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Beyond Incarceration: Identification of Post-Incarceration Strategies for Successful Reintegration

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Abstract

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by

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MA, Florida Metropolitan University, 1998

BS, City University of New York, 1991

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The problem that was addressed in this study was the high rate of recidivism among released offenders in the United States. Recidivism results in the rearrest of up to 650,000 offenders within 3 years of release. Reentry barriers are a primary cause of recidivism across the United States, as released offenders struggle to reintegrate into their communities. Policymakers and researchers have not focused on non-recidivating ex-convicts who designed, implemented, and maintained strategies for successful living. Rather than identifying obstacles ex-convicts face, which have been long recognized, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate and identify post-incarceration strategies for reintegration that led to sustained success. The theoretical frameworks for this study were Weiner's attributions for achievement, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, and Bourdieu's subset of habitus (theory of practice). Specifically, this study involved strategies used by released offenders to successfully navigate the following five policy-driven social barriers: (a) employment/income, (b) food, (c) stigmatized social relations, (d) finance/banking, and (e) housing. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 10 ex-offenders who had successfully reintegrated and had not been under supervision for at least 3 years. Thematic analysis revealed a total of seven themes and four subthemes. While the system continues to demonstrate many flaws that contribute to high rates of recidivism, research on successful ex-offenders offers positive social change through a new way of examining the recidivism problem.

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Dedication

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The focus of this study was postincarceration strategies that lead to successful reintegration after release from prison. The problem that was addressed in this study was the high rate of recidivism among released offenders in the United States (U.S.). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS, 2017), recidivism results in the rearrest of up to 650,000 offenders within 3 years of release. The greatest issue with reentry is the failure to successfully reintegrate and desist from future criminal activities. This study involved examining which strategies were employed by nonrecidivating ex-convicts to navigate five policy-driven social barriers (employment/income, food, stigmatized social relations, finance/banking, and housing) upon release from prison. Findings provided a deeper understanding of the ways nonrecidivating ex-convicts create, build, and sustain success. The theoretical frameworks were Weiner's attributions for achievement, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, and Bourdieu's subset of habitus (theory of practice). research was qualitative and I used a phenomenological design. Findings may guide the development of successful reintegration strategies and interventions.

This chapter includes an introduction to the current investigation. It begins with a discussion of the background of the study, followed by the problem and purpose statements. The guiding research question is then presented. Next, the framework, nature of the study, key terms, and assumptions are discussed. Finally, study delimitations, limitations, and significance are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary and transition to Chapter 2.

Background

In recent decades, the number of convicted persons sentenced to serve 1 year or more in state prisons increased by 400% (BJS, 2016; Carson & Sabol, 2016). On an average day, over 2.2 million people are incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons (Glaze & Herberman, 2013; Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). Alongside the rise in incarceration, the U.S. justice system now grapples with the subsequent rise in reentry as released offenders reintegrate into communities. According to McNeeley (2018), approximately 95% of prison inmates are released back into communities at some point; to put this figure into context, between 600,000 and 700,000 individuals are released from incarceration each year (Cochran & Mears, 2016).

Jonson and Cullen (2015) defined reentry as the movement of an inmate from custody back into society. The greatest issue with reentry is the failure to successfully reintegrate and desist from future criminal activities. According to the BJS (2017), 67.8% of released prisoners are rearrested for a new crime within 3 years of release; 5 years after release, that statistic increases to 76.6%. Within 3 years of release, recidivism results in the rearrest of 429,000 of 650,000 released offenders (BJS, 2017).

Current recidivism statistics indicate a failure to address reentry challenges faced by released offenders (Mitchell et al., 2016). Unaddressed reentry barriers increase risks of recidivism. During the first 30 days after release, reentry has been described by former inmates as even more difficult than the time they spent in prison (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2017). Recidivism is largely related to five social barriers upon release

from prison: (a) employment/income, (b) food, (c) stigmatized social relations, (d) finance/banking, and (e) housing.

A defining characteristic of the reentry movement is the development of programs intended to foster successful reintegration into communities after release from incarceration (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). The aim of reentry programs is to help former offenders overcome common barriers to reentry. According to Jonson and Cullen (2015), a major challenge to the development of reentry programs is determining characteristics that are most effective. Much of the focus on reentry programming has been on collaboration among agencies to create dynamic programs to improve reintegration. Many states across the country have adopted reentry programming, consisting of coordinated partnerships between private and public organizations that attempt to help former offenders successfully reintegrate into their communities (Amasa-Annang & Scutelnicu, 2016). However, many of these efforts are disjointed. Nhan et al. (2016) explained, "Prisoner reentry services in the United States are a hodge-podge assortment of official and unofficial agencies and organizations localized in different regions" (p. 2). The disjointedness of reentry programming often makes it difficult for offenders to navigate, contributing to underuse of available services, and lack of reductions to recidivism rates (Nhan et al., 2016).

Another problem with reentry programming is the tendency of stakeholders to focus on assumptions of failure. At present, research on sustained successful reentry and reduced recidivism is rooted in presumptions of failure. That is, rather than continue to focus on causes of recidivism, research is needed to identify strategies that create, lead to,

and sustain success. Despite high rates of recidivism, many released offenders do manage to successfully reintegrate and abstain from additional criminal activities (Wright et al., 2015). What remains unknown is how exactly successful reentry takes place.

Rather than focusing on barriers faced by former offenders, more research is needed on how to overcome challenges and experience successful reentry. From this perspective, with input from those who successfully developed and applied strategies to overcome reentry barriers, it may be possible to develop more helpful interventions. Improved interventions may not only increase immediate reentry success rates, but also foster long-term reductions in recidivism rates.

Problem Statement

The problem that was addressed in this study was the high rate of recidivism among released offenders in the U.S. According to the BJS (2017), recidivism results in the rearrest of up to 650,000 offenders within 3 years of release. Barriers can increase risks for recidivism, including those related to employment, food, social relations, finances, and housing (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2017). Recidivism is also more likely to occur among minorities because they are disproportionately represented in U.S. correctional facilities. Although minorities comprise only about 30% of the U.S. population, they represent 60% of the incarcerated population (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2017). Of the total population of 19 million African American men, 1 million are incarcerated and another 1.2 million are under supervision (Moore, 2015; Wolfers et al., 2015).

Reentry barriers are a primary cause of recidivism across the U.S., as released offenders struggle to reintegrate into their communities. Trouble obtaining employment, housing, and transportation are common struggles (Anderson et al., 2018; Anderson, 2019; Lockwood et al., 2015; Lutze et al., 2014; Obatusin et al., 2019). Other barriers include poor education, lack of social support, substance abuse, and mental health disorders (Jonson & Cullen, 2015; King et al., 2018; Taylor & Becker, 2015; Zortman et al., 2016).

While reentry programs have been developed and implemented to help reduce recidivism, research is lacking on characteristics of programs that are most effective (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). In addition, disjointed efforts among organizations and assumptions of failure often undermine reentry programming (Nhan et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2015). Rather than focusing on reentry barriers faced by released offenders, research is needed on how successful ex-convicts have overcome barriers and successfully reintegrated into their communities. Such research may inform the development of more effective reentry programming and reduce recidivism rates.

Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore postincarceration strategies for reintegration that led to successful reintegration, which was defined as nonrecidivism for at least 3 years following release. Policymakers and researchers have not focused on nonrecidivating ex-convicts who designed, implemented, and maintained strategies for successful living. Rather than identifying obstacles that ex-convicts face, which have been long recognized, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to

investigate and identify postincarceration strategies for reintegration that led to sustained success. Specifically, I explored strategies used by released offenders to successfully navigate the following five policy-driven social barriers: employment/income, food, stigmatized social relations, finance/banking, and housing.

Participants in the study were nonrecidivating ex-convicts who served at least 2 years, had been released for a minimum of 3 years, and had not recidivated during that period. Strategies used to reintegrate were categorized into three domain levels: micro (personal), mezzo (group and community), and macro (policy). Information and data gained from narratives about actions and thought processes of successful nonrecidivating ex-convicts helped create a case for shifting the focus of research from failure to success.

Research Question

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks for this study were Weiner's attributions for achievement, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, and Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice.

Weiner (1972) suggested individuals who have control over the outcomes in their lives are more likely to succeed during challenging situations, as opposed to situations where they do not influence external forces beyond their control. Weiner's attributions are classified along three causal dimensions: locus of control (internal versus external), stability (ability), and controllability (skill).

Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in his or her capability to execute behaviors necessary to produce the specific performance

required for success. Bandura and Weiner (1972) posited individuals' successes are reflections of their abilities to exert control over their behaviors by adjusting to their environments to succeed in challenging situations. At the core of Bourdieu's theory lies the concept of *habitus*, which is the notion that individuals have a herd or collective mentality and behave the same way in similar situations, embodying cultural aspects that influence how they think, where they live, and how they behave. According to Bourdieu (1977), individuals internalize social norms; when situations and environments change, people change to align with the internalized social norms of the new situation or environment.

In the case of ex-convicts, for example, an individual's locus of control, stability, controllability, and sense of self-efficacy are formulated before entering the prison system. While in prison, their habitus changes to align with the environment where they are incarcerated, and is transformed once again when they are released back into society. Taken together, these theoretical approaches provide a working formula for identifying and understanding behaviors. A more in-depth discussion of these theories is provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this research was qualitative and I employed a phenomenological design to investigate and identify successful strategies used by nonrecidivating ex-convicts to successfully navigating the following five policy-driven social barriers: employment/income, food, stigmatized social relations, finance/banking, and housing. The qualitative research design was used to better understand reentry barriers faced by

released offenders, as well as how those barriers have been successfully navigated by offenders who do not recidivate. While quantitative research has provided insights regarding some common barriers such as housing and employment, findings are often conflicting and lack depth. Qualitative research provides opportunities for researchers to better understand mechanisms and details of quantitative findings, and it may also lead to new information. Further, the phenomenological design was appropriate because it allowed for exploration of individuals' perspectives of successful reentry strategies.

In this study, I focused on strategies that resulted in reentry success, rather than prevailing assumptions involving failure and recidivism which permeate the criminal justice system and academic literature. Nonrecidivating ex-convicts who served at least 2 years and had been released for a minimum of 3 years provided information that may aid in the development and improvement of reentry programming. Distributing the information across three levels that affect all persons involved in ex-convict's lives–the micro (personal), mezzo (group/community), and macro (policy) levels–may contribute to social change by shifting stakeholder attention away from assumed failure and toward reentry success.

Data were collected via individual semistructured interviews with 10 released offenders. To be eligible, individuals had to be successful nonrecidivating ex-convicts who served a minimum of 2 years and had been released from prison for at least 3 years. Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to identify prospective participants who resided in Tampa, Florida. Data analysis consisted of open and axial coding to

identify the emergent themes and subthemes. A written narrative of the results is presented in Chapter 4.

Operational Definitions

Recidivism: Any new contact with the criminal justice system or reoffence after release from incarceration; such contact involves new charges, arrest, conviction, and sentencing of former inmates (Hashim & Nohuddin, 2018; Scott & Brown, 2018).

Reentry: Movement of inmates from custody back into society (Jonson & Cullen, 2015).

Reentry programs: Interventions provided to offenders, either while incarcerated or upon release, which are designed to improve reentry. These interventions can be correctional and/or community based. Reentry programs may target single aspects or reentry, or they may offer more multimodal interventions that simultaneously address several reentry challenges (Berghuis, 2018).

Released offender: Individuals who have been convicted of a crime, served a sentence, and been released from incarceration (Ouellette et al., 2016).

Assumptions

I assumed all participants provided open, honest, and thorough responses to interview questions. Because of stigmas related to incarceration and reentry, it was possible that participants may have censored themselves when answering questions. However, I assumed participants responses were honest based on confidentiality. Participants were selected based on their successful reentry; interview questions centered on strategies they employed to overcome reentry barriers. Questions about their offenses

or any other potentially embarrassing topics related to participants' incarceration were not asked.

Another assumption was that interview questions I asked were free of bias and framed in a neutral manner in order to not lead participants to particular responses. This assumption was based on an expert panel review of the interview protocol as described in Chapter 3. This panel review helped ensure interview questions were stated in an unbiased manner and not leading. I also assumed only individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria participated. To be eligible for the study, individuals had to be successful nonrecidivating ex-convicts who served a minimum of 2 years and had been released from prison for at least 3 years. Individual records and backgrounds of participants were not examined; thus, I also assumed information they provided about their experiences was accurate and ineligible individuals did not lie about their eligibility in order to participate. Finally, I assumed participants' self-reporting involving successful integration was accurate. I assumed all participants had abstained from any criminal activity since their release from incarceration, and they were being truthful about their reentry experiences and strategies.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to former offenders who had been released from prison, had not been under Department of Corrections (DOC) or parole supervision for the past 2 years, had not committed crimes since, and experienced successful reintegration. Individuals who went to jail were not included. Those who were incarcerated for less than 2 years postrelease were not included even if they had

experienced successful reentry. Both male and female offenders were eligible, but gender was not examined in this study. Reentry experiences of each released offender are unique and influenced by their experiences, resources, and support that is available to them. While unique backgrounds of participants were detailed to the extent to which they were comfortable, these factors were not subject to examination. Participants freely described strategies they used to reintegrate after release from prison.

Only individuals located in Tampa, Florida were included in this study, as this was the population to which I had access. Individuals in other areas of the country may have different experiences and resources, or be influenced by regional variations in culture, which could produce different findings. The theoretical framework was a delimiting factor, as was the nature and design selected for this research. Importantly, the approach taken for this study was positive in that it focused on reentry strategies used by released offenders who have successfully reintegrated into society. Experiences of individuals who had not successfully reintegrated, as well as those who have recidivated, may be different from experiences of those who have successfully reintegrated. The scope of this study was limited to experiences of those who had successfully reintegrated.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study involved acquiring a sample of released offenders who met inclusion criteria. Personal contacts and snowball sampling were used to ensure the minimum of 10 participants was recruited. Identities of all participants were protected; data from this study relied upon their open and honest responses to interview questions. This could present a limitation if they were reticent in

terms of answering questions honestly for fear of retribution. Because of social distancing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was conducted remotely via video conferencing. This form of data collection could present limitations in terms of participants who lack familiarity with communication technology. The small sample size was another limitation, as findings from this study may not be transferable to the larger population of released offenders.

Variations in experiences of participants may affect dependability of the study. Dependability is a measure of consistency and replicability of findings. Because released offenders come from a wide range of backgrounds with their own unique experiences and perceptions, it is likely that different findings may be reported by other researchers performing similar investigations with other participants. Finally, my choice of research design was a limitation, as it relied on subjective experiences and assumed accuracy of information provided by participants. Because there was no way to confirm the accuracy of information provided by participants, this was a limitation. Phenomenological inquiry into their experiences could be used to address general strategies that could help a broader population of released offenders to reintegrate into society more successfully.

Significance of the Study

This study involved emphasizing success among postincarceration nonrecidivating ex-convicts, rather than focusing on failures and recidivism. The potential contribution to practice and policy depends on willingness of policymakers and essential stakeholders to use information to benefit communities and individuals they represent and serve.

This study can serve as a useful guide for postincarceration success. Finally, this research involved serving an overlooked nonrecidivating population that is projected to continue to impact society as they reintegrate back into their communities.

Summary

The problem that was addressed in this study was the high rate of recidivism among released offenders in the U.S. Recidivism results in the rearrest of up to 650,000 offenders within 3 years of release (BJS, 2017). Several barriers can increase risks for recidivism involving employment, food, social relations, finances, and housing (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2017). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore postincarceration strategies that led to successful reintegration, as demonstrated by nonrecidivism for at least 3 years following release.

Data were collected via interviews with 10 individuals who had successfully reintegrated into their communities after release from prison. To be eligible, participants had to be successful nonrecidivating ex-convicts who served a minimum of 2 years and had been released from prison for at least 3 years. Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to identify prospective participants who resided in the local community of Tampa, Florida. The framework for this study was based on Weiner's attributions for achievement, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, and Bourdieu's theory of practice. Data analysis consisted of three cycles of coding.

Chapter 2 includes a review and synthesis of related scholarship, with the intent of providing important context and addressing the research gap in this study.

Methodological details are provided in Chapter 3. Findings are presented in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of results and implications in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In recent decades, the number of convicted persons sentenced to serve 1 year or more in state prisons increased by 400% (BJS, 2016; Carson & Sabol, 2016). On an average day, over 2.2 million people are incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons (Glaze & Herberman, 2013; Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). Alongside the rise in incarceration, the U.S. justice system now grapples with the subsequent rise in reentry as released offenders reintegrate into communities. According to McNeeley (2018), approximately 95% of prison inmates will be released back into communities at some point. Between 600,000 and 700,000 individuals are released from prison each year (Cochran & Mears, 2016).

The greatest issue with reentry is the failure to successfully reintegrate and desist from future criminal activities. According to the BJS (2017), 67.8% of released prisoners are rearrested for a new crime within 3 years of release; 5 years after release, that statistic increases to 76.6%. Within 3 years of release, recidivism results in the rearrest of 429,000 of 650,000 released offenders (BJS, 2015). This indicates a failure to address reentry challenges faced by released offenders (Mitchell et al., 2016).

Much of the existing research on community reentry has focused on reentry barriers and subsequent recidivism. However, less is known about strategies that released offenders use to successfully reintegrate into communities and demonstrate long-term desistance. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate and identify postincarceration strategies for reintegration that led to sustained success. Specifically, I explored strategies used by released offenders to successfully navigate the following five

policy-driven social barriers: employment/income, food, stigmatized social relations, finance/banking, and housing.

This chapter includes a review of existing research on reentry programs, recidivism, barriers, and postincarceration policies. To begin, the search strategy used to locate sources discussed in this review is described. Next, details involving the theoretical foundation are discussed. The literature review includes a discussion of U.S. imprisonment statistics, recidivism rates, and reentry. Common reentry barriers faced by released prisoners are then described. Postincarceration legislation and policies are highlighted, followed by an examination of select reentry programs. Finally, the research gap is identified, and the chapter closes with a brief summary.

Literature Search Strategy

The following online databases were used to locate literature discussed in this chapter: Academic OneFile, FirstSearch, JSTOR, Digital Commons, Gale, IngentaConnect, Lexis Nexis, Wiley, and Google Scholar. Most of the studies discussed were published within the last 5 years; however, older research was also selectively reviewed when particularly relevant . The following search terms were used: *imprisonment, incarceration, recidivism, desistence, reentry, reintegration, reentry barriers, stigma, substance abuse, housing barriers, education, post-incarceration policies, Second Chance Act, Fair Sentencing Act, First Step Act, reentry programming, criminal, criminality,* and *community support.*

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks for this study were Weiner's attributions for achievement, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, and Bourdieu's theory of practice. The emphasis was on strategies that helped nonrecidivating ex-convicts navigate the five social barriers faced by many ex-convicts upon release from prison.

Weiner (1972) suggested individuals who have control over outcomes in their lives are more likely to succeed in challenging situations, as opposed to situations where they cannot influence external forces beyond their control. Weiner (1972) classified perceived self-efficacy along three causal dimensions: locus of control (internal versus external), stability (ability), and controllability (skill). Previous researchers have used the attribution theory to explore criminal behaviors.

The self-efficacy theory was also used. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is an individual's confidence in his or her capability to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance required for success. Individuals' successes are reflections of their abilities to exert control over their behaviors by adjusting to their environments in order to succeed in challenging situations (Bandura, 1977; Weiner, 1972). The self-efficacy theory is central to much existing research on criminal behavior and recidivism.

