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## **An Exploration of Male Ex-Offenders' Experiences of Postsecondary Education and Reentry**

Marvin Lee Moore, Jr  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

An Exploration of Male Ex-Offenders' Experiences of Postsecondary Education

and Reentry

by

Marvin Lee Moore, Jr.

MS, Mercer University, 2016

BSS, Mercer University, 2014

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human and Social Services

Walden University

November 2022

## Abstract

The research problem addressed in this study is postsecondary education in prisons, ex-offenders, and the issues surrounding their reintegration into society. The primary focus is on ex-offenders who had received postsecondary education in prison, their experience obtaining a credential, and their ability to cease criminalistic behavior. After time served and education acquired, lack of inclusion within society perpetuated the problems ex-offenders faced when reentry occurred. This study includes an exploration of the experiences of ex-offenders who had received postsecondary education while in prison. The theoretical frameworks for this study were Leibrich's desistance theory and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. The generic qualitative approach was used to obtain the experiences of eight educated male ex-offenders in society and their views about education in prisons through semi-structured interviews. The ex-offenders' statements were assessed through an iterative approach and evaluated through systematic analysis for analyzing data. The study results revealed that self-efficacy and desistance are primary factors for assessing the effectiveness of postsecondary education and reentry in the life of an ex-offender. Postsecondary education in prisons is important because it provides ex-offenders with an opportunity for rehabilitation and serves as a preventative measure after reentry. Ex-offenders' insights are meaningful in pushing policies that support their need for equal employment. This study fills the gap in knowledge about postsecondary education and reentry and attempts to amplify the voice of educated ex-offenders to professionals in education, human services, and criminal justice fields.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, who has continuously prayed for me and encouraged me to keep pressing and building resilience during challenging times. I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents, who spoke of doctoral aspirations over my childhood life and identified my potential.

## Acknowledgments

I thank my lovely wife and extended family members who have kept me motivated and accountable within the dissertation journey. My wife has been with me throughout this doctoral journey and has been the greatest supporter and believer as she encouraged and edified me daily. Her unfailing love, patience, and comfort have been God-inspired and felt.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

In this study, I explored adult male ex-offenders released back into society who received postsecondary education and a degree and/or certificate of achievement while incarcerated. I sought to understand how ex-offenders' education and employment could lead to desistance of criminalistic behaviors. This generic qualitative study was necessary to explore the reentry status of ex-offenders released from prison who had obtained an education within the prison system. According to Jones (2018), remorseful offenders should have the opportunity to receive higher education while incarcerated to prevent recidivism after release. To determine the current state of ex-offenders with a postsecondary education, I conducted semistructured interviews to learn about their reality in society as educated, second-chance citizens.

This chapter includes an outline of the study and its social implications concerning ex-offenders and reentry. I also discuss the theoretical framework. I also discuss the purpose, nature, and significance of the study, the rationale for the research, and the potential contribution of this research to the advancement of knowledge within this discipline.

### **Background**

An *ex-offender* is an individual who engaged in criminal behavior that led to incarceration and subsequent release into society (Schneider & Weber, 2020). This definition provides insight into the theory of desistance (Leibrich, 1994) that being an individual who no longer functions in the state of an offender. Previous researchers

explored prisoners' experiences with education while in prison, yet not much research has addressed ex-offenders' educational attainment experiences received while in prison and now functioning as reintegrated citizens (Coupland & Olver, 2020). I examined the experiences of ex-offenders who received postsecondary education to understand the current realities of these individuals since their release from prison.

Postsecondary education is any academic or vocational coursework beyond high school or equivalent learning and attainment (Castro et al., 2018). Current and previous studies provide an understanding of the need for postsecondary education in prisons. Prison education is fundamental in rehabilitating ex-offenders who need skills, tools, knowledge, and application.

Many researchers have applied self-efficacy theory in understanding the effects of education in prisons (Gould, 2018). For example, Mertanen and Brunila (2018) found that education was crucial in promoting confidence in ex-offenders while in prison. Furthermore, Szifris et al.'s (2018) study of prisoners revealed that they felt empowered intellectually and stimulated to know more about academic discourse. These researchers lauded the effectiveness of education in prisons.

In addition, Binda et al. (2020) asserted that increased educational opportunities in prisons could reduce recidivism significantly. Thus, engaging in postsecondary education could be a potential factor in the cessation of criminalistic behaviors in ex-offenders' lives. According to Kallman (2020), offenders who received postsecondary education in prisons felt more focused and connected to learning than being on the streets, distracted and unsupported. This finding highlights the importance of education in

prisons and emphasizes the need to explore its effectiveness in offenders' lives.

Therefore, further research is necessary to assess the attributed factors for the cessation of criminal behavior by focusing primarily on ex-offenders' perceptions of their educational achievement and its effects on them (Utheim, 2016). Transformation for ex-offenders is a means of exploring their educational experience and their reentry reality.

Postsecondary educational achievement among inmates in correctional institutions has positive effects on offenders and their integration within society (Ward, 2009). However, despite engaging in rehabilitation while in prison, inmates often experience anxieties caused by facing the realities of reentry into society upon release (Wood, 2009). The varying factors associated with reintegration perpetuate concerns for ex-offenders who leave prisons prepared educationally yet full of uncertainty. Some researchers focused on the statistical findings using a quantitative approach. In contrast, I used a generic, qualitative approach to encourage ex-offenders to share their realities and experiences in this study. I explored the perceptions and interpretations of ex-offenders regarding postsecondary education in prison and its effect on their lives to understand the importance of increasing higher learning opportunities in prisons.

### **Problem Statement**

According to Cioffi et al. (2020), prison education is a form of "focused citizenship education" (p. 132) that prepares ex-offenders for reintegration into the community as reformed citizens. Some ex-offenders exit prisons with credentials they obtained while incarcerated, yet they may lack the resources or supportive services to facilitate their transformation into productive citizens once released. Furthermore, after

exiting prison, ex-offenders who have obtained educational degrees may face numerous challenges (i.e., employers, family). Therefore, ex-convicts require more programs that meet inmates' needs and/or aspirations for higher education to have more opportunities outside prison (Gould, 2018). The implementation of postsecondary education has the potential to create more positive advantages for ex-offenders who reenter society.

For example, programs providing more higher learning opportunities for inmates have the capacity to enhance ex-offenders' employability, which would also promote their confidence and hope (Evans, 2018; Szifris et al., 2018). Evans (2018) spoke of ex-offenders overcoming the feeling of demoralization they experienced when society did not afford them the same opportunities in society after completing their time served and obtaining a postsecondary educational degree. To confront social inequality, citizens must be open to higher education afforded to prison inmates (Utheim, 2016).

There is a need for greater insight into the self-efficacy and success of inmates who attended postsecondary education while in prison. Mertanen and Brunila (2018) addressed self-efficacy and how education provides ex-offenders a different perspective of life and where they fit into it educationally. According to Pelletier and Evans (2019), more research is necessary to assess the outcomes of male ex-offenders who have reentered society after completing postsecondary education. Postsecondary education may prevent the recidivism of ex-offenders (Gould, 2018). Further research on life after prison for educated ex-offenders may help reveal the effectiveness of postsecondary education in prison and their reentry experience.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In this generic, qualitative study, I aimed to determine if ex-offenders' education led to effective reentry into society by exploring the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who undertook postsecondary education programs while incarcerated. The population consisted of adult male ex-offenders who had completed a postsecondary education program, degree, or certificate and had not recidivated for at least 1 year. The specific age group was 18 to 62 years of age, and I gathered perspectives of multiple generations of male ex-offenders.

### **Research Question**

What are the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who have completed postsecondary education programs while incarcerated, and whether gaining an education led to effective reentry into society?

### **Theoretical Foundation**

I used desistance theory as the foundation for this study. Leibrich developed the desistance theory in 1994; however, numerous researchers seeking to understand the cessation of criminalistic behavior researched desistance throughout the 20th century. The development of desistance theory was for (a) understanding the maturation process of criminal behaviors based on the age of the offender, (b) identifying what caused the reduction in criminal behaviors, and (c) assessing the relationship between supervision and social supports and its implications for preventing recidivism (Leibrich, 1994). According to desistance theory, implementing different forms of prevention against recidivism for ex-offenders causes cessation of criminal behaviors (Leibrich, 1994). I



used desistance theory to collect data about whether adult male ex-offenders who received postsecondary education ceased criminal behaviors.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was qualitative with a generic approach. Researchers use qualitative methodologies to interpret social problems or a phenomenon and explore the realities of people by assessing their words (Riese, 2019). Kennedy (2016) maintained that a generic qualitative approach serves as a focal point for the subjective view of a person or population concerning perspectives, experiences, and opinions of a phenomenon or problem. A generic design for research is more flexible than commonly used qualitative designs (i.e., phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnography), and the researcher uses this design to explore more than one established approach to conduct a study without restriction (Kahlke, 2014). In this study, I used the generic qualitative approach to understand male ex-offenders' experiences and thoughts regarding receiving postsecondary education, as well as its effectiveness in their community lives.

### **Definitions of Terms**

Keywords defined for this study were *effective*, *employment*, *ex-offender*, *postsecondary education*, *recidivism*, *reentry*, and *employment*. The following terms were considered to provide meaning to the scope of the study:

*Effective*: O'Donnell (2013) contended that effective describes the realization of an intended or wanted outcome about the success of a person, place, or thing.

*Employment*: This is a place of provisional resources where one can find personal development, career growth, and social involvement (van Hooft et al., 2020).

*Ex-offender:* According to Obatusin et al. (2019), an ex-offender is a person who has served time in prison for a committed crime.

*Postsecondary education:* Any academic and/or vocational coursework that extends beyond high school or equivalent learning and attainment is considered postsecondary education (Castro et al., 2018).

*Recidivism:* This term refers to a state of perpetual violation of law that leads an ex-offender back to jail or prison (Menefee et al., 2019)

*Reentry:* This occurs when an ex-offender leaves prison and returns to society (Mizel & Abrams, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

I explored the assumption that education enhances the probability that ex-offenders will not recidivate. I gathered insight from ex-offenders who could articulate their postsecondary education experiences and their effectiveness in preventing recidivism. According to Cioffi et al. (2020), the purposeful advantage of postsecondary education in prisons leads to reentry opportunities in society for second-chance offenders. To determine the accuracy of this assumption, I explored the experiences of ex-offenders impacted by postsecondary education while in prison.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The stigmas associated with being an ex-offender can be demoralizing, causing ex-offenders to feel scrutinized for their past criminal behavior (Evans, 2018). Social inequality and judgments can create negative narratives for an ex-offender who has been

rehabilitated through the prison, causing a postsecondary education received while incarcerated to appear null and void.

One-on-one interviews were the primary source for data collection in this study. I identified adult male ex-offenders who had completed some form of postsecondary education during their incarceration and then reentered society without recidivism for at least one year. I conducted semistructured interviews to explore ex-offenders' experiences. I presented each adult male ex-offender who participated in the study open-ended questions for uniformity, allowing the participants to express their experiences. All interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and occurred virtually.

The methodology and instrumentation section of this study, which includes an outline of the type of study, participants, and data sources, promotes the replicability by other researchers. I used purposeful sampling, using ambiguous age range and sample size considerations. The strategy for purposeful sampling was the recruitment of the population needed for a study. According to Mason (2010), it is typical for a generic qualitative study to have five to 25 individuals within the sample size for qualitative research. This study had a sample size of eight participants.

### **Limitations**

A challenge within the study was having preconceived notions of the topic. I undertook this research, which is near and dear to me, because of my brother, who has been incarcerated for most of my life and denied opportunities for a postsecondary education while incarcerated. His struggle has been to live a productive, illegal activity-free lifestyle when released because he has been unable to earn the money he desires due

to his lack of educational attainment. I needed to abstain from filtering this bias in the overall analysis of the study. To mitigate this challenge, I used bracketing to note my personal biases to ensure they were not present in the research.

Another potential barrier to conducting the study was identifying the safest and most appropriate type of data collection for participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted virtual interviews with participants to minimize the fear of gathering during the pandemic. This involved the use of the online Zoom platform to conduct individual interviews with the participants.

A further challenge was establishing trust with participants and ensuring cooperation within the interview sessions. To promote trust and cooperation, I reviewed the interview procedure with interviewees, which encompassed voluntary consent, privacy, and transparency for conducting interviews. I also solicited feedback from participants to ensure the clarity of their responses.

### **Significance**

According to Szifris et al. (2018), researchers have examined ex-offenders' experiences with education while in prison. However, there has yet to be an exploration of ex-offenders' experiences since reentering their communities. I filled this gap by interviewing adult male ex-offenders who obtained a postsecondary education from prison and failed to recidivate for 1 year. The findings from this study include information for those in education, criminal justice, social work, and human service professions on the effectiveness of education in prisons in preventing recidivism in released ex-offenders. Professionals in the field can use the study results to provide more

supportive services that increase the employability and sustainability of reformed ex-offenders in the community. Legislators may use the results from this study to enact and enforce laws and policies within the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for second-chance offenders who have been rehabilitated through postsecondary education in prisons. These social change implications affect professionals and communities by presenting greater awareness of higher education in the life of offenders and their successes or challenges within reentry.

My goal was to understand the collaborative functions of education, supportive services, and employment to assess how less likely ex-offenders are to recidivate. The implementation of resources to meet the needs of ex-offenders properly improves the chances that these individuals will not reenter prison (Binda et al., 2020). An increase in employment results in positive social change for ex-offenders because it affords them the right to be actively working citizens in the community (Seim & Harding, 2020). When human services professionals collaborate with the community, there is an increase in second-chance efforts for ex-offenders (Coupland & Olver, 2020).

