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The Perspective of Formerly Incarcerated African American Men During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Iyesha Shauntae' Franklin
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Iyesha Shauntae' Franklin

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

The Perspective of Formerly Incarcerated African American Men

During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

Iyesha Shauntae' Franklin

MPhil, Walden University, 2022

MS, Grambling State University, 2015

BS, Grambling State University, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

November 2024

Abstract

The confluence of two devastating circumstances—the COVID-19 pandemic and the crowded, insalubrious living conditions in American jails as a result of mass incarceration, brought about an epidemic of an unprecedented magnitude. The large jail population, highly susceptible to infections due to overcrowded conditions, experienced exponential spread of the virus. While earlier research examined unhealthy situations related to the prison environment and their effects on inmates, the focus of such studies was not typically major crises or disease outbreaks in prisons. This qualitative phenomenological study used 10 participants located in the southeastern United States as a case study to better understand the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on the men's psychological and physiological well-being. Recruitment was conducted using a demographic and interest survey. Purposive sampling was used, and semi structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and in face-to-face meetings for maximum insight. Responses to these interviews were then coded and analyzed to determine the most frequent challenges faced by these individuals during the pandemic. The responses highlighted unsanitary conditions, loneliness, and isolation due to overcrowding, deaths from COVID-19, and inadequate healthcare as the main challenges. Additionally, fear, helplessness, stress, anxiety, and a sense of uncertainty were expressed. This study's findings suggest that policymakers and key stakeholders can create positive social change and implement needed improvements by developing effective management and policy reforms to upgrade living conditions across the nation's prison system.

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Dedication

God's gift to us is life; what we do with that gift and how we live our life is our gift back to Him. I dedicate this dissertation in honor of my grandmother, Sara Elizabeth Slaughter-Cooper. Losing you and continuing to pursue my dreams was the hardest thing ever. Thank you for always believing in me and my dreams. Not a day goes by that I do not miss you and think of you. I can still hear your voice; keep resting, sweet pea. I also dedicate this dissertation to my late grandfather, Henry Joseph Cooper. You are gone but never forgotten. Thank you for being a loving grandfather to all your grandchildren. To my grandparents, Jessie Franklin and Doris Marve-Franklin, whom the Lord called home before I was born: you both live in my father, aunts, and uncles. I grew up hearing so many amazing stories about you, and I am blessed that you instilled love and the importance of family in your children. They have passed these values on to us all. To my amazing parents, Michael and Pamela Franklin: Thank you for teaching me that I can do anything I put my mind to as long as I keep God first. Thank you for believing in me and my dreams, for always lifting me up, and for speaking life into me. I could not have done this without your love and support.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic of 2019 (COVID-19) changed the lives of all Americans in multiple ways. In the early stage of the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) used samples taken from an individual in Washington State, on January 18, 2019, and confirmed the first COVID-19 case in the United States on January 20, 2019. According to public health organizations, only 14 coronavirus infections were documented between January 21, 2020, and February 23, 2020. By April 23, 2020, the numbers had increased significantly, with 865,585 positive cases announced (Smith, 2022). Tensions spread as the number of infections rose among the general population and even among scientists. At first, scientists were unsure of how the virus was transmitted or its full impact on the human body. Ultimately it was discovered that COVID-19 was transmitted via tiny droplets released by infected individuals during coughing or breathing (Ningthoujam, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a pandemic due to the rising number of cases and confirmed diagnoses spread across the world, including the United States (Colson et al., 2021). Because this is a respiratory-borne infection, respiratory contact affects the transmission rate. Jails and prisons around the nation became hubs for the virus, partly because those imprisoned could not maintain social distance. *The New York Times* reported that over 2,700 prisoners died in custody from the coronavirus infection during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic and that 400,000 individuals in jails and prisons tested positive for the illness (Nicholas, 2020). Because the pandemic has already impacted so

many of those involved in the U.S. justice system, better planning is vital to reducing the outbreak's adverse effects on detainees, staff members working in correctional facilities, and the local community (Akiyama et al., 2020). To reinforce this point, the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic exposed the failure to incorporate prisons in preparation efforts, an issue perhaps most pertinent to the coronavirus outbreak (Lee et al., 2014). According to Nyamathi et al. (2021), the American government's response to the spread of COVID-19 in jails and prisons has been ineffective. For example, there have been over 500,000 cases among inmates and over 3,000 fatalities. It is important to note that the southeastern United States set up a temporary discharge committee to assess 594 prisoners for parole. However, the board was dissolved in June 2020, just 3 months after the pandemic began (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021). Jails had to adjust to unique and dangerous situations (Gutierrez, 2022).

However, even as institutions tend to relax regulations when new infections decline, there has yet been very little proof that sufficient and significant modifications have been put into place to better address potential disease outbreaks in the future (Keri et al., 2021). The coronavirus experience has shown that prisons were not prepared to manage the highly contagious illness, which caused the death of approximately 3,000 inmates and employees due to overcrowding, infamously subpar medical care, and continuously moving demographics. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, sheriffs at smaller prisons held 46% of the 13,051 inmates in the southeastern region during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, the Department of Corrections has not gathered information on COVID-19 vaccination schedules,

prevention strategies, or deaths in these places (Julie, 2021). From March 2020 to June 2021, the head of the Department's budget committee examined several areas of the jail system in response to the disease. The head of the budget committee changed an assessment of the economic effect of laws to omit the financial implications of responses to the pandemic's effects on the economy and public health (Peter, 2020).

Background

The body of literature selected to inform this study primarily addressed the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on jail overcrowding, poor ventilation, lack of testing, and inadequate infection control measures. At the same time, there was a lack of available literature that addressed the actual lived experiences and perceptions of African American men who were in jail during the COVID-19 pandemic. I used the following keywords and phrases while investigating the literature: *COVID-19, formerly incarcerated, challenges, overcrowded, prison, living conditions, and qualitative design*.

To repeat, most of the selected articles focused on the environmental conditions of jails during the COVID-19 pandemic. Montoya-Barthelemy et al. (2020) discussed the issues of jail overcrowding, close habitation, and poor ventilation during the pandemic. Nicholas (2020) proposed ways to prevent the spread of the virus among prison inmates and staff, including wearing masks and keeping jails clean and disinfected. Akiyama et al. (2020) provided statistics from the years before the pandemic, detailing the overcrowding issues already present in jails and prisons. Nelson and Kaminsky (2020) focused on overcrowding, lack of testing, inadequate infection control measures, and

shortages of essential supplies for staff and inmates as contributing factors to the spread of COVID-19 in jails and detention centers.

Research conducted by Nyamathi et al. (2021) and Keri et al. (2021) explored incarceration rates in the southeastern U.S. region. Nyamathi et al. found that the rate was 1,067 in about 100,000 people as of 2022, which included those in jails, prisons, juvenile justice facilities, and immigration detention centers. Keri et al. observed that overcrowding in prisons and jails, inadequate medical care, and the ever-shifting incarcerated population in the southeastern U.S. have continued to characterize the region. O'Donoghue (2021) analyzed how prisons in the southeastern region have handled COVID-19. Overall, the selected material offered valuable insights into issues related to incarceration in the southeastern U.S. region, including the current medical and healthcare situation.

According to Montoya-Barthelemy (2020), about 2.3 million people in the United States were held in state and federal prisons, municipal jails, immigration detention centers, and nongovernmental facilities, accounting for around 0.7% of the country's total population. The incarcerated populations experienced unjustifiably higher rates of COVID-19-related illness and death (Hagan et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic imposed excessive health problems upon persons living in detention (PLDs) and those working in detention settings (Pont et al., 2021). Throughout the pandemic, physical distancing was the backbone for controlling the spread of COVID-19, a measure hardly manageable in custodial settings, particularly in overcrowded ones (Pont et al., 2021). In addition, relatively recent research has indicated that prison personnel consulted with

medical experts to establish the best approach to reduce the number of COVID-19 cases in the prison population due to the rising number of cases worldwide (Tepper, 2021). Unfortunately, jails became super spreaders. The virus quickly disseminated among inmates and prison authorities because of the cramped quarters, lax cleanliness procedures, and inadequate medical facilities (Franco-Paredes et al., 2020). Other factors contribute to high rates of infection in general. These involve discrimination, people living in unstable housing, substance abuse problems, and people with mental illness (Akiyama et al., 2020). As a result, it has become necessary to develop comprehensive solutions that span both detention centers and society at large.

While the overall body of literature has addressed various issues regarding impacts of incarceration on imprisoned or detained individuals, I posit that a gap still exists in terms of addressing how the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically, affected incarcerated African American men (Franco-Paredes et al., 2020; Higgins, 2021). Because there is no current research focused on their actual, lived experiences during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study was purposed to raise awareness and contribute to understanding the unique perspectives of this demographic group. Thus, in order to obtain clear and direct feedback, this qualitative study centered on interviews with African American men concerning their lived experience of incarceration during the initial outbreak of COVID-19. As a result of study findings, I propose a program for prisons, jails, and other detention facilities that could be set up for possible future pandemics.

Problem Statement

This study was designed and conducted to address the problem of poor living conditions and inferior healthcare—issues that have chronically plagued the prison system in this country—through the perceptions and stories of formerly incarcerated African American men during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 served as the backdrop of this study’s problem because the pandemic, in fact, magnified those already existing problems, adding a new and dangerous element to living as an incarcerated individual. This qualitative study aimed to explore the firsthand perspectives and experiences of formerly incarcerated men through the lenses of race, discrimination, and the frightening unknowns of living through a pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed lives forever, and its impact has been felt across the globe. In the United States, jails in the southeastern region of the country have been the most critically affected by the pandemic due to the expanded number of incarcerated individuals, overcrowded conditions, and lack of sufficient healthcare resources and protocols (Carson et al., 2022.). The chances of COVID-19 spreading are greater inside a jail than outside of it. This increased occurrence is attributed to the fact that in jail, individuals are confined to a small space where keeping a 6-ft distance from others is impossible while access to the outside is limited. Moreover, COVID-19 has affected African Americans more than any other race due to underlying health issues.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men who were detained in jails located in the southeastern

United States during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the pandemic's influences on their psychological and physiological well-being. The findings that emerged from this research could potentially aid correctional officials, the public, and more importantly, prison inmates because this study was conducted to shed light on the ramifications and implications of COVID-19, as well as to suggest potential solutions for improving current conditions (Lofaro & McCue, 2020). With this study, I used a qualitative methodology for the purpose of generating information that could be useful to policymakers in identifying changeable legislation for Black crimes. On this view, it is crucial to expand the research and develop comprehensive solutions that span both detention centers and society as a whole. Another goal of the study was to estimate the criminal population density figures and assess how much COVID-19 had impacted those individuals incarcerated and housed in jails (Keri et al., 2021).

According to the CDC, deciding how to proceed in making improvements to the healthcare systems of jails and detention centers in the southeastern region will require additional research that can yield essential information to effect positive changes. According to Lofaro and McCue (2020), more research should focus on the following questions: (a) What was the status of the prison environment regarding spread of infection and medical care before COVID-19? (b) What is the current status of infection and medical care in terms of COVID-19 within the prison environment? and (c) What are the destructive effects COVID-19 has had on inmates?

Research Questions

To investigate this topic with more depth and to expand awareness of the impact of incarceration on the individual during a traumatic global pandemic, I sought to answer two of the most critical questions specific to the incarceration of African American men in the southeastern United States. The two research questions that guided the study were the following:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men, located in the southeastern United States, regarding their lived experiences of incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How did the incarceration experience during COVID-19 influence each individual's physiological and psychological well-being while in jail or prison?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that I used for this study was transcendental phenomenology, based on Edmund Husserl's (1931) philosophy of looking at the phenomenon under investigation through the natural world. It is the study of the essential structures of experience. Phenomenology opens up a different field of investigation into something that has not been explored before from a different standpoint rather than going off of what is already there. Phenomenology is transcendental because it investigates what can be learned by replicating acts and their unbiased connections (Husserl, 1997).

I also employed social cognitive theory, intersectionality theory, and social exchange theory within the study's primary framework in order to address various aspects of study participants' personal and sociocultural backgrounds.

By using phenomenological observation to explore the lived experiences and personal perspectives of formerly incarcerated Black men during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research approach provided detailed descriptions of not only each individual's experience, but also their uniquely subjective assessments of the prison environment and its value to society.

Nature of the Study

This study was qualitative in terms of methodology and was designed to explore and better understand study participants' unique requirements, convictions, and opinions as a particular demographic group—formerly incarcerated African American men—within the setting of a detention facility facing an unusual health emergency, the COVID-19 outbreak. I used a phenomenological research approach, which involves attempting to describe a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Teherani et al., 2015). This approach was designed to elicit rich descriptions of the participant's experience in terms of what happened in jail during the earlier stages of the pandemic and its meaning for the person who experienced it (Teheraniet al., 2015).

