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The Need for Belonging for Previously Incarcerated Probationers

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Alaina A. Elam

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

The Need for Belonging for Previously Incarcerated Probationers

by

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MP, Walden University, 2021

MS, Capella University, 2017

MS, University of Maryland Eastern Shore, 2011

BS, University of Maryland Eastern Shore, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Research on offender rehabilitation has primarily focused on providing those who are incarcerated with programs and resources to mitigate the circumstances that would lead to recidivism. There is an absence of research on how the need for belonging could reduce recidivism in probationers. Recidivism remains a social problem for many U.S. communities, as those being released are not properly equipped for their transition. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of probationers regarding their transition into their community, recidivism, and their need for belonging. As individual fulfillment and human motivation were examined, Maslow's self-actualization theory was used as the conceptual framework. Data were collected from semi structured, one-on-one interviews with 10 previously incarcerated individuals who had been put on probation. The interview data were analyzed and coded to identify themes. The eight themes that emerged were (a) institutionalized living; (b) lack of rehabilitation, programming, and release preparation; (c) needs and desires during reentry; (d) barriers to success; (e) motivation to acquire things after release; (f) feeling alone; (g) family support; and (h) street life. Leaders of correctional facilities and reentry programs could use these findings to develop program blueprints that are conducive for successful reentry and reduce recidivism. These programs could lead to positive social change by enhancing rehabilitative efforts for those being released from incarceration.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and father, LoVen and Nathaniel Elam. Thank you for setting the example of excellence and always supporting me throughout all of my endeavors. I love you!

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I would like to acknowledge my dissertation committee for all of their assistance throughout this entire process. Thank you, Dr. Scott Hershberger, Dr. Jeffrey Harlow, and Dr. Nicole Hamilton, for your dedication to my research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

Rehabilitation and belonging are key factors in prison reentry and recidivism, as several theoretical models show. Schmitt-Matzen's (2019) inside-out model, for instance, focuses on strengths for each individual inmate being released and leans on the idea that reentry planning must begin inside the facility. McMay and Cotronea (2015) endorsed the importance of inmates developing positive relationships and using leisure time to reduce stress during one's transition into the community. The community reinforcement and family training model is an example of how recidivism can be lowered when the offender's needs are adequately addressed (Miller et al., 2016). Although Fahmy and Wallace (2019) highlighted the importance of positive social relationships with family members during the inmate's transition to the community, Pleggenkuhle et al. (2016) argued that social support and social relationships are important during reentry and play a role in offender success. Rowell-Cunsolo et al. (2020) noted that transition support during reentry is vital to offender resiliency and maintaining good health. When offenders know that there is positive public support for their reentry, it promotes constructive mindsets (Rade et al., 2018). As these differing perspectives illustrate, successful reentry requires intentionality and planning.

In their work, Mowen et al. (2019) identified three separate categories of family support that offenders might receive upon their return home. They found that family support increased prosocial reentry outcomes. Comfort et al. (2018) noted that offenders returning to the community lack a sense of belonging when it comes to relationships.

Correctional facilities and programs bear responsibility when it comes to offender rehabilitation prior to release (Lucken & Fandetti, 2019). As recidivism rates remain high, insight on this phenomenon is needed, and it is imperative that those in need have adequate access to reentry programs (Alper et al., 2018; Seigafo, 2017). Staff within correctional facilities decide what inmates do and what programming or help that they have access to (Burke et al., 2018). Motivation is an important part of an offender's success, and the lack of motivation is a primary reason that they may fall into recidivism (Higley et al., 2019).

Reentry programs designed decades ago that are currently in place need to evolve to meet the needs of offenders (Garot, 2019). When offenders are incarcerated, they are unable to maintain social ties, which are imperative to living a healthy life. Inmates who have social support have higher expectations for themselves in regard to reentry (Meyers et al., 2017). Offenders have social needs that must be met in order to be effectively rehabilitated (Hall & Chong, 2018). De Claire and Dixon (2017) highlighted that socialization can assist offenders with not engaging in criminal behavior. Recidivism rates remain high in the United States; 77% of inmates are arrested again within a 3-year period, and most inmates being released will return to a handful of neighborhoods within one city (Drawve et al., 2019). Le Penne (2017) stated that by choosing to join a community, people satisfy their need to belong. Being accepted by social groups has a significant impact on well-being and willingness to adhere to pro-social ways (Baumeister et al., 2005). Because of its importance, belonging should be a critical element of prisoner reentry programs.

Problem Statement

Fulfilling the need for belonging by previously incarcerated probationers is vital for their successful reentry in the community. Riley (2019) described belonging as “being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity, a feeling of being at home in a place and of being valued” (p. 91). Offenders preparing for release, who begin to do so at preliminary meetings with staff, rather than towards the end of their sentence, are adequately prepared for their transition into the community (Ellis & Henderson, 2017). However, many programs lack social support aimed at instilling a sense of belonging, which is a reentry barrier to an offender’s successful transition (Lin et al., 2018). Today’s programs for offenders typically include traditional services, which include employment, education, counseling, and substance abuse treatment; however, it is critical to address all of the needs present (Woodside & McClam, 2015). To increase the quality of life for an offender, correctional programs should solve all existing problems and target the whole person (McDonald & Wetzel, 2019). This would include imparting strategies to assist offenders with achieving a sense of belonging.

When offenders are released from incarceration, they face many challenges including housing and employment; however, feelings of anxiety and isolation are also very present barriers (Western et al., 2015). While making their transition back into the community, many offenders are restricted in terms of where they can live, where they can go, whom they can associate with, and so forth (ten Bonsel & Sample, 2019). Such restrictions erase a sense of belonging for offenders. Many offenders have also

experienced significant trauma and are in need of social support, so the trauma remains unresolved and leads to recidivism (Pettus-Davis et al., 2019). It is also imperative that individuals feel accepted by those helping them. Offenders under community supervision who have a positive relationship with their parole officer have lower rates of recidivism (Chamberlain et al., 2018). The support an offender receives from all social avenues is important for their successful transition into the community (Kras, 2019).

Social rehabilitation includes the offender assuming their place in society and getting used to their new social life outside of the jail walls (Western et al., 2015). Durose et al. (2015) reported that following their first year of release from incarceration in 2005, 43% of inmates in the U.S. were arrested again. Recently released offenders may feel isolated. Offenders on probation feel the stigma of incarceration and may even be restricted from connecting with other offenders, even if these are their friends (Goodstein, 2019). Solutions for recidivism should take an offender's environment into consideration. The social climate of an offender's environment can have an impact on their ability to be rehabilitated (Hall & Chong, 2018). Many relationships are strained during incarceration. It is essential that researchers examine strategies to maintain relationships as well as the role of belonging (Kras, 2019; McKay et al., 2018).

Although the existing research regarding offender rehabilitation and recidivism illuminates important findings, I have found no research on how satisfying the need for belonging could reduce recidivism in probationers. Given such, further research is warranted on recidivism in probationers through the application of belonging, as defined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Such knowledge may address the documented problem

of unsuccessful community transition and high recidivism rates in offenders (see Durose et al., 2015; Hall & Chong, 2018; Lin et al., 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological design study was to understand the lived experiences of probationers in regard to community transition, recidivism, and belonging. In Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, there are five tiers that encompass basic human needs. Maslow identified these tiers, from bottom to top, as physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs. In this study, I focused on belonging, which is a part of the third tier. When Maslow illuminated belonging, he noted that people not only desire but need to have meaningful and affectionate relationships. Simply joining a community, as offenders do after release, does not signify a sense of belonging (Le Penne, 2017). Seigafo (2017) stated that inmates who are released into the community often continue to commit new crimes resulting in increased recidivism rates. Seigafo (2017) reported that in preparation for the rehabilitation process and for release one day, inmates need adequate access to programs that can assist them in that transition. Alper et al. (2018) reported that 83% of inmates released were arrested again within a 9-year period. Social support after release is critical and could assist with increasing inmates' feeling of belonging, as well as lowering recidivism (Kras, 2019). In this research, I evaluated the significance of belonging as a potential framework for addressing successful offender rehabilitation.

Research Question

What are the experiences that probationers have with belonging in their family, community, and workplace after release?

Conceptual Framework

The theory that was appropriate for this research study was self-actualization. Maslow (1971) described self-actualization as an individual's development towards fulfillment of all of their needs. The motivation to acquire these needs lead individuals to make various decisions. In studying human motivation, Maslow (1943) found that people have a desire to meet their needs; he developed the hierarchy of needs to categorize human needs by priority. A tenet of the hierarchy of needs is that in order to help someone, one must first address their basic human needs such as food, water and housing. Woodside and McClam (2015) noted, for instance, that if an individual is hungry, it will be challenging for them to focus on a higher need such as love and security. McLeod (2007) added that when there is deprivation of a specific need, an individual is then motivated to have that need met; if a person is cold, for example, they are motivated to find a warm place, so they are no longer cold. After the basic human needs have been resolved, additional needs can be identified and fixed. In his work, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow (1943) reported that the hierarchy of needs includes safety needs such as security, social needs such as love and acceptance, esteem needs such as independence, and finally self-actualization and understanding of oneself.

Self-actualization informed the development of the research question for this study. I also used the concept to shape the interview questions that I posed to participants

and to interpret the resulting data. McLeod (2007) describes the motivation to fulfil an unmet need growing and becoming stronger when it is not met. The concept of self-actualization was therefore applicable to studying offenders being released from incarceration, to describe the desire they feel to have their needs met when returning to the community. Bunn (2018) demonstrated that the needs of those returning to the community can be complex and it is imperative that these crisis needs are met.

Individuals who feel that the dominant group has excluded them, risk exercising self-defeating behavior such as substance use and criminal activity (Baumeister et al., 2005).

Baumeister et al. (2005) found that people thrive when they are included, rather than resorting to delinquency when rejected by society. In an earlier study, Baumeister, with Leary (1995), highlighted that the need to belong is strong motivation to survive and self-regulate. People have a need to belong and to be accepted, which is no different for members of stigmatized groups who have been rejected, such as offenders (Carvallo & Pelham, 2006). Social support and social interaction after release assist with increasing the feeling of belonging, as well as reducing the odds of recidivism (Pettus et al., 2017). I conducted interviews to understand participants' experience. Correctional programs should provide assistance targeting the whole person, because their failure to do so could lead to recidivism (McDonald & Wetzel, 2019). A human being has a need for belonging (Maslow, 1943). A lack of addressing all of the offender's needs, beginning with their basic human needs, lead to a lack of rehabilitation and ultimately recidivism.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I used a qualitative research methodology, specifically phenomenological inquiry. I conducted open-ended interviews to gain an in depth understanding of the lived experiences of probationers in reference to belonging. A phenomenological study was appropriate because it is a valuable technique to understand what an individual's experience is (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). A phenomenological approach involving interviews also allows for deeper understanding of how the interviewee has been impacted from the experience (Awenat et al., 2018). One-on-one interviews allow the researcher to fully explore an individual's lived experience (Thackeray & Eatough, 2018). As opposed to structured interviews, semi structured interviews work well to authentically explore participants' experience and comprehend the reality of the human experience (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018).

A transcendental phenomenological approach was fitting for this research study because it allowed me to elicit rich accounts of the essence of post incarceration and social inclusion (Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019). This qualitative approach also allows for a deeper understanding of the human experience by removing preconceived notions that could hide the true meaning of the phenomenon (Sheehan, 2014). This theoretical approach also permits the researcher to pursue an unbiased approach towards the data being collected (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenological approach promotes clarity about the experience being studied. This is different than a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which would encompass the researcher's judgments and beliefs regarding the data as well as allow for multiple viewpoints (Cooper-Sadlo et al.,

2019). With transcendental phenomenology, any predetermined concepts from the researcher's personal or professional life would have to be ignored and disregarded (Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019). This omittance promotes the truthfulness of the research.

An internet search brought me to the website for the Department of Public Safety & Correctional Services. On the website I was able to locate three probation and parole offices within a 10-mile radius of the study area. Purposive sampling was initiated to ensure that the interviews that took place would be full of significant knowledge. I selected participants by posting flyers on bulletin boards and handing them out to individuals (see Appendix A). Eligible participants would have to be currently on an active probation. They had to have been previously incarcerated within the last year; while incarcerated, they needed to have participated in at least one reentry program. The flyers explained who I am, as well as the purpose of my research study. I also provided details regarding the entire process, how confidentiality would be maintained, and any risks or benefits they could encounter by participating. Individuals who were interested called me to obtain further details such as the time commitment, and a time and date was confirmed to meet for the interview. The appropriate number of participants can greatly vary by study; however, 3-10 participants are recommended for a phenomenological study (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). A total of 10 participants was selected to better understand the lived experiences of probationers in regard to belonging.

I conducted the interviews at a public library or public location of the participant's choosing, and at a time that was convenient for them. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes each. To initiate the conversation, participants were prompted to speak

about their experience of belonging before, during, and after their release from incarceration. I asked questions about belonging in their family, in their community, in their workplace, and in other places that are a part of their individual life. To properly capture participants' statements, I recorded each interview. After each interview, the recordings were transcribed and checked for accuracy. All interview materials will be secured in a locked file cabinet in my home office. To analyze the data, I used a thematic method. Thematic analysis involves six steps, including familiarizing oneself with the data, assigning preliminary codes to describe the data, seeking patterns or themes within the codes, reviewing the themes that surface, defining each of the themes that emerge, and producing a report (Nowell et al., 2017). To commence this process, I read the data collected over and over to gain an understanding of what information was present. After thoroughly combing through the data, I recorded and coded any themes that began to emerge. I then looked for patterns in the codes from the different participant interviews. My next step was to review all of the themes that had appeared. I then categorized each of the themes present. A thematic analysis allows for patterns in the data to be given significance (Stevens & Wood, 2019). Ultimately, all of the themes collected should characterize the unique lived experiences of the participants.

Qualitative studies can be multifaceted, and, as such, I needed to take the appropriate measures to ensure that validity and reliability were upheld (see Cypress, 2017). This was partially done by confirming understanding with interviewees after the data had been transcribed. This was also achieved by viewing the participant experiences as generalizable to the larger population (Torvik, et.al, 2018). Part of my role as the

researcher was to spend a large amount of time submerging myself with all of the details of the study to guarantee that the findings are accurate from the viewpoint of the participants. To that end, I strove to become knowledgeable in all details of the participants, the study, and data collected. An audit trail assists with maintaining confirmability; likewise, it is important that all of the interviews were conducted in the same manner. I conducted member checks to ensure the accuracy of the findings (see Graneheim et al., 2017). After identifying key themes, I met with the research participants to determine whether they agreed with my interpretation. These actions helped to confirm my interpretation was correct, as well as ensure the meaningfulness of the study findings.

