traditional schools was due to the policies of schools. In the alternative schools where they were placed, they were less likely to be successful and more likely to be marginalized than before. The literature clearly establishes that African American female students are often stigmatized and marginalized in the public school environment. The literature also supports that school policies such as the zero tolerance policy also often lead to involvement and unfair treatment within the criminal justice system. The poor perceptions that study participants shared about themselves and their prospects for their futures therefore resonated with the literature. .

### **Impacts of Being Out of School on Education**

Eight participants disclosed that their experiences of suspension or expulsion led to missing classes, lessons, and assignments, and they generally experienced falling behind on their schoolwork. One study was noted in the literature that focused research on the impacts of being out-of-school on education among African American female students that confirmed these specific findings among the participants of this study. Martin and Smith (2017) discussed the discipline experienced by African American female students and found that even when conditions such as family factors, school quality, and teacher quality were controlled for, there were significant differences between African American girls and their peers in terms of disruption in their high school education, and the subjective discipline and informal reports of discipline problems also

substantially influenced African American girls to drop out of school. The limited focus of research in the current literature on this specific topic of the impacts of being out-of-school on education also indicates that this study has extended the existing literature in this area as related to the specific findings of this study regarding the impacts of being out-of-school on education among African American female students and as also related to the poor perceptions of their future outcomes as previously noted of the disruption and non-completion of their high school education and difficulty finding a job with a stable income.

### **Involvement in Trouble and the Criminal Justice System**

The majority of the participants of this study shared that they were involved in trouble and the criminal justice system after their experience of expulsion or suspension. These findings were confirmed in the literature, with discussion of this phenomenon also referred to as the “school-to-prison-pipeline” (Johnson, 2017; Poole, 2019; Rambo, 2020; Rodriguez, 2015). Rambo (2020) found that there was a significant disproportionality in the increase of arrests by police, where minorities would experience outcomes of greater severity than Caucasian peers that supported the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline. Rodriguez (2015) also discussed the issue of the preschool-to-prison pipeline and determined that early interaction with police officers can result in the establishment of a longer-term relationship with police and eventually prison because students became accustomed to the criminal justice system based on their earlier interactions. Poole (2019) discussed the role of the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of African American girl identity in the structure of public schools in Pennsylvania and determined



that existing policies pushed African American female students out of schools and into the criminal justice system. Johnson (2017) further determined that the school-to-prison pipeline was a phenomenon more frequent among African American female students than other students. Therefore, the literature also supports the finding of this study that current school policies such as the zero tolerance policy led to involvement in the criminal justice system, particularly among African American female students.

### **Recommendations for Policies That Are Fair and Do Not Interfere With Education**

After the experience of suspension or expulsion as a result of the zero tolerance policy, five participants voiced their recommendations for implementation changes that would remove the disadvantage for any racial group, with these participants suggesting a consistent and fair approach which should involve talking to the students and conducting an investigation of the situation. The concept of the need to move away from zero tolerance policies to facilitate approaches that were more fair and non-interfering with education was confirmed with great consensus in the literature overall (Aldridge, 2018; Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020; Crosby et al., 2018; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018; Moreno & Scaletta, 2018; Ruiz, 2017; Schiff, 2018; Skrzypek et al., 2020; Woods, 2020). Moreno and Scaletta (2018) determined that there was an important need to move away from zero tolerance policies through educator preparedness and further determined that the solution was based on greater professional development for faculty to achieve greater classroom management. Ruiz (2017) and Aldridge (2018) determined that most expulsions were not because of violence, but because of other issues that could be addressed with alternative disciplinary methods, with Lacoé and Steinberg (2018) further concurring that many

public school districts have concluded that applying zero tolerance policies has been too extreme and have committed to rolling back zero tolerance discipline because using zero tolerance discipline, particularly in nonviolent scenarios, was unproductive.

Specific to African American students, Woods (2020) found that this population represented 89.4% of the students arrested or referred to juvenile proceedings under zero tolerance policy, but that by applying an alternative discipline model such as the restorative justice model, only 6.8% of students were negatively impacted. Schiff (2018) further supported the use of the restorative justice model because it could reduce the number of African American and other racialized minority students from continuing to enter the school-to-prison pipeline. Clark-Louque and Sullivan (2020) also concurred specific to African American female students that the use of restorative justice instead of a zero tolerance policy reduced the number of suspensions or expulsions from school. Crosby et al. (2018) also explored the use of an alternative disciplinary intervention called the Monarch Room (MR) among African American female students that recognized the personal trauma of their lived experiences and found that this program had a positive impact and was increasingly being utilized.