More specifically, this study took a transcendental phenomenological approach to draw in participants—meaning, an approach that enabled deep contemplation and encouraged subjective meaning-making on the part of each participant as a means to move forward. Stated another way, transcendental phenomenology, as a research

approach and this study's theoretical framework, was used to explore, interpret, and understand the lived experiences of the study subjects, as such exploring how their experiences were perceived, described, and explained so as to ultimately transform the individual's sense of self in some meaningful way (Moustakas, 1994; Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Listening and learning about lived experiences—based on the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men during the COVID-19 pandemic—has provided significant information with which to make improvements to the prison environment, to implement preventative and ongoing healthcare mechanisms, and to promote equitable and fair treatment of African Americans and other marginalized groups navigating the American prison system.

Definitions

African American: An American of African descent. This term is used interchangeably with *Black* (Collier- Thomas & Turner, 1994).

Challenges: Challenges represent difficult situations in which it becomes hard to do something or in which obstacles stand in the way of easily moving forward. (Nelson & Kaminsky, 2020).

COVID-19: COVID-19 is contagious illness brought on by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The majority of those who contract the virus suffer from mild to moderate respiratory illnesses (WHO, 2023).

Incarcerated: Confined in a jail or prison as a result of a criminal act (Dmitrieva et al., 2012).

Lived experiences: Refers to a representation of the experiences and choices of a given person, and the knowledge that they gain from these experiences and choices (Reid et al., 2005).

Outbreak: Outbreak refers to a sharp rise in the incidence rate of infectious disease correlated with location, time, and population under observation (Nelson & Kaminsky, 2020).

Pandemic: A widespread infectious disease that affects an entire country or the world simultaneously (Benziman, 2020).

Social isolation: The objective absence of contacts and interactions between a person and social network (Garner et al, 2018).

Assumptions

Based on phenomenological theory and the existing literature, the underlying assumption of this study was that formerly incarcerated African American men would consciously reveal their experiences and personal perceptions of prison life during the COVID-19 pandemic. From a research standpoint, I assumed that a phenomenological approach and design would be the best fit for a human subject study focused on individual experiences and personal perceptions. Further, I assumed that the participants were truthful in providing information and honest accounts of their incarceration experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak. To this point, I proceeded to carry out the study process based on the assumption that each study participant had, in fact, served a period of incarceration during the pandemic. In turn, the study was conducted under the assumption that the participants' sex and gender identity were male and that they were

African American—both established requirements for inclusion in this study. Finally, I assumed that each participant gave voluntary and informed consent in order to participate in the study.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope and delimitations of this research project were essential in establishing the bounds of the study, the participants, and the study's purpose. As to scope, this study focused on the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men who were in jail during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The target population for this study was limited to African American men located in the southeastern region of the United States. Therefore, this study did not investigate other populations or areas. I removed all personal and identifiable information of participants in accordance with the Institutional Review Board of Walden University.

The study's research questions were designed to target the lived experiences and personal perceptions of study participants in order to address and assess their states of physiological and psychological well-being. Therefore, the research focus was purposefully shaped to address perceptions of well-being specific to the dynamics of an extreme, pandemic situation. The framework selected to guide this study was grounded in the transcendental phenomenological approach, which allowed for an in-depth exploration into the lived experiences of the participants.

The transferability of this research is limited given the specific population—African American men who had been incarcerated during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic—and the geographical location of the study, specified as the

southeastern region of the United States. As such, the findings of this particular study may not be applicable to other populations or areas. However, study findings could be transferable to future studies designed to further explore the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men located in other regions of the country during the outbreak of the pandemic. Overall, based on the specificity of the study population and the essential context of COVID-19, similar studies using this targeted approach could potentially add broader insights into the psychological and physiological well-being of formerly incarcerated African American men. That said, the relatively recent experience of COVID-19 leaves space for expanded exploration of this topic whereby other prison populations might be examined and compared. In turn, this and newer studies could contribute to a growing body of literature focused on healthcare crises as experienced in the prison environment so as to inform policy decisions that would benefit this population and others in the future.

Limitations

A particularly notable limitation of this study was the degree of accessibility to participants due to post release supervision requirements, such as probation, parole, and other conditions like curfews. Another limitation was the fear of contracting an infectious disease such as COVID-19 or monkeypox. Both viruses were on the rise during the time this study was conducted (March 2020–August 2020). Another limitation that emerged was the issue of a participant not wanting to speak openly due to fear of retaliation from the law enforcement community. A unique 21st-century limitation was accessibility of

technology, which proved to be an issue for potential participants as some lacked the resources to participate in teleconferencing interviews such as meetings held on Zoom.

Significance of Study

This study is significant because it adds to the information currently available concerning the challenges ex-offenders faced while incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was especially designed to help policymakers understand the pandemic from the perspective of ex-offenders, specifically focusing on African American men as study subjects. As a reflection of the problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions, this exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives provided a deeper understanding of the COVID-19 crisis within the prison environment. Moreover, examination of participants' shared experiences also contributed to explaining their feelings and perspectives during the pandemic at the height of the shutdown. As indicated by study findings, it became clear that no one could explain the experiences that took place in the prison environment—while the outside world was shut down—better than those who experienced it. As researcher, I found that interviewing these men opened the door to a broader recognition of their situations and provided deeper insights into their unique “perspectives.”

This study identified what each participant experienced and felt in the middle of a critical health crisis while being incarcerated. More importantly, this study has also provided suggestions as to how research can help policy makers and prison administrators better prepare for dealing with COVID-19 and future healthcare crises. The overarching significance of this study is its targeted focus on the impacts of a

relatively recent, worldwide pandemic on a group of individuals typically marginalized and often forgotten. As such, this research could be beneficial to correctional officers, the public, and most importantly, the incarcerated because it highlighted some of the ramifications and implications COVID-19 has had on their lives while also offering recommendations for improvement and potential solutions.

Summary

This research has served to provide policymakers, academics, and other interested parties with an incarcerated African American male viewpoint on the COVID-19 pandemic. As a qualitative study, it has done this by examining the individual participant's experience as a projection of the defined problem, the theoretical framework, and the research questions that have assisted in eliciting and understanding the subject's point of view. Essentially, the problem under study involved the firsthand experiences and perspectives of African American men who had been incarcerated during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the study was to recognize and bring to light the difficulties and inequities attached to being imprisoned as an African American male during a worldwide pandemic. I selected transcendental phenomenology as the study's theoretical framework, also incorporating social cognitive theory, intersectionality theory, and social exchange theory.

Following are the research questions that guided this study:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men, located in the southeastern United States, regarding their lived experiences of incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How did the incarceration experience during COVID-19 influence each individual's physiological and psychological well-being while in jail or prison?

Public health officials have implemented various social segregation measures to combat the continuing pandemic and lower the danger of SARS-CoV-2 transmission from individual to individual (Nelson & Kaminsky, 2020). However, physical distance is next to unattainable in confined areas like jails, prisons, and detention facilities around the United States. Research has shown that overcrowding has contributed to significant epidemics in U.S. detention centers—along with a lack of testing, insufficient infection prevention procedures, and a lack of basic supplies for staff and prisoners. Challenging and unanswered issues have been raised regarding how detention centers contribute to and worsen racial differences, as well as how insufficient testing can prevent health authorities from identifying new regions of infection due to limited and unreliable findings (Tepper, 2021). As a contribution to ongoing research in this area, this study was purposed to highlight prison conditions and racial inequities, under pandemic conditions, through the testimonies expressed by actual ex-offenders.

The following Chapter 2, Literature Review, draws on existing literature concerning the topic under examination and includes a discussion of the study's theoretical framework. In this chapter, I highlight previous research findings that informed the study, noting their relevance to its purpose, design, and theoretical content.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men on their experiences of being detained in a jail in the southeastern United States during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, while the experience of being detained or imprisoned itself uniquely impacts a person's way of life, being detained during a global pandemic makes the situation much more challenging (Li, 2023). Thus, in this study, I sought to explore study participants' perspectives on being incarcerated under conditions dictated by a global health crisis and its influences on their psychological and physiological well-being.

For this literature review chapter, I aimed to explore both earlier and more recent studies of the difficulties African American men have faced while incarcerated and the challenges of reintegration into society after the detention period. Specific to this study, the unique backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on prison life and life after release into society has been pivotal. Clearly, studies conducted prior to the onset of COVID-19 (which occurred in early 2020 in the United States) have addressed reintegration issues, but minus the influence of living under pandemic conditions. Other research included in this chapter has addressed the influences of the COVID-19 pandemic on complicating and intensifying interpersonal issues, such as economic or social issues made worse by lack of employment (Jetson & Melissa, 2021). Exploring the impacts of COVID-19—on individuals across lifestyles and social classes, as revealed in the more recent body of literature—helped to shed more light on this study's unique focus;

specifically, African American men who were formerly incarcerated during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting influences on their well-being.

This study focused on the hardships of incarceration and the effects of COVID-19 on the incarceration experience. It considered the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a unique manifestation of the hardships of confinement. The COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic by the WHO on March 11, 2020 (Balkhair, 2020). Along with obvious fears of contagion, it led to several problems such as social exclusion and confinement inside the jail system (Wagner, 2022). In their assessment of the current studies on incarceration, researchers have continued to emphasize issues of concern that reflect more general jail studies, where investigation tends to be conducted on, rather than with, those in safe and healthy detention centers (Higgins, 2021; Maruna et al., 2022).

Most studies on the effects of COVID-19 in correctional facilities have dealt with health problems; less attention has been devoted to the psychological impact of confinement on inmates (LaBranche et al., 2021). That said, the research on COVID-19 in correctional facilities is still developing, with new studies being published regularly (Desai et al., 2021). The propagation of the infection is significantly more challenging to avoid in such settings because inmates and staff spend many of their daily, scheduled hours together (Desai et al., 2021). In general, the enclosed habitat (for this study, a jail or prison setting) proved to be crucial in infection dissemination and rapid spread of the virus (Nakazawa et al., 2020). In the context of correctional facilities, including child correctional facilities, and forensic mental health systems, many difficulties emerged in

terms of controlling and managing COVID-19. Overpopulation, inadequate ventilation, limited access to cleanliness, and subpar health services have been cited as frequent characteristics of these environments (Desai et al., 2021). Additionally, the movement of employees in and out of correctional facilities, along with admissions and discharges of inmates in hospitals, tended to increase COVID-19 transmission and spread. As a result, prison facilities became high-risk areas for COVID-19 infection and its eventual spread to the larger society outside the prison walls (Maruna et al., 2022).

Custody environments aggregate marginalized communities, a contention held by many based on socioeconomic issues that contribute to the vastly higher prevalence of mental illness, drug addiction, contagious illnesses, mental retardation, and states of morbidity associated with these communities (Czeisler et al., 2021). Consequently, those individuals living in detention facilities risk developing the COVID-19 condition more easily than individuals in the general society. Moreover, they are also highly susceptible to the adverse effects of prolonged and intense imprisonment, whereby their living conditions negate the use of typical COVID-19 preventive and management techniques (Phillips, 2021). On the other hand, measures that limit privileges and opportunities for significant socialization among inmates, such as institutional confinement and seclusion, raise mental stress levels, negatively affecting those in captivity and producing more severe effects on those who already have mental disorders (Jeltsen, 2021).

Essential factors for administrative responses to COVID-19 in detention environments must balance commitments to carrying out jail sentences while also

safeguarding detainees' health and personal rights. Therefore, minimizing COVID-19 cases and deaths in the prison environment has proven to be necessary (Higgins, 2021).

The COVID-19 outbreak caused a drastic flood of guidelines provided by the CDC to reduce the dissemination of COVID-19 in prison facilities because of the awareness of such weaknesses and their impact on health (Howen et al., 2020). States and prison centers, following this advice, were entrusted with mounting a swift reaction to COVID-19 within the judicial and immigrant prison systems that, across many contexts, previously operated independently from society and public healthcare (Maycock, 2022). There has not yet been a significant effort to compile and summarize these initial suggestions or evaluate how much clear information had been given during the critical early phases of the outbreak. Clarification of guidelines is understood to be critical for determining areas that call for elaboration and areas that need further direction and support, and for guiding ongoing evaluation and study of COVID-19 (Maycock, 2022).

Therefore, one of the goals of this research was to find, compile, and summarize the recommendations for COVID-19 preventive methods and management in detention facilities in the first half of 2020 (Von Seidlein et al., 2021). As previously stated, most current research on COVID-19 and incarceration centers has focused on the health concerns and the dangers of the virus from a dissemination and management standpoint (Kendall et al., 2020). Other, less prevalent arguments have examined the effect of limitations and disparities experienced by the prison population as worsened by the pandemic, a crisis that has added yet more levels of unfairness and risk beyond those intrinsic dangers of jail facilities as a whole (Czochanski, 2021).