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice is based on merging of stability and controllability. At the core of Bourdieu's theory is the concept of *habitus*, which is the notion that individuals have a herd or collective mentality and behave the same way in similar situations; their actions embody everything within their culture which, in turn,

influences how they think, where they live, and how they act. According to Bourdieu, individuals internalize social norms within their situations. When situations and environments change, individuals also change, consistent with the internalized social norms of the new situation or environment. The theory of practice has been used to examine a variety of criminal justice topics. Ilan and Sandberg (2019)

In the case of ex-convicts, their locus of control, stability, controllability, and sense of self-efficacy are formulated before entering the prison system; these factors change while in prison, and then transform again when released back into society. When taken together, these theoretical approaches provide a working formula for identifying and understanding behaviors. These three theories were used to provide a working formula for understanding post-release offenders' behaviors.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

U.S. Imprisonment

To begin the literature review, it is important to address incarceration and reentry issues. The U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world (Anderson, 2015), even when compared to countries with repressive regimes, such as China and Russia (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2017). The incarceration rate in the U.S. is 5.5 times higher than the European Union (Hall et al., 2015). On average day, over 2.2 million people are incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons (Glaze & Herberman, 2013; Wagner & Rabuy, 2017), and one in 36 U.S. adults is under supervision of the correctional system (Kaeble et al., 2015).

Criminogenic Effects

Early correctional facilities were designed to correct criminal behavior through work, deprivation, and isolation (Cochran & Mears, 2016). As Cochran and Mears (2016) explained, "The logic behind incarceration rests in part on expected deterrent effects and benefits that accrue from rehabilitation, especially programming or practices that reduce criminogenic attitudes and beliefs and seek to improve social bonds and capital" (p. 433). However, research indicates that imprisonment often has the opposite effect. Incarceration does not appear to reduce criminality; rather, growing evidence indicates that imprisonment has a criminogenic effect (Cullen et al., 2011), over time. For example, Langan and Levin (2002) revealed that 67.5% of offenders were rearrested for new offenses within 3 years of release. Durose et al. (2014) studied recidivism among a sample of 404,638 released offenders and found that 67.8% were rearrested within 3 years. According to Jonson and Cullen (2015), "inmate reentry is marked by widespread failure" (p. 526).

A variety of experiences can contribute to misconduct while imprisoned (Cochran & Mears, 2016). These experiences foster continued criminality inside jails and prisons; such experiences include victimization, declines in mental and physical health, and deteriorating social ties (Cochran & Mears, 2016). For some, incarceration may lead to desistance; for others, spending time in jails or prisons fosters criminality. Several factors can influence the effects incarceration has on an individual, such as pre-incarceration characteristics and in-prison experiences. Cochran and Mears (2017) posited that the negative effects of incarceration may be particularly influenced by treatment,

victimization, and programming that individuals receive while incarcerated. Many of these programs are aimed at improving reentry, but as discussed later in this chapter, success is often dismal.

Recidivism in the U.S.

Each year, between 600,000 and 700,000 individuals are released from incarceration (Cochran & Mears, 2016); however, most of them return to confinement shortly after release. Recidivism, which describes "the rearrest, reconviction, or reincarceration of ex-offenders" (Anderson et al., 2018, p. 3), can result from new crimes, minor offenses, more serious offenses (such as felonies), or parole violations (Anderson et al., 2018). Nearly three-quarters of released inmates are re-arrested within 5 years (Ouellette et al., 2016), making the U.S. recidivism rate higher than that of any other country (Zoukis, 2017). According to the BJS (2017), 67.8% of released prisoners are arrested for new crimes within 3 years of release; 5 years after release, that statistic increases to 76.6%. Within 3 years of release, recidivism results in the rearrest of 429,000 of 650,000 released offenders (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2015). These statistics demonstrate the failure of the U.S. correctional system to create meaningful reductions in recidivism (Mitchell et al., 2016).

Prison overcrowding is a major contributor to the mass reentry of former offenders – many of whom are released without being adequately prepared for societal reintegration (Amasa-Annang & Scuelnici, 2016). Released offenders are often treated as second-class citizens – given limited access to education, barred from participation in voting, and subject to housing and employment discrimination and reductions in public

benefits (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2017). Consequently, these individuals are confronted with significant job and housing barriers upon release from incarceration (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015).

Incarceration also creates significant disruptions to individuals' community ties, personal relationships, and employment, all of which can undermine efforts to reestablish themselves in communities (Mears & Cochran, 2015). The high rate of recidivism is often attributed to efforts and policies aimed at punishment rather than rehabilitation; upon release, many former offenders are unprepared to cope with life outside of incarceration (Zoukis, 2017). Consequently, a single offense and sentence can tie an offender to the criminal justice system for their entire life (Alexander, 2012). Because more offenders are returning to communities than ever before, it is critical to develop and implement effective reentry programming (Seiter & Kadela, 2016).

Technical Violations

Recidivism related to technical violations accounts for a significant portion of reincarceration. For example, release violators comprise one-third of recidivists in Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2016). Thus, reentry programs targeted at this population could significantly reduce overall recidivism (McNeeley, 2018). As Skinner-Osei and Stepteau-Watson (2018) explained, "The individuals most likely to recidivate are those on probation or parole because they are in virtual prisons governed by unjust rules and restrictions" (p. 243). Fines, travel restrictions, and struggles to make mandatory meetings with probation officers results in more rearrests than additional criminal activities (Morenoff & Harding, 2014).

Race

Recidivism is also more likely to occur among minorities simply because they are disproportionately represented in U.S. correctional facilities. Although minorities comprise only about 30% of the U.S. population, they represent 60% of the incarcerated population (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2017). For example, the U.S. population includes approximately 19 million African American men – over 1 million of which are incarcerated and another 1.2 million who are in supervised release programs (Moore, 2015; Wolfers et al., 2015). To put the size of the incarcerated population of African American men into perspective, they comprise more than the *total* prison populations of Japan, Finland, Germany, Israel, England, Canada, India, and Argentina, combined (Moore, 2015).

Reentry

According to Anderson et al. (2018), reentry is " the process of leaving an institution of incarceration and rejoining conventional society" (p. 3). Similarly, Jonson and Cullen (2015) defined reentry as the movement of an inmate from custody back into society. According to Visher and Travis (2003), the reentry process involves four stages: (a) life before incarceration, (b) life during incarceration, (c) the moment immediately following release, and (d) life after release.

Alongside the rise in incarceration, the U.S. justice system now grapples with the subsequent rise in reentry. Approximately 95% of prison inmates are eventually released back into their communities (McNeeley, 2018). Between 1978 and 2013, the number of individuals released from state and federal prisons each year increased from 142,033 to

623,337 (Carson, 2014). When the jail population is included, the number of offenders released annually jumps to nearly 10 million (Jonson & Cullen, 2015).

A defining characteristic of the reentry movement is the development of programs intended to foster successful reintegration into communities, after release (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). The aim of reentry programs is to help former offenders overcome common barriers to reentry. During the first 30 days after release, reentry has been described as even more difficult than time spent in prison (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2017). Unaddressed, reentry barriers increase risks of recidivism. As Jonson and Cullen (2015) pointed out, a major challenge to the development of reentry programs is determining characteristics that are most effective.

Reentry Barriers

Several barriers are associated with reentry. As Rade et al. (2018) explained, these barriers are often the result of stigma and discrimination toward released offenders, which can make reintegration very difficult. Reentry barriers also result from unfairly punitive and discriminatory post-integration policies that create an underclass of disenfranchised released offenders (Hall et al., 2015). Some of the most common issues discussed in the reentry literature are discussed, as follows.

Employment and Money

Employment is a critical challenge for released offenders – and it is also an integral component of successful reentry. Employment is not only crucial for helping meet the material needs of released offenders, but high-quality and stable jobs may reinforce values and prosocial behaviors, thereby improving reintegration (McNeeley,

2018). Workforce participation has the potential to improve reentry and reduce recidivism by fostering social bonds and capital (Hinton, 2020). However, employers are often hesitant to hire individuals with a criminal history. Research indicates that employers often perceive released offenders as lacking basic work skills, and fear that hiring formerly incarcerated individuals could create concerns or backlash among clients and customers (Obatusin et al., 2019). Often, employment is considered to have the greatest influence on recidivism risks (Lockwood et al., 2015). Lockwood et al. (2015) argued:

> It is reasonable to believe that uneducated and unskilled ex-prisoners are likely to be unemployed after release from prison; and, probably that they will become recidivists simply because they do not have the financial means for independent living in the community. (p. 16)

As many as 90% of U.S. employers conduct criminal background checks (Applebaum, 2015) and applicants with criminal backgrounds are 62% less likely to receive calls back than those without criminal histories (Anderson, 2019). California enacted a law in 2017 called *Ban the Box,* which made it illegal for employers to discriminate based on criminal history. Anderson (2019) explained the initiative was meant to prevent employers from generating bias about an applicant's character based on past criminal offenses without first considering the applicant's skill and ability to perform the job. However, the initiative has proven difficult to enforce and seems to have done little to alleviate the employment challenges faced by released offenders.

Petersilia (2008) indicated that most released prisoners have limited employment skills and work history. Offenders are usually released with very little money; other than funds they have accumulated in personal accounts during their incarceration, they are typically provided with less than $100, an in-state bus ticket, a single set of clothing, and prescription medication to last less than 2 months (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Accordingly, they are pressured to quickly find financial means to support themselves upon release. If a released offender cannot obtain employment, he or she is more likely to resort to crime.

Petersilia (2011) noted a criminal record can also prevent former offenders from working in several fields, including childcare, education, home health, nursing, and security. Occupations that require licensure, such as nail technicians and barbers, may also be out of reach for former offenders, even if their former crimes are completely unrelated to a profession (Alexander, 2010). Compounding the employment barriers that many released offenders experience are the employment or vocational training requirements that are often conditions of probation or parole (Petersilia, 1999). Thus, it is possible for such violations to occur, not because of an individual's lack of desire to obtain a job, but because of the lack of opportunities available to them. Recidivism may not just occur because a former offender cannot access material resources needed during reentry, but also as technical violations due to the inability to fulfill vocational conditions of supervised release. Other issues that exacerbate employment-related challenges include the growing digital divide, the rising costs of post-secondary education, increased reliance on a skilled labor market, and perceptions that former offenders are social threats (Hall et al., 2015).

Without stable employment, released offenders often have very few financial resources, making access to financial assistance an essential buffer during the transition from incarceration to communities. Unfortunately, many offenders are banned from accessing such resources. For example, Section 115 of the Welfare Reform Act created a lifetime ban on cash and food stamps for individuals who have been convicted of state or felony drug offenses (Personal Responsibility and Work Responsibility Act, 1996). As Hall et al. (2016) pointed out, this ban does not apply to more serious offenses, such as murder, sexual battery, or domestic violence. Some states have exercised discretion in the enforcement of Section 115. For example, Massachusetts allows individuals convicted of drug crimes to be eligible for welfare assistance; however, they are not eligible during the first 12 months after release – the time when such assistance is most critical (Hall et al., 2015). While Section 115 was enacted as a deterrent to drug-related crimes, no evidence exists to indicate the policy has reduced drug-related offenses. Instead, as Hall et al. explained, "this policy has reduced the capacity of families to economically care for their children when reentering society prior to finding employment" (p. 61).

Housing

Next to employment, housing is the largest hurdle faced by released offenders. Housing instability can increase recidivism via social stigmas that encourage released offenders to engage in criminal activities (Lutze et al., 2014). Criminal records often prevent released offenders from accessing public housing (Hall et al., 2015), and private rental communities and landlords can refuse to rent to individuals with criminal backgrounds (Phillips & Spencer, 2013). Even when a released offender finds a landlord

willing to rent to them, they often lack the upfront money required for security deposits and other fees (Phillips & Spencer, 2013).

Moreover, the housing that released offenders have access to is often located in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods, which are associated with high rates of criminality and recidivism (Anderson et al., 2018). As Huebner and Pleggenkuhle (2013) explained, "The social structure of a community has potential implications for the availability and nature of social services, housing opportunities, and community relationships" (p. 823). Negative correlations have been established between community disadvantage and recidivism, with the most notable effects occurring among minority men (Huebner & Pleggenkuhle, 2013). Recidivism rates are particularly high among African American men who return to disadvantaged and segregated communities (Amasa-Annang & Scutelnicu, 2016).

Many released offenders must live with family members who may be unable to provide long-term, stable accommodations (McNeeley, 2018). Consequently, rates of homelessness among released offenders are often estimated at over 25% (McNeeley, 2018), and many are relegated to living in high-poverty, crime ridden neighborhoods (Anderson et al., 2018). Chamberlain and Wallace (2015) investigated how the concentration of released offenders in neighborhoods influenced rates of recidivism. Analysis revealed that neighborhood characteristics of poverty and crime were strong predictors of recidivism, and that neighborhoods with large concentrations of parolees had particularly high rates of re-offense (Chamberlain & Wallace, 2015). Individuals who lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods were not only more likely to recidivate, but the

timeline for recidivism was shorter. The researchers suggested that this finding may be the result of increased competition for resources, as well as disruptions in social ties – both of which can facilitate crime (Chamberlain & Wallace, 2015).

Education

Low levels of education can also create reentry barriers for many offenders. The problem is not necessarily due to the lack of educational programming available to inmates. For example, although most prisons offer educational (GED) or vocational training to inmates, fewer than 8% of inmates take advantage of these programs (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Significant disparities exist regarding risks for incarceration and recidivism, by educational level. Lockwood et al. (2015) conducted a 5-year study to examine correlations between post-release recidivism and educational levels, and whether racial differences existed. Disparities for both race and educational level were present. For example, the recidivism rates among Caucasian men, according to educational level, were 26.2% for men with less than a high school diploma or GED, 20.8% for those with a high school diploma, and 13% among those with at least a 2-year college degree. Among African American men, rates of recidivism were 26.9% for men with less than a high school diploma, 22% among those with a high school diploma or GED, and 14.2% for men with at least a 2-year degree. At the end of the 5-year study, the recidivism rate for Caucasian men with less than a high school diploma was 55.2%; among African American men, the rate was 57.8%. When controlling for race, significant differences in recidivism rates existed by education level. The researchers concluded that results highlighted the need for correctional education that helped offenders increase their

employability upon release, as this could help reduce recidivism rates (Lockwood et al., 2015).

The employment barriers faced by released prisoners do not just harm the formerly incarcerated; these barriers also have economic implications on a broader scale. Research indicates that disqualifying released offenders from jobs based on criminal histories results in employment reductions that equate to approximately $80 billion in yearly gross domestic product (Bucknor & Barber, 2016; Hopkins, 2017). In addition, the lower wage jobs that individuals with criminal backgrounds must often assume results in lower income tax revenues (Hinton, 2020).

Transportation

An oft-overlooked barrier to reentry is the lack of transportation available to former offenders (Northcutt Bohmert, 2015). Transportation challenges not only impede the ability to travel to work but can also make it difficult for released inmates to obtain substance abuse or mental health treatment or meet conditions of supervised release such as meetings with parole officers (McNeeley, 2018). Research indicates that one-quarter of released prisoners experience difficulties accessing transportation upon reentry (McNeeley, 2018). These challenges are not just associated with accessing public transportation resources or personal vehicles; released offenders may also struggle to obtain driver's licenses. Often, driver's licenses are revoked when an individual is convicted and incarcerated, and the process of reinstating licenses after release is time-consuming and expensive (Hall et al., 2015). The inability to reinstate a driver's license

can make it difficult for released offenders to drive to job interviews, jobs, or meet with mandated probation appointments (Hall et al., 2015).

Social Support

When present, social support may reduce risks of recidivism; accordingly, the absence of a social support network can create reentry barriers for released offenders. One strategy to help individuals maintain social and community ties during incarceration is through visitation. Prison visitation provides offenders with opportunities to maintain their connections outside of prison while they are incarcerated (Mitchell et al., 2016). In a large meta-analysis on the effects of visitation, Mitchell et al. (2016) found that visitation was associated with modest reductions in recidivism. Importantly, not all forms of social support are created equally, and some researchers have reported minor or null effects of certain forms of social support on reentry success. For example, Taylor and Becker (2015) studied the effects of peer instrumental support on recidivism. The researchers reasoned that instrumental support from peers may help released offenders overcome common reentry barriers, such as finding employment, housing, and treatment for substance abuse. However, the researchers found that peer support had no significant effects on recidivism risks (Taylor & Becker, 2015).

Public/Community Support

An essential component of effective reentry programming is related to public support from communities (Oullette et al., 2017). Schlager (2018) argued that there must be symbiotic relationships between former offenders and communities for reentry to be successful. Offenders need to possess human capital within their communities, and

community members must be willing to provide resources to generate that capital. Public support for released offenders is an attitudinal construct that is often operationalized as an individual's willingness to spend time around ex-offenders, along with an assessment of an ex-offender's character (Rade et al., 2018). In contrast, reentry support describes the public's endorsement of policies and programs that facilitate community reintegration (Rade et al., 2018). Released offenders who return to underserved and disadvantaged communities often struggle to reestablish themselves after incarceration and are at and increased risk for stigma, probation violation, and recidivism (Hall et al., 2015). Community support for reentry programming may exist as support for tax-funded housing and employment programs for released offenders (Rade et al., 2018). Not only can community support affect stigmas and opportunities available to former offenders, but it can also impact the very development of criminal justice policies and reentry programming and resources.

Ouellette et al. (2017) explained opposition to reentry and associated programming can create political barriers to related services. Negative attitudes toward rehabilitative programs among the public has led to increases in punitive criminal justice policies that channel money into incarceration and out of rehabilitative programs (Nhan et al., 2016). However, researchers have found that the public does not hold a disparaging view of all post-incarceration policies and programs. For example, Ouellette et al. studied public support for post-incarceration policies, especially those related to housing and employment, and found moderate public support for services related to employment,

mental health, substance abuse, education, and public housing. However, the public was less supportive of policies when it meant increases to their taxes (Ouellette et al., 2016).

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse issues significantly increase chances of recidivism. According to the SAMHSA (2014), 38% of parolees had a substance abuse issue in 2012. Estimates of substance abuse problems among incarcerated individuals are as high as 85%, and offenders are four times more likely to have substance abuse issues than members of the general public (Zortman et al., 2016). Link and Hamilton (2017) explained why released offenders with few resources, support, or other coping mechanisms turn to drugs or alcohol. The relationship between substance abuse and incarceration may be bidirectional; substance abuse can predict the likelihood of recidivism, and recidivism can also increase the likelihood of substance abuse.

Compounding the substance abuse problem is the low level of treatment that is received for it. Petersilia (2008) reported that only 2.5% of California inmates who were in high need of drug treatment received it. Hipp et al. (2010) reported that recidivism rates were significantly lower for released prisoners who were living in areas where more social services, such as substance abuse treatment, were available. Other researchers have suggested that the problem is not necessarily the provision of treatment programs, but access and enrollment in them. For example, Taxman et al. (2014) reported that 74% of U.S. prisons offered substance abuse programs, but only 13.3% of inmates participated in such programs. Moreover, only 4.7% of offenders with specific needs for treatment services accessed them (Taxman et al., 2014). As discussed later, low levels of

participation in reentry programming, such as substance abuse treatment and vocational training, suggest an underlying problem may be offenders' lack of desire or intrinsic motivation to change.

Mental and Emotional Health

Individuals with mental disorders, such as depression and psychotic illness, are overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Abracen et al., 2013). Over the last 50 years, deinstitutionalization has resulted in an enormous (95%) reduction in the number of available beds at psychiatric facilities, creating massive growth in the number of untreated individuals with mental illness in the public (Baillargeon et al., 2010). An estimated one million individuals with severe mental disorders are under correctional supervision each year, and around 3.5 million encounter the criminal justice system, annually (Wilson & Wood, 2014). The U.S. system of corrections houses 10 times more individuals with mental illness than do the country's psychiatric hospitals (King et al., 2018). Increasingly punitive polices, such as mandatory minimum sentencing for drug-related crimes, have created increases in the number of incarcerated individuals with mental illness (King et al., 2018).