By contrast, although Skrzypek et al. (2020) found that restorative justice practices were a promising alternative to zero tolerance policies because of their non-punitive nature by promoting the expression of thoughts and feelings instead, there were some limitations that were noted of significant differences in the feelings toward restorative practices between African American male and female students, with male students who believed that restorative practices supported the use of nonviolent problem-

solving skills and female students who did not support restorative practices as a method of learning to solve problems without violence or changing their behavior. Lustick (2017) also did not concur that the use of restorative justice was always a better alternative approach, particularly in small schools with locked-down buildings, by finding that the use of restorative practices was responsible for replicating racial inequality when discipline was still partly dependent on an association with zero tolerance policies. These limitations specific to the alternative approach of the restorative justice model versus zero tolerance discipline, while not disconfirming the finding of this study of the need to find more fair and non-interfering policies to education, do suggest a need for further research on this particular alternative approach to discipline, especially among African American female students. However, whether the alternative approach to discipline is the restorative justice model or other approaches, the overall consensus in the literature clearly confirms that there is a need for such reform that does support the findings of this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Yosso (2005) described critical race theory as existing at the intersection of race, power, and law that supports a critical assessment of how these factors relate and are responsible for the continued impact of racism through society's structure, and particularly, how racism continues to permeate through social institutions. The critical race theory delineates from critical theory due to a specific application of the theory to problems concerning race, most often, those in the venue of law and public policy, and has been utilized in previous research to understand zero tolerance policy and advocate

for its elimination (Scott et. al, 2017; Thompson, 2016). Thompson (2016) specifically determined that African American students were more likely to experience suspension or expulsion because the structure of the system was such that minority students were disproportionately impacted by zero tolerance policies and proposed that alternatives to zero tolerance policy should be implemented instead such as the restorative justice model. Scott et al. (2017) concurred that a shift from federal zero tolerance policy requirements to state and local actions was needed to better uphold the civil rights of students, particularly students of color.

The theory of change is a theory that supports establishing a strategy for social change such as the previously described shift from zero tolerance policies in public schools to alternative discipline approaches. Through the theory of change, nonprofit and government organization leaders can design and implement changes through interventions that support positive outcomes for all stakeholders (Brest, 2010). The theory of change functions through establishing a series of small steps that culminate into achieving a higher order goal, with there being several checkpoints on the path to the accomplishment of this goal with criteria that includes plausibility, feasibility, and testability of the elements proposed for a change initiative (Kubisch et al., 1997).

The key findings of this study within the themes of perceiving the issue of the policy was related to race and poor perceptions about themselves and prospects about their futures as also directly related to the negative impacts of involvement in trouble and the criminal justice system and being out-of-school on education clearly fit within the construct of critical race theory that examines the intersection of race, power, and law and

provides a critical assessment of how these factors are ultimately responsible for the continued impact of racism through society's structure and social institutions (Yosso, 2005), with Thompson (2016) and Scott et al. (2017) specifically being noted in the literature as utilizing critical race theory to examine the negative impact of zero tolerance policies on African American students. Further support was also found in the literature that race is a significant factor in the implementation of zero tolerance policy (Alnaim, 2018; Camacho & Krezmien, 2020; Curran, 2019, 2016a, 2016b; Ruiz, 2017; Wilson et al., 2020), especially among African American female students (Aldridge, 2018; Camera, 2017; Hill, 2018; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020), that negatively impacts their perceptions of themselves through marginalization and stigmatization and through adverse future outcomes such as becoming involved in the criminal justice system (Hines & Wilmot, 2018; Hines & Young, 2020; Morris, 2016; White, 2017; Wun, 2018), as a part of the school-to-prison pipeline (Johnson, 2017; Poole, 2019; Rambo, 2020; Rodriguez, 2015), and or as a disruption in their high school education that may cause these students to drop out of school (Martin & Smith, 2017). Therefore, critical race theory is also appropriate and useful to interpret and analyze these specific findings in the literature to better understand the intersection of race, power, and law and how these factors are ultimately responsible for the continued impact of racism through society's structure and social institutions.