### **Summary**

This chapter included an outline and framework for the overall trajectory of this generic qualitative study. This chapter included a discussion regarding the social problem of recidivism and the elements for social change. Chapter 2 includes a synthesis of existing research, and examination of desistance theory, and an overview of supporting, relevant literature that I used for this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss the components needed to fulfill the theoretical discourse by exploring background research and content synthesis pertinent to the phenomenon under investigation. In the literature review, I sought to explain the past and current research, convey any overarching issues or problems, and clarify with evidence the need for advanced knowledge and research surrounding the phenomenon. Prisons continue to experience an influx of offenders, with a 75% recidivism rate after the first five years of release from prison (Binda et al., 2020). However, prisons that offer postsecondary education (i.e., prison education) are at 43% lower odds of recidivism for ex-offenders after the first three years of release from prison (Binda et al., 2020).

Researchers have sought to discover connections between recidivism and education with the purpose of understanding the genetic factors as a contribution in offenders (Binda et al., 2020; Castro et al., 2018). In times past, legislation has been enacted to prevent recidivism; however, with budget cuts, only 35% of state prisons offer postsecondary education, restricting incarcerated individuals' opportunities to participate in the programs offered (Bender, 2018). In a study assessing the equity of postsecondary education and its accessibility and effectiveness in inmates' lives Castro et al. (2018) found "roughly one in every four states has but a single institution offering credit-bearing postsecondary education to people in prisons" (p. 414). Castro et al. (2018) emphasized the need for more research to determine "the extent to which formerly incarcerated people are able to use certificates of completion and applied associate degrees after

release” (p. 420). Thus, postsecondary education tends to be less of an option in most prisons, potentially excluding offenders from having an opportunity to cease criminalistic behaviors if postsecondary education is a factor for desistance. The ex-offenders who have access are less likely to recidivate; postsecondary education in prisons provides ex-offenders the ability to overcome typical reentry issues, including employment, housing, and social support (Kallman, 2020). The current literature presents postsecondary education in prisons and the recidivation rates. Further research may provide more insight into the gaps concerning the reentry status of educated ex-offenders.

In this study, I aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of ex-offenders who received some form of postsecondary education while in prison and did not recidivate after one year of release from prison. The goal was to explore the effectiveness of postsecondary education in prisons while also understanding the life of an ex-offender impacted by it. I used semistructured interviews with ex-offenders to explore the social problem of recidivism and identifying any inequalities they had faced within society. The extensive literature I have provided is relevant support for the framework of this study. My aim in this study was to affirm the research problem through this literature review and establish the purposeful benefits for conducting this study.

In the following sections of this chapter, I provide the literature search strategy, theoretical foundations, literature related to key concepts/terms, and the conclusion of the literature findings. I briefly examined postsecondary education, ex-offenders, recidivism, and reentry/reintegration into society and inserted a descriptive analysis of the pros and cons surrounding access to prison education. Supporting sections include definitions for

keywords, background history, and preventative measures for recidivism. Lastly, I address problems surrounding reoffending, discuss factors associated with desistance theory, and identify whether self-efficacy creates a sense of fulfillment in the life of an ex-offender.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To gather the appropriate literature for this study, I used the strategy of searching multiple databases: ERIC, Ebrary, EBSCO eBooks, Thoreau, and JSTOR. The primary servers and hosts used via Walden University included ProQuest, Google Scholar, and EBSCO. The key search terms were *ex-offender and/or ex-convict, postsecondary education and/or prison education, reentry, employment for ex-offenders, inequality, services for ex-offenders, desistance theory, and self-efficacy theory*.

My search of the literature was exhaustive in retrieving the information and processing it to set the scope for desistance theory as the theoretical foundation for learning more about the different phases of the approach and how it aims to depict how criminals arrive at a place of cessation. Leibrich (1994) formed the construct of desistance into the theory based on research geared towards understanding the patterns of criminalistic behavior and all factors that lead to and/or support the paradigm shift of ceasing those behaviors. In assessing this theory, I completed a thorough dissecting of keywords that address recidivism and factors that govern the idea of postsecondary education as a preventative measure. Findings suggest that some educational enrichment enhances an ex-offender's chances of getting a job and limits the likelihood of recidivating (Szifris et al., 2018).



Another construct for analyzing this study was self-efficacy, which Bandura (1997) defined as one's conviction to accomplish something that successfully produces a direct result. This theory is in connection with desistance theory because the interpretation of the criminal's behavior is derivative of their perception of the action or pursuit of a particular outcome (Laferrière & Morselli, 2015). Therefore, what I have found presented a need for a more strategic search of peer-reviewed articles that called for a tailored combination of search terms focusing on *desistance theory* AND *postsecondary education* AND *ex-offenders* AND *self-efficacy*, AND *reentry*. Finally, although I discovered current research surrounding postsecondary education and prisons, the literature search I conducted had minimal research on postsecondary education and the effects on ex-offenders who have reentered society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this study, I focused on desistance, thereby allowing for the theoretical construct of the research to gauge ex-offenders' experiences and perceptions of postsecondary education received in prison and its impact on their desistance. Leibrich's (1994) theory of desistance served as a framework for researchers understand what causes a reduction in criminal behaviors and assess the implications in preventing recidivism. Considering this theory, definitions, in-depth rationales, and concepts unveil the history of this theoretical construct, provide insight into the gaps in the literature, and gather meaningful knowledge to review for usability and credibility.

In addition, I evaluated self-efficacy to understand the ex-offenders' perceptions of achievement related to postsecondary education as a positive motivator. Bandura and

Jourden (1991) explained self-efficacy was a theoretical construct for evaluating and addressing individuals' cognitive functions, inspirations, and perceptions of their ability to feel a sense of fulfillment.

Delineation of assumptions was scarce concerning other studies when making comparisons of theories. I evaluated both constructs to assess the cessation of criminal behaviors and the impact of postsecondary education as experienced and perceived by ex-offenders. I used desistance theory to primarily guide me in this present study because it is a significant and relevant theoretical construct needed for understanding an ex-offender's ability to become a successful, law-abiding citizen.

### **Theoretical Background of Desistance**

The term desistance refers to a gradual or continual process undertaken by a criminal to reduce the chances of reoffending, ultimately leading to the cessation of criminalistic activities (Fagan, 1989). Desistance determines the criminal's ability to change their paradigm, which in this case refers to how people think and behave in society. Leibrich (1994) undergirded the efforts of many researchers and theorists who had a stake and contribution to unfolding the term desistance. However, through practicum, she engaged in the external factors that affect criminals' internal process of how they view their behaviors that leads to them quitting crimes. Other researchers have identified desistance as a process of decelerating criminal behaviors versus the term *reduction* in the frequency of illegal activities (Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989). In comparison, both reduction and deceleration can be used by researchers to examine the

process of desistance influenced by a criminal's decreased behaviors stemming from unlawful acts.

Desistance theory includes two overarching theories: socio-situational theory (i.e., environmental factors leading to desistance) and subjective theory (i.e., self and/or facilitating factors leading to desistance; Williams & Schaefer, 2021). Although many subtheories support and/or reflect desistance theory, Leibrich's (1994) desistance theory allows for a larger number of diverse interpretations with more variables that lead to cessation (Weaver, 2019).

I chose Leibrich's (1994) desistance as the theoretical framework for exploring postsecondary education as a factor in ex-offenders who have ceased criminalistic behaviors and reintegrated into society with a degree or certificate. The research question I used allowed for a generic approach to unraveling the continual phenomenon of recidivism among adult males yet assessing the victories of postsecondary education in the lives of those who were fortunate to have access to it while in prison. In using the research question, I was able to have participants to share their experiences, as well as provide their current perspectives on postsecondary education and the implications of its preventative measure regarding being a rehabilitated citizen in society. Lastly, I used the research question to target the participants' perception of themselves, and their present life as no longer incarcerated.

### **Postsecondary Education**

As early as 1920, criminal justice professionals and educators developed and implemented education in prison environments to positively impact the lives of offenders

(Criminal Justice Center, 1994). Postsecondary education and correctional institutions have positively affected offenders and their integration within society (Ward, 2009). However, budget cuts escalated a decline in supporting postsecondary education in prisons, causing a decrease in opportunities for prison education rehabilitation (Reese, 2019). According to Messemer (2003), there was more need to allocate financial resources to build more prisons and hire more staff, as reported in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. In addition, society favored more punitive measures over rehabilitative measures for dealing with criminal behaviors (Clear & Frost, 2014). However, the intent of postsecondary education in prisons was to decrease recidivism and increase employability of ex-offenders. Employability and desistance to criminal activities are potentially elevated when inmates receive postsecondary education. Davis et al. (2008) concluded that for every 100 offenders with postsecondary educational attainment, there is an estimated 1 million decrease in reincarceration funds. Thus, postsecondary education would be more cost efficient than the deficiency of spending money on building more correctional institutions. Understanding the need for postsecondary education in prisons is necessary because of the continual rise of ex-offenders who reoffend, as identified in current and previous studies on this topic.

Prisons with postsecondary education opportunities are effective and impactful in the lives of offenders, who benefit from being stimulated by higher learning. According to Kallman (2020), offenders who received postsecondary education in prisons felt more focused and connected to learning than being on the streets, distracted and unsupported. The small percentage of offenders who take postsecondary education courses while

incarcerated tend to develop different perspectives about crime and cessation of lawless offenses (Runell, 2018), ultimately turning their attention to new positive routines and experiences within life due to educational enhancement and achievement (Maruna, 2001). According to Hill (2014), adult learners in prisons connect by dialoguing about practical realities associated with higher learning.

### **Ex-Offender**

The term ex-offender is interchangeable with the terms ex-convict, ex-felon, and ex-prisoner, which researchers use to describe a population of people who have committed unlawful acts. For this study, the term ex-offender refers to an individual who engaged in criminal behavior that led to incarceration and subsequent release into society. Traditionally, the term offender, also known as a convict, is a Latin word from the 14th century used to describe someone who committed a moral and/or civil offense (Tsougarakis, 2014). This Latin term indicates an individual who transgressed the laws, leading to the need for some form of corrective/rehabilitative measure. The term ex-offender implies that the individual has ceased criminal offenses and now lives as a lawful citizen (Cioffi et al., 2020). For decades, many criminal justice professionals have attempted to discover a correlation between crime and poverty and arrests and convictions of individuals (Berk et al., 1980). Labeling of offenses attached to the offender still occurs in this current dispensation, although cessation has occurred, and the pursuit of abstaining from criminalistic behaviors is a constant goal. The term ex-offender addresses inclusively anyone who has been detained and institutionalized in prison and currently resides in society.

During the 20th century, researchers joined in collaborative efforts to assess variables and factors surrounding why offenders reoffend, creating a continual imprisonment cycle. Between the mid-1970s and 1980s, the construction of prison projects rapidly grew to accommodate the coinciding reoffender population in prisons (Rich & Barnett, 1985). Some argue that offenders have a *living in the moment* hedonistic attitude and posture toward what the future holds for them (Persson, 1981). The perceptions of researchers who observed the behaviors of offenders lack connection to the environment or sociological elements surrounding the offenders' offenses. According to Rich and Barnett (1985), the need for preventative measures is associated with more punitive measures to impart fear in the offender and the expectation of cessation of criminalistic behaviors. The demands for harsher punishments and sentences in the last century superseded the prison rehabilitative opportunities that promote desistance.

Many released prisoners reenter society with predictions of recidivating (Holland et al., 1983). In some regards, ex-offenders must overcome the stigma associated with the prediction while maintaining their freedom. Metfessel and Lovell (1942) evaluated several determinants and factors associated with offenders: (a) chronological age (i.e., development), (b) sex (i.e., gender), (c) race/nationality (i.e., origin/culture), (d) physical traits (i.e., characteristics), and (e) intelligence (i.e., mental/intellectual capacity). Most of these factors are consistently associated with the predictions made for released offenders, highlighting gender, race/nationality, and intelligence as more frequently cited than are others. Almost 8 decades have passed, and the reality of these factors and stigmas are current reminders for ex-offenders.

Males account for the highest imprisoned gender in the United States. Between 1903 and 1936, 93% of delinquents in New York were males (Maller, 1937). For decades, public perception of males was as the most problematic of the male and female gender. Researchers have identified poverty as the link between men and crime. Unfavorable environments that lack financial resources make it easier to recidivate and commit crimes for lucrative measures (Kingston & Webster, 2015). Therefore, adult male offenders are more prone to commit offenses when they are in a position of scarcity economically and environmentally.

### **Overview of Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy refers to one's capability to initiate and carry out distinct behaviors that one has set out to achieve (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1984) explained that self-efficacy differs from behavior reinforcements aimed at incentivizing one to make better decisions and/or change behavior because it focuses primarily on the individual's perception and view of their ability to achieve specific outcomes. To test an individual's ability to carry out tasks under what they perceive as a challenging or difficult situation, researchers have created self-efficacy measures (Williams et al., 2020). Thus, self-efficacy is identified in terms of stressor appraisal, an individual's perception of their capabilities warranted as a challenge or potential threat (Lazarus, 1966). In addition, it is necessary to conclude that an individual's self-perception governs the individual's willingness to perform specific tasks, whether positively or negatively influenced. Self-efficacy influences an individual's ability to accomplish new outcomes and gain confidence to perform (Bandura & Jourden, 1991). Considering self-efficacy as a

construct for further investigation of desistance served as a supplement to understanding ex-offenders' motivation to change their behaviors.

The theoretical foundation of self-efficacy stemmed from Bandura's social-cognitive theory, which is the basis for discovering one's ability based upon personal perceptions (Cramer et al., 2009). Bandura (1993) pursued developmental research and found the determinants for self-efficacy were an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Given the different determinants and/or domains, the meaning of self-efficacy transcends multiple degrees of functioning. The various degrees of functioning are outliers for numerous interpretations of confidence theory, which builds off one's assuredness of one's ability to accomplish or achieve a task (Price & Stone, 2004). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that self-efficacy is multifaceted in defining how one could see oneself achieving something based on how one ascertains one's knowledge and awareness of one's ability.

The concept of self-efficacy creates an opportunity for transformative realities in the lives of individuals who have struggled to overcome criminalistic behaviors. Still, for some, a lack of hope and optimism keeps them defeated. Johnston et al. (2019) identified the opposing views of offenders who struggle to see positive change in their lives due to feeling disqualified from having successful cessation. The idea surrounding identity theory and desistance undergirds the explanation of an individual who arrives at a place of *new self* because of the ability to change their ways and behaviors due to self-efficacy (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). In other words, the pre-qualifier for adaptation of



renewed mindset and a renewed lifestyle is the decision to see oneself as evolved and changed.