Definitions

Following are definitions of some of the key terms used throughout this research study:

Offender: A person who has previously committed an illegal act.

Probation: Supervision in the community by an agency.

Probationer: A person who is on probation.

Recidivism: Engagement in criminal activity after a previous criminal justice encounter.

Assumptions

The first assumption that I had in conducting the study was that probationers would be willing to share their experience. Another assumption was that they would be able to provide accurate accounts of their experiences in their interviews. Another

assumption was that the personal accounts provided would be easily understood so that the data could be analyzed.

Scope and Delimitations

I interviewed Maryland probationers who were 18 years or older and who were released within the last year. I did not consider other criteria such as gender or race in determining participant eligibility. Semi structured, one-on-one interviews allowed for a greater understanding of the lived experiences of the probationers. The purpose was to use the data collected to not only understand the participant experience better, but to also impact the policies and decisions being made about how to assist this population.

Limitations

Qualitative research is not free from the possibility of limitations, so all appropriate precautions need to be taken to ensure that the study is conducted properly (Munthe-Kaas et. al, 2018). Potential barriers in this study included probationers not wanting to participate in the study or the probation offices not wanting to participate in the study. Another limitation was that participating probationers might have felt uneasy about sharing such personal topics and sensitive information with a stranger, and this could limit how much detail they share (Rodriguez, 2017). A limitation exists due to the data only being collected in one region. Also, transcribing the data from the interviews could have led to misunderstanding during the transfer process; however, this could be addressed through triangulation (Helm & Dooly, 2017). I used multiple data sources to bolster the research findings.

Significance

This research study may assist with understanding how to rehabilitate offenders being released, which may ultimately help to reduce recidivism. This study has the potential to provide much-needed insight into the specific needs that offenders have and their motivation to acquire those needs. Maslow (1943) highlighted that humans have an urgent desire to have their needs met. Programs that provide assistance to offenders being released should be able to adequately meet the needs of their client population. Currently, legislation that is implemented to protect the public also acts as a form of social exclusion for offenders in the community (ten Bensel & Sample, 2019). This study could inform the development and implementation of new policies to reduce recidivism. The offenders being released; their families; and correctional staff, probation and parole officers, and other public safety personnel may benefit from the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

An individual's sense of belonging is not just about fitting in with the popular crowd, but rather it is connected to their overall well-being (Cullinane, 2020). For recently released individuals, feelings of a deficiency in attachment may motivate them to fulfill that need (Goodstein, 2019; Mcleod, 2007). An essential function for every living person is to feel desired and needed (Maslow, 1943). This feat becomes tougher during and after incarceration (Kras, 2019). Not only does having a sense of belonging feel good, but it also helps individuals to battle negative characteristics such as stress, suicidal thoughts, drug or alcohol abuse, and violence (Cullinane, 2020). After fulfilling vital needs such as food, water, and safety that keep them alive, individuals are able to pursue love and belonging (Maslow, 1943). In this chapter, I will describe the literature search strategy and then review key literature. The literature review will include discussion of reentry, the need for belonging, and probation.

Literature Search Strategy

For this research study I searched through numerous resources. The majority of the resources were peer reviewed journal articles found within Walden databases. I also reviewed older sources to for relevant statistics, trends, theory, reentry history, and other valuable information. In addition, I obtained statistics from national and state resources that offer data on reentry, recidivism, probation, and corrections. To find literature, I used terms such as *reentry*, *offender*, *probation*, *need for belonging*, *socialization*, *relationships*, *ex-offender*, and *social bonds*. Additional key search words included *jail*,

prison, family, prisoner, reentry programs, and community. The literature review provides understanding of the many barriers faced by returning citizens during their transition.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Reentry

Although reentry issues do not constitute a new phenomenon, individuals released from incarceration continue to indicate that they are not provided with everything that they need to be self-sufficient (Lucken & Fandetti, 2019; Rade et al., 2018). The reentry programs that do exist in some jurisdictions typically focus on the general needs of shelter and employment (Hall & Chong, 2018). Although both of these needs are vital for reentry success, there are a number of other needs that a newly released individual will need to be successful (LaCourse et al., 2019). In many areas there is a lack of public support for offenders receiving free education and skills training (Leone & Wruble, 2017).

Recidivism

The cycle of incarceration is difficult for ex-offenders to break out of when they have little resources to build their new life (Goodstein, 2019). Newly released individuals who were once the head of their household are often expected to return to that role immediately (McKay et al., 2018). Without viable employment and other necessary resources, however, individuals often fail at their reentry efforts (LaCourse et al., 2019). Offenders seeking financial stability often find barriers when it comes to gaining employment (Goodstein, 2019). Employers who have never had prior communication

with a recently released individual can be reluctant to hire potential recruits with a criminal record, even when the individual has job experience in the field (Rade et al., 2018; Goodstein, 2019). Racial and ethnic minorities experience further discrimination, as White counterparts with the same skills, and a criminal record, are more likely to be selected for openings, over a minority with no previous convictions (Christian & Walker, 2021). Many ex-offenders fail to make it past the application stage, when they disclose their criminal background on the application (Goodstein, 2019).

When hired, ex-offenders experience rigorous practices and more stringent rules that other employees do not experience (Goodstein, 2019). Low-income offenders seeking additional support, such as food and housing benefits, are often deemed ineligible due to their record, even if they have children to support (Golembeski et al., 2020). Family members are also impacted. Many housing agencies have a zero-tolerance policy for criminal backgrounds, and if the individual's family is receiving support from social services, these benefits can be revoked, simply by the individual coming to live in the same home as their family (Walter et al., 2017). Therefore, an individual's criminality can negatively impact their entire family.

Offenders without feasible resources experience stress and are at risk of recidivism as they are unable to contribute to their family's well-being (Kras, 2019). The inability to gain viable legal income can cause some to go back to illegal means to provide necessities such as food and shelter for themselves and for those whom they are responsible (LaCourse et al., 2019). Being arrested for a minor crime could lead to

barriers for low-income individuals such as financing their basic needs in addition to the newly added justice-related expenses (Edelman, 2019).

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that 68% of offenders released from incarceration return within 3 years, while 83% of offenders released from incarceration return within 9 years (Alper et al., 2018). In Maryland, the recidivism rate is alarming, with 40.5% of offenders returning to incarceration; it is attributed to lack of preparation for the impending transition (Leone & Wruble, 2017). For the purpose of this research study, reentry was defined as transitioning from incarceration to the community. In addition, recidivism was defined as any event of being rearrested or reincarcerated or experiencing a probation violation after prior incarceration.

Rehabilitation

With such high numbers regarding recidivism, new ideas are needed to create a blueprint for successful reentry (Hall & Chong, 2018). Judges continue to choose incarceration as a means of rehabilitation although incarceration has not been demonstrated as a better rehabilitative means than options that do not include incarceration (Mitchell et al., 2017). It is imperative that inmates are not just randomly selected for programs, but that risk needs assessments be done so that each inmate is provided with a tailor-made guide to their needs (Matz et al., 2018). Rehabilitative programs that focus on education and skills are in abundance while programs that identify social needs are difficult to uncover (McMay & Cotronea, 2015). Rehabilitative services that focus on self-change, rather than skills, are more beneficial to those about to reenter society (Visher et al., 2017).

Higher recidivism rates and lower public safety are the fruits of correctional facilities and communities failing to integrate rehabilitative efforts into their process (McDonald & Wetzel, 2019; Seigafo, 2017). Reentry should be looked at from the lens of what any individual needs, and programmers should treat the whole person, rather than what needs they believe that an offender needs (McDonald & Wetzel, 2019). Maslow (1943) identified the needs that humans require to survive, which are expressed as the hierarchy of needs. Maslow provided five levels of needs that humans not only require to survive, but are the root of all motivation. These needs include physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Within the level of love and belonging, as Maslow noted, people desire friendship, family, intimacy, and a sense of connection to those around them.

Hall and Chong (2018) noted that the social climate of a correctional facility is imperative, as it has the power to assist offenders with progressing in their rehabilitation, as well as to hinder their progress in their journey. Those who possess healthy coping skills are typically able to uphold rules while incarcerated and maintain a higher level of well-being that could help them when facing new and difficult situations (LaCourse et al., 2018). Even though a lack of rehabilitation during incarceration is known to lead to recidivism, there is still a lack of support from the public who have an influence on these verdicts (Nalukwago et al., 2019). This lack of support can begin within the facility, with correctional officers, and with the relationship between the inmate and the program facilitator, which can be reflected in the inmate's success (Higley et al., 2019; Leone & Wruble, 2017). A positive social bond with the program facilitator means a more

favorable outcome is possible (McMay & Cotronea, 2015). Inmate participants who are engaged in the program are more likely to be motivated to make changes regarding their criminality, even when the program focuses on social desires (Higley et al., 2019).

Planning for release is a necessary component for inmates; it ensures that individuals once they are released will not be disconnected from community resources such as healthcare, housing, and employment (Rowell-Cunsolo et al., 2020). Most inmates being released from jails will return to the local community so linking those in need to local resources could be beneficial (Miller et al., 2016).

Offender Needs

Reentry efforts are growing across the United States as data are collected regarding the ill preparedness of newly released individuals (Seigafo, 2017).

Rehabilitative efforts in the area of education, employment, trades, and other skills have shown to be beneficial in individuals' gaining access to opportunities (Higley et al., 2019). Even though rehabilitative efforts can be beneficial to those who are in need of the skills, recidivism rates remain high, and other needs remain unmet. Programs often fail to meet all of the needs that an individual has, which leaves them unprepared and not rehabilitated prior to their release (Rade et al., 2018). Program participants with low self-worth are less likely to be successful in rehabilitative programs (Higley et al., 2019) and may possess fewer positive coping strategies that could help improve well-being (LaCourse et al., 2019).

To add to the success of reentry efforts, the Federal Bureau of Prisons mandated in 2010 that correctional facilities emphasize positive relationship building in

rehabilitative programs (McMay & Cotronea, 2015). Effective offender rehabilitation that prepares participants for release assists offenders in not committing new crimes (Seigafo, 2017). As inmates are released without being connected to proper resources, they feel unprepared for their transition (Rowell-Cunsolo et al., 2020). Upon release when met with potential opportunity, offenders have not been taught how to overcome challenges, and correctional facilities have failed to correct those under their supervision (Seigafo, 2017). The majority of inmates will be released from incarceration one day, but once released, they may be disqualified from employment due to background checks and diminished social skills due to their time away from society (Christian & Walker, 2021). The longer an individual has been incarcerated, the stronger the strain on their connection to the community (Christian & Walker, 2021).

Need for Belonging

Relationships

The need for belonging and socialization is an essential requirement for human beings to thrive (Meyers et al., 2017). Even from the early years of preschool, peer acceptance is imperative, and relationships provide much-needed support (Wang et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an example of the need for belonging. Older adults reported feeling alone when separated from loved ones for as little as 4 weeks (Kutwal et al., 2020). Kutwal et al. (2020) noted that even residents who were able to communicate with family via telephone or video visits described experiencing loneliness and depression that persisted, even after the period of isolation was over.

Incarceration similarly limits individuals' ability to contact loved ones to maintain relationships. In both instances with the older adults and the inmates, social ties are impacted significantly due to feelings of isolation. Physical visits during incarceration are a vital opportunity for the interaction that inmates as well as family members need (Meyers et al., 2017). As the research indicates, a persistent motivation to feel accepted exists in every individual and in various situations. The need for belonging for the purpose of this research study was defined as longing to fit in.

Family

Although social connections can often develop effortlessly, maintaining these social connections, once formed, requires more effort to preserve (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Inmates are often unable to put in the effort needed to maintain prior social connections while behind bars, as families experience multiple challenges including financial barriers (McKay et al., 2018). Physical visits during incarceration allow for continuous communication with family, while reducing the feeling of loneliness (Meyers et al., 2017).

Throughout the course of incarceration, the inmate is not the only one who experiences a loss. Beginning with arrest, children can experience their own loss. Many inmates try to parent from behind bars to help their child address the stigma and emotional trauma associated with their parent's incarceration (McKay et al., 2018). Inmates who are unable to continue providing for their child financially, emotionally, and their overall well-being, experience feelings of insufficiency, especially as children often develop anxiety and depression associated with the parental loss (McKay, Lindquist,

Feinberg, Steffey, Landwehr, & Bir, 2018). The cycle of incarceration impacts the inmate and their family members (Seigafo, 2017). Although most incarcerated individuals identify themselves as someone in an intimate relationship, without the maintenance of these social bonds, significant others feel unprepared to welcome a loved one home (Comfort, Krieger, Landwehr, McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Kennedy & Bir, 2018).

Significant Others

For incarcerated individuals who have a significant other, the need for belonging can be seen through the desire to maintain a healthy relationship; however, the more time away results in less time to advance these relationships (Comfort, Krieger, Landwehr, McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Kennedy, & Bir, 2018). As most criminal justice involved families struggle financially before and during the incarceration period, there is a great expectation by the significant other for the recently released individual to come home and immediately provide the vital support needed; but the challenges faced regarding lack of employment opportunities is difficult to overcome (McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Steffey, Landwehr, & Bir, 2018; Comfort, Krieger, Landwehr, McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Kennedy, & Bir, 2018).

Couples have a feeling of helplessness after having spent the time of incarceration without being able to communicate freely. As they begin to communicate for the first time in possibly years, the conversation is about finances, seeking employment and shared duties, rather than the emotional support that has been desired on both ends (McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Steffey, Landwehr, and Bir, 2018). Differences in each

party's expectations about how life will be lived after the release, can fuel a conflict (Comfort, Krieger, Landwehr, McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Kennedy, and Bir, 2018).

Conflict between recently released individuals and their support system can lead to a search for support from those in other places, including negative influences (Comfort, Krieger, Landwehr, McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Kennedy, & Bir, 2018). As people seek to hold on to social bonds, the unfavorable relationships formed prior to incarceration or during incarceration, that may have previously been severed in trying to live a healthy lifestyle, may now be an option while seeking the need to belong and facing rejection from others (Carvallo & Pelham, 2006).

After release, as social support begins to fade, recently released offenders are often drawn to the perceived social support from other offenders who may be completing similar community programs and requirements (ten Bensele & Sample, 2016; Comfort, Krieger, Landwehr, McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Kennedy, & Bir, 2018). As conflict is planted from insistent significant others trying to motivate their recently released offender to seek opportunities, offender to offender relationships serve as a replacement for the substantial emotional support of family (McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Steffey, Landwehr, & Bir, 2018; Comfort, Krieger, Landwehr, McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Kennedy, & Bir, 2018).