Key findings of this study specific to perceiving that the zero tolerance policy was not fair and recommendations for policies that were fair and non-interfering with education directly link to the theory of change as an appropriate and useful theory for

analyzing and fostering the implementation of changes through interventions that support positive outcomes for all stakeholders within nonprofit and government organizations (Brest, 2010), such as alternative discipline approaches to zero tolerance policies within public schools. Further support was found in the literature with great consensus overall that there was a definite need to move away from zero tolerance policies in order to foster change with alternative discipline approaches that were more fair and non-interfering with education (Aldridge, 2018; Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020; Crosby et al., 2018; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018; Moreno & Scaletta, 2018; Ruiz, 2017; Schiff, 2018; Skrzypek et al., 2020; Woods, 2020). Therefore, the theory of change is also appropriate and useful for interpreting these specific findings in the literature, and along with critical race theory, provides an appropriate and useful theoretical framework to effectively analyze and facilitate the changes that are needed to reform zero tolerance policies, particularly for African American female students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A significant limitation of this study was the small sample size of fourteen participants and the specific nature of the sample based on race, gender, geographic location, and the characteristic of the participants already being out of school that could impact trustworthiness in the area of transferability and external validity. Multiple strategies supported achieving credibility and internal validity in this study though such as member checking, data saturation, and peer review. Another limitation that may impact trustworthiness was associated with possible bias in the research due to the primary researcher being of the same race and gender as the participants. However, the

objective confirmability of this research was supported by the primary researcher maintaining a reflexivity journal.

### **Recommendations**

Although the strengths of the existing literature included a great amount of research with consensus on the finding that race is a significant factor in the implementation of zero tolerance policy (Alnaim, 2018; Camacho & Krezmien, 2020; Curran, 2019, 2016a, 2016b; Ruiz, 2017; Wilson et al., 2020), especially among African American female students (Aldridge, 2018; Camera, 2017; Hill, 2018; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020), and of the need to move away from zero tolerance policies in order to foster change with alternative discipline approaches that were more fair and non-interfering with education (Aldridge, 2018; Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020; Crosby et al., 2018; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018; Moreno & Scaletta, 2018; Ruiz, 2017; Schiff, 2018; Skrzypek et al., 2020; Woods, 2020) that all confirmed the findings of this study, there were some limitations to the current literature of a focus of research on the topics of being out-of-school on education and difficulty finding a job with a stable income that were specific findings of this study, with the literature mostly focusing only on involvement with the criminal justice system (Hines & Wilmot, 2018; Hines & Young, 2020; Morris, 2016; White, 2017; Wun, 2018) and as the school-to-prison-pipeline (Johnson, 2017; Poole, 2019; Rambo, 2020; Rodriguez, 2015).

It is therefore recommended that further research be conducted on these specific topics of the impact of zero tolerance policies on being out-of-school on education and vocational options among African American female students and across a broader

spectrum of students as well. A second limitation in the literature pertained to the restorative justice model and the need to confirm or disconfirm specific criticisms of this model, particularly as they pertained to African American female students (Lustick, 2017; Skrzypek et al. 2020). Therefore, further research is also recommended to explore the nuances of the restorative justice model in more depth as this model may interact with specific groups of students and across different types of school settings.

### **Implications**

The implications of this study offer many opportunities to promote positive social change on the individual, family, and organizational levels. On an individual level, other African American females who have also experienced the negative impact of zero tolerance policies may benefit from the recognition that they are not alone and may become more empowered in the process of sharing their own lived experiences with others to facilitate positive social change on this issue. In turn, their families may be strengthened through a greater understanding that they were not always to blame or always at fault for this negative impact, and there are other systematic factors that unfairly worked against them that could be changed by also becoming empowered to be a part of a broader conversation of the need to move away from zero tolerance discipline policies.

This study has the propensity to promote positive social change on an organizational level as well for how public school leaders in Texas apply zero tolerance policies to African American girls by providing valuable information that stakeholders, policy makers, and school administration could use to better understand the unintended



consequences of zero tolerance policies on African American girls. The findings of this study also have implications for a deeper understanding of critical race theory by adding further support and extending the existing literature on how the intersection of race, power, and law are ultimately responsible for the continued impact of racism through society's structure and social institutions specific to the lived experiences of African American female students who were negatively impacted by zero tolerance policies in schools.

### **Conclusion**

This study on the lived experiences of African American female students who were impacted by zero tolerance discipline policy shared important insights that contributed to the gap in existing literature and provided a better understanding of the difficulties they experienced from being marginalized, stigmatized, and treated unfairly from this policy, causing many to have poor perceptions of themselves and their future life outcomes, and also often led to a disruption in their education and involvement in the criminal justice system that inhibited their ability to find a job with a steady income. Significant findings from this study included greater recognition in the literature that zero tolerance policies disproportionately impacted African American girls in these negative ways that could ultimately lead to the unintended consequence of causing much more harm than good. Significant findings also included further recognition in the literature that alternative discipline approaches must therefore be implemented to stop this cycle of harm from being allowed to continue.