According to Bandura (1997), four primary sources describe the criminal perceptions of self-efficacy: (a) personal performance accomplishments, (b) vicarious learning, (c) social persuasion, and (d) physiological states/responses. To understand the cognitive processes of how offenders perceive their accomplishments, researchers have used qualitative methods to understand the distortions of criminal self-efficacy (Laferrière & Morselli, 2015) and found offenders who lack education and employment opportunities perceive themselves as failures (Uggen & Thompson, 2003). Therefore, investigations of criminal self-efficacy interpret the education as influential in the life of an offender who is striving to achieve some form of positive self-efficacy. Offenders' view of themselves is instrumental in the outcomes they tended to have for themselves.

### **Understanding Reentry**

Reentry refers to the reintegration of ex-offenders released conditionally or unconditionally back into society (Cannonier et al., 2021). The process speaks to the after-prison experiences, encounters, and obstacles of ex-offenders as they adapt to living outside prison walls. Many ex-offenders struggle with adjusting and reintegrating because of a lack of social support, positive environment reinforcements, and employable skills (Petersilia, 2004). Furthermore, reentry for ex-offenders is subject to bias since some ex-offenders are unable to receive help or support in society. The Second Chance Act of 2005 allocated resources for servicing ex-offenders but failed to provide specific services for some ex-offenders based on their criminal history (Pogorzelski et al., 2005).

Impactful reentry requires a host of resources and supports for ex-offenders to succeed, but frequently the lack thereof places ex-offenders at a disadvantage when released without assistance (Piehl, 2002). The depiction of reentry provides understanding of the experience of the reintegration process of ex-offenders.

Reentry for ex-offenders carries different meanings and perspectives based on their perceptions of what they may confront outside of prison. This population faces socioeconomic challenges that create scarcity in the larger society, which continues to cause reentry issues for ex-offenders (Frazier, 2013). The anxieties associated with reentry cause ex-offenders to experience skepticism about their realities for successful reintegration. Ex-offenders are as successful as the external factors providing significant resources for maintaining productive citizenship, highlight the need for increased and stakeholder and community involvement, as well as legislative support and reentry programs, to improve the reentrance of ex-offenders into society (Clear, 2007).

Designed to address recidivism for ex-offenders, reentry programs assist in the transition from prison into society. Reentry programs aim to reduce prison populations, rehabilitate offenders, and help public safety (Miller, 2012). According to Hughes and Wilson (2004), what happens before and after an offender's release is a vital predictor of the outcomes of the ex-offender. As aforementioned, the criminal justice system has executed more punitive measures, yet the purpose of reentry programs is to achieve more rehabilitative efforts. For over two decades, the U.S. Department of Justice has developed grants and initiatives focused to improve reentry for ex-offenders, namely, the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, the Transition from Prison to Community

Initiative, the President's Prisoner Reentry Initiative, and the Second Chance Act of 2005 (Wilkinson & Rhine, 2005). Although these initiatives are in place, most ex-offenders do not receive the opportunity to take advantage of reentry services when released from prison.

One major barrier ex-offenders encounter upon reentry is the lack of societal support, as the public typically do not believe an ex-offender can entirely change (Ouellette et al., 2017). Public perception is an outlier for governmental allocations of resources and governing policies surrounding criminal offenses (Wood, 2009). Therefore, the public's view conveys a lack of belief concerning an ex-offender's chances of complete desistance. According to Maruna and King (2009), when the public starts to believe in ex-offenders' ability to be law-abiding citizens, there is a decrease in reoffending. A disconnect between societal views of reentry initiatives, their effectiveness in rehabilitating ex-offenders, and society's acceptance of ex-offenders' ability to thrive as community partners exists (Brooks et al., 2006). The effects of societal views concerning ex-offenders' reintegration serve as factors in the overall outcome of reentry participants.

Reentry interventions, rarely informed by reentry literature and theory associated with ex-offenders' complexities and reintegration, have focused on deficits (Berghuis, 2018). Identifying deficiencies in ex-offenders' lives has its purpose, but neglecting other pertinent factors, such as strength-based approaches, limits the efforts needed for full rehabilitation (Schlager, 2018). Interventions are complex; however, to have a positive impact, they must address an individual's overall needs. Seiter and Kadela (2003)

discovered four types of programs deemed as reentry interventions for ex-offenders: (a) work/vocational programs, (b) drug rehab programs, (c) halfway houses (i.e., reentry programs), and (d) prerelease programs. These types of programs identify as effective and overall holistic in reintegrating ex-offenders into society. The understanding that these programs are necessary and beneficial for some ex-offenders does not delineate that all ex-offenders are subject to reentry programs.

Reentry programs provide exposure to resources associated with education, employment readiness, substance abuse counseling, and accessible information on community resources from all levels of government and private sectors (Austin, 2001). The merit surrounding expectation and responsibility aims toward what the ex-offender will do versus what the prison system or rehabilitating institution does to assist the ex-offender (Horn, 2001). In other words, ex-offenders' choice of their level of activity and engagement in the redemption plan for reintegration influences the outcome. The variances for successful reentry are contingent upon the resources offered and the ex-offender's determination to take advantage of those resources provided.

### **Services for Ex-Offenders**

Researchers who researched reentry identified services for ex-offenders as official and unofficial varieties of localized organizations, agencies, and systems utilized for preventative measures (Nhan et al., 2017). Lack of services creates pandemonium among ex-offenders who relapse, leading to increased recidivism and social disintegration (Currie, 2013). Services for offenders are essentials needed to thrive. The overall intention of providing services for offenders is to connect the ex-offender to the

community while providing them with tailored interventions for successful reintegration (Bouffard & Bergeron, 2006). This term is limited in assuming that all ex-offenders prosper from services. However, the research provided validity in the success of having services for ex-offenders.

### **Jail Diversion**

In terms of jail diversion, community-based mental health and substance abuse services are necessary to address the psychological factors associated with criminalistic behaviors (Davis et al., 2008). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration's enactment was for jail diversion purposes by reducing the number of inmates in prison (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Ex-offenders enter society with mental health concerns, such as untreated diagnoses and illnesses. Many strive to uphold the law and stay free of criminal behaviors but lack psychological assurance to assess their ability to endure the adversities associated with reintegration (Steadman & Naples, 2005). One of the oldest, evidence-based practices for community mental health is Assertive Community Treatment (ACT), which has helped transition many offenders into community mental health agencies for ongoing services and treatment (Test & Stein, 1976). The reality for ex-offenders is that failure to receive needed mental health services can be a precipitating factor in them recidivating.

### **Mental Health Court**

Many people with mental health illnesses encounter the criminal justice system due to a lack of integrated services to treat their mental health concerns (Vogel et al., 2007). Previous researchers have reported lower reincarceration rates with mental health

treatment services in prisons and reentry aftercare mental health services (Sacks et al., 2004). According to Knight et al. (1999), there must be a collaborative effort among mental health and criminal justice disciplines for integrated, efficient, and effective services for ex-offenders. Therefore, the link between mental health services and criminal justice intertwines in preventing reincarceration and recidivism.

Mental Health Court (MHC) implementation is another form of diversion in reducing the number of adults with mental health illnesses in the criminal justice system (Lowder et al., 2018). Although MHC has its place in reducing the overrepresentation of adults with mental health issues in prisons, it also has biases that obstruct the due process of defendants' rights (Redlich et al., 2006). MHCs serve as an alternative to not-guilty-for-reason-of-insanity criteria for those who commit criminal offenses but have a mental health problem that contributed to the criminal behavior (Loong et al., 2019). MHCs are needed to consider potential mental health barriers that have misappropriation when law enforcement is warranted. Careful assessments of such cases are justified, with the MHC acting as a connector for ongoing mental health services as needed for the offender.

### **Educational Services**

Educational services are fundamental in rehabilitating ex-offenders who need skills, tools, knowledge, and application. The debate between education and recidivism is controversial for measuring effectiveness and success (Kelso, 2000). The limited access to correctional education for some leaves many without education and credentials for reentry into society. According to Duguid et al. (1996), prison education has a more significant impact on released offenders' cessation of criminal behaviors. However,

educational services for post-prison offenders are few, as research was also scarce in the literature.

### **Spiritual Services**

Some ex-offenders thrive in religious groups where they participate in spiritual services in a faith-based community. Researchers have found religion and spirituality to contribute to ex-offenders gaining social support and self-esteem in their ability to make better decisions (Mowen et al., 2018). Attending spiritual services with others has created a sense of belonging for ex-offenders who have felt isolated and detached from society (Fowler & Levin, 1984). Spiritual services connect ex-offenders to a higher power and promote belief in themselves and among others. However, spiritual services, or religiosity, are only practical to those who desire the connection and need social support (O'Connor, 2004). Although those who do not see the significance of spirituality in the lives of hopeless, disassociated individuals have frequently shunned spiritual services, the reality is that some ex-offenders require support, love, and a community of people found in faith-based communities.

### **Housing Services**

Housing services are essential in preventing homelessness and recidivism of ex-offenders in need of shelter. Newly released ex-offenders have been subject to rearrest and conviction of homelessness-related crimes (Mills et al., 2013). According to the Social Exclusion Unit (2002), more than one-third (35%) of ex-offenders have no home to go to upon release from prison. Ex-offenders face a lack of housing, which causes them to function in survival mode, often leading to their commission of illegal activities

to survive. The Homelessness Act 2002 only addresses the “vulnerable” and those with a “priority need,” and the ex-offender must prove the veracity of having nowhere to live (Fitzpatrick et al., 2009). The bias associated with some homeless ex-offenders is that local authorities can deem them intentionally homeless because of their crime (Cowan & Fionda, 1994). This stigmatization of ex-offenders who undertook recovery or rehabilitation creates negative perceptions and restrains ex-offenders who need housing in the community. Thus, housing services are only as advantageous to those ex-offenders who fit specific criteria that warrant assistance.

### **Transportation Services**

For many ex-offenders, transportation is one of the barriers to making scheduled appointments, such as parole/probation meetings, employment interviews, mental health/substance abuse appointments, and other sources of benefit for reentry. The need for transportation services has been a challenging commodity for the accessibility of ex-offenders’ lack of transportation (Gulliver et al., 2010). Upon release from prison, most ex-offenders only have enough money for a bus ticket home. They are outside their primary location, often without a close relative or friend accessible to assist them with transportation. Although transportation services can be inaccessible to some, others who have the opportunity to be a part of reentry programs may receive bus passes (Sachs & Miller, 2018). In carefully considering the perpetual problems associated with lack of transportation services, this adds hindrances to ex-offender’s ability to access resources and comply with some of their conditional terms for release.



## **Employment Services**

Ex-offenders face numerous challenges in obtaining employment due to lack of education, job marketability, work history, severe mental/physical health concerns, and employment laws (Rakis, 2005). The need for good employment serves as a dissuasion of criminalistic activities and acts as a motivator for good behavior (Seiter, 2002). In addition, being employed is one of the solutions to preventing economic scarcity among ex-offenders who pursue legal means of making money. Employment services offer ex-offenders job readiness skills and career guidance that assist in gaining an opportunity with an employer (Steurer et al., 2001). The need for public and private sectors to collaborate to establish employment policies for vulnerable populations gives meaning to social value (Kemp et al., 2004). In essence, employment services provide ex-offenders with the meaningful tools and resources necessary to obtain some level of employment.

Community-based employment programs in the 1970s and 1980s were developed to provide employment training and employment placement services for former prisoners and disadvantaged populations (Visher et al., 2005). The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 led to hundreds of employment training programs for ex-offenders needing employment assistance (Finn, 1998). The development of such programs aimed at rehabilitating ex-offenders and granting them access to employment opportunities. However, the intentions of the previously developed programs were not all successful in reducing recidivism among offenders, as revealed in the methods used to research its effectiveness (McDonald et al., 1995). Due to the prejudices and disqualifiers associated

with some ex-offenders' criminal backgrounds, the employment services could not assist them with securing employment.

Employment provides a sense of diversion and distraction to ex-offenders who tend to commit lawless acts when bored, idle, and unemployed (Batastini et al., 2019). According to Friedman (2015), the number of U.S. individuals with four-year degrees resembles that of U.S. individuals with criminal histories. This comparison alone speaks to systemic issues surrounding ex-offenders and their criminal history, resulting in an unjust balance of perception about the interpretations of poverty and well to do. Hence, a released convict expects to get a job and abstain from criminal behavior. Still, the accurate depiction of success is the understanding that beneficial jobs decrease unlawful acts (Wadsworth, 2006). In closing, most ex-offenders are constantly reminded of their criminal history, which builds an increasing barricade of resistance to their ability to have a good job and make sustainable money to prevent recidivism.

### **Different Types of Inequalities**

In this dispensation, there is a perpetual increase in mass incarcerations and the expansion of penal systems. In previous studies, correctional systems and mass incarcerations demographically and economically impute voter turnout and drive unemployment rates (Harris et al., 2010). The populations and groups often affected are those in impoverished neighborhoods where criminal activities are committed (Travis & Waul, 2004). The monetary sanctions usually attached to those impacted by penal systems are astronomically impossible due to the inability to find employment and afford the monetary fines and fees associated with certain crimes (O'Malley, 2009). In addition,

ex-offenders reenter society with the expectation to pay for punitive damages for their criminal behavior, and court systems enforce by demanding recompense. The ex-offenders' debt to penal systems is observed as recycling poverty and producing greater inequality. Most ex-offenders struggle to survive after prison and make a decent living (Western, 2002). The struggle promotes more internal war within ex-offenders who feel that society refuses to display grace while they strive to recover.

Economic inequality is increasing as more correctional institutions are housing more offenders, causing a reduction in wages for low-skilled workers and minorities (Western, 2002). With constant economic challenges in poor urban communities, ex-offenders who live in those areas lack the salaries needed to support themselves and those who rely on them (Western & Beckett, 1999). Ex-offenders become susceptible to reoffending when economic resources are not plentiful, exacerbating their current condition of economic inequality. They become locked in their urban community with limited jobs and financial assistance, reducing economic equality.