Inmate Bonds

Inmates who are unable to maintain social ties with family, find that they are often able to form new social bonds with those around them, who are also longing for a sense of belonging. As financial challenges and social connections decline on the outside

of the bars, new relationships form on the inside (McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Steffey, Landwehr, & Bir, 2018). Proximity in correctional facilities has a powerful influence in regard to relationship establishment, as people can find comfort in the presence of others who are around, and experiencing the same traumas (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Motivated by a need to belong, people will devote much of their time into nurturing these new relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Latane, Eckman, & Joy (1966) found that bonding will transpire between individuals under hostile circumstances, such as participants in their study who liked each other more after experiencing an electric shock together. After developing a favorable perspective of other inmates who they spend their time with, inmates are likely to form bonds with them. (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need to belong is so meaningful that people have even formed relationships with prior rivals, and as the time for release approaches, inmates again experience loss, as their newest social ties are separated (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Even though these newer social ties were formed during incarceration with an impending end, people still put effort into not only forming the relationship but maintaining it after they are physically separated (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This is a replica of what they have done when they were physically separated from their families. The need for belonging motivates people to avoid breaching social ties, and to even make promises of remaining in contact via phone or letters, even if the relationship was obstructive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For ex-offenders who have lost social ties while incarcerated, they find that they are unable to share the struggles and barriers that they face with their family when they return home. Implementing interventions that allowed

for social support and fulfilled the need for belonging could greatly assist with the post incarceration transition. Positive social bonds are extremely important, even if they are formed in incarceration because they are needed to bridge the way to resources (Pleggenkuhle, Huebner, & Kras, 2016).

Reentry Process

The need for belonging can be found in people from all walks of life, over a multitude of demographics and regardless of criminal background; however, this feeling can increase for those who have had encounters with the criminal justice system and feel the smudge of wrongdoing on them (Pettus, Dunnigan, Veeh, Howard, Scheyett & Roberts, 2017). During the reentry process, social support from friends and family can diminish the possibility of recidivism (Pettus, Dunnigan, Veeh, Howard, Scheyett & Roberts, 2017). Love and belonging were found among the important things that families could provide their returning family members with during their transition (Mowen, Stansfield, & Bowman, 2019).

When families provide support, barriers can be overcome for those returning home in a multitude of ways, including guidance, housing, and transportation (LaCourse, Listwan, Reid, & Hartman, 2018). Once an inmate has been released from incarceration, this is a period of uniting for the social bonds that still exist (Comfort, Krieger, Landwehr, McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Kennedy & Bir, 2018). As the transition into the community commences, offenders often find that there are many barriers in place that continue to restrict them from being close to their families including social limitations, even though they are no longer behind bars (ten Bensel & Sample, 2019). The journey of

incarceration is one that all parties involved experience from arrest to release (McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Steffey, Landwehr, & Bir, (2018).

There is a great need to understand what things can be done to improve the stability of bonds during the time of incarceration, especially because most recently released offenders will rely on the social bonds they had prior to incarceration for a successful transition (Pettus, Dunnigan, Veeh, Howard, Scheyett, & Roberts (2017). Maintaining social bonds through incarceration assists with the opportunity to design a strategy for a successful reentry (Meyers, Wright, Young, & Tasca, 2017). Effective maintenance of positive social bonds can also provide support after release and reduce individual recidivism (Pettus, Dunnigan, Veeh, Howard, Scheyett, & Roberts, 2017). Unfortunately, the majority of recently released offenders are not met with the necessary social support required to be successful (Pettus, Dunnigan, Veeh, Howard, Scheyett, & Roberts, 2017). The rotation of reincarceration not only has consequences for the family, but impacts the community as well (Seigafo, 2017).

Society

Offenders who have been released and are in the community, describe feeling less than those around them when among other members of society (Comfort, Krieger, Landwehr, McKay, Lindquist, Feinberg, Kennedy & Bir, 2018). Belonging can be defined as feeling secure or confident in being who you are, and assured that you fit in (Riley, 2019). The desire for companionships can be so strong that individuals lose a part of themselves, seeking the satisfaction of being needed by others.

Feeling Vulnerable. Social institutions such as schools, the workplace and correctional facilities unknowingly create a sense of belonging (Riley, 2019). Regardless of the circumstances that cause inmates to arrive in the same place, once there, human motivation warrants seeking acceptance from those in the environment (Cullinane, 2020). Positive social bonds are so significant that they not only have a heavy bearing on our well-being, but it decreases the motivation of violence (Juan, Hemenway & Bendall, 2017). Many attackers in school shootings have described experiencing bullying, harassment, and a lack of positive relationships (Vossekuil et al., 2000). Students seeking to know that the ones around them care about them, also feel the absence of social capital in their environment when needed (Juan, Hemenway & Bendall, 2017).

Lacking social connectedness is not restricted for youth social institutions. Adults in the workplace establish an identity and perceive whether they feel valued (Filstad, Traavik, & Gorli, 2019). Individuals who perceive discrimination in the workplace also experience feeling defenseless and a lack of social support (Zambrana, Valdez, Pittman, Bartko, Weber, Parra-Medina, 2020). In addition to individuals feeling vulnerable and a lack of social support, perceived discrimination can lead to increased stress levels (Mirpuri, Ocampo, Narang & Robers, 2020). In social institutions, belonging produces the opportunity for one to feel valued and essential (Le Penne, 2017). Belonging to a community of people is essential for the places that we frequent (Tyrell & Griffin, 2013). When individuals feel that the social group (workplace) that they have chosen to be a part of is not accepting of them, they will have the desire to join a different social group that is accepting of them (Le Penne, 2017). For individuals who feel a lack of respect or

embarrassed, this can result in low self-fulfilment, as people often use the perceptions of others to define themselves (Hershcovis, Ogunfowora, Reich, & Christie, 2017).

Feeling Out of Place or Undesirable. A positive sense of belonging assists in feeling motivated toward shared goals, rather than feelings of exclusion that can lead to decreased motivation (Riley, 2019; Filstad, Traavik, & Gorli, (2019). Unfortunately, in social institutions and public domains, offenders are met with the stigma of incarceration, even after the incident is no longer recent, which is destructive to their success (Rade, Desmarais, & Burnette, 2018). After spending significant amounts of time in the workplace, people naturally use the signs from what is going on around them to determine if they belong in the group and gain an understanding of their value to others (Hershcovis, Ogunfowora, Reich, & Christie, 2017). The manifestation of wanting to belong is again illustrated when lower self-esteem is developed for immigrants with language barriers who perceive diminished respect from those in their environment (Borgonovi & Ferrara, 2020). Those who seek higher education post release, are met with barriers of obtaining financial aid due to their background, and experience the stigma of criminality which affects their ability to thrive in learning platforms (Christian & Walker, 2021). When an individual's perspective is modified from feeling like they belong, to not feeling like they belong, the consequences for both the individual and society as a whole can be harmful (Riley, 2019). It is imperative to understand how social support is perceived by ex-offenders, as lack of social support is a hazard to individuals seeking a new life away from illegal means (Kras, 2019).

Low Satisfaction With Life. Belonging, which can be described as feeling at home (Riley, 2019), is frequently far from what returning citizens experience, as those who have not had contact with someone from the criminal justice system have negative outlooks on offenders (Rade, Desmarais, & Burnette, 2018). As offenders return home and adhere to the new restrictions of their life, they often feel the associated shame that accompanies their new life, and experience high levels of stress (Kras, 2019). Without opportunities to get ahead recently released offenders experience a lack of dignity and self-respect (Goodstein, 2019). The majority of offenders, male and female, have experienced significant trauma throughout their life and their incarceration; however, this trauma is rarely observed as a required area for improvement (Pettus-Davis, Renn, Lacasse & Motley, 2019). People tend to adopt the labels placed on them from those around them and begin to live under the stigma of the new label they have replaced with their identity (Christian & Walker, 2021).

Status Shift

The need for belonging is converted as one returns to the community from the criminal justice system. The high-level status that an individual may have held while incarcerated, can quickly change as they return home and are unable to add to the well-being of their family structure (McKay, Feinberg, Landwehr, Payne, Comfort, Lindquist, Kennedy & Bir, 2018). During the journey home, the need for belonging increases, as their ability to provide decreases. An inability to provide for the well-being of their family could be due to refraining from illegitimate financial means, and from inability to find legitimate financial means (McKay et al., 2018; Rade, Desmarais, & Burnette,

2018). Many recently released offenders find that their family who once depended on them prior to incarceration, now depend on other means.

Belonging and feeling valued does not always exist for those who feel excluded from society, which can often lead to searching for that fulfillment in other places, (Riley, 2019). In social institutions such as schools, individuals who have observable differences such as special education needs, feel increased levels of isolation and rejection (Cullinane, 2020). Those with other differences like living in poverty are two times more likely to be isolated from those around them (Riley, 2019). Although there is general social support towards reentry efforts, those returning to their communities from incarceration experience discriminatory treatment regarding their status change which plays a large role in their access to opportunities (Rade, Desmarais, & Burnette, 2018). Recently released offenders face immediate and significant barriers to their success while trying to rebuild what their family lost while they were away (McKay et al., 2018).

For male offenders who previously maintained the status of breadwinner or head of the household, there has been a status shift as they may be providing a fraction of what they formerly were to their family (McKay et al., 2018). With the associated strain put on relationships with significant others, a breakup could mean a new financial obligation of child support (McKay et al., 2018). For many fathers transitioning from incarceration, the lack of communication and relationship with their child continues, especially if they are unable to maintain their parental status of a financial provider (McKay et al., 2018). As the effects of incarceration linger long after physical confinement, a national dilemma

exists regarding the elimination of challenges that halt a successful rehabilitation (Rade, Desmarais, & Burnette, 2018; (McKay et al., 2018).

Probation

Probation is the most frequently used form of supervision, but it is often a challenge that many who have previously been incarcerated find difficult to overcome (Mai & Subramanian, 2017). In the state of Maryland, probation is “a corrections options program established under law which requires the individual to participate in home detention, inpatient treatment, or other similar program involving terms and conditions that constitute the equivalent of confinement” (Md. CRIMINAL PROCEDURE Code Ann. §6-220). For the purpose of this study, probation, rather than parole, is being observed. In Maryland, parole is defined as “conditional release from confinement granted by the Commission to an inmate” (Md. CORRECTIONAL SERVICES Code Ann. §7-301). Probation will be used instead of parole because the majority of individuals under a form of correctional supervision are on probation (Kaeble, Maruschak, & Bonczar, 2015).

Rehabilitation

The priority of probation is rehabilitation and reducing recidivism, which allows for the impartation of restrictions for the probationer (Mai & Subramanian, 2017). Program opportunities to acquire education and skills are very much needed as the majority of the incarcerated population reflects a lack of education with just 1% having earned a bachelor’s degree and 30% who have not completed high school (Leone & Wruble, 2017). Certifications and licenses can be earned in programs within correctional

facilities which allow inmates to provide verification of the proficiency they have learned; however, community partnerships are needed to remove the barriers remaining once the skills are ready to be put to use when released (Jalongo, 2019).

In correctional facilities that do offer programs, there are many barriers including lengthy waits to get in, vacancies in program staff, and lower incentives than programs where you can earn money to send home to your family (Leone, Wruble, 2017). For inmates who know their families are home struggling, the short-term opportunity to earn a few dollars a day competes with the long-term benefits of acquiring education and skills (LaCourse, Listwan, Reid, & Hartman, 2018; Pleggenkuhle, Huebner, & Kras, 2016). Offenders who have been able to find success in their transition have often completed programs, earned credentials, and acquired skills that can help guide them through the process, but there are still many systematic barriers to overcome such as ineligibility for grants for college education (Leone & Wruble, 2017). Once in the community, offenders must map through technological means to submit applications and resumes, when they may not have developed those skills behind bars (Leone & Wruble, 2017).

Probation Officers

With high caseloads, probation officers are unable to spend the necessary time with each probationer to ensure they are actually being rehabilitated during their period of supervision (Martin & Zettler, 2020). Creating smaller caseloads has been found to be beneficial for offenders when they are able to have better guidance towards treatment programs, but many jurisdictions lack the resources to be able to do so (Matz, Conley, & Johanneson, 2018). Tischauser (2019) notes that in 2014, about 3,864,100 individuals

were under supervision through probation. Most probationers have been charged with minor crimes, and their probation is regulated through the jurisdiction where the individual became involved with the criminal justice system (Martin & Zettler, 2020). Many programs and resources are linked to offenders through their Probation Officer (Matz, Conley, & Johanneson, 2018). Justice involved individuals report harboring anxiety and fear of disappointment in regard to their probation officer (Kras, 2019). Those who are not able to maintain a positive relationship with their probation officer, express living in fear that their actions could unintentionally lead them towards incarceration (Chamberlain, Gricius, Wallace, Borjas & Ware, 2017). Due to the high consequences that come with violating probation, quality of life is impacted as many probationers cope through opting to retreat from activities which could include social gatherings, maintaining social ties, or medical appointments (Capece, 2020; LaCourse, Listwan, Reid, & Hartman, 2018). The stress of failing to secure employment lingers for offenders who are unable to bypass rigorous hiring practices (Goodstein, 2019). Although probationers have left the physical restraints of incarceration, they experience the incarceration of their mind; when they gauge the unfavorable perception, they understand exists from their probation officer, that restricts them from the social freedoms they long to enjoy (Chamberlain, Gricius, Wallace, Borjas & Ware, 2017; Kras, 2019).

Probationers can request that their probation be transferred to the jurisdiction where they reside with their stable housing, employment, and family ties, which would be more convenient for them; however, the request is not guaranteed to be approved which means after release they must continue to travel back to that area in order to remain in

compliance. Traveling to the jurisdiction where the probation is, can be a challenge when it comes to transportation and requesting time off a newly acquired job to be present at all mandated appointments. Many offenders being released from incarceration only travel within in a small area and are reliant on public transportation or walking so they must use this as a means to attend probation appointments (Rosés, Kadar, Gerritsen, & Rouly, 2018). Even though probationers may prioritize probation restrictions to maintain their freedom, probation officers spend less time with low-risk offenders and African American offenders (DeMichele & Payne, 2018). This could mean that they are not being advised of the rehabilitative resources that could maximize their success in their transition.

Restrictions

Probationers can even be restricted by where they can live, what jurisdictions they can travel to and the individuals that they can be around (Kras, 2019; Leone & Wruble, 2017). The restrictions of probation can include curfews, refraining from alcohol or drugs, periodic check-in's, urinalysis, and maintaining employment (Kras, 2019). Probation officers can use their discretion and mandate requirements they believe are helpful, which can vary from one officer to another, such as substance abuse treatment or other programs they believe can be beneficial to the individual; but failing to meet all requirements could mean returning to incarceration (Lucken & Fandetti, 2019; Seigafo, 2017).