Literature Search Strategy

Literature research was conducted utilizing several sources of information, but primarily the Walden online library system, and its broad range of databases and institutional access to other scholarly resources. These included EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, the Criminal Justice Database, SAGE Online Journals, the Thoreau Multidata Base, the University of Colombia, and JSTOR. The keywords, phrases, and search terms used during the literature search included *mass incarceration*, *Black men*, *African American men*, *COVID-19*, *Black populations*, *formerly incarcerated*, *ex-convict*, *post incarceration*, *previously incarcerated*, *challenges*, *overcrowded*, *prison*, and *living conditions*. All of these identified database resources proved to be beneficial.

I also examined reference lists, websites of organizations concerned with the healthcare and human rights of individuals in prison, and COVID-19 data portals that listed material pertinent to correctional contexts. Specific to this aspect of the research process, “COVID-19” and “correctional environments”—in various combinations—represented the two primary search terms I used. Other terms related to concepts about the criminal justice process, denial of freedom, and particular categories of detention sites were included in the process of searching for relevant and appropriately dated resources. Finally, I pulled statistical information from governmental websites documenting COVID-19 infection rates, along with its spread specific to the southeastern region of the country.

In addition, this literature review chapter includes only those studies and other information formats published in 2019 or later; in other words, resources published no

more than 5 years from the time of this study (2024). Moreover, the scope of all the selected peer-reviewed databases was limited to journal articles that fell within the 5-year time frame, up until and including 2020. The research also explored information systems identified in these published articles. The main objective was to find relevant, peer-reviewed articles, books, and other information sources published between December 2019 and January 2021, a time of heightened viral contagion and spread. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, and the numbers are rising. Therefore, I maintain that it is essential to address the literature describing living conditions common to jails and prisons in the United States from a general standpoint. From there, it then becomes essential to address studies concerned with the creation and implementation of policies intended to address the psychological and physiological well-being of incarcerated individuals during a worldwide health crisis.

Theoretical Foundation

In researching the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men in selected southeastern states during the COVID-19 pandemic, I aimed to explore their perspectives specific to their psychological and physiological well-being during that uniquely challenging period of prison life. Collectively, the following theories served as the theoretical foundation of this study: (a) social cognitive theory, (b) intersectionality theory, and (c) social exchange theory. By utilizing these theories to underscore the research and analysis process, this culminating dissertation has been intended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of incarceration under pandemic conditions as experienced and perceived by formerly incarcerated African American

men. The following three subsections address each of the three theories and their relation to the problem and purpose of this study.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory (SCT) is a psychological theory that explains how individuals are affected by their environment, and how they respond to it. According to this theory, people learn through observations of the actions of others and from their own experiences (Schunk, 2012). SCT also emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy, which is the belief that one can successfully cope with challenging situations and achieve desired outcomes.

In the case of incarcerated individuals, the COVID-19 pandemic made it more difficult for them to express themselves due to the additional restrictions put into place regarding prisoner interactions and communication access within the facility. These restrictions include limiting in-person visitations, which are crucial for maintaining connections with family and friends (Craig et al., 2023). Furthermore, access to communal areas and activities where inmates could socialize or participate in rehabilitative programs was often curtailed to prevent the spread of the virus. As a result, many prisoners experienced heightened isolation and stress.

Moreover, the already limited communication options, such as phone calls and emails, faced increased demand, leading to longer wait times and reduced availability. Some facilities also struggled with ensuring adequate health measures, causing further disruptions in communication channels. This combination of factors severely impacted

the mental health and well-being of incarcerated individuals, making it challenging for them to seek support or voice their concerns.

Overall, the pandemic exacerbated the existing barriers to expression and communication within prisons, highlighting the need for better policies and infrastructure to support the incarcerated population during such crises (Li et al., 2023). The Supreme Court's deference towards increased prison restrictions during the pandemic further hampered the ability of inmates to believe that they could successfully express themselves, as the restrictions served as a deterrent to their efforts (Desai et al., 2021; Hanan, 2021).

As Hinton et al. (2018) noted, communication bans in times of epidemics have prevented public knowledge of the severity of disease spread in prisons and jails, also negatively impacting inmate well-being. This makes it difficult for formerly incarcerated African Americans to convey any messages of hope to them, further highlighting the need for improved communication and resources across the criminal justice system. Relevant to SCT, this study explored the perceptions of formerly incarcerated African American men regarding their experiences of extreme limitation specific to human interaction and communication access within the prison environment (and outside), including how they were physically and psychologically impacted.

Intersectionality Theory

In the United States, the prison population is an estimated 1,230,100 individuals, with African Americans being particularly adversely affected (E. Ann Carson et al., 2023). This disproportionality is especially evident among the elderly population in that

African Americans make up only 13% of the nation's population yet constitute one third of the prison population (Phillips, 2021). Consequently, intersectionality theory is a particularly relevant concept to consider when discussing the experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theory highlights the ways in which the various, socially constructed identities of an individual intersect and how these intersections create unique experiences, particularly in the case of African American men navigating the prison system (Khoi, 2021). In other words, social identities associated with color, gender, and low socioeconomic status intersect to create and reinforce experiences of oppression and marginalization in the prison setting. For example, the oppression of African Americans, as people of color, is often compounded by their gender identity. This means that incarcerated African American men face multiple forms of oppression and exclusion due to their race and gender combined. The experience of oppression and marginalization in the prison environment can be further illustrated by the fact that African American men are more likely to be subject to racially biased criminal justice systems, resulting in their disproportionate incarceration numbers (Privitera, 2022). Additionally, due to White supremacy's structural oppression, the observations and perspectives of African American men are frequently dismissed or marginalized (Al-Faham et al., 2019).

African Americans have been subjected to discrimination and exploitation by legislators and justice system representatives for generations. As an attempt to further alienate them, the criminal justice system has been used as a tool to impede their economic and social advancement (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). Clearly, the pandemic

experience has had a devastating effect on all communities, including the community of formerly incarcerated African American men who endured its early stages in an already isolated and oppressive environment (ACLU West Virginia, 2020). Intersectionality theory, therefore, can be used to understand the impact of the pandemic on formerly incarcerated African American men because their experiences have been influenced by the various aspects or intersections of their identities in ways different from other populations.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (SET) posits that people are motivated to exchange resources, and that the exchange is based on the perceived value of the resources (Hanan, 2021). However, incarcerated individuals have been at a disadvantage when it comes to social exchange because of their limited access to resources. This, in turn, has deprived them of the ability to form meaningful relationships with other individuals, which further exacerbates their isolation from society. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of adequate access to communication channels for incarcerated individuals has been highlighted by the more severe restrictions put into place to try to contain the spread of the virus within the prison environment.

Going further, the SET is an important factor in understanding the repeated incarceration of African American men in the southeastern region of the United States. It is based on the idea that individuals will engage in behaviors expected to lead to positive outcomes for themselves. This is done by weighing the costs and rewards of any given behavior and deciding if it is worth it or not. In the case of incarceration, African

Americans may feel that the rewards of engaging in certain behaviors—even risky ones— outweigh the consequences, including imprisonment. This is due to the lack of resources and support that African Americans have faced in the criminal justice system.

More specifically, epistemic injustice represents inequitable social and political structures that prevent marginalized individuals and groups—such as incarcerated African American men— from offering their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives to authorities or to any kind of public discussion; thus, making it impossible for them to have an impact on policies that might benefit them.

The coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic presented a critical concern to administrators and prison staff regarding how to manage extremely contagious infections in their prisons and jails. Additionally, because employees at penal and prison facilities are part of the prison neighborhood, increased COVID-19 infection rates in correctional facilities also impacted dissemination of the virus in the larger population residing outside the prison walls (Higgins, 2021). According to Cloud et al. (2020), if this kind of health crisis is not addressed, it could quickly lead to healthcare and humanitarian disasters that would harm not only prison personnel, but also the inhabitants of areas that neighbor the nation's more than 5,000 detention facilities ().

This review of the literature represents studies addressing (a) the American prison system and its living conditions, both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) challenges and obstacles to inmate interactions and communication, especially under extraordinary pandemic restrictions; (c) issues of race, systemic unfairness, and epistemic

injustice; (d) challenges associated with reentry/reintegration into society after being released; and (e) possibilities for improvement.

Review of Related Literature

COVID-19 in the Confined Environment

In cellblocks and various penal institutions, many of which had reported significant numbers of illnesses among inmates and employees, the nation's subpar planning and sluggish reaction to the dangers associated with COVID-19 had already been exacerbated. Although social isolation was considered essential for reducing the transmission of infections, it had been challenging to achieve real social isolation under the regular living conditions of detention centers (Higgins, 2021). With regard to the spread of COVID-19, the worries of both proponents of jail reform and correctional facilities have been legitimate from the standpoint of the healthcare system. Considering the tremendous amount of evidence showing that routine confinement practices increased rates of illness and death among those who had previously been confined, isolation in response to a pandemic situation needed to be addressed. In contrast, isolation—understood as intended punishment—is a discipline frequently used in U.S. detention centers. The incarcerated experience of solitary separation has been shown to lead to a lack of physical activity, psychological torture, severe mental distress and aggression, and can cause the isolated individual to commit violent acts, including murder (Vose et al., 2020). During the pandemic. Many people had argued that using social distancing in detention centers to stop the spread of COVID-19 would help because imprisoned individuals would be far from each other (Cloud et al., 2020). That said, control of the

transmission of infection would have been challenging, if not unthinkable, under regular prison confinement practices

In reality, confinement presents serious health risks to prisoners and to those who provide health services for prison security personnel, communities, and the families to whom employees return at the end of their shifts. To limit the spread of these hazardous conditions and preserve the decency of those being cared for, it is essential to define and implement the moral and compassionate use of appropriate hospital seclusion and quarantine methods within the prison population (Cloud et al., 2020).

Prisons as Centers of Disease Spread

Due to the close areas, inaccessibility to prevention strategies, hygienic concerns, and movement of both staff and prisoners in and out of detention centers, many other communicable infections have spread throughout the prison environment over the course of time. Thus, it was generally believed that correctional centers would emerge as COVID-19 epidemic centers, leading to fast distribution of the virus (Saloner et al., 2020). Contrary to a variety of many other ailments that already had affected state prisons—such as HIV, hepatitis, other STIs, and gastrointestinal infections—the new coronavirus had no vaccine, very few available options for treatment, and was highly contagious when spread through the air (Kinner et al., 2020). With inmates living in such close quarters, the U.S. prison population had a greater morbidity rate and an earlier onset of risk factors than the general population (Higgins, 2021).

Over time, more prisons have taken the initiative to minimize the number of inmates, and most have seen declines of at least 25% (Higgins, 2021). According to the

Prison Policy Initiative (2022), local jail populations have decreased the most. Inmates who may have typically been imprisoned for pretrial detention or given brief terms for minor crimes were now being freed. Additionally, authorities took measures to prevent the stream of offenders into prisons by refraining from arresting people and charging them for minor infractions (Kinner et al., 2020). In contrast to local jails, the Prison Policy Initiative (2022) reported that many state jail facilities have exhibited minimal demographic declines. Small states had more significant declines, ranging from 8% to 16% as of (2022). Larger states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons have made reductions, but these were only between 2% and 4% as of (2022) (Wendy Sawyer, 2022).

During the pandemic, it had been repeatedly demonstrated, world-wide, that universal screening was a crucial first step in halting the transmission of COVID-19. It was thought that a poor testing technique would either overstate the severity of the disease or understate its genuine prevalence inside an institution like a prison. In addition, lack of information led to another probable cause of viral spread because it overlooked asymptomatic or presymptomatic disease carriers who unknowingly spread the disease when correct social isolation was not or could not be practiced.

The diagnostic tests currently used (as of this writing, the year 2024) for prisoners, employees, guests, and volunteer groups have proven to be mostly beneficial. Nevertheless, a continuous diagnostic routine would have to be implemented in order to better check and control viral spread; a routine that could check the public upon entering centers in order to reduce COVID-19 spread in such confined institutions. According to Higgins (2021), it has been hard to assess the precise numbers of specific diseases and the

pace at which infections can spread among institutions with no broad and continuous screening practices while persons are regularly moving in and out of the prison buildings.

Another method used to minimize spread of COVID-19 involved the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the purpose and function of the BOP is to protect society by confining offenders in the controlled environments of prisons and community-based facilities that are safe, humane, cost-efficient, and appropriately secure, and that provide work and other self-improvement opportunities to assist offenders in becoming law abiding citizens again. In response to COVID-19, the Bureau decreased the general population size of people needing to be processed and transferred to specific prison sites around the country. Instead of focusing on prisoners who could not be freed, decisions were designed depending on those who could (Hummer, 2021). There was a subjective component to these evaluations, but if the main criterion was that a person be released from custody if they were not considered a severe threat to public health and safety, the procedure was expected to result in a quicker decline in the overall prisoner population (Hummer, 2021).

Contact Limitations Inside and Outside Prison

Due to the practical challenges, surveillance, and censorship in the prison system (not related to COVID-19), convicts have difficulty communicating with the outside world, and in-person contact with loved ones and other types of communication are severely restricted. Visitors cannot enter the prison without the necessary resources (money, time, or transportation). Inmates may be denied social visits as a form of punishment or administrative policy.