Mental disorders are not only linked with higher rates of incarceration (King et al., 2018), but also higher risks for recidivism (Wilson & Wood, 2014). As King et al. (2018) noted, symptoms of mental health disorders can compound reentry challenges due to interference with the abilities to complete tasks essential to successful reentry, such as obtaining employment. Released prisoners with mental health disorders are more prone to homelessness, physical health ailments, drug abuse, and unemployment (Bruce et al.,

2013). King et al.'s study on recidivism among women with severe mental disorders revealed that those with mental disorders were 16% more likely to recidivate within 8 years of release.

Mood and psychotic disorders that cause significant impairments are often associated with recidivism (King et al., 2018). After controlling for drug abuse, age, and other risk factors, Stewart and Wilton (2014) found that people with mental illness were 1.5 times more likely to recidivate. Anderson et al. (2018) revealed that along with income and housing needs, assistance for mental health problems was crucial to reducing recidivism. While many released offenders contend with serious mental disorders, others struggle with poor emotional health. For example, Wright et al. (2015) explained that released offenders often face internal struggles related to returning to communities that have significantly changed since they left, depression and anxiety, and feelings of isolation and loneliness. Often, released offenders experience estrangement from friends and relatives and are treated as social outcasts (Wright et al., 2015). As noted earlier, a lack of social support can increase risks for recidivism. In this way, poor emotional well-being can be compounded by poor social ties, which may facilitate engagement in criminal behaviors.

Abuse and Trauma

Trauma and abuse, especially that which occurs during childhood, can also create reentry barriers for released offenders. Skinner-Osei and Stepteau-Watson (2018) revealed two barriers that quantitative researchers rarely mention: stress and childhood trauma. Mahoney (2019) also reported the high incidence of childhood trauma among

offenders as an issue that is often ignored. Trauma experienced during childhood can alter the ways individuals respond to stress, leading to increases in aggression, risk-taking, and antisocial behaviors (Mahoney, 2019). Other researchers have reported that the rates of childhood trauma among offenders is significantly higher than that of the general population (Arsenault, 2016; Lynch et al., 2017; Mahoney, 2019). For example, Lynch et al. (2017) found that 92% of incarcerated women had experienced interpersonal violence, childhood abuse, or witnessed violence during childhood. When childhood trauma contributes to criminal behaviors later in life, it is essential for that trauma to be dealt with before an offender is returned to the community to improve reentry success. Unfortunately, childhood trauma is often undetected, creating a barrier that receives little attention.

Reentry Programs

Alongside the growing number of prior offenders who are released from incarceration each year has been increased attention to programs designed to improve community reintegration and reduce risks for recidivism (McNeeley, 2018). Nationwide, rising awareness of the barriers faced by released offenders has been the subject of many policies and programs designed to foster more successful reentry (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). Much of the focus has been on collaboration among agencies to create dynamic programs to improve reentry. Over the last three decades, states across the country have adopted reentry programming, consisting of coordinated partnerships between private and public organizations that attempt to help former offenders successfully reintegrate into communities (Amasa-Annang & Scutelnicu, 2016).

Unfortunately, many of these efforts are disjointed. As Nhan et al. (2016) explained, "Prisoner reentry services in the United States are a hodge-podge assortment of official and unofficial agencies and organizations localized in different regions" (p. 2). The disjointedness of reentry programming often makes it difficult for offenders to navigate, contributing to the underutilization of available services and, ultimately, paltry reductions to recidivism (Nhan et al., 2016).

Some reentry programs can help reduce recidivism; however, the effects of many of these programs are heterogenous, while others are criminogenic (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Ndrecka (2014) revealed that, on average, reentry programs only reduce recidivism by about 6%. Researchers have examined the reasons for the small impacts of these programs and reported several factors that undermine their effectiveness. For example, many reentry programs begin after an offender is released, but others begin pre-release and continue for a period after reentry (Oullette et al., 2017). Jonson and Cullen (2015) revealed three common issues: First, there is too much variation in programs. Some programs are focused on addressing substance abuse, mental health issues, or behavioral problems. Others focus on education, employment, and housing. Some are run by volunteers and local non-profits; others are faith-based; still others are federally funded and organized. Compounding the challenges associated with the variations in reentry programming, very few programs are evaluated for effectiveness (Mears & Cochran, 2015). As Jonson and Cullen (2015) explained, the lack of empirical investigation and support makes it nearly impossible to declare which types of reentry programming are evidence-based and effective.

The lack of established theory to inform program development is another issue that undermines the effectiveness of reentry programming (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Reentry programs are often based on little or no credible theories (Mears & Cochran, 2015). Jonson and Cullen (2015) explained, "Most often, program inventors do not rely on scientific criminology when implementing an intervention" (p. 539). Rather, developers of reentry programs focus on the known barriers that former offenders face, such as housing, employment, and substance abuse. The creation of interventions to help individuals overcome these barriers is important; however, without a theoretical foundation rooted in treatment and rehabilitation, it is difficult to know whether such programs actually reduce recidivism (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Oullette et al. (2017) explained despite the growing number of reentry programs, the most effective program strategies were still unclear. Anderson et al. (2018) also pointed out the trouble with the lack of reentry research, explaining that a lack of empirical research on what types of interventions are effective at reducing recidivism can lead to the adoption of ineffective programs or counterproductive policies – both of which may exacerbate recidivism rates.

This section includes a discussion of some recent investigations on the effectiveness of reentry programs for reducing recidivism.

High Risk Revocation Reduction (HRRR) Program

The HRRR program was developed by the Minnesota Department of Corrections and received funding through the SCA. The aim of the HRRR program was to provide released inmates with case management, transition planning, and other services to assist with housing, employment, transportation needs, and family/social support. The program

specifically targeted male release offenders – men who were released from prison but returned on technical violations, such as failing to meet parole expectations or committing new criminal activities that would not result in a prison sentence for someone with no prior offenses (McNeeley, 2018). An initial evaluation of the HRRR's effect on recidivism conducted by Clark (2015) indicated positive effects on recidivism reduction, suggesting that targeting release offenders may be a viable strategy for reducing over recidivism. However, McNeeley's (2018) follow-up, which examined the long-term effects of the HRRR on recidivism, revealed the program was less effective, over time. Still, McNeeley's analysis indicated that program participants were slightly less likely to be re-arrested or re-convicted, but it did not significantly reduce supervised release revocations. The researcher suggested the paltry long-term effects of the HRRR may have been related to a lack of pre-release services, as well as low levels of service utilization (such as employment assistance, transitional assistance, and transportation assistance) among participants.

Pennsylvania Board of Probation & Parole (PBPP) Reentry Program

The lack of long-term effects has been reported in examinations of many other reentry programs (RP), including the PBPP program. The RP offered by the PBPP provided participants with strong supervision and oversight through the reentry process. The program helps released offenders set goals, receive substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, employment assistance, education, and family reunification (Zortman et al., 2016). Program participants were also involved in monthly meetings with parole agents to discuss their progress, challenges, goals, or accomplishments. A large,

18-month study was conducted to examine the short- and long-term effectiveness of the PBPP RP on recidivism. Data were obtained via interviews and questionnaires with program participants.

Findings revealed several short-term benefits of the program, including improvements in participants' behaviors, attitudes, substance use, socialization, and cognition (Zortman et al., 2016). Participants were less likely to associate with negative people, they experienced improved relationships with family members and friends, and they demonstrated increasing levels of independence as they progressed through the program. However, in terms of recidivism, the benefits of program participation diminished, over time. The 1-year rate of recidivism was 19%; however, 3 years after program participation, Zortman et al. found that the benefits almost completely disappeared. At 3-year follow-up, the difference in recidivism between control and intervention groups was just 2.7%. The researchers explained that while the program showed promise, research was needed to better understand how to sustain the benefits observed during the first year of the program.

Systematic Reviews

Several systematic reviews have been conducted to understand the effects of reentry programming. For example, Berghuis (2018) performed a meta-analysis of nine studies to examine the effects of reentry programs on reintegration and recidivism. Overall, the analysis provided little evidence of positive effects of the examined reentry programs. Berghuis stated, "Although the results are not very encouraging, it is important that funding for reentry programs is supported" (p. 4671). That is, Berghuis did not feel

the lack of empirical evidence to support reentry programming was justification for cuts in funding; rather, the researcher argued that more investigation was needed to better understand the most effective aspects of reentry programs and how they could be improved upon.

A systematic review of eight qualitative studies on reentry programming was conducted by Kendall et al. (2018). The researchers reported that several elements were essential to reentry program success, including the provision of social support, access to housing and employment, interpersonal skills of case workers, individualized approaches to case management, and continuous support throughout pre- and post-release periods. Moore et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of reentry programs that specifically addressed substance abuse and found that essential elements included cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), motivational interviews, therapeutic communities, psychoeducation, and medication-assisted treatment. Eighteen of the 31 studies Moore et al. examined for recidivism outcomes indicated reductions in at least one indicator of recidivism, such as re-arrest or re-incarceration.

Taken together, findings from these two studies (Kendall et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2020) highlighted not only the heterogeneity of reentry interventions, but also the emphasis that substance-abuse programs placed on psychological and emotional tools, which were far less evident in Kendall et al.'s study. As discussed later, a critical element of successful reentry programming may be an intrinsic desire to change, which might be fostered through psychological tools such as motivational interviewing and CBT.

Legislation

In response to the large number of released offenders who reenter communities each year, several new criminal justice policies have been developed. These policies are aimed at deterring future illegal behaviors, setting consequences for future criminality, and improving desistance. Post-incarceration policies cover a number of dimensions, including employment, education, housing, healthcare, and finance, at local, state, and federal levels (Hall et al., 2015).

Although post-incarceration policies are aimed at dissuading criminal behavior after release from incarceration, they often create significant disservice for released offenders. As Hall et al. (2016) explained:

> These policies prohibit convicted individuals from (1) using public housing, thereby increasing homelessness rates; (2) entering a range of employment opportunities, thereby increasing unemployment, long-term unemployment, and nonlabor force participation rates; (3) continuing on to higher education, thereby increasing the low-skilled labor force rates; and (4) economically providing to their children, thereby increasing the rate of children in poverty and increasing the number of children in the child welfare system. (p. 64)

In this way, post-incarceration policies can create reentry barriers that facilitate, rather than reduce, recidivism (Hall et al., 2015).

Fair Sentencing Act

The Fair Sentencing Act (FSA, 2010), which was passed in 2010, changed mandatory minimum sentencing for cocaine possession. Prior to passage of the FSA, the

ratio of powder to crack cocaine that was required to trigger mandatory minimum sentencing was 100:1. Critics argued that this enormous discrepancy often targeted minorities and the poor, as cocaine is a much more expensive drug to acquire. The FSA resulted in a five-fold increase of the quantity of crack required to trigger mandatory sentencing, shifting the powder to crack cocaine ration required for mandatory minimums to 20:1 (Bjerk, 2016). The FSA was viewed as legislation that would improve the fairness of sentencing; just 2 years after passage of the law, average sentence lengths for crack defendants dropped by nearly 16% (Bjerk, 2016). However, an investigation into the actual effects of the FSA revealed the law's impact was modest. Bjerk (2016) found that the FSA was not the primary factor in declines in sentencing for crack cocaine, nor did it significantly reduce disparities between crack and cocaine sentences. Rather, changes to sentencing guidelines allowed judges and prosecutors to exercise more leniency in sentencing crack cases.

First Step Act

The First Step Act (FSA) was signed into law in 2018, signaling the first legislative reform of the criminal justice system in years. The FSA ushered in several changes to the justice system, including (a) an increase in the number of good time days an in inmate could be credited for, (b) sentence reductions for individuals who had been caught in possession of crack or cocaine, (c) a reduction in mandatory minimum sentences for drug crimes, (d) authorization of compassionate release for individuals over the age of 60 who had served at least two-thirds of their sentences, and I the prevention of shackling pregnant women or placing minors in solitary confinement (Aviram, 2020).

While the FSA created improvements to the federal prison system, Young (2019) pointed out that it failed to reach those outside of federal confinement, which accounts for just 12% of the incarcerated population. The FSA also touted goals of recidivism reduction, but critical flaws in the program undermined these objectives. Few corrections-based programs have demonstrated any statistically significant improvements to recidivism (Young, 2019).

Second Chance Act

The Second Chance Act (SCA), which was passed in 2008, allocates funding for services needed to improve reentry. The focus of SCA is the provision of job skills and employment assistance, substance abuse and mental health treatment, social support, and mentoring (Amasa-Annang & Scutelnicu, 2016). The SCA authorized the distribution of funds to state, local, and tribal agencies to provide services to assist former offenders with reentry (Amasa-Annang & Scutelnicu, 2016). Between 2009 and 2012, alone, $271 million in funding was provided to SCA programs (Amasa-Annang & Scutelnicu, 2016). To be eligible for funding under the SCA, programs must use evidence-based practices and implement need- and risk-assessments. The SCA led to the development of reentry councils in most states, which are tasked with coordinating assistance in the areas of employment, education, health, housing, and other social services (Anderson et al., 2018). Amasa-Annang and Scutelnicu (2016) assessed the effectiveness of SCA programs for reducing recidivism in the states of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi and found SCA programs were linked to significant declines in recidivism in Georgia (-12.4%) and Mississippi (-10%), but a 2.5% increase in Alabama.

Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI)

Serving as a nationwide and unprecedented response to the increasing reentry issues faced by former offenders (Garcia & Ritter, 2012), the SVORI was funded by the U.S. Departments of Justice, Labor, Education, Housing, and Health and Human Services, which provided more than $100 million in funding to develop or expand reentry programming. The program began in 2003, awarding 69 agencies funding in amounts of up to $2 million. The only major requirement of reentry programming developed under SVORI was that it had to consist of three phases: during incarceration, pre-release, and post-release (Garcia & Ritter, 2012). Because there was little guidance in the development of reentry programs under SVORI, significant variations in these programs exist.

Visher et al. (2016) examined the effects of the SVORI (Garcia & Ritter, 2012 across 12 types of reentry services, which were provided to 1,600 adult men between 2004 and 2005. These services included case manager needs assessment, reentry planning, reentry classes, life skills, employment services, individual changes services, mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, personal relationship training, criminal attitudes training, anger management, and education. Surprisingly, the analysis revealed that three of the services (reentry classes, life skills, and employment services) were associated with a shorter time to re-arrest. Overall, findings not only failed to demonstrate consistently positive effects of 12 services often assumed to improve reentry but indicated the aforementioned three categories of services actually had deleterious effects on reentry.

Willingness to Change

An important finding that emerged from the literature on reentry, which has received little attention, is the essential role of intrinsic motivation. That is, in order for any reentry programming to be utilized, released offenders must have an internal desire and willingness to change. Several researchers have suggested that the null or paltry effects of reentry programming may result from a lack of desire for change. According to Visher et al. (2016), negative effects of reentry services may be due to raised expectations that released offenders were not prepared to meet. MacKenzie (2012) said even when reentry services are available to released offenders, they may be unprepared to take advantage of those services until they are ready to make individual changes. Visher et al. (2016) found education and training designed to change attitudes about criminal behavior was associated with a longer time to re-arrest. Accordingly, a missing element in many reentry programs may be a focus on fostering released offenders' intrinsic motivations to make positive changes to their lives. Zortman et al. (2016) emphasized this point, explaining that reentry programs are only effective when offenders had a desire to make positive changes to their lives.

Schlager (2018) argued that for former offenders to take advantage of programs available to them, they must be empowered during the reentry process. By providing former offenders with agency and engaging them in the reentry process, they may be more likely to take the process seriously and generate desires to improve their own lives (Schlager, 2018). Wright et al. (2015) argued that successful reentry is contingent upon released offenders' abilities to generate a shift in self-image, from viewing themselves as

deviant to viewing themselves as people who are capable of change and becoming contributing members of society. This shift can be difficult for released offenders, especially when they have held to deviant identities throughout incarceration (Wright et al., 2015). Unfortunately, many reentry programs focus on former offenders' material needs, such as housing and employment, without adequately addressing the internal changes that must occur for successful reentry to happen.

Methodology Literature Review

The current study was qualitative in nature and followed a phenomenological design. A phenomenological approach allowed me to explore participants' perceptions and experiences with navigating five policy-driven social barriers after release from incarceration. These barriers included (a) food, (b) housing, (c) stigmatized social relations, (d) employment/income, and (e) finance/banking. The aim was to explore and document a changing social phenomenon of not only an entire demographic, but the transformation that will be brought about by the shift in a non-recidivating population of ex-convicts.

A qualitative design was selected for its exploratory nature. The reasoning for eliminating a quantitative method was that unlike qualitative research, quantitative researchers strive for and develop explanations of lived experiences by statistically examining individuals' perceived realities (Yilmaz, 2013). The intent of the current study was not to assess relationships between variables, but to explore the strategies employed by non-recidivating ex-convicts to navigate five policy-driven social barriers. For this research, it would have been impracticable to condense the social phenomenon under

investigation into quantifiable variables because of the varied, unique, and unpredictable experiences of individual participants.

Literature Review of Related Methods

A phenomenological approach was deemed suitable as it allows researchers to gather information from participants' lived experiences to understand their pathways to success in complex and unpredictable social environments (Landrum & Garza, 2015). According to Creswell (2014), phenomenological researchers explore research phenomena as experienced and perceived by the individuals who encounter them. The rationale for choosing a qualitative phenomenological design related to the study phenomenon, as well as the type of data that were collected. Information was obtained via interviews with a small group of successful ex-convicts. The focus of the interviews was the meanings assigned by participants. A phenomenological design was appropriate because it allowed for an exploration of successful reentry strategies, from the perspectives and experiences of individuals who employed those strategies, firsthand.

Summary and Conclusion

Qualitative research may provide important opportunities to better understand reentry barriers faced by released offenders, as well as how those barriers have been successfully navigated by the minority of offenders who do not recidivate. While quantitative research has provided insights regarding some common barriers involving housing and employment, findings are often conflicting and lack depth. Qualitative investigation provides opportunities for researchers to better understand the mechanisms and details of quantitative findings, in addition to providing new information. Skinner-

Osei and Stepteau-Watson (2018) revealed two reentry barriers faced by African American men: stress and childhood trauma.

As revealed in this chapter, research indicates that released offenders face a multitude of complex barriers to reentry; these barriers are fundamental contributors to high rates of recidivism. However, as Wright et al. (2015) claimed, despite high rates of recidivism, many released offenders do manage to successfully reintegrate into communities and abstain from additional criminal activities. Rather than focusing on barriers faced by former offenders, more research is needed on how to successfully overcome challenges to experience successful reentry. Via input from those who have successfully developed and applied strategies to overcome reentry barriers, it may be possible to develop more helpful interventions that not only improve immediate reentry success, but also foster long-term reductions in recidivism.

Additional research is needed to develop and modify policies and interventions related to reentry. Lack of research on successful offender reentry strategies is a gap that was addressed in this research. This chapter included a comprehensive review of existing research on reentry, recidivism, barriers, and postincarceration policies. Chapter 3 includes information about the methodology.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and investigate postincarceration strategies that help convicted criminals reintegrate into society with sustained success. Rather than focus on setbacks and problems faced by ex-convicts, which scholars have long recognized and documented, the purpose of this study was to explore and identify strategies that helped ex-convicts successfully address social barriers involving food, housing, stigmatized social relations, employment/income, and finance/banking.

In general, policymakers and researchers have failed to focus on strategies used by ex-convicts who have made the most of their second chances at freedom and avoided recidivism (Jonson et al., 2015). Successful reintegration strategies used by ex-convicts fall into three domains: micro (personal), mezzo (group and community), and macro (policy). Data gathered from participant interviews may be used to develop research-based interventions to improve social reintegration among ex-convicts. With an emphasis on success, I explored strategies employed by 10 successful nonrecidivating ex-convicts. Participants were at least 18 years of age, had served a minimum of 2 years, been out of prison for at least 3 years, and successfully navigated the five policy-driven social barriers which result in self-sufficiency. The aim of this study was to explore reintegration strategies that worked, rather than focus on recidivism and failure.