Overall, these restrictions not only guide the lifestyle that one can live, but they must pay a monthly fee to be on probation, and the services that they receive cost each

Maryland state resident \$179 (Leone & Wruble, 2017; Mai & Subramanian, 2017). Since probation is ultimately a public safety issue, it would be beneficial if the money that taxpayers spend towards it, were going towards rehabilitative efforts, rather than punishment only (Leone & Wruble, 2017). In addition to probation fees, many offenders also pay for pretrial fees, incarceration fees, restitution and other fees that could leave them with a high amount of debt, especially when they have not yet secured stable employment (Ruhland, Holmes, & Petkus, 2020). Melamed (2019) notes that many involved with the criminal justice system get stuck in a cycle that last for years where they are unable to pay off fees that can average \$1,000/month, so more fees, supervision or incarceration are tacked onto their already large debt.

Probation Violations

Failure to adhere to probation restrictions such as payment of fees, could result in a violation of probation and ultimately returning to incarceration (Mai & Subramanian, 2017; Ruhland, Holmes, & Petkus, 2020). For probationers who have just found employment, the fee for probation and other mandated treatments must be calculated into their monthly budget along with other financial responsibilities such as restitution, child support and other fines/fees. The weight of violating probation that hovers over their head, means prioritizing probation fees and appointments over personal medical visits, work responsibilities, the needs of their families, and other tasks (Capece, 2020; LaCourse, Listwan, Reid, & Hartman, 2018). Probationers who are unable to finance the mandates of their probation along with their basic needs, will need to choose probation mandates to ensure that they do not return to incarceration. Although a technical violation

could result from failing to adhere to a probation restriction, a technical violation is not a great predictor of future recidivism or that the individual is not trying to better themselves (Campbell, 2016).

Probation can be violated through many ways including failing to show up for a scheduled appointment with their probation officer, failing to complete a program or testing positive during a urinalysis. For probationers who are unable to find employment and the resources they need, the consequences birthed are shared by not only the victim, but their families and society (Goodstein, 2019). Even though Judges use probation as an alternative for correctional facilities that have not historically been successful at rehabilitation, with heavy probation caseloads, and wait lists for prison programs, there are probationers that failed to receive resources in a correctional facility, and again fail to receive resources while on probation (Mai & Subramanian, 2017; Leone & Wruble, 2017). The consequences of violating can mean returning to incarceration or even extending the length of the probation. With the many tribulations that come along with probation, those who have recently been released from incarceration, find it difficult to find balance in their new life.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature reflects that there is an immediate and stressful hardship for individuals being released from incarceration. Both families and the individual are faced with burdens that negatively impact the successful transition. Social bonds are strained and eradicated during incarceration and unfortunately, reconciliation of these relationships is a difficult task in addition to the weight of piecing together life necessities

such as employment. Many returning citizens use the social bonds they have as a map to the resources that they need to be successful, so stressed relationships could mean less resources. The establishment and re-establishment of positive relationships is needed for success.

Offenders seeking opportunities to build on their new life are met with disappointment from rejected applications and an inability to provide for their loved ones. The lack of availability in resources and programs continues from incarceration into the community. In addition, laws prohibit program eligibility for low-income social services programs. Offenders with higher justice related financial expenses are more likely to recidivate as they balance personal finances such as rent and food. Some offenders remain resilient as they seek opportunities, but many are unable to find healthy ways to cope and find themselves back behind bars. There is a need to better understand what meaningful changes can be made in reentry to assist with more successful transitions into the community.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to seek understanding regarding the lived experiences of probationers in regard to community transition, recidivism, and the need for belonging. I collected data by conducting semi structured interviews; the key aim was to gather data that reflect the lived experiences of probationers in the community. Research has shown that at the time of release, offenders experience numerous barriers, not only in obtaining tangible necessities, but in fulfilling their emotional well-being (Western et al., 2015). The findings from this study may provide an inclusive understanding of the unique experiences of probationers. This knowledge may assist researchers and other professionals in developing better strategies to successfully rehabilitate offenders. In this chapter, I outline the research design and rationale; describe my role as the researcher; provide an overview of the methodology, including participant selection, instrumentation, and data collection and data analysis; and discuss issues of trustworthiness, including ethical strategies.

Research Design and Rationale

The study phenomenon was the lived experiences of probationers within the community. With high recidivism rates, new concepts are necessary to clarify the components for a successful reentry (Hall & Chong, 2018). In this study, probationers described their personal evolution into the community after release and their transition back into their families, workplace, and society. I conducted interviews, as they can be a method to gain in-depth knowledge about an experience (Queirós et al., 2017). For this

research study, recidivism was defined as any event of being rearrested or reincarcerated or having a probation violation after prior incarceration. The need for belonging for the purpose of this research study was defined as longing to fit in.

I developed the interview questions through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1943) highlighted belonging as something that people need in order to have meaningful relationships. Self-actualization was the most appropriate theory for this research study. Maslow (1971) explained self-actualization as one's progression towards attaining all of their needs. Self-actualization theory informed the development of the research and interview questions and the collection and analysis of data. McLeod (2007) asserted that human motivation to fulfil an unmet need grows and becomes stronger when it has not been met. Offenders being released from incarceration demonstrate this motivation in describing their desire to have their needs met during their transition to the community. The research question that I sought to answer is the following. What are the lived experiences that probationers have with belonging in their family, community and workplace after release?

In this research study, I used qualitative methodology, as it was the best approach to display the details of the lived experiences of the participants (see Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The purpose of this research study was to explore and understand the experiences as described by the participants. A qualitative research design permits the researcher to explain the phenomenon through the eyes of the participants and to discover the social problem attached to their experience. A transcendental phenomenological approach was fitting for this research study because it provided information-rich accounts

of the essence of post-incarceration and social inclusion (Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019). The qualitative method was fitting for this study, as the data collected allowed for themes to emerge during the data analysis stage. A quantitative research study would not permit the in-depth analysis that a qualitative research study would. Future researchers could utilize quantitative methods to gain a measurable understanding of the experiences of probationers in the community. A qualitative phenomenological design also reflects insight into the perceptions of the probationer participants (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). One advantage to using a qualitative research design was that I had the ability to build a rapport with the participants, which helped them better understand the goal of the study and to be more comfortable providing honest answers. The results from this research study may further consideration of the beliefs, history, and perspectives shared by participants.

Role of the Researcher

During the course of this research, I strove to provide research participants with all necessary information regarding the study. This included having all participants sign a consent form and advise them of how confidentiality would be maintained. I discussed the importance of being honest during the study and explained how the research study might impact the field. I understand that it is my responsibility to protect the research participants and their identities. I conducted individual semi structured, face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions. The questions were formulated to reveal the in-depth experiences of the participants. Throughout the study, I sought to remain professional, build rapport, acquire trust with the research participants, and listen

attentively. I conducted practice interviews with family and friends to sharpen my interview skills, as the data collection tool was significant to this study. During the interviews, I sought to remain objective and record exactly what I heard from participants. I tried to be patient with participants as they shared their memories and ensure that they understood that they could rescind their consent to participate at any time. Throughout the interview, I used the interview guide that I created to keep the interview on track and make it easier to discover meaningful patterns during the analysis phase. I planned to use the rapport that I had built prior to the interview to maintain sufficient engagement during the interview.

It was imperative, as the researcher, that I be conscious of ethical procedures and considerations prior to initiating the study or having any contact with participants for interviews (see Barroso et al., 2019). Transparency is imperative for researcher credibility (Mendes-Da-Silva, 2019). In this document, I share pertinent study information so that the study can be replicated and seen as trustworthy by the audience. Throughout the research, I abided by all ethical guidelines set forth by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I provided all participants with detailed information up front regarding the risks and benefits of their participation. As the researcher, I also took responsibility for making sure that the confidentiality of participants and their experiences was always protected (Turcotte-Tremblay & McSween-Cadieux, 2018). While working with the research participants, I accommodated any special circumstances; I was aware that I was working with a population that has reasons to be

apprehensive and cautious about the interview process (see Nalukwago Settumba et al., 2019).

As the researcher, I sought to analyze the findings accurately, as well as prevent bias from penetrating the research. I was strategic in understanding my own bias from working in the criminal justice field. The use of transcendental phenomenology in this research study fostered a deeper understanding of the participant experience by eradicating preconceived notions and bias that could distort the real understanding of the phenomenon (see Sheehan, 2014). From the beginning of the research study to the end, I strove to put my own understandings to the side to gain a more profound understanding and clarity of the phenomenon of interest.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

After obtaining approval from Walden University's IRB (approval no. 09-24-21-0573097), I recruited research participants by posting flyers on bulletin boards, as well as handing out flyers to people. The flyer (see Appendix A) included the details for eligibility, as well as how to contact me if they were interested in participating. The population of interest for this research study was probationers in the community. To gain a clear understanding of the study phenomenon, it was imperative to include participants with this precise perspective. To be eligible for this research study, participants needed to be age 18 and older, currently on probation in the state of Maryland, and released from incarceration after May 1, 2020. There was no disqualification for age, gender, or any other demographic.

I screened any individual who was interested to ensure that the sample reflected the target population. Participants were selected based upon their willingness to share their experiences, as well as we their ability to adhere to the time commitment of the research study. Using purposeful sampling, I hand-picked individuals who appeared to be information rich, as is needed for a qualitative study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This sampling strategy assisted with narrowing down participants with characteristics that could enhance the data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Once participants agreed to participate, I explained the consent form and had them sign it. The necessary number of participants for each research study can vary, but 3-10 participants are recommended for a phenomenological study (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). A total of 10 participants were used for this research study. Phenomenology studies allow the researcher to inquire of the participants, and then submit data as the researcher's interpretation to the audience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Participants received a \$20 Walmart gift card for their engagement in the study.

Instrumentation

Although there are many ways to conduct a qualitative study, I chose to conduct individual face-to-face interviews with all 10 of the participants to collect data in this research study. Interviews allow for profound clarity in how the participant has been affected from the life experience (Awenat et al., 2018). The 60-minute interviews took place in a safe, convenient, and public location that allows for privacy. The participants and I agreed on a date and time to meet. I received permission from each participant to audio record the interview and ensured that they understood that their personal

information would remain protected. Any questions that participants had were answered prior to the interview process. The interviews were semi structured and focused on the participants' lived experiences. During the interview, I took notes in my research journal so that they could be used during the data analysis stage. I made note of body language and other social queues that could be categorized into a theme at a later time.

There will be 16 questions that will be open ended and allow for the participant to provide as much information as they are comfortable with providing. The questions can be found in Appendix B. I developed these questions by trying to capture the specific areas of their life that the research question seeks to answer. I thought about what the answers might be and how they might provide me with answers to fill the gap in the research. I also tried to craft open ended questions that would prompt deep thoughts and cause the participants to dig deep for answers, rather than answers that could be a simple yes or no. Through my literature review, it is clear that gaps remain when it comes to whether the cycle of recidivism commences prior to release or after release. I made sure to include questions that inquire about their mindset prior to release and after.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) note that unstructured interviews will have a general topic; however, many of the questions are prompted by the way that the conversation goes. I like this idea because sometimes someone might talk about something that I did not have on my questions list but now I want to know more about. Rubin and Rubin (2012) highlight that each researcher will vary in the style that they use with participants. I believe that this can heavily influence the responses that the researcher gets. I like the idea of responsive interviewing because it can help me to build a rapport with someone I

just met, and they could feel more comfortable sharing personal stories and information with me. Rubin and Rubin (2012) also talk about the importance of a friendly and supportive tone. I feel that this is crucial to the interview process. I plan to maintain a gentle and calm tone regardless of the information presented to me. I am also curious about how the flexible questions could work with my participants. I want to be certain to gather a full understanding of all of the information my participants have to give me and not create a barrier to obtaining information due to my formal questions or style. At the end of the interview, and each step, I will thank the participants for their time and their contribution. I will also advise the participants of how the data collected will be presented and shared.

Data Analysis Plan

After the completion of all of the interviews, all of the recordings will be transcribed one by one, verbatim by the researcher and coded. The transcripts will be thoroughly reviewed to exercise validity. After the completion of each transcript, I will provide each participant with a copy of their own transcript so that they can review it and provide me with any feedback about precision of my transcription process. During the transcription process, I will develop themes as information emerges. To analyze the findings, a thematic method will be used for the data. Thematic analysis includes 6 different steps. These steps are becoming familiar with the data, assigning preliminary codes to define the data, looking for patterns in the codes, reviewing the themes that arise, defining the themes that emerge, and writing my report (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). I considered using Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software to assist

with analyzing my data; however, I decided to do this on my own by hand, since it was my first-time analyzing data. I also enjoy manually crossing out information on paper after I've completed using it. Rubin and Rubin (2012) note that the QDA programs will not do the whole analysis for the researcher. The program will not tell the researcher what the data means or what relationships might be missing from the data. Unfortunately, it cannot reason like a researcher can and it could cause there to be a distance in the data. QDA software can be helpful when it matches the researchers needs and it might be something that I use in the future as I become more comfortable with the analysis process. Thematic analysis births meaning to visible patterns (Stevens & Wood, 2019). All of the data will be saved in one folder on my personal computer and protected by a password that only I will have.

Issues of Trustworthiness

It is vital for all research studies to be conducted in a manner that is concise and yields beneficial data. This is especially important for qualitative research. From the data collection stage to the data analysis stage, I will be vigilant in double checking every step, regardless of how minor it is. As the researcher I will protect all participant information and data collected. I will adhere to all criteria the IRB asks and wait for their approval before proceeding with each step. I will ensure that all ethical guidelines are followed throughout the study and done without bias. In adhering to all of these guidelines, I am confident that my work will be observed as dependable, credible, transferable, and confirmable.

Ethical Procedures

This research study will utilize human subjects which means that there are many ethical guidelines to adhere to. It is the responsibility of the researcher to protect all of the participants, their personal information and to make them feel comfortable. Participants would be asked to sign an informed consent form prior to starting the interview. The informed consent form would include the purpose of the study, how they were selected, the possible benefits or risks, maintaining confidentiality, and that the entire procedure is voluntary. Participants would be notified at this time that at any time that they want to discontinue their participation they can. The participants would be provided with a copy of the informed consent form for their own records. Permission from the Walden University IRB would be established prior to proceeding with participant interviews. All research data including all participant personal identifiable information, would be locked in a drawer in my office, where only I would have access. After each interview, each participant will be assigned a name of “Participant #__” to maintain confidentiality.