In the United States, prison policies regarding the use of cell phones by inmates are stringent due to concerns over security and the potential for illegal activities. Inmates are generally prohibited from possessing cell phones, as these devices can be used to coordinate criminal activities, communicate with outside contacts without monitoring, and circumvent prison security measures. The contraband status of cell phones means that correctional facilities employ various strategies to prevent their smuggling and use, such as installing detection equipment, conducting random searches, and using trained dogs to sniff out hidden devices. Actual prison bans on cell phones may be justifiable for safety reasons, but they significantly impact how incarcerated people interact with one another and the rest of the world (For example, the Black Lives Matter Movement relied heavily on the Internet to disseminate information about police shootings. A prisoner who did not have access to a cell phone or the Internet was unable to document and share proof of cruelty or filthy living conditions should they have wanted to support the Black Lives Matter movement by providing evidence of those conditions. On the other hand, while inmates could possibly record the conditions of their prison cells with the use of illicit cell phones, they had to do so at tremendous personal risk (Smith, J., 2020)

During the pandemic, detainees who opted not to join organized groups or political parties within prisons may have considered various options for affiliation based on their personal beliefs and interests. These could include support groups providing emotional assistance or educational programs offering literacy and vocational training. Additionally, inmates might seek spiritual support from religious communities or align themselves with advocacy groups focusing on criminal justice reform or prisoner rights.

Political parties aligned with specific ideologies might also attract inmates interested in advocacy or policy discussions. Demonstrating involvement from prison often necessitates engaging in written correspondence with external organizations or individuals, participating in prison programs or activities organized by external groups, or contributing to advocacy efforts through writing, networking, or legal means. By utilizing these methods, inmates can actively demonstrate their engagement despite physical confinement, illustrating their resilience and determination to stay connected and involved in broader societal conversations and initiatives. Because of the COVID-19 jail rules, lockdowns often lasted weeks or months, preventing inmates from interacting with each other. In other words, under routine circumstances, prison social isolation is generally impossible unless prisoners are confined to their cells and not allowed to interact with other convicts as was the case under mandated lockdowns caused by the pandemic.

Implications of Isolation and Lack of Communication

According to Maner et al. (2021), jails and prisons became the main sites of population spread of the COVID-19 outbreak during the height of the crisis, from its beginnings in March 2020 through December 2021; as such, a source of increased, but isolated crisis and dread within the more significant worldwide crisis. Medical seclusion and quarantine during this time period became essential public health measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19, but using these measures was challenging in correctional facilities where excessive use of harsh confinement and isolation have been the custom of added punishment for years (Maner et al., 2021). Thus, it is crucial to

make clear the key distinctions between criminal seclusion—as the consequence of infractions committed by an inmate under routine circumstances— and the moral application of clinical segregation and quarantine practices in the prison environment throughout a pandemic situation (Maner et al., 2021). Research has shown that minimizing the spread of COVID-19 in a prison or detention setting could be achieved by using clinically sound separation and quarantine measures instead of harsh punishment (Maner et al., 2021).

Despite being marginalized and ignored; jailed individuals became more active regarding their concerns about contracting the virus. This heightened activism stemmed from a recognition of their vulnerability to COVID-19 within carceral settings, where overcrowding, limited access to healthcare, and inadequate sanitation heightened the risk of transmission. Facing neglect from authorities and society at large, incarcerated individuals took matters into their own hands, advocating for improved safety measures, access to testing and healthcare, and ultimately, early release or alternative forms of sentencing to mitigate the risk of exposure. Their activism often involved various strategies, including organizing protests, filing lawsuits, writing letters or petitions, and engaging with advocacy groups or legal representatives to amplify their voices and push for change. Despite the challenges and barriers, they faced, incarcerated individuals demonstrated resilience and agency in demanding recognition of their rights to health and safety amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In the realm of the American prison system, the orderly reporting of complaints is an example of self-advocacy for incarcerated individuals seeking to challenge poor living conditions in prisons and jails. The

researcher suggests that in dire situations like a global pandemic, inmates' use of this strategy could prove to be especially effective.

For those imprisoned, communication obstacles can be seen as epistemic injustice, making it impossible for them—as members of a socially marginalized group—to have an impact on public policy, administrative practices, or general thought about an issue. Systemic unfairness toward those who are jailed includes its effects on punishment policies and practices while negating or ignoring inmates' perspectives. Systemic unfairness and epistemic injustice denied any potential realization of the benefits of prisoner perspectives in resolving the COVID-19 problem in correctional facilities (Cloud et al., 2020). Moreover, intersectional identities of inmates—highlighting race in particular—have further impacted their treatment and their silencing. Therefore, as a result of overlaying stigmatization, the perspectives of inmates of color may be regarded with utter apathy and skepticism for issues unrelated to the validity of their allegations (Cloud et al., 2020).

Despite the restrictions in many institutions during COVID-19, some inmates used prison email networks to report pandemic hardships, such as the lack of programming and extremely restricted communication with others within and outside the prison. As a means of reporting from prison, contraband cellphones were also used to share videos of “guys crowded together in their cells, dozing and wheezing” (Hanan, 2021, p. 502). After being released from prison, several ex-offenders spoke out about their living conditions. Many detained persons also communicated their conditions of incarceration during the pandemic through family members.

Going further, certain media outlets helped detained inmates gain perspective by releasing their reports of prison circumstances. For example, while imprisoned at San Quentin, one journalist interviewed other inmates regarding the difficulty of establishing social distance in a facility where people are “crammed in like sardines in a can” (Hanan, 2021, p. 503). Other examples of poor living conditions included a lack of knowledge about the pandemic, limited paper to compose letters, few permitted phone calls, and convicts “shoulder-to-shoulder” in everyday places, as reported by jailed writer Peter Debelak (Hanan, 2021, p. 503).

Access to COVID-19 Data

The COVID Prison Project, a collaborative initiative published in 2021, collected information on COVID-19 among prison personnel. This investigation covered the 45 state correctional systems, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and Puerto Rico.

Massachusetts’s criminal justice system was excluded from this study because this state lacked staff population statistics (Nowotny et al., 2021). Since most authorities did not test their personnel—focusing instead on self-reporting—while authority webpages refer to COVID-19 testing as the personal duty of personnel, the incidences recorded among correctional officers are probably an underestimation. Furthermore, while documenting COVID-19 incidents, most authorities did not distinguish between various employee categories. Information on the staff members was gathered from the web pages of the correctional facility and other government statements (Nowotny et al., 2021).

Additionally, it has been well-recognized that worker turnover levels in prison facilities are relatively high. As a result, predictions of the people at risk throughout the

outbreak were limited in scope. These issues raised significant questions regarding the reliability of the data utilized in the research (Nowotny et al., 2021). Epidemiology research has been hampered by the lack of timely and correct information from prison institutions throughout the COVID-19 outbreak. At the same time, prisoners moved in and out of detention centers and had frequent contact with corrections officers (COs), managers, administrators, and other staff members. Although also at risk of being exposed to COVID-19, the investigation on contagious infection among staff had only focused on C.O.s and prison health workers (Nowotny et al., 2021). All these issues have impacted the reliability of the data from the “COVID Prison Project.” While this study focused on exploring the perceptions of formerly incarcerated individuals during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also highlighted the factor of race by singling out African American men as study participants. In the following section of this literature review, the issue of reentry into the greater society—upon completion of the prison sentence—is addressed through a racial lens.

Considering Race in Reentry Practices and the Potential to Reoffend

Race has proven to be an obstacle to reintegration into society for many African American males who have spent time in prison. It has been and continues to be a problem that needs public concern and discussion among lawmakers. Structural racism in reintegration is a problem that has extended beyond the criminal justice system because it impacts how organizations construct and implement their rules and procedures specific to reentry (Higgins, 2021). Prison release regulations based on race negatively impact the state, the previously jailed person, their family, and society (Higgins, 2021).

In general, African American homes are badly affected by criminal justice legislation. In particular, many criminal justice methods and laws have resulted in a disproportionately high number of African American men being locked up, also harming African American communities (Higgins, 2021). The consequences or indirect harm of incarceration caused to these individuals continues during their reentry into society, which only worsens issues for the African American community. Ultimately, the damage experienced by a formerly incarcerated individual frequently leads to recurrence of an unlawful act which would, in turn, leads to a disproportionately high rate of reimprisonment of African American men (Higgins, 2021). Reoffending is not necessarily what the individual intended, but it frequently happens because of some form of action taken to conquer obstacles and problems brought about by the law.

Overall, studies show that African Americans are more likely to be arrested and sentenced to longer terms of imprisonment than their White peers. The high incarceration rate among African American men has been directly linked to racial injustices engendered by White supremacist events, laws, and practices over time (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). In turn, racism in the criminal justice system has long-term consequences that extend beyond the confines of prison (Williams et al., 2019). For example, African American males face a variety of reintegration challenges upon their release from prison; in particular, finding work and getting assistance from their families and communities (Higgins, 2021). Reentry programs do not guarantee that formerly incarcerated African American men will not face structural and legally generated difficulties (Ortiz & Jackey,

2019). For many, the reality has been that finding work after their release has proven to be much more difficult.

In this scenario, the wife acknowledges that it would be preferable to receive support from the welfare system or the husband (when he is not at home).; Either way, the family is then broken, and the children must now live in a one-parent household. Typically, these children live in destitute, violence-based communities with shattered households. Frequently, they resort to selling drugs to get their basic needs met (Kirkland et al., 2021). This scenario can be said to represent the school-to-prison pipeline, a situation whereby minority youth are predisposed to failure because their parents cannot afford to enroll them in the kinds of institutions where they could potentially receive educational and social support typically available to young people whose parents can afford to pay for it (Kirkland et al., 2021).

Those individuals from poor households frequently struggle academically and eventually leave school. Without an educational pathway and meaningful goals, they soon find themselves in the criminal court system where they struggle to understand the meaning of justice (Higgins, 2021).

Over time, researchers have argued whether implicit discrimination, discriminatory behavior, or the type of actual crime committed were to blame for the unequal numbers of Black Americans confined to the country's prison system (Brückmann, 2019). They have also looked at how instances involving African Americans and Caucasians have been treated differently by legal authorities (Brückmann, 2019). Some have even asserted that mass imprisonment has become a legal and efficient

tool targeting underserved populations of persons of color. As an ongoing problem of deep concern to African American individuals and the African American community as a whole, this study sought to bring the individual voices of formerly incarcerated African American men to the forefront—via their individual perspectives on the experience of incarceration through both racial and crisis-oriented lenses brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the theoretical foundation of the study—comprised of Social Cognitive Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and Social Exchange theory—has informed the collection and analysis of data provided by these study participants.

Employment Challenges for Formerly Incarcerated African American Men

People who have been incarcerated must find work if they want to pay their rent and feed their families. Finding work can be difficult for anyone, but it is more difficult for African American men who have served time. As a result, recently jailed African American men often return to poverty following their release, precisely as they had before their incarceration, without finding new jobs (Williams et al., 2019). If they cannot find work after release, they may fall deeper into poverty, increasing their risk of recidivism (Williams et al., 2019). Many formerly incarcerated individuals depend heavily on social support networks—such as family, friends, and community members—to avoid homelessness. (Lindsay, 2022). This support is crucial due to the significant barriers they face in securing stable housing, such as discrimination by landlords and the use of criminal records in housing decisions. The Prison Policy Initiative notes that formerly incarcerated people are almost ten times more likely to experience homelessness compared to the general population. Housing instability can exacerbate their reintegration

challenges, including access to employment and healthcare (Lucius Couloute, 2018)

Regarding returning to society after incarceration, studies have shown that family relationships are essential. Studies consistently highlight the crucial role of family relationships in the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals into society. Research shows that maintaining and strengthening family bonds can significantly influence successful reentry and reduce recidivism. For instance, family emotional support has been identified as a key factor in helping formerly incarcerated individuals succeed in their communities.

Overall, many interrelated elements play a role in the effective reintegration of formerly incarcerated African American men into society. These elements include finding work, finding a place to live, and reconnecting with family (Crutchfield & Williams et al., 2019). Williams et al. (2019) conducted studies with recently jailed African American men who were socially, economically, and politically repressed, using critical ethnography and semistructured interviews. In their study, they analyzed the reintegration process of these participants and found that issues of stigma, housing, employment, masculinity, and family support had a detrimental impact on their ability to reintegrate into the larger society.

Finding and keeping a job is critical to a person's long-term societal success, and job opportunities for ex-convicts can be especially challenging (Williams et al., 2019). In other words, although work is essential to reintegration, a released prisoner's criminal record presents a significant obstacle to employability (Williams et al., 2019). That said, there are groups of advocates who believe that previously jailed people should be given

another opportunity to work and start over after having served their responsibility to the public during incarceration (Smith, J., Johnson, A, 2020) Because this is frequently not the situation, formerly incarcerated Black men often face difficulties in the world outside prison that might promote criminality. Clearly, finding successful employment opportunities is challenging for people who have been incarcerated. Furthermore, their race and criminal history make it even harder for African American males who have served time in prison to find decent jobs (Williams et al., 2019). Regardless of racial identification, the research has shown that lack of jobs and schooling are the more significant predictors of reoffenses after release (Williams et al., 2019).