## References

- Aldridge, S. (2018). Criminalization and discrimination in schools: The effects of zero tolerance policies on the school-to-prison pipeline for Black girls. *Aisthesis: Honors Student Journal*, 9(2), 1–7.  
<https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/aisthesis/article/view/1216>
- Alnaim, M. (2018). The impact of zero tolerance policy on children with disabilities. *World Journal of Education*, 8(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wje.v8n1p1>
- Al Tajir, G. K. (2018). Ethical treatment of participants in public health research. *Journal of Public Health and Emergency*, 2(2), 1–10.  
<https://doi.org/10.21037/jphe.2017.12.04>
- Bell, C. (2015). The hidden side of zero tolerance policies: The African American perspective. *Sociology Compass*, 9(1), 14–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12230>
- Bell, D., Jr. (1984). A holiday for Dr. King: The significance of symbols in the Black freedom struggle. *UC Davis Law Review*, 17(2), 433-444.  
[https://lawreview.law.ucdavis.edu/issues/17/2/address/DavisVol17No2\\_Bell.pdf](https://lawreview.law.ucdavis.edu/issues/17/2/address/DavisVol17No2_Bell.pdf)
- Bell, D. (1987). *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial justice*. Basic Books.
- Bell, D. (1988). White superiority in America: Its legal legacy, its economic costs. *Villanova Law Review*, 33(5), 767-779.  
<https://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/vlr/vol33/iss5/2>
- Bell, D., Higgins, T., & Suh, S.-H. (1989). Racial reflections: Dialogues in the direction of liberation. *UCLA Law Review*, 37, 1037-1100.  
[http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/218](http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/faculty_scholarship/218)

- Bernal, D. D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 105–126.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F107780040200800107>
- Blake, J. J., Keith, V. M., Luo, W., Le, H., & Salter, P. (2017). The role of colorism in explaining African American females' suspension risk. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 32(1), 118–130. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000173>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.  
<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706QP063OA>
- Brayboy, B. M. (2005). Toward a tribal critical race theory in education. *The Urban Review*, 37(5), 425–446. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-005-0018-y>
- Brest, P. (2010). The power of theories of change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 8(2), 47–51. <http://sc4ccm.jsi.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Power-Of-Theories-Of-Change.pdf>
- Brincat, S. (2016). Traditional, problem-solving and critical theory: An analysis of Horkheimer and Cox's setting of the 'critical' divide. *Globalizations*, 13(5), 563–577. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2015.1130204>
- Camacho, K. A., & Krezmien, M. P. (2020). A statewide analysis of school discipline policies and suspension practices. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 64(1), 55–66.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2019.1678010>

- Camera, L. (2017, May 9). Black girls are twice as likely to be suspended, in every state. *U.S. News and World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2017-05-09/black-girls-are-twice-as-likely-to-be-suspended-in-every-state>
- Cavazos-Rehg, P., Min, C., Fitzsimmons-Craft, E. E., Savoy, B., Kaiser, N., Riordan, R., & Wilfley, D. (2020). Parental consent: A potential barrier for underage teens' participation in an mental health intervention. *Internet Interventions*, 21, Article 100328. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.invent.2020.100328>
- Celikates, R. (2018). *Critique as social practice: Critical theory and social self-understanding*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Clark-Louque, A., & Sullivan, T. A. (2020). Black girls and school discipline: Shifting from the narrow zone of zero tolerance to a wide region of restorative practices and culturally proficient engagement. *Journal for Leadership, Equity, and Research*, 6(2), 1–21. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cvj/index.php/cvj/index>
- Cole, M. (2017). *Critical race theory and education: A Marxist response*. Springer.
- Crosby, S. D., Day, A. G., Somers, C. L., & Baroni, B. A. (2018). Avoiding school suspension: Assessment of a trauma-informed intervention with court-involved, female students. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 62(3), 229–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2018.1431873>

- Curran, F. C. (2016a). Estimating the effect of state zero tolerance laws on exclusionary discipline, racial discipline gaps, and student behavior. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(4), 647–668.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0162373716652728>
- Curran, F. C. (2016b). Racial disproportionalities in discipline: The role of zero tolerance policies. In Information Management Association (Ed.), *Discrimination and diversity: Concepts, methodologies, tools, and applications* (pp. 1251–1266).  
<https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-1933-1.ch057>
- Curran, F. C. (2019). The law, policy, and portrayal of zero tolerance school discipline: Examining prevalence and characteristics across levels of governance and school districts. *Educational Policy*, 33(2), 319–349.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0895904817691840>
- Daly, B. P., Hildenbrand, A. K., Haney-Caron, E., Goldstein, N. E., Galloway, M., & DeMatteo, D. (2016). Disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline: Strategies to reduce the risk of school-based zero tolerance policies resulting in juvenile justice involvement. In K. Heilbrun, D. DeMatteo, & N. E. S. Goldstein (Eds.), *APA handbook of psychology and juvenile justice* (pp. 257–275).  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/14643-012>
- Dejours, C., Deranty, J. P., Renault, E., & Smith, N. H. (2018). *The return of work in critical theory: Self, society, politics*. Columbia University Press.

