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Public Participation in Georgia's Environmental Permitting Process

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MPA, Troy University, 2009

BS, Georgia State University, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

There is no meaningful way for Georgia residents to participate in the environmental decision-making process before environmental permits are approved. As a result, hazardous waste facilities are disproportionately placed in African American communities, exposing them to poor air quality and a higher prevalence of heart and respiratory diseases than Whites. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand how African American residents living in Stonecrest, Georgia felt about the hazardous waste site being placed in their community without an opportunity to provide input into the Georgia Environmental Protection Division's (GEPD) decision-making process before a decision was made to grant permits. The theoretical framework for this study was Bergman and Luckmann's and Schneider and Ingram's social construction theories. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit eight African American homeowners residing in Stonecrest, Georgia between 2017 and 2020. Data were collected through semistructured interviews. A priori, in vivo, and axial coding were used; thematic analysis was manually conducted. The results indicated that the lack of timely notification and the lack of communication prevented African Americans from participating in the GEPD permitting process, contributing to feelings of being ignored and distrustful of the decision. Findings could promote positive social change through helping decision makers reexamine their process, policies, and practices to ensure communications and notices are all-inclusive.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Ann, who encouraged me to take advantage of education and strive to do good. My mother often stated that opportunity sometime only knocks once. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends, who constantly encouraged me to keep pushing ahead.

This dissertation is also dedicated to a special friend, Sylvester Carter, whose support was the source of completing this study. I remember him asking me on his last visit before passing away, “will you finish?” Finally, I thank my savior Jesus Christ for all things are possible with him and through him. Thanks to all for your support, love, patience, and understanding as I completed this journey.

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A huge thanks to Dr. Shepeard, my committee chair, whose leadership guided me to complete this study. Her patience, encouragement, and wisdom motivated me to push forward little by little. Dr. Shepeard was always available to answer questions and make recommendations to keep me on track. She is a great listener with an awesome sense of compassion, making me feel as though I was her only student.

Thank you, Dr. Matarelli, for your expertise and knowledge. I remember our first meeting when you took the time to point out what I should do to meet the methodological requirements, and discussing with me other approaches that might be beneficial to enhance the study.

I would like to thank all of the participants in the study. Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences and perspectives. This study would not have been possible without you. Thank you to my friends and family far and near. I appreciate the concerns, encouragement, and prayers you have offered on my behalf.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Historically, hazardous sites have been disproportionately placed in African American communities, a practice that continues today (Brazil, 2022). African Americans have been on the front lines of systematic environmental injustice for too long (Alton & Waldman, 2020; Been, 1995; Bullard & Wright, 2009; Chemnick, 2020; Hamilton, 1995; Morello-Frosch et al., 2001). The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is tasked with cleaning up hazardous sites and created the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980. The Act promotes communities working with stakeholders; however, support depends on community members (Zaragoza, 2019). The Act is a positive step forward, but not enough is being done to address the permitting of hazardous waste sites in African American communities (Zaragoza, 2019).

Examples of the results of the permitting of hazardous waste sites are extensive. Due to hazardous waste site emissions, a Baltimore community of African Americans has been challenged with environmental threats that impact their ability to grow vegetables in their backyards (Shargo et al., 2021). Cognitive development among African American children has been affected due to living near hazardous sites and contributes to unequal survival chances before birth (Persico et al., 2020). Type 2 diabetes has been linked to hazardous waste sites in epidemic proportions among adults and youths (T. A. Johnson, 2019). Housing values in African American communities are also negatively affected due to the proximity of these sites (Currie et al., 2015). The hazardous waste site problem has been blamed on the permitting process, which needs further study (Ulibarri, 2018). The

permitting process in the state of Georgia does not provide an opportunity for the public to provide input (Determination of Adverse Effect on Quality of Environment, 1982/2019), resulting in a negative impact on African American communities, which prompted the current qualitative case study. The study was needed to fill the gap in the literature to understand the experiences and perceptions of African American community members impacted by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division's (GEPD) environmental decision making.

Chapter 1 addresses the study's background, research problem, and purpose. The chapter also includes the research question and a discussion of the theoretical framework and nature of the study. Definitions of terms, assumptions, scope of the research and delimitations, and limitations are provided.

Background

One of the significant challenges that African Americans face is that industries and state governments select neighborhoods that put up little resistance or lack the financial resources to oppose the building of toxic landfills, hazardous material sites, and industrial facilities in their communities (Clayton et al., 2019). Aitamurto and Chen (2017) found that inclusiveness requires diversity in participation to ensure the representation of various arguments and viewpoints. Anderson et al. (2020) claimed that policy entrepreneurs have influenced policymaking due to their ability to connect with legislators, provide reliable information, define the problem, and build coalitions. Anyebe (2018) posited that policymaking is political, socially constructed over time, a result of citizen demands, government focused, positive or negative, and based on law and

authority. The GEPD has no meaningful procedures for public participation in its environmental decision-making process (Determination of Adverse Effect on Quality of Environment, 1982/2019).

Factor (2018) investigated participation processes, Lee et al. (2017) examined public participation, and Nabatchi et al. (2018) researched stakeholder processes. Nabatchi and Mergel (2010) studied deliberative democracy, and Weiksner et al. (2012) explored deliberative public engagement. These researchers evaluated the extensiveness and complexity of the public participation struggle but failed to examine the state's role in the process or inclusiveness for all community members. For example, in Stonecrest, Georgia, residents were not involved in the decision to build a hazardous waste site in their community until the clearing of land began and activists filed an injunction that halted construction. Therefore, it is essential to understand how this African American community feels about the GEPD environmental permitting process.

Problem Statement

Georgia has no effective process for public participation in decisions to locate hazardous waste sites in local communities or determine their members' satisfaction with their choices (Determination of Adverse Effect on Quality of Environment, 1982/2019). There is little information on how African American residents in Georgia feel about being excluded from the GEPD decision-making process before a decision is made to grant a permit. The problem impacts African Americans because hazardous waste sites are disproportionately located in their communities (Ahmed, 2021; Rhubart & Galli Robertson, 2020; Shargo et al., 2021; Villarosa, 2020). As a result, African Americans

are exposed to poor air quality and have a higher prevalence of heart and respiratory diseases (Servadio et al., 2019). Georgia's air quality permitting for African American communities in rural areas is higher, especially for commercial and nonindustrial private landowners, than in other communities (Johnson Gaither et al., 2019). Furthermore, nuclear reactors are disproportionately placed in zip codes of predominantly African American communities, resulting in lung cancer (Webber & Stone, 2017), hypertension, and heart and kidney disease (Jantz, 2018; White-Newsome, 2016).

Georgia has limited requirements for environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which only applies when federal funds are involved. The NEPA "requires federal agencies to assess the environmental effects of their proposed actions before making decisions" (EPA, 2021, para. 1). However, despite complying with these legislative requirements, the GEPD only posts notices in local newspapers, radio stations, or the GEPD.org website, announcing pending or enacted environmental actions. Community members can request notification of environmental activities or projects via email for an annual fee of $50.

The literature reviewed for the current study included research by those who had investigated this problem focusing on public inclusion (De'Arman, 2020; Hines, 2001; Kramar et al., 2018; Soffen, 2016), social and economic status (Deimel et al., 2020; Do et al., 2017; Wagmiller et al., 2017), public participation (Roberts, 2008), stakeholder processes (Bryson et al., 2013), deliberative democracy (Nabatchi & Mergel, 2010), and purposeful public engagement (Weiksner et al., 2012). Researchers have evaluated the extensiveness and complexity of the public participation struggle; however, none have

examined the experiences or perceptions of African American residents living in Stonecrest, Dekalb County, Georgia. My study helped fill this gap by contributing information to the research literature that identified the experiences and perceptions of African American residents regarding Georgia's GEPD permitting process, the presence of hazardous sites in their communities, and overall environmental concerns. My study might also help policymakers establish best practices from lessons learned.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand how African American residents living in Stonecrest felt about the hazardous waste site being placed in their community without an opportunity to provide input into the GEPD decision-making process before a decision is made to grant permits. Stonecrest residents were not involved in the decision to build a hazardous waste site in their community until land clearing began and activists filed an injunction to halt the construction. The landfill permitting process in Stonecrest was the case to be studied. The issue remains fluent and is currently in the court system. According to the plaintiff, the city council of Stonecrest approved permitting under pretense; therefore, a judge ruled that the Stonecrest hazardous waste site was improperly permitted (Hansen, 2022). The court filing demonstrates the importance of this case study and confirms the problem exists. A county superior court judge halted the site's construction until further information could be obtained (Barrie, 2020).

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was the following: What are the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of African American homeowners living in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020 concerning how GEPD addresses community concerns in the decision-making process before hazardous waste site permits are issued?

Theoretical Framework

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) and Schneider and Ingram's (1993) social construction theories were the guiding lens through which this qualitative case study explored the experiences and perceptions of African Americans regarding the GEPD permitting process. Berger and Luckmann proposed that social construction progresses over time and builds from interactions and communication. Further, they noted that communication in everyday dialogue is the most powerful method of establishing beliefs and thoughts, which become socially constructed. Everyday communication becomes a habit that is socially shaped and institutionalized into social constructs.

Moreover, Schneider and Ingram (1993) defined social construction as either positive or negative when characterizing target populations. African Americans are placed in the negative category. Schneider and Ingram built on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work and examined more extensively how public policies have been designed based on stereotypes of people, ideas, institutions, events, and other aspects that become habit-forming in everyday life. Considering these factors, policy design for the target population, African Americans, has been constructed in a way that negatively impacts their communities. For example, African American communities are more often burdened

with hazardous sites than White communities (Bullard et al., 2008; Mascarenhas et al., 2021; Webber & Stone, 2017). Therefore, Schneider and Ingram's social construction theory also guided this study. I discuss social construction theory in detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative case study design for this research. A case study was a suitable design because it allowed the use of multiple sources to collect data from residents living in or near the hazardous waste site. I explored the experiences and perceptions of African American residents living in Stonecrest regarding the GEPD permitting process without input from community members. Stonecrest was charted in 2017 and is 92.6% African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Since 2017, the GEPD has granted permits to a company that handles or emits toxic substances into the environment in Stonecrest. Using both purposive and snowball sampling, I recruited eight African American homeowners who lived in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020. Recruitment continued until data saturation was met. Data were collected using a self-developed interview protocol in one-on-one interviews via Zoom calls. Andrejuk (2020) found that Zoom interviews are suitable for obtaining information on a concept. Andrejuk and Archibald et al. (2019) recommended Zoom interviews for hard-to-reach populations. Zoom interviews were used for research during the COVID-19 pandemic (Andrejuk, 2020). Data were coded manually to assist with pattern and thematic analysis.

Definitions

The following is a list of terms used in this study and their definitions:

Adverse environmental action: A project proposed to be undertaken by a government agency or agencies for which it is probable to expect a significant negative impact on the natural environment, including air, land, water, plants, animals, historical sites, buildings, or cultural resources (NEPA, 1970).

GEPD: A Georgia State agency that is charged with protecting air, land, and water resources through the authority of state and federal environmental statutes. These laws regulate public and private facilities in the areas of air quality, water quality, hazardous waste, water supply, solid waste, surface mining, underground storage tanks, and others. GEPD issues and enforces all state permits in these areas and has entire delegation for federal environmental permits except Section 404 (wetland) permits (Environmental Protection Division [EPD], 2022a).

Public participation: This process includes procedures designed to consult, involve, and inform the public to allow those affected by a decision to have input regarding that decision (EPA, 2022; Rowe & Frewer, 2000).

Stonecrest: An incorporated city located in the southeastern corner of Dekalb County, Georgia, bordering Clayton, Fulton, Gwinnett, Henry, and Rockdale counties. The estimated population of Stonecrest is 54,903, with 94% African Americans, a median household income of $49,865, and 44.6% homeownership (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Assumptions

Assumptions are those aspects of the study that are out of a researcher's control, but if they disappear, the study will become irrelevant (Simon, 2011). Assumptions for my research included that the participants would respond truthfully during the interviews.

I also assumed that the participants would be honest in self-reporting that they were African American and owned homes in the required zip codes from 2017 to 2020.

Scope and Delimitations

This study included African American homeowners living in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020. Stonecrest was charted in 2017, has a statistically reported African American majority residential demographic, and was the specific focus of this study. The study did not include residents outside of Stonecrest, other races or ethnic groups, non-English speakers, and renters. Homeownership has more advantages than renting and is the most significant lifetime investment for most people; therefore, homeowners have a vested interest in their property (Mandič, 2018). The scope of the current study included African American homeowners in Stonecrest to better understand their perceptions and experiences as well as obstacles in the environmental permitting process.

Yin's (2003, 2018) case study approach served as my research design. Yin (2018) recommended generalizing theoretical propositions and not populations. With good documentation and a detailed database, generalization into a new case can be achieved (Yin, 2003). For example, using the same selection criteria and similar circumstances, the study can be a model to examine the regentrification processes in metropolitan cities with large African American populations and other underserved target populations with social and environmental issues. The study could be generalized to other predominately African American communities challenged with environmental justice concerns regarding hazardous landfills, recycling plants, and other unwanted facilities.

Limitations

This study was limited to African American homeowners who resided in Stonecrest within zip codes 30038 and 30058 between 2017 and 2020. The study did not include other races' experiences and perceptions. The sample was not comprehensive, which might limit the transferability of the findings. The study excluded renters and businesses; therefore, the study may not be a general representation of other African American communities because a single population was used to collect data. However, I worked to ensure the sample represented the population in the community as much as possible.

According to Simundic (2013), "bias is any trend or deviation from the truth in data collection, data analysis, interpretation, and publication which can cause false conclusions" (p. 12). To eliminate bias in the current study, I asked questions that did not motivate the participants to provide a particular response or steer them to view the problem in a certain way. The participants were volunteers, which could have created a self-selection bias. There could have been potential for bias in their answers because they lived or had lived near the hazardous waste site. All participants were asked the same questions in the same order. I was precise and focused on the facts, and I gathered data by creating an environment in which participants could freely express their thoughts and ideas without judgment or intimidation. I also acknowledged my potential bias as an African American and self-reflected by taking notes during data collection and analysis, reporting and removing any potential bias. In addition, the participants had the opportunity to review their responses for accuracy as well as the study's findings. I

provided a transparent audit trail outlining all steps to collect data to assist with transferability. More detailed information regarding consistency and neutrality is provided in Chapter 3.