Summary

Chapter 3 provides motive for the utilization of a qualitative phenomenological tactic. This research design will provide enlightened views of the lived experiences of the participants. The goal of this chapter is to provide a blueprint of each detail throughout the research study. This chapter outlined detailed instructions on how participants will be recruited, how interviews will be conducted, how the data will be analyzed and overall, how this study will be steered. The results of this study will be an amazing contribution

for rehabilitative efforts in the field of Criminal Justice. Chapter 4 will discuss the specific research findings from the participant interviews.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the need for belonging in previously incarcerated probationers. The research question was the following. What are the experiences that probationers have with belonging in their family, community, and workplace after release? I developed a total of 16 interview questions to help reveal information that would help to answer the research question (see Appendix B). Each interview was in person and one-on-one. The interview questions were open-ended and allowed for the participants to answer freely. I asked questions that might be considered difficult towards the end of the interview after a rapport had been established. The final question allowed the participant to be forthcoming with any final details that they wanted to add or clarify before the conclusion of the interview.

In this chapter, I discuss the research setting, provide demographic information on the participants, and present the results of the one-on-one participant interviews. I also describe the data collection and analysis methods. Additionally, this chapter includes evidence of trustworthiness. The Results section is organized by theme and includes participants' responses. Self-actualization theory was used for the conceptual framework of this study.

Setting

I conducted all 10 participant interviews in public places that contained a private area where each participant could feel comfortable completing the interview. I would ensure as much as possible that the participant was comfortable where they were seated.

Demographics

In order to be eligible to participate in the study, the participants had to be age 18 or older and previously incarcerated. The participants had to have also been placed on probation in Maryland upon their release from incarceration. The participants in this study were all African American. All 10 participants were male and were from Baltimore, Maryland.

Data Collection

Prior to the commencement of interviews, I screened each participant for the eligibility criteria and provided them with an informed consent form to review. Each participant provided their consent. Upon meeting each participant in person for the scheduled face-to-face interview, I took a few minutes to try and build a rapport with each participant and answer any questions they may have had. The purpose of this was to increase the likelihood that each participant might feel both relaxed and comfortable sharing their personal experiences and being truthful. All 10 participants were advised that the interview process could take about 60 minutes; however, each semi structured interview took about 30 minutes. Any question that a participant was unclear about was restated and/or rephrased to help them understand the question.

I audio recorded all interviews with my personal cell phone to listen to, transcribe, and review later. I took notes throughout each of the interviews to be able to record thoughts that I had. Note-taking also helped in that, if a participant wanted to skip a question, I would know where to come back to and continue. I also made notes of words or phrases that were repeated amongst participants. I read each interview question slowly

and spoke the words as clearly as possible. I maintained a body posture and speaking tone that I felt displayed a neutral and understanding tone, rather than reacting to participants' responses. I dressed casually for each interview. At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked each participant for their time and gave them a gift card. I confirmed my contact information with each participant in case they wanted to reach out to me before I provided them with further steps. I listened to each individual participant interview and transcribed each interview by hand. Each participant confirmed the accuracy of their responses, and none of the participants requested further clarification or changes to be made.

Data Analysis

I gave each interview participant a name (P1 through P10) to avoid revealing personal identifying information. I began the data analysis process by listening to each of the interviews three times back-to-back. I went in the order that the interviews were conducted. As I listened to the audio recordings, I paused as needed to have time to write down thoughts that came to my mind including what would be the beginning of the themes that would later emerge. Each separate item that was pulled from a participant's response was placed onto a Post-it sticky note. As themes began to reoccur, I would group Post-it notes together that appeared as though they might go into a similar category. As more items were added, Post-it notes were moved around multiple times. Once the categories were filled with Post-it notes, an overall theme was developed to encompass all that was within that category. Notes that I had taken during the data collection phase were also included on the Post-its. Each category was thoroughly

reviewed to reveal the patterns in the data. This helped me to solidify the final themes that emerged from participant responses. I reviewed each final theme and organized the topics within that theme. I used the experiences that the participants shared to identify the emergent themes. These final themes are (a) institutionalized living; (b) lack of rehabilitation, programming, and release preparation; (c) needs and desires during reentry; (d) barriers to success; (e) motivation to acquire things after release; (f) feeling alone; (g) family support; and (h) street life.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are all vital parts of establishing trustworthiness in this research study. Credibility ensures that the data represented from the participants interviews is accurate (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). To attain credibility in this research study I confirmed with each participant that the information captured during the interview was indeed accurate. The participants agreed that the responses recorded were precise. Transferability was achieved through the use of detailed and thorough wording to truly capture the essence of the participants accounts. This enhances the possibility that future researchers will be able to use the wording and details I provided. Using rich and complete descriptions of the participants accounts allows for generalizability towards other contexts and populations (Cypress, 2017). Dependability guarantees that the responses received from the participants were accurately depicted (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). To uphold dependability, I audio recorded each interview and then transcribed each interview verbatim. This maintained the accuracy of the data. Confirmability safeguards against inaccuracies in the participant

responses (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). I thoroughly reviewed each transcript once completed to ensure that it matched up with the audio recording.

Results

I conducted a phenomenological study to better understand the need for belonging for previously incarcerated probationers. A total of 10 participants volunteered. All of the participants were African American, male, and from Baltimore, Maryland, and all appeared to be between the ages of 21 to 45. The research question for this study was, “What are the experiences that probationers have with belonging in their family, community, and workplace after release?” Even though all 10 participant interviews mirrored very similar detailed experiences, they all had unique information and opinions to add to the data. The data indicate that people who have been released from incarceration feel ashamed of what they have been labeled as. They also have a desire to do better in life when they return to the community, even if they have not been provided with necessary reentry resources, planning and guidance.

Based on the coded data, I identified eight themes. These themes are (a) institutionalized living; (b) lack of rehabilitation, programming, and release preparation; (c) needs and desires during reentry; (d) barriers to success; (e) motivation to acquire things after release; (f) feeling alone; (g) family support; and (h) street life. Table 1 shows the themes and subthemes. The themes and subthemes are in no meaningful order.

Table 1*Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme
Institutionalized living	Waste of life Learned criminal behavior Home Sick/Build relationships inside Increased trauma/Declining mental Health
Lack of rehabilitation, programming, and release preparation	Not being offered programs/Not completing jail programs Released worst off than before Lack of guidance for release planning Programs that are not useful or that others have failed
Needs and desires during reentry	Physiological needs (shelter, food) Additional needs (job, car) Desires to excel and be successful Desire for relationships
Barriers to success	Labels and stigma of criminality Difficulties with employment and opportunities Probation and other restrictions No plans/ Plans not working out
Motivation to acquire things after release	Desire to play catch up/ make up for lost time Yearning to acquire things quickly/In survival mode Fathers feel need to provide for family Desire for instant gratification.
Feeling alone	Relying on self Need good use of leisure time Limited interaction with old friends Increased frustration and lowered motivation
Family support	Family willing to provide support, but not able to Generational poverty and criminality/Childhood Absent father/Female support Parents failed to equip with life skills
Street life	No choice but to go back/Back to what you know Fast money, easy money. Able to put in hard work Turned to the streets for support Illegal means to obtain basic needs.

Theme 1: Institutionalized Living

A theme that emerged during the interviews was the institutionalized living. Many of the participants referred to their time of incarceration as a waste of life, meaning that they failed to make progress in the areas they deemed important in life. The majority of the responses from participants regarding their time behind bars echoed descriptions of animals, slavery and lifeless objects. P1 reported “I felt like I was waiting in a cage like a dog in a kennel to be walked, fed, or played with.” P6 noted that “When you're locked up you feel like meat rotting in a can. You're sitting and wasting your life away.”

Institutionalized living was also apparent through the learned criminal behavior that participants noted they were exposed to during their time of incarceration. P1 highlighted that “Jail is college for criminals if you choose to enroll. It can also be a steppingstone to change your life.” P1 is alluding to the opportunity available to inmates to befriend other inmates and learn more criminal behavior, or to make alternative changes to try to better yourself during that time.

Being home sick and building supplemental relationships while incarcerated is seen in multiple participant interviews. P7 notes that “It was bittersweet when I was released. I had built relationships with people. It was sad because I got to know some people. I was sad for the people I was leaving behind. I was happy I got to see my kids”. His description of his experience indicates how upon incarceration, inmates grieve their loved ones at home, and later grieve their newly formed inmate friendships upon their release. P7 says “People feel like a tight knit family inside rather than on the streets. It

becomes like a second home for people. Many times, when you go back, you see the same people that were there before. I'm always going to see someone I know in there.”

Increased trauma and declining mental health states are evident throughout this theme. P1 notes that “A lot of people leave jail physically but are still incarcerated mentally. It is important to understand where a person was before they were locked up. Jail gives you PTSD.” In this statement, P1 acknowledges that an individual can physically be released from incarceration, but still experience a mental incarceration due to the experiences that occurred while incarcerated. P8 reports that “People come out discouraged”, while P7 reports that “Jail is a mental thing and I only have a couple people who can support me in that way”. Both of these responses are indicative of lower levels of mental health during the transition into the community, as well as having a small amount of people to be able to provide support for that. P1 also mentions that “You might need to get off the tier because you're worried about your life. You can't even look down the road because of the current situation.” In this interview response he is acknowledging the dangers that lurk behind bars and the priority that it might take in someone’s life, over the decision to enroll in a program that could help them when they are released.

Theme 2: Lack of Rehabilitation, Programming, and Release Preparation

Throughout the participant interviews a clear theme was discovered. A lack of rehabilitation, programming and release preparation was evident in their experiences. From the data it was clear that the majority of inmates were not completing programs during their incarceration. Unfortunately, only 2 out of the 10 participants interviewed

were able to participate in any rehabilitative efforts including programs during their incarceration.

The participants disclosed that in many ways, they were released into the community worst off than when they were prior to incarceration. P5 reports that “Prison don't offer you nothing. They don't rehabilitate a person. That's something they need to work on, or people will end up back in prison. It's not easy out here.” His response highlights the lack of rehabilitation many inmates leave with, as well as the struggle many face as they seek success in their new life. P6 notes that “My life as far as my finances was hard. After release it only got harder. If someone has been locked up over 6 months, they should get at least \$500 to get your new life started. Imagine getting thrown out with \$25. If a person is incarcerated, they should get a check when they leave.” P7 reported “Financially, I have no one.” The majority of participants described their life as a struggle prior to being locked up, and through many responses we see that the life that inmates try to establish after their release is only exacerbated by their incarceration.

Many participants talked about not only the lack of resources they received regarding their release planning, but also the lack of guidance from staff regarding the next steps to take. P3 reported that “I was incarcerated during the pandemic. We were locked in all day except for 1 hour.” As many correctional facilities face unprecedented challenges due to the ongoing pandemic, they simultaneously fail to provide the much-needed direction to a vulnerable population in need. P1 notes that “Transition starts from the day you're incarcerated. People start to think, what am I going to do different next time.” This statement reflects the desire that many have to create a better life for

themselves when they are released, although they have not been provided with the resources and appropriate planning to do so.

The data indicated that the participants view of programs were not favorable. P8 reports that “I saw people do programs. It wasn't helpful for those people.” As inmates observe others enroll in programs, but fail to be successful, the desire to also enroll in programs is short lived. P6 notes that “When people get out, they need more support, especially financially, as they transition back into the world. The government should provide financial support.” This statement reiterates the support that is needed for a successful transition, with the biggest part being forms of financial support. P9 highlights that “Many programs provided information that I had prior, but I did pick up some useful skills. It was a good reminder of the skills.” This statement acknowledges that when appropriate reentry measures are put in place and inmates are provided with the opportunity to receive the information, it can be beneficial.

Theme 3: Needs and Desires During Reentry

Many of the participant interviews provided insight into the needs and desires that were coveted during reentry. Physiological needs such as food and shelter were listed as one of the immediate needs participants wanted as soon as they were released. P2 notes “I wanted to get real food” and P3 says “I wanted to get a house” The majority of participants reported that housing was a priority need for a successful transition into the community. P4 says “It's a tough transition. Some people don't have a home to go back to.” Without some form of guaranteed housing on the day of release, participants believe

it is unlikely one will be successful. P5 notes that “A place to stay and a job are the main 2 things. Without those things a brother will end up in prison.”

After physiological needs such as housing, food and employment, participants expressed that there were additional needs they felt would enhance their chances of being successful after release. P1 reports “My own business. To move. To provide for my family.” A step up from being employed, some participants expressed wanting to work for themselves, especially knowing the challenge that waits ahead with securing employment. P4 notes that “I needed a car” and P8 says “I wanted to go back to school.” The participants desired to have things that they believed would prepare the way for a better life after release.

Participants expressed their desire to not only excel and be successful in life, but to never return to any form of incarceration again. P1 said “I ain't never trying to go back. When I was released, I had a fresh sense of life. A weight off your shoulders. I knew what I had to do.”

P6 indicates his optimism and reports “I was motivated to do well”. Many of the participants, even without receiving any reentry guidance, were expecting positive results. P7 says “My mind was made up when I left that I was going to do good.” Some participants acknowledged the uncertainty of their journey. P9 reports “I felt extremely overwhelmed. Where do I start?”

Among the aforementioned desires, is the desire for relationships, including those who come in the form of a support system. P4 notes that “What's needed is a good support system because you'll be by yourself, and you think negative. When you come

back you go back to what you know. If you don't have anyone to tell you that you're doing wrong, then you'll keep doing wrong cause you don't know any different.” His response highlights that importance of having relationships with people who are able to help you stay on the right track after your release, especially when you begin to have negative thoughts about the transition. P5 says “A support system is necessary”. P6 tells us that “A support system is a big thing. By yourself you have ideas, but you can't physically execute it alone. Everything is better with another person.” This participant response exposes the usefulness of a friend to help accomplish things during the transition into the community. P7 “I wanted to get established, spend time with my kids, and get on a schedule.” After missing so much time from the lives and activities of their loved ones, many expressed the urge to get settled in and get back to regular life with their friends and family.

Theme 4: Barriers to Success

Within the theme of barriers to success, we find that the participants highlight labels and the stigma of criminality. P1 mentioned that “People feel like they weren't good enough before so how can they be good enough now.” His words speak to the situations people were in prior to incarceration where they were barely surviving, and now after incarceration there is more pressure to perform, but with fewer resources than before. P6 notes that “You have a label on you when you get out.” This label that many of the participants talked about unveils the way that participants feel that they are observed in a negative manner after their release, which hinders the chances towards success that they are given. P8 describes that “There's a stigma with having a record.

People get treated and talked to a certain way after they have been locked up. People need to not be judged.”