In the context of social inequality, researchers have examined the effects of neighborhoods and communities where ex-offenders reside to determine the social and environmental factors associated with reoffending (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006). Socioeconomic status contributes to many predictions concerning the probable cause of an ex-offender reoffending (Elliot et al., 1996). By no means is the implication that external factors alone warrant recidivation. However, it confronts the biases associated with the perception that "you can think your way out of poverty." Many have felt that reoffending is an individual's decision, but researchers have examined and reported the

social factors that provoke reoccurring criminalistic activity (Elsner, 2005). In conclusion, most ex-offenders face numerous opposing elements and possess predisposing factors that potentially hinder their ability to see and experience equality in their environment and community

### **Summary of the Literature**

The research discovered within the literature was dense in providing supplemental information to this study, such as educational services for ex-offenders and transportation services for ex-offenders. Exhaustive search of the literature did not yield any current literature about ex-offenders' perception and experiences associated with prison education and their progress with reintegration in their communities. Although the literature was relevant and prevalent with issues surrounding inequality and its effects on ex-offenders' ability to thrive in their communities, it did not intrinsically address the attitudes of those who have gained tools and skills for desistance. A gap in the literature existed concerning prison education and reintegration, considering that the majority of the research gave voice to the offenders who had gained some form of self-efficacy while in prison. There was a continual gap in the literature on how ex-offenders who had obtained a postsecondary educational degree/certificate while in prison gained access to higher-wage positions in their communities. The lack of a continuum between prison education and reintegration of ex-offenders within the literature validated its functionality as a source of desistance. The literature was insightful in providing information on reentry programs and their intent for rehabilitating ex-offenders. There was ample research and findings surrounding employment and recidivism, as they conveyed the pros

and cons of ex-offenders obtaining and maintaining employment. The literature also highlighted both desistance and self-efficacy's collaborative efforts and the perceptions and motivations about ex-offenders' ability to change their behaviors.

Chapter 3 provides the methodology and sampling strategy needed to connect the gap between generic, qualitative research and analysis for investigating. In essence, Chapter 3 formulates the process for making the research question applicable to participants and helping to fill the gap in the literature. Furthermore, the process for analysis gave the researcher an understanding of the findings and results extracted from the research question by conceptualizing the study holistically for an in-depth conclusion of the matter.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

My focus for Chapter 3 was to review the methodological procedure needed to respond to the revealing of Chapter 2, which a more qualitative study in postsecondary education and the potential effect it has on ex-offenders was warranted. My purpose in this study was to explore the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who had undertaken postsecondary education programs while incarcerated to determine how their education led to effective reentry into society. This chapter includes the following sections: Research Design and Rationale, Role of the Researcher, Methodology, Issues of Trustworthiness, and Chapter Summary. In the Research Design and Rationale section, I reiterate the study's purpose, restates the research question, and provides a discussion of the theoretical framework of desistance theory and self-efficacy theory, as well as the use of a generic approach in the qualitative design. In Role of the Researcher, I describe my role as an observer with an indirect professional relationship with participants and delineates the measures taken to prevent potential research biases or ethical issues. In the Methodology section, I identify, describe, and explain the participants selection logic, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis plan. In Issues of Trustworthiness, I list procedures instituted to promote the validity, reliability, and confirmability of the study and discuss the steps to ensure proper ethical conducting of the study, which includes informed consent and the protective means for safeguarding participants' information. Lastly, the Chapter Summary closes out the chapter with keynotes.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

My purpose in this study was to explore and better understand the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who obtained postsecondary education while incarcerated and the effectiveness of education that led to their successful reentry into society. This was done by applying a generic approach to gathering and capturing participants experiences.

### **Research Question**

What are the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who have completed postsecondary education programs while incarcerated, and whether gaining an education led to effective reentry?

### **Theoretical Framework and Research Tradition**

In the basis of this study, I focused on desistance, therefore, allowing for the theoretical construct of the research to gauge ex-offenders' experience of postsecondary education from being in prison. Leibrich's (1994) theory of desistance aided me in understanding what causes a reduction in criminal behaviors, as well as its implication on preventing recidivism. In examining Leibrich's theory on desistance, I applied a supplemental conceptualization of self-efficacy theory which was for a generic, qualitative intent. I used self-efficacy theory in providing understanding of the ex-offenders' perceptions on achievement as they related to postsecondary education as a positive motivator. Bandura (1977) developed self-efficacy as a theoretical construct for evaluating and addressing one's cognitive function, inspiration, and perception of personal ability. I chose self-efficacy, because it allowed for more exploration and

interpretation of experiences and perceptions about desistance and educational implications for success.

The term desistance refers to a gradual or continual process undertaken by a criminal to reduce the chances of reoffending, ultimately leading to the cessation of criminalistic activities (Fagan, 1989). Desistance determines the criminal's ability to change their paradigm, which in this case refers to how people think and behave in society. Leibrich (1994) undergirded the efforts of many researchers and theorists who had a stake and contribution to unfolding the term desistance. However, through practicum, she engaged in the external factors that affect criminals' internal process of how they view their behaviors that leads to them quitting crimes. Other researchers have identified desistance as a process of decelerating criminal behaviors versus the term reduction in the frequency of illegal activities (Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989). In comparison, both reduction and deceleration can examine the process of desistance influenced by a criminal's decreased behaviors stemming from unlawful acts.

Desistance theory includes two overarching theories: socio-situational theory (i.e., environmental factors leading to desistance) and subjective theory (i.e., self and/or facilitating factors leading to desistance; Williams & Schaefer, 2021). Although many subtheories support and/or reflect desistance theory, Leibrich's (1994) desistance theory is used by researchers to gauge for a larger number of diverse interpretations with more variables that lead to cessation (Weaver, 2019).

I chose Leibrich's (1994) desistance as the theoretical framework for exploring postsecondary education as a factor in ex-offenders who have ceased criminalistic



behaviors and reintegrated into society with a degree or certificate. I used the research question to allow for a generic approach to unraveling the continual phenomenon of recidivism among adult males yet assessing the victories of postsecondary education in the lives of those who were fortunate to have access to it while in prison. The research question I developed, allowed participants to share their experiences, as well as provide their current perspectives on postsecondary education and the implications of its preventative measure regarding being a rehabilitated citizen in society. Lastly, I used the research question for targeting the participants' perception of themselves, and their present life as no longer incarcerated.

Self-efficacy refers to one's capability to initiate and carry out distinct behaviors that one has set out to achieve (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1984) explained that self-efficacy differs from behavior reinforcements aimed at incentivizing one to make better decisions and/or change behavior because it focuses primarily on the individual's perception and view of their ability to achieve specific outcomes. To test an individual's ability to carry out tasks under what they perceive as a challenging or difficult situation, researchers have created self-efficacy measures (Williams et al., 2020). Self-efficacy is identified in terms of stressor appraisal, an individual's perception of their capabilities warranted as a challenge or potential threat (Lazarus, 1966). In addition, it is necessary to conclude that an individual's self-perception governs the individual's willingness to perform specific tasks, whether positively or negatively influenced. Self-efficacy influences an individual's ability to accomplish new outcomes and gain confidence to perform (Bandura & Jourden, 1991). I considered self-efficacy as a construct for further

investigation of desistance, which served as a supplement to understanding ex-offenders' motivation to change their behaviors.

### **Rationale**

The nature of this study was qualitative with a generic approach. I used qualitative methodology to allow the researcher to explore the realities of people by assessing words to interpret social problems or a phenomenon (Riese, 2019). According to Kennedy (2016), a generic qualitative approach serves as a focal point for the subjective view of a person, or population of people, concerning their perspectives, experiences, and opinions on a phenomenon or problem. A generic design is more flexible than the commonly used qualitative designs (i.e., phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnography), thereby the researcher can explore more than one established approach to conduct a study unrestrictedly (Kahlke, 2014). The generic qualitative approach was selected so that adult male ex-offenders can be subjective in their experiences and thoughts concerning how they viewed receiving postsecondary education while incarcerated and its effectiveness within their lives in the community. The generic approach was the best design for this qualitative study.

In this qualitative study, I used purposeful sampling, with an age range of 18-62 years of age, male gender, and sample size considerations. The strategy for obtaining purposeful sampling is that I recruited according to the needed population for the study. According to Mason (2010), it is typical for a generic study of this topic to have five to 25 individuals within the sample size for qualitative research. For this study, there was a sample size of eight participants. Eight participants were sufficient to provide saturation

in capturing the data needed to support the research. If I did not reach saturation with eight participants, I planned to increase to 10 to ensure saturation occurred.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a researcher, I have been involved in human services for over 6 years in foster care, social services, behavioral health, and criminal justice (reentry services). In the past, I have dealt with ex-offenders through the reentry program in a direct manner. However, in regard to this study, I was a direct observer of the participants. I had no personal or professional relationships with any of the participants in this study.

According to Wadams and Park (2018), the researcher should be aware of four primary biases associated with qualitative studies: questions, sampling, conceptualizations, and anticipated outcomes. They suggested that the researcher be aware that all the components related to qualitative research have biases that could potentially influence the findings. I managed my personal preferences by bracketing and noting anything that tended to draw from preconceived notions, and I avoided projecting it in the research. The research question presented the gap in the literature with an intent to understand the phenomenon surrounding desistance.

### **Methodology**

#### **Participant Selection Logic**

The participants for this study were adult male ex-offenders who had completed a postsecondary education program (i.e., obtained a degree or certificate) while incarcerated and who had not recidivated for at least 1 year of being released from prison. The recruited participants were from different areas in Georgia. In this qualitative study, I

used purposeful sampling, with an age range of 18 to 62 years of age, male gender, and sample size considerations. One of the strategies for obtaining purposeful sampling was recruiting according to the needed population for the study. I used purposeful sampling for this study because the participants were able to provide insight into the research problem and the overall significance of the study. The overarching issue concerning ex-offenders is recidivism. To understand this problem, I needed to gain insight into how postsecondary education had granted success for those who received it in prison. The sampling of participants I selected, strategically voiced the social problems about ex-offenders and social acceptance and addressed the need for more postsecondary educational opportunities in prisons.

I used the maximum variation strategy to diversify the differences and commonalities within-participant responses to complete interviewing, which is useful for this type of study according to Creswell (2013). This strategy is known for predicting different variations of perspectives in qualitative studies. Emergent opportunity sampling was another strategy utilized for flexibility in sampling over time during the study, which researchers have found to be satisfactory for generating new findings and insights during data collection (Suri, 2011). Emergent opportunity sampling is a practical and sampling strategy for qualitative research. However, purposeful sampling was primary in the sampling strategy for this study.

According to Mason (2010), it is typical for a generic study to have five to 25 individuals within the sample size for qualitative research. For this study, there was a sample size of eight ex-offenders. The goal was to reach saturation within the data

collection. Therefore, I facilitated eight qualitative interviews which achieved data saturation for this study.

I dispersed a minimum of 20 invitations via email to participants, and the first eight who responded were ultimately the selected participants for the study, as deemed necessary by researchers (Creswell, 2013). The criteria for selection were adult male ex-offenders, 18 to 62 years of age, currently living in Georgia, who had obtained a postsecondary educational degree or certificate received while incarcerated and who had not recidivated for at least 1 year. All chosen participants received a consent form, and it was satisfactory for the purpose of the research setting.

### **Instrumentation**

I screened all participants for this study via consent form and provided an interview guide before scheduling and conducting the interviews. Following satisfaction of participant criteria (i.e., selected, screened, and consent obtained), dissemination of the interview guide took place before their scheduled interview. Presenting the interview guide in advance relieved participants of any potential anxiety from anticipating questions addressed during the session.

The interview guide's development was to make the overarching research question more functional and any sub-questions supplemental. I designed this guide to provide validity to content and interpret the research question. I developed the research question to answer the gap in research, assess the effectiveness of postsecondary education in prison, determine the reentry status of the ex-offender, and utilize desistance and self-efficacy for inductive purposes. In developing the research question, the

interview guide I used was to direct the interview questions and help in constructing emerging participant responses, as recommended by researchers (Lim & Kim, 2014). Interview questions were purposeful for understanding a phenomenon and not intended to direct personal judgments or perceptions of the social issue. Because I conducted a generic, qualitative study, it was advantageous to use in-depth interviews to delve deeply into the phenomenon while the participants navigate the interviewer into unbiased but beneficial information.

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

I sent an email invitation to adult male ex-offenders who had obtained a postsecondary educational degree or certificate while incarcerated and who had not recidivated for at least one year. I recruited participants by using social media platforms and public knowledge of this population. I used email to distribute the invitation and informed consent form. I used Zoom as an easily accessible platform for participants and me to utilize during virtual face-to-face interviews. I used a digital recorder to capture each interview. Prior to each interview, I ensured that each interviewee had internet connectivity or appropriate data connectivity for the Zoom virtual interview platform.

In planning for the appointment setting, I asked each selected participant to select his availability out of various days and times within the week via email. I assured them via invitation that the interview should be roughly 30 to 60 minutes but less than an hour. After the first eight prospective participants confirmed and returned the informed consent, I emailed an interview guide for them to review alongside the scheduled date. I interviewed in a semistructured manner and reminded the interviewee that the interview

would be relaxed and informal. I shared an overview of the basis of the interview and highlighted the importance of their participation in the topic's comprehensive study.

Two methods for gathering data in interviews were using another source to transcribe the recording and summarizing the interview through notation and journaling responses. Halcomb and Davidson (2006) recommended creating a verbatim transcript of interview data, commonly used for audio transcription (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Both transcribing forms created more data analysis for interpreting the themes, codes, and phrases identified within the interview.

In concluding each interview, I thanked the participants for his participation, offered him the opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy, and provided him time to respond within two weeks of completion. After completion of transcription, I immediately discarded the audio recording. All participants had access to the study results as I expressed during their debriefing. The participants wanted to view the results, I considered the interviews conclusive since findings were deemed accurate, and no further data were necessary to collect from participants since saturation was achieved.