Significance

This study may create positive social change because it contributed to the current literature on state agencies' roles in environmental permitting and may inform policymakers in shaping their policy design process. The findings may improve decision-making procedures to include all citizens. Also, the results demonstrated the importance of public participation and may prompt a change of policy that gives individuals an opportunity to participate in the process before a decision is made. Results from the study provide information to decision makers that may help improve policies and practices to encourage public engagement, promote a positive environmental attitude, and create consistency between Georgia and communities statewide. African Americans may become aware of the GEPD's process and seek participation opportunities, and decision makers may become aware of community members' environmental concerns, attitudes, beliefs, and other unknown factors. The goal was to better understand the perceptions and experiences of African Americans to create tools to encourage two-way dialogue between the target population and GEPD in the environmental permitting process.

Summary

A better understanding of African Americans' experiences and perceptions regarding the GEPD's environmental permitting process was needed. The GEPD has limited requirements for environmental review under the NEPA, which only apply when

federal funds are involved. The GEPD's decision-making process lacks meaningful ways for public participation resulting in African American communities being targeted for hazardous sites, waste dumps, and other undesirable industries.

Many studies have addressed public participation; however, researchers have not explored how community members are notified in the first place. Berger and Luckmann's (1966) and Schneider and Ingram's (1993) social construction theories were the lens used to explore the perceptions and experiences of the target population and how they feel about being excluded from the environmental permitting process. Chapter 2 consists of the literature search strategy, a discussion of the study's theoretical foundation, and a literature review related to key concepts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Georgia has no meaningful way for public participation in decisions to locate hazardous waste sites in local communities or to determine their members' satisfaction with the decisions made (Determination of Adverse Effect on Quality of Environment, 1982/2019). There is little information on how African American residents in Georgia feel about being excluded from the decision-making process before a decision is made to grant the permit. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand how African American residents living in Stonecrest felt about the hazardous waste site being placed in their community without an opportunity to provide input into the GEPD decision-making process before a decision is made to grant permits.

The problem is relevant because hazardous sites continue to be disproportionately placed in African American communities, resulting in environmental health problems due to the current decision-making process for environmental permitting. Georgia air quality permitting in African American communities in rural areas is higher than others, especially for commercial and nonindustrial private landowner permits (Johnson Gaither et al., 2019). The lack of public involvement has resulted in exposure to environmental hazards in African American communities, disproportionately resulting in poor air quality and a higher prevalence of heart and respiratory diseases (Servadio et al., 2019). Furthermore, nuclear reactors are more often placed in zip codes of predominantly African American communities, causing lung cancer, hypertension, and heart and kidney disease (Jantz, 2018).

Georgia's environmental decision-making process for community engagement is absent (Determination of Adverse Effect on Quality of Environment, 1982/2019), and policymakers do not address or seem to care about the needs of the communities (Quintero, 2019). The EPA does not provide oversight and enforce environmental laws equally in African American communities (Judy, 2018). For decades, African American communities have experienced social injustice and environmental inequality (Alvarez & Evans, 2021; Ard, 2016; Hamilton, 1995; Johnson Gaither et al., 2019; King, 2020; Soraghan, 2020).

Moreover, African American communities tend to be more segregated with greater exposure to air toxins (Ard, 2016; Weaver et al., 2021;). Numerous researchers have asserted that African American communities are burdened with hazardous living conditions (Agyeman et al., 2016; Been, 1995; Bikomeye et al., 2021; Dombey, 2019; Hamilton, 1995; Morello-Frosch et al., 2001; Pastor et al., 2001; Yabes & Pijawka, 2008). The landfill permitting process in Stonecrest was the case studied in the current study and is an example of why this problem is relevant. The issue remains fluent and is currently in the court system. According to the plaintiff, the city council of Stonecrest approved permitting under false pretenses (Barrie, 2020)

Chapter 2 includes details of the literature search strategy, including key terms and search engines used. I also discuss the study's theoretical foundation based on social construction theory. Finally, I provide a literature review of this study's main concepts.

Literature Search Strategy

The following databases were used to locate peer-reviewed research for this study: SAGE Journal, SAGE Research Methods Online, Thoreau, Academic Search Complete, Political Science, ProQuest Central, Google Scholar, ProQuest Dissertations, and Theses Global. The key search terms and phrases included *community engagement + attitude, civic engagement, awareness, environmental policy, public participation + environmental policy process, public participation + environmental policy, community satisfaction, rulemaking, EPA community participation guidance, federal registry, transparency in government agencies,* participation + *environmental policy process, environmental awareness + environmental policy process, environmental policy process + minorities, African Americans, environmental policy process, Hispanics, community member attendance + environmental policy process, satisfaction, response rate, federal registry, transparency in government agencies, information dissemination, environmental rulemaking, community satisfaction, environmental racism, environmental justic*e, *air pollution, respiratory disease, cardiovascular disease, inequity, racial disparity,* and *theories*.

The scope of the literature review was the last 5 years and consisted of current peer-reviewed and seminal articles. The literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of social construction theory, public policy, policy design, policymaking, awareness, and messaging. The terms were researched in Walden University Library's Public Policy and Administration database under the subjects of public policy and public administration. The literature review includes secondary searches of peer-reviewed

articles. I also used Google as a search engine to locate dissertations, Georgia laws, and Dekalb County, Georgia Superior Court websites for background information for programs and regulations.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation that guided this study was social construction theory. Social construction theory originated from the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), who argued that social construction progresses over time and is built from interactions and communication. Berger and Luckmann further clarified that communication through everyday dialogue is the most powerful method to establish beliefs and thoughts, which become socially constructed.

Schneider and Ingram (1993) built on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory and introduced the target populations social construction concept. The central theoretical propositions are based on the social constructions of individuals, labeled as the target population, who receive benefits and burdens according to their social standing and political power (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Based on this concept, African Americans are the last to become aware of environmental actions and their impact; therefore, they are targets for locating hazardous sites in their communities. In the current qualitative case study, I explored the perceptions and experiences of African Americans residing in Stonecrest regarding the permitting process. I investigated the impact of policy design, permitting, policymaking, public participation, and exclusion from the process on the community.

Social construction involves stereotypes created by media, socialization, culture, history, and politics (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Social construction theory highlights how a specific group is constructed as the target population (Ingram et al., 2019). According to Schneider and Ingram (2019), the core rationale found in previous research indicated that social construction involves positive labels regarding a target population (e.g., retired and older individuals) or negative labels (e.g., welfare recipients, racial minority males, sex offenders). Labeling citizens is used in policy design to determine which group receives benefits and which shoulders burdens.

For African Americans in Stonecrest, social construction theory suggests that not all communities are treated equally, and evidence shows a difference in where hazardous sites are located (see Schneider & Ingram, 2019). The target population has been socially constructed with the powerful influence of decision makers shaping the agenda and policy design through embedded messages. In contrast, the positive group (business) receives benefits, and the negative group (racial minorities) receives burdens (see Schneider & Ingram, 2019). The messages cause communities labeled as unfavorable to lose hope, creating a negative generational attitude toward public participation, believing it is not worthwhile (Schneider & Ingram, 2019).

Policymakers develop policies with messages regarding government responsibility, what groups are deserving, and what participation patterns are appropriate in a democratic society (Schneider & Ingram, 2019). According to Schneider and Ingram (2019), some policymakers view racial minorities as oppressed and deserving of benefits; others view them as powerful special interest groups and entities that do not deserve

government benefits. The rich and powerful group finds ways to ensure their interests are prioritized on legislative agendas with the capacity to define their construction and fight to refrain from being labeled negative (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 2019). Target populations include (a) the powerful and positively constructed as the advantaged group, (b) the powerful and negatively constructed as contenders, (c) the powerless and positively constructed as dependents, (d) and the powerless and negatively constructed as deviants (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

New policies are built onto those that are older and more deeply rooted; these are challenging to change and become engrained in laws, administrative guidance, and everyday decision makers' practices (Pierce et al., 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 2019). Politicians and decision makers who make laws and guidelines are empowered to benefit the positive groups because they are constructed as deserving, and decision makers assume there will be no retaliation from the powerless, who are defined as negative (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 2019). The socially constructed target population is essential from a political perspective because politicians can build their base using policies that benefit the positive and punish the negative (Ingram et al., 2019; Schneider & Ingram, 2019). Benefits continue to be distributed to positive groups (e.g., powerful, well-regarded), which are oversubscribed (Ingram et al., 2019; Schneider & Ingram, 2019). When policymakers can provide benefits to the negative group (e.g., drug addicts, criminals), they also find a way to include the positive group, even when it is illogical (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 2019). Policies for contenders (e.g., racial minorities, cultural elites) are concealed by policymakers who use complex and convoluted

processes because they fear their political careers will be jeopardized (Ingram et al., 2019; Schneider & Ingram, 2019). Policy changes stall when the public complains benefits are given to the negative group (Ingram et al., 2019; Schneider & Ingram, 2019). Schneider et al. (2014) defined the target population as the group that receives benefits and burdens through various elements of public policy to achieve a public purpose.

Social construction theory had been applied in ways similar to the current study. Using social construction as a lens, Nicholson-Crotty and Nicholson-Crotty (2004) studied inmate health as a public health issue, developing a concise multistage approach to understanding the problem. The researchers concluded that socially constructed criminals are a powerful predictor of spending on inmate health. Therefore, states do not adjust health care policies to address HIV, AIDS, and tuberculosis. According to Nicholson-Crotty and Nicholson-Crotty, empirical evidence points to social construction's critical role in the policy process. Policy decisions are made from the perception of policymakers of the target group instead of the need for fiscal capacity. Nicholson-Crotty and Nicholson-Crotty added to social construction theory the idea that the powerless and negatively perceived target populations receive few benefits in the decision-making process.

Shanahan et al. (2018) applied social construction theory in an obesity study to test the power of narrative, an empirical approach under the narrative policy framework. According to Schneider and Ingram's (1993) target population framework, the Shanahan et al. study was a controlled subject experiment and examined individual attitudes toward obesity. Two-hundred and fifty-six participants were randomly selected and assigned to

one of the four experimental conditions (advantaged, contenders, dependent, and deviant). A between-subject design was used to isolate individual effects and relate the different treatments. The results indicated that certain narratives could influence perceptions of policy on target populations as well as solutions.

Flores-Landeros et al. (2021) used a social construction framework to determine a relationship between air pollution levels and multiple groups in California's Central Valley cities. The focus was on outcomes using inferential statistics instead of the regularly used qualitative approach. The researchers identified the target population from seven groups and one or more from each category, including water and air quality and hydroclimatic hazards (drought and flood), specifically environmental outcomes. Their findings indicated no relationship between air pollution levels in the various cities of the Central Valley and the social construction of populations within those cities.

Martinez et al. (2017) applied social construction theory in a study on how to help school counselors and trainees work more effectively with African American and Latina/o students in urban schools. Martinez et al. used a narrative framework with social construction theory to understand, connect, and build relationships with students. Martinez et al. concluded that a clearer understanding of the cultural, historical, and social contexts of working with students in an urban school would help counselors make a difference in a child's life.

Wagner and Morris (2018) applied social construction theory in their study in which students were given two assignments. In the first assignment, students placed specified target groups into Schneider and Ingram's social construction political power

matrix. In the second task, students used media data to populate the matrix. Using social construction theory, teachers taught students about the political and normative facets of public analysis and closed the policy debates about fairness, deservedness, and values, giving the students a better appreciation and practice.

Hananel (2018) applied social construction theory to landlords, lenders, borrowers, and tenants to understand how stigmatization becomes internalized in the policymaking process and how the construct of images has influenced policy agenda. Social construction theory as well as policy design have created a better understanding of the laws of racial segregation and housing discrimination (Sidney, 2001; Trochmann, 2021). In addition, social structure has been applied to homeownership policy and the design of low-income homeownership guidelines (Drew, 2013; S. P. Taylor, 2018)

Social construction establishes who benefits from early childhood subsidies and reinforces stereotypes that enable the powerful and advantaged to have benefits and those considered as negative to be undeserving and burdened, having minimum resources (Barigozzi et al., 2020; Hynes & Hayes, 2011). Those with AIDS have been socially constructed as either innocent or guilty in the public discourse, influencing how public policies are designed and justified. Fonseca et al. (2020) used social construction theory to analyze the social problems associated with AIDS and addiction to make recommendations for interventions. Valcore and Dodge (2019) applied social construction theory in a case study to assess the evolution of a prison's AIDS policy. Women taking responsibility for their health was highlighted in a study through the lens of social construction theory (Cameron et al., 2018). The theory has also been applied to

understand the social meanings of amphetamine use and the social constructions of users (Gstrein, 2018; Levin, 2018; McKenna, 2011).

Gaynor (2018) used a social construction lens to examine crime and criminality, including (a) state-sanctioned oppression that marginalizes underserved populations and socially stigmatized groups; (b) exploitation through labor practices; (c) a population that does not identify as White, heterosexual, and cisgender; (d) the cultural imperialism classified as stereotyped; (e) a crime motivated by race and sexual orientation; and (f) an unethical administration influenced by negative social construction, shaping thoughts and behaviors. Gaynor's findings indicated how negative social constructions mold administrative actions so that race, gender, and sexual orientation are criminalized. This validates how those identifying as people of color are burdened by public actors' unjust and oppressive actions.

Social construction theory has been applied in research on public health, prisons, homeownership, education, air pollution, and environmental policies. Social construction theory has also been applied to endangered species, with plants, birds, mammals, and fish considered more positive than reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, and microorganisms. Social construction theory was used to understand why some species benefited disproportionately from the Endangered Species Act and the development of political strategies for conservation purposes (Czech et al., 1998; DeMello, 2021).

The rationale for social construction theory is based on positive or negative connotations and public policy. Socially constructed beliefs influence policy agendas and are the rationale that validates policy choices. The policy is embedded with these

connotations and sends a message to citizens, which affects their orientation and participation. The policy design that is socially constructed for the target population often deliberately fails its normal purpose to solve public problems, support institutions of democracy, and promote equal citizenship, and instead prolongs injustice (Sabatier & Weible, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 2019).