- Delgado, R. (1988). Critical legal studies and the realities of race-Does the fundamental contradiction have a corollary. *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, 23, Article. 407.  
[https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1460&context=fac\\_articles](https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1460&context=fac_articles)
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2007). Critical race theory and criminal justice. *Humanity & Society*, 31(2–3), 133–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F016059760703100201>
- DeMitchell, T. A., & Hambacher, E. (2016). Zero tolerance, threats of harm, and the imaginary gun: Good intentions run amuck. *Brigham Young University Education and Law Journal*, 2016(1), 1–23.  
<https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1378&context=elli>
- Douzinas, C., Goodrich, P., & Hachamovitch, Y. (1994). *Politics, postmodernity, and critical legal studies: The legality of the contingent*. Psychology Press.
- Dunning-Lozano, J. L. (2018). Secondary discipline: The unintended consequences of zero tolerance school discipline for low-income Black and Latina mothers. *Urban Education*. Advance online publication.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085918817343>
- Evans, K., & Vaandering, D. (2016). *The little book of restorative justice in education: Fostering responsibility, healing, and hope in schools*. Simon and Schuster.
- Feenberg, A. (2014). *The philosophy of praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School*. Verso Trade.

- Geuss, R. (1981). *The idea of a critical theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gramsci, A. (2000). *The Gramsci reader: Selected writings, 1916–1935*. New York University Press.
- Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PLoS One*, *15*(5), Article. e0232076.  
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>
- Hardaway, A. T., Ward, L. W., & Howell, D. (2019). Black girls and women matter: Using African American feminist thought to examine violence and erasure in education. *Urban Education Research & Policy Annuals*, *6*(1), Article. 913.  
<https://journals.charlotte.edu/urbaned/article/view/913>
- Hassan, H. H., & Carter, V. B. (2020). Black and White female disproportional discipline K–12. *Education and Urban Society*, *12*(9), 23–41.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0013124520915571>
- Hill, L. A. (2018). Disturbing disparities: Black girls and the school-to-prison pipeline. *Fordham Law Review Online*, *87*(1), Article 11.  
<https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flro/vol87/iss1/11/>
- Hines, D. E., & Wilmot, J. M. (2018). From spirit-murdering to spirit-healing: Addressing anti-Black aggressions and the inhumane discipline of Black children. *Multicultural Perspectives*, *20*(2), 62–69.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2018.1447064>

- Hines, D. E., & Young, J. L. (2020). Never again left in prison cells: African American girl's citizenship making in an era of anti-Black girlhoods. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 52(3), 283–294.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1788520>
- Hines-Datiri, D., & Carter Andrews, D. J. (2020). The effects of zero tolerance policies on Black girls: Using critical race feminism and figured worlds to examine school discipline. *Urban Education*, 55(10), 1419–1440.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085917690204>
- Hoffman, S. (2014). Zero benefit: Estimating the effect of zero tolerance discipline policies on racial disparities in school discipline. *Educational Policy*, 28(1), 69–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0895904812453999>
- Honneth, A. (1991). *The critique of power: Reflective stages in a critical social theory*. MIT Press.
- Horkheimer, M. (1937). Traditionelle und kritische theorie. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 6(2), 245–294. <https://doi.org/10.5840/zfs19376265>
- Horkheimer, M. (1982). *Critical theory selected essays*. Continuum Publishing.
- How, A. (2017). *Critical theory*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Hunt, A. (1986). The theory of critical legal studies. *Journal of Legal Studies*, 6(1), 1–45.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/764467>
- Jay, M. (1984). *Marxism and totality: The adventures of a concept from Lukács to Habermas*. University of California Press.



- Johnson, B. G. (2017). Safeguarding students' access to education: An analysis of stop-and-frisk and zero-tolerance policies. *Colleagues, 14*(1), Article 18.  
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1286&context=colleagues>
- Kelman, M. (1987). *A guide to critical legal studies*. Harvard University Press.
- Kubisch, A. C., Brown, P., Chaskin, R., Hirota, J., Joseph, M., Richman, H., & Roberts, M. (1997). *Voices from the field: Learning from the early work of comprehensive community initiatives*. Aspen Institute.
- Kyere, E., Joseph, A., & Wei, K. (2020). Alternative to zero-tolerance policies and out-of-school suspensions: A multitiered centered perspective. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 29*(5), 421–436.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2018.1528914>
- Lacoe, J., & Steinberg, M. P. (2018). Rolling back zero tolerance: The effect of discipline policy reform on suspension usage and student outcomes. *Peabody Journal of Education, 93*(2), 207–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2018.1435047>
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Sage.
- Lindsay, C. A., & Hart, C. M. (2017). Exposure to same-race teachers and student disciplinary outcomes for Black students in North Carolina. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 39*(3), 485–510.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0162373717693109>
- Lukács, G. (1974). *Conversations with Lukács*. MIT Press.