The goal of interviewing participants was to build trust and comfortability. Although a conversational approach could be practical, it would not be befitting for the research. Interviews are known as storytellers, allowing interviewees to share their experiences and intricate details that often give way to the phenomenon or social issue (Seidman, 2012). Phrases that invite the participant to expand on a specific question of interest allow for essential concepts and ideas that may spring up within the data (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). It is necessary to convey to the participants their actual benefit of as

a vital part of the research and assure them of confidentiality and anonymity (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). With a general interview guide, the interview questions were more structured and guided to stay on course, as well as aligned for recording and transcribing purposes in data collection (Turner, 2010). The interview style was informal and aimed in making the participant as comfortable as possible to promote maximum fluid interaction. However, for data collection, keywords, phrases, patterns, and other themes and codes were captured by way of recording the interview and transcription of the interview (Turner, 2010). Scribie was the transcription source for all recorded interviews; however, interruptions with the program warranted a manual transcription.

### **Analysis Plan**

Building a framework takes on layers that add to exploring a phenomenon when utilizing the systematic analysis to pull out transparency of experiences from participants (Gregory, 2020). The systematic analysis aligned with the qualitative inquiry in which I identified the key phrases, themes, and codes reflective of the key concept words for this study. The use of Nvivo12 software helped in organizing and finding the key phrases developed. For coding, I utilized descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2015). I conducted an intense reading of the transcript by highlighting the responses to the questions asked to create coding for sorting the common phrases or developed phrases that occurred throughout the interview. This process consisted of organizing the responses found from participants to include categorizing 3-4 themes that aligned with the research question. For this study, four themes emerged. In implementing a systematic analysis, I paid



attention to the details. A systematic analysis captured the experiences and the perceptions conveyed throughout the interview (Gregory, 2020)

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Reliability and Validity**

In qualitative research, validity is necessary to determine data appropriateness and provide accurate accounts from participants within the study and beyond to researchers and readers (Spiers et al., 2018). Reliability within qualitative research deals with consistency and replicability of processes and results (Leung, 2015). Validity strategies and reliability perspectives examine the efficiency and effectiveness of methodological alignment (Creswell, 2013). I utilized validation strategies for verification by semistructured interview questions, participant review and debriefing, and member/interview checking (Leung, 2015). These strategies supported transferability and provided external validity.

Following each interview, I emailed each participant the transcript, and each checked the accuracy of responses and provided any feedback within two weeks. A member interview checker served the purpose of validating responses for content validity and credibility. The member check occurred at the end of each interview and allowed each participant to review the transcript dictation of his responses. The basis of concerns of potential threat to external validity was an environmental factor, such as the utilization of a virtual platform for interviewing and sharing the screen for an overview of responses through transcription. Therefore, using the virtual platform posed a limitation within data collection. By focusing on ex-offenders who received postsecondary education in prisons,

generalizations limited participants' responses to the questions. These processes supported dependability, reliability, and overall confirmability within the study. A systematic analysis was appropriate for coding the study because of its exploratory nature in capturing the experiences through in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 2012).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Prior to participant selection, I first obtained Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB; Approval # 12-01-21-0671816) for approval and consent. After each interview, I stored the sensitive data in a password-protected external USB in a secured location to protect confidentiality and privacy of the participants, thus adhering to IRB ethical research practices. Data were collected from ex-offenders who had obtained a postsecondary educational degree or certificate while incarcerated and who had not recidivated for at least one year.

All ethical intentions within this generic, qualitative study addressed implementations for safeguarding confidential information. Any hardcopies or duplicates of the transcripts were appropriately discarded. Appropriate disclosure of the study, nature of participation, informed consent, and researcher identification complied with ethical standards for conducting qualitative research (Mason, 2010). When there was a range of ethical issues within the study, participants received informed consent (Crabtree & Parker, 2014). An informed consent carried the intent of the research and the confidentiality of identification of the person participating. For the purposeful study, identifiers such as age, classification, and race were used in the sense of limited confidentiality with the anonymity of name (Bryman, 2012). I kept the consent forms in a

password-protected external USB flash drive with no link between data and identities of the participants. The consent forms assured all participants that they could withdraw from the research process at any time.

I used the systematic analysis process to develop and gather themes from participant responses from the interview guide to direct research questions. I utilized strategies for reliability and validity to ensure data accuracy and collection and convey the importance of this research within the field of human services and criminal justice. To ensure the validity and integrity of research, I utilized bracketing for reflexivity and self-awareness of any preconceived notions, biases, or opinions (Creswell, 2013).

The goal was to explore the experiences of the ex-offenders with postsecondary education from prison by presenting questions from the Interview Guide, analyzing their responses, and understanding the overarching social problem about recidivism. I aimed to make the participant as comfortable as possible throughout the interview process. One way I accomplished this was to grant assurances that I would pause or stop due to a moment of discomfort or traumatic recall. During the interview process, stress or anxiety related to this study did not surface from participants.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I presented the research methods of this study by defining and classifying the content; the research design and rationale; the researcher's role; the methodology; the process for participant recruitment and participation; data collection and analysis procedures; issues with trustworthiness; and ethical considerations. In each section within this chapter, I provided the purpose of interpreting the qualitative

variances and factors that aid the reader in understanding the numerous strategies, processes, and protocols needed to address the study holistically. This generic, qualitative study was identified within this chapter to capture the approach used to address the research question.

In Chapter 4 I present the study's findings. It begins with an introduction, then provides a discussion of the setting, demographics, data collected, analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, the results, and a summary.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

This qualitative, generic study conducted in Georgia undertook eight adult male ex-offenders between the ages of 18 and 62, who experienced postsecondary education while incarcerated and who had been released from prison for at least 1 year. I aimed to explore male ex-offenders' experiences of postsecondary education and reentry into society, focusing on the effects of postsecondary education. In alignment with research questions, the ex-offenders' feelings and beliefs about postsecondary education and reentry guided the inquiry I had as a researcher. The results of this research are purposed to optimistically provide awareness to educators, social workers, and criminal justice professionals. The revealing of factors and outliers concerning the need for supportive services in the community I discovered may assist professionals in obtaining and providing resources. In this chapter, I comprehensively review the data collection process, conveyed in Chapter 3, and the setting, demographics, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, the results, and a summary. I embarked in the exploration of this study by applying the following questions. To fully understand the following questions, I have used abbreviations for the research question (RQ) and supportive research questions (SRQ); which are the interview questions.

What are the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who have completed postsecondary education programs while incarcerated, and whether gaining an education led to effective reentry into society? (RQ1)

Where were you incarcerated while pursuing postsecondary education? (SRQ1)

How many years were you in prison before released? (SRQ2)

How many years have you been released from prison? (SRQ3)

While pursuing postsecondary education in prison, did you obtain a degree or certificate? (SRQ4)

What led you to obtaining a degree or certificate while in prison? (SRQ5)

What was your postsecondary educational program study? (SRQ6)

What type of feelings or emotions did you have obtaining a degree and or certificate while in prison? (SRQ7)

Do you think postsecondary education provides a sense of fulfillment when achieved? If so, elaborate. (SRQ8)

Did you experience any challenges with utilizing your degree and or certificate while reintegrating into society (i.e., establishing a career path or employment)? If yes, share what those challenges were. Are you currently still facing any challenges? (SRQ9)

Do you believe that higher learning in prisons affords ex-offenders a way of escape from criminalization in society? If yes, share how it provides an outlet. (SRQ10)

How has being educated made you see yourself differently in society? (SRQ11)

Although you have obtained a postsecondary educational degree, do you believe that your background offenses still hinder you in society? If so, please elaborate. (SRQ12)

### **Settings, Demographics, and Characteristics**

In this study, participants' willingness to identify the benefits in exploring and understanding postsecondary education and reentry's effectiveness, influenced their

participation. Each participant was able to engage in the interview process with minimal concerns, adding plentiful commentary to the overall study. No unfavorable conditions discouraged the participants from taking part in this exploration of their experiences.

The demographics of the study I collected were from eight ex-offenders who had experienced postsecondary education in a U.S. prison and resided in Georgia at the time of this study. The criteria for the population of the study were males between the ages of 18 and 62 years of age, currently living in Georgia, who had obtained a postsecondary degree or certificate attainment while incarcerated and who had not recidivated for at least 1 year. The average age of the participants was 35 years old. The participants all attained either a degree or certificate of completion while incarcerated. The men, who had been out of prison for at least 1 year before this study occurred, met the inclusion criteria.

### **Data Collection**

I received permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB; Approval # 12-01-21-0671816) to conduct this generic, qualitative study. The process outlined in Chapter 3 for data collection I considered and executed. The eight interested and qualified participants responded via email to my flyer (see Appendix A) posted on social media platforms (i.e., FaceBook). I screened participants to determine their eligibility based on the inclusion criteria, and then I emailed an informed consent form to each recruit. The purpose of the consent form was to give prospective participants insight into the intent of the research and the right of the voluntary participants. Interested participants responded with “I consent” to move forward.

Following this, I arranged interviews via Zoom at convenient times for participants by providing them with different days and times they chose. In addition, I emailed an interview guide (see Appendix B) before the scheduled interview to clarify the research purpose and relieve participants' anxiety relating to the nature of the questions, as expressed acceptably from researchers (Lim & Kim, 2014). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants understood that this interview would be conducted using a virtual platform versus face-to-face. Each interview averaged between 30 and 40 minutes in duration. I captured each interview using a digital recorder in a private location to protect the participant's identity. The interview guidelines aligned with the proposed process in Chapter 3 of the study's research methodology.

The data collected used an informal, semistructured interview style as applicable and recommended by researchers (Seidman, 2012). I completed the data collection plan outlined in Chapter 3 and subsequently destroyed the audio recordings following transcription, in which the speech recognition software (Scribie) attempted did not suffice. However, I manually completed a verbatim transcript due to issues with the speech recognition software not capturing the interviews accurately (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). The coordination of scheduled interviews was interrupted due to unanticipated difficulties experienced by two participants, who rescheduled immediately and followed through on their next appointed time, which was convenient for all parties involved. Using the interview guide brought relaxation and meaningful flow to the order of questions needing to be explored and answered by each participant involved.



## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis involved utilization of an exhaustive systematic analysis to acquire codes from the transcribed data from interviews, as deemed appropriate by researchers (Gregory, 2020; Saldaña, 2015). The intense reading and highlighting of responses for meaningful interpretations coordinated the findings for storing and categorizing using Nvivo12 software. In descriptive coding, repeated, notable statements generated specific themes and codes. I distinctively developed the themes from the codes, and the codes derived via systematic analysis. In gathering the themes and codes, the research questions I arranged and synchronized with the participants' responses within the results section, as applicable.

The systematic approach (Gregory, 2020) was the most effective method for analyzing this type of qualitative research topic. According to Gregory (2020), the systematic approach for analyzing data is to explore the typical interconnective responses and relationships. Consequently, I compared and contrasted the answers to the research questions to assess the significance of each statement. Saldaña (2015) emphasized that the alignment of similarities discovered in data by researchers is ideal for revisiting concepts vital to the research questions. Gregory (2020) stated that assessing the data before the complete analysis establishes a framework for how the researcher compartmentalizes the information found. Gregory (2020) specified that a qualitative researcher must organize and assess the data obtained with a plan in mind for how the data will be designed for analysis. In designing, the levels of specificity within the data are processed for selection. The key was to read and reread the data, with the goal being

to identify essential statements repeated in participants' responses to the research questions.

A compilation of words formed through a precoding matrix to assess participants' responses compared to keywords from the literature. This process led to categorizing responses and/or words in Nvivo12 and comparing them through the hand search method (see Appendix C). Although, in Chapter 3 I proposed that Nvivo12 would primarily be the source of categorizing, it was just as efficient in having a hand search method for both data sets to cross-reference for discovering themes. The iterative process of reading and then rereading the data was an exercise by which words and phrases I found mainly may be converted to codes as meanings developed. In exhaustive rereading I unraveled significant phrases identified and coded for their purpose on each question answered by participants. Typically, interpretation provides concepts for categorizing the data to create themes, and subthemes are formed for additional meaning (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The intentionality of the analysis was to assess, identify, and distinguish patterns in the data that compare to the central phenomenon under exploration. The generic approach to this study I undertook made connections within the data by ensuring that words and phrases produced significance and relevance to the overall exploration of the effectiveness of postsecondary education in the lives of ex-offenders.

The next step in this iterative engagement, I observed the related connecting statements by stressing the words and phrases found. The essential data rereading were examined with purposeful relational factors, as alluded necessary by researchers (Saldaña, 2015). I made notations to capture the crucial phrases and responses from the

interviews while reading the transcripts. I used the depictions to formulate domains that provided insight into the prevalence of meanings found within the data. When I discovered connections among statements, the significance of the study was identifiable by issuing codes as the definitive words and relationships arose. Lastly, I erected a framework from participants' responses and gave cadence and synchronization to the indicated relationships among the domains.

I used the systematic analysis approach to enhance the plausibility that the findings within the data would potentially lead to conclusions that acknowledged the research questions. Numerous categories erected from the preliminary analysis of the results. However, only nine categories or codes emerged from the data. I iteratively read and reread the transcripts to identify and highlight the similarities in concepts and meanings, which is appropriate according to researchers (Creswell, 2013; Lim & Kim, 2014). As exhaustive as the reading of data transcripts were, constant similarities and a few differences unfolded while I continued looking for confirming and disconfirming findings. I rigorously searched for commonalities within the results caused an achievable analysis. I continually maintained categorizing and organizing codes using the software which was essential; hand searching became just as beneficial in identifying the similarities and distinguishing the differences. In accomplishing this, I highlighted, circled words, phrases, and imperative statements by putting them into groups that formed meaning. Notations in the margins were for tracking and identifying commonalities found in the participants' responses and structured and aligned for review of their perspectives. Therefore, the development of participants' experiences happened

to be depicted. The grouping of categories helped in the development of themes. The categories were placed into clusters for meaning, and the four themes that were derived were as follows: (a) education enhances, (b) supportive services help, (c) education validates, and (d) reentry dilemma. I used a saturation grid for the participants' perspectives in response to the research questions, which were captured to form a structural account of their experiences.