The social construct of a target population, specifically African Americans, is negatively labeled as unworthy, underserving, and a burden on society's general welfare (Sabatier & Weible, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 2019). The positive is categorized as worthy, deserving, and contributing to the general welfare. In other words, the positive is admired and favored. Public policy language takes on a tone that indicates that those who are positively constructed are good, hardworking, smart, loyal, disciplined, generous, caring, respectful, and creative. In contrast, negative social construction is the opposite; people are labeled as immoral, greedy, looking for a handout, lazy, disrespectful, and treated as unhuman (Sabatier & Weible, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 2019). An application of social construction theory is the proposition that African American communities are selected first for housing hazardous sites. Public policy sends a signal that has been engrained in laws, administrative guidance, programs, and decision-making processes.

Social construction theory served as the lens to examine GEPD's efforts to include or exclude and encourage or discourage public participation in African American communities. My research was built to explore the GEPD's environmental decision-making process, how the process impacted the African American community of

Stonecrest, how GEPD can effectively inform African American communities of environmental actions, and the lack of outreach that prevents interactions. The study highlighted environmental awareness and attitudes toward public participation and whether GEPD encourages it.

Social construction theory relates to the present study because it allows exploration as to how and why the advantaged group—considered positive, wealthy, and powerful—receive benefits and the powerless do not. On the other hand, the disadvantaged group, labeled as shiftless, lazy, and often believed to be minorities, has no power (Sabatier & Weible, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 2019). Social construction theory builds on existing theory to show that public policy negatively constructs target populations, which are marginalized, and discourages public participation. Using social construction theory as a lens helped me interpret the data to answer the research question regarding the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of African American homeowners living in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020 concerning how GEPD addresses community concerns in the decision-making process before hazardous waste site permits are issued. Social construction theory can be used to demonstrate how policy design influences the treatment of the target population, the role of the powerful in this process, and its effect on politics and democracy (Pierce et al., 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 2019).

Target populations labeled as negative have little power and depend on the government to ensure their well-being. The phenomenon is that public policy is designed to message to the constructed target population what the government should do and how

citizens might be treated (Schneider & Ingram, 2007). Benefits and burdens are influenced by political power, which is considered positive. Based on their beliefs, the negative target population feels they do not deserve benefits. The negative target population is defined as "groups actually chosen to receive benefits and burdens through the various elements of policy design" (Sabatier, 2007, p. 95). As a result of this ideology, the negative target population is burdened or punished through policies that are disproportionately distributed, resulting in withdrawal from public participation (Schneider & Ingram, 2007, 2019). Various elements in the policy's design contribute to the disparities in environmental permitting as it relates to the negative target population (see Schneider et al., 2014).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

The literature review is a synthesis of the research on the phenomenon of policy design and its impact and influence on the GEPD decision-making process, public policymaking and design, public participation, environmental awareness, and messaging. I conducted the literature review to understand the impact and challenges African American communities face when left out of the environmental permitting process and, as a result, the location of hazardous sites and other unwanted facilities in their neighborhoods.

Policy Design

Birungi and Colbourn (2019) researched how political processes influenced policy design regarding an AIDS target population. They confirmed social construction theory's prediction and patterns in policy benefits and burdens distribution. Health care

programs for AIDs citizens were influenced by finance policy design reform and to promote a political agenda. Due to the decline in external funding, the challenge for AIDs patients was how to maintain the program. Birungi and Colbourn recommended a reformed health care policy financing model. However, the researchers could not conclude which target population would prevail when more than one group was targeted, such as members of the LGBTQ community or health care workers.

For programs to be effective in water conservation policy design, local stakeholders must be included in the planning and implementation phases (O'Connell & Billingsley, 2020). O'Connell and Billingsley (2020) interviewed farmers and showed the importance of understanding the community, practices, history, and beliefs of stakeholders when designing policy regarding water quality. Findings indicated that farmers in the area had local knowledge of the situation and should be more than consultants and play a role in policy design.

Williams (2020) indicated that the male African American public workforce lacked adequate employment-based policies and programs. Williams studied the perceptions of public workforce employment professionals who helped recipients of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act programs. More positive results were achieved when the workforce sought jobs independently instead of through a mock interview preparation workshop. Being autonomous created an interest in the process and a meaningful relationship between managers and recipients when both parties' job search was independent. Williams recommended allocating more resources to independent programs and technology to develop autonomy to sustain meaningful employment.

Low-income housing is a problem nationwide, especially in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Leonard's (2018) research focused on policy design and noted that low-income housing was lacking due to program barriers and elected officials' policies and attitudes. Obstacles to this type of housing in Martha's Vineyard included rentals that were unavailable year-round because of winter and summer month demands and a policy that contributed to the low-income housing inventory. Benefits and burdens were influenced by political power, which was considered positive, and the belief that the negative target populations did not deserve benefits.

The phenomenon of policy design has been addressed in previous research, including education, health care, welfare, employment, environmental decision making, and housing. Most researchers concluded that policy design has contributed to the target population receiving either benefits or burdens. Previous studies were conducted in various disciplines impacting all areas of African American lives. My research benefited from this framework, adding to the literature by examining how GEPD's environmental policy design contributed to the distribution of burdens or benefits to its target population, discovering ways to improve and include all its citizens. Using a qualitative case study, I explored and provided a better understanding of how African American residents living in Stonecrest felt about being excluded from the GEPD decision-making process before a decision is made to grant the permit.

Environmental public participation began with the NEPA, which was created in 1970 (Daniels et al., 2021; Wikle, 2020). Researchers have studied environmental public participation through various lenses using different approaches. Wikle (2020) found the

NEPA guidelines were often applied inconsistently, and it does not have the capacity to prevent agencies from implementing irresponsible actions. Daniels et al. (2021) confirmed that the environmental impact assessment of the NEPA's strengths included being well-established worldwide; however, its weakness was its entrenched professional bureaucracy perspectives. There are threats to the NEPA framework, which dictates public participation in government decision making Daniels et al., 2021). Developers speed up the environmental process for financial gain; this fast approach is a threat to the environment, and, in some cases, governments have accepted this as the standard. The threat may increase as concerns for climate change grow and communities recognize the importance of public participation regarding environmental decisions.

Policy design can encourage or discourage public participation. According to Flynn (2021), public administrators are tasked with public policy formation and implementation and have varying degrees of discretion (Flynn, 2021). Public administrators (a) decide changes to the policy, (b) what government resources are allocated to the policy, (c) which populations will receive program benefits and which will not, (d) determine the operations of the program, (e) and which agents will have operational responsibilities (Flynn, 2021). Based on Flynn's findings, policy design rests with the policy architects and elected officials and can reflect their personal and group values, priorities, and beliefs.

According to a study by Bell (2020), policy design support for tuition-free college occurred when the design was universal and not based on students' families making less than $50,000 a year. When examining affordable housing and policy design, DeBray

(2021) found that socially constructed images, as well as tenants, lenders, and landlords, influenced policy agenda according to social construction theory. Debray also suggested that the media and policymakers have constructed images and reflected popular press images of different target populations.

Ellis and Faricy (2020) examined the role of a policy delivery mechanism concerning tax expenditures, such as the earned income tax credit, labeled positive or deserving, and a monthly welfare check, categorized as negative. Findings suggested that the tax code was perceived as deserving and less driven by prejudices (Ellis & Faricy, 2020). Shiigi (2018) researched a proposal to increase public participation in the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act through public notice. Shiigi examined timeline requirements and existing procedures for community engagement or intervention in addressing environmental hazards released to the public. Findings indicated that community members were not aware of the hazardous conditions in their community until it was too late due to inadequate public notice. Shiigi's recommendation was for an amendment that required notifications to be all-inclusive and published through television, the internet, and mail.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used to study public participation and communication using social media in China. Zhao et al. (2018) examined the planning process of a network society in urban planning using elite groups and those with internet access. Planning a bus route using social media indicated that most citizens were excluded from participating (did not have internet) and were not actual users of the route. Rollason et al. (2018) examined how communities interacted at

the local level to determine how participation was translated into local practices. Rollason et al. concluded that more work was needed to achieve involvement in activities and recommended moving away from low-power process models that exclude local knowledge as unscientific and incapable of participating in the decision-making process.

Teschner and Holley (2021) found that local stakeholders felt their input was not considered, their voices were unheard, and they were frustrated when publicly participating in the NEPA process. In a study by Jollymore et al. (2018), consultation was used to explore public participation to evaluate outcomes and processes with limitations on classification. The counting process for submitters did not capture the diversity of the participants and the significant variability in the number of participant input submissions per category from community groups. Findings indicated barriers to successful participation, statistical differences between nonindustry and industry groups, and unequal participation, which influenced policymaking.

Gonzalez (2018) explored meaningful participation for local citizens to report environmental pollution incidents by examining community engagement, specifically, industry accessibility for locals and its impact on their ability and willingness to become involved. Findings showed that strong, resolute citizens or community connections must be developed or in place, and there must be a willingness to act, especially if there are widespread suppressors who are not concerned with environmental protection or oil companies operating below standard in opposition to those with no voice (Gonzalez, 2018).

Kroll et al. (2019) studied spillover effects due to performance management reform that promoted decision maker openness to input resulting in citizen orientation to public participation. The researchers found performance management enhanced citizen participation. Because of the many types of performance management and participation tools, the measurements concerning planning and customer satisfaction could not capture the full diversity of these practices. For example, participation and performance management tools might not work together to create customer orientation. More research is needed to examine how spillover affects customer orientation to participate.

Brown et al. (2017) studied African American women using civic engagement in a quasi-experimental pre- and poststudy design. The researchers examined improvement in heart health and found a positive result for the preliminary effectiveness of behavior change; however, the lack of comparison groups and sample size limited the study. In a mixed method study, Tataw and Ekundayo (2017) used a combination of focus groups, survey research, and community engagement to research prostate cancer among marginalized African American communities in the United States. They examined screening services as a factor for cancer prevention planning. The quantitative findings showed self-efficacy variables, such as knowledge types and attitudes, as predictors of screening services utilization; the qualitative themes included symptoms, risk factors, causes, and heredity. The disadvantage of this type of community engagement was that members did not take advantage of services in unwelcoming environments or seek information through hostile educational channels. Tataw and Ekundayo recommended alternatives, such as churches, in community health planning efforts.

Luque et al. (2015) conducted a feasibility study of community engagement utilizing barbershops in African American communities to examine prostate cancer and other health issues, including disparities that highlighted the importance of public participation. Barbers were interviewed for their willingness to participate in the intervention and become health advisors. Limitations of the study were that the barbershops and the towns where they were located were not randomly selected and could not be generalized to other areas where trust in the community was negative (Luque et al., 2015). Other researchers have explored barbershops and hair salons as public participation platforms, with findings indicating that health promotion interventions were a positive method for accomplishing cancer screening and managing hypertension and diabetes in African American communities that otherwise would go unchecked (Palmer et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2018)

Churches have a role in shaping their members' attitudes and promoting public participation. Ramirez et al. (2021) studied a church congregation in southwest Philadelphia to promote good health for African Americans. Findings indicated the need to train more underrepresented racial minority health care practitioners to address disparities and the various ways racism has been embedded into society. This same study highlighted the importance of public participation and how churches can be a source of this, especially for hard-to-reach members. Hewitt et al. (2018) looked at the engagement of church members to examine environmental behavior, specifically on climate change. The researchers determined that the relationships depended on the strength of religious

beliefs. According to Hewitt et al., a relationship exists between knowledge of protecting the environment and religious beliefs, resulting in a greater concern for the environment.

Hoang (2021) conducted a quantitative case study using 1160 questionnaires sent to citizens in Malaysia regarding their perceptions of citizens and public servants in local government. Findings indicated an inadequacy of public participation in programs, a lack of response to complaints, and a slow reaction in making basic repairs to infrastructure. Scholarship was also absent concerning racial and ethnic differences in public meetings. Hoang recommended that researchers examine how often respondents attend and speak publicly at the scoping meetings held to allow the public and local community the opportunity to offer comments or ask questions regarding proposed projects.

Atencio et al. (2022) examined public participation in Tribal government and consultation to address the impact of federal projects. The results confirmed that federal statutes, such as the NEPA and the National Historic Preservation Act, did not guarantee meaningful public participation and Tribal consultation or environmental justice. Atencio et al. recommended that input from the poorly served needed to be heard and the policy revised.

Researchers have reviewed the literature to examine public administrators and e-participation and discovered administrators were deficient in technology and organizational change. E-participation initiatives may fail due to barriers put up by public administrations (Steinbach et al., 2019; Toots, 2019). Attitude was the predictor of the public participation process as it related to nuclear research installations in a study by Hoti et al. (2021). Findings showed that community participants were enthusiastic about

being informed, wanted to participate in focus group discussions, and confirmed that the more extensive a person's knowledge, the better they were prepared to engage. Hoti et al. explored perceived behavior control and how including self-efficacy might improve the model.

Lappas et al. (2018) used content analysis to examine enabling citizen participation in Gov 2.0, a collaborative technology at the heart of Web 2.0, to solve shared problems by investigating citizen empowerment to achieve desired outcomes. This study was conducted in an organizational setting with a direct connection to a government context, which focused on the positive outcome of empowerment. Such practices could have negative outcomes, and Lappas et al. recommended exploring citizen empowerment in other disciplines.

Pearson et al. (2018) examined policy design for Latinos and environmental justice. Public perceptions have created barriers to addressing longstanding environmental disparities. Pearson et al. found that people of color expressed more concern for the environment than Whites. Policymakers have underestimated the environmental concerns of people of color and those with low incomes with the perception that people of color's environmental concerns were lower than those of Whites and the wealthy. According to Pearson et al., environmental compliance decreased in communities when there was significant Latino representation in the legislature. In other words, policies designed for environmental protection regarding people of color have been written in such a way that enforcement is unequally applied.

Previous policy design used to create home ownership was instrumental in helping develop policies for low-income target populations but failed to provide households with guidance on maintaining their homes (Okkola & Brunelle, 2018). This type of policy was designed with the assumption that economic benefits associated with homeownership would automatically transfer to low-income households once approved by the lending industry (Okkola & Brunelle, 2018). Soni et al. (2022) found that policy design for welfare programs was racially unequal and biased against certain disadvantaged groups. Using the lens of social construction and critical race theories, Soni et al. suggested that social welfare was racially discriminatory, and policies have a long legacy of excluding or oppressing African Americans, which are engrained in them.

Bell (2021) examined policy design in a study concerning the impact of Affirmative Action on socially constructed target populations. Findings suggested the policy design framed preferences based on beliefs of the deservingness of target population, similar to political leaders. Also, results demonstrated that public opinion was based on ideology and the racial or ethnic group's identity (Bell, 2021). Joseph (2018) also examined policy design for welfare and self-sufficient individuals and determined it has been set up to fail and not designed to help people experiencing poverty.