Racism and imprisonment history may be harmful to closing the vast economic gap between the African American and Caucasian populations, as there is a connection between ethnicity and the stagnation in the economy of the former group (Jackson, T., Williams, A., 2020) since jobs enable previously imprisoned people to support themselves and their families, it is essential to the reintegration process. African American men, in particular struggle to support their families when their earnings are unstable. They frequently take jobs from companies that mistreat them and require them to perform backbreaking and humiliating work for less pay or, even worse, mistreat them as if they are not human beings (Williams et al., 2019). When businesses employ African Americans who have served time behind bars, it is not uncommon for them to be denied benefits like health services and stable income. As a result, these individuals frequently avoid obtaining healthcare since they do not have medical insurance of their own.

Social Support on Reentry

According to previous research by Harris and Harding (2019), ex-inmates from underprivileged communities are more likely to return to prison at some point after release. Those who have been incarcerated for an extended period may find that the opinions once held of them by the people in their communities have changed. Some may have had comparable experiences and perceptions of the difficulties that led to their confinement, while others may not. As a result, individuals frequently lack faith in law enforcement and the justice system (McPhee, 2022).

Because of their own experiences with racial disparities in the criminal justice system, many formerly jailed African American men have held suspicions of law enforcement and all criminal justice authorities. They have also been distrustful because of the bigotry they encountered during their reintegration into society following their release from prison. Formerly jailed African American men frequently experience a sense of hopelessness when trying to better their situation while under the constant surveillance of law enforcement agencies waiting for them to be arrested again, and also lack trust in the criminal justice system, as do members of other racial minorities and other marginalized groups. Sometimes, people in their communities may not be prepared to give them a second chance.

Considering Reentry Practice Risk-Need-Responsivity Mode

Correctional facilities in the United States release prisoners back into society each day. Depending on the state, many of these people could be sent to intermediate homes to reintegrate the ex-offender into society. Rehabilitation programs do not necessarily have

a standard design, and even those run by the same company or in the same state will have different services and programs when offered (Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021). However, in terms of basic requirements, all transitional homes for ex-offenders adopt measures to evaluate and implement community corrections standards while focusing on public health and safety (Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021).

On the other hand, there are various reentry programs that have been designed and implemented, with all having the same end goals: (a) to reduce criminal justice outcomes, such as recidivism; (b) meet the individual's needs; (c) and encourage effective reintegration across all areas of their participants' lives prior to incarceration, including employment (Garcia, M., Lee, S, 2020). Theoretical models, like the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model, can be used to guide inmate rehabilitation programs. Initially, the RNR method was developed to aid in classifying inmates and formulating intervention strategies. The responsiveness principle focuses on the unique needs of the people who have already undergone assessment. According to the RNR model, RNR helps identify those individuals at low risk of failing in rehabilitation programs and those at more significant risk by adhering to specific necessities for those with greater needs (Vose et al., 2020). This assessment allows each individual to receive the treatment they require. In addition, Vose et al. (2020) discovered that pairing lower-risk criminals with high-risk criminals was ineffective because the reduced-risk criminals could pick up unfavorable habits from the greater-risk criminals.

One of the main issues with reintegration programs is that individuals are frequently sent to the wrong programs or agencies and cannot experience effective

improvement. Additionally, many individuals are frequently put on waitlists because there are too many people needing to use these services (Taxman & Smith, 2020).

According to Taxman and Smith (2020), lowering the incidence of reoffending depends on having the right resources available in a place easily accessible to persons who need them.

Numerous researchers have assessed and analyzed the RNR model's concept in relation to the efficiency of reentry programs. Recognizing the differences and gaps in reintegration treatments and programs is crucial as more people leave prison and push for reform (Taxman & Smith, 2020). According to the RNR approach, minimizing recurrence begins with meeting the person's needs and degree of risk upon reentering society. Future research can expand on this paradigm to more effectively develop the concepts of therapy and readmission as a working model.

Criminogenic Needs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 outbreak had impacted numerous aspects of our daily lives. In addition to the challenges of transitioning from jail to the outside world, the pandemic added new burdens onto people making their way back into society. (Lytle, 2022). The risk-need-responsivity principle provides a framework for assessing the difficulties encountered by the reentry population according to the eight risks, they are deemed to face, including factors such as substance abuse, lack of stable housing, limited education or vocational skills, mental health issues, association with antisocial peers, employment instability, family/marital instability, and leisure/recreation activities conducive to crime. (Lytle, 2022).

Illegal or criminal history is a constant risk factor that frequently acts as a barrier for those in the judicial system dealing with people who have engaged in or have a history of engaging in criminal activities. During the pandemic, as resources and opportunities were being distributed among a much larger population—people not involved in the criminal justice system, but who were also in need of employment, financial assistance, and medical care—the negative impact of this risk factor for recently incarcerated individuals became more apparent (Hager, 2020). In fact, early relief legislation enacted in March 2020 (when COVID-19 spread to the U.S.) barred small business owners with criminal records (i.e., placement on parole within the preceding five years or a prior felony conviction) from receiving federal assistance from the U.S. Small Business Administration (Hager, 2020). This is just one example of how the government addressed the unprecedented impact of a global pandemic on a variety of its institutions.

Employment and Education

The COVID-19 outbreak resulted in severe losses for the U.S. economy, causing widespread concern. In many industries, including those employing former convicts, layoffs or furloughs occurred in areas such as food service, maintenance, and rideshare (Suneson, 2020). The absence of employment options made finding work difficult for a majority of people. At the same time, pandemic conditions increased competition in the labor market, even for individuals with the qualifications to take advantage of openings that arose during and after the outbreak. Those who spent time in prison during the early stages of the pandemic and then released had to weigh the risks to their health versus the

benefits of finding work. If a worker accepted a “critical” position— delivery services, hospital-based maintenance, and facilities—the risk of contracting COVID-19 grew greater.

Because of their collectively high rates of academic failure and unemployment before incarceration, ex-inmates typically require educational and vocational training in terms of expanding their prospects through education; pandemic-related shutdowns delayed or even suspended opportunities to obtain the required training or a particular degree. Ex-convicts often experienced an additional challenge related to the pandemic even when training and education programs were offered online: securing online resources that allowed for at-home study, such as Internet access, computers, books and other study materials.

Reentry and Family Relationships

If an individual lacks family and marital bonds, they are more likely to reoffend, another criminogenic risk factor. The families of ex-convicts who have been released from jail may be prone to conflict or include antisocial members. A sudden increase in time spent with family members due to shelter-in-place orders during the pandemic often resulted in more significant stress or fostered antisocial behaviors. In general, intimate partner violence is more likely to occur in people who have just been released from prison because of various variables, including their time in prison. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic’s increased rates of domestic violence, this danger became elevated (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). When schools and daycare centers closed across the country, many young people who were monitored during the day at their schools and

centers now had to be cared for by their parents at home and full-time (Winthrop, 2020). As a result, those workers who could work from home faced the challenge of balancing work and childcare responsibilities while those in crucial positions (outside the home) found it difficult to find childcare while working. Many parents' additional strain of supporting remote learning and preparing weekday lunches for their children increased while schools were closed (Winthrop, 2020).

With regard to intersectionality theory, the issue of age is worth considering against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and this study's focus on formerly incarcerated African American men. When imprisoned, older people age more quickly; yet, when released, they are much less likely to commit a crime again (O'Hanlon & Broome, 2022). However, while criminologists and gerontologists have lately turned their attention to the aged inmate population, little is known about the experiences of elderly, previously jailed individuals (as a particular subgroup) during the reintegration phase back into society. However, O'Hanlon and Broome (2022) referred to older individuals—enrolled in a sophisticated reintegration program for recently imprisoned older people in New York City—who were freed in 2019 and 2020 and who were since interviewed on many occasions. These individuals' top reintegration problems were: (a) finding secure housing, (b) taking care of physical and mental health difficulties, and (c) dealing with trauma, social alienation, and interpersonal issues. Other recidivism characteristics were less often observed within this population, such as difficulty finding a job and drug addiction—problems generally linked to resumption of criminal behaviors (O'Hanlon & Broome, 2022).

For this study, the researcher used a qualitative methodology with the aim to better understand the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men across all their identifiable intersections, including age; in this way, speaking to their unique requirements, convictions, and opinions while living in the prison setting and facing the challenges of an unusual health emergency, the COVID-19 outbreak (O’Hanlon & Broome, 2022).

Participants in the research cited the importance of receiving organizational and/or community assistance with regard to housing, food, and clothing for their families. The interviewees admitted relying on public transit to and from interviews and other locations because they did not have the help of family members; thus, indicating that many African American men who have been imprisoned become displaced from their families and communities (Higgins, 2020).

Given that the “family” is typically understood to be a source of both financial and psychological support for its members, Strickland’s (2016) research sought to explore how study participants—formerly jailed African American men—tapped into informal assistance from their families. Having the support of one’s family is a critical component of one’s overall social capital. In addition, having the support of one’s family is critical for networking, which can lead to better job prospects through the development of stronger social links. Family members can speed up hiring by vouching for formerly jailed African American men. Strickland (2016) noted that several study participants who found employment after being incarcerated said their jobs were “hand-delivered” to them. In other words, due to the influence of family members, some of the participants

were hired without question. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that family support does not erase the prejudices and stereotypes connected with the racial identities of these formerly incarcerated individuals; nor does it erase their history of incarceration. (Frazer, Robinson, & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2021). In the end, if ex-offenders do not have the support of their families, they may have difficulty getting the resources needed to overcome the obstacles they will encounter upon returning to society (Strickland, 2016).

Homelessness, Housing, and Social Support

Homeless shelters can function as temporary homes for African American men imprisoned in the past. Certain obstacles to reintegration might be eliminated if these individuals were provided options for stable housing accommodations and opportunities for decent work. In other words, recidivist conduct or a need to resort to activities that can lead to reimprisonment could potentially be reduced if economic stability, in the form of a job and a permanent shelter, could be provided at the start of the reintegration process. African American men who have served time in prison are already a disenfranchised demographic. When they return to society and cannot get work to support and provide for their families, they, their families, and communities are all adversely impacted (McNeill & Whyte, 2013; Higgins, 2021).

With work typically linked to men's sense of self and their position as family providers, those ex-offenders who lack social support or who struggle to retain their family roles are most likely to seek and receive support from others (Williams et al., 2019). Thus, when ex-incarcerated African American men (who are already

marginalized) cannot provide for their families, the chances of perpetuating a more impoverished family and community rise. Because of this, African American communities that are already disenfranchised suffer on both social and economic levels. Unemployed ex-convicts who are trying to support themselves and their families, as well as single mothers who cannot raise their children alone, remain the primary residents of such disenfranchised communities (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019).

Summary

Studies show that African Americans are more likely to be arrested, sentenced to longer terms of imprisonment than their White peers; also, that they are incarcerated at nearly five times the rate of white Americans (A. Nellis, 2021). Amidst the documented levels of racial/ethnic imbalance across the country's prison systems, less has been reported about COVID-19's impact on inmates and staff throughout the pandemic—including huge healthcare expenses and the capacity of medical staff working in prison facilities to both reduce and, on the other hand, possibly worsen existing racial/ethnic health inequalities (Hughes & Prior, 2021).

In 2020, the CDC started COVID-19 screening at all the country's state prisons in response to the increased risk of contagion within the prison environment. The Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) started COVID-19 monitoring among southern state prisons in March 2020, documenting illnesses within different facilities (Wallace et al., 2020). According to this investigation, southeastern prison systems confirmed 489 COVID-19 occurrences between March and April 2020, including 37 hospitalized inmates and ten inmate mortalities.

It is crucial to ensure that prisons and jails have a defined strategy for reacting to future infectious disease outbreaks. Prison systems should create a disease outbreak preparedness and mitigation strategy aligned with health officials' recommendations, including those from the Department of Health and Human Services, the WHO, and the Pandemic Planning Review for jails (Beaudry et al., 2020). These regulations analyze readiness, containment, and control measures for COVID-19 in detention centers (Gostin et al., 2020).

As discussed earlier, the body of literature addresses several reintegration challenges that African American males have confronted upon their release from prison, including finding work and getting assistance from their families and communities (Higgins, 2021). Reentry programs do not guarantee that incarcerated African American men will not face structural and legally generated difficulties (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). In other words, finding work and suitable housing after their release will be much more difficult. As a result of having been removed from their homes and communities due to criminal convictions, African American males who have served time in prison must work hard to repair broken relationships while behind bars. Some relationships, however, cannot be saved (Higgins, 2021). Ultimately, their reintegration into society will be hindered if they do not get the social support they need. On this point, reincarceration among African American men has been linked to both unemployment and a lack of social support. Further, and according to Higgins (2021), reincarceration is a direct result of the legal restrictions set by criminal justice policies and an entire criminal justice system based on racism.