The following guiding question informed the current study: What strategies do nonrecidivating ex-convicts use to navigate the five policy-driven social barriers upon release from prison? This chapter includes information about the methodology. Chapter

3 begins with a discussion of the research design, my role as the researcher, and participation selection. Procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection are detailed. The data analysis plan is followed by a review of trustworthiness strategies and ethical procedures. The chapter concludes with a brief summary and transition to Chapter 4.

Research Design and Rationale

This research was qualitative in nature and involved using a phenomenological design. The phenomenological approach was used to explore participants' perceptions and experiences involving navigating five policy-driven social barriers after release from incarceration. This approach involves gathering information from participants' lived experiences to understand their pathways to success in complex and unpredictable social environments (Landrum & Garza, 2015). According to Creswell (2014), phenomenological researchers explore research phenomena as experienced and perceived by individuals who encounter them. The rationale for choosing a qualitative phenomenological study design related to the study phenomenon, as well as types of data that were collected. Information was obtained via interviews with a small group of successful ex-convicts. The focus of interviews was meanings assigned by participants.

A qualitative design was selected for its exploratory nature. Unlike qualitative research, quantitative researchers strive for and develop explanations of lived experiences by statistically examining individuals' perceived realities (Yilmaz, 2013). The intent of the current study was not to assess relationships between variables, but to explore strategies employed by nonrecidivating ex-convicts to navigate five policy-driven social

barriers. For this research, it would have been impracticable to use quantifiable variables because of varied, unique, and unpredictable experiences of individual participants.

Before selecting the phenomenological design, I considered and eliminated several other qualitative approaches. These approaches included grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and ethnography. A discussion of each of these designs and why they were inappropriate for this current research is provided.

The grounded theory design was not suitable because my intention was not to gather data from participants' experiences to establish a process, generate a theory from that process, or explain how a process worked. Narrative inquiry was rejected because the aim of the study was not to collect individuals' stories to better understand their identities and personal assessments. Using narrative inquiry, researchers record sequences of events as told by participants in the form of journals, autobiographies, biographies, and pictures of their experiences. These stories are then retold using participants' authentic accounts (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Because of the delicate nature of the population under investigation, and importance of ensuring participant confidentiality, a narrative design was unsuitable for the current study. Further, the purpose of the study was not to retell participants' stories, but rather to gain insights regarding their experiences involving successful social reintegration.

An ethnographic design was also considered. Ethnographic research is often used to explore cultural aspects of a distinct group or society. These researchers immerse themselves in the everyday lives of the group of interest, observing and studying their social dynamics. Researchers' observations are used to develop detailed accounts of

group values, behaviors, and beliefs over an extended period of time (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Although nonrecidivating ex-convict can be considered a distinct or unique group, their lifestyle is not considered a traditional or time-honored cultural mode of life, but rather a social phenomenon. Accordingly, the ethnographic design was not appropriate for this current research.

Role of the Researcher

I was led to this research topic while volunteering with a few small nonprofit organizations. My volunteer work involved mentoring at-risk youth, which educated me about devastating effects that incarceration has on communities, families, and the ex-convicts themselves. My interest in the plight of disillusioned and at-risk youth came about while listening to their stories about the challenges faced navigating five policy-driven social barriers.

My role in this research was to explore reintegration strategies used by successful ex-convicts; findings may be used to foster successful social reintegration among other ex-convicts. This information may be used by policymakers and other stakeholders to advance policies and practices that benefit local communities. My role as the researcher involved planning, implementing, and meeting with a sample of nonrecidivating ex-convicts who had successfully reintegrated into society. I conducted semistructured interviews in virtual settings. I also transcribed, analyzed, and reported all study data. According to Janesick (2011), a crucial role of the researcher is to comprehend, interpret, and report participants' experiences. My work in this study included selecting the appropriate method and design, administering, crafting, and compiling interview

questions, and listening, recording, and transcribing participants' responses. According to Moustakas (1994), the researcher is a detective who investigates phenomena under study by engaging participants to determine evidence of their experiences.

To perform my role as researcher, it was important that I remained impartial during the entire research process. To remain neutral and unbiased, I engaged in self-reflectivity by journaling, reviewing notes, and engaging in self-scrutiny. According to Maxwell (2013), the qualitative researcher is the instrument and the vehicle of the study, who investigates, seeks, examines, records, and transcribes data. I also employed the strategy of bracketing to maintain an awareness of my biases while protecting the integrity of study data. Journaling my biases about the ex-convicts helped me acknowledge and prevent my personal opinions and ideas from influencing study data (Creswell, 2014).

Lien et al. (2014) stated that phenomenological researchers should engage in deep self-reflection to examine data in a way that is truthful, meaningful, and sensitive. During data collection and analysis, researchers should also remain mindful and objective (Lien et al., 2014; Simon, 2011). A reflective approach should be part of all qualitative inquiry methods because it helps researchers pay careful attention to details and willfully set aside preconceived notions and biases (Creswell, 2014). While reflecting, I employed bracketing to help identify any set aside any preconceived opinions and values about the study phenomenon (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Self-reflection involves several essential traits: open-mindedness, careful listening, impartiality, and independence of thoughts; such considerations provide balance and add

strength, validity, sensitivity, and objectivity to study data (Darawsheh, 2014; Karimova, 2014). Lien et al. maintained that reflexivity involved the consideration of how researchers' assumptions, such as those about participants' characteristics (i.e., race, gender, age, and nationality), could affect study outcomes.

I did not include any participants with which I had any former or current relationships. Regarding supervisory or instructor relationships that involved power over the participants, researchers' power relationship are not completely defined in qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There are no acceptable standards or ideal power relationship guidelines because of the complexities associated with qualitative studies (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009).

There usually exists an element of professional relationship and inferred instructor relationship of power over participants that is associated with a researcher's role as study administrator. The researcher has specific functions associated with the planning and enactment of research activities. As such, it is crucial that researchers identify, understand, and diffuse participant-researcher power relations from the onset of the research process by creating an atmosphere of power neutrality (Schäpke, 2018).

Researchers are also tasked with ensuring participant confidentiality so they may feel comfortable sharing details of their personal experiences and beliefs. In addition, care must be taken to create a casual, relaxed setting that is free of ethical dilemmas. Any presumptions of researcher bias and power relations are considered during the planning stages of research. One of the most significant challenges for qualitative researchers is addressing research bias (Chenail, 2011). As stated by Anyan (2013), it is almost

impossible to create a perfectly unbiased study. Nevertheless, researchers must be aware of and address the potential biases that result from their professional and personal experiences. According to Tufford and Newman (2010), researchers can take precautionary steps to mitigate bias, such as reviewing interview questions for biased phrasing and engaging in honest self-reflection. Self-scrutiny also helps researchers to bracket their personal and professional experiences.

There were no known conflicts of interest associated with the current research. I had no dealings with outside organizations or participants' affiliations. I offered a $25 gift card to Starbucks, Walmart, or Wawa for participants as a gesture of appreciation for their time. Largent and Fernandez-Lynch (2017) argued that offering monetary incentives to impoverished ex-offenders can influence their participation and interview responses, distorting the topic under investigation. However, participants in the current study included non-recidivating ex-convicts who self-reported as successful and were unlikely to fall into the category of poverty.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Upon approval from Walden University IRB (#XXXX), I recruited participants from two sites in Tampa, Florida with which I had no affiliation or prior contact. Upon study approval, I created a non-traceable telephone number and email address (using Google) to communicate with participants. Via email, I contacted non-profit advocate organizations, individuals from my social network who were involved in the judicial system, associates who knew individuals who may be eligible to participate, and advocate

groups to begin the process of recruitment. The solicitation email included a flyer that explained the study, participation requirements, and inclusion criteria (see Appendix B). Recruitment flyers were also posted at an advocate center, requesting volunteers who would be interested in participating in the research study. Based on responses from interested and eligible individuals, I scheduled telephone meetings with each respondent and invited them to extend the research invitation to any individuals they knew who may have met the inclusion criteria.

To be eligible to participate in this study, individuals had to be a successful, non-recidivating ex-convict who had served a minimum of 2 years and had been released from prison for at least 3 years. Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to identify prospective participants who resided in the local community. Snowball sampling is used when prospective participants are limited to a small subgroup of the population and are generally difficult to locate. Snowball sampling provides a means for contacting prospective participants via researchers' social networks or existing participants (Robinson, 2014). This cascading sampling technique is a deliberate process that works like a chain reaction, whereby the researcher requests assistance from their social network to help locate eligible participants (Kircher & Charles, 2018).

I expected program administrators from the advocate groups and the individuals to contact me and refer self-reported ex-convicts who met the inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria included male and female successful ex-convicts who were at least 18 years old. When potential participants contacted me affirming their interest in participation and their availability, I scheduled virtual interviews with them. Out of the respondents, I

selected a total of 10 ex-convicts as participants. According to Sienkiewicz and Smith (2014), a sample of less than 12 participants is usually adequate for phenomenological investigations.

Prior to data collection, scheduled meetings were arranged to discuss the aim of the research and participation requirements. In addition, I had all participants complete a demographic questionnaire to gather data on each participant's age category, sex, ethnicity, race, years incarcerated, type of crime committed, years released from prison, and profession. I selected participants based on the best fit responses to screening questions. According to Robinson (2014), researchers must make judgments about which individuals will provide the most sound and useful perspectives. As additional participants were needed, the snowball sampling technique was used to solicit the help of ex-convicts who already volunteered to participate in the study. Snowball sampling strategy is helpful in phenomenological research when the group under investigation is unique and difficult to locate, or when asking existing participants to recommend individuals who might be interested in the study and fit the conditions under investigation (Bandola et al., 2014).

The principal criteria for selecting participants for this study was that the potential contributors had to be successful non-recidivating ex-convicts who served a minimum of 2 years in a state and/or federal correctional facility, had been released, had completed post-release/parole supervision, were not presently facing any criminal charges, and had been released for 3 or more years. The targeted number of participants for the study was 10. Phenomenological investigations often involve samples of fewer than 12 participants

(Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Sienkiewicz and Smith (2014) argued that a sample of less than 12 participants was usually adequate for phenomenological investigations. According to Morse (2000) and Denzin et al. (2000), a sample size of six to 10 individuals is appropriate for phenomenological investigations. In their phenomenological study, Joosten and Safe (2014) reported that saturation was achieved with just seven interviews. Data quality is not necessarily determined by the number of participants, but by the scope and quantity of usable data (Denzin et al., 2000; Morse, 2000).

The sample size of qualitative research has been a topic of contention, as some scholars have argued that samples must be large enough to achieve saturation. Saturation is indicated when no new ideas emerge from the data (Robinson, 2014), there are enough data to replicate (Morse et al., 2014), no additional information can be obtained, and no further coding is feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Morse et al. (2014) explained that sample size was rarely taken into consideration over data saturation. Furthermore, sample size is often based on the number of accessible and available participants. Fusch and Ness (2015) stated that often, researchers must be content with the sample size available to them, in terms of access to individuals who meet inclusion criteria, and that researchers must choose the sample that has the best potential to provide the needed data and achieve saturation.

Instrumentation

Data were collected via semistructured interviews with 10 non-recidivating offenders. The data collection instrument consisted of an interview protocol (Appendix

A) based on research regarding the five policy-driven social barriers (employment/income, food, stigmatized social relations, finance/banking, and housing) often faced by released offenders (Anderson et al., 2018; Anderson, 2019; Jonson & Cullen, 2015; King et al., 2018; Lockwood et al., 2015; Lutze et al., 2014; Obatusin et al., 2019), and strategies used to overcome those barriers and successfully reintegrate. The interview protocol was reviewed by two subject matter experts to ensure the questions were not biased, were easy to understand, and were aligned with the research question. In addition, the panel members were asked to provide any recommendations for improving existing questions, or adding new, relevant questions. No changes to the protocol resulted from this review.

An inductive approach was employed using semistructured, open-ended questions to gather information. Semistructured data collection methods allow participants to speak freely so researchers may collect in-depth information regarding their experiences and perspectives. Open-ended questions also allow participants to speak freely with the understanding they are not obligated to provide specific responses (Anyan, 2013). Also, semistructured, open-ended questions provide researchers with the flexibility to ask probing, follow-up questions to better understand responses to interview questions (Patton, 2002).

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded with a reliable and secure device, and then transcribed to help ensure participants' exact meanings, phrasing, qualms, and emotions were captured. At the end of each interview, participants were encouraged to share additional information they

considered important, but which was not covered by any of the interview questions. Reflective notes were used to document the interactions and conversations with participants and were utilized as part of the analysis process to highlight accounts of any presumptions and biases that could negatively affect the data (Joosten & Safe, 2014).

After all interviews were complete, I transferred the audio recordings to textual documents, which were stored on my personal, password-protected computer. The electronic data were then separated into units, transcribed verbatim, transformed into categories of meaning, analyzed, saved, and encrypted. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality. Transcripts from participants interviews were purged of any identifiable information. I was the only individual who had access to raw data.

Pilot Study

In lieu of a pilot study, the interview protocol was reviewed by a panel of two experts in the field of criminology. The expert panel reviewed the interview protocol to ensure it was not biased or leading. This review helped to establish face validity for the interview protocol. Panel members were requested to provide written feedback on the protocol, offering suggestions for any improvements that could be made. No changes to the protocol were made based on the panel review.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The targeted group for this study consisted of 10 individuals released from prison who had not been under the Department of Corrections (DOC) or parole supervision for the past 2 years, had remained crime-free, and self-reported as successfully reintegrated. Prospective participants were recruited by recommendations from church groups,

families of ex-convicts, ministers, professionals within the judicial system, non-profit organizations, advocate groups, ex-convicts, and referrals from recruited ex-convicts using a non-probability snowball sampling or chain referral technique. Also, research recruitment materials were distributed and posted at various advocate sites in Tampa, Florida.

I used a screening technique to recruit participants whose telephone numbers were acquired through my social network. The initial calls to potential participants commenced as follows:

> Hello, my name is Sharon Walker and I am a PhD candidate at Walden University. I am conducting research to learn about the strategies you have used to successfully reintegrate into society after release from prison. Participation in this study will involve an in-depth interview regarding your experiences overcoming five policy-driven societal barriers. You will be asked questions about the obstacles you have encountered after returning to the community, people and organizations who have helped you, or who could help you, and your suggestions for helping other ex-convicts as they return to the community. You will be one of ten people from the [NAME] community who are all former prisoners that have successfully reintegrated. The information you share will be kept in the strictest confidence. During the interview, our conversation will be audio-recorded with a microphone and a tape recorder to record precisely what you are saying. A laptop computer will also be in use for taking notes during the interview session. Your real name will not be used; you will be assigned a

pseudonym to disguise your identify so that no one will be able to identify who made certain comments or remarks. If you decide to participate in the study, I have a few questions to ask to make sure you meet the study criteria:

1. Have you been released from prison for at least three years?
2. What was the date of your release?
3. Are you under parole or another DOC supervision?
4. Have you remained crime-free since your release?
5. Are you at least 18 years of age?

I also told participants that I would not be participating in the conversation, as my role as the researcher was to ask the questions and listen. I further stated this study attempted to answer key questions about the major topics that were discussed, and the information gathered may be used to create policy changes to help other ex-convicts successfully reintegrate into their communities.

If the responses to any of the above questions were "no," I will politely thanked the individual for their time and explained that they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Individuals were excluded if they had not successfully reintegrated after serving at least 2 years and had been non-recidivating for at least 3 years. These exclusion criteria were critical to ensure participants possessed the experience needed to answer the research questions. If individuals responded with "yes" to all the screening questions, they were invited to participate in the research. Eligible individuals who were interested in participating were asked for their mailing addresses and were informed I would send them an informed consent form that provided all the details about the research the [date],

begin [time] and end [time], a map to the [location]. The consent form also contained a phone number they could use to contact me with any questions.

I mailed two copies of the consent form to participants – one for them to keep, and one for them to sign and return to me. In addition to the consent form, I sent a brief demographic survey for participants to complete. These demographic surveys provided me with descriptive information needed to describe the study sample. Participants had the opportunity to review the study procedures and ask any questions prior to participating. I sent participants a self-addressed stamped envelope so they may return the signed consent form and demographic questionnaire to me. Individuals who had access to a computer or smart device were invited to participate in virtual interviews, via Zoom. Interviews followed the interview protocol to ensure consistency across participants. The letter also contained a phone number they could use to contact me with any questions.

As a qualitative approach is more exploratory in form, data analysis may be ongoing. In some cases, a more free-flowing conversation was utilized to communicate and devise subsequent strategies to obtain explanations and provide insights based on participants' perspectives. Moreover, due to the length of time spent with each participant, there was no need to contact any of the participants for follow-up questions. After the transcription of the data, each participant was given an opportunity to read the findings to clarify any misunderstandings that might have taken place during the transcription activity.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis for this study consisted of three cycles of coding. The cycles were used to categorize the data, analyze the data for emergent themes, and present data in a written narrative. Patton (1990) maintained the purpose of the initial coding phase is to organize the data, while additional readings are aimed at developing a formal construct or theme. The original reading of the raw data should be done with the aim of developing categories. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explained that the initial step in qualitative data analysis is the categorization of themes. Patton (2002) asserted the goal of the data analysis process is to decrease the expected large amount of data that will be collected and to identify the significance of the emerging themes. The initial step is conducted to define the categories, subdivided into subsections for well-defined meanings that enable the researcher to reduce the data into categories and uncover the answer(s) to the research questions.

I began the process of data analysis by reviewing transcripts multiple times. After thoroughly reviewing transcripts, I began the process of open coding. Open coding consisted of searching for similarities and differences, labeling, and comparing them (Patton, 2002). Data were analyzed, question by question, then line by line, and paragraph by paragraph, to examine similarities and differences in participants' statements, explanations, and comments. Using the constant comparative method, data were divided and analyzed into three cycles of coding: primary coding, secondary coding, and triangulation of the data (Saldaña, 2012). The primary cycle was open coding (Saldaña, 2012). Next, I applied axial coding to connect the categories and subcategories.

The aim of the axial coding was to focus on and understand which specific situations, conditions, events, and core themes or outcomes of the various events led to the success of the ex-convicts and their cessation from crime.

The third and final stage of the analysis consisted of selective coding. Selective coding consists of feeding the subcategories into the overall categories by discovering and assigning new categories from the emerging core concepts that were identified during open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Selective coding was used to identify and develop the categories and themes, to answer the research study's questions (Saldaña, 2012). I concluded by reviewing the categories and grouping them together to determine how they connected, based upon certain terms, contexts, perspectives, encounters, activities, and proceedings.

In conjunction with coding methods, I simultaneously reviewed field notes collected during interviews. Specifically, comparable remarks, occurrences, and phenomena were highlighted and scrutinized. Once meanings from the transcribed data were established, I organized the categories and subcategories into broader themes according to shared properties that characterized each (Strauss, & Corbin, 1990). My aim was to organize the findings into a framework that best communicated the rich, in-depth information revealed by the data (Patton, 2005). The goal was to ensure the new findings and categories related to themes that answered the study's research questions. I emailed all participants a brief summary of study findings. I sent a summary of findings to any individuals who requested. I also shared the summary of findings with partnering organizations.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative investigations, the researcher is the instrument through which data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted (Patton, 2002). It is important that qualitative researchers employ strategies to improve the trustworthiness of study data. By improving trustworthiness, researchers may reduce the incidence of bias (Krefting, 1991) and ensure they accurately interpret meaning as participants intended to convey (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Researchers must apply rigorous checks to enhance trustworthiness, using strategies for improving credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Anney (2014) recommended that qualitative researchers engage in certain meticulous practices, processes, and verifiable strategies.