The Arkansas Lottery Scholarship Act is another example of policy design where burdens are placed on those with low incomes and gambling addictions (Copeland & Mamiseishvili, 2017). There were four target groups constructed in the policy design: higher education students, low-income individuals (dependents), retail vendors (contenders), and gambling addicts (deviants). The higher education students became the

advantaged group and benefitted because they received an education based on messaging at the school counselor level and other outreach programs that made the program more accessible and visible, such as scholarships. The higher education students benefitted from the low-income groups who played the lottery more than other groups. Copeland and Mamiseishvili confirmed that themes reinforced social construction theory and that policy design impacted the process. Duncheon (2020) examined policy design in the recruitment and selection practices for early entrants into college while in high school. The admission process was dictated by patterns that favored academically and privileged students and were based on beliefs of who was likely to succeed and more deserving, highlighting that reform was needed (Duncheon, 2020).

Stockman (2019) examined policy design to assess the impact of state immigration policy on immigrant communities concerning political engagement and child well-being. Findings showed that immigration policies had the most significant effect in Hispanic communities, followed by those identified as Asian; however, there was little effect on African Americans. There was a pattern across generations concerning state immigration, especially among children of Hispanic immigrants. Stockman's study highlighted the vital role of public participation in policymaking.

In another study by Ledford (2018) on welfare recipients and drug testing policy design, findings indicated institutional racism and public bias influenced policymakers in the proposal stage. Even though several states continue to develop drug testing policies for welfare recipients at a high cost, the results have been uncertain. In other words, the price might outweigh the benefit. There was no conclusive evidence regarding how many

individuals did not sign up due to drug testing requirements or if the policy deterred individuals from using drugs (Ledford, 2018).

Policy design has been explored in African American fathers' experiences of alienation from their children due to the Texas Family Code (Thomas, 2022). Thomas (2022) examined policy design regarding the Code's possession order's impact on the father-child relationship. Nine themes were developed from this study, indicating a positive father-child relationship, father standard legal rights, child support system biases and unfair treatment of the father, lack of understanding, equal rights for fathers, the deadbeat label, wanting more time with children, updating child support policies, and limited family structure.

Using a mixed-method approach, May and Ross (2018) examined whether the web platform operated by nongovernmental organizations provided a new avenue to widen community engagement. The results showed that this approach only attracted participants who had already been engaged and that interactions between community members mattered. May and Ross recommended being open to diversity because it is unknown who will contribute, and a simple and user-friendly platform removes as much complexity as possible.

Social construction theory points to the concepts of the GEPD decision-making process, public policymaking and design, public participation, environmental awareness, and messaging. Research has indicated that public participation and community engagement are influenced by awareness. Previous research has also demonstrated social construction takes on positive (e.g., retired and older individuals) or negative (e.g.,

welfare recipients, racial minority males, sex offenders) labels (Schneider & Ingram, 2019). The labeling of citizens has been used in policy design to determine which group receives benefits and which shoulders burdens (Schneider & Ingram, 2019).

Georgia Environmental Protection Division's Decision-Making Process

The EPD is part of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, a state agency responsible for protecting air, land, and water resources under the authority of state and federal environmental statutes. These laws regulate public and private facilities regarding air quality and others areas. The GEPD issues and enforces all state permits in these areas and has full delegation for federal environmental permits except Section 404, Wetlands. (EPD, 2022a).

The GEPD administers 26 state environmental laws and is responsible for programs under four federal acts: the Clean Air Act, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Clean Water Act. GEPD also develops and enforces rules based on the OCGA statutes (Determination of Adverse Effect on Quality of Environment, 1982/2019). The GEPD's website references links to existing regulations, their corresponding laws or statutory authorizations, and proposed rules. Information on proposed rules remains on this page for at least 60 days after final action by the Board of Natural Resources.

GEPD lacks the necessary tools to address environmental justice issues (Determination of Adverse Effect on Quality of Environment, 1982/2019). If an entity wants to build a hazardous waste site in a community, there are no guidelines or laws governing the demographics or the economic burdens of residents before a permit is

granted. Furthermore, there is no meaningful way for African Americans to receive notification to participate and provide input in the permit decision-making process. In other words, African Americans cannot participate in the decision-making process without awareness of the proposed government action.

Forty-five percent of the state of Georgia's population consists of racial and ethnic minorities, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021). Due to its notification methods, GEPD's public participation process is noninclusive regarding environmental permitting decisions. African Americans may receive a notice of environmental activities if their email address is registered on GEPD's website. The GEPD announces public hearings and explains the protocols required to provide comments, statements, or viewpoints, orally or in writing through email. Besides email, GEPD's website links to public announcements regarding specific permits, determinations, stakeholder meetings, and other activities (see EPD, 2022b). Proposed rule public notices are voted on by the Department of Natural Resources regarding environmental regulations (see EPD, 2022d). A separate GEPD website provides information about enforcement actions and public notices for proposed consent orders (see EPD, 2022c). GEPD protects air, land, and water resources based on state environmental statutes (EPD, 2022a). These statutes regulate air and water quality, hazardous water, water supply, solid waste, surface mining, and underground storage. All state permits for these areas are under GEPD's authority.

In addition, some permits or other activities have specific requirements. For example, certain permits must be posted in particular locations, such as newspapers or

legal organizations. Environmental covenants must be mailed to adjacent landowners before they are recorded on the deed. If a community member does not have access to a computer or electronic communication device with internet capability, there is no way to be notified of proposed government action in Georgia other than in the legal notice section of the local newspaper or legal organization. There is no other method of notification for GEPD's proposed government action. Getting African Americans to participate in decision-making activities is difficult to achieve (Wilson et al., 2019), and without a user-friendly approach to participation, communities will continue to deteriorate and attract undesirable industries.

Public Policymaking and Design

Public opinion sets the boundaries for policymaking (Fforde, 2019). Agencies have discretion in their policymaking through the Administrative Procedure Act, which has moved the process away from the public (Ruder & Woods, 2020; Sant'Ambrogio & Staszewski, 2018). Public administrators make and implement policy, manage programs, as well as shape, influence, and design its processes. (Boushey & McGrath, 2020; Starke, 2020). Boundaries are created by policies that target populations using old and new constructions that are engrained in images and messages in the details of policy design (Schneider & Ingram, 2019). Schneider and Ingram (2019) claimed policymaking is a political act with conflict designed to organize the public, resembling neoliberalism, and marginalizes the public's role in the policy process if kept in place. During the inquiry, public views are cherry-picked to support policy agendas and ignored when opposed, even when transparency efforts are attempted. Policy meetings where decisions are made

are not accessible to the public, and rules guiding the decisions are unknown. Policymaking aligns with industry instead of the public (Popiel, 2020; Searle & Legacy, 2021). Industry can participate and provide comments in the rulemaking process because of their expertise, while public input is mainly for political issues under consideration (D. A. Crow et al., 2017).

The group socially constructed as advantaged is oriented toward policy and politics if the government favors them. The advantaged group has been taught the importance of government, that policy is fair with beneficial outcomes, and that the payoff is significant if public officials are supported (Schneider & Ingram, 2019). Legislators usually support policies based on their beliefs, experiences, and religion (Arnon, 2018; Hogan, 2021). Public policy design has often been the result of concern regarding political risks and keeping the support base satisfied for leadership groups and institutions rather than solving citizens' problems (Head, 2019). Many actors shape public policy designs by defining problems and solutions that support their interests (Peters et al., 2018). The political actors must accept proposed solutions to problems before policies are designed and developed (Bali et al., 2019). Because public policy design relates to environmental policy, municipalities focus on amenities and services, whereas states concentrate on resources and risks (Lim, 2021).

Civil servants can initiate policy change by extending their agenda, especially when there is gridlock or political power is divided (Boushey & McGrath, 2020). State governments can implement rulemaking when gridlock or political power interferes with

policymaking. Other political actors, such as constituents, interest groups, or members of legislative committees, can lobby directly to solve problems.

Public Participation

Other than the voting booth, public participation is the most viable and democratic way for citizens to participate in government decision making (Stephan, 2005). Public participation and community engagement are used interchangeably in this current study. According to the EPA (2022), public participation is defined as "any process that directly engages the public in decision-making and gives full consideration to public input in making that decision" (para. 1). Public participation is practiced worldwide to address various policies, build relationships, and encourage communication and community involvement in the hope of obtaining a better outcome (Lane & Kent, 2018). M. Taylor and Kent (2014) expanded on this further and claimed there is already a relationship between organizations and stakeholders, with benefits for all. Community engagement usually refers to long-term relationships and is often seen as a two-way or multiway process where participants expect to have some type of influence in decisions (Ross et al., 2016). Community engagement is an excellent opportunity to build and maintain relationships.

Public participation in environmental issues is believed to be an afterthought or a form of demonstrating that all boxes have been checked, fulfilling a NEPA requirement before making decisions on actions such as permit approval (Rowe & Watermeyer, 2018). In other words, public participation should happen early in the planning process rather than later. Rowe and Watermeyer (2018) found there has been a lack of honesty in

promoting public participation, and when there is an opportunity to participate, input or rigorous evaluation has not been accepted. Various research has discovered that policymaking has failed to focus on the most vulnerable communities because of their constituents' interests inside and outside the government (Hopkins & Knaap, 2018; Woodruff, 2018).

Decision makers should accommodate diverse values from the community they serve, especially concerning their well-being and benefit (Bidwell & Schweizer, 2020; Liang et al., 2019). When the quality of decision making improves, the results are positive, and decisions are enhanced and accepted; therefore, social democracy increases when the public is involved (Abou-Zeid & Fujii, 2016; Bidwell, 2016; Bidwell & Schweizer, 2020; Perlaviciute, 2019). Public participation in decision-making is a prerequisite, especially regarding target populations, to promote effective outcomes (Tse et al., 2018). Berke et al. (2021) suggested expanding public participation through training, technical assistance, and regularly monitoring plans and implementation practices.

There is no public participation in environmental policymaking when there is no notification or awareness of what to engage in or how to be active in the process. For the community to engage with decision makers, a notice must be given identifying planned actions so that interested individuals are aware and can participate if they choose. A notice of action allows African American communities to become aware of environmental activities and offers an opportunity for involvement in the decision-making process, such as attending meetings or forums. Involvement allows the

community member to become environmentally aware of what might impact them. Good public participation indicates community awareness, which creates communications with the government (Gailmard & Patty, 2017; Lee et al., 2017).

The level of satisfaction is the indicator for determining GEPD's method of notifying community members to participate in meetings for government proposed action. Satisfaction is defined as the percentage of community members that receive notification of government-proposed environmental action meetings. African American citizens have not been allowed to engage in environmental policymaking until a decision has been made and becomes controversial. Communities cannot participate in environmental policymaking when there is no messaging. Schneider and Ingram (2019) suggested benefits and burdens are distributed through various elements of policy design to achieve a public purpose.

Environmental Awareness

Environmental awareness should not be used to manipulate the community or rectify existing power relationships that continue to marginalize those at risk. Neither should environmental awareness be a condition for public participation (Kedzior, 2017). Instead, environmental awareness is knowledge that can help a community understand the complex business of environmental decision making. Environmental awareness is defined as knowing the impact of human behavior on the environment and an understanding and awareness of the environment and its related issues (Ianniello et al., 2019; Rahmani et al., 2021). Environmental awareness has been used to assess college students' knowledge of the environment in urban areas. Ningrum and Herdiansyah (2018)

found that female students were more aware of the environment than their male counterparts. Findings showed no relationship between environmental awareness and the level of education; however, there was a positive relationship between gender, education, and place of residence.

Although most people have a general understanding of environmental issues, they lack knowledge of how the decision-making process works, understand the environmental laws that protect them, and are unaware of publicized information regarding environmental programs (Li et al., 2017). Community members must be cognizant of an environmental activity or action so that public participation can occur. According to Rahmani et al. (2021), "Public awareness of environmental protection is the ability to be aware of the changes that take place in the environment, including the world around us, the relationship between human behavior, and the quality of the environment" (p. 1). On the other hand, environmental awareness is when an individual understands environmental quality, human activities, environmental behavior, perceptions, and attitudes (Rahmani et al., 2021).

Du et al. (2018) conducted a water conservation study in China and found that attitude was the factor that influenced environmental awareness rather than demographics. Findings showed the need for environmental awareness to better inform the community of policies and activities impacting their well-being (Du et al., 2018). According to MacPhail et al. (2020), the way to measure environmental awareness is by counting and tracking community members' attendance at public or scoping meetings for further evaluation or inquiry to discover their experiences. Awareness alone is not

enough; public participation should include having a positive attitude and a willingness to participate in improvement activities for a healthy environment (Jo & Nabatchi, 2021).

According to Gustria and Fauzi (2019), there is a need for an environmental framework that is integrated into various school curricula. Their research consisted of three survey-designed questionnaires to measure views on environmental issues and evaluate them along with the attitudes of secondary school students. Environmental perspectives can easily be included in schools' curricula. The lack of students' knowledge regarding environmental issues pointed to family background, gender, age, and socioeconomic status.

Messaging

With awareness comes messaging. Primary obstacles to public participation are information deficiencies and the lack of equality (Ianniello et al., 2019). Language is etched in social situations and reinforces specific ways of thinking; if there is not a vision for justice and a method for citizens to be included in the decision-making process, democracy will be a cover for exploitation and domination (K. Crow et al., 2021; Hermansson, 2019). Inequality is structurally connected to a political culture saturated with symbols of equality through public awareness and partisanship (Edelman, 1988). Adequate communication of government-proposed actions should be investigated to determine if efforts have been made to include communities impacted by environmental activities in the decision-making process. According to K. Crow et al. (2021), Environmental communication to mean the pragmatic and constitutive vehicle for our understanding of the environment as well as our relationships to the natural world; it is

the symbolic medium that we use in constructing environmental problems and in negotiating society's different responses to them. (p. 19)

Limited communication of government-proposed action could be the reason African American communities are burdened with hazardous sites, with polluting industries creating environmental degradation (Yetano & Royo, 2017). The process of inviting African Americans to participate in meetings needs improvement, which includes publishing government-proposed actions in a manner that is accessible to all and creating an awareness of environmental activities (Yetano & Royo, 2017).