An ever-present obstacle that those who have recently been released face is difficulties with employment and other opportunities. P1 talks about this and says, “People have shame during a job interview when they have to talk about their charge.” This participant is describing the humiliation that many face as they advise potential employers about their criminal past, and attempt to be forthcoming, even though they understand the strong possibility that they will not receive an offer. P2 reported “In the beginning I wanted to get things back on track, but it didn't happen that way. My charge impacted my employment. My plan didn't work out.” P5 says “It was hard to get back on track with a felony. Once I tell jobs about my incarceration I'm fired. I have no choice but to turn back to the streets. I don't want to be there, but I have no choice.” This participant begins to shed light on the feeling many have expressed as having no choice but to go back to old ways after trying to do things the right way has concluded with no success. P7 explains “People need opportunities. I've seen people with the worst records get hired before me. Ain't nobody going to take care of you.” Many of the participants harped on the importance of good employment and opportunities to help them to be successful with their transition into the community. P8 tells us “People say to make something out of yourself, but you can't do that at Wendy's. Sometimes things are not openly said to the person, but they are implied.” The majority of the participants were able to express this same concern as they voiced that there are a lack of good opportunities for those with a record, and that the opportunities that are available are not enough to make ends meet.

Probation and other restrictions are often looked at through the lens of a probationer as something that causes added stress at a time where you are trying to prioritize getting your life back on track. P8 was able to use probation as an encouraging factor and expresses that ‘I felt motivated. Probation put weight on me to get through, so I wouldn’t return to prison. It made me more responsible.’ Fortunately, this participant was able to use his fear of returning to incarceration as a deterrent, which caused him to prioritize his probation stipulations. P9 tells us that “You have physical freedom, but you have probation hanging over your head. You can't do anything.” This participant is referring to the restrictions that forms of community supervisions, such as probation provide. P8 reports that “Probation stipulations say you can't be around other felons. It's a catch 22.” Many of the participants expressed that when probation restrictions propose guidelines such as not being around others who have a criminal record, it can make it difficult when members of your support system may have a criminal past.

Many of the participants expressed that they had no guidance when they were released, and as a result, had no plan for their transition into the community. P2 tells us that “Having a support system and a plan is important. A plan means you have a better chance of transitioning successfully.” This participant speaks of the greater possibility of creating and sustaining a new life when a plan is created prior to release. P5 reports “I was wondering what to do and how I would survive”. This description of a lack of direction is evidence that those who are not provided with a plan to do well begin to search for answers that can provide one’s basic needs to survive. P7 notes that “It's important for people to know that incarceration is not the end. You can reinvent yourself

and make the best out of your situation. People can reinvent themselves in jail.” This participant talks about the importance of providing hope for people who are incarcerated and letting them know that there is light at the end of the tunnel and they can create a better life.

Theme 5: Motivation to Acquire Things After Release

As the themes continued to emerge, the motivation to acquire things after release became a focus. Many of the participants expressed the desire to play catch up and to make up for lost time during incarceration. P7 describes it as “Reality sets in when you come home. Things have been happening on the outside while you are on the inside, where things are not happening, and they are standing still”. This event that the participant describes of time passing them by, is an indicator of the feeling that many incarcerated people experience. P8 notes that “You have to play catch up. You say to yourself that you're not going to catch up.” This statement is evidence of the feeling participants have of being behind, while others on the outside have continued to move ahead, gain things and make progress. Some participants describe trying to make do with what they do have to get ahead. P9 speaks to others in his shoes and says “Set your plan. Be disciplined. You must make a smart plan with the resources you have available to you. If you have a \$10/hour job, then use that to create your plan.” He is speaking to the desire that many have to begin financially planning for what they need for their new life, without the level of income and resources that they may have had previously. P1 notes that “The lifestyle led to wanting to have nice things. I knew what I had to do.” This participant expresses the lifestyle he had built for himself prior to incarceration.

The majority of the participants expressed their yearning to acquire things quickly and being in survival mode upon their release. P1 expresses that “People want what's projected on the outside (cars, houses, money), not what's real. It's not rational.” He speaks to the desire that many participants articulated as wanting to obtain their wants, versus their needs. P9 describes it as “Survival by any means. I've been homeless. I've had to hustle for basic needs.” He voices the strong desire to survive and obtain just basic needs, no matter the costs, and to avoid things such as homelessness. P7 highlights that “You have to make sacrifices. What are you willing to do to stay afloat?” His words present that hard decisions will have to be made during the reentry process to force success even when you do not have all the necessary resources or answers.

While examining the theme of motivation to acquire things after release, we see that participants who had a family to provide for, felt additional pressure to perform and provide for them. P1 explains that “When I was released, I wanted to provide for my family in a way that wouldn't take me away from my family.” After being incarcerated, the participants expressed a combined goal of not wanting to return and wanting to provide for their families in a legal manner. P5 tells us “I was working hard trying to provide. I had kids, so I had to feed my family”

P7 explains “It was hard. I had 2 kids at 19 years old. Providing for home was hard.” For those recently released from incarceration, a dual desire exists. These desires are to take care of themselves, and to also take care of their families. P8 describes the struggle to obtain what you need for your family. He says “You can't get the same money legally. People are depending on you. You turn back to what you know. You are stigmatized.

They want you to change but they don't give you a way to.” His words voice the low level that many of the participants feel they are viewed on the hierarchy of life.

After understanding the need to provide basic needs for self and those they are responsible for, it is easier to understand the desire for instant gratification. Not only is there a desire to acquire these things, but there is a desire to do so quickly. P1 notes that “People want immediate gratification. The instant coffee generation. Hard work doesn't come overnight. Patience is taught in jail.” This participant shares his view of people seeking fast results once they are released, despite having to exercise much patience while incarcerated. P9 notes that “People need a guaranteed list of housing or jobs that are useful if you have a record. Trades and opportunities.” As he speaks about guaranteed housing and jobs, he repeats what some of the other participants shared regarding endless searching for opportunities, only to be repeatedly shut down and turned away.

Theme 6: Feeling Alone

Another theme that emerged was feeling alone. The idea of relying on oneself was present frequently in the data. P1 explains “It was all on me and God. I didn't do any programs. God was my program and I just had to execute it.” This participant sums up what many other participants expressed in feeling alone in their new journey. P3 notes “Since I was released when I face a challenge, I have no one I can rely on. All by myself. It's just me and God” The majority of the participants stated that they felt they had no help with overcoming challenges when faced with them. P6 clarifies that “When I first came out, I had no help. I handle my own situations. I've built up my reputation.” His

response sheds light on not only feeling alone but having to constantly prove himself to others.

The data also illuminated the need for a good use of leisure time for some of the participants. P8 tells us that “There's people, lifestyles and habits I had to avoid.” His story explains that after his release, he had to remove certain people and things that used to occupy his time. Now that these things have been removed, there is idle time and empty space that has not been filled with positive activities. P6 states that “I had nothing to do”. His response is similar to other participants in explaining how previous people and things have been removed from their life while seeking a better life. However, they have not found new people for their new lifestyle.

Many of the participants shared the experience of limiting interaction with old friends. P1 tells us that “I absolutely continue to associate with people, but at a minimum. I have family members still in the lifestyle. I limit my interaction with them.” He goes on to explain that “It's hard to hold onto old things. Your efforts have to match your goals. Actions have to work towards the goal.” This participant is explaining how he chooses to continue to associate with some of his old friends from his previous lifestyle, but he tries to protect himself by limiting his interactions, as well as putting effort and hard work into his future. P4 says that “I continue to associate with the same people as before. It makes your transition harder. You get home sick while you're gone.”

P3 admits to removing people from his life and he says “Absolutely, I had to get rid of people. It was hard in the beginning to let people go.” He expresses the need to remove people from his life, while admitting the difficulty in the task. P5 explains that

“Some people I had to leave alone even if it meant it would make it harder. When you’re locked up people pass away or move on.” P7 says “Yes I had to let some friends go, but sometimes it's best to let people go before it gets bad. I've outgrown some genuine friends.” Many of the participants share the ordeal of not only having to remove people from their lives but remove people that they once called friends and who could possibly be a source of support during this difficult transition in their lives. P9 notes that “A lot of people I cut off. I build back up. If people were not trying to grow, be positive or trying to do better, I have nothing for you.” In his response, this participant explains that the people he cut off were the ones who were not trying to be positive and grow.

Every interviewed participant expressed their own frustration with the transition process, and many of the participants expressed their decreased motivation as a result of this growing frustration. P4 reports “I was motivated to do better at first, then I faced challenges and barriers when I entered society and then my motivation died.” Many participants grow weary after being faced with ongoing rejection. P1 explains “But understand that the table is set against you.” His response is one that mirrors other participants shared feelings that victory is not in their favor.

P2 was early in his reentry transition, and he states that “It's too early. I haven't faced any difficulties yet. But I believe it will impact me in the future. I know people who have been hindered.” With all of the participants knowing others who have transitioned back into the community and faced challenges, they understand that they too will likely face these same challenges during their journey.

Theme 7: Family Support

A theme that was present among many of the participants was that their family was willing to provide them with support; however, the family lacked the resources to actually do so. P1 describes that “Being incarcerated didn't change my support. What you need support in, is not always something they can help you with.” He explains in his response that being incarcerated did not remove his support system; however, the people in his support system lacked the ability to provide him with the type of support he needed. P4 mirrors this response and says “I had support before I was locked up. After getting out it didn't change.” There are different forms of support once someone has been released. P8 explains that “I had the same support system when I got out. They provided advice and encouragement.” Although his support system remained present, what they provided was not tangible goods or financial assistance, but instead positive words.

Some participants explained the downside of having a support system. P7 explains “When you have a support system, they feel like they own you.” His response is similar to other participants explaining that after you receive help or support from someone, you then feel as though you owe them or are in debt to them for the help they have provided to you. P9 notes that “My mom had a good job. We weren't poor. Anything extra you had to get on your own.” He describes how only the essentials were provided, but anything additional he would be responsible for getting on his own. The majority of the participants explained how a support system provided a sense of security, as well as a reason to keep moving in the right direction. P2 explains “If people don't feel like they have anyone, what's the point of being free?”

A theme that was persistent throughout the research was generational poverty (especially in childhood), generational criminality, and being incarcerated at a young age. P1 explains “My father had life plus 10 years. He came home when I was 13 years old and 2 years later, he was reincarcerated.” P6 tells us “I first got locked up at 18. I found myself running around looking for money.” It was clear that many of the participants had experienced a childhood where basic needs were provided but additional needs many times were not provided. Participants described that their families did the best that they could. P3 explains that “My family struggled financially. We had no money. My needs were not met as child.” P7 tells us that “Most of my needs were met as a child such as food and shelter, but not mentally.”

Throughout the participant interviews it was evident that the majority of the support that was received was generated from the females in their lives. Participants mentioned the support of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and girlfriends. Only 3 participants mentioned male support which included a father and a brother. P9 expresses that “Most of my basic needs besides having a father were met. My mom didn't have all the support she needed as far as having sons. She was a single mom.” The majority of the participants mentioned either there being no male support, or a negative male support.

Many of the participants expressed that their parents had failed to equip them with life skills, and some even described having adult responsibilities as a child. P4 tells us “Life was hard. My parents didn't teach me the things I needed to know. I had to learn it on my own. I didn't know.” The participants felt that they lived lives that were sometimes absent of childlike things but filled with adult friendships and adult things. P7 notes “I

had a lot of older people around me. I was a grown child. I had kids when I was 14". P3 reports that "My father made me pay rent early on." Many participants went on to describe how their basic needs were met as a child, but they were not taught skills that would have made their life as an adult easier to navigate. P9 "I did the bare minimum. Paid bills but didn't worry about other things like my credit."

Theme 8: Street Life

Many of the participants expounded upon the feeling that they had no choice but to go back to their previous lifestyle, thus being forced into going back to what they knew. P4 said, "When you come back you go back to what you know." Many of the participants share the view that after trying to do things the right or legal way, they were only presented with rejection and lack of opportunities, which forced them into the streets to obtain what they needed. P5 says that "It was hard getting back on track with a felony. Once I tell jobs about my incarceration I'm fired. I have no choice but to turn back to the streets. I don't want to be there, but I have no choice." The participants shared the feeling of having no other choices but to turn back to old lifestyles for what they needed.

A common topic among the participants was the opportunity for fast money or easy money and being able to put in hard work to get the money that they needed. P1 expressed that "The money comes fast so you don't respect the money." His response echoed some of the participants responses when they explain that when they were making illegal money, that they did not value the ability to make money because they could often make money when they needed it; however, they now have a struggle to try to make any money. P8 "People need money. Lots of people don't have money and they get

discouraged and turn back.” He expressed the need people feel to survive and end up turning back to old ways. P9 tells us that “I had a hustling phase where your mindset is that your family comes first. No matter who helps you, if you're hungry you will get it.”

The participants described how many of them turned to the streets for the support they were not getting anywhere else. P1 says “Support is extremely important, especially if you feel like you're doing it alone. Surround yourself with people.” It was evident that the participants agreed that if they were not getting the support they desired from family and friends, they would turn to the streets to get the support. P8 shares that “People don't have the academic credentials that they need. They can't get FAFSA loans. People need more financial support. You can't get the same money legally. People are depending on you. You turn back to what you know. You are stigmatized. They want you to change but they don't give you a way to.” In this response he highlighted the struggle of not being able to obtain support from social institutions such as school funding. He also described that when people have the label of being a criminal, no opportunities exist for jobs or higher education, and then they turn back to where they know they are guaranteed to have support and their needs will be met.

Many of the participants described that they had to turn to illegal means to be able to obtain their basic needs. P1 tells us “I learned fast money. Street money can get you to other places faster”. This response mirrors some of the responses of other participants who felt that street means had the power to help them achieve what they needed in a faster manner. P8 explains “I knew what I was doing had the potential to get me in

trouble”. He described the choice he made to engage in illegal activity, even though he knew that there was a possibility he could get in trouble.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to capture the essence of the lived experiences of previously incarcerated probationers. This chapter provided a detailed account of the participant interviews and revealed insight regarding the feelings and beliefs of many within that community. In this chapter I presented the setting, demographics, and the data collection process. In addition, the data analysis and evidence of trustworthiness was provided. Furthermore, the results of the analysis were presented where participants expressed their frustrations, barriers and unresolved traumas. The themes that emerged are (1) institutionalized life, (2) lack of rehabilitation, programming and release preparation, (3) needs and desires during reentry, (4) barriers to success, (5) motivation to acquire things after release, (6) feeling alone, (7) family support, (8) street life. Chapter 5 will discuss my interpretations of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Although physically free, those who have been released from incarceration and back into the community often experience alternative forms of boundaries and restrictions. Many probationers find that they are still defined by the labels placed upon them during their incarceration. These labels prevent them from employment, housing, and academic opportunities that might allow them to get their lives back on a positive track. Many probationers experience loneliness and shame while feeling that society has not accepted them back, although they have served their sentence. The majority of the participants in this study reported not being provided with reentry resources and guidance during their incarceration, which left them trying to navigate their new life themselves on their day of release. The theme of survival was present for many participants starting from childhood and continuing through their life post incarceration. They were now struggling with a criminal record. With a lack of opportunities, and the high expectation to immediately resume their role in their families, participants reported feeling that they had no choice but to go back to old ways and that they are being forced into recidivism. This chapter will discuss the many findings that reveal the constant struggle experienced by participants.