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility is defined as the assurance that outcomes are dependable and reliable (Anney, 2014), trustworthy, or believable (Creswell, 2014). To ensure credibility, three distinct features must be noted: (a) credibility of the researcher, (b) rigorous methods, (c) belief and value of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). To establish such requirements, the researcher adopts research methods, researches the topic, and becomes familiar with the sample of participants (Patton, 2002). A credible study is one in which findings are reasonable and accurately convey participants' views and ideas. To a large extent, credibility is essential for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln). Anney (2014) suggested that credibility may be improved via members' checks, reflexivity, saturation, and triangulation.

Transferability

Transferability describes the degree to which qualitative findings may be generalized to other contexts, settings, or phenomena (Korstjensa & Moserb, 2018). From a qualitative perspective, transferability represents external validity and is used to assess the extent to which study outcomes may apply to different situations (Shenton, 2004). To establish transferability, the researcher must provide detailed information about participants, research settings, and study contexts so other scholars can determine how findings may transfer to other contexts (Krefting, 1991).

Shenton (2004) maintained that it may not be feasible to prove study results are applicable to other contexts because qualitative findings are generally based on small samples. Fisher and Stenner (2011) echoed this sentiment, implying that transferability was not an aim in phenomenological research. Instead, phenomenological researchers should emphasize trustworthiness, significance, and meanings associated with research phenomena. However, some academics suggest that transferability is possible if the researcher provides enough contextual information (Anney, 2014; Cope, 2014). For example, Cope (2014) argued that qualitative findings may be transferable when results are essential to individuals not directly involved in the study. Furthermore, transferability is attained when readers identify with the findings as a result of experience, familiarity, and expertise.

To improve the possibility of transferability in the current research, I synthesized data through theoretical frameworks that were researched and verified for validity and reliability, and through the resulting comprehensive information gathered to enhance the

dependability and reliability of the research. Also, a rich account of the study was provided to facilitate transferability. In doing so, the focus was on detailing every aspect of the study in terms of presenting full descriptions of the data analysis process, the unique, purposely sampled population, and the outcomes that enabled decisions to be made based on how well the background, framework, and setting of this research and analysis compared with other similar perspectives (Anney, 2014).

Dependability

According to Guba (1981) and Merriam (2009), dependability in qualitative studies is a strategy used to establish the integrity of data while indicating the stability and consistency of findings. One strategy for enhancing the dependability of qualitative data is documenting all the procedures and providing insights into the actions taken during all phases of data collection and analysis to create a rich audit trail (Patton, 2002). In the current study, I developed an audit trail that provided a rationale for all study decisions, details of data analysis, and the analysis features applied to reach the outcomes of the study. Dependability was also improved via my reflexivity throughout data collection, analysis, and presentation. According to Shenton (2004), dependability also fosters an assessment of the effectiveness of the methods of inquiries, procedures, and other implemented research processes.

Confirmability

According to Cope (2014), confirmability describes the degree to which findings are an honest and accurate interpretation of the data, and are not based on the researchers' personal experiences, beliefs, or perceptions. Moustakas (1994) pointed out that it can be

difficult to bracket out researcher's beliefs, assumptions, and biases. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) argued that reflecting and focusing on the insights obtained from participants, as stated in their meanings, interpretations, and statements, will improve confirmability. In the current study, confirmability was fostered via an audit trail that detailed the processes for collecting, coding, analyzing, and interpreting data, and the rationale behind all research decisions. Triangulation was also utilized to establish confirmability and to enhance research credibility. To reduce the potential effects of researcher bias, reflexive notes were used to record my effect, biases, and any potential threats to confirmability.

Reflexivity

There is an assumption among researchers, particularly qualitative academics, that bias or skewness in a research study is undesirable. Reflexivity is a strategy for reducing unintended bias in qualitative investigations. Researchers conduct self-checks to ensure their personal attitudes, ideas, preconceptions, or cultural dispositions do not influence study data.

Recording information at every stage of the process is an invaluable reflective strategy that allows researchers to reflect not only on the method, procedure, and development of the study, but also how their backgrounds, values, and positions may influence study findings. According to Houghton et al. (2013), reflexivity in qualitative studies is a state of self-alertness in which researchers are cognizant of and set aside their biases to improve the trustworthiness of findings.

Member Checking

Member checking, also known as informant feedback or respondent validation, is another technique used by researchers to improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability of research findings (Guber & Lincoln, 1989). Shenton (2004) suggested that after data are transcribed, each participant should be presented with the opportunity to ensure the researcher accurately interpreted and captured the full essence of ideas participants intended to express. Member checking involves sending participants a copy of preliminary findings to ensure data were collected and interpreted accurately (Anney, 2014). Carlson (2010) cautioned participants could become overwhelmed during the member checking process and recommended sharing only the portion of the transcript pertinent to each participant rather than providing the entire transcript.

Ethical Procedures

A main concern of research is ensuring participants' well-being, upholding ethical standards regarding the treatment of human subjects, and implementing plans for addressing issues related to confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, conflict of interest, power differentials, justification for incentives, and other related matters. Researchers remain in compliance with the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46, guidelines provided by the Office for the Protection of Human Subjects. The United States Federal regulation provides guidelines regarding ethical obligations and responsibilities of researchers when using human subjects. Researchers must have well-defined agreements with the participants to protect them from harm. Before the initial

contact, each participant was provided with two copies of the informed consent form. They signed and returned one copy and kept the other for their records.

I will initially gain approval from Walden University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board (IRB). The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certification program for the protection of human research participants was completed. The Training Certification number is 286351, and the date of certification was July 10, 2018. The targeted research population of ex-convicts was no longer under the supervision of State or Federal Department of Corrections (DOC) or parole supervision and had stayed crime-free during the time since their release from prison. Participants were reassured that their involvement in the research was voluntary and if selected, they had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. The volunteers selected to take part in the study were informed that the research strictly adhered to the do no harm principle and ensured confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the participants' confidentiality. The identification of the participating organizations was shared. No potentially identifiable information was published for participants or organizations. For interviews conducted via Zoom, participants will be encouraged to select locations that were private.

All data were stored in digital form on my personal, password-protected computer. Any paper data, such as printed and signed informed consent forms, were stored in a locked file cabinet in my office. By IRB's ethical guidelines, all written or electronic files, audiotapes, transcripts, and documents (including recruitment materials) will be kept for 5 years after the completion of this study. After the 5-year duration, all

files and documents associated with this study will be destroyed. All paper data will be shredded, and all audio recordings and flash drives deleted electronically and destroyed. The names and contact information of participants were needed to communicate with individuals and send the informed consent forms. However, all personal information was securely stored on my personal password-protected computer. Possible stigma may exist because participants were former offenders. As such, the identities of participants were completely protected. The organizations that distributed the email invitation had no idea of who contacted me to participate. Participants completed a brief demographic survey, but no information was shared in a way that could possibly reveal participants' identities. The names of participating organizations were not shared. Information about those organizations was kept vague, so they may not be identified.

Participants were reassured that their involvement in the research was voluntary and if selected, they were able to withdraw from the study at any time. No potentially distressing questions were asked in the interviews. Conflicts of interest were not present because I had no personal or professional relationships with any participants.

The burdens of participating in short interviews are small, when considering the potential social change significance of this study. The potential contribution of this study that advanced knowledge in public policy and administration included emphasizing success among post-incarceration non-recidivating ex-convicts, rather than focusing on failures and recidivism. The potential contribution to advance practice and policy depended on the willingness of policymakers and essential stakeholders to use the information to benefit the communities and individuals they represent and serve. Those

responsible for programs and who dedicate their work and lives to helping and supporting ex-convicts is tangible evidence that some strategies are successful at avoiding failure; therefore, they could make changes to their programs to reflect strategies that support successful reintegration.

The potential contribution to the ex-convicts themselves was to provide a map that can serve as a useful guide when developing their own successes post-incarceration. Positive social change can come about in those areas that prove to be the most significant challenges to successfully navigate. Additionally, in published form, this study can serve as recognition for participants in the study where they stand to gain another form of sustained motivation and continued success, and for other ex-convicts to whom they reach out and help.

Participation was completely voluntary, and this was explained in the invitation and informed consent forms. There were no known conflicts of interest associated with the current research. I had no dealings with outside organizations or participants' affiliations. I offered participants a $25 gift card to Starbucks, Walmart, of Wawa, as a gesture of appreciation for their time. Largent and Fernandez-Lynch (2017) argued that offering monetary incentives to impoverished ex-offenders can influence their participation and interview responses, distorting the topic under investigation. However, participants in the current study included non-recidivating ex-convicts who self-reported as successful and were unlikely to fall into the category of poverty.

Summary

For this study, a phenomenological qualitative methodology was chosen to explore experiences of nonrecidivating ex-convicts who successfully reintegrated into society. The phenomenological design was used to address participants' lived experiences involving navigating five social-driven policy barriers to avoid recidivating. I collected data via interview to explore participants' feelings, viewpoints, emotions, and thoughts. The research question informed the interview protocol.

My role as the researcher included investigator, primary data collector, transcriber, analyst, and reporter. Prospective participants included self-supporting and nonrecidivating ex-convicts who participated in in-depth semistructured interviews that were guided by the research question. Participants included individuals not currently under DOC supervision for the last 3 years and who self-reported as successful. They were recruited through snowball sampling or chain referral techniques, in which I leveraged referrals from church groups, families of ex-convicts, ministers, professionals within the judicial system, ex-convicts, and referrals from recruited ex-convicts, nonprofit organizations, and advocate groups. Participation flyers were distributed and posted at various advocate sites.

The goal of the study was to obtain rich descriptions of the phenomenon under study. Each participant was given the opportunity to read findings to clarify any misunderstanding that might have taken place during transcription. All data transcripts, forms, journal, notes, audio tapes, and flash drives that were used during the dissertation process were stored in a locked and fireproof filing cabinet in my home office. I was the

only person who had access to raw data. According to IRB ethical guidelines, all written or electronic files, audiotapes, transcripts, and documents (including recruitment materials) will be kept for 5 years after completion of this study. After 5 years, all files and documents associated with this study will be destroyed. All paper data will be shredded, and all audio recordings and flash drives will be deleted electronically and destroyed.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore postincarceration strategies that led to successful reintegration as indicated by non-recidivism for at least 3 years following release. Policymakers and researchers have not focused on nonrecidivating ex-convicts who design, implement, and maintain strategies for successful living. Rather than identifying obstacles that ex-convicts face, which have been long recognized, the purpose of this study was to investigate and identify postincarceration strategies for reintegration that led to sustained success. Specifically, I explored strategies used by released offenders to successfully navigate the following five policy-driven social barriers: (a) employment/income, (b) food, (c) stigmatized social relations, (d) finance/bankinIand (e) housing. The following guiding question informed the research: What strategies do non-recidivating ex-convicts use to navigate the five policy-driven social barriers upon release from prison?

This chapter includes results of the analysis. First, the study setting and participant demographics are presented. Data collection strategies are detailed, followed by a discussion of analysis procedures. Measures of trustworthiness are then provided. Study results are presented thematically, and the chapter closes with a brief conclusion.

Setting

I conducted all interviews remotely. My role in this study was to explore reintegration strategies used by successful ex-convicts. I was led to this research topic while volunteering with several small nonprofit organizations. My volunteer work involved mentoring at-risk youth, which brought my attention to the devastating effects

that incarceration has on communities, families, and the ex-convicts themselves. My interest in the plight of disillusioned and at-risk youth came about while listening to their stories about challenges they faced when navigating five policy-driven social barriers. There were no potential conflicts of interest between myself and participants, and I had not prior working or personal relationships with any of them. Because of my background volunteering with troubled youth, I was intentional about bracketing out my opinions and biases during data collection and analysis. The process of reflexivity helped reduce any potential researcher bias.

Demographics

The study sample included 10 ex-offenders who had successfully reintegrated and had not been under supervision for at least 3 years. In addition, all participants had to be at least 18 to participate. The sample was diverse in terms of age, time spent incarcerated, number of years since release, and profession (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race	Age Range	Education	Time incarcerated	Years since release	Profession
A	Male	African American	55+	High school	17 years	43 years	Real Estate/CEO
B	Female	African American	55+	Master's degree	4 years	27 years	Non-profit/social services
C	Female	African American	30-45	High school	10 months	15 years	Construction
D	Male	Caucasian	55+	Some high school	40 years	6 years	Lawn care and pressure washing business
E	Male	Caucasian	30-45	High school	2 years	11 years	Electrician
F	Female	African American	55+	Bachelor's degree	2.5 years	10 years	Non-profit and worked for elected office
G	Male	African American	55+	Some high school	10 years	20 years	Rebuilding
H	Male	African American	55+	4 years of apprenticeship training	3 years	31 years	Owns plumbing business
I	Male	African American	30-45	Some college	7.5 years	3 years	Electrician
J	Male	African American	30-45	GED	5.5 years	12 years	Barber

Data Collection

Data were collected via semistructured interviews with 10 participants. Interviews were conducted via telephone to provide convenience to participants and allow for social distancing. Prior to beginning interviews, the following screening questions were asked to make sure participants met eligibility criteria:

1. Have you been released from prison for at least 3 years?
2. What was the date of your release?

3. Are you on parole or DOC supervision?
4. Have you remained crime-free since your release?
5. Are you at least 18 years of age?

Those who were eligible were required to provide written informed consent. In addition, each participant completed a brief demographic questionnaire, which was used to develop a description of the study sample.

It is important to note several challenges that occurred during data collection. These challenges resulted in a much longer data collection process than was originally anticipated. The first point of contact in the data collection process was the COACH Foundation. I contacted the director/owner of COACH, Reverend Johnson, for referrals for my study. After providing a brief outline of research, I offered to meet with him to hand him a folder with flyers, a demographic questionnaire, an interview protocol, and an informed consent form. I followed up with Reverend Johnson several times with telephone calls, text messages, and emails for referrals. During one of our conversations, the reverend called eight prospective participants on a three-way call to introduce me and give them a synopsis of my study. When the reverend was on calls, the conversation with participants went well. Prospective participants sounded willing to participate in the study.

After introductions, I requested telephone numbers of eight prospective participants. I called each referral; some expressed they disapproved of how Reverend Johnson introduced them without getting their permission or notice. One of the prospective participants was furious and abruptly stated she did not have a business and

that I should not contact her again. One participant stated they were guarded and would only accept calls and emails from people they knew. Two were in denial about being incarcerated. One was outraged that the reverend volunteered them without their permission, and they declined to participate in the study. However, three prospective participants were receptive to taking part in the study.

The reverend also sent out a group email with contact information for seven program managers. I emailed the program managers individually to formally introduce myself. I attached the recruitment flyer to the email and then sent followup emails 5 days later. To date, I have not received a response from any of the program managers.

While on calls, I noted prospective participants had the most profound respect for Reverend Johnson and treated him with the utmost courtesy. However, after he dropped off the calls, only four agreed to work with me. I requested their emails to forward consent forms. I did not get any response from the other four prospects despite my followup attempts.

I interviewed three of the four participants, but it was challenging getting them to commit to a mutually agreed-upon time to conduct interviews. I was curious why they were so elusive and posed the question to Reverend Johnson and the four participants. Recalling that participants were responsive when Reverend Johnson contacted them, I communicated challenges I was facing recruiting ex-convicts that he referred and requested advice about how to get them to respond and commit. In response, he stated: “I could tell that you have not had many dealings with ex-convicts from your demeanor.” Moreover, he suggested I needed help, as the population I was targeting had a different

mindset, and trust was a significant factor in terms of their lack of response. He also advised that for the best results, I should consider engaging an ex-convict to interview participants, as they were more trusting with people who had been in their shoes. I also discovered ex-convicts were intimidated by my British accent and did not trust me because of how I sounded. Reverend Johnson noted that my delivery was intimidating to ex-convicts and suggested I refrain from using scholarly language.

One participant told me I would have gotten a better response if I was an ex-convict; as one suggested, next time, I deal with an ex-convict in such a capacity that I should engage an ex-convict to ask the questions. Two others suggested I should refrain from using scholarly language, as this was intimidating to the ex-convicts. All respondents agreed the initial slow response or non-response was because the prospects distrusted my British accent.

After receiving commitment from three of the ex-convicts referred by Reverend Johnson, I attempted snowball sampling by asking those participants for referrals. However, none could provide me with additional subjects. I concentrated on the three prospective participants (two females and one male) who were receptive. I requested their email addresses and permission to forward to them the recruitment flyer and demographic questionnaire. After reviewing the completed demographic questionnaires, I noted all four prospects met the inclusion criteria. After multiple attempts to schedule their interview, I planned a mutually agreed-upon date and time for the interviews with two of the four candidates. I also followed up with two other prospects, but two who eventually agreed to participate.

Reverend Johnson invited me to a Juneteenth celebration so he could introduce me to some successful ex-convicts; I connected with two who expressed their willingness to do the interview. However, I never received any response from all my follow-up attempts with them. After the celebration, the reverend sent out a group email with the contact information for seven program managers. I emailed the program managers individually to introduce myself formally and attached the recruitment flyer. I sent follow-up emails 5 days later, but never received a response from any program managers.

I also tried recruiting through a second organization. On May 11, 2022, I visited the organization and spoke briefly with the program manager about the nature of the study and what I was requesting from the organization. She was not as receptive as the director, whom I had approached to discuss my study one year earlier. I handed 20 flyers to the program manager to be placed by the front door for those ex-convicts entering the business. The program manager stated she could not guarantee that anyone would contact me as there was limited access to the building due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and they did not track the successful ex-convicts. I requested her business card and emailed her the flyer, demographic questions, and informed consent form on May 12th, in the event someone should show interest. I followed up with emails and phone calls but received no response from anyone within the organization.

I considered recruiting through Facebook but was reluctant as the few ex-convicts I interviewed preferred to be interviewed by phone. I would have had to revise and resubmit my IRB application if I changed my recruitment strategy. It was extremely challenging to get the prospects to commit in person or to conduct the interview via

Zoom due to the limited type of prospects available and after I had exhausted my options. I requested leads and handed flyers to coworkers, acquaintances, law enforcement, lawn personnel, and neighbors. I was fortunate to obtain two participants from a colleague's referral. One referral was a close friend who was an ex-convict, and the other was a woman who had dealings with ex-convicts, who was able to provide additional referrals. I managed to schedule an appointment with only one after numerous attempts. I could not pin down the other two for an interview. I solicited ex-convicts from my handyman of over 10 years, and to my surprise, he told me he had served time and was willing to be interviewed. I did not know he was an ex-convict.

As a last resort, I returned to one of the referrals from Reverend Johnson that had seemed hopeful. He finally gave in and allowed me to interview him. The other participants were referrals from an acquaintance in the social work field, who suggested I call he' coworker's son, a barber, who had some dealings with the law but was not convicted. I called and explained the role and purpose of my study. He stated he had several clients who had dealings with the prison system and was very forthcoming and referred two of his clients who fit the criteria. I contacted the referrals the same day, and they both agreed to interview, without hesitation. We scheduled the interviews the same day. One was willing to be interviewed the same day I called. I scheduled a face-to-face consultation with the other referral within the same week. I was curious why they were so accommodating to my request and posed the question to the two participants. They both stated that their barber had explained that I needed the information to help other ex-convicts become successful. Finally, I had achieved my required sample.

Participant A

Participant A was an African American male with a college degree, a former teacher, a retired real estate consultant, the Chief Executive Officer of a non-profit organization, a community activist, and head of a prison ministry. He was released 43 years ago. At the age of 90, he was the oldest Participant. Participant A was receptive and agreed immediately to the interview, as he indicated the study could benefit released offenders. The interview time was changed many times due to Participant A's demanding schedule, particularly as a community activist and prison ministry pastor. He finally agreed to an interview on 6/6/22. The interview lasted 55 minutes.