Rosenbloom and Fisk (2017) asserted that notices should be placed in areas familiar to the community and not in small print in legal sections of local newspapers. Community members have the right to know (transparency), the right to comment (direct participation), and the right of standing (accountability). These are associated with a written request for information, public hearings testimony, written comment letters, and legal action. Furthermore, environmental communication must be more accessible and started early in the process, and environmental protection language should be usable (K. Crow et al., 2021). Proposed government action should be posted on agencies' websites and other mediums for maximization (Bonson et al., 2017).

A more precisely designed public participation format improves inclusiveness, resulting in better involvement (Hong, 2015). Due to the digital divide, African Americans might not be aware of the government's proposed action. The digital divide is not recent, but was highlighted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, as African Americans lack access to information (Frank, 2020). For example, community members

had no access to the internet to participate in environmental justice issues concerning the proposed Natural Gas Power Plant project in Charles City County, Virginia (Soraghan, 2020). The public participation process should offer meaningful opportunities that have an influence on decision-making outcomes (Nabatchi et al., 2018; Quick & Bryson, 2022; Wilson et al., 2019).

Studies have indicated policy designs are developed to target populations negatively or positively to determine which groups are awarded benefits or saddled with burdens. Studies have also shown that policy design is influenced by agendas set by politicians and powerful individuals labeled as positive. Positive groups are those in elected offices with connections to wealthy stakeholders who set agendas. African Americans are labeled negatively due to their powerless voices and other elements outlined by Ingram et al. (2019). Policy design usually frames African Americans as the negative target population who bear burdens in policies, such as welfare, housing (Leonard, 2018), and education (Bell, 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

The major themes in the literature are policy design, the GEPD decision-making process, public policymaking and design, public participation, environmental awareness, and messaging. What was not known was how African American homeowners in Stonecrest felt about GEPD's environmental permitting process, which has been designed so that decisions can be made without their input and knowledge. My study contributed to the field of public administration for several reasons. First, no research had been done to examine if the methods used to announce GEPD decision making for environmental

action impacted African Americans communities. My research helped fill the gap by determining if GEPD's decision-making processes were all-inclusive from the perceptions and experiences of the African American homeowners in Stonecrest. Second, this research could assist the EPA in outlining its future environmental justice plans that some studies found are needed (see Alexander et al., 2021; Banzhaf et al., 2019; Heguehag, 2019; Henderson & Wells, 2021). This research was vital because it highlighted and addressed hazardous environmental conditions that burden racial minority communities (see Bullard, 2019; Donley et al., 2022; Frickel & Elliott, 2018; B. L. Johnson, 2020; Richter, 2018; Smith & Blowers, 2021). Third, my study's findings showed the necessity to save the culture and improve the health and living conditions where African Americans live, work, and play. Fourth, my study supported deficiencies regarding environmental policymaking, public health, crime, and social well-being and is a distinctive contribution to the scholarly literature. Finally, the results of my study could be used to provide the framework that creates new attitudes toward environmental inequality and promote social change in all communities.

The reviewed literature demonstrated that policy design and public participation had been a topic of concern to many researchers. Scholars have been interested in uncovering the impact that environmental awareness and messaging have on public participation in at-risk communities. Researchers have studied awareness in education, health, and the environment. The literature did not address Georgia's government agencies' roles and efforts to encourage public participation in their environmental decision-making process. In Chapter 3, I discuss the study's research design and

rationale, my role as the researcher, and the methodology that helped close the gap in the literature.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand how African American residents living in Stonecrest felt about the hazardous waste site being placed in their community without an opportunity to provide input into the GEPD decision-making process before a decision is made to grant permits. In this chapter, I detail the study's research design, rationale, and my role as the researcher. I discuss the methodology, including participant selection logic, instrumentation, and procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. I provide a data analysis plan and address any issues of trustworthiness.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question guiding this study was the following: What are the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of African American homeowners living in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020 concerning how GEPD addresses community concerns in the decision-making process before hazardous waste site permits are issued? Yin (2018) suggested that a case study is preferred when answering "how" and "why" questions and is ideal for handling a variety of data, such as interviews, documents, direct observation, and artifacts. Yin stated that a case study is an empirical method used to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in the real world when the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined and understood. Creswell and Poth (2017) recognized the strengths of the case study approach when investigating an unknown phenomenon that

can be studied in its natural setting; the case study approach allows for more meaningful questions regarding why rather than what and how, and early exploratory investigations when there are unknown variables.

Creswell (2007) described the case study approach as ideal for developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases. The case study approach also provides a deeper understanding through analysis of data collected from interviews, observations, and documents. A case study involves an issue or problem investigated through one or more data sources within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). The bounded system is recommended to illustrate the issue as an instrumental case study (Stakes, 1995). The scope of the current case study was limited to Stonecrest, Georgia. The single case study approach allows for more in-depth knowledge and an opportunity to examine new relationships as well as old (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991).

Other qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology, ethnography, and narrative, were considered. Creswell (2007) emphasized that phenomenological studies are designed to explore what the participants have in common, reducing individual experiences within a phenomenon. Creswell described an ethnographic approach as one that examines shared patterns in units of analysis larger than 20 individuals and usually aligns with a grounded theory study. Finally, Creswell described the narrative approach as focusing on one person's experience, traditionally presented in story format.

A case study represents a phenomenon of interest (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018; Yin, 2018). Through my qualitative case study approach, I explored the experiences of residents living in Stonecrest who had encountered the GEPD decision-making

permitting process related to the Metro Green Recycling, LLC hazardous landfill. I selected a case study as the most suitable approach because it allowed for multiple sources for data collection, including public information, legislation, and residents' experiences while living in or near the setting of the hazardous landfill. Using a case study approach, I analyzed and developed an understanding of the phenomenon in a real-world environment. As described in Chapter 2, African American communities are often the first choice for placing hazardous waste sites and other unwanted environmental actions. However, existing research had not addressed how the GEPD decision-making process impacts Georgia's African American communities.

A case study is most useful when the main research question focuses on how and what, when there is little or no control over behavioral events, and when the focus of the study is contemporary as opposed to historical (Yin, 2018). Tracy (2019) expanded this concept and noted that a case study is an in-depth examination of one or a few instances of a natural phenomenon, such as an organization, program, or geographical location. Case studies are intensive, single units conducted in numerous fields, including political science (Apostol & Netedu, 2020; Yin, 2018), education (Alghizzawi et al., 2019; Klaassen, 2018; Yildirim et al., 2018), and health (Onie et al., 2018; Sommariva et al., 2018). According to Müller and Korsgaard (2018), a unit is a spatially bounded phenomenon observed at a single point in time or over delimited time. Yin (2018) found the fewer the cases, the better opportunity for more profound observation. Case study research provides an opportunity for a holistic view of the process (Yin, 2018). Theory or

conceptual categories guide the case study, and it is a way to gather information about an event or community to inform decisions, policymaking, or business practices (Yin, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to be transparent and reflexive in the research inquiry and avoid any conflict of interest. I did not have any personal or professional relationship with the potential participants. The potential for researcher bias could be perceived based on my background and knowledge of the permitting process. I currently work for the U.S. Department of the Interior and am responsible for protecting endangered species, historical properties, and Native Americans. I provided a climate of comfort for the participants by listening and allowing them to complete their thoughts without interruption. I managed bias by being transparent, inclusive, and gender neutral; choosing words carefully using a third person point of view; being open-minded; recognizing opinions; and having a positive attitude.

The names of the participants were not used to track the interviews; instead, I used alphanumeric codes. I advised each participant to retain their consent form for their records. I was the only person with access to data stored on my computer, recorder, and external storage device. I used Zoom's recording feature to record the interview if the participant agreed, which was also indicated on the consent form.

I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions in an unbiased manner, asking "how" instead of "why" questions to avoid creating a defensive participant response or generating speculation and opinion (see Yin, 2018). Asking nonthreatening questions increases rapport and helps to create an environment in which

participants may feel more comfortable and willing to share information (Yin, 2018). The interview questions all began with "how" or "what," recommended by Nathan et al. (2019), allowing the participants to freely expand on their experiences and perceptions.

Yin (2018) further advised minimizing the conversational nature of the interview because it may lead to a subtle reflexivity influence, a change or distinction too difficult to analyze or describe regarding feelings and reactions between the participant and the researcher. Yin noted that case study interviews should last no more than 45 minutes to gain in-depth information and limit the opportunity for reflexivity. Wadams and Park (2018) advised researchers to control their nonverbal communication to avoid influencing a participant's response based on their perception of the interviewer. Further, Yin advised the researcher to refrain from making moral statements in the interview.

My role as the researcher was to ensure safeguards to protect the participants' privacy and confidentiality, including names and other identifying information. I also informed the participants of these safeguards and key elements of the study's protocol. Keeping the safeguards in focus gave the participants assurance and a sense of trust.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study was African American homeowners residing in Stonecrest, Georgia, within zip codes 30038 and 30058, who purchased their homes before 2017. The participants must have resided in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020. Stonecrest became a city in 2017 and is located in the southeastern corner of Dekalb County, bordering Clayton, Fulton, Gwinnett, Henry, and Rockdale counties. The

population is 54,903 and is 94% African American, with a median household income of $49,865 and 44.6% homeownership (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The participants must also have been able to read and speak English. This study did not include residents outside of Stonecrest, other races or ethnic groups, or renters.

I used purposive and snowball sampling methods. Purposive sampling reflects intentional participant recruitment to more effectively obtain data sources familiar with the phenomenon of interest (Suri, 2011). This method was the most effective for the current qualitative case study because this type of participant provided firsthand knowledge of the research problem. I combined purposeful and snowball sampling to identify and invite potential participants meeting my study's inclusion criteria.

The participants could have changed their minds and withdrawn at any time during the study, including during the interviews. During the screening process and at the end of the interview, I asked the participants if they knew others who might have met the study criteria, were interested, and wanted to participate. I did not ask for a name but advised the participants to share my contact information to refer others who might have been eligible for the study. Snowball sampling is often used to connect with the hard-to-reach or hidden target populations (Andrews, 2019). Using snowball sampling allowed me to discover new sampling units and increase participant availability. This approach is ideal for expected low recruitment situations.

I asked each potential participant who contacted me in response to the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) or church letter (see Appendix B) specific questions located in the screening guide (see Appendix C). Eligibility was determined based on a "yes" response

to the screening questions. Also, during the screening process, I asked the potential participants if they were aware of others who might have an interest in the study and would like to participate.

I recruited eight community members who met the study's inclusion criteria; saturation was achieved after all interviews were completed. Sample size is determined after the data collected are saturated. According to Saunders et al. (2018), specifying how many participants are needed to understand a phenomenon is not logical. Many qualitative case study researchers use saturation as a guide (Aguboshim, 2021; Creswell, 2014; Kruth, 2015; Schäfer et al., 2014). Creswell (2007) recommended a sample size between four and 10 for case studies.

I contacted potential participants via a recruitment flyer posted on social media outlets such as Facebook and Nextdoor. The post included an overview of the case study and information for potential participants interested in contacting me. The flyer included the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, assurance of confidentially, my Walden email address, and my phone number. A church invitation letter was used to contact potential participants. The church letter was emailed to several churches with large memberships located in the study area for their media outlets to broadcast to possible interested participants.

After I received notice indicating a participant was interested in the study, I responded to the email or phone call to establish eligibility using the screening guide. Once eligibility and contact information were established, a consent form was emailed to the potential participant. I informed the participant that they would receive a consent

form to complete and return to me via email. The consent form provided information about the study, including the interview process (via Zoom), audio recording, voluntary nature, ability to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality assurance. The eligible participants returned their consent forms indicating “I consent” to my Walden email address. The consent form had a box to check indicating consent. Once the consent form was received, I contacted the participant to schedule a convenient time for the interview.

I recorded contact information on an Excel spreadsheet. The initial goal was to (a) make sure the potential participant met the criteria, (b) explain the purpose of the study, (c) inform the participant of the time it would take to complete the interview, (d) identify the benefits and risks of participating in the study, and (e) discuss the confidentiality of the data. Also, the initial email was an opportunity to establish rapport and create a relaxed environment. I ensured the participant knew that participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. I also discussed with them the time frame for the interview and reminded them to be in a quiet location with limited distractions. I shared with the potential participant that I am an African American residing in Georgia.

All eight eligible participants were interviewed. No participant changed their mind and exited the study. Some interview questions were listed on the consent form as suggested by Walden University. Each interview occurred during a one-time Zoom call once all participants were selected and scheduled. I advised each participant that a transcript of their responses would be shared with them for edits or for them to provide comments. Other information on the consent form included interview duration, the

possibility of conducting a follow-up interview, statements regarding confidentiality, and information on the ability to withdraw at any time or to reschedule if necessary.

Determining sample size in qualitative research is challenging (Hennink et al., 2019). Sample size is often determined by saturation. The sample size must be appropriate to accomplish the saturation of theory, themes, codes, data, and meaning. Saturation allows for the investigation of objective and individual evidence. Saturation is inductive and should remain flexible until themes are realized (Hennink et al., 2019). Saturation and sample size are established when the same themes are highlighted continuously from the interviews, no new data are revealed, and redundancy is obvious. There are no assessment standards for sample size for a qualitative study (Andrews, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Lowe et al., 2018; Malterud et al., 2016).

Instrumentation

I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix D) to conduct individual interviews via Zoom. I asked open-ended questions so participants could share their perspectives. The *City of Stonecrest, Georgia and Citizens for a Healthy and Safe Environment v. Metro Green Recycling Three, LLC, et al*. (2020) was the legal document used as a data source. This legal case represented the best source of data. The interview protocol offers more flexibility, can contribute to a higher participation rate, and is appropriate for in-depth probing (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Gubrium et al., 2012). Interviews are useful when the participant cannot be observed, allowing for more control over questioning (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2017). I used a semistructured

format to gather data sequentially to ensure all participants were asked the same questions in the same order.

Because the interview protocol assisted me in asking questions in the same order, there was no confusion regarding how the responses would used to determine the findings (see Andrews, 2019; Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2015). In semistructured interviews, the meaning of each question is equal for each participant. Components of the interview protocol included headings with date, time, representative code of the interviewee, and other information that will be captured in a log. The interview protocol also included procedures to be followed from one interview to the next, with an icebreaker question followed by 10 interview questions. I recorded feedback from the interviewee regarding what they said, with a space between the questions to ensure I noted the response. I kept a log to record the documents collected and noted primary or secondary materials for reliability and value or data sources (see Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2018).