Interpretation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of previously incarcerated probationers. Those returning to the community are often burdened by high expectation, coupled with low opportunity. Their struggle is

one that is many times misinterpreted for laziness or unwillingness to work hard for success. A better understanding of these experiences may reveal what is necessary to create a smooth and successful transition into the community after release.

Theme 1: Institutionalized Living

The majority of participants described their time of incarceration as wasted time. Eight out of the 10 participants said they were not provided with rehabilitative programs during their incarceration, or reentry resources and guidance about how to successfully transition back into society. Participants explained that although they were not provided with resources to better themselves while incarcerated, they were informally presented with numerous opportunities to learn how to be better criminals from other inmates. With so much time being incarcerated, it is striking that this time could not be used in a more productive manner that would lead towards success after reentry. The majority of the participants described waiting to begin their life again and feeling as though the world was passing by as their life was put on hold. Many participants explained a feeling that everyone else on the outside was progressing and moving forward, while they remained stagnant. Participants explained that they felt their time of incarceration mirrored an animal in a cage waiting for food and other basic needs to be provided.

Many participants described missing their family members and feeling isolated from them. As participants expressed their sorrow over being away from loved ones, they also explained the dynamic of friendships and relationships that form while incarcerated. These relationships sometimes form out of survival, shared situations, and proximity, rather than genuine desirability for close bonds. This does not mean that the relationships

do not hold the same weight as other relationships on the outside. Many participants explained the sadness they had on the day of release for the people they were leaving behind that they now considered family.

The participants' sentiment is similar to that of individuals in other settings. Miller (2019) highlighted the loneliness described by residents of nursing home facilities. The researcher noted that residents of the long-term care facilities missed face-to-face connections with their friends and families. Similar to correctional facilities, some in nursing homes have also been removed from their home, sometimes not by choice. These residents experience loneliness and isolation. Miller noted that human beings need to belong and that residents can be found without healthy social ties. Not being able to maintain the same level of social interaction as prior to their placement in the nursing home and subsequently experiencing loneliness fosters an unmet need. Just as in correctional facilities, the interaction that nursing home residents have with staff is primarily regarding their medication, meals, and other nursing home daily tasks. Miller found that positive social connections helped to reduce loneliness. This conclusion is also applicable to efforts aimed at reducing loneliness in correctional facilities.

Participants in this study described feeling discouraged and not being mentally strong enough to get through the trials of living in a facility daily. In addition to the trauma of being incarcerated and separated from familiar aspects of their lives, participants expressed feeling mentally incarcerated even after being released. Those being released into the community are set free with reduced mental health and increased trauma from the things that they have experienced and observed behind bars, research

shows. Participants even described being in fear for their own life while incarcerated and acknowledged the dangers that were present within correctional facilities. These situations are certainly traumatic and take priority in their daily life over any opportunities that may have been presented to enroll in a program or plan for release.

The majority of participants described their time of incarceration as lonely and isolating. Many participants described feeling like they only had God to rely on in their cell. With the physical restrictions of in-person interactions, participants felt distanced from their loved ones. This is very similar to the psychological distress people experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brühlhart et al. (2021) studied helpline calls during the COVID-19 pandemic. They described an increase in calls from callers reporting fear and loneliness. They also found that some of the usual topics that motivated calls were replaced by the new concerns of loneliness. In their study, they described an increase in suicide-related calls when social isolation was enforced in the caller's jurisdiction. This study is pertinent to this research because it shows what happens to people when they are socially isolated, just as inmates are socially isolated from their loved ones during incarceration. Brühlhart et al. noted that "interventions designed to contain infections, affected mental health" (p. 121). This conclusion is mirrored as interventions such as incarceration that are designed to contain criminal behavior and that inadvertently affect mental health in detrimental ways. Brühlhart et al.'s research also demonstrated a decrease in suicide-related calls when financial relief and income supports were provided to people.

Brülhart et al.'s (2021) findings may be applied to those who are struggling to survive after release and need financial support, as they likely experience the same emotions. Goldmann et al. (2021) found that although African Americans were more likely to experience COVID-19 related stressors, they were less likely to report declining mental health. They noted that this was likely due to the odds of African Americans already being predisposed to adverse situations and possessing coping mechanisms such as resiliency. It was also noted that this could have been due to the stigma of seeking mental health assistance in the African American community. They also found that when participants were asked about their outlook on their future regarding strengthening relationships with others, creating new possibilities, identifying personal strengths, spiritual change, and increased appreciation of life, the scores were higher among African Americans than participants of other races. They noted that demonstrating a positive outlook in stressful situations lead to higher resiliency.

Brülhart et al.'s (2021) findings are further applicable for the current research study as all 10 participants are African American. The researchers' findings may explain the participants' experiences while they were incarcerated. Even though participants experienced social isolation, loneliness, and declining mental health during their incarceration, it was unlikely that they sought or received the help that they needed. Although they were locked up and received no reentry assistance or guidance, once released, they held a positive outlook that they would be able to survive.

Theme 2: Lack of Rehabilitation, Programming, and Release Preparation

The data indicated that there was a lack of reentry programs that were available to inmates. This was especially true for inmates incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic who were locked in their cell for 23 hours a day to adhere to social distancing requirements. The social isolation, in turn, reduced their ability to engage in programs or receive guidance for reentry. Many inmates described that they were released into the community worse off than when they were incarcerated. Only two out of 10 participants were given the opportunity to participate in programs and receive reentry guidance prior to their release. Both of those participants are business owners, and one is currently in college. Participants noted seeing others complete programs that were not beneficial, as the person later returned to incarceration or returned to an old way of life to obtain basic needs.

The majority of the participants expressed that the facility where they were incarcerated did not provide a means for rehabilitation. They also were aware of the struggle that would be waiting for them once they were released into the community. Ravindran et al. (2020) highlighted the risk of suicide for military members after being discharged from military service. They noted that this was a vulnerable time frame for suicide risk in military members. They attributed some of this to the struggles that await including obtaining employment and access to health care and other social supports. Surprisingly, these are some of the very same areas that those who are returning from incarceration experience. In addition, they found that military members with less

education faced additional barriers when trying to obtain employment and as a result experienced additional stress.

In another study, Senecal et al. (2021) investigated the reintegration into civilian life for the military. They noted that military members coming home may appear antisocial or aggressive and emphasized the importance of not only recognizing the environment they have just come from but providing outlets for people who may be experiencing PTSD or other behaviors that impede on a successful transition. The described challenges faced and noted that the behavior exhibited is similar to that experienced by people returning from incarceration. Military One Source (2021) is a resource for military members and their families that identifies reunion and reintegration as a time that can be exciting but also challenging. They offer help to military members in speaking to others about their deployment, reconnecting with family, improving social interactions, and feeling like they belong when they come home. Mitchell et al. (2021) studied people returning home from incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic. They noted that people returning home from incarceration are more susceptible to the risk of suicide due to the stressors of their reentry, including feeling like they do not belong or feeling like a burden to others. Efforts similar to those made for military members need to be made to assist all of the populations returning home after a traumatic experience. These same services and opportunities are a necessity for those returning home from incarceration.

As the participants talked about their long-time struggles with finances, they all acknowledged how their incarceration had only intensified their financial situation. The

participants all shared their experience of being put outside of the facility on their release day with amounts similar to \$25, in which they were expected to finance shelter, food, and other basic needs for their new life. Participants who had been incarcerated during the pandemic described an environment that was not fostering of rehabilitation and provided little communication with others in general.

In other fields we observe guidance being provided for newcomers and those who may be in need of direction to make progress. Stoebe (2020) highlights that online learners often feel like they have no support and express loneliness during their academic journey. To combat this, institutions of higher education provide orientations to students to overcome this feeling of isolation. Stroebe (2020) notes that providing an orientation for new online students increased their level of preparation. She also explains that when the orientation is provided for students learning virtually, there is increased retention. This data is invaluable when it is applied to the context of the current research study. We can see that providing appropriate knowledge and support to those who need direction, will increase the possibility that they will do well, and means that they will remain engaged longer. Many participants described a desire to do better upon their release, as well as wanting to be equipped with the resources to lead a better life. The reentry planning that the participants in this study failed to receive could have helped them to more easily navigate their reentry transition, and to do so with increased engagement.

Theme 3: Needs and Desires During Reentry

For many reasons the most mentioned reentry need was housing. Those being released into the community need an address for employment purposes, shelter, as well as

other reasons. The reason that housing was such a concern for those being released was because of the well-known barriers that a criminal record presents towards being approved for housing. When background checks are run for housing applications a criminal record can surface and act as a barrier towards getting approved to rent their own home. For those returning home to loved ones who receive social services benefits, they are often restricted from living in the same home as their partner or children due to their criminal record. After the need for housing, participants mentioned employment and food being important needs. Unfortunately, we again see the barrier of the criminal record to both of these needs. Even though those who have recently been released from incarceration may have no shelter, food or employment, they are often deemed ineligible for assistance with any of these imperative needs due to their background. This means that the \$25 that recently released individuals have been given must last until they are able to obtain employment and receive a paycheck.

Outside of some of these basic needs, participants expressed the desire for additional things that could improve their quality of life. A vehicle was one of the most sought-after items to be able to get from place to place, including probation and other obligatory appointments. Acknowledging the challenges with obtaining employment, other participants expressed wanting to work for themselves so that they would not have to be turned down by others. Some participants expressed the desire to go to school and learn new skills and trades that could be used to ultimately pursue higher income opportunities. All of the previously mentioned needs were in pursuit of a better life after

release. In particular, all of the participants expressed the desire to be successful, to prove others wrong, and to not ever return back to incarceration.

Every participant highlighted the desire for relationships. While many participants mentioned a good support system during the transition, they highlighted the need for positive people to help them stay on track and to share their successes. Some of the participants talked about the benefits of having people to help you and mentioned the importance of having people in your life when you begin to have negative thoughts. The support that they are speaking of is not a foreign concept to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). O'Sickey, Hanes and Tonigan (2020) note that there is an association between AA members that remain abstinent from alcohol and maintaining a sponsor. They also highlight that the majority of those who obtain a sponsor, do so early in their journey of abstinence from alcohol. This data highlights the benefits of sponsorship for AA members, and is easily a concept that could be applied for those recently released from a correctional facility. Guidance through mentorship could certainly be beneficial to those seeking resources and direction to enhance their lives.

Those being released from incarceration played various roles to their loved ones before they were locked up. Many of the participants were fathers and expressed the desire to build a relationship with their children, with whom they had lost valuable time. Not only did the fathers want to try to make up for lost time with their child, but they desired to jump back into the role as the provider for their children. With hurdles to employment, many of the fathers were unable to provide anything for their children.

Theme 4: Barriers to Success

Many of the participants spoke of the shame that they experienced due to the label of criminality that had been assigned to them. They mentioned the fear of not feeling good enough prior to incarceration, and this feeling being magnified after release. The pressure to perform as a rehabilitated citizen is unbearable when searches for resources and aid are continuously empty. Their situation is compounded by the fact that they have often lost everything that they had prior to incarceration, or they are now forced to rely on others for what they need. Those who have been released from incarceration experience the stigma of criminality when seeking out opportunities for success. This includes employment, housing, academic opportunities, financial assistance, government assistance, and even with those they have had relationships with prior to incarceration. The participants highlighted the stench of criminality that lingers with them in how people speak towards them and how they are turned away without someone trying to get more information outside of their criminal record. Many of the participants expressed that they've sat through many different job interviews for positions where they have experience in the field and the interview might be going well until the prospective employer finds out about the criminal background. They describe the temptation to lie about their past to not only obtain employment, but to avoid the humiliation they experience through words and sour faces of employers who have no intention of entertaining a job offer. Although some of the participants have gained employment before, they often find that they are terminated on the basis of their record, after they

have already begun working, even if they have been truthful about their background from the beginning.

When those who have recently been released from incarceration are put on probation in the community, the supervision by an agent is meant to ensure that the client is being monitored and adhering to all of their probation stipulations. Some of the participants talked about the pressure of probation. Even without a vehicle or money to use public transportation, those on probation are required to appear for appointments with their agent, as well as other appointments their agent has mandated. If probation or other appointments occur at the same time that they are expected be at work, they risk being penalized by their agent for non-compliance.

Many of the participants found that the plan they began to shape on their day of release was not working out the way that they had planned and often felt that they were the defined by the labels that had been placed on them. Moore, Gregorian, Tangney, Folk, Stuewig, and Salatino (2018) found that experiencing continuous shame after release from incarceration impacts community integration in many ways. Those who have been recently released have a lower chance of becoming employed and a higher chance of using “nonadaptive means” after incarceration. They also found that the anticipation of the stigma alone meant the odds of the individual having unstable housing increased. The participants acknowledged the importance of gainful employment while also expressing that the stigma of their past erased opportunities to be successful. The majority of the participants felt a shared consensus of feeling they had no choice but to go back to old ways after no success. Other participants expressed that there are some

opportunities, but these opportunities do not offer the income needed to provide for their families, pay probation fees, and other living expenses.

Choi (2021) highlights the fear of failure for students of higher education. They acknowledge that fear of failure influences one's motivation. When an individual wants to reach a goal or make a change, fear of failure can be observed in shame and anxiety. Choi (2021) notes that fear of failure causes individuals to exhibit behavior that is not beneficial to their goal such as procrastination, avoidance or even self-sabotage. Although this fear of failure can be born out of prior failures, traits such as attitude, self-esteem and motivation can be increased in an environment that fosters those traits (Choi, 2021) This fear of failure is identical for those returning home from incarceration.

Theme 5: Motivation to Acquire Things After Release

The majority of the participants expressed their frustration with feeling as though they were so much further behind than people on the outside. They explained a need to play catch up and to make up for the lost time that had passed. Although the time passed as they are incarcerated, they recognize that they have not made the same progress that they could have made on the outside in regard to earning income, pursuing academics, and advancing in a career. Even though there is a desire to play catch up, many of the participants expressed feelings that they might not be able to catch up. Many of the participants expressed desiring the resources to acquire more than what they were actually able to in reality. There is a gap present between what they desire and the life they are capable of creating.