- Lunn, E. (1984). *Marxism and modernism: An historical study of Lukacs, Brecht*.  
University of California Press.
- Lustick, H. (2017). *Restorative small schools in locked-down buildings: The impact of zero-tolerance district-wide discipline on small school culture* (ED605007).  
ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED605007>
- Mallett, C. (2016). The school-to-prison pipeline: A critical review of the punitive paradigm shift. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 33(1), 15–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-015-0397-1>.
- Martin, J., & Smith, J. (2017). *Subjective discipline and the social control of Black girls in pipeline schools* (EJ1149866). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1149866>
- Martinez, A. (2014). Critical race theory: Its origins, history, and importance to the discourses and rhetorics of race. *Frame-Journal of Literacy Studies*, 27(2), 9–27.  
<https://experts.syr.edu/en/publications/critical-race-theory-its-origins-history-and-importance-to-the-di>
- Marx, K. (1972). *The Marx-Engels reader* (Vol. 4). Norton.
- Marx, K. (1981). *Capital: A critique of political economy: Volume III*. International Publishers.
- McNeal, L. R. (2016). Managing our blind spot: The role of bias in the school-to-prison pipeline. *Arizona State Law Journal*, 48, 285–311.  
[https://arizonastatelawjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/McNeal\\_Final.pdf](https://arizonastatelawjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/McNeal_Final.pdf)
- Miller, B. D. (2017). *Cultural anthropology*. Pearson.

- Monell, A. (2018). *Zero tolerance, zero justice: Teacher perceptions of using restorative justice* [Doctoral dissertation, Kennesaw State University]. Digital Commons at Kennesaw State University.  
[https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/teachleaddoc\\_etd/28/](https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/teachleaddoc_etd/28/)
- Moodie, N. (2017). Decolonising race theory. In G. Vass, J. Maxwell, S. Rudolph, & K. N. Gulson (Eds.), *The relationality of race in education research* (pp. 33–47). Routledge.
- Moreno, G., & Scaletta, M. (2018). Moving away from zero tolerance policies: Examination of Illinois educator preparedness in addressing student behavior. *International Journal of Emotional Education, 10*(2), 93–110.  
<http://www.um.edu.mt/ijee>
- Morris, M. (2016). *Push-out: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. New Press.
- Nance, J. P. (2016). Student surveillance, racial inequalities, and implicit racial bias. *Emory Law Journal, 66*(4), Article 765.  
<https://scholarlycommons.law.emory.edu/elj/vol66/iss4/1/>
- Neumann, F., Marcuse, H., & Kirchheimer, O. (2013). *Secret reports on Nazi Germany: The Frankfurt School contribution to the war effort*. Princeton University Press.
- O'Brien, D., & Nygreen, K. (2020). Advancing restorative justice in the context of racial neoliberalism: Engaging contradictions to build humanizing spaces. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 53*(4), 518–530.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2020.1791768>

- Okilwa, N. S., & Robert, C. (2017). School discipline disparity: Converging efforts for better student outcomes. *The Urban Review*, 49(2), 239–262.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-017-0399-8>
- Paley, J. (2016). *Phenomenology as qualitative research: A critical analysis of meaning attribution*. Taylor & Francis.
- Poole, B. A. (2019). The school of hard knocks: Examining how Pennsylvania school disciplinary policies push Black girls into the criminal justice system. *Duquesne Law Review*, 57(1), Article 382.  
<https://dsc.duq.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3849&context=dlr>
- Rambo, S. E. (2020). *Spare the rod, educate the child: Moving away from zero-tolerance policies in schools* (Publication No. 28024005) [Doctoral dissertation, Saint Mary's College of California]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.  
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/bffba0ea3eac3360c455c4084cfeb4c3/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Ramsay-Smith, H. E. (2016). *Zero-tolerance or intolerance: A critical examination of the influence of school policies on student perceptions and aspirations in public schools* [Doctoral dissertation, Wooster University]. OpenWorks.  
<https://openworks.wooster.edu/independentstudy/7001/>
- Roberson, A. J. (2019). *Predictors of zero tolerance policy violations among high school and middle school students* [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. Liberty University Scholars Crossing. <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/2168/>