Yin (2018) suggested the researcher should follow their own line of questioning, asking questions in a nonbiased manner, and record discussions (if possible) to decrease missing crucial information. However, recording should not be done if the participant is uncomfortable. Yin also recommended not using the recorder as a substitute for listening. In the current study, the selected participants received an email confirmation or phone call indicating the date and time of the interview. I recorded one interview at a time with each participant’s consent.

I developed the interview protocol based on recommendations from Yin (2018), Creswell (2014), and Rubin and Rubin (2005). I thoroughly understood the phenomenon being studied; asking good questions is required during data collection (Yin, 2018). The data collection instrument was developed to answer the research question regarding community members' experiences and perceptions of GEPD's permitting decision-making process.

The open-ended interview questions allowed the participants to describe their experiences and perceptions in detail. Every day lived experiences are best explained through qualitative interviews, which allow community members to express and expand upon their experiences and perceptions (see Döringer, 2021; Edwards & Holland, 2013; Nathan et al., 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Questions developed for the interviews were based on the key concepts discussed in Chapter 2, including policy design, the GEPD decision-making process, public policymaking and design, public participation, environmental awareness, and messaging. It was important to collect this data to understand the community members' experiences and perceptions of the GEPD decision-making process and whether messaging is sufficient or needs improvement.

In addition, the participants had the opportunity to confirm the narrative to me after the interview and after the transcripts were available with their responses and perspectives. I checked with each participant to inquire and clarify that their accounts were realistic and accurate by including their comments in the final narrative. This added credibility to the study because the participants had a chance to react to the data. Collaboration and investing time in the process meant the participants were involved in

the study, further adding credibility. A thick, detailed description of the study, the target population, and the community demonstrated how people felt about the subject, which may help the reader understand these experiences are real and credible. It also helps the reader apply the findings to similar settings or contexts.

I used triangulation to search the data for common themes, combining overlapping areas. I provided corroborating information discovered from interviews and court records. The narrative from the participants in the target community provided firsthand knowledge of their experiences with court records of the ligation process to validate the study. I disclosed my assumptions, beliefs, and biases that may have shaped the inquiry early in this study. Identifying biases and beliefs at the beginning of the process gave participants an understanding of their positions.

The data collection instrument was developed to answer the research question and the purpose of the study regarding community members' experiences and perceptions of the GEPD permitting process. The questions were developed in everyday language without academic jargon (see Nathan et al., 2019), which helped to make the participants comfortable in their responses. My basis for developing the interview protocol was to ask pertinent questions to help answer the research question by obtaining the community members' understanding, perceptions, and experiences of the phenomenon. Yin (2003, 2018) recommended asking good interview questions, interpreting the answers fairly, being a good listener, as well as striving to be adaptive and flexible. My committee chair and methodologist reviewed and analyzed the questions for appropriateness. The

interview protocol listed the open-ended questions asked using Zoom and was the primary data collection instrument.

Data Collection

A hazardous waste landfill was permitted in Stonecrest, Georgia, a predominantly African American community, within 18 months of its charter. The study specifically focused on homeowners residing in zip codes 30038 and 30058, where the data were collected between 2017 and 2020. Data also were drawn from the case of the *City of Stonecrest, Georgia, and Citizens for a Healthy and Safe Environment v. Metro Green Recycling Three, LLC, et al*. I was the sole researcher collecting data.

Data were collected from one interview with each participant, lasting no more than 45 minutes (see Yin, 2018). I conducted eight interviews over 2 months. Information was included on the consent form, including the time it would take to complete the interview. The interview time was scheduled based on the availability of the participants and noted during the screening process. I informed the participant that their information and that of others would be analyzed, and if they were interested, they might obtain the findings once the study was complete. I thanked the participants for being a part of the study and for taking time from their schedules to be interviewed.

The semistructured interviews were conducted in English from the privacy of my home. The participants provided consent to be recorded. The audio recording feature on Zoom was used to record the conversations, and I informed the participants when the recording began. Detailed notes were taken to also record the data. Note-taking ensured I was listening and could serve as a backup if the digital recorder failed. Taking notes also

allowed me to note follow-up questions to be used later in the interview. As mentioned, I received permission from the participants before recording their responses. There were no participants who refused to be recorded.

I emailed flyers to churches in the surrounding study area to extend an invitation to participate. Ekúndayò et al. (2020) solicited church participants in a study regarding physical activities in an urban minority community. Tataw and Ekundayo (2017) found that churches are a communication outlet and educational channel for community health planning and engagement.

Before exiting the interview, I allowed the participant an opportunity to make additional comments if they felt something had not been asked or needed to be included. I summarized the notes taken during the interview and reminded the participants of the study's confidentiality and their right to withdraw even after completing the interview. Each participant received a transcribed copy of their responses via email for clarification and triangulation and to ensure validity. I thanked the participant for taking part in the study and advised them that a transcript of the interview would be emailed to them for their review and edits. I used the Zoom transcription feature to transcribe each interview, putting them into a Microsoft Word document. The participants had the option to validate the accuracy of the transcript, clarify, or add new information. I informed the participants that a follow-up interview might be required for clarification during the screening process and at the time of the interview. I ensured the participant understood that follow-up was a part of the interview process, also noted on the consent form; however, this was not necessary.

Data Analysis Plan

I collected data from homeowners residing in Stonecrest and court documents showing litigation concerning a hazardous waste site permitted in their community. The connection of data to the research question is displayed in Appendix E. I used the research question in the first column to drive the study; the interview questions were used to answer the research question; the participants' responses, patterns, and themes followed, respectively. The participant's responses were grouped in relationship to the interview questions. Common patterns and themes were organized as they emerged.

In vivo and axial coding were used to organize data and weigh the codes. In vivo coding captured the participants' voices in phases, indicated their perceptions, and told their stories (see Saldana, 2021). Results were presented in themes. In vivo coding was done in the first coding cycle and the participants' exact words were used. I used the chart to display the participants' responses in the third column and themes in the fourth. Axial coding was done in the second cycle to weigh the dominant codes and their importance (see Saldana, 2013). I looked for patterns in the codes to categorize and group them to form themes displayed in the fourth column. Data were coded manually to identify emerging themes and patterns from each interview. After each interview, I transcribed and entered the participant's responses into tables based on thematic and pattern analysis.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Internal validity requires accuracy and checking for misinformation using specific procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For this study, I used triangulation by examining information from the sources to build justification for themes. Allowing the participants to review the transcripts also increased credibility. I detailed the findings with rich, thick descriptions, giving the reader a sense that they had experienced or could experience this phenomenon, which provides a sense of shared experience. This approach provided a detailed version of how the participants felt regarding their community being the host of a hazardous waste site.

Transferability

I documented this qualitative case study's procedures so that others could replicate them. I established the case study protocol recommended by Yin (2018). The interview protocol contained interview questions and rules to be followed. The protocol consisted of an overview of the case study, data collection procedures, interview questions, and an outline for the case study report. This protocol could help researchers efficiently replicate the study.

Dependability

Dependability reduces bias and errors in a case study (Yin, 2018). I documented the procedures in as much detail as possible. Documentation could corroborate data from other sources and play a prominent role in data collection; it could be used for background and preparatory information. Documentation can also help dispute any

biases. Documenting the problem in detail and creating a case study database is suggested by Creswell (2014) and Yin (2018). Answers to questions from the participants and court case documentation were justification for themes, which added to the study's dependability.

Confirmability

I provided a detailed description of the steps in the interview process, which served as an audit trail so an observer could repeat the study step-by-step (see Johnson Gaither et al., 2019; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Having an interview protocol contributed to the detection of biases, personal interests, and perspectives. Taking advantage of nonparticipants to serve as peer debriefers helped me discover biases and assumptions and highlight other perspectives that might have been missed. The debriefers reminded me that I assumed the participants had all the details regarding the GEPD permitting process, that they had a clear understanding of the hazardous waste site being built, and a bias of what it meant for their community.

Ethical Procedures

Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the interview questions as well as the consent form (Approval No. 01-18-23-0251037). I followed the guidelines set by the IRB. I indicated that no participant would be forced to participate in the study and that it was strictly voluntary. An electronic consent form was provided to the potential participants detailing the procedures and participation risks and that privacy and confidentiality were assured. All data are maintained on an encrypted USB drive in a secure location and will be stored for 5 years after completion of the study as required by

IRB and later destroyed in a manner that protects the participants' privacy. The IRB Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative certificate is provided in Appendix F. No payments were made to the participants.

The participants' recorded responses to interview questions were stored in my secured file cabinet. Transcribed participant responses were documented using Microsoft Word and stored on my personal computer, OneDrive, and an encrypted flash drive with password protection. More than one storage source served as a backup in case of computer problems or file corruption. Participants were advised that transcribed information is for historical purposes and stored if needed or appropriate according to IRB requirements. Also, the participants were informed their identities would continue to be protected after the study. Before participation could begin, the participants signed a consent form, and I made it clear the interview could stop at any time. Participants were also advised they could review the transcript of their responses to ensure I interpreted and transcribed them correctly. I was committed to maintaining these safeguards while capturing the participants' experiences and perceptions in their own voices. Before data were shared, all identifying information was removed. Therefore, all names were coded to ensure confidentiality and that there were no retaliation or repercussions from the study for the participants.

Only I have access to the data. Participants were advised of the purpose of the data collected (see Cox et al., 2014). The consent form contained confidentiality protocols mandated by the Privacy Act of 1974 and the Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act of 1998. The participants were homeowners who resided in Stonecrest

from 2017 to 2020 and were not from my work environment. There was no conflict of interest or power differential. There were no incentives to participate in this study.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I discussed the research design and rationale for this qualitative case study, including my role as the researcher, management of biases, and any conflict of interest. Chapter 3 also provided details on the study's methodology, including participant selection logic, instrumentation, and procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. Finally, I discussed issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures followed.

I conducted eight semistructured interviews with African Americans who resided and owned a home within the zip codes 30035 and 30094 and could read and speak English. I used purposeful and snowball sampling by sending flyers to local churches and posting them on social media platforms. I developed an interview protocol to guide the interviews conducted via Zoom. I used in vivo and axial coding to organize and analyze the data. The participants had an opportunity to review transcripts of their responses to ensure accuracy. I followed all guidelines and regulations put forth by Walden University's IRB.

Chapter 4 includes a description of the study's setting and demographics. I detail the data collection and analysis process and provide evidence of trustworthiness. The results of the study are presented.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand how African American residents living in Stonecrest felt about the hazardous waste site being placed in their community without an opportunity to provide input into the GEPD decision-making process before a decision is made to grant permits. Stonecrest, Georgia obtained its charter to become a city in 2017 and has mostly African American residents. In this chapter, I describe the study's setting, demographics, data collection process, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results, including the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Setting

I interviewed eight participants, which was the number when data saturation was achieved, meeting the criteria outlined in Chapter 3. Researchers indicated that saturation is reached when themes become apparent and no new data are revealed (Aguboshim, 2021; Creswell, 2014; Kruth, 2015; Schäfer et al., 2014). I conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews from my home using Zoom. At the time of the interviews, the participants were in their homes or a safe space.

There were no personal or organizational conditions that influenced the participants' perceptions or experiences or that influenced my interpretation of the data. All participants were homeowners in zip codes 30038 and 30058. Participants were provided a consent form with instructions on how to indicate consent and return the form to me in a timely manner. The consent form also included information regarding the

minimal risk involved in the study and the option to withdraw without penalty at any time.

Demographics

All eight homeowners were African American females and males residing in the study area who met the inclusion criteria for participation. I assigned each participant an alphanumeric code for privacy and confidentiality: HO, which represented the homeowner; first and last initial; and a number indicating the order of the interview. Table 1 reflects the participants' demographics, including their alphanumeric code, zip code, and gender.

Table 1

Case Study Participant Demographics

Participant	Zip code	Gender
HOBM1	30058	Female
HOAB2	30038	Male
HOTB3	30058	Female
HOAH4	30038	Female
HOTT5	30038	Female
HODT6	30058	Female
HOAC7	30058	Male
HOAF8	30038	Female

Each interview was transcribed into Word using the recorded transcription feature in Zoom and by consulting handwritten notes.

Data Collection

The data collection process began after I obtained approval from Walden University's IRB. Data were collected between February 2023 and March 2023. The interviews were conducted twice a week using the Zoom recording feature, audio only. I

emailed a request to churches in zip codes 30038 and 30058 and posted the recruitment flyer on the social media sites Facebook and NextDoor.

I used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants who met the criteria and volunteered to be interviewed. Once a participant expressed interest, a consent form was sent to their email address for review and consent. I asked potential participants to reply to my email by stating “I consent.” I acknowledged receiving their consent email and requested a date and time for the interview. I maintained a record of who consented and their availability for the interviews.

I interviewed each participant once for 15 to 45 minutes, asking the same questions in the same order to ensure the consistency of the process. I began the interview by reminding the participant of the purpose of the study, the interview process, and the elements of the consent form. I took notes of my thoughts and feelings to curtail any potential biases. The audio recording of each interview was done through Zoom, with all settings to “cameras off” to maintain confidentiality. Each interview was transcribed using Zoom’s recorded transcript feature.

I interviewed eight homeowners from zip codes 30038 and 30058. Researchers have affirmed that sample size is determined when saturation is met (Aguboshim, 2021; Creswell, 2014; Kruth, 2015; Schäfer et al., 2014). A sample size between four and 10 for case studies was recommended by Creswell (2007); however, in the current qualitative case study, data saturation was met with eight participants. There were no unusual circumstances encountered in data collection.

I thanked the participants after each interview and expressed my appreciation for their willingness to take part. I informed the participants that I would email a copy of the transcript for their review within 7 days, and asked them to reply with any edits. I asked the participants if there was anything they would like to add or share about their experience with the GEPD permitting process in general or anything specific regarding the way community members were given an opportunity to participate or voice concerns before the permit was granted. I also asked the participants if they knew anyone else who might be interested in sharing their experience with GEPD's effort to communicate with the Stonecrest community about the permitting of the 2020 hazardous waste site.

I informed the participants they could provide potential participants with a copy of the flyer or my contact information. I also notified the participants that a summary of my findings would be shared with them once the study was completed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using the Zoom transcription feature. The recordings were saved on a password-protected file on my personal computer. I adhered to all of the data collection processes outlined in Chapter 3, including waiting 7 days for a response from the participants after they received their transcripts. There were no additions to the transcripts by any participants during the allotted time.