Participant B

Participant B was referred by Reverend Johnson and was an African American female in the 55-plus age group. She had been incarcerated for 4 years on a drug charge. Released 27 years ago, she had a master's degree, was a board-certified counselor, owned a non-profit housing program for women, and was a pastor. It was challenging to get an interview with Participant A. However, with persistence and patience, and after numerous attempts by phone, text, and email, the interview was scheduled for 6/7/22. Participant B was very cooperative, friendly, forthcoming, and helpful during the interview. During the interview, she talked about her constant day-to-day struggles with her family, businesses, trusting others, and the stigma of people seeing her as a bad person. She further explained that opening up and trusting others was hard; even the church people shunned her. She told me I should not take her lack of timely response personally.

Participant C

Participant C was referred by Reverend Johnson and was an African American female who was college educated. She had been released 15 years ago and was in the 30-45 age group. Participant C owned a consulting agency, construction and transportation companies, and a non-profit organization. The interview was initially scheduled for 6/7/22. Despite her enthusiasm to participate in the study, scheduling the interview was challenging. After numerous emails, phone calls, and scheduling changes, the interview finally took place on 6/28/22. The interview lasted 60 minutes.

Participant C was very helpful, communicative, informative, and candid with her responses; she revealed profound insights about helping other ex-convicts, their hardships and basic needs. Mentioning to Participant C the challenges of recruiting her and other targeted ex-convicts, she explained that the ex-convicts were not going to trust me as they would think I was conservative or a snitch because of my British accent. She also suggested that I consider getting an ex-convict to conduct the interviews on my behalf as they would be more readily accept that person as familiar with their situation and be more trusting with them. She further specified that ex-convicts liked to feel needed and were tired of seeking approval. So, she suggested my language and approach with the ex-convicts should be inclusive, stating, "you are asking for their help, and acknowledging that you hear them is important. As the researcher, to put the participants at ease, it is important to emphasize that the study will benefit them and others in similar situations."

Participant C maintained that people from all walks of life were ready to grow if they had somebody they could trust. Most people were motivated by money, and people's

help was limited to the extent of their money; they must find balance with limited resources. It was a lot for an ex-convict who had been excluded from the mainstream to trust. I mentioned to Participant C that I used to volunteer at an organization that mentored delinquent young men and found it challenging to gain their trust. She responded that it was because I had never walked in their shoes. In their eyes, I could relate, so they would not trust me. However, Participant C suggested I show the ex-convicts that I cared, as they would appreciate me for respecting them.

Participants A, B, and C mentioned the importance of outlining the direct benefits of participation to the ex-convicts and suggested I change the way I approached prospects. They explained I should aim to make them feel valuable by asking for their help in contributing to the study and emphasizing that taking part in the study may help make future changes for themselves and others. Participant C also suggested that I refer to the ex-convicts as returning citizens, but Participant A disagreed, stating that returning citizens have voting rights.

Participant D

A colleague referred Participant D to me. Participant D was a White male, age 74, who served the longest time in prison of all the participants, which a little over 40 years. Released in 2016, he was the owner of a lawn care and pressure washing business. Participant D was available on all attempts to contact him but scheduling a mutually agreed upon time and date was challenging due to work commitments. The interview finally took place on 6/29/22. I emphasized to participant D upfront that the study would benefit him and others in similar situations and that the process was to gather information

so that I could help others in similar positions. The interview lasted 35 minutes. The interview flowed with ease and Participant D was direct, affable, enlightening, and easy-going. He stated that he had experienced little to no barriers with reintegration because he had strong family support throughout incarceration and release. Participant D stated he would not change any of his past because his past has gotten him where he was, today.

Participant E

An acquaintance referred Participant E to me. Participant E was a White male in the 30-45 age group, who graduated from high school, was a qualified electrician, and was released from prison on 8/13/2013. The interview with Participant E lasted 30 minutes. Participant E was easygoing, upfront, approachable, friendly, and ready to commit to the interview upon first contact. The person who referred him had briefed him on the nature of the study. However, the interview was rescheduled several times due to unanticipated work demands. The interview was conducted on 7/7/22.

Participant F

Participant F was an African American female in the 55-plus age group. She was college-educated, considered herself successful, was released from prison on 5/6/2012, and was referred by a colleague who had conducted a similar study. The interview was conducted on 7/21/22 and lasted 25 minutes. Participant F knew what to expect during the interview and was willing and prepared. Accordingly, the interview flowed quickly, and she anticipated where the questions were headed and, in most cases, seemed very forthcoming with her responses.

Participant G

Participant G was an African Male [wi]th an 11th-grade education. He had been released for 20 years and was self-employed in the construction business. Participant G was 67 years old and considered himself successful. His interview was conducted on 8/1/22 and lasted 40 minutes. I had personally known this participant for over 15 years and shared my frustrations in recruiting successful ex-convicts. I asked him if he could provide any referrals. He volunteered, which caught me off guard as I had no idea he had ever been incarcerated. Even though he volunteered, he was apprehensive about responding to the questions at the beginning of the interview. At the end of the interview, he acknowledged that he wanted to take part in the study as he knew that I would listen and cared about what he had to say.

Participant H

Participant H was referred by Reverend Johnson and was an African American male. He was released in 1991, was currently self-employed with his plumbing business, and was 56 years old. Participant H was the most challenging to recruit. He was one of the first people I contacted and was also the most elusive. The interview took place on 8/1/22 after multiple phone calls and text messages. I was persistent in getting the interview, but on the few occasions I was able to touch base with Participant, he indicated he was busy and avoided setting up the interview. His reasons included:

- "I am getting ready to go to work, I will call you shortly."
- "I am driving. Please call me back."
- "I am busy and will call you back."

- "I am with my family."
- "I am doing my bills. Please call me back."

When I was finally able to schedule and perform the interview with Participant H, it lasted 60 minutes. The interview flowed, and Participant H was obliging and accommodating. At the end of the interview, I relayed the challenges of recruiting the participants to Participant H. He suggested I continuously hound prospective participants as I did with him, knowing he wanted to participate in the study and that it would benefit ex-convicts. He told me he initially hesitated to take part in the study because he thought, when I first approached him and explained the process, it would make him feel uncomfortable. Over time, he felt at ease and when I suggested we conduct the interview by phone, rather than meet face-to-face, he felt even more comfortable. Duration of the interview 70 minutes

Participant I

Participant I was an African American male with some college education. He was released in 2019 and was in the 30-45 age group. At the time of the interview, Participant I worked as an electrician. Participant I was recruited through an associate of mine, who informed her coworker about the research and forwarded her number to me. I reached out to the coworker, who referred her son, a successful barber who had some dealings with the justice system but was never convicted. I reached out to brief him about the study and asked for his help recruiting the remaining participants. The barber was very forthcoming and told me he had several successful ex-convict clients. Without hesitation, he asked without hesitation how many participants I needed. I told him I needed two more. He

then referred Participants I and J. I contacted both on the same day to schedule the interviews, and they were waiting for my calls, as they trusted their barber, who had briefed them on the study. During my initial call with Participant I, he spoke as though he knew me. I scheduled my first face-to-face interview for two days later, on 8/1/22. I thanked him for agreeing to do the interview in person and he admitted that he was a little stressed because he did not know what to expect. I explained how the study would benefit ex-convicts and I was looking forward to gaining insight into his experiences, emphasizing that the information would help him and others in the same situation. He was open-minded, welcoming, caring, forthcoming, and informative. The duration of the interview was 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Participant J

Participant J was an African American male who had earned his GED and was released 12 years ago. He was a self-employed barber and fell into the 30-45 age group. The interview was conducted on 8/2/22. I had no problem recruiting Participant J for the interview. Upon initial contact, Participant J informed me of his availability and opted to set the interview for his day off. The interview was conducted by telephone. I sensed Participant D had a mellow, at ease, and down-to-earth disposition. His responses to the questions were candid and straightforward. The briefing by his barber may have put his mind at ease, or I may have become a more seasoned interviewer. The interview lasted 35 minutes.

Participant recruitment significantly improved after taking a different approach and applying the suggestions from the ex-convicts. In interviewing the participants who

agreed to take part in the study, they expressed several reasons for their slow responses. For example, some of them did not trust me, as they thought I was a "snitch." Participant B suggested that I speak Ebonics, stating, "I am not intellectual; you know how people talk. I will never be that way, and I am ok with it." Participant C stated, "The ex-convicts are not going to trust you as they will think that you are a conservative or a snitch with that British accent." Participant I stated he did not understand "stigma" regarding the question on social relationships and felt as though he had been deceived. Participant H suggested it was difficult for ex-convicts to open up to someone they did not know and who had not walked in their shoes. Several of the participants suggested I engage another ex-convict to conduct the interviews when dealing with released offenders. One participant stated they were guarded and would only accept calls and emails from people they knew.

After much consideration, much time could have been saved had I considered a barber shop or beautician as recruiting centers to target and recruit the targeted participants. From what I gathered during the recruitment process, ex-convicts have a close trusting relationship with their barbers and beauticians. Also, by the end of the interviews, some of the ex-convicts who were apprehensive at the beginning expressed that they felt valued; disclosing their experiences and being allowed to tell their stories first-hand helped restore their confidence that someone cared.

After data collection was completed, audio from each interview was transcribed. Each participant was sent a copy of their transcript to review for accuracy. The process of transcript review resulted in no changes to the data.

Data Analysis

After data collection, transcription, and transcript review were completed, data analysis began. I started with a thorough review of all study transcripts, which allowed me to become immersed in the data. Next, open coding was performed on each transcript. Open coding involved a line-by-line review of all transcripts to identify patterns in the data (see Table 2).

Table 2

Samples of Axial Coding

Quote from Data	Coded as
I made a commitment to God and myself.	Commitment-influence of God
People don't understand, it affects everything about me I am defeated. I am like a walking zombie.	Feel defeated
I had to find people who were open to backgrounds like mine, so I went to this job and they hired me as a secretary	Finding employers open to my background
I was pretty much right to work.	Got a job after release
My rock bottom and my support system are what held me together.	Had a support system
No, I never had no challenges regarding food.	No problem getting food
I was incarcerated because I did something wrong, and I accepted that and went along with the rules.	Owning my past
I think is just think it's a lot of self-work.	Self-improvement
I moved in with a friend of mine and I went back to work and I saved my money and I moved to my own apartment and I kept saving to elevate myself and it was a journey and still a journey.	Working my way to better circumstances

I used my experience in prison, and I used my experience as a drug addict to become a specialist, and I did not try to hide that from anyone as I was able to articulate about my use of drug. I was able to articulate going to prison and staying out of prison.	Using my experience to help others

Repeated words, phrases, ideas, sentiments, and attitudes were identified and coded. After all transcripts had been coded once, a second pass was performed to ensure all codes had been identified and noted in the data.

As illustrated in Table 3, a total of 41 codes emerged during open coding. Among the most pervasive codes were *commitment-influence of God* (*f* = 43), *reasons for recidivism* (*f* = 26), *had a support system* (*f* = 24), and *help other offenders* (*f* = 19). Less common codes included *aware of recidivism statistics* (*f* = 2), *had savings upon release* (*f* = 2), *criminal history follows offenders* (*f* = 2), hope (*f* = 2), and *employment barriers* (*f* = 2).

Table 3

Code Frequency

Code	*F*
commitment - influence of God	43
reasons for recidivism	26
had a support system	24
help other offenders	23
Stigma	19
working my way up to better circumstances	15
determined to improve my life	15
Drugs	15
how I obtained housing	13
self-employed – entrepreneur	13
got a job after release	12
attended programs while incarcerated	11
released offenders need help	11
Significant professional success	10

no problem getting food	9
housing barrier	9
self-improvement	9
owning my past	8
do not want to return to prison	8
lack of family support	8
walked in our shoes	8
expansion of prison industrial complex	7
feel defeated	7
motivated by my children	7
financial constraints upon release	6
low pay better than no pay	6
using my experience to help others	6
government assistance	5
Fear	5
existing programs fall short	5
planned for my ow– release - was autonomous	4
no reentry programming	4
self-respect and love	4
move on	4
finding employers open to my background	3
emotional struggles	3
aware of recidivism statistics	2
had savings upon release	2
criminal history follows offenders	2
Hope	2
employment barriers	2

The next step of analysis involved axial coding. During this step, codes were examined for relationships. Related codes were then arranged into themes and subthemes, in alignment with the guiding research question. A total of seven themes and four subthemes were identified. The main themes included overcoming material needs, social support is essential to successful reintegration, intrinsic motivation fosters reintegration success, the current system has shortcomings, offenders recidivate for many reasons, spirituality/relationship with God, and helping others helps former offenders. The

subthemes included employment and income, food, and housing, learning from and owning the past, and focusing on future success (see Table 4).

Table 4

Study Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

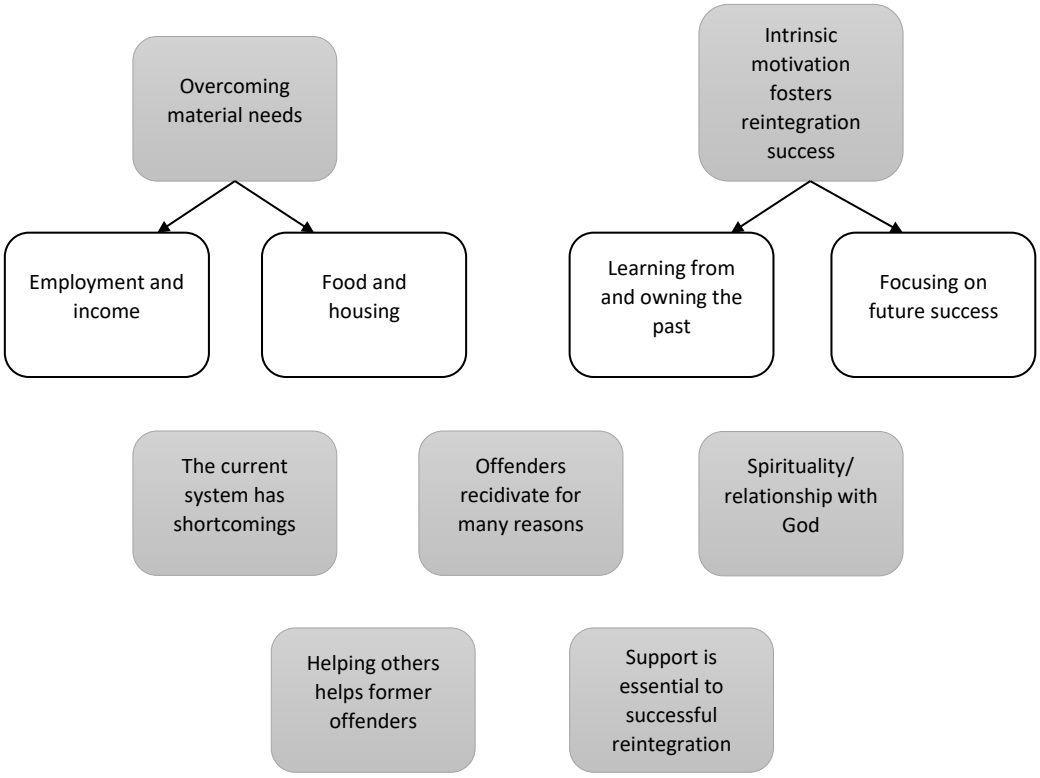
Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Overcoming material needs	Employment and income	Self-employed – entrepreneur
		Got a job after release
		Low pay better than no pay
		Finding employers open to my background
		Criminal history follows offenders
		Employment barriers
		Financial constraints upon release
		Had savings upon release
	Food and Housing	How I obtained housing
		No problem getting food
		Housing barrier
		Government assistance
Support is essential to successful reintegration		Had a support system
		Released offenders need help
Intrinsic motivation fosters reintegration success	Learning from and owning the past	Owning my past
		Do not want to return to prison
		Self-respect and love
		Move on
		Aware of recidivism statistics
		Fear
	Focusing on future success	Working my way up to better circumstances
		Determined to improve my life
		Significant professional success
		Self-improvement
		Motivated by my children
		Planned for my own release

		Hope
The current system has shortcomings		Expansion of prison industrial complex Existing programs fall short No reentry programming Walked in our shoes Attended programs while incarcerated
Offenders recidivate for many reasons		Reasons for recidivism Stigma Drugs Lack of family support Feel defeated Emotional struggles
Spirituality/relationship with God		Commitment – influence of God
Helping others helps former offenders		Help other offenders Using my experience to help others

Finally, a thematic map was created to depict relationships between the themes and subthemes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Thematic Map



Evidence of Trustworthiness

Several checks were integrated to ensure the trustworthiness of findings from this investigation. Member checking and assurance of saturation was employed to improve the credibility of findings. Transferability and dependability were established via thick description and an audit trail. Researcher reflexivity and an audit trail helped to control for bias and improve confirmability.

Results

After analysis was completed, a narrative of the findings was developed. The following narrative includes a discussion of each theme and subtheme to emerge. The narrative is supported using examples and direct quotes from participant interviews. A rich audit trail helped improve transferability, including details on all aspects of the data collection and analysis processes. The audit trail and researcher reflexivity helped establish dependability and confirmability.

Overcoming Material Needs

The first main theme to emerge centered on ways participants overcame material needs related to four of the policy-driven social barriers that were the focus of this investigation (employment/income, food, stigmatized social relations, finance/banking, and housing). Because stigmatized social relationships were discussed as barriers without any clear strategies for overcoming them, this policy-driven social barrier is discussed in the fifth theme (*offenders recidivate for many reasons*). This first theme was broken into two subthemes to distinguish between needs related to finances and those related to food and shelter. Each of these two subthemes is discussed, as follows.

Employment and Income

In discussing barriers and needs related to employment and income, participants were frank about some of the challenges experienced by released offenders. Criminal pasts often follow offenders, undermining their abilities to obtain jobs and earn livable wages. Participants in this study knew the importance of getting jobs after release and were aware of the barriers their backgrounds could create. However, they did not use

these barriers as an excuse to not become employed; they just knew they would have to find employers who would overlook their records. For example, when looking for a job, Participant B said, “I had to find people who were open to backgrounds like mine.” The strategy Participant B used was transparency, letting prospective employers know about their past upfront:

> I went into the interview I told the lady, the lady told the manager that she really wanted me to work and then she saw the potential and she gave me a chance, so I was upfront with it. I thought, let’s be upfront because you know I didn’t want them to hire me and fire me. Let them know X, Y, and Z and I didn’t have a problem anymore.

Participant B was hired despite her background, and then used that job as an opportunity to prove herself to their employer. Participant E also described employment hurdles related to his background, sharing he had recently gotten “shot down for really good high paying jobs that would have been life changing for me.” Participant E said he usually applied with smaller companies because those employers were either more open to individuals with criminal histories or did not run criminal background checks on applicants.

Participant H also said employment applications usually screened for criminal backgrounds, creating hurdles for released offenders:

> When it comes to getting employment, when people ask you, "What's your experience? What have you done in the past? What have you been in the past?" And when you have to mark that about... They ask you, "Have you ever been

> incarcerated or convicted of a crime?" When you answer that, oftentimes, that automatically eliminates you from a position or getting a position. You'll always get that, "I'll call you."

Participant G had to take jobs he did not necessarily want because of hindrances caused by his background: "The kind of job I was trying to get, it wasn't out there for me because I was just recently released from the prison system. So, I had to do things like construction … things of that nature."