Appendix C serve as references of the four themes developed from the data. Appendix C provides the organization of themes and codes. The themes were developed by attaining commonly used words and phrases repeated throughout the responses. As I repeatedly found statements that emerged, perpetual analysis of the data supported the gathering of meanings through the categorization of the data. While continuing a systematic approach, I grouped the codes and compared to the manually searched data as a cross-reference mechanism. Finally, congruency was accomplished in data comparison, and the formulation of themes derived from frequent responses

The common expressions from the participants in their use of words and phrases produced a more robust insight into their experience at large. For example, Participant 1 stated, "Getting a degree just made me feel like, it just made me feel like that I was going to be okay once I got back into society because I had specific knowledge."

Participant 2 said, "Yes, yes, yes, of course, you know, getting a degree makes you feel special in my situation. I was already incarcerated but accomplishing and achieving something while confined is life changing."

Participant 6 responded, “Well, the sense of fulfillment I got in getting my certificate was like an achievement; it’s like how you can say, checking on one of the boxes in life.”

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

As stated in Chapter 3, I applied credibility strategies using member checking to support validity (Creswell, 2013). A member checker reviewed transcripts alongside me to take notes and observe commonalities and differences in participant responses. The member checker did not know any of the participants; furthermore, to ensure all participants' privacy, I did not provide any identifiers. In reviewing notes for similarities and distinctions, the overall process helped me in formulating categories, groupings, and themes. Essentially, this added value to the participant through a supportive review of the data. The collective efforts of the member checker and I aided in an upbeat recap and succinct perspectives concluded from the participants’ experiences conveyed throughout the interviews. This approach supports validity and reliability in examining perspectives (Leung, 2015). Data sufficiency is a consideration when saturation is found within data quality (Creswell, 2013).

Using semistructured interviews and member/interview checking, I executed the transferability strategies discussed in Chapter 3, thus supporting transferability and external validity. The in-depth discussion through an informal approach provided relaxation, which elevated conversation for participants to share experiences (Creswell, 2013). Cognizant that the participants were the experts, I carefully explored and

evaluated the shared experiences for quality. Member checking was the quality assurance for what was transferred to optimize the full embodiment of the participants' experience.

Dependability strategies, as discussed in Chapter 3, involved using participant review and debriefing of their transcript to support reliability and confirmability. Five to seven days after completion of the transcript and analysis, I contacted participants so they could review them for accuracy and adjust if needed. Due to consensus of convenience and comfortability, participants chose to review via email, which they were assured should not take more than 10-15 minutes for them to assess for accuracy of what was captured. Each participant was an active member checker in identifying their own transcribed data, and this was done to ensure the accuracy of statements captured in their pure form and meaning. Both interviewer and interviewee reviewed and evaluated all discussion points. All interviewees agreed with what was captured via transcription. Finally, I executed the confirmability strategies delineated in Chapter 3 and elevated the coding reliability within the study's data analysis.

## **Results**

In totality, the results will aid in providing insight into the premise of this study that postsecondary education in prisons is effective for ex-offenders reintegrating into society. Chapter 5 provides more interpretation of findings in support of Chapter 2, which presents the literature review. The primary themes that emerged from the data analysis, as previously discussed, were as follows: (a) education enhances, (b) supportive services help, (c) education validates, and (d) reentry dilemma. The data from this study are arranged sequentially into the four themes. Participant responses are organized within the

study results; however, the 13 questions, including the research question, focus on all criteria and essential questions needed for acceptability. Primary questions/interview questions for alignment of the themes with the research questions derive from nine important support research questions that align the study (SRQ3, SRQ5-SRQ12):

How many years have you been released from prison? (SRQ3)

What led you to obtain a degree or certificate while in prison? (SRQ5)

What was your postsecondary educational program study? (SRQ6)

What type of feelings or emotions did you have obtaining a degree and or certificate while in prison? (SRQ7)

Do you think postsecondary education provides a sense of fulfillment when achieved? If so, elaborate. (SRQ8)

Did you experience any challenges with utilizing your degree and or certificate while reintegrating into society (i.e., establishing a career path or employment)? If yes, share what those challenges were. Are you currently still facing any challenges? (SRQ9)

Do you believe that higher learning in prisons affords ex-offenders a way of escape from criminalization in society? If yes, share how it provides an outlet. (SRQ10)

How has being educated made you see yourself differently in society? (SRQ11)

Although you have obtained a postsecondary educational degree, do you believe that your background offenses still hinder you in society? If so, please elaborate.

(SRQ12)

The supportive research questions selected were arranged and categorized into groups for meaning from the data. These groups were developed into two categories of

participant responses and research questions. The groups were assigned based on the similarities and differences in the answers. The themes identify the arrangement of participant responses in connection to the themes described. The thematic meaning was unfolded through grouping and clustering of data interpretation, and the structural depiction of the data was provided to evaluate saturation. Exhaustive reading and rereading of the data allowed for assessing and identifying repetitive patterns through words, phrases, and statements. Appendix C provides the evolved themes from the iterative process of coding.

The proceeding sections of the findings include the themes produced from the data based on a systematic analysis of the responses to the interview questions. Participants' answers to the research questions address the study's research inquiry. As previously described, the research questions are grouped appropriately for the validity of the findings. A narration of results is provided to align with the responses flow and to eject any repetition within the data.

### **Findings for Supportive Research Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 11**

The supportive research questions aid in solidifying the foundational research question (RQ1), which asked, what are the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who have completed postsecondary education programs while incarcerated, and whether gaining an education led to effective reentry into society? Below are the supportive research questions asked during the interview.

What led you to obtain a degree or certificate while in prison? (SRQ5)

What was your postsecondary educational program study? (SRQ6)



What type of feelings or emotions did you have obtaining a degree and or certificate while in prison? (SRQ7)

Do you think postsecondary education provides a sense of fulfillment when achieved? If so, elaborate. (SRQ8)

Do you believe that higher learning in prisons affords ex-offenders a way of escape from criminalization in society? If yes, share how it provides an outlet. (SRQ10)  
How has being educated made you see yourself differently in society? (SRQ11)

Due to repetitive findings within statements and meanings, all participant responses were grouped in relation to the questions. The evidence obtained within the data analysis showed congruency in the commonalities of the ex-offenders' perspectives and experiences about postsecondary education in prison and reentry. In assessing participants' views on education effectiveness in their lives to enhance and validate, essentially provided relatable themes erected from the six supportive research questions.

The research question (RQ1) was the central focus for understanding the ex-offenders' experiences at large and aligning the interview flow with the supportive research questions (SRQ5, SRQ6, SRQ7, SRQ8, SRQ10, and SRQ11). All participants found the study purposeful in exploring this research as stated in RQ1 and acknowledged the study's significance in assessing desistance and self-efficacy. The researcher collected and analyzed participants' responses to SRQ5, SRQ6, SRQ7, SRQ8, SRQ10, and SRQ11.

The ex-offenders' collective responses to their experiences with postsecondary attainment, feelings, view of fulfilled achievement, and self-perception provided insight into a new image or reality. Ex-offenders' perspectives were commonly found when discussing how postsecondary education in prison opened them up to better job opportunities, as noted by Participants 1, 3, and 8. Additionally, ex-offenders felt that receiving postsecondary education gave them a "better chance" and opened them up to making "decent money." Participant 1 stated, "Postsecondary education in prison gave me a chance to return to society and make some decent money."

Participant 3 responded, "It was my education in prison that opened all the doors for better employment. It was my education because I was listening to this teaching by Myles Monroe on the currency of life."

Another significant fact is that 7 out of 8 participants (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8) made relatable statements with common perspectives about having a "new outlook" due to being educated in prison. When ex-offenders receive opportunities, they did not previously have in their communities, they tend to feel a "sense of citizenship" as rehabilitated individuals returning to their communities. This viewpoint gives the ex-offenders "empowerment" and a "broader horizon" on how they see life as educated convicts. Participant 1 explained,

In many ways, education in prison put me ahead to a degree because I feel like I can sit down and talk to anybody. The main reason is that I chose to broaden my horizons while in prison. While I was there, I learned something about a lot of things; it could help me grow.

Participant 4 replied,

Postsecondary education in prison enabled me in different areas of my life, making me a better citizen. I may not be high class, but at least I am middle class, and now others cannot look down on me as much because I know something. I have wisdom now, and I have an education. I am not illiterate; I know how to talk to people, handle situations, and be professional. I am fully rehabilitated even to the degree that I was once incarcerated at the same prison where I work. Now I work there as a correctional guard.

Participant 5 responded,

Being rehabilitated through postsecondary education in prison has empowered me. It has empowered me, and no longer is there a label on me to just be an ex-offender, ex-con, or inmate. With an education, I can now use my time wisely and be productive in my community.

Ex-offenders expressed their need to turn negative labels into positive reinforcement through education. The commonalities unraveled among the six ex-offenders who strongly felt “validation” and “fulfillment” from receiving postsecondary education. The ex-offenders (Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7) passionately articulated their “feelings of accomplishment” about furthering themselves through postsecondary education, which ultimately affected their self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to reach a sense of achievement. Participant 3 stated, “Receiving a degree in prison or a penal system is excellent. The narratives associated with the penal system would be a perception of the lowest of the low in society, but I accomplished getting a degree.”

Participant 6 replied,

I was excited and encouraged because I obtained a certification while in prison. I never thought that I would be able to do something like that. Growing up, I had a lot of ADHD problems, but I focused and put my mind on doing something that I wanted to do.

Participant 7 responded,

You are told when you are young that you should finish school, and things are instilled in you. I took things for granted and did not listen when I was younger. So now as an adult, the light came on, and I realized that I missed out as a child and could have enjoyed the options. But I now have options because I completed a postsecondary education program while in prison, and I have this feeling of validation.

Conversely, Participants 2 and 8 did not speak on validation or fulfillment in attaining postsecondary education while in prison. Instead, they were passionate about the empowerment and different views stemming from their education.

Ex-offenders expressed their appreciation for knowledge obtained through postsecondary education and its effectiveness in providing “intellectual growth” and a “boost of confidence.” The continual agreement of efficacy being a factor became a typical theme leading to self-actualization rooted in attained confidence and competence. The perpetual occurrence of attributed statements assured data saturation, with only two participants (Participants 2 and 7) not sharing the exact phrases depicted in the analysis. Participant 1 stated, “I feel confident knowing that if I go and apply myself, I already have the basic knowledge of it. This would not be so had I not received postsecondary education in prison.”

Participant 3 replied, “I am delighted that I have received postsecondary education and completed the program. Just the weight of having such a degree and obtaining knowledge of such a degree has benefited me.”

Participant 5 responded,

This achievement has given me a sense of confidence to keep on going and pursue even more things. I know what it took to get the certificates; it was hard work. I am inspired to take the same effort and energy toward many other things I want to pursue.

### **Findings for Supportive Research Questions 3, 9, and 12**

The participants’ responses to supportive research questions (SRQ) 3, 9, and 12 were extensions of the primary research question 1 (RQ1), and the three supportive research questions were grouped to categorize significantly found meanings.

How many years have you been released from prison? (SRQ3)

Did you experience any challenges with utilizing your degree and or certificate while reintegrating into society (i.e., establishing a career path or employment)? If yes, share what those challenges were. Are you currently still facing any challenges? (SRQ9)

Although you have obtained a postsecondary educational degree, do you believe that your background offenses still hinder you in society? If so, please elaborate. (SRQ12)

In the analysis, it was apparent that the ex-offenders had adverse experiences with reentry, although they had completed postsecondary education while in prison. Only one participant had the assistance of supportive services by attending a reentry program

(halfway house). Five out of eight participants experienced some unfortunate issues with reentry. The findings from data were gathered for these two supportive research questions in one section. The supportive research questions helped develop the themes of Supportive Services Help, and the Reentry Dilemma. The following paragraphs provide the ex-offenders' responses that were coupled and analyzed to SRQ3, SRQ9, and SRQ12.

Only one ex-offender expressed receiving supportive services and its positive implications on their reentry. This significant event was captured to show the effectiveness of such services and highlight the discrepancies of untapped resources for those who did not have the opportunity to receive supportive services as a bridge back to society. Participants 3 and 7 were the only two who reported not having any issues with reintegrating back into the community without the assistance of supportive services. Participant 1 made specific comments that implied that a halfway house linked ex-offenders to "job opportunities" and "resources" that ensured "viable living." This reflection from this ex-offender provided insight into the positive contributions made by supportive services.

The halfway house was a blessing to me. I was able to receive assistance with getting back acclimated to being in society. They helped me get my ID for employment purposes. The halfway house had jobs for me to choose and at least have an interview.

The significance of these last findings within the developed theme of the reentry dilemma is that five ex-offenders (Participants 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7) provided insight into some level of challenge faced when reentering society. These five participants may be interpreted as discrepant cases due to some unfortunate experiences with reentry that

could be perceived as ineffective reentry. Still, they are factored as enlightening experiences that emerged to provide validity to their continual attributed self-efficacy amid adversity.

All participants represented had been released from prison at an average of three years or more, denoting desistance since being rehabilitated through education. This theme was coded with three commonalities that emerged from the findings, (a) lack of housing, (b) discrimination/guilt, and (c) unrecognized potential. The ex-offenders made statements about having challenges with “getting housing and assistance,” facing “rejection for employment,” and being constantly reminded of their violations. The ex-offenders’ statements revealed the importance of recognizing the challenges faced with “rehabilitation” and “reintegration.” These factors mirrored the ex-offenders’ perspectives and experiences with reintegration after incarceration and highlighted points of considerable challenges that influence potential barriers to sustainable living in society. Participant 2 recalled,

When I was released from prison, I tried to apply for some masonry jobs in my hometown. Employers kept telling me that I had no skills even though I had the certification to complete the work. This was so disheartening, yet I still maintained my dignity, knowing that I had accomplished something while in prison.