Data Analysis

In this qualitative case study, I sought to better understand the experiences and perceptions of African American homeowners residing the Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020 concerning a hazardous waste site being placed in their community. I interviewed each participant, asking the same questions in identical order. There were 27 pages of

transcripts from the interviews. I began the data analysis by developing a code and analysis worksheet that included the participant's alphanumeric code, first-cycle coding, in vivo codes, and a priori codes. These were "experience," "perception," "impact," "outreach," "awareness," "input," "satisfied," "feel," and "recommendation," which were established from the study's framework. More codes were added during the inductive data analysis process. I used axial coding in the second-cycle coding to group the codes and create categories.

I used in vivo codes to analyze the data from the interviews. I read the interview transcripts several times, highlighting responses and phases. I analyzed each response to the interview questions in the transcripts and hand coded without software to a data analysis worksheet, which included key concepts connected to the research question. The first cycle produced 54 codes, including some a priori codes. I used axial coding to explore the initial coding to develop the categories. The codes with similar meanings were combined to create five categories. Table 2 displays examples of the in vivo coding, including the code, participant, and excerpts from the data to demonstrate its origin.

Table 2

Examples of In Vivo Codes

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Experience	HOAH 4	Group meetings. I was with a group of citizens here in the area. They did not approve of them having the site here. We went to several meetings to fight against them.
Perception	HOTB 3	Minimum communication. The city hopes people won't ask questions. They take advantage of people that are not looking for the information; go ahead.
Timely	HOTT 5	The way it's ran. History of race and power structure in our state. If there is an African American and a Black in those conversation [*sic*], it's always done as it means to say we checked with all.
Impact	HOAF 8	Lack of knowledge; where there is no knowledge, it's hurtful, [and the] community falls apart.
Outreach	HOBM 1	I think it can do with the time that most residents are available to go to those types of meetings. You know, how convenient that [*sic*] are, you know, for people who work during the day and maybe even the location of where they have [*sic*] having them. Maybe not have [*sic*]enough signage in the actual subdivision where people live.
	HOAB 2	Churches. Church affiliation congregation.
Aware	HOBM 1	I was never made aware, and I don't remember ever seeing any signage about that.
	HOAB 2	Made aware through my church.
	HOTB 3	Heard about the site through the news.
	HOTT 5	I had no knowledge of it.
Input	HODT 6	None.
	HOAC 7	I signed the petition to stop the site.
	HOAH 4	We provided quite a bit of input. We went to the board meetings as a group. We would get up and speak our opinion on how we felt about it, and that's how we communicate to try to get it stopped.
Stonecrest impact	HOAF 8	Walking trails, schools, taxes, libraries, air.
	HOTB 3	Property value.
	HODT 6	Clean air, water, visual, and live next to it.
	HOBM 1	Health, environment, water system.
	HOAB 2	Water.
	HOAH 4	Air quality property value. When people are looking for somewhere to live, they want a clean area, so we [*sic*]will bring our property value down, and that's not good.
	HOTT 5	Dissemination [of] the information in a timely manner. African American communities are out of the loop, and it comes across as if we do not care, no [*sic*] aware, or they are not interested.

After completing the first-cycle in vivo coding, I examined the initial codes and established categories through axial coding. Similar codes were grouped; codes with the same meaning were combined, which continued until all codes were in groups based on similarities. The groups became categories, with some named after a code the category contained. There were five categories from which two themes emerged: lack of timely notification and lack of communication. Table 3 shows the codes, categories from code groupings, and final themes. The categories and themes that emerged during the analysis were related to the research question.

Table 3

Codes, Categories, and Themes

Code	Category	Theme
No input	Notification	Lack of timely notification
Meetings		
Petition		
Perception		
Slow response		
Too late		
Timely		
No opportunity		
Notices		
Input		
Time restraint		
Recommendation	Recommendations	
Board meeting		
Education		
Local newspaper		
Citizen group		
Advocate		
Awareness	Awareness	Lack of communication
Perception		
Experience		
Petition		
Lack of communication		
No announcement		
Awareness		
Too vague		
No voice		
No information		
Lack of knowledge		
Last to know		
Lack of contact		
Out of the loop		
Unclear		
Understandable		
Outreach		
Feel	Feelings	
Don’t care		
Priority		
Disturbed		
Ulterior motive		
Impact		
Attracts the wrong businesses		
Drive the right businesses away		
Property value		
Race		
Stereotype		
Negatively		
Satisfied		
Unsatisfied		
Health	Health	
Safety		
Water supply		
Water disposal		
Overcrowding		
Air quality		
Transportation		

Thematic analysis was used to develop the themes from the categories and to connect themes to the research question. The participants were asked to describe their perceptions of the GEPD. Each participant responded that the GEPD did not make them aware of the hazardous waste site coming to their community, and that they only learned about it when a church member made it known and shared a petition to be signed to stop the process through court intervention. Participant HOAH 4 was active in the community and learned of the site from a grass roots organization developed to fight the site development. Other participants learned from the news and social media after the fact and were unfamiliar with any announcement or signage notifying them of the hazardous waste site planned for their community.

All participants indicated that lack of communication had been their experience, and communication was critical to building a relationship with African American communities. Participants noted that increased awareness improves community engagement. They also highlighted that achieving satisfaction promotes a feeling of being valued. All participants stated that the lack of timely notification and communication had been their experiences and perceptions of GEPD permitting. There were no discrepant cases that factored into the analysis for this study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Morgan and Ravitch (2018) found that credibility builds confidence in a study's findings. I used transcript review to verify the participants' responses to the interview questions. I emailed a copy of the transcripts to the participants for their review for feedback to ensure that what was recorded was what they intended to say and to provide

them with an opportunity to make corrections. There were no amendments to the transcripts. I did not ask leading questions during the interviews, and I made notes that allowed me to self-reflect. Credibility was also established because all participants lived and owned a home in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020.

Transferability occurs when the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts (Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). Transferability was strengthened as I detailed the study's setting, sample population, sample size, eligibility criteria, sampling strategy, demographics, and interview procedures and provided the participants with a consent form with sample interview questions. The participants varied in age and lived in the area studied for more than 3 years. The findings may be relevant to readers and researchers because of the detailed description of the participants' experiences, perceptions, perspectives, and ideas. Transferring the study's findings to other contexts or equivalent scenarios could be determined by readers or scholars in the future.

Dependability occurs when there is consistency, so researchers can duplicate the findings using like participants (Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). The Zoom format for interviewing allowed me to collect personalized and contextual data. I asked open-ended questions focused on the topic of study. The interview questions were asked in the same sequence using the interview protocol to ensure consistency and reduce irrelevant conversations. The findings were supported by the data as indicated throughout the data analysis. I kept notes to document personal beliefs, thoughts, and theories, as suggested by Creswell (2014) and Yin (2018).

According to Morgan and Ravitch (2018), confirmability is when the participants determine the findings of the study and not the researcher. I used triangulation to ensure confirmability. The notes and documentation trail maintained the originality of the data in the study. Notes allowed me to identify and dismiss any personal biases, and using the documentation as an audit trail helped me verify data collection and analysis methods. A nonparticipant was used as a peer debriefer to help me discover any biases or assumptions. To ensure confirmability, the participants' responses were presented verbatim in table format throughout the data analysis process.

Results

I investigated the experiences and perceptions of African American homeowners in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020 and their recommendations that could help the GEPD improve their notification policies for environmental action. A qualitative case study approach was used with semistructured interviews. The data collected answered the research question: What are the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of African American homeowners living in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020 concerning how GEPD addresses community concerns in the permitting decision-making process before hazardous waste site permits are issued? Two themes emerged from the interview data and field notes: lack of timely notification and lack of communication

There were two sections of the interview protocol that included 10 questions. The first section contained four questions to help answer the part of the research question regarding the GEPD permitting notification process. The second section contained interview questions to help answer the part of the research question pertaining to the

perceptions and experiences with the GEPD's efforts to include African Americans living in Stonecrest in the permitting process.

Theme 1: Lack of Timely Notification

The lack of timely notification surfaced as the first theme from the data collected, using questions from the first section of the interview protocol. All participants indicated they were unaware of any form of notification from GEPD. Participants shared they become aware of environmental action after the fact or when approached by a community member to sign petitions to stop the activity. Participants also stated they became aware when the action had already begun, such as when trees were cleared to build a facility. Some participants confirmed that they had no way to know if it was too late to provide input once the action had begun. The participants indicated that timely notification might build a better relationship with the African American community. They also expressed that the lack of timely notification regarding environmental actions impacts the air, water, and even walking trails in African American communities. Others mentioned that the lack of notification did not provide them an opportunity for input as to whether they wanted certain community facilities. Some indicated that the lack of notification regarding what goes on in their community impacts property value and schools, and that they should be notified at the beginning of an environmental project for input. A few stated that the lack of timely notification demonstrated that African Americans were not valued and believed race was a factor. Several participants thought that local politicians could do a better job of keeping the community informed.

Knowing and understanding a community is essential in building relationships with African American homeowners. All participants indicated their experience with the state had been through last-minute involvement to stop environmental action after the process had already begun or been completed with no official awareness or opportunity to engage. Participant HOAH 4 became aware of the hazardous waste site being built in their community from a citizen group when they attended several meetings to voice their opinion to stop the construction from moving forward: “We went to several meetings to fight against them.” HOAB 2 stated that their experience was a result of HOAH 4 sharing what they had learned from the citizen group with their church membership. This occurred when they “had some documentation for us to sign” (a petition) to stop the process. HOAB 2 also voiced their experience involved signing a petition to stop the building of a gas station down the street from their home: “I didn’t know about it until I went to my mailbox. I saw this letter statement right—the community need to meet to talk about this gas station that was about to be put up.”

HOAC 7 stated they had two experiences when they became aware through their church and community newspaper of facilities being put in their area: a hazardous waste site and a wood chipping facility. They signed petitions to stop the construction of the hazardous waste site that circulated in their church and attended several meetings to stop the wood chipping facility. HOTT 5’s experience was that they did not view any signs or notices:

> I didn’t see any signage. Any time there’s a new development or anything of that nature, be [it] a commercial, or in this case, environmental, I may see the

> beginning of, like, when they're about to start a project. Like in driving passing [*sic*], you may notice that the area has been cleared, or you may see construction vehicles or workers. But I've never been made or know about meetings or petitions.

HODT 6's experience with the process resulted in the belief the African American community had been deceived: "We've actually been misled because sometimes you don't know about items that are going on until it's actually 100% constructed." HODT 6 stated, "No. There was no petition."

Not receiving timely notification on environmental actions causes communities to be disenfranchised and skeptical of the government's motives. There was a disconnect between GEPD and the African American community in the study area. The participants felt the only time they received any type of attention was during the voting cycle when politicians were seeking their support. The participants indicated that the lack of timely notification was their main concern when it came to environmental issues. The African American community members felt frightened that something hazardous would be built near their homes without their knowledge and it would be too late to do something about it.

Theme 2: Lack of Communication

The lack of communication was the second theme. Six interview questions addressed African Americans' experiences and perceptions of the GEPD's efforts to be inclusive in their permitting process. All the participants' perceptions were similar in that they were unaware of any formal announcement process. HOTB 3 expressed that it was

just “go ahead” and make the decision to begin and complete the project: “There are no questions or discussions. . . . I heard about the hazardous site coming to [the] community through the news, and most of [the] time when hearing of the project, it is already too late.” HOAB 2 stated the lack of communication and response from the state was the wrong process. “We are the last to know . . . there is no documentation indicating the building is not coming; no outcome knowledge after the courts intervened.” HOTB 3 also indicated that the brokenness of the political system, scandals, and the lack of local government’s willingness to communicate with the community were factors.

To build trust, it is imperative to create a space where diverse voices from the African American community are heard, respected, and valued. Many participants stated they thought it was too late to provide input. When African Americans are allowed to provide input and make decisions regarding their community, whether through a community organization or attending a community meeting, they feel a sense of belonging and self-worth. HOBM 1 noted, “Well, I’m not aware that they do ask for input because I don’t remember ever getting anything in the mail or anything like that regarding that subject.” When asked if they were allowed to provide input, HOBM 1 stated: “No. I think it was probably too late by then.” HOAB 2 noted, “They don’t go about it the right way.” When asked about their perception of GEPD community engagement and the environmental decision-making process, they explained, “We are always the last to know . . . most of the time it is a lack of communication . . . people find out the last minute, and when they get to find [out], it is when it’s almost approved to be done.” HOAB 2 further stated, “[They] almost treat us like second class when it comes to

these things." This participant believed the GEPD was "sneaky" and noted: "They just go ahead and do it hoping we would never find out. . . . I think it is because they just don't care . . . don't have our best interest at heart . . . we are treated completely different."

Reaction from the community was expected, but the problem was not solved. HOAB 2 reflected, "Everything seems to get quiet, and then in another 3 or 4 months, you see the same thing repeat itself, and we start doing the same thing all over again." HOTB 3 communicated their perception of the GEPD process:

> Very minimal communication, minimal interaction, minimal engagement whatsoever. I feel like the city really does things hoping that people won't ask questions and does [*sic*]. And they don't really publicize a lot of things that they do, so when things are done, it's either already in progress. Also, it's not something that you can really fight, and I think that they really take advantage of people who are not looking for information readily. I didn't have any input at all about it. It was that most of the time, when you hear about something that's already in it, it's already done. It's a done deal.

Decision makers should be more responsive to the communities they serve. HOAH 4 provided their perspective:

> I don't think they—I don't think they look into it as much as they should, and I don't think they respond as quickly they should. . . . I just think people that are in the position to do something about it, [they] need to step up quickly to try to solve the problem.

Communication engagement involves actively collaborating with the community regarding projects and activities that affect them. This is crucial in building relationships and promoting inclusivity. HOTT 5 pointed out: “They do not involve the community. They are not transparent with the community. After they make their decision, and at that point, it’s so far gone.” HOAC 7 believed that minority communities’ outreach was lacking: “It seems like, in the primary minority communities, it seems like the outreach isn’t as strong as it would be on the north side of town.” HOTT 5 noted,

> If an African American is involved in the planning process, then that means it is okay to move forward as if one person speaks for all. I have never seen any signage regarding any announcement of environmental participation opportunities. I have never been made aware of any meetings or petitions or anything of that nature.

Communicating with the community should be understandable. HOAF 8 noted,

> I think that it can be a little clearer and more understandable. I see a sign going up, [which] does not give me a real indication of what they’re trying to do. So, I think it needs to be a little less vague when they’re putting these signs up.