- Rodriguez, L. F. (2015). *Intentional excellence: The pedagogy, power, and politics of excellence in Latina/o schools and communities*. Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers.
- Ruiz, R. R. (2017). *School-to-prison pipeline: An evaluation of zero tolerance policies and their alternatives*. Semantics Scholar.  
<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/School-to-Prison-Pipeline%3A-An-Evaluation-of-Zero-Ruiz/2738b314e11e52eee31af07b3b79cbcd19083c53>
- Saldana, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Schiff, M. (2018). Can restorative justice disrupt the ‘school-to-prison pipeline?’ *Contemporary Justice Review*, 21(2), 121–139.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2018.1455509>
- Scott, J., Moses, M. S., Finnigan, K. S., Trujillo, T., & Jackson, D. D. (2017). *Law and order in school and society: How discipline and policing policies harm students of color, and what we can do about it*. National Education Policy Center.
- Sellers, B. G., & Arrigo, B. A. (2018). Zero tolerance, social control, and marginalized youth in U.S. schools: a critical reappraisal of neoliberalism's theoretical foundations and epistemological assumptions. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 21(1), 60–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2018.1415044>
- Sharp, D. N. (2019). What would satisfy us? Taking stock of critical approaches to transitional justice. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 13(3), 570–589.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijz018>
- Sim, S. (2004). *Introducing critical theory: A graphic guide*. Icon Books.

- Skiba, R. J., Mediratta, K., & Rausch, M. K. (Eds.). (2016). *Inequality in school discipline: Research and practice to reduce disparities*. Springer.
- Skrzypek, C., Bascug, E. W., Ball, A., Kim, W., & Elze, D. (2020). In their own words: Student perceptions of restorative practices. *Children & Schools, 12*(9), 1–9.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdaa011>
- Slate, J. R., Gray, P. L., & Jones, B. (2016). A clear lack of equity in disciplinary consequences for Black girls in Texas: A statewide examination. *The Journal of Negro Education, 85*(3), 250–260.  
<https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0250>
- Smith, M., & Bowers-Brown, T. (2010). *Practical research and evaluation: A start-to-finish guide for practitioners*. Sage.
- Sparer, E. (1984). Fundamental human rights, legal entitlements, and the social struggle: A friendly critique of the critical legal studies movement. *Stanford Law Review, 36*(1/2), 509–574. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1228691>
- Stahl, S. D. (2016). The evolution of zero-tolerance policies. *CrissCross, 4*(1), Article 7.  
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/crisscross/vol4/iss1/7/>
- Stoetzle, M. (2020). *Beginning classical social theory*. Manchester University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526153456.00016>
- Thompson, J. (2016). Eliminating zero tolerance policies in schools: Miami-Dade County public schools' approach. *Brigham Young University Education and Law Journal, 2016*(2), 325–349. <https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/elj/vol2016/iss2/5>
- Thompson, M. J. (2017). *The Palgrave handbook of critical theory*. Springer.

- Thurairajah, K. (2018). *The person behind the research: Reflexivity and the qualitative research process*. Canadian Scholars Press.
- Tseng, M., & Becker, C. A. (2016). Impact of zero tolerance policies on American K-12 education and alternative school models. In G. A. Crews (Ed.), *Critical examinations of school violence and disturbance in K-12 education* (pp. 135–148). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-9935-9.ch009>
- Tushnet, M. (1986). Critical legal studies: An introduction to its origins and underpinnings. *Journal of Legal Education*, 36(4), 505–517.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/42898048>
- Tushnet, M. (1991). Critical legal studies: A political history. *Yale Law Journal*, 100, 1515–1544.  
[https://openyls.law.yale.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.13051/8607/60\\_100YaleLJ1515\\_March1991\\_.pdf?sequence=2](https://openyls.law.yale.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.13051/8607/60_100YaleLJ1515_March1991_.pdf?sequence=2)
- Unger, R. M. (1983). The critical legal studies movement. *Harvard Law Review*, 96(3), 561–675. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341032>
- Unger, R. M. (2015). *The critical legal studies movement*. Verso.
- Weiss, C. H. (1995). *Nothing as practical as good theory: Exploring theory-based evaluation for comprehensive community initiatives for children and families*. Semantics Scholar. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Nothing-as-Practical-as-Good-Theory-%3A-Exploring-for-Weiss/ed98a1ac4b7b54ef4854b7b7a802db7b3e46ae02>