Participant 6 explained,

Beyond struggling to find employment, housing was a significant issue for me. I have been living with different people to maintain my basic needs. Knowing that I do not have money sometimes makes me want to do what I know best: illegal activity. But I

know better, and I know I am a better person because of my rehabilitation through postsecondary education in prison. I have had to stay in all types of messed-up environments while trying to dismantle the labels and stigmas associated with being an ex-offender. Housing programs are out there but with so many stipulations against ex-offenders, I typically do not qualify because of my offenses.

Participant 5 stated,

In certain instances, especially concerning specific jobs, I would like to have. The label of being an ex-offender is still there because of my charges. I am now rehabilitated and facing brick walls when society is telling me I need to do something with myself, but there is neither help nor true second chance for a guy like me.

Participant 7 replied,

The challenges I had to face was having a record and then having to face racism in certain aspects of job searching. I would speak to employers over the phone and because I speak well and am educated, it would almost catch them by surprise. Conversations over the phone lead to face-to-face interviews, and all the enthusiasm leaves when they see me and bring up my record. I have two challenges, my skin color, and my previous offense. I am still blessed to know that I am not defined by either of the two. This will never get me down because I am still an accomplished African American male.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, I provided a comprehensive glance at the findings and results of this qualitative study based on the research question. I thoroughly described in this chapter



the generic approach to collecting data, the systematic process of analyzing data, and the connection between the results and findings and the research question.

The eight supportive research questions (SRQ3, SRQ5 through SRQ12) were derivatives of the primary research question (RQ1). The essence of participant answers to the supporting research questions was narrated by the experiences of each ex-offender, confirming and affirming meaning to RQ1, with the exception of five participants who had challenges with reentry and potentially may be viewed as discrepant cases. However, all participants attained the overarching element of effectiveness, affirming that postsecondary education impacted reentry through their responses to the supportive research questions.

In support of content validity, all ex-offenders' experiences and perspectives provided affinity and aided in giving meaning to their realities as ex-offenders (Weaver, 2019). Using purposeful sampling, the selected participants provided ample insight and essential information with limited ambiguity, as expected from the heterogeneous population (Creswell, 2013). The diversity of the sample and the data quality collectively enhanced findings and results. Through a generic approach, this study satisfies data saturation for research inference.

In Chapter 5, I provide a discussion for interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and the conclusion of this study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

### **Purpose of the Study**

By exploring the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who undertook postsecondary education programs while incarcerated, I accomplished the purpose of this study by determining how education led to their effective reentry into society. In this section of the introduction, I aim to broaden the understanding of the nature of the study and convey the key findings. Further in this chapter, I provide an overview of the study in the interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications for positive social change, and study conclusions.

### **Review of the Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was qualitative with a generic approach. I used qualitative methodology to explore the realities of people by assessing words to interpret social problems or a phenomenon (Riese, 2019). According to Kennedy (2016), a generic qualitative approach serves as a focal point for the subjective view of a person or population concerning perspectives, experiences, and opinions about a phenomenon or problem. A generic design for research is more flexible than commonly used qualitative designs (i.e., phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnography), thereby the researcher can explore more than one established approach to conduct a study unrestrictedly (Kahlke, 2014).

For this study, the participants were ex-offenders who had experienced postsecondary education while in prison and reintegrated into the community without recidivating for at least 1 year. The sampling method for interviewing, discussed in

Chapter 3, was purposeful sampling. I used a qualitative approach for adult male ex-offenders to be subjective in their experiences and thoughts concerning how they viewed receiving postsecondary education and its effectiveness in their community lives. The generic approach was the best design for this type of qualitative study. Therefore, all questions and participant responses were interrelated in the findings about their shared experiences.

### **Key Findings Summary**

The critical findings ascertained for this study came from the themes found in the data analysis that developed from groupings of supportive research questions and participant responses. Data were collected through semistructured interviews of participants and analyzed by applying an exhaustive iteration of assessing codes and themes from participants captured shared experiences. Four themes emerged from the data: (a) Education Enhances, (b) Supportive Services Help, (c) Education Validates, and (d) Reentry Dilemma. All themes grouped into two categories of clustered supportive research questions stemming from the primary research question (RQ1) and meanings: SRQ5, SRQ6, SRQ7, SRQ8, SRQ10, SRQ11, and SRQ3, SRQ9, SRQ12. I utilized grouping to support key findings confirm, disconfirm, and expand insight into the perspectives relatable to this exploratory research and literature review. Chapter 4 provides examples of the key findings that were systematically grouped to further show key findings in the study as a comparison tool for peer-reviewed literature in Chapter 2 and further discusses in this chapter in the interpretation of findings.

## Interpretation of Findings

### Research Question 1

The primary research question was as follows: What are the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who have completed postsecondary education programs while incarcerated, and whether gaining an education led to effective reentry into society? The ex-offenders shared similar experiences with postsecondary education in prison and reentry status, with five individuals encountering some barriers with acceptability and susceptibility in their communities. These ex-offenders were looked upon as discrepant cases, but they confirmed need for supportive services in the community for ex-offenders. Overall, the ex-offenders expressed their views on postsecondary education afforded to them while in prison and its extensive motivation for right living in the community as rehabilitated individuals. The participants' acknowledgment of self-efficacy and desistance through postsecondary education was the determinant for effectiveness in reentry. I carefully considered the research question and supported with more in-depth questions to unveil more implications on potential self-efficacy and desistance as deterrents to recidivism. The participants' views and experiences on the positive effects of postsecondary education in prison provide validity to their reentry into society, as expressed previously in the literature review (Ward, 2009).

### *First Cluster of Meanings*

**SRQ5 and SRQ6.** Supportive research question 5 was as follows: What led you to obtain a degree or certificate while in prison? Supportive research question 6 was as follows: What was your postsecondary educational program study? Both questions were

interconnected in that they related to understanding the participants' reasoning for participating and achieving some degree or certificate while in prison. Prisons with postsecondary education opportunities are effective and impactful in the lives of offenders, who benefit from being stimulated by higher learning. According to Kallman (2020), offenders who received postsecondary education in prisons felt more focused and connected to learning than being on the streets, distracted and unsupported. The small percentage of offenders who take postsecondary education courses while incarcerated tend to develop different perspectives about crime and cessation of lawless offenses (Runell, 2018). The participants in this study shared these sentiments as they continued to express their reasons for participating in a postsecondary education program: to become more knowledgeable and confident. They no longer wanted to be viewed as ignorant or a menace to society because of their poor decisions in the past. The education enhances theme was a direct result of the continual expressions of the ex-offenders wanting to evolve and be identified as intelligent, rehabilitated individuals. According to Hill (2014), adult prison learners become better connected to society by discussing practical realities associated with higher learning. The participants shared their experiences of the effectiveness and preventative measures related to desistance through postsecondary education.

**SRQ7.** Supportive research question 7 was as follows: What type of feelings or emotions did you have obtaining a degree and or certificate while in prison? The supportive research question asked is to align with the supplemental theoretical framework of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy is an action word

executed by individuals who pursue their objectives and ultimately arrive at an outcome. It differs from behavior reinforcements aimed at incentivizing one to make better decisions and/or change their behavior (Bandura, 1984). Self-efficacy is used to focus primarily on the individual's perception and view of their ability to achieve specific outcomes. Researchers have created self-efficacy measures to test an individual's ability to carry out tasks under what they perceive as a challenging or difficult situation (Williams et al., 2020). Thus, self-efficacy is identified in terms of stressor appraisal, an individual's perception of their capabilities being a challenge or potential threat (Lazarus, 1966).

The participants equally conveyed their emotions and feelings about obtaining a major accomplishment such as a postsecondary educational degree or certificate. The continual theme of education validates derived from their feelings of betterment and positive change. For instance, an ex-offender reported that he experienced a feeling of accomplishment in achieving something he never thought possible. I used this question to support the next supportive research question that ex-offender's answered pertaining to their sense of fulfillment being stimulated by completing a degree/certificate in prison.

**SRQ8.** Supportive research question 8 was as follows: Do you think postsecondary education provides a sense of fulfillment when achieved? If so, elaborate. The participants fully reflected on the advantages associated with their postsecondary educational experience. They carefully paused as if they were digesting the question to provide a natural, transparent response. In relating their responses, participants confirmed self-efficacy and the implications of postsecondary education as a change agent in their

lives. Bandura (1977) developed self-efficacy as a theoretical construct for evaluating and addressing an individual's cognitive function, inspiration, and perception of their ability to feel a sense of fulfillment. The determinants of self-efficacy are an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Bandura, 1993). I used the concept of self-efficacy to create an opportunity for transformative realities in the lives of individuals who have struggled to overcome criminalistic behaviors. Investigators of criminal self-efficacy have discovered that offenders with impediments, such as lacking education and employment opportunities, see themselves as failures (Uggen & Thompson, 2003). I investigated criminal self-efficacy to interpret the motivation behind education as being influential in the life of an offender who is striving to achieve some form of positive self-efficacy. The offenders' view of themselves has been instrumental in the outcomes they have for themselves.

**SRQ10.** Supportive research question 10 was as follows: Do you believe that higher learning in prisons affords ex-offenders a way to escape criminalization in society? If yes, share how it provides an outlet. Desistance theory is categorized into two overarching theories: (a) socio-situational theory (i.e., environmental factors leading to desistance) and (b) subjective theory (i.e., self and/or facilitating factors leading to desistance; Williams & Schaefer, 2021). Although many subtheories support and/or reflect desistance theory, I used desistance theory for more diverse interpretations with more variables that lead to cessation (Weaver, 2019). Desistance theory is a lens I used for unraveling the significance of postsecondary educational effectiveness in ex-offenders' lives. Postsecondary education in prisons (i.e., prison education) was

implemented to lower recidivism and increase ex-offenders' employability (Mackall, 2018). The probability of ex-offenders desisting criminal activities is potentially elevated when offered postsecondary education. The ex-offenders agreed that higher learning opportunities in prisons gave them a way out because it enhanced their thinking and decision-making skills and provided favorable employment opportunities.

**SRQ11.** Supportive research question 11 was as follows: How has being educated made you see yourself differently in society? The idea surrounding identity theory and desistance is what I chose to undergird the explanation of an individual who arrives at a place of new self because of their decision to change their ways and behaviors due to self-efficacy (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The decision to see oneself as evolved and changed is the pre-qualifier for adaptation of renewed mindset and a renewed lifestyle.

The theme education validates continued to resound as ex-offenders confirmed the alignment of desistance and self-efficacy with postsecondary educational attainment. According to Bandura (1997), four primary sources describe the criminal perceptions of self-efficacy: (a) personal performance accomplishments, (b) vicarious learning, (c) social persuasion, and (d) physiological states/responses. Investigators of criminal self-efficacy have discovered that offenders with impediments such as lacking education and employment opportunities see themselves as failures (Uggen & Thompson, 2003). However, the participants all concurred that they no longer saw themselves as convicts but as changed, educated, and rehabilitated individuals in society.



### *The Second Cluster of Meanings*

**SRQ3.** Supportive research question 3 was as follows: How many years have you been released from prison? Desistance determines the ex-offender's ability to change their paradigm (i.e., how people think) and behave in society. Leibrich (1994) undergirded the efforts of many researchers and theorists who had a stake and contribution to unfolding the term desistance. However, through practicum, Leibrich engaged the external factors that affect the criminal's internal process of how they view their behaviors that leads to them quitting crimes.

Other researchers have identified desistance as a process of decelerating criminal behaviors versus the term reduction in the frequency of illegal activities (Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989). Therefore, carefully assessing how long an ex-offender has been out of prison provided insight into successful reentry and the cause for desistance of criminalistic behaviors. The ex-offenders provided adequate timeframes for how long they had been out of prison with the expectation of remaining in the community and not recidivating. This further supports that higher learning opportunities lend credence to desistance in the life of criminals, such as the participants who had been out of prison for three or more years. This perspective was further explored in sequential supportive questions for validating postsecondary education for cessation.

**SRQ9.** Supportive research question 9 was as follows: Did you experience any challenges with utilizing your degree and or certificate while reintegrating into society (i.e., establishing a career path or employment)? If yes, share what those challenges were. Are you currently still facing any challenges? This population continues to face

socioeconomic challenges that create scarcity in the larger society, which continues to cause reentry issues for ex-offenders (Frazier, 2013). The anxieties associated with reentry for ex-offenders produce skepticism about the realities of a successful release. Therefore, increasing the need for stakeholders and community involvement makes ex-offenders better reintegrate into society (Clear, 2007). Ex-offenders are as successful as the external factors providing significant resources for maintaining productive citizenship.

A few ex-offenders reported facing hindrances with reintegrating into society and utilizing their degree/certificate. The participants stated that their postsecondary attainment was not deemed “qualifiable,” although they earned it. The continual theme of Reentry Dilemmas continued to give cadence to “paying debt to society through incarceration.” The need for Supportive Services Help continued to surface, as responses regarding housing, employment, and other factors warranted. Only one participant reaped the benefits of having supportive services for reintegrating, which added validity to the importance of supportive services contributing to reentry. In furthering research on reentry, services for ex-offenders are official and unofficial varieties of localized organizations, agencies, and systems utilized for preventative measures (Nhan et al., 2017). Lack of services creates pandemonium among ex-offenders who relapse, leading to increased recidivism and social disintegration (Currie, 2013). Services for offenders are essentials needed to thrive. The overall intention of providing services for offenders is to connect the ex-offender to the community, while providing them with tailored interventions for successful reintegration (Bouffard & Bergeron, 2006). Although the

participants had attained degree/certificate while in prison, they still lacked the services needed for employment and other essential reentry needs.

**SRQ12.** Supportive research question 12 was as follows: Although you have obtained a postsecondary educational degree, do you believe that your background offenses still hinder you in society? If so, please elaborate. The term *ex-offender* implies that the individual has ceased criminal offenses and now lives as a lawful citizen (Cioffi et al., 2020). For decades, many criminal justice professionals have attempted to discover the correlation between crime and poverty and arrests and convictions of individuals (Berk et al., 1980). There is still labeling of offenses attached to the offender in this current dispensation, although cessation has occurred, and the pursuit of abstaining from criminalistic behaviors is a constant goal. Each participant spoke of different factors faced with reentry that highlighted economic hindrances and social inequality because of societal views of past offenses and charges. Economic inequality increases as more correctional institutions are housing more offenders, causing a reduction in wages for low-skilled workers and minorities (Western, 2002). With constant economic challenges in poor urban communities, ex-offenders who live in those areas lack the salaries needed to support themselves and those for whom they are responsible (Western & Beckett, 1999). Ex-offenders become susceptible to reoffending when economic resources are not plentiful, exacerbating their current condition of economic inequality.