In Chapter 3, the researcher provides a comprehensive explanation of the design and methodology utilized to conduct this study and generate its findings. The chapter reiterates and details essential components of the investigation. These include: (a) research questions; (b) rationale for the study; (c) selected research methodology; (d) participant recruitment and selection methods; (e) ethical measures for safeguarding the identities of study participants; (f) the study setting; (g) the role of the researcher, including acknowledgement of biases; and (h) the data collection and analysis processes.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men who were detained in a jail in the southeastern United States during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, I aimed to explore study participants' perspectives on the influences of confinement under pandemic conditions relative to both their psychological and their physiological well-being. The major sections of this chapter are organized as follows: (a) Research Design and Rationale; (b) Role of the Researcher, (c) Methodology (with key subsections), (d) Issues of Trustworthiness, (e) Ethical Procedures, and (f) Summary. Within the chapter section on Methodology, other components of the research process have been addressed, including participant recruitment and selection, instrumentation, and data collection, and analysis processes.

Guided by the revelation of experiences as communicated by African American males who had previously served time in prison during the COVID-19 pandemic, this qualitative study was designed to ascertain how their health was affected by their imprisonment during the outbreak, as well as to gain insights into how to improve living conditions in the prison environment should there be a future wide-scale outbreak of disease. At the same time, the study was designed to address these concerns via a racial lens focused on African American men. The findings of this research could be valuable to prison officials, the broader public, and, most importantly, both current and former prisoners. In addition, findings could assist policymakers in discovering amendable laws

to help alleviate the problem of disease spread in prisons. At the same time, policymakers could address the use of racial discrimination against offenses committed by African Americans. In turn, researchers in racial studies could benefit from the firsthand information and personal perspectives provided by study participants.

As a result of this study, I learned more fully about the topic of confinement and prison living conditions, especially as experienced from the standpoint of race. The in-depth interviews with study participants provided rich textual data that made it easier to understand the specifics of their experiences because the phenomenon was examined from their perspectives (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020).

Research Design and Rationale

The process of designing a qualitative study requires that the researcher create clearly written research questions that convey the study's focus and purpose. Qualitative research questions should be open-ended so as to allow for emerging and evolving information that characterizes the study of human perspectives. Following are the research questions created for this study:

- RQ1: What are the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men, located in the southeastern United States, regarding their lived experiences of incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ2: How did the incarceration experience during COVID-19 influence each individual's physiological and psychological well-being while in jail or prison?

A research rationale is a justification for why a study was considered essential. Specific to this study, African Americans have made up a disproportionately high percentage of people imprisoned in the southeastern United States, and African American men have been the bulk of those behind bars (Higgins, 2021). As of 2019, African American men comprised 68% of this group, and African American adults comprised approximately 67% of the jailed population (Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement [LCLE], 2019). Despite presenting the proportion of individuals arrested and reimprisoned by the 5th year after their official release, LCLE does not separate data concerning race or gender (LCLE, 2019). Consequently, I concluded that the qualitative research methodology, utilizing qualitative interviews, was the most appropriate approach with which to gather the kind of information that could aid in understanding the difficulties behind the issue of high African American incarceration rates—in particular, based on the perspectives of the individuals who experienced such difficulties. In this case, those difficulties were further complicated by the experience of a global pandemic while living in confinement (Boulos, 2023).

Furthermore, I selected qualitative research approach as appropriate for this study based on its use of nonnumerical variables and open-ended questions (Tenny et al., 2024). With qualitative research, there can be multiple realities and interpretations of the situation, which is important to explore in a study about social justice, as in this case. Therefore, the open-ended questioning and nonnumerical variables characteristic of the qualitative interview allowed for the collection of valuable data from the study participants (Johnson & Parry, 2022; Misoch, 2019). In turn, the main objective for using

qualitative interviews—as a data collection tool—was to gain knowledge about study participants’ perceptions and understandings of their unique experiences in a particular setting and context (Howarth et al., 2024). Qualitative research, which emphasizes the human element, enables scholars and other researchers to better understand how people view, comprehend, and make meaning of their personal experiences. This approach to data collection provides the researcher the opportunity to gather in-depth, detailed data leading to the discovery of emergent patterns and themes across the collection of interviews—serving as the foundation for determining the study findings (Piotrowski et al., 2021).

To further achieve the study’s objectives, I chose phenomenology as the research design because it is a qualitative method that allows for the examination of participant impressions of the events they experience and provides an opportunity to gain rich, in-depth data on the opinions of those studied (Gill, 2020). This approach allows the researcher to focus on the actual experiences of individuals; in this case, providing a deeper understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on formerly imprisoned African American men—from their unique points of view (Gill, 2020). Thus, phenomenology offered me a way to gain a more intimate and detailed understanding of how this population was impacted by the pandemic while living under institutional confinement.

Role of the Researcher

I conducted interviews with study participants either through online Zoom sessions or in face-to-face interview sessions. Given the complex nature of the research topic, I also used a reflexive procedure to identify any bias that might have impacted the

study (Korstjens & Moser, 2022). Throughout the study, I used tools with which to self-reflect, monitor, and acknowledge my presumptions and biases in order to gain a transparent understanding of my own investment in the research process. The research design was crafted with the goal of providing an unbiased view of the experiences of the formerly incarcerated African American men under pandemic conditions, as told by each of them. In addition, a researcher or investigator should aim to connect with study participants for the purpose of developing a trustworthy, working relationship (Korstjens & Moser, 2022). By establishing this kind of connection, participants tend to feel more at ease in responding to every inquiry honestly and fully. On this point, the interview process for this study was designed to give participants the freedom to respond openly and candidly to the interview questions. In other words, I did not present the respondents with any preplanned ideas or information that might have influenced how they responded.

Ultimately, the qualitative researcher's role and duty is to gather, evaluate, and analyze information in order to determine plausible findings in response to the study's research questions. In the process of categorizing and interpreting the interview data, the qualitative researcher identifies patterns and themes that have emerged from the interview data, both individually and collectively. Overall, I carried out this study in a professional manner by ensuring, from the start, that there were no personal or professional connections to the selected respondents and no competing interests. Using semistructured interviews, I was able to minimize the possibility of influential biases, thus encouraging individuals to elaborate voluntarily on their answers (Bergelson et al.,

2022). Participants were not given any material from previous studies or results in the field that could influence their opinions and answers.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The southeastern portion of the U.S. jail system served as the geographic focus of this qualitative study. The group of study subjects was comprised of 10 African American men who were formerly incarcerated during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary purpose of the study was to explore participants' individual perspectives on the experience of confinement—living in closely populated quarters with subpar healthcare interventions—while facing the challenges and fears brought on by a global pandemic. Therefore, this study's significance lies in the revelation of real human experiences and perspectives grounded in both personal and political issues as viewed through the lenses of race and social justice. Following are the key components of this Methodology section: (a) Participant Selection Logic; (b) Instrumentation; (c) Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection; and (d) Data Analysis Plan.

Participants selected for this study consisted of 10 formerly incarcerated African American men who were in jail during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research sample was purposefully selected to meet certain fundamental criteria. First, the study required that participants be African American males—meeting the requirement of a designated racial group. Secondly, the situation or context underscoring the study was the experience of incarceration during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, the criteria for participant selection provided me with clear access to respondents who were willing

and able to participate in interviews so as to learn about their lives and experiences relative to institutional confinement during the pandemic. This sampling approach enabled me to engage with rich, in-depth, and detailed information about the concepts and dynamics under study (Jones et al., 2021).

I approached potential participants via social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, where groups had been explicitly formulated for formerly incarcerated African American men. I also used the snowball sampling method for the study. The snowball method requires that a study participant send a referral to another potential participant. (Darko, 2022). This method aided me in constructing a sequence of applicants who would potentially be good candidates for participation in the study.

Instrumentation

The method of data collection was through semistructured interviews using the script for conducting the semistructured interviews as data collection instrument. According to Ravitch and Carl (2020), the key tool in a qualitative research investigation is the researcher. In other words, it is the researcher's positionality that shapes the selection of research instruments used in their study (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). This was an important component of the study in terms of ensuring that researcher bias did not obscure the new knowledge obtained from the interviews (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). This aligned with the study's purpose and design and conformed with qualitative research protocols. Interviews were conducted ethically, and researcher reflections were documented to maintain personal awareness and to keep in check any biases that could negatively impact participant engagement and follow-through.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Ten previously jailed African American adult males from the southeastern United States participated in one-on-one, in-depth interviews to discuss how their experiences of incarceration during COVID-19 affected their well-being. This data-gathering methodology was suitable because it evoked expression of each individual's perspective on their experience. All individuals who participated in the study were taught and aware of how to use Zoom, although some of the participants were interviewed in person. For those individuals who participated online, the videoconferencing still enabled me and the respondents to communicate while seeing each other's faces. Because each participant had a unique set of life experiences, and because what is difficult for one person might not be difficult for another, the questioning was not concentrated on specific lived experiences and reintegration challenges (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Overall, I was able to gather rich information that came from firsthand communications with participants; this enabled me to better understand the significance of participants' responses when analyzing the interview data (Howarth et al., 2024).

The first step in the recruitment process was to gather contact information for possible volunteers for this study using the snowball sampling method until data saturation was achieved. In other words, I used snowball sampling as a strategy for recruiting additional study participants by requesting that previously contacted participants provide contact information for other potential participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Initially, I introduced myself to the prospective volunteers and informed them of the topic of the study. In turn, I asked these participants whether they knew of other

people who would fit the study sample's profile requirements, also disclosing the targeted time period for the interview sessions and the overall timeline of the study. (Taquette, 2022). The study's eligibility rules and requirements for individuals participating in the research were also addressed to ensure that they would be met. Otherwise, it would have consumed too much time to cancel an interview session and find a replacement for that person once the interview portion of the study had begun. I also gave prospective volunteers complete disclosure details about the research, including the timing, techniques, and study goals (Taquette, 2022).

In addition, I informed potential participants that a consent form—to be kept on file throughout the research/post research period—would be emailed to them if they chose to participate. I asked participants who verbally agreed to participate in the research to enter “I consent” in the email. Along with the researcher's task of telling the participants about the research study, the informed consent form included content describing the study and provided details about volunteer involvement. The consent form to participate in the study provided information about the possible risks and advantages of participating in the study. Respondents could opt out of the study at any moment; thus, their original decision to enroll was not the only factor in determining their level of voluntary engagement (Taquette, 2022). As an additional component of the recruitment and selection process, I asked for permission to record each interview session. In the end, the individuals were successfully recruited during the earlier stages of the recruiting process.

The second stage of the interview included asking questions listed in Appendix A. The participants were also asked to depict their lived experiences with respect to the research questions. All interviews with the study participants took place via Zoom or face to face. There was one Zoom interview, for which I sent email instructions on how to use Zoom. I conducted nine face-to-face interviews, which followed protocols based on CDC guidelines on indoor social gathering and social distancing, which relaxed once vaccines became an option. The CDC recommended maintaining a social distance of 6 ft outdoors. Masks were not required in most places but were recommended (Henein et al., 2020). Furthermore, all in-person interviews were conducted at safe and secure locations upon which the participant and the researcher agreed. Locations varied for each interview, but all interviews were conducted outside. I used an audio recorder to record face-to-face interviews. In terms of preparation and participation in the use of the semistructured interview instrument, each individual received an identical list of questions in a similar sequence. Along with open-ended questions, there were also planned follow-up inquiries depending on participants' comments, giving them a chance to explain further.

Data were collected through two stages of interviews. The first stage of the interview focused on the background of the participant. The purpose of this stage of the interview was to build a relationship with the participant, get to know them, gather information about them, and to get them to sign the consent form. This stage of the interview helped the participant to understand the nature of the study and allowed the participant to share personal experiences related to their incarceration experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The face-to-face interviews were recorded on an audio recorder and transcribed using the software Otter.ai. Because the in-person interviews were recorded, I could concentrate more on the participants because I did not have to note participants' responses throughout the interview process. Furthermore, recording the interview with an audio recording device simplified transcribing the notes due to use of online transcription tools.

Using good communication with participants in the study proved to be essential for this researcher. As interviewer, the researcher must also consider the participants' communication and listening abilities when gathering information via interviews

Lastly, the researcher did not coerce respondents into continuing or responding to a question if they needed a pause or were hesitant. The respondents believed in the researcher's genuine interest in the phenomenon being studied. The researcher further informed the respondents regarding how they would be contacted if they were needed for a subsequent interview. The second interview would not last as long as the first one, which lasted over an hour. Three respondents were the subjects of quick follow-up interviews in which they were asked additional questions for clarification purposes. In terms of security measures taken to safeguard the interview data, the researcher saved and kept the recorded interviews on various disk drives. The actual interview transcripts were kept on various storage devices.