Employment barriers related to criminal backgrounds also limited the pay participants could earn; a general sentiment existed, which illustrated a willingness to take low-wage positions to get by. Participant A explained that while in prison, he learned "low pay was better than no pay." Participants D and F described taking low wage and menial jobs, sometimes making only minimum wage. Participant I explained that reintegration into the workforce was hard for many released offenders because "you have to accept that most of the time, you have to start from the bottom." Participant I then added, "But if you stick it out, it will get better," demonstrating his willingness to do what needed to be done to get a job, earn money, and successfully reintegrate. Participant I said that after leaving prison, he was working at Subway for $7.56 per hour. Participant D described working at a flea market and as a laborer in the evenings, saying, "I would pick up the trash and stuff like that."

Only two participants mentioned having small savings upon release, so getting a job was a critical first step to successful reintegration. Despite criminal backgrounds, six participants said they either had jobs waiting for them or had no trouble getting jobs upon

release. Participant A shared, “When I was released from prison, I had a job waiting for me, so I did not have a problem finding employment, nor did I have a problem with income.” Similarly, Participant C explained, “Prior to when I got released before I got incarcerated, my background was real estate, so quite naturally I had a job to go when I came home.” Participant E “was pretty much right to work” upon release.

Another finding to emerge under this subtheme was the prevalence of self-employment and entrepreneurism among participants. Starting their own businesses allowed participants to overcome stigmas and hurdles with traditional employment. Participant B started a business after release and said “People [offenders] know when they get out, they are going to have to be entrepreneurs because they will always be stigmatized by people.” Participant C also described the spirit of entrepreneurialism among released offenders and shared about the three businesses she currently owned. Participant G said he was self-employed in construction and remodeling. Participant H started working for plumbing companies after release, but eventually decided to get licensed and start his own business as a plumber. Participant H shared:

> I started working for plumbing companies, after about 15 years, I decided I wanted to go into business for myself, which made me go and started doing a prep course to take the state licensing exam and the plumbing contractor.

Food and Housing

The second subtheme to emerge under the theme of overcoming material needs was focused on food and housing. For the most part, participants did not have challenges with obtaining food. Seven participants specifically said they had experienced no barriers

with food, either because they were making their own money through employment, had support from family, or were receiving government assistance. When asked about challenges obtaining food, Participant A said there were no barriers "Because I was making money, so I was able to buy anything I wanted." Similarly, Participant B said she experienced no issues with hunger because she was working. When asked if he had experienced any barriers obtaining food, Participant H 'aid, "I didn't have issues with food because I had family." Participants C, D, and I said food scarcity was not a problem because they were receiving food stamps or other forms of government assistance. Participant C explained, "I applied for assistance now, I got $1,200 that fit the criteria of EBT." Participant H said they had no issues with food because their family supported them. Participant H then added, "I didn't have that issue of dealing with being hungry and stuff like that. If I was hungry, it was because I chose to get high than to eat."

While none of the participants described experiences of hunger after release, most described barriers to obtaining housing. Because offenders rarely leave prison in strong financial standing, they are often dependent on help from family members. However, without family support, housing barriers often emerged. For example, Participant A explained that he was not able to live with his female relatives because they all had husbands who would not allow it. Participant A became eligible for subsidized housing, but then got a job that caused him to become ineligible. Participant C came home from prison to a house that was in foreclosure and Participant E was limited because of background checks performed by most landlords. Similarly, Participant H explained, "There are some apartments that when they do a credit check on you, or do a background

check, if you've been to prison, they won't rent to an ex-con." Participant I said finding a place to live was "real hard" because of their criminal history: "I was getting rejected from trailers, just everything." Similarly, Participant E explained, "I had a couple of places that I just couldn't even apply at because they would do background checks so I definitely had to um research them where I can go and where I can't go."

Despite the housing barriers that were present, all participants were able to find places to live. There was an attitude of persistence and determination expressed in the interviews. For example, Participant A started with renting a room from a lady, on a weekly basis. Eventually, he moved up to a home in a housing project. He then was able to secure a rental home for a few years before purchasing it. He mentioned that his home was now paid for.

Participant B participated in a housing program for mothers, and then was also able to get a house in a housing project. Participant D sought help from the program, *Noah's House*, and Participants E and H temporarily stayed with family. Although he felt it was "embarrassing," Participant G stayed with his parents until he was able to afford a place of his own. None of the participants were homeless after release, despite the challenges their criminal pasts created in terms of obtaining housing. The tenacity and ability to secure housing may be one of the most important factors in participants' successful reintegration.

Essential Nature of Support to Successful Reintegration

The second main theme to emerge highlighted the importance of support systems. Participants described important forms of social support, which were likely integral to

their reintegration success. Eight participants specifically described the ways friends and family members provided them with social support. For example, Participant C said, "I had a friend of mine that believed in me." Participant E said, "Family was and has always been a huge support." Participant F described a strongly supportive family and husband, admitting that support made her reintegration experience very different from that of most released offenders:

> My situation was a little bit different from the majority of people. I came home to a stable home. I've been married for 26 years now, but I was married over 18 years when I came home, and actually a little longer than that. Sorry. My husband was very supportive. I have a very supportive family. My situation was completely different from the majority of people who are released from incarceration.

Participant I explained, "My support system is what held me together," adding "my family… has been my rock."

Social support was described as a critical element of successful reintegration, but participants also discussed different forms of support that were often scarce for released offenders. Without adequate knowledge, resources, and support, participants believed released offenders were more likely to recidivate. For example, Participant C emphasized the importance of obtaining financial education: "[Released offenders] need a place to go to and someone to teach you how to establish themselves, how to fix their credit, how to save their money, how to be able to…. They need a program." Participant H explained that released offenders were often sent back into the same environments that caused them

to offend in the first place, without any knowledge or assistance on how to make changes. Speaking of social support, Participant F explained:

> It's a big help. Doesn't mean you have to have it in order to be successful, but it's a good driving force that it allows you to relax some part' of what you're concerned about in everyday life versus being concerned about every area of your life.

Intrinsic Motivation as a Method to Foster Reintegration Success

The third main theme focused on ways participants were intrinsically motivated to overcome barriers to successful reintegration. This motivation emerged in two main ways: (a) by learning from and owning their pasts, and (b) by focusing on their future success rather than dwelling on their past offenses. Each of these categories of intrinsic motivation are discussed as subthemes, below.

Learning from and Owning the Past

Participants were intrinsically motivated to overcome their pasts, describing ways they had learned from and owned their past experiences. Four participants described taking ownership over their past. For example, Participant A said he did not allow the stigma of being an ex-offender impede his future success, sharing that he proactively "let everyone know that I was an ex-offender." Participant C said she had made mistakes and accepted the consequences, while Participant D admitted he had been incarcerated because he did something wrong and accepted the consequences. By owning their pasts, participants were able to move on to more positive, productive futures. As Participant B shared, "Let's move on let not waste another day…it's all in the past." Participant C said released offenders often feel stuck in the past, unable to let go and move forward. For

Participant C, a willingness to let go of the past was essential to her success: "Me, I accepted it and kept moving." Speaking of her past, Participant B shared, "I have to learn to live with this. I'm ok with who I am, and I love me regardless of who don't, but I have a strong opinion of myself."

Part of learning from the past was a desire to never return to that place. Because they had moved on to positive, healthy lives, participants were motivated to do whatever needed to be done to ensure they never went backwards. Participant E shared, "I'm so far past it, I don't think I will ever have to think about going back again, there [would] have to be some ridiculous offense or catastrophe for me go back to prison." Participant H said a key to avoiding recidivism was being self-driven and determined to never go back to prison. In describing his experiences with his prison ministry, Participant A recalled strong feelings to never be behind bars again: "Every time when I go back to the prison for my ministry, when they slam the doors behind you that remind me that I can leave now, but if they bring me back for a crime, I cannot leave when I want." Participants were also aware of recidivism rates and motivated to not become statistics. As Participant B shared, "A lot of people will come out and go back." Similarly, Participant A explained, "According to statistics, 1 out of 5 reoffend within 90 days to 3 years getting out of prison. They are either back in prison, in jail, or dead." Participant B was intrinsically motivated by "the fear of getting trapped again and going back."

Focusing on Future Success

The second way participants expressed intrinsic motivation to successfully reintegrate was by focusing on their future success. There was a strong desire to improve

their lives, which began with an emphasis on self-improvement. Participant D realized she had the ability to choose what she focused on and how she reacted to situations:

> I can change how I feel about what's going on I don't react negatively towards anything because whatever is happening is meant to happen, but I have this free will to choose how it's going to affect me, and I don't let it affect me anymore."

Participant E admitted that successful reintegration was the result of "a lot of self-work." Participant I watched motivational videos for inspiration and self-improvement.

Two participants expressed a sense of hope for the future. As Participant F said, "There is hope. There's always hope." Participant C believed that instilling hope for the future was paramount to helping ex-offenders avoid recidivism. There had to be a sense of hope in the ability to achieve better futures. Hope and self-improvement then fostered determination to create better futures. Five participants shared how a resolute desire to improve their circumstances helped them overcome barriers to achieve reintegration success. There was a willingness to not only take on low-paying jobs or start over, as previously mentioned, but to also capitalize on all the skills and opportunities they could. Participant B said, "I had to get up money along the way and you know I got a lot of different skills. I'm eye lash extension tech, I got license as a facial specialist, so I had to pull those things out." Participant C explained how the experience of getting in trouble could have to defeat and depression, but she did not allow that to happen. When discussing keys to successful reintegration, Participant G said,

> I would say that in coming out of prison, you have to have a determined and made up mind that you're going to stay out, because outside of prison there are so much that you can get into, so much that the world can offer.

Later, Participant G added, "You have to have a made of mind to stay out of prison, to keep it from being a revolving door." According to Participant H:

> It's going to take persistence. The door is going to get closed in your face a lot, but you got to stay determined and you got to start somewhere. You can't just give up. And if you got the heart, especially you got to have a mindset that I'm not going back. Once you get that mindset, then you'll do whatever it is that you need to do to stay out.

Participant I also described determination to become successful, saying that released offenders must want change, and be willing to take action to achieve that change: "You have to really want it. You have to change your people, places, things. You can't expect to get something different, doing the same thing."

Six participants described a willingness to act in the present, even if that action was undesirable, in order to achieve future success. Participant C described working and saving money, budgeting carefully so she could get into real estate. As soon as he was released, Participant E got to work building himself back up from the bottom: "I went right to work and once built myself up, I pretty much moved out of state, same thing got to work in another state, got my own place you know and I built up everything, just like anyone does." Participant F summed up this sentiment when she shared her personal mantra: "This is my mantra and I say it all the time. I say it to myself, we do what we

have to do until we can do what we want to do." Determination and work ethic were described by Participant I, who shared, "I started to see that you work hard, you keep your head down, and you just do what you're supposed to do, and it will get better."

Hard work and determination to create future success resulted in the manifestation of professional success for many participants. As previously mentioned, most participants were currently self-employed and entrepreneurs. Significant professional success was described by three participants, in particular. Participant A had partnered with the City of Tampa to build 250 homes, became a ghost writer, got a real estate license, became recertified to teach, as well as becoming "famous for being an ex-offender and ex-drug addict." Participant B turned a $20,000 salary into a business that earned $300,000 during its first year. She also earned a master's degree in Christian psychology, became a board certified counselor, and a minister. Participant C owned three successful businesses, including a consulting agency, a construction firm, and a transportation company.

Shortcomings of the Current System

While most of the themes and subthemes to emerge were focused on the barriers participants faced and overcame, there was also discussion of flaws in the current judicial system and prison industrial complex. Six participants were involved with different types of reentry and educational programs while incarcerated. Although some benefits of these programs were described, there was significant talk about improvements that were needed. Speaking of reentry programming, Participant C said, "I don't see nobody benefitting from the programs. You show me somebody who benefit from a program where that person is really being successful." Participant F became fully submersed in

available programs while incarcerated but did not find much benefit in any of them: "Everything that was available for me to participate in, I tried it. Most of the programs are surface and they're time consuming for no reason at all." When asked if she felt current reentry programming was helpful, Participant F replied, "No."

Four participants said reentry programming had not been available to them. When asked about their experiences with reentry programs, Participant B replied, "I didn't have any reentry program while I was in there and when I got out, I had to figure this out on my own." When asked the same question, Participant C shared,

> I don't think they have one. Most of the programs are just housing. The housing is a drug program which consists of going to a class and saying we are not going to get high anymore.

Speaking of reentry programming, Participant H said he had also experienced none. Participant H then added, "The only reentry program that I ever had was continuing to get in the system."

Many Reasons for Offenders Recidivating

The fifth theme to emerge was focused on the reasons for recidivism. It was important to discuss these reasons to shed light on the barriers that participants discussed, which expanded upon the five policy-driven barriers that were examined in this study. For example, participants discussed the mental and emotional challenges that released offenders often struggle with. As Participant A shared, "Some people who become institutionalized can get out of prison, but they cannot get prison out of themselves. They feel more comfortable going back to prison because they can relate to that." Although she

had successfully reintegrated, Participant C was still haunted by feelings of defeat because of her past: “People don’t understand, it affects everything about me I am defeated. I am like a walking zombie.” Participant F similarly explained that individuals often recidivate because “they've been beaten down ’o much. They've been told that they're so worthless, and you and I both know that even for those who haven't been incarcerated, if you don't have good self-esteem or self-worth, this could hurt anybody.” Participant I described feeling completely overwhelmed and underprepared to manage all the tasks required to reintegrate after release:

> I cried for the first time in 20 years. How am I going to do this? I don’t know how I'm going to do this. They want me to go here, do this, do that, do this. I’m two days out of jail. How am going to do all of this?

Feeling unsupported and uncared for was described as a barrier for Participant C: “It feels it hurts to know that nobody cares and it hurts to build yourself back by yourself with no assistance. It’s a lone feeling.” A lack of support was also mentioned by Participants B, D, and F. Without family support, especially, participants explained that offenders become more likely to recidivate. As Participant B shared, “I see a lot of people will come out and get hyped up about their family and then their family lets them down.” Participant C said recidivists often lack family support, and Participant F said it is not always possible to reconnect offenders with their families, after release.

The influence of drugs was mentioned by four participants. Drug addiction created a cycle that was very hard to break, and which often fostered repeat crimes and recidivism. Speaking of their own experiences, Participant B admitted that drugs had

captivated her life, keeping her in a cycle of crime. Similarly, Participant E shared, “The only reason that I mainly got in trouble was through drugs. I don’t have any drug charges, but I had a drug habit so that what got me into situations.” Participant H explained that a bad marriage and cocaine addiction were catalysts for his own recidivism.

Participants also described how the stigma of being a criminal can foster recidivism. For example, Participant B explained that she faced stigma from her own family and church, sharing, “It was difficult for me again because of the stigma and being incarcerated all my life the church people shunned me.” Similarly, Participant C shared that people who had been incarcerated “will tell you people look at them crazy.” Participant I felt stigma from others in his daily interactions, sharing that people would ask about his incarceration, which would automatically make him feel judged and criticized:’

> And then it's, “Well, how long were you going for?" And now it starts being like, now the stigma is, damn, you just don't get it. You been effing up your whole life. And of course I'm my hardest critic, because that’s how I’m thinking. I’m like, “Oh, they looking at me like I’m messing up.” And they’re probably not. But that’s how I feel sometimes.

Spirituality/Relationship with God

The sixth theme centered on the ways spirituality and relationships with God helped offenders with reintegration. Eight participants specifically described the positive influence of spirituality and religion, often crediting their successful reintegration to God. For example, when asked about how he was able to successfully reintegrate, Participant

A replied, “I was able to establish myself, and I made a commitment to God and myself.” Participant B gave “all the credit to God,” sharing she had been blessed and favored by God. When asked how she had developed confidence that she could successfully reintegrate, Participant C replied, “God, I believe in Him.” Participant D credited her reintegration to a spiritual awakening that she said, “changed my life completely.” Similarly, Participant I described how his “higher power” had helped him find a path to a new life and successful reintegration. Participant G shared, “I changed my life a lot. I've had to accept Christ and that helped a lot. That helped a whole lot. It is helping a whole lot.” Participant H noted they always felt God “had His hand on me,” but also pointed out that having a relationship with God did not mean life would be without challenges. Participant H shared:

> I had a strong belief in God... Here's another thing that people don't realize. Even though you have a strong belief in God, you're still not perfect and you're still going to make mistakes. Let me just put that idea. You still make mistakes, and you still struggle.

Helping Others in Order to Help Former Offenders

The final theme to emerge was helping others helped offenders. Study participants emphasized the importance of helping other offenders. It seemed that being able to help others successfully reintegrate may have also helped them, personally. For example, three participants described ways they used their personal experiences to help others. Participant A used his experience as a drug addict to become a specialist who was able to help and inspire others. Participant B shared an emotional anecdote of a time she

struggled to buy clothes after getting out of prison; that experience inspired her to start her own clothing company "because I never wanted anybody to feel and experience what I had gone through." Participant A also tried to put together a program for 12 successful ex-offenders, so they could share their stories with one another "and see what we have in common."

Seven participants described various other ways they helped other people who were incarcerated or trying to reintegrate after release. Participant A visited the institution he had been incarcerated in to try to inspire others: "I was going back into the institution as a role model for other inmates so that they can see if I can make it, they can make it." Participant C had made a business of helping former offenders repair their credit and apply for loans to start their own businesses. Participant C shared, "I want to help my people." Participant C expanded on this business, explaining:

> I still help people in those positions get there, that's what I do for a living. Right now, I probably have like twenty clients that need their credit repair and the live over there on the east side of Tampa and right now they say I want a house D and a car and I say, "Ok, well you got to fix your credit first." [They respond] "Well you know, nobody ain't teach me nothing." [I say] "Ok, I charge this and I'm gonna send my friend to do your paperwork for you I can't do that because I am busy." But I still make time to help those people because if you don't help, they will go crazy. But if you do help, they going to do what they say they will do.

Participant H wanted to be an example for others, to show them that they could turn their lives around. Participant F wanted to help young men learn their worth and

prevent them from becoming criminals in the first place: “I am so passionate about this. As I said, the reason why I felt that I had to do something was I wanted to stop these bright young guys from going to prison because they don't know their worth.”

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate and identify postincarceration strategies for reintegration that led to sustained success. Specifically, I explored strategies used by released offenders to successfully navigate the following five policy-driven social barriers: (a) employment/income, (b) food, (c) stigmatized social relations, (d) finance/banking, and (e) housing. Interviews were conducted with 10 former offenders who had successfully reintegrated after release from incarceration. Thematic analysis of interview data revealed a total of seven themes and four subthemes. Main themes were overcoming material needs, essential nature of social support to successful reintegration, intrinsic motivation as a method to foster reintegration success, shortcomings of the current system, many reasons for offenders recidivating, spirituality/relationship with God, and helping others as a method to help former offenders. Subthemes were employment and income, food and housing, learning from and owning the past, and focusing on future success. Participants used a number of strategies to overcome policy-driven barriers. A discussion of these findings, their implications, and opportunities for future research are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore postincarceration strategies that led to successful reintegration, indicated by non-recidivism for at least 3 years following release. Little research existed on strategies for successful reintegration that are implemented by nonrecidivating ex-convicts. This study was focused on how successful ex-convicts addressed the following five policy-driven social barriers: (a) employment/income, (b) food, (c) stigmatized social relations, (d) finance/banking, and (e) housing. The study was guided by a single research question: What strategies do non-recidivating ex-convicts use to navigate the five policy-driven social barriers upon release from prison?

The study sample included 10 ex-offenders who had successfully reintegrated and had not been under supervision for at least 3 years. Data were collected via semistructured interviews with these participants. Interviews were conducted via telephone as was convenient to participants and allowed for social distancing. After data collection was completed, audio from each interview was transcribed and thematically analyzed using open and axial coding. Thematic analysis of interview data revealed a total of seven themes and four subthemes. Main themes were overcoming material needs, the essential nature of social support to successful reintegration, intrinsic motivation as a method of fostering reintegration success, shortcomings of the current system, many reasons for offenders recidivating, spirituality/relationship with God, and helping others in order to help former offenders. Subthemes were employment and income, food and housing, learning from and owning the past, and focusing on future success.