In the context of social inequality, researchers have examined the effects of neighborhoods and communities of ex-offenders to determine the social and environmental factors associated with reoffending (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006).

Socioeconomic status contributes to many predictions concerning the probable cause of an ex-offender reoffending (Elliot et al., 1996). By no means is the implication that external factors alone warrant recidivation. However, it confronts the biases associated with the perception that “you can think your way out of poverty.” Many have felt that reoffending is an individual’s decision, but researchers have examined the social factors that provoke reoccurring criminalistic activity (Elsner, 2005). In this study, one participant reported that he was turned down numerous times for housing because of his criminal charges, which made him desire to go back to doing illegal activities to make money. However, he gained intellectual and emotional stimulation through postsecondary education, as he alluded to that as the reason he decided not to revert to criminal activities. Another participant reported that when he attempted to get a job, he was denied employment because his appearance was incongruent with how he presented himself over the phone. This type of inequality is another societal stigma attached to ex-offenders who feel demoralized as newly educated and rehabilitated citizens. In conclusion, this further constitutes the need for forgiveness of ex-offender offenses and understanding within the community.

### **Limitations of the Study**

#### **Trustworthiness**

In combatting potential biases and barriers to the study, as aforementioned in Chapter 1, I established trust with participants by ensuring their cooperation and providing full disclosure about the intentionality of the study. The participants were unknown to the researcher, which diminished the bias regarding the sampling for

research. I reviewed the entire interview procedure, which encompassed voluntary consent, privacy, and transparency for conducting the interviews, with each interviewee. Appendices A through B provide evidence of the disclosures to each participant. The ex-offenders were in agreement with participating in a virtual Zoom meeting, which added comfort and increased confidentiality to each participant.

Due to the diversity of participants, they individually expressed themselves differently, which brought about distinctions in each supportive research question response. The differences or variations were not due to the inability to cooperate and answer questions; instead, the different levels of perception and experiences were factors.

The sampling size was small, limiting the assumptions or interpretations of findings; however, the appropriateness of data adds to the knowledge of this field. Credibility, reliability, and validity were credible due to the purpose of the study being sound in its consideration for meaningful contribution (Mason, 2010). Furthermore, I did not allow my personal biases to impede my ability to analyze and cohesively consider the findings that emerged. Lastly, this qualitative study warrants trustworthiness and contributes to the expanded discourse of unraveling educational benefits in the lives of rehabilitated offenders.

### **Recommendations**

I recommend further exploration of postsecondary education and reentry, such as a deeper examination of how ex-offenders who obtained a postsecondary educational degree/certificate gained and occupied higher wage occupations in the community. As discussed in Chapter 2, postsecondary education in prisons (i.e., prison education) was

implemented to lower recidivism and increase ex-offenders' employability (Mackall, 2018). A potential data collecting instrument would be to survey ex-offenders based on salary ranges for specific positions within their field of educational attainment. There appears to be limited empirical research focusing on postsecondary education and equal employment opportunities for ex-offenders (Seim & Harding, 2020). These recommendations interest researchers who want to further their knowledge and scope of this research about postsecondary education and reentry.

This qualitative study gave meaningful insight into the perceptions and perspectives of ex-offenders' experiences with postsecondary education and reentry regarding self-efficacy and desistance (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Leibrich, 1994). I suggest further exploration and investigation in this field of study.

### **Positive Social Change**

The results of this research provide significant findings that inform those in education, criminal justice, social work, and human service professions on the effectiveness of education in prisons in preventing recidivism in released ex-offenders (Szifris et al., 2018). The study can be a referral source for those seeking to broaden their horizon on the importance of postsecondary education in prisons and the impact it makes on the lives of ex-offenders. The ex-offenders are resources for a greater understanding of how postsecondary education brought about the cessation of their criminalistic behaviors (Leblanc et al., 1989). In essence, this study conveys the ex-offender's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts regarding the interconnected workings of rehabilitation through education and reintegration back into society. The findings and meaningful

interpretations of ex-offenders' perceptions through their experiences contribute to the perpetual theme unveiled in this study that education enhances and validates in the lives of rehabilitated individuals.

The awareness of the effects of postsecondary education gives insight to legislators in enacting and enforcing laws and policies within the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for second-chance offenders who have experienced rehabilitation through postsecondary education in prisons. Many ex-offenders struggle with adjusting and reintegrating because of a lack of social supports, positive environment reinforcements, and skills to obtain employment (Petersilia, 2004). The Second Chance Act of 2005 allocated resources for servicing ex-offenders but could not provide specific services for some ex-offenders based on their criminal history (Pogorzelski et al., 2005). The insight provided by ex-offenders is meaningful in pushing policies that support their need for equal employment. This study gauged the ex-offenders' perspectives and experiences with not always having an equal opportunity as an educated, rehabilitated offender. An increase in employment helps in bringing about positive social change for ex-offenders because it affords them the right to be actively working citizens in the community (Seim & Harding, 2020). The need for positive social change is implied in their expressed realities pertaining to some form of inequality.

Proper implementation of resources that meets the needs of ex-offenders increases the chances that ex-offenders will not reenter prison (Binda et al., 2020). Only one participant in the study provided positive feedback on the effectiveness of receiving supportive services by way of a reentry program (halfway house). This information

helped to bring awareness to the overarching theme of Reentry Dilemma regarding lack of supportive services in the lives of ex-offenders needing assistance with reintegration after incarceration. Collaboration of human services professionals and the community increases second-chance efforts for ex-offenders (Coupland & Olver, 2020). It is a proven reality that there is a gap between exiting prison and reintegrating back to the ex-offenders' community. The insights provided by ex-offenders enhance the knowledge of criminal justice professionals and human service professionals regarding the need for implementation of resources and services. This level of awareness can lead to the formation of agencies and organizations that intend to make positive social change by integrating reformed offenders with the community.

### **Methodological, Theoretical, and Empirical Interpretations**

According to Kennedy (2016), a generic qualitative approach serves as a focal point for the subjective view of a person or population concerning perspectives, experiences, and opinions about a phenomenon or problem. This approach affirmed the ex-offenders' experiences regarding postsecondary education and reentry. The ex-offenders were cooperative and passionate about participating in the study. Their vocal expressions to the interview questions added validity to the theoretical premise of desistance and supplemental theory self-efficacy as potential factors for cessation (Bandura, 1984; Leibrich, 1994). The ex-offenders felt pride in their ability to obtain a postsecondary educational degree or certificate and experienced a sense of achievement or fulfillment in the community. Participants perceived the implication of escaping criminalization due to postsecondary education attainment as a positive incentive for



change. The approach and theoretical framework used in this study allowed for emerging themes that provided insight into the advantages and challenges faced. Although the ex-offenders reported having successful reentry through postsecondary education, this achievement did not erase the other contributing factors that constricted them in reintegrating in their respective communities. The significant depictions were analyzed and arranged through the themes that erected from the participants' responses in the interview session. Therefore, the participants' perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and opinions were insightful and key in unrestrictedly allowing the researcher to explore more than one established approach in conducting the study (Kahlke, 2014).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The stigmas associated with being an ex-offender can be demoralizing, causing an ex-offender to feel scrutinized for their past criminal behavior (Evans, 2018). Social inequality and judgments can create negative narratives for an ex-offender who has been rehabilitated through prison, causing a postsecondary education received while incarcerated to appear null and void. This problem provokes a need for awareness and advocacy from community leaders and human services professionals. Communities at large should be educated on the barriers faced by ex-offenders because of the labels and stigmas associated with their past offenses. From a practical position, community gatherings or town halls held by professionals (i.e., educators, human services professionals, criminal justice professionals) could suggest greater empathy for the overall needs of ex-offenders who truly deserve a second chance. This perpetuates the resounding of ex-offenders who share their experiences and perspectives on reintegration

after incarceration. Through implementation of true community partnerships, the understanding of supportive services and supportive communities would improve the overall experience of reintegration for educated, rehabilitated individuals.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to connect the gap in the literature to show the benefits of having reentry programs and services for ex-offenders and to address the need for postsecondary education in the lives of ex-offenders. The goal was to complete the research or understand it more by analyzing all the contributing factors regarding ex-offenders and their ability to cease criminal activity. Considering the impact of postsecondary education in the lives of prisoners potentially served as an influential source of fulfillment in the lives of ex-offenders. This study helped identify and voice the concerns, criticisms, testimonies, and victories associated with ex-offenders' experiences with postsecondary education and their present reality with navigating society with a degree/certificate.

The significance of this study is its contribution to the dearth of research pertaining to ex-offenders' rehabilitation and reintegration process and their outcomes. This study aimed to fill the gap in the literature by extending knowledge in the discipline and profession of criminal justice, education, and human services. In essence, the relevance of postsecondary education as a form of cessation to criminalistic behaviors is imperative in the life of an ex-offender who has achieved a level of self-efficacy (Cioffi et al., 2020). The importance of postsecondary education in prisons is that it provides ex-offenders with an opportunity for rehabilitation, and it serves as a preventative measure

after reentry. This study elevates and enhances awareness pertaining to reentry issues faced by ex-offenders, in addition to their perceptions and feedback concerning the systems of education and criminal justice, and their realities in the community. Finally, this study thoroughly conveys the exploration of postsecondary education and its effectiveness in reentry, which aids to fill the gap in the literature. Consequently, I am optimistic that this study will contribute to positive social change within the field of education, human services, and criminal justice.

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## Appendix A: Participant Flyer

Researcher seeks participants who have obtained a postsecondary education while in prison

There is a new study called “*An Exploration of Male Ex-Offenders’ Experiences of Postsecondary Education and Reentry*” that could help professionals like educators and criminal justice officials better understand the effectiveness of postsecondary education in the life of an ex-offender. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences with obtaining a postsecondary education degree or certificate and its effectiveness on your life in society.

This survey is part of the doctoral study for Marvin Moore Jr., a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

### **About the study:**

First eight volunteers will be selected

Virtual interview using Teams or Zoom platform

To protect your privacy, no names will be collected

One 30–60-minute interview

### **Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

18-62 years old

Adult Males

Obtained a Postsecondary Education degree or certificate

Have been out of prison for at least 1 year

Lives in Georgia

**To confidentially volunteer  
Please email:**



## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Introduction**

At this time, the interviewer will make an introduction-welcoming participant and thanking the participant for agreeing to be a-part of the research study

A brief overview of the research being conducted will be conveyed to the participant

Express importance and the benefit of the participant being an asset to the study being explored:

An Exploration of Male Ex-Offenders' Experiences of Postsecondary Education and Reentry

What are the experiences of adult male ex-offenders who have completed postsecondary education programs while incarcerated, and whether gaining an education led to effective reentry into society?

#### **Transparency/Respect Established**

The interviewer will introduce the recorder that is being used only to capture the conversation for transcription and analysis after all interviews have been finalized

The interviewer will affirm the interviewee by:

Expressing the importance of being open and honest and sharing what they desire to share

The interviewer will express to the interviewee that there is no right or wrong answer because it is their perception and experiences that they are sharing; based upon the question and conversational caveats for research

The interviewer will inform the interviewee that if at any time they need to stop or reconvene because the portion of the interview becomes touchy, the interviewer will respectfully pause and give the interviewee the time that they need

The interviewer will assure the interviewee that they can stop the interview at any time if they desire to no longer continue

### **Background**

Will open for the participant to share a little about themselves to loosen them up to begin the interview

### **Begin Interview**

Where were you incarcerated while pursuing postsecondary education?

How many years were you in prison before released?

How many years have you been released from prison?

While pursuing postsecondary education in prison, did you obtain a degree or certificate?

What led you to the obtaining of a degree or certificate while in prison?

What was your postsecondary educational program study?

What type of feelings or emotions did you have obtaining a degree and or certificate while in prison?

Do you think that postsecondary education provides a sense of fulfillment when achieved? If so, please elaborate.

Did you experience any challenges with utilizing your degree and or certificate while reintegrating into society (i.e., establishing a career path or employment)?

If yes, share what those challenges were. Are you currently still facing any challenges?

Do you believe that higher learning in prisons affords ex-offenders a way of escape from criminalization in society?

If yes, share how it has provided an outlet.

How has being educated made you see yourself differently in society?

Although you have obtained a postsecondary educational degree, do you believe that your background offenses still hinder you in society?

If so, please elaborate.

Is there anything else you would like to add that may have been missed or you would like to elaborate more on?

### **Exiting Gratitude/Next Steps**

The interviewer will thank the participant for sacrificing time and being willing to be a-part of the mission for Social Change

The interviewer will give the interviewee a brief understanding of what is going to happen after the interview

The recorded interview will be transcribed/translated by the interviewer and use of Nvivo software (looking for patterns, key phrases, themes, and codes) to interpret for understanding.

A follow-up with the participant for accuracy of information will be conducted before completing study analysis

Upon completion of the interview, the interviewee will be updated concerning the findings of the research conducted.

A summary/conclusion of the study will be shared for record-keeping and a reminder of being a pertinent part of the explored research

## Appendix C: Categories/Codes and Themes

**Categories and Codes**

Better Jobs	Bj
Change in Outlook	CiO
Halfway House	HH
Fulfillment	Ful
Increased Confidence/Competence	Incr
Lack of Housing	LoH
Discrimination/Guilt	DiG
Unrecognized Potential	UnPo

**Codes Grouped by Themes****Themes:**

Education Enhances

    Better Jobs

    Change in Outlook

Supportive Services Help

    Halfway House

Education Validates

    Fulfillment

    Increased Confidence/Competence

Reentry Dilemma

Lack of Housing

Discrimination/Guilt

Unrecognized Potential