- White, B. A. (2017). The invisible victims of the school-to-prison pipeline: Understanding Black girls, school push-out, and the impact of the Every Student Succeeds Act. *William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender, and Social Justice*, 24(3), Article. 8.  
<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1482&context=wmjowl>
- Wilson, M. A. F., Yull, D. G., & Massey, S. G. (2020). Race and the politics of educational exclusion: Explaining the persistence of disproportionate disciplinary practices in an urban school district. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(1), 134–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2018.1511535>
- Woods, L. V. (2020). *Juvenile detention alternatives initiatives, zero-tolerance discipline, and the school-to-prison pipeline* (Publication No. 28150379) [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.  
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/caafcd3fe62a3661d0c319b4aa0533/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Wun, C. (2016). Unaccounted foundations: Black girls, anti-Black racism, and punishment in schools. *Critical Sociology*, 42(4-5), 737–750.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514560444>
- Wun, C. (2018). Angered: Black and non-Black girls of color at the intersections of violence and school discipline in the United States. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(4), 423–437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248829>



Young, J. L., & Butler, B. R. (2018). A student saved is NOT a dollar earned: A meta-analysis of school disparities in discipline practice toward Black children. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 17(4), Article 6.

<https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1176&context=taboo>

## Appendix: Codebook

First phase	Second phase	Theme	Description
		Perceived the issue with the policy was related to race	Critiques about the racial disparities impacting African American women when implementing zero-tolerance (Aldridge, 2018)
	Automatically assumed to be at fault because of racial stereotypes		
Immediately suspended them			
No investigation			
Believe in stories			
They did not start the fight			
Had not been in trouble prior to fight			
Implicated for situation			
Participated in a riot			
All participants in the riot got suspended			
Punished despite video evidence			

*(table continues)*

First phase	Second phase	Theme	Description
School with predominantly White students	Perceived other racial groups would have been punished lightly for the same offenses	Perceived that punishment was not fair	Critiques about the harsh and inconsistent nature of the zero-tolerance policy (Ramsay-Smith, 2016)
<p>does not see how the school could have punished them differently</p> <p>Immediately punished heavily</p> <p>Arrested because of being 18</p> <p>Not a favorite</p> <p>-perceived they were punished lightly</p>	Heaviness of punishment was not aligned with the severity of the offense		

*(table continues)*

First phase	Second phase	Theme	Description
The only one punished Many students were skipping classes		Had poor perceptions about themselves and prospects about their futures	The zero-tolerance policy having detrimental impacts on student outcomes (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018)
	-experience of expulsion or suspension motivated to work harder to prove themselves		
Moved to a different school for a new start Persisted to finish high school		Perceived that they could not improve their situation	
Believed that racism was adamant Could not get a professional job Could not achieve dream profession Did not go to college Effect of their own choices			

*(table continues)*

First phase	Second phase	Theme	Description
<p>Got pregnant</p> <p>Few job choices</p> <p>Homeless</p> <p>Low self-esteem</p> <p>Sent to juvenile detention</p> <p>Forever on their record</p> <p>Six years of youth spent locked up</p>	<p>Perceived themselves to have undesirable attitudes and behaviors deserving of punishments</p>	<p>Impacts of being out-of-school on education</p>	<p>The zero-tolerance policy having detrimental impacts on education (DeMitchell &amp; Hambacher, 2016)</p>
<p>-not because of race</p> <p>Perceived adverse events as the cause of their attitude problem</p> <p>Thought they'd receive heavier punishment than necessary</p>			

(table continues)

First phase	Second phase	Theme	Description
	Fell behind, got delayed, or fully dropped out		
Behind school work			
Fully dropped out of school			
Did not want to go to school			
Missed classes			
Delayed graduation			
GED and military			
GED and vocational studies			
Minimal impact			
	No impact on education and career		
Doing school work while suspended			
No impact on education, continued while in detention			
		Involvement in trouble and the criminal justice system	The zero-tolerance policy having impacts on the school-to-prison trend among African American women (Hassan & Carter, 2020; Rodriguez, 2015; Thompson, 2016)

(table continues)

First phase	Second phase	Theme	Description
	Got into more trouble due to doing nothing while suspended		
No supervision at home			
Reduced patience and attention span			
	-improved behavior		
Did not get involved in fights anymore			
	Involvement in the criminal justice system		
Arrested once			
Been arrested multiple times			
Cases dismissed			
Fighting			
Implicated as a student, implicated as an adult			
Jailed			
None			
Traffic violation			
Was on probation			

(table continues)

First phase	Second phase	Theme	Description
		Recommendations for policies that were fair and non-interfering with education	Perceptions of alternative policies that could result in better outcomes for African American women (Weiss, 1995)
	Fair approach		
Fairness for all races			
Investigate before accusing students			
Talk to the students first			
	No disturbance in education		
After school program			

*Note.* GED = general equivalency diploma.