Data Analysis Plan

The collection of rich qualitative data was essential to implementing the data analysis plan for this study. To reiterate, the researcher used a qualitative,

phenomenological approach to gather detailed accounts of how African American men who had served time in prison experienced COVID-19 during the first six months of the outbreak; in particular, how the experience of incarceration under pandemic conditions affected their psychological and physiological well-being. While not physically present to one another during online interviews, each individual who participated in an online interview session and the researcher could see each other's faces in real time due to the video format. On the other hand, those individuals who participated in face-to-face interview sessions were able to engage with the researcher in person. To get detailed, rich responses from the respondents, the researcher developed 14 interview questions. When further explanation was required following a particular question, the researcher followed up with related critical inquiries.

The actual process of data analysis began with the transcription of interviews. The face-to-face interviews were transcribed using computer-assisted data analysis software, enabling the researcher to sustain structure and organization in the analysis phase of research. (Archibald et al., 2019). The Zoom interviews were recorded, thus providing the interview data via playback of the recorded video interviews, which were transcribed by Assembly.

To code effectively, one must view the world via the researcher's analytical lens (Mortelmans, 2019). Coding is clearly influenced by the researcher's interpretation of the emergent patterns and themes derived from analyzing all the interviews—individually and collectively—in order to produce findings. The researcher used NVivo software to

code and evaluate study participants' responses to the interview questions. Any qualitative study can benefit from NVivo coding since the software is user-friendly.

Issues of Trustworthiness

There were possible threats to internal validity and challenges in regard to the phenomenological theory that could arise. However, for the purpose of this research study, finding individuals who have been formerly incarcerated during the Covid 19 pandemic provided a different viewpoint because they lived through it. Furthermore, the participants who were interviewed for my research were selected due to having been incarcerated during the Covid 19 pandemic. Adults in this study were selected through a convenience sample. One issue that were predicted to arise was the confidentiality process with the participants personal information. However, this was handled through IRB approval by aligning numbers and alias to each participant who has agreed to participate in the study. A liability and confidentiality waiver were developed in order to protect the participants' rights and confidentiality during the study.

To achieve dependability in this study, the researcher employed triangulation so as to accumulate evidence from multiple sources. This ensured continuous stability in the data over the period of the study. By synthesizing data from various sources, it was possible to verify the authenticity of the research findings. Furthermore, the researcher used an in-depth interview process to ensure that the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men during the COVID-19 pandemic were accurately captured (Misoch, 2019). In doing so, the researcher was able to demonstrate the dependability of this qualitative study.

To the end of establishing the study's credibility, the researcher employed qualitative research methods that included collecting the experiences of the respondents and having them confirm their results, also known as member-checking. Moreover, the data collected was compared to that of other respondents to guarantee its accuracy and reliability. Additionally, the study was designed to accurately reflect the real world, thereby increasing its trustworthiness. Furthermore, Misoch (2019) suggested that by having the respondents share their experiences, it furthers the credibility of the research.

The study employed different strategies to ensure its confirmability as a well-planned research project that demonstrated transparency in its purpose, design, and implementation. In using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, the researcher was especially aware of the importance of examining their biases throughout the process in order to ensure that the data collected was not influenced by their own perceptions or subjective beliefs (Nguyen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the researcher made use of impartiality and verifiability to ensure that the research was free from any hidden prejudices. Additionally, the researcher conducted a thorough review of the literature to ensure that the data collected did not contain any biased information.

Ethical Procedures

The ethical procedures for this study followed strict guidelines. Before starting any section of the interview session with a respondent, informed consent was obtained (UK Statistics Authority, 2022). Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose to end the interview at any time. At the same time, while the participants were informed of the importance of being candid and open

during the interview process, the researcher also took steps to ensure that these volunteer participants would not be harmed in any way. In order to prevent any ethical problems, the researcher ensured that the volunteers were not misled about the purpose of the study or their participation.

Preserving the anonymity of study participants is vital in qualitative research. Hence, the researcher identified each participant using letters and numbers so as to preserve their anonymity. (UK Statistics Authority, 2022). To further protect their identities, all information collected was kept in a safe place.

Summary

The research methodology for this study is qualitative in nature and incorporated a phenomenological approach in its design. The researcher prioritized the phenomenon addressed in the study—the personal perspectives of African American men who experienced incarceration during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic—in the context of their physiological and psychological well-being under especially challenging conditions. As a combination of phenomenological inquiry and secondary data analysis, the phenomenological aspects of this inquiry allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants, while secondary data analysis provided insight into the structural underpinnings of the problem. (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The combination of these two methods offered a comprehensive view into the lived experiences of the study participants and the contexts in which those experiences took place.

In addition to addressing the study's research approach and problem, the researcher addressed the following: (a) the researcher's pivotal role in the research process, including the importance of tracking researcher biases; (b) the dynamics of recruitment and selection of study participants; (c) the study's primary data collection instrument, the semistructured interview; (d) use of a journal as a secondary instrument for documenting significant data, ideas, and researcher reflections; (e) plans and procedures for data analysis; (f) issues of trustworthiness, and (g) ethical procedures.

The next chapter, "Chapter 4: Results," presents an analysis of the findings drawn from the gathered data. Chapter 4 also provides detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of these study participants—African American men who had previously served time in prisons in southern states, and how that experience during COVID-19 affected their well-being.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze the findings of primary data collected through interviews administered to this study's target population—African American men who were incarcerated in the southeastern United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of the study's purpose, I aimed to explore the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men while confined in jails or prisons under pandemic conditions, as such focusing on the impact of the experience on their psychological and physiological well-being. As a result of collecting interview data, analyzing the data, and compiling study findings, I aimed to shed light on the impact of incarceration and COVID-19 as a personally lived experience for the participants of this study. Two research questions were used to guide the study:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men, located in the southeastern United States, regarding their lived experiences of incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How did the incarceration experience during COVID-19 influence each individual's physiological and psychological well-being while in jail or prison?

In order to address these questions, I selected a qualitative phenomenological research approach that would utilize the semistructured interview format to obtain firsthand data from identified study participants. In order to successfully select study participants, I used a 9-item participant interest/demographic survey that was distributed

through social media and emails (Facebook Messenger, email, or WhatsApp). Survey questions were designed to target candidates who fit the criteria for participation while also ensuring their anonymity and obtaining their informed consent. I crafted the survey questions so as to meet these objectives. Following are the survey items:

1. If you understand the research and wish to join in, please show your consent by clicking “I Agree.”
2. Provide the initials of your first and last name and any two numbers (to ensure anonymity).
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What is your age?
5. Have you ever been incarcerated?
6. Were you incarcerated during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020–August 2020)?
7. How do you identify?
8. Where were you incarcerated in the southeastern United States (Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Maryland, Florida, Mississippi, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee) during the pandemic?
9. What is your marital status?

Moving forward, this chapter presents discussions of the following sections: (a) Setting, (b) Demographics, (c) Data Collection, (d) Data Analysis, (e) Evidence of Trustworthiness, and (f) Results. In presenting the results, note that I have addressed them in relation to the research questions posed at the start of the study. The chapter

concludes with a summary of study findings, including discoveries made during the research process, and a brief introduction to Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.

Setting

After addressing the eligibility of willing applicants, I confirmed the participation of 10 individuals for this study. I then arranged meetings with the confirmed participants by email, taking into account their availability in terms of location and time. Nine interviews were conducted in a conference room at a local building in Pineville, Louisiana. One interview was conducted via Zoom. All interview times were chosen by participants. Allowing the participants to choose when and where they felt more comfortable being interviewed increased the likelihood that participants would be comfortable during their interviews.

Demographics

Participants were 10 formerly incarcerated African American men. The following section includes brief summaries of the relevant demographic characteristics of the study participants.

Relevant Demographic Characteristics of Individual Participants

Participant 1 (SS35)

Participant 1 is an African American male. He is 35 years old. He has been incarcerated three times since the age of 20 years old. He went to jail in Mississippi three times. His third time going, he was in jail during the first 6 months of the pandemic. He is single and does not have any children.

Participant 2 (LM31)

Participant 2 is an African American male. He is 34 years old. He was incarcerated one time in Louisiana. He was in jail during the first 6 months of the pandemic. He has two children and is single.

Participant 3 (DR21)

Participant 3 is an African American male. He is 40 years old. He was incarcerated during the first 6 months of the pandemic in Arkansas. He is not married and does not have any children.

Participant 4 (KW89)

Participant 4 is an African American male. He is 34 years old. He was incarcerated in Tennessee during the first 6 months of the pandemic. He is single, and he has five children.

Participant 5 (MS10)

Participant 5 is an African American male. He is 55 years old. He has been incarcerated five times. He was in jail in Mississippi five times. He is not married and does not have any children.

Participant 6 (SS88)

Participant 6 is an African American male. He is 35 years old. He was incarcerated once in Louisiana. He was in jail during the first 6 months of the pandemic. He is not married and does not have any children.

Participant 7 (KP82)

Participant 7 is an African American male. He is 40 years old. He was incarcerated once in North Carolina. He went to jail during the first 6 months of the pandemic. He is divorced and has two children.

Participant 8 (PS29)

Participant 8 is an African American male. He is 25 years old. He was incarcerated once. He was in jail in Georgia during the first 6 months of the pandemic. He is single and a father of two.

Participant 9 (ZC98)

Participant 9 is an African American male. He is 30 years old. He was incarcerated once. He was in jail during the first 6 months of the pandemic in Georgia. He is single and has one child.

Participant 10 (LJ61)

Participant 10 is an African American male. He is 33 years old. He was in jail during the first 6 months of the pandemic in Georgia. He is married. He does not have any children.

Data Collection

I took the necessary steps to properly prepare, in advance, for each interview session scheduled with an individual study participant. Initial steps included labeling folders with each of the participants' aliases and inserting a copy of the interview questions in each folder. Additionally, I rechecked the meeting location for each interview session. For in-person sessions, I timed my arrival at the agreed-upon location

15 minutes before the start of the interview and informed participants once I had arrived. With regard to preparation for Zoom interview sessions, I logged into Zoom 10 minutes ahead of the planned meeting time to ensure that equipment was operational and that session materials were ready and in place for the interview.

As the primary data collection instrument, the semistructured interview consisted of 14 prepared yet open-ended questions designed to enable responsive conversations between the interviewee (the study participant) and the interviewer (the researcher). As a result, the content and quality of the prepared questions allowed for a flow of conversation that took into consideration the feelings and thoughts of the individuals involved. This interview approach provided built-in flexibility regarding both the questions asked by the interviewer and the responses expressed by each study participant. As a corresponding data collection instrument, I used Sembly AI, an artificial intelligence application, to record each interview session on my cellular device. This application also generated transcripts of the sessions. In addition to the semistructured interviews, I used journals. These journals served as an important instrument for capturing reflections and observations throughout the research process. The researcher journal is indeed a valuable study instrument. It allows for reflexivity by providing a space to document personal insights, biases, and reactions during a study. This practice enhances the rigor of the research by acknowledging and addressing potential influences on the data collection and analysis process.

After welcoming each study participant using their designated alias or pseudonym, I provided them with an overview of the interview process, including verbal

confirmation of their consent to participate (each participant's written consent had already been obtained). After addressing demographic information, I used the first question— "Can you explain the living conditions inside of the jail during the COVID-19 pandemic?"—to establish the study's interview focus. Following this step, I proceeded with the question/response process based on the remaining prepared interview questions, at the same time allowing the participant to respond to additional questions or commentary that may have arisen during the exchange. If unsure of something the interviewee stated, I verbally clarified their understanding of the statement so as to exhibit attentiveness and engagement with the participant's responses. Once the interview was complete, I thanked the participant and outlined steps to verify the accuracy of the interview.

Key Steps to Verify Interview Accuracy

Each interview session was recorded using Sembly AI, an artificial intelligence application, on my cellular device. This application also generated transcripts of the sessions. After each interview, I provided the participant with a copy of the transcript to review. Participants were encouraged to correct any inaccuracies and provide additional comments to ensure that their responses were accurately captured.

During the interview, if I was unsure of something the interviewee had stated, I verbally clarified my understanding with the participant. This step helped ensure that the information recorded was accurate and reflected the participant's intended meaning. I maintained a journal throughout the data collection process. This journal included reflections, observations, and any potential biases identified. This practice helped ensure

that I remained aware of how my perspectives might influence the data collection and analysis.

Prior to each interview, I prepared a set of semistructured interview questions aimed at exploring the living conditions inside the jail during the COVID-19 pandemic. These questions were designed to allow for flexibility and to encourage detailed responses from participants.

Each interview began with a brief introduction and confirmation of verbal consent. I then addressed demographic information before proceeding with the interview questions. Throughout the interview, I remained attentive and engaged, clarifying any statements when necessary and allowing for a natural conversation flow. All interviews were recorded using the Sembly AI application, which provided high-quality audio recordings and automated transcription services. This technology ensured accurate and efficient documentation of each interview session.