Analysis revealed that participants used many strategies to overcome policy-driven reintegration barriers. They described ways they met their own needs through obtaining jobs, starting businesses, and securing streams of income needed to provide for their basic needs. When it came to food and housing needs, they either provided for themselves through their own income streams, or relied on assistance from family, friends, or government programs. A key finding was that support was essential to successful reintegration. Success seemed largely contingent upon having people who believed in participants, encouraged them, and helped them obtain skills and information they needed.

Participants demonstrated intrinsic motivation to succeed and were determined to own their mistakes, learn from their pasts, and become better people because of their experiences. They were more concerned about where they were going in life, and not where they had been. Participants recognized their experiences but did not seem to dwell on past mistakes or challenges. They were growth-oriented and striving to achieve future successes.

Participants noted that the current system had many shortcomings that made it harder to overcome policy-driven barriers. They described lack of reentry programs or challenges involved with accessing reentry programs and resources. They also described many reasons that released offenders often recidivate, such as mental and emotional challenges, feelings of defeat, drug use, and lack of preparation and support. Eight participants specifically described the positive influence of spirituality and religion, often

crediting their successful reintegration to God. Finally, participants described how helping others successfully reintegrate also helped them personally.

Interpretation of the Findings

As follows, an interpretation of key findings is presented. This interpretation is presented thematically. Findings from the current study are compared with existing literature to highlight ways this investigation aligned with and sometimes challenged findings from previous researchers.

Overcoming Material Needs

Participants in this study described ways they made sure their basic needs were met, despite policy-driven social barriers. They detailed strategies they implemented to overcome barriers related to employment/income, food, stigmatized social relations, finance/banking, and housing. In discussing barriers and needs related to employment and income, they were frank about some challenges experienced by released offenders. For example, they spoke at length about how employers were often reticent to hire them because of their criminal histories. This finding echoed existing literature. Employers often perceive released offenders as lacking basic work skills and worry that hiring formerly incarcerated individuals could create concerns among clients and customers (Obatusin et al., 2019). Job applicants with criminal backgrounds are 62% less likely to receive calls back than those without criminal histories (Anderson, 2019). Petersilia (2011) reported criminal records could prevent released offenders from working in several fields, including childcare, education, home health, nursing, and security.

Occupations that require licensure, such as nail technicians and barbers, may also be out of reach for former offenders (Alexander, 2010).

In response, participants had to put in additional effort to either find employers who would look past their criminal history or find ways to work for themselves. Self-employment among ex-convicts has been reported previously. Irankunda et al. (2019) found ex-convict status was significantly and positively associated with entrepreneurism. Bakker and McMullen (2023) described the prevalence of entrepreneurism among ex-convicts as a behavioral dimension of unconventional entrepreneurism. Patzelt et al. (2014) argued self-employment provided a way for former convicts to overcome discriminatory attitudes among employers, while also fostering an entrepreneurial mindset.

Through persistence, participants were able to overcome employment and income barriers, which ultimately helped them obtain food and housing. For the most part, participants did not have challenges with obtaining food. They often had help from friends and family members as well as government assistance programs, which helped them meet these needs. This challenged findings reported by some previous researchers. Al Abosy et al. (2022) reported food insecurity was a persistent problem among formerly incarcerated individuals, which compounded problems in terms of chronic disease. Structural issues with programs designed to provide a food safety net to justice-impacted populations created barriers to accessing healthy foods (Al Abosy et al., 2022). Rhim (2020) explained food insecurity is a persistent problem for many released offenders and tends to be the worst during the first few months after release. The apparent lack of post-

release food insecurity described by participants in this study may be attributed to increased levels of social support.

While none of the participants described experiences of hunger after release, most described barriers to obtaining housing. Released offenders are often dependent on housing help from family members. Challenges related to housing described by participants have also been reported by previous researchers. Criminal records often prevent released offenders from accessing public housing (Hall et al., 2015), and private rental communities and landlords can refuse to rent to individuals with criminal backgrounds (Phillips & Spencer, 2013). The housing that released offenders have access to is often located in low-income and high-crime neighborhoods, which are associated with high rates of criminality and recidivism (Anderson et al., 2018). Lutze et al. (2014) explained housing instability can increase recidivism via social stigmas that encourage released offenders to engage in criminal activities.

Essential Nature of Support to Successful Reintegration

The second main theme to emerge highlighted the importance of support systems. Participants described important forms of social support, which were likely integral to their reintegration success. Participants described the essential role of support from friends and family members in their successful reintegration. Participants also discussed different forms of support that were often scarce for released offenders. Without adequate knowledge, resources, and support, participants believed released offenders were more likely to recidivate. The integral of social support and information in successful reentry has been previously described. For example, Kjellstrand et al. (2022) found social

support helped ensure successful reentry through multiple pathways. Support provided to individuals while still incarcerated is also related to reduced recidivism. For example, Mitchell et al. (2016) found that visitation was associated with modest reductions in recidivism. Similarly, Berghuis et al. (2022) found in-prison visits to be associated with reduced recidivism. Marcus-Antonio (2019) similarly reported that positive emotional support from family members was negatively associated with recidivism among released violent offenders.

Intrinsic Motivation as a Method to Foster Reintegration Success

The third theme focused on ways participants were intrinsically motivated to overcome barriers to successful reintegration. This motivation emerged in two main ways: (a) by learning from and owning their pasts, and (b) by focusing on their future success rather than dwelling on their past offenses. Participants were growth oriented and had visions for their futures. They focused on the possibilities for their lives, rather than dwelling on their pasts. Research indicates this growth mindset is essential to overcoming major life challenges, such as incarceration. Hines (2021) found growth mindset was very common among African American former offenders who successfully reintegrated. Several scholars have reported on the presence of intrinsic motivation among ex-offenders who were able to successfully reintegrate (Ally, 2022; Davis et al., 2012; Johnson, 2013). Similarly, Palmer and Christian (2019) found future orientation was essential to growth and success of formerly incarcerated men.

An internal desire to change seems to factor into the effects that other reentry sources and programs may have on released offenders. For example, Zortman et al.

(2016) explained that the intrinsic motivation to make positive change was required for reentry programs to be maximally successful for former offenders. Similarly, Schlager (2018) argued that for former offenders to take advantage of programs available to them, they must be empowered during the reentry process. Wright et al. (2015) argued that successful reentry is contingent upon released offenders' abilities to generate a shift in self-image, from viewing themselves as deviant to viewing themselves as people who are capable of change and becoming contributing members of society.

Shortcomings of the Current System

Participants discussed flaws in the current judicial system and prison industrial complex. Some participants were involved with different types of reentry and educational programs while incarcerated. Although some benefits of these programs were described, there was significant talk about improvements that were needed. Overall, participants found reentry programming, when available, to be of little help to their successful reintegration.

Previous researchers have criticized reentry programming at length, pointing out the shortcomings that participants discussed in the current study. While research indicates some reentry programs can help reduce recidivism, the effects of many of these programs are heterogenous, while others are criminogenic (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). Petrich et al. (2021) reported that flaws in the content and delivery of reentry programs often limit their effectiveness. Programs rarely target offenders at the highest risk of recidivism, do not target the main causes of recidivism, and are rarely implemented with fidelity (Petrich et al., 2021). Singer and Kopak (2021) reported on the gaps in reentry programs that

failed to offer substance abuse treatment. Overall, systemic shortcomings described by study participants aligned with those reported by previous researchers.

Many Reasons for Offenders Recidivating

The fifth theme focused on the causes of recidivism. It was important to discuss these reasons to shed light on the barriers that participants discussed, which expanded upon the five policy-driven barriers that were examined in this study. Participants described the ways mental and emotional challenges, feelings of defeat, drug use, and lack of support increased ex-offenders' likelihood of recidivism. Much of this discussion echoed that from previous scholars. For example, Wilson and Wood (2014) reported that mental disorders are linked to higher rates of recidivism. King et al. (2018) explained that symptoms of mental health disorders can compound reentry challenges due to interference with the abilities to complete tasks essential to successful reentry, such as obtaining employment. Bruce et al. (2013) reported that released prisoners with mental health disorders were more prone to homelessness, physical health ailments, drug abuse, and unemployment, all of which increase the likelihood of reoffending. Skinner et al. (2018) noted the barriers that stress and childhood trauma can create to reentry.

Spirituality/Relationship with God

The sixth theme centered on the ways spirituality and relationships with God helped offenders with reintegration. Most participants described the positive influence of spirituality and religion, often crediting their successful reintegration to God. This finding was strongly aligned with previous literature on the relationship between spirituality and reentry success. For example, Stansfield et al. (2019) found participation in spiritual and

religious programming was associated with lower rates of recidivism among released offenders. Among juvenile offenders, Stewart et al. (2019) found spirituality served as a protective factor against recidivism. Christian (2022) argued that the church played a fundamental role in rehabilitation and reducing systemic barriers among released Black male offenders, explaining that religiosity could help reduce recidivism rates among this population.

Helping Others in Order to Help Former Offenders

The final theme to emerge was helping others helps offenders. Study participants emphasized the importance of helping other offenders. It seemed that being able to help others successfully reintegrate may have also helped them, personally. Participants described ways they started businesses that helped released offenders or served as volunteers or mentors to those undergoing reintegration. Other researchers have reported on similar ways helping others helps former offenders, in terms of rehabilitation and reintegration. Chan (2014) found former drug users and offenders benefitted from sharing their life experiences in ways that helped others overcome their own struggles. LeBel et al. (2014) similarly explained that ex-convicts could work as *wounded healers* by similarly helping other convicts; helping others also helped ex-convicts reconcile their own criminal pasts.

Limitations of the Study

The current study was subject to limitations that must be acknowledged. As described at length in Chapter 4, the main limitation of this study pertained to difficulties acquiring the study sample. Finding released offenders who met the inclusion criteria and

were willing to participate in this investigation was very difficult. There was a degree of suspicion and mistrust among released offenders that made them unwilling to participate. While challenges with recruitment were expected, I did not anticipate the degree of pushback I would experience when trying to gather the study sample. Recruitment issues caused the data collection process to take much longer than expected.

While the identities of all participants were protected, data relied upon participants' open and honest responses to interview questions. Given the overall reticence among ex-convicts to participate in research that involved sharing details about their reintegration experiences, it was certainly possible that participants censored their responses during interviews. While confidentiality protected them from any possible experiences of retribution, related fears, along with trauma experienced during incarceration and reintegration, may have led to less forthcoming responses. There was no way to confirm the accuracy of the information provided by participants, so this was an inevitable limitation that had to be accepted.

Because of social distancing guidelines and discomfort among some participants with meeting face-to-face, several interviews were conducted remotely. This form of data collection presented minor limitations in terms of my ability to read body language or pick up on non-verbal cues during interviews. The small sample size was also a limitation that prevented generalization of findings to other samples or populations of released offenders.

It was likely that heterogeneity in the sample created additional limitations. Because participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, it was

likely that different findings may be reported by other researchers performing similar investigations. The study design presented a final limitation, as it drew upon participants' subjective experiences and their ability to communicate about those experiences.

Recommendations

Several recommendations for future research may be gleaned from this investigation. These recommendations may help to build upon findings from the current study, expand the body of related research, and address aforementioned limitations that emerged in this investigation. First, future researchers could replicate the current study with a more homogenous sample. That is, samples could be less varied in terms of key demographic factors that may influence participants' experiences and perceptions, such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, years served, number of years released, and the nature of crimes for which they were convicted. Similarly, researchers could examine the experiences of ex-convicts from different areas of the country to detect if differences in reintegration and associated barriers varied, based on geographic region.

An excellent opportunity for future research may lie in a replication of the current study, but having interviews be conducted by ex-convicts. By having a released offender serve as co-researcher in data collection, greater trust and rapport may be developed, ultimately creating more openness and honesty during interviews. To address hesitancy among prospective participants, data collection could also occur via online, anonymous questionnaires. Such a data collection strategy could provide ex-convicts with a deeper sense of protection and security, and possibly reveal information they would be hesitant to share in face-to-face interviews.

Because spirituality and religiosity emerged as prominent factors in participants' abilities to overcome barriers and successfully reintegrate into communities, future researchers could conduct research that specifically examines the role of spirituality and religiosity in reintegration. It would also be of benefit to study the role of different forms of social support in offenders' reintegration success. Finally, future researchers could consider conducting quantitative investigations on the role of personal characteristics, such as intrinsic motivation, resilience, and hope, in ex-offenders' reintegration experiences.

Implications

In terms of social change, the current research has a number of implications. Recidivism is a persistent problem in the United States, with significant social and economic costs. Each year, between 600,000 and 700,000 individuals are released from incarceration (Cochran & Mears, 2016); however, most of them will return to confinement shortly after release. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2017), 67.8% of released prisoners are arrested for new crimes within 3 years of release; 5 years after release, that statistic increases to 76.6%. Within 3 years of release, recidivism results in the rearrest of 429,000 of 650,000 released offenders (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2015).

Findings from this study revealed a number of flaws in the current system, as well as the ways ex-convicts overcame those flaws and other obstacles in order to experience successful reintegration. There is an ongoing need for improvements to programs aimed at rehabilitation and reintegration; yet, the criminal justice system is overwhelmingly

focused on policies aimed at punishment, rather than rehabilitation (Zoukis, 2017). Consequently, many released offenders are unprepared to cope with life outside of incarceration (Zoukis, 2017). Changes are needed to criminal justice policies, programs, and entire systems. Individuals need to be provided with resources, information, and support to help ensure their successful reintegration.

Study findings also highlighted the personal characteristics and strategies associated with successful reintegration. For example, personal motivation, growth orientation, social support, and spirituality all seemed to play an important role in the successful reintegration of study participants. Accordingly, pre-release and other prison-based programs that foster these characteristics and strategies may better prepare offenders, upon release. Programs that teach the value of positive mindset, which encourage interaction and support both among offenders and between offenders and their friends and family members, may also be very beneficial. Prison-based ministries as well as programs that foster other types of spirituality and mindfulness could also prove beneficial to released offenders.

Theoretical implications also emerged. The theoretical framework for this study was based on Weiner's (1972) attributions for achievement, Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, and Bourdieu's (1977) subset of habitus. The emphasis, with regards to non-recidivating ex-convicts, was on the strategies that helped released offenders navigate five social barriers faced by ex-convicts upon release from incarceration. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy describes an individual's confidence in his or her capability to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance required for success.

Both Bandura and Weiner (1972) posited that individuals' successes are reflections of their abilities to exert control over their behaviors by adjusting to their environments in order to succeed in challenging situations. Findings from this study support the use of self-efficacy and achievement attributions in understanding the seemingly elusive factors that cause some ex-offenders to successfully reintegrate, while the majority end up recidivating. Indeed, a deep and personal believe in self, an orientation toward the future, and attributions of achievement all emerged as factors related to the success of individuals in the current study.

At the core of Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice lies the concept of *habitus*, which is the notion that individuals have a herd or collective mentality and behave the same way in similar situations; their actions embody everything within their culture which, in turn, influences how they think, where they live, and how they act. According to Bourdieu, individuals internalize social norms within their situations. When situations and environments change, individuals also change, consistent with the internalized social norms of the new situation or environment. This theory may be helpful for explaining why so many released offenders end up back in prison. Without changing their ways of thinking prior to release, it is possible that the herd mentality of other offenders in prison creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat, failure, and ultimately, recidivism. Bourdieu argued that an individual's internal social norms and attitudes naturally shift along with changes in their external situations, but it is possible such shifts do not occur quickly enough when an individual transitions from incarceration to release. That is, if ex-offenders carry the attitudes and behaviors they demonstrated within confinement into the

outside world, post-release, those very attitudes and behaviors may contribute to quick recidivism. Thus, ex-offenders may need help in evolving their perspectives and attitudes into mindsets that work for them, outside of incarceration; positive evolution in mindset may ultimately foster reintegration success.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore post-incarceration strategies for reintegration that led to successful reintegration, indicated by non-recidivism for at least 3 years following release. Little research existed on the strategies for successful reintegration that are implemented by non-recidivating ex-convicts. Data were collected via semistructured interviews with 10 participants who had demonstrated successful reentry. Thematic analysis of interviews revealed a total of seven themes and four subthemes. The main themes included overcoming material needs, social support is essential to successful reintegration, intrinsic motivation fosters reintegration success, the current system has shortcomings, offenders recidivate for many reasons, spirituality/relationship with God, and helping others helps former offenders. The subthemes included employment and income, food, and housing, learning from and owning the past, and focusing on future success.

Overall, findings highlighted key traits that may be associated with success among the subset of released offenders who are able to reenter their communities, post-release, and go on to become successful, contributing citizens. Along with personal characteristics, such as positive mindset, determination, and resilience, participants in this study highlighted the important roles of spirituality and sense of purpose in reintegration.

While the system continues to demonstrate many flaws that contribute to high rates of recidivism, research on successful ex-offenders offers a new way of examining the recidivism problem. Rather than continually focus on barriers and obstacles faced by released offenders, it may be of value to understand and nurture the characteristics and attributes that prepare released offenders to overcome the obstacles they encounter on the outside.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about your experience upon release from incarceration. Share any information you are comfortable sharing about the process.
2. Please describe any reentry programming you experienced during incarceration, or after release.
3. Recidivism is a common issue for released offenders because of five common social barriers, including employment/income, food, stigmatized social relations, finance/banking, and housing. I want to go through each of these barriers with you to understand if and how you experienced those barriers, and what strategies you used to overcome each and successfully reintegrate into your community. The first barrier is employment and income. Please describe your experience obtaining employment and an income source after your release.
4. The next barrier I'd like to discuss is the basic need of food. I'd like to know if you had any challenges obtaining enough food, and if so, how you overcame them.
5. Stigma is another common barrier for released offenders, as it can strain social relations and make it difficult to reintegrate into communities. Did you experience any social stigma that strained your personal relationships after release? If so, please tell me about your experiences.
6. Banking and finance management is another challenge that can lead to recidivism. How did you manage your finances (open a checking account, pay bills, etc.) after your release? Did you experiences any challenges with this? If so, please explain.

7. Finally, released offenders often struggle to obtain safe, affordable housing upon release from incarceration. This is perhaps the most significant barrier. Please tell me about your experience securing housing after your release. Did you experience any barriers, and if so, how did you overcome them?
8. Finally, is there anything else that we did not cover, related to reentry barriers and your strategies for overcoming them, that you would like to share?

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

Research Title: Beyond Integration: Identification of Post-Incarceration Strategies for Successful Reintegration

You are invited to take part in a research study about the strategies used by former offenders to successfully return to their communities and refrain from committing additional crime.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Sharon Walker, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. This study will be used to complete the researcher's dissertation.

The purpose of this study is to explore post-incarceration strategies for re-integration that lead to successful reintegration.

Participation will involve completing a brief demographic questionnaire and participating in an interview that will last approximately 45 minutes.

To participate, you must:

- ✓ Be a successful, non-recidivating ex-convict who has served a minimum of 2 years and has been released from prison for at least 3 years
- ✓ Be at least 18 years old
- ✓ Have completed post-release/parole supervision and are not presently facing any criminal charges

Participation is completely voluntary and you will be free to withdraw at any time. Your identify will be protected.

Participants will receive a $25 gift card to Starbucks, Walmart, or Wawa for their time and effort.

To participate in this study, please contact the researcher, at [redacted].

Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire

1. What gender do you identify as?
2. What is your race?
3. What is your highest level of completed education?
4. How many years were you incarcerated?
5. How long have you been out of incarceration?
6. What profession do you work in?