A shared consensus among all of the participants was a desire to acquire things quickly. The things that they wanted to obtain were sought out in a survival mode. As there is a mad dash to acquire all that they desire in such a quick manner, those who have been recently released must find the line between needs and wants. Many of the participants highlighted the need to make hard decisions and sacrifice to keep their head above water. Some of the participants noted that they had experienced homelessness after their release. A lack of housing not only means nowhere to lay your head at night, but this could also lead to a violation of their probation. Being without basic needs such as housing strengthens the desire for it, especially for fathers tasked with providing for their children. Maslow (1943) describes the need to obtain basic needs growing stronger and stronger as the need is unmet over time. He talks about human beings and the need to feel wanted. This is no exception for those who have been incarcerated. After being released from incarceration where participants feel that they have been patient, there is a strong desire to quickly play catch up and an expectation for fast results.

Oscarsson, Carlbring, Andersson, and Rozental (2020), highlighted New Year's resolutions and the way that people approach their goals to be successful. They noted that people who set weight loss goals might stop before there is sign of progress when faced with defeat. They found that when people set smaller goals towards their bigger goal, there are more chances to miss deadlines, and as a result more chances to experience failure. This is applicable for those who have been released from incarceration have the overall big goal of being successful, with many smaller goals leading up to that such as

securing housing and employment. As they face rejection over and over, they experience failure over and over.

Theme 6: Feeling Alone

As the participants described the time soon after their release, many of them described a lonely place that was not inclusive of the relationships that they desired. The majority of the participants expressed feeling alone and like they only had themselves and God to rely on through their transition. Even after time had passed, participants still described feeling alone and that they had no one to rely on. This drowning feeling of loneliness was mentioned when participants explained having no one to help them overcome challenges, give advice or to financially assist them. Some participants expressed efforts to build up their reputation after they had been released to remove labels and allow people to trust them.

The feeling of being alone is compounded as participants describe hard work to make good use of leisure time, and to abstain from old friends and lifestyles. After disconnecting from prior relationships, without the presence of newly created relationships, participants find themselves with idle time. Some participants described limiting their interactions with closely selected friends from their past, which alleviates feelings of loneliness. It is important to note that the prior relationships that are being spoken of are not simply associates, but often close friends and family members. The participants shared the feeling of frustration and even lowered motivation as they felt that they had no one to share in their success or failures.

Theme 7: Family Support

Many of the participants explained that they did have someone or people that they considered a part of their support system. They also detailed that having a support system does not always mean that your support system is capable of supporting you. Many of the participants noted that if their support system had the ability to provide them with what they needed then they would have. This coincides with the participants descriptions of generational poverty. Many of the participants described a childhood with an absent father and the support of only female family members such as a mother, sister, or grandmother. As many participants described childhoods where all of their needs were not met, their now adult lifestyles mirror the same situation, and financial struggles are exposed. This is identified as a cycle that has been passed down to the next generation. Since childhood for many of the participants, there has been a struggle between meeting needs and wants. As the participants talked about absent or ill-equipped fathers, they also highlighted that they were given adult responsibilities at an early age. While many of the participants expressed that they had been incarcerated for the first time at a young age, some of them described their then agenda to help contribute towards the household needs. Some participants described having adult friendships as a child. During this timeframe, some of the participants expressed that they were not taught everything their parents should have taught them. Some of the participants acknowledged that they now see that their parents were not capable or equipped to support them the way they had hoped.

The participants acknowledged that there are different forms of support and sometimes the support that they were provided with was in the form of advice, rather than tangible goods and financial assistance. Many of the participants expressed that many times if you do receive assistance from someone, the individual feels as though they are in debt to the person.

Theme 8: Street Life

For many of the participants the feeling of rejection was described as they explained seeking opportunities but feeling forced back into prior lifestyles to meet their needs. Participants explained that it seems that there is always a help wanted sign hanging in the window when it comes to illegal activities that you have years of experience in already. The majority of participants explained that fast and easy money could be made in their former lifestyles. The same way that a salesman can work longer hours to increase overtime hours or commission, participants explained being able to earn additional income by putting in more work. All of the participants described their survival instincts being activated as they sought basic needs but felt excluded from opportunities because of the labels on them. As participants described the importance of family, they talked about family coming first and the strong desire to provide for their family. Unable to find legitimate opportunities, sometimes those recently released from incarceration desperately turn to old ways to be able to fund basic needs. Some of the participants talked about feeling as though society desired for them to make better lives for themselves, but without academic credentials, the ability to take out student loans because of their record, or employment opportunities. Those who made choices to

temporarily dabble back into their old lives to provide for them and their families discuss that they knew that they were doing something that had the potential to get them in trouble, but they also knew they needed food to eat or a place to sleep. The chance at a better life seemed unreachable.

Limitations of the Study

As previously discussed in Chapter 1, there are limitations that can occur during a research study. With the COVID-19 pandemic in progress, there were fewer public places available that could be used for participant interviews. In addition, the face mask could act as a barrier to participants who are unable to observe facial expressions during the interview. All of the data collected came from male participants which means that the data lacks the perspective from women who have been released into the community. Even though the participant interviews included open ended questions, there were some responses that were short or without much detail. Additional demographic information could have been collected from the participants to further understand more about the group. The data reflects participants that were currently living in the same neighborhoods and environments that they had grown up in. The data lacks the perspective of someone who is in an unfamiliar or new environment. To reduce the opportunity for issues of trustworthiness, I was careful to be present as the researcher during the interviews, instead of viewing the events through bias from my experience.

Recommendations

After considering the strengths and limitations of the current research, as well as prior studies, further work is recommended. The exploration of variations in experiences

between ages, and time of incarceration would be beneficial. Further research could cover the specific reasons why more inmates are not able to participate in programs while incarcerated. A deeper understanding of policies and procedures used within correctional facilities that restrict access to reentry help is needed. Further research could examine the accessibility of reentry resources for inmates transitioning. The inclusion of the female perspective for the same population would definitely enhance the data available. Deeper insight is also needed to understand if this experience is similar to probationers who reside in other counties and cities in Maryland. Further research could be done on the impact of mentoring and support groups on recidivism for those returning to the community. Additional research could also be done on the relationships between recidivism and family unification efforts in the reentry population.

Implications

The data from this study has the ability to impact social change in many ways. This study revealed many of the barriers to success that returning citizens experience. Unlike employment and housing, there is no application to obtain meaningful relationships and feel welcomed into society. The need to belong must begin during one's incarceration. Part of the rehabilitation process is removing social barriers that prevent people from feeling excluded from society. It is imperative that correctional facilities begin to correct.

For those returning to society from a correctional facility, an easier transition is possible with this new data. Many of the population who feel that they are alone might find solace in understanding that many others are also on this journey. Families of the

incarcerated can be equipped with this information and as a result, be knowledgeable about the experience that their loved one had while they were away. This would hopefully lead to a smoother transition for the entire family. Organizations tasked with assisting those returning to the community can have a better understanding of the barriers that clients face and work harder to help mitigate these barriers. Correctional facilities can review old policies that prevent inmates from gaining access to necessary rehabilitative tools such as reentry programs. State and federal funds that support reentry efforts can examine the policies and procedures in place that stop all inmates from being able to access necessary resources. Case managers, human services workers, and counselors who provide guidance during reentry cannot recommend additional resources and programs that can assist clients with feeling as though they belong in society. After all of the data has been reviewed, analyzed and considered, I hypothesize that the rapid reentry theory provides an explanation for low perception of acceptance in previously incarcerated individuals.

Rapid Reentry Theory

People who are incarcerated feel that they are isolated from the world. They feel that as the world continues to move forward and progress on the outside, they are standing still and making no progress on the inside. This feeling of stagnation further separates them from feeling that they belong. There is a desire to rapidly reintegrate back into society and with their loved ones, as well as quickly obtain the things that they need. They believe that once released, they will no longer feel separated from others or feel behind. Once they have entered the community, they continue to face barriers that make

them feel alone and behind. Some of the themes that emerged to demonstrate this are feeling alone, barriers to success, and family support.

Expectations are for a quick turnaround in mending relationships, as well as obtaining the things that they seek. The feeling of being behind is perpetuated through a lack of opportunities to gain their basic needs, as well as not having family or friends contribute to them becoming established. There is a perception that they have not been embraced by their loved ones and the community they return to. The experience of those returning to the community is that their basic needs will remain unmet, and they have an inability to obtain these things as quickly as they need to. Lacking these things causes further division and feelings of separation from society. Although great motivation was initially present to rekindle relationships and acquire their needs, individuals find that they are met with challenges and there is a low perception of acceptance from others. This theory could be tested through monitoring the relationships between one's perception of their acceptance, compared to their success while out in the community.

The theme of feeling alone was persistent when participants highlighted their incarceration, as well as their transition back into the community. These findings suggest that those being released from incarceration consistently feel alone on their reentry journey. These unfulfilled emotions to fit in, coupled with the emergent theme to acquire things after release, creates the desire to quickly obtain what is needed, not just to survive, but to also feel included. The quicker that an individual can acquire what they need, the quicker they will be able to live a better life and to feel like they belong.

Through understanding the experiences of previously incarcerated individuals, and application of the Rapid Reentry Theory, correctional facilities, reentry programs and human services providers could better assess and provide for the needs of those reentering the community, including the need to belong.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to answer the following research question: “What are the lived experiences that probationers have with belonging in their family, community and workplace after release?” Before this study, there was limited research on the need for belonging for this population. The findings of this study filled the gaps that were present in the literature by providing an in depth understanding of these previously unearthed experiences.

Through participant interviews I was able to capture the essence of the lived experiences of previously incarcerated probationers. I was also able to better understand their vital need for belonging, as well as how this need is not being met. Based on the themes that emerged from the data, it is evident that beginning with the event of incarceration, individuals begin to feel disconnected from their family and society. Throughout the incarceration their feelings of isolation are further amplified. Once released into the community, although physically free and able to socialize with their loved ones, the feelings of isolation and not belonging remain. The findings suggest that there are multiple instances of separation and loss beginning with one’s incarceration.

The findings suggest that the need for belonging is sought out during incarceration through building relationships with other inmates. This need for belonging

that inmates feel is often temporarily satisfied through the relationships built in correctional facilities. Once it is time to be released, the experience of separation is again felt as they leave companions behind. This time of incarceration where temporary relationships have been built, has allowed individuals to feel a sense of belonging, even if it were due to close proximity and similar circumstances.

Once released into the community, recently released individuals begin searching for opportunities such as housing and employment to better their lives. They often feel as though they do not belong back in society because their past acts as a constant barrier to these things. They often look back at their time of incarceration and understand that they were not properly equipped with skills and guidance to create a successful reentry transition. These collective experiences provide insight into how those being released from incarceration feel separated from their loved ones, partially because, they have little in tangible things to offer when they return home.

The data further addressed feelings of not belonging through encounters with people who participants felt looked down on them because of their past incarceration. This includes potential employers and landlords. The desire to acquire what they need to survive remains unsatisfied as they continue to face consistent challenges. The data provides insight into the motivation that those who have been recently released feel when trying to gather what they need, as well as the feeling of not belonging when they are unable to obtain these things.

The findings also suggest that further insight is needed to develop strategies to assist those returning to the community to not only feel as though they belong, but to

ensure that they belong. Interventions implemented into reentry programs and correctional facilities could focus on helping inmates to maintain social ties during their incarceration, and during their transition into the community.

Throughout this study we see that many who have been incarcerated have had desires to belong since childhood. In seeking this need to belong there are many who have only satisfied their need for belonging outside the home with others... For some, this need is satisfied through belonging with others who engage in criminal activity. For people who have longed to belong, when they are released from incarceration they do not feel like they belong in society and feel the shame of the label of being a criminal. This study was successful at uncovering the heavy burden and strong stigma that results from experiencing incarceration, as well as the transition back into the community after release. This study provided much needed insight into the almost underground community that many believe that they are forever trapped within.

The same way that sports fans want to see a player that has been injured return to the game as soon as possible and at 100% capacity, this is similar to the expectations placed on those returning to their communities, who lack what they need to be successful. The same way that new employees are given a manual to guide them in their new role, is the same way that returning citizens should be guided through their journey. Inclusion efforts that take place in the workplace to help employees feel comfortable, are comparable to the efforts that need to be in place for returning citizens. It is essential that improved social integration for this population is the reentry standard. The fresh sense of life that inmates are anticipating should be filled with the resources and opportunities in

which they can take advantage. A tremendous weight could be taken off of their shoulders with available opportunities that do not force them to go backwards.

Mentorship and guidance have the ability to allow those who have survived reentry to teach others how to do it, instead of allowing the cycle of generational criminality to lead.

With appropriate programs for all inmates and reentry efforts prior to release, the desire to never return to incarceration can be made a reality.

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Researcher seeks interview with people on probation for research study

There is a new study called “*The Need for Belonging for Previously Incarcerated Probationers*” that could help human services professionals to better understand and advocate for the need’s inmates have when preparing for release. For this study, you are invited to describe your experience transitioning back into the community.

This survey is part of the doctoral study for Alaina Elam, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

About the study:

- One 45-60 minute in person or phone interview
- To protect your privacy, no names will be collected

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Currently on probation in Maryland
- Released from incarceration after October 1, 2020

**To volunteer, use the following
number or e-mail:**

[redacted]

[redacted]

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Think about your life prior to incarceration. Elaborate on any sense of belonging you experienced (family, society, workplace).
2. Tell me about your experience being incarcerated and if it had an impact on feeling like you belong in your family.
3. Explain your experience with being incarcerated and having a support system within the jail when it comes to transitioning back into the community.
4. While you were incarcerated describe in detail any measures that you took to feel like you belonged or fit in. Did the facility take any action to help inmates feel like they fit in, and do you think it could have been helpful?
5. Explain your experience with trying to acquire everything that you needed after you were released. Did you feel a sense of urgency to do these things? Did you feel as though you would fit in or be more accepted once you had these things?
6. Describe in detail your experience with the direction that your personal relationships took after your release, and any motivation to revive those relationships.
7. After your release, what has been your experience with facing a challenge and relying on others for support? Explain your experience with relying on others for this support.
8. Explain your experience with fitting in after your release and assuming your place back into society.
9. Explain your experience in seeking or obtaining employment after your release. Provide any details of your experience that you believe are related to being incarcerated.

10. Since your release, explain your experience with feeling valued, feeling at home, and feeling safe in your identity.
11. What has been your experience with your current support system and how does it compare to the support system you had while incarcerated?
12. Explain any value that you believe a support system may provide during the transition from incarceration to the community?
13. Tell me about your overall sense of belonging and your motivation to lead a crime free and healthy life.
14. Explain any feelings of isolation and change in quality of life that you may have felt after your release, due to your experience.
15. Describe in detail how you believe your experience would be changed if you felt more accepted in society.
16. Is there anything you would like to share with me before we finish the interview today?