After each interview, I shared the transcript with the participant for review. This member checking process ensured that the recorded data accurately reflected the participants' responses and allowed for any necessary corrections or additional insights. The researcher adhered to all ethical guidelines, including obtaining written and verbal consent, using pseudonyms to protect participant identity, and ensuring the confidentiality of all data collected.

Transcription of Interviews

Following completion of the interviews with study participants, all audio files were transcribed using Sembly.ai and securely saved as encrypted PDF files. I sent each

participant a copy of their respective transcript, via email, for member checking. In addition, I informed each participant of their right to make corrective changes in the transcript they felt were necessary, along with their right to contact me regarding remaining concerns or issues. Participants were also informed that they could request a copy of the data analysis portion of the research. Further, once data saturation was achieved, I sent one final message to each interviewee, informing them that they had 7 days to make any changes to their interview transcript. None of the participants raised any objections regarding the content or quality of their transcript.

Per Walden University's data storage and removal protocol, all digital data gathered from this study were encrypted for the duration of 5 years. After 5 years, any information stored in the encrypted, cloud-based memory storage will be permanently erased, with no possibility of reversing the deletion (Walden University, 2020).

Data Analysis

I used a phenomenological process in which methods involving bracketing and horizontalization were prioritized to analyze the qualitative data obtained from participant interviews, minus any hints of researcher bias or personal opinion. (Tufford & Newman, 2010). To clarify, bracketing is used to address the qualitative researcher's responsibility to maintain the credibility of their research. They do this by purposefully monitoring and setting aside their own subjective feelings and opinions while analyzing the interview transcripts. (Tufford & Newman, 2010). For this study, the bracketing process involved a conscious effort on my part to leave behind any preconceived notions of study participants' experiences while analyzing and interpreting the thought processes behind

their interview responses. For example, by purposefully bracketing out personal opinions and feelings, I was better prepared and particularly mindful to take a fresh and unbiased look at the living conditions inside the jail environment, as described by each study participant. By focusing on each participant's experiences and unique perspectives without subjective interference, I was able to achieve a clearer understanding of what the inmates went through during the pandemic.

Next, I began the process of horizontalization. As a data analysis method, horizontalization involves the task of developing a deep connection with and understanding of the interview data. To do this, the researcher must read all the transcripts thoroughly and repeatedly in order to identify significant statements found within and across the interviews (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher must then group the statements into themes so as to identify and name these emergent findings as they demonstrate relevance and pertinence to the research questions. According to Delve et al. (2022), horizontalization allows researchers to treat every statement as having equal value initially, ensuring that no data are disregarded prematurely. The researcher must then group the statements into themes to identify and name these emergent findings as they demonstrate relevance and pertinence to the research questions.

As a result of utilizing the horizontalization process for this study, I identified fundamental patterns regarding study participants' shared experiences—as African American men—of being incarcerated, along with the added impact of living in confinement during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Delve et al., 2022). These patterns revealed numerous and serious issues, including the following: (a) limited

access to healthcare, (b) the adverse effects of isolation, (c) issues with poor sanitation and personal hygiene, (d) overcrowding, (e) COVID-19 sickness and fatalities, and (f) delays in court proceedings.

Proceeding with the next step in the data analysis process, the researcher maintained the process of horizontalization while encoding the data electronically, utilizing NVivo 14 to gain a comprehensive outlook of the codes. The researcher studied the NVivo 14 codes and eliminated those that did not apply to the lived experiences of the study participants—African American males who had previously served prison sentences during the pandemic. The general patterns and themes identified during the initial phase of horizontalization—that is, the researcher’s own studied reading and analysis of the transcription data—helped in this process by enabling the researcher to evaluate and eliminate, as irrelevant, any codes that did not align with the general patterns/themes initially identified prior to using the software application.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the concept of trustworthiness encompasses four criteria that need to be met in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study’s findings: (a), credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Each of these criteria plays a crucial role in validating the research findings and providing confidence to the readers that the results are both accurate and applicable. By addressing these criteria comprehensively, researchers can demonstrate the robustness of their methodologies and the authenticity of their conclusions. (R. Berk et al., 2021). In the following four subsections, the researcher discusses each of these criteria individually.

Credibility in qualitative research is concerned with the accuracy, consistency, and integrity of a study's findings in relation to participants' experiences and how the data were collected and represented by the researcher (R. Berk et al., 2021). For this study, it was important that the researcher made interviewees fully aware of the research questions, in advance of the data collection process, in order to establish credibility relative to the purpose of the study and the nature of their involvement (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In addition, to eliminate any potential data collection bias, the researcher refrained from disclosing their stance on the topics of discussion during the data collection phase. (Fettig, A., & Zeidman, S. 2022), To further ensure the accuracy of the analysis of the data collected from the interviews, the researcher employed member checking. This process involved sending each participant an encrypted PDF file containing the interview transcript; thus, enabling each participant to review the transcript and clarify any discrepancies or inaccuracies. Member checking supported the researcher's efforts to accurately capture study participants' experiences and perspectives by including them in this aspect of the research process. (Fettig, A., & Zeidman, S. 2022).

Transferability is concerned with the extent to which the findings of a research study can be applied to other contexts and settings in quantitative research. (Kakar, Z. U. H., Rasheed, R., Rashid, A., & Akhter, S, 2023). The concept of transferability in research is crucial, as it allows researchers to assess the viability of study findings that might show a correlation to potential studies that could be conducted in other, similar contexts and environments.

Qualitative research necessitates meeting the criterion of dependability in order to support a study's findings and to ensure the rigor and integrity of the research process. Dependability in qualitative research is likened to quantitative reliability, which is defined as the consistency and stability of the measurement process over time. (Kakar, Z. U. H., Rasheed, R., Rashid, A., & Akhter, S, 2023). Quantitative reliability ensures that the results of a study can be replicated under similar conditions, indicating that the measurement instrument produces consistent results. In qualitative research, dependability is achieved by thoroughly documenting the research process, including the methods and decisions made throughout the study.

As one of the criteria contributing to the overall trustworthiness of a qualitative study, confirmability is defined as the degree to which the findings of a study are shaped by the participants and the data rather than by the researcher's biases, motivations, or perspectives. Confirmability ensures that the results are based on the participants' experiences and viewpoints and not influenced by the researcher's personal beliefs or theoretical predispositions. Achieving confirmability in this research was paramount to establishing a nonbiased stance as a qualitative researcher (R. Berk et al., 2021). To this end, and as addressed earlier in the data analysis of this chapter, the researcher employed bracketing as an intentional method of suspending personal or preconceived notions and opinions while collecting and analyzing study data. Specific to conducting interviews, this entailed the conscious effort on the part of the researcher to attend fully to the conversation with each participant and being careful not to exert any personal influence during the interview. The researcher also conducted a qualitative analysis with NVivo 14

software to further reduce researcher bias, as a computer does not possess emotions or preconceived ideas.

To facilitate the recruitment of study participants, the researcher posted an invitation on relevant online forums dedicated to discussions about criminal justice reform and support for formerly incarcerated individuals. The invitation encouraged potential participants to join the study by completing a Google Forms survey designed to assess their eligibility. The recruitment survey was explicitly targeted at African American men formerly incarcerated in jails or prisons located in the southeastern United States during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Nellis, A. 2021). Additionally, the researcher spread the word on their Facebook page by posting the invitation and survey link weekly.

Specifically, the survey asked each potential participant to provide their electronic signature in order to take the survey and be considered for joining the study by selecting the “I consent” option. It is important to note that this "I consent" feature within the survey is not the same as the study’s formal Informed Consent form. The survey’s “I consent” option indicates the participant's willingness to provide preliminary information for eligibility screening. In contrast, the formal Informed Consent form is a comprehensive document provided to eligible participants, detailing the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and participant rights, and requires their explicit agreement to partake in the full study.

The researcher also developed an Informed Consent form to support the study’s recruitment and research functions, also serving as the initial step in demonstrating the

use of ethical study procedures. The Informed Consent form provided a concise explanation of the purpose of the study, the method of data collection, and a selection of sample questions. It also highlighted content that addressed the potential risks of participation and how such risks would be minimized; for example, by the researcher maintaining participant anonymity and ensuring researcher trustworthiness. The form also stated that participants could withdraw or not answer specific questions at any point during the study. In addition, the researcher provided their contact information through which participants could report any complaints or concerns regarding the study, including concerns that should be reported to the university's IRB.

Ultimately, those individuals who were invited to participate in the study received a copy of the Informed Consent form in their email, which they were required to accept, sign, and return to the researcher in order to confirm their participation. Those individuals who agreed to participate signed the form, indicating that they truly wanted to share their experiences of being in prison during the pandemic, with the knowledge that the study was purposed to address how their confinement impacted their mental and physical health.

Confidentiality in qualitative research refers to the obligation of researchers to protect the identities and personal information of study participants, ensuring their privacy throughout the research process. The qualitative research process requires that the researcher maintain confidentiality with regard to the identities of study participants, their personal information, and their privacy. (Kang, E., & Hwang, H.-J, 2023). Therefore, the researcher used pseudonyms or code names, in place of participants' real names, when

referring to them throughout the research process and in the presentation of findings. This approach safeguards participants' identities from being revealed and ensures that their personal data remains protected.

This principle is fundamental to ethical research practices and helps build trust between researchers and participants. To uphold confidentiality, researchers must take measures to prevent the disclosure of participants' identities and sensitive information.

The qualitative research process requires that the researcher maintain confidentiality with regard to the identities of study participants, their personal information, and their privacy. Therefore, the researcher used pseudonyms or code names, in place of participants' real names, when referring to them throughout the research process and in the written documentation of the study. The pseudonyms were, in fact, created by the researcher as individual code names by using participants' initials and two digits of their choice; in this way, ensuring the anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy of all participants. Other examples of some of the confidentiality procedures used in this study are as follows: (a) storage of all Zoom interviews and audio recordings using participants' code names, safely saved in the encrypted vault of Microsoft OneDrive under the researcher's password protection; (b) use of the Sembly.ai application to produce the interview recordings which were then stored in the application's cloud memory; (c) use of multi-authentication security features to password-protect the recordings, and (d) encryption of the electronic consent link embedded in the recruitment surveys and storage of the surveys in Google Forms.

Results

This section presents the outcomes of a phenomenological investigation of formerly incarcerated African American men during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data for this study was gathered via semistructured interviews with 10 consenting study participants who met the stated eligibility requirements as put forth in the initial recruitment survey that was discussed at the beginning of this chapter. After completing the data collection process, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of interview data by carefully examining each transcript, using horizontalization methods that were supplemented with the use of the software application, NVivo 14. The thematic analysis led to the discovery of significant lived experiences of the Black men who served as study participants, revealing both the psychological and physiological impacts of confinement under pandemic conditions and the coping mechanisms each individual used to weather that traumatic time in their lives. In the sections that follow, the reported results of this qualitative investigation are structured to respond to each of the two research questions underscoring the study.

Research Question 1

What are the perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men, located in the southeastern United States, regarding their lived experiences of incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The perspectives of formerly incarcerated African American men during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal a complex interplay of fear, neglect, and resilience. Analysis of the data highlighted several recurring themes, beginning with heightened anxiety and

uncertainty. Many participants reported experiencing increased levels of anxiety due to the unpredictable nature of the virus and the lack of clear communication from prison authorities. This constant state of fear extended beyond concerns for their own health to worries about fellow inmates and loved ones outside the prison.

Participants also expressed concerns about inadequate health and safety measures. They noted that overcrowded conditions made social distancing impossible and that basic hygiene supplies like soap and sanitizers were scarce or unavailable. Additionally, they reported delayed or insufficient medical care, which heightened their sense of vulnerability.

The pandemic severely restricted the ability of inmates to communicate with their families and support networks. Participants recounted how visitation rights were suspended, and there were long delays in mail and phone services. This isolation from the outside world added to their stress and made it difficult to stay informed about the pandemic's developments and their families' well-being.

Many participants felt neglected by the prison system and broader society during the pandemic. They perceived their lives as undervalued, evidenced by the lack of adequate response to their health and safety needs. This neglect was seen as part of a broader pattern of systemic racism and inequity, which many participants felt was exacerbated by the pandemic. The psychological impact of these experiences was profound. Participants shared feelings of depression, hopelessness, and despair. The compounded stress of incarceration and the pandemic took a toll on their mental health, leading to a sense of helplessness and resignation.

Despite these challenges, some participants highlighted their coping mechanisms and resilience. They found strength in their faith, engaged in self-improvement activities, and formed supportive bonds with fellow inmates. These strategies helped them navigate the hardships of the pandemic and maintain a sense of hope for the future.

Research Question 2

How did the incarceration experience during COVID-19 influence each individual's physiological and psychological well-being while in jail or prison?

The experiences of formerly incarcerated African American men during the COVID-19 pandemic were filled with anxiety and fear as these individuals already had experienced personal and social marginalization due to their race and socioeconomic status. As collectively recounted by study participants, this prior sense of marginalization was reinforced and magnified under pandemic lock-up conditions as evidenced by their compromised physical well-