HOAH 4 became involved after hearing about the site coming to her community through a grassroots movement developed just to address the issue: “I was made aware of the hazardous waste site from one other citizen by phone call. . . . I think they should reach out to the community that they are planning to do this.”

The African American community members were left in the dark when it came to communication from the GEPD as it related to their plans for environmental actions.

Participants were left feeling disturbed and confused as to what their rights were, how to move forward, or if they had any recourse. The participants also felt frustrated when communication broke down and displayed a sense of disconnection and uncertainty. The African American community members were left wondering if it was their fault for the lack of communication or if it was a systemic barrier.

There were no discrepant cases that factored into the analysis for this study. The participants' responses were consistent, and no conflicts emerged. No responses needed clarification.

Summary

The research question was designed to guide this study to help understand the experiences and perceptions of the GEPD permitting process. Theme 1 and 2 answered the research question regarding the perceptions and experiences the community had with the GEPD permitting process. Chapter 4 included the setting, demographics, and data collection. I provided the data analysis process, including how data were coded and categorized and themes generated. I presented the results of the data obtained from the eight participants' real-life experiences, perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. In Chapter 5, I provide an interpretation of the findings, discuss the limitations of the study, make recommendations for future research, and note any implications of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand how African American residents living in Stonecrest felt about the hazardous waste site being placed in their community without an opportunity to provide input into the GEPD decision-making process before a decision is made to grant permits. Data were collected from one-on-one semistructured interviews through Zoom calls with homeowners who resided in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020. Through this current case study, I gained a thorough understanding of the homeowners' experiences and perceptions of the GEPD's notification process for issuing permits with no input from the African American community. Two themes emerged from the data analysis process: lack of timely notification and lack of communication.

In Chapter 5, I share the findings of this study and demonstrate how the results provide a better understanding of African Americans' experiences and perceptions with the GEPD's efforts to notify and communicate with the community. This understanding may help homeowners build a better relationship with the GEPD and provide decision makers with information that can enhance the notification process in African American communities. In this chapter, I compare the research findings with the current literature and social construction theory. The study's implications, limitations, and recommendations are also discussed.

Interpretation of the Findings

The data collection process began after I received approval from Walden University's IRB. One-on-one semistructured interviews, the literature review, and social

construction theory drove the interpretation of the findings in this current qualitative case study. The case study had one research question: What are the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of African American homeowners living in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020 concerning how GEPD addresses community concerns in the decision-making process before hazardous waste site permits are issued? I asked eight African American homeowners 10 open-ended interview questions regarding their experiences and perceptions of the GEPD notification process and what recommendations, if any, they had for policy change. Two themes emerged from the participants' responses to the questions in the semistructured interviews.

The findings support social construction as a theory of knowledge that enables community members to participate and provide input into the permitting process to help make their community better. Social construction theory posits that knowledge comes from social interactions and language use (Schneider & Ingram, 2019). Within social construction, awareness is established through interactions and when discussions are understood (Schneider & Ingram, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). The findings of the current study support the social construction theory, which argues that communications and interactions progress over time and are the most powerful way to develop thoughts and beliefs that become socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). I applied social construction theory to the perceptions of the participants to stress African American community members' beliefs and thoughts regarding the GEPD process and outreach. I also applied the theory to their experiences because of its relevance to participating in society. Findings in this study provided information regarding the participants'

perceptions and experiences that could ensure better communication between the African American communities and the GEPD.

Theme 1: Lack of Timely Notification

All-inclusive notification policies promote community engagement, encourage communications, increase feelings of self-worth, and promote satisfaction (Chan et al., 2022). The lack of timely notification in the African American community decreases trust in the government's motives and decisions (Clark, 2018). Timely notification to the African American community is a critical for building a strong relationship. States can empower African American communities to have their voices heard and engage in shaping their local and state environments. Without engaging, African Americans may miss opportunities to provide important input that impacts their well-being (He & Ma, 2021). The eight participants in the current study indicated they were not notified of any environmental actions until after the project had begun, was completed, or during a petition process.

The participants stated they were not aware of any environmental actions in their community and did not realize that input could be offered. Participants also stated that notification was not a formal process. They became aware when people noticed changes and the community newspaper reported it. Environmental justice is a significant concern because it relates to environmental issues; all communities, including African American communities, should have access to information, opportunities, and resources for environmental action (Carnahan et al., 2020). Receiving information in a timely manner

enables effective community contribution of viewpoints that might offer better solutions (Ianniello et al., 2019).

One participant was concerned that the GEPD was slow to respond regarding the outcome of the hazardous waste site after it was halted by court proceedings. The participant wondered whether the project would begin again once things died down and the community moved on to other challenges. In other words, there was no notice to the community that the project was no longer going forward other than the court's intervention. African American communities have been marginalized historically and have faced disproportionate hazardous waste exposure with limited access to environmental resources and the decision-making process, which has led to environmental inequalities and various health issues (Alvarez & Evans, 2021; Brazil, 2022).

Theme 2: Lack of Communication

The findings of this study demonstrate that the lack of communication resulted in African Americans feeling they were not represented fairly and their perspectives and input were not considered. Having no representation causes disparities in all areas of African Americans' lives, including environmental impacts, education, health, and housing (Harrison et al., 2020). Current participants felt that local officials should notify their constituents when the state proposes environmental actions in their community. Community members can then be prepared to attend the scoping meetings to voice their thoughts and concerns and provide solutions to the proposed project. Participants reported that not having information due to the lack of communication sends a message

that the community is not interested or does not care about what is going on in their neighborhoods. However, the community's lack of input was not because they did not care; the information had not been communicated to them.

Some participants expressed that they believed the reason for the lack of communication was because of their race and the part of town in which they reside. One participant indicated that the GEPD did not care about the African American community. It was a "go ahead and proceed" practice engrained in policymaking. Signage was vague and placed in obscure locations where drivers must get out of their cars to view it at traffic lights (e.g., on utility poles). One participant was contacted by an acquaintance who informed them that a grassroots organization was being established to address the hazardous waste site. This initiated a petition, which introduced the concern to churches in the communities. Several participants acknowledged that they received communication through church members regarding environmental actions and asked to put their signatures on the petition to stop the action.

Lack of communication can be a missed opportunity for the GEPD and the African American community to collaborate and build partnerships and initiatives that benefit not only one group. The situation becomes challenging when community members have no way to voice their concerns, hold the GEPD responsible, and remedy grievances. The lack of communication could result in systemic injustices.

Limitations of the Study

Saturation was determined after interviewing eight homeowners, which produced rich data to understand the participants' perceptions and experiences with the GEPD. The

study focused on African American homeowners in a city that is 94% African American. There were no renters included in the study, and only English speakers from two zip codes were included. To eliminate bias, I took notes throughout the data collection and analysis process. Taking notes helped me to focus on data collection and interpretation to mitigate researcher bias.

Recommendations

The participants reported that communication and timely notification are critical approaches that will contribute to enhancing the GEPD's decision-making process. The participants expressed the need for an all-inclusive process and the importance of communicating with the African American community to build relationships and trust. Participants also stressed that timely notification is crucial to the communities to ensure they are aware of environmental action because it enables responsiveness, fosters collaboration, improves satisfaction, and builds trust.

I recommend a follow-up study to include a sample of other marginalized groups in various counties in the state. A different study sample could result in additional findings to improve understanding of other counties' experiences and perceptions of GEPD's decision-making permit process. Another recommendation is to study the GEPD's perspectives regarding their decision-making process. Finally, a study could be conducted concerning why communities are not engaged and, if they are, which communities are involved in this process.

Implications

This study may contribute to positive social change by providing the GEPD with the experiences and perceptions of the African American communities they serve. The results of this study may prompt decision makers to examine their policies and practices to determine whether they are inclusive as they relate to environmental actions in all communities. The need to address disparities is to ensure that all community members have equal access to timely communication and inclusive notification systems. This study's findings could help build trust in the GEPD and encourage transparency and inclusivity in communication practices that might help overcome historical mistrust and build a better relationship based on understanding and respect. This may increase community satisfaction, leading to a better appreciation of citizenship, pride, and an attitude that demonstrates the community is clean and safe.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and better understand how African American residents living in Stonecrest felt about the hazardous waste site being placed in their community without an opportunity to provide input into the GEPD decision-making process before a decision is made to grant permits. African American environmental challenges are molded by a history of environmental injustice, socioeconomic disparities, limited access to information, and limited access to decision making (Aitamurto & Chen, 2017; Bullard, 2019; Bullard et al., 2008; Clayton et al., 2019). Participants' perceptions in the current study indicated a deep-rooted understanding of environmental, social, and economic issues. African Americans

advocate for equality in the distribution of environmental benefits and believe environmental justice is a civil rights issue.

Eight homeowners from Stonecrest were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected from semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom. The participants reported a lack of communication and lack of timely notification from the GEPD regarding environmental actions that require a permit. The results of this study demonstrate that the lack of communication and the lack of timely notification have a significant impact on the African American community and may inform GEPD decision makers that African Americans have a need to know and a voice that needs an ear.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

There is a case study called *Public Participation in Georgia's Environmental Permitting Process* that explores the experiences and perceptions of African American residents living in Stonecrest with the GEPD permitting process at the exclusion of input from community members. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences and perceptions of Georgia's environmental permitting process.

This research is part of the doctoral study for Joyce Stanley, a Ph.D. student at Walden University.

About the study:

- One 45-minute Zoom call interview

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- African American
- Speak English
- Homeowner residing in Stonecrest within zip codes 30038 and 30058 between 2017–2020

If you would like to participate in this case study, please contact via email

joyce.stanley@waldenu.ed

Appendix B: Church Letter

Hello, Church Office:

My name is Joyce Stanley, and I am a student at Walden University in their Ph.D. Public Policy and Administration Program. I am conducting a study called *Public Participation in Georgia's Environmental Permitting Process* to explore and better understand how African American homeowners in Stonecrest feel about the hazardous waste site being placed in their communities without an opportunity to provide input into the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (GEPD) decision-making process before a decision is made to grant permits. This study is a partial degree fulfillment of the Ph.D. program at Walden University.

I am emailing you to seek your assistance in advertising the study in your broadcast, announcements, bulletin board, newsletter, or program. This is only a request that you post the attached flyer where you deem appropriate and does not involve your staff in providing any information to the proposed participant.

The study's interview will only take 30-40 minutes and will be conducted via telephone.

Participation is voluntary, as indicated on the flyer, and no personal identifying information will be collected. Interested individuals can contact me directly for additional information and screening for eligibility. The study results will be reported in the aggregate and in no way connect your organization or the participants to its findings.

I have attached a newsletter, social media, and bulletin board-friendly flyer. I appreciate your time. If you need additional information before you honor this request, you may contact me at [redacted].

Respectfully,

Joyce Stanley

Appendix C: Screening Guide

(1) Are you African American? ☐ Yes ☐ No☐

(2) Did you own your home and reside in Stonecrest within the zip codes 30038 and 30058 between 2017 and 2020?

☐ Yes ☐ No

(3) Is your home in zip code 30038? ☐ Yes ☐ No

(4) Is your home in zip code 30058? ☐ Yes ☐ No

(5) Do you speak English? ☐ Yes ☐ No

(6) Do you have any knowledge or experience with the Georgia Environmental Protection Division permitting process?

☐ Yes ☐ No

(7) Are you willing to follow-up with an additional interview if necessary?

☐ Yes ☐ No

You, the participant, can change their mind and not participate at any time, including during the interview. Do you know of others meeting these criteria that might have an interest in participating?

The interview process might require follow-up questions for clarity and review.

Appendix D: Interview Protocol and Questions

Date:

Time:

Interviewee Code:

The interview questions are open-ended to support a maximum variation interview process. This will provide me with an opportunity to maximize differences in participants' responses at the beginning of the study, increase the chance that findings will show difference(s), and have conversations with residents in the community with firsthand knowledge.

Instructions of standard procedures from one interview to the next.

- I will transcribe the participants' responses immediately after the interview.
- I will interview one participant per day or at least four participants per week, if availability permits.

Ice breaker: Which do you enjoy most, being indoors or outdoors? Why

Open Ended Questions

A. GEPD community permitting notification process

1. What is your experience in the environmental permitting decision-making process in Georgia?

2. What is your perception of the way Georgia Environmental Protection Division conducts its community engagement in environmental decision-making process in Georgia?

3. How does the dissemination of or lack of timely environmental notifications or announcements for governmental permitting actions impact African Americans communities?

4. What community outreach efforts have historically prevented or facilitated interactions and two-way dialogue with community members to encourage participation in permitting issues that impact their communities?

B. Specific perceptions and experience with the GEPD's efforts to include African Americans living in Stonecrest in the permitting process.

5. When and how were you made aware of the permit application by Green Metro Recycling to build a hazardous waste site in Stonecrest in 2020?

6. After learning about the permit application and prior to the decision being made, what input, if any, were you allowed to provide?

7. How does the way GEPD disseminate environmental notification or announcement for government action (permits) impact African Americans in Stonecrest?

8. How satisfied were you with the response, and how it was communicated to you?

9. How do you feel after learning the hazardous waste site is being constructed in your community?

10. What recommendations do you have for improving GEPD's efforts to provide the Stonecrest community members with an opportunity to participate in their permitting process before a permit is granted?

11. Is there anything I missed you would like to add?

Appendix E: Research Question, Interview Questions, Participants' Responses, Patterns, and Themes' Chart

Research question	Interview question	Participants response	Pattern	Theme
What are the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations of African American homeowners living in Stonecrest between 2017 and 2020 concerning how GEPD addresses community concerns in the decision-making process before hazardous waste site permits are issued?	1. How have you participated in environmental decision-making in Georgia? 2. What is your experience in the environmental decision-making process in Georgia? 3. What is your perception of the environmental decision-making process in Georgia? 4. What is your perception of the notification process for the Georgia Environmental Protection Division's environmental action in Stonecrest? 5. How does the dissemination of environmental notifications or announcements for governmental action (permits) impact African Americans in Stonecrest? 6. What community outreach efforts have historically prevented interactions and two-way dialogue with community members to encourage participation in permitting issues that impact their communities? 7. What is your awareness regarding the hazardous			

Research question	Interview question	Participants response	Pattern	Theme
	waste site permitted in Stonecrest in 2020? 8. What is your knowledge concerning the Green Metro Recycling hazardous waste site locating in Stonecrest? 9. How did you feel after learning the hazardous waste site is being constructed in your community? 10. Is there anything I missed you would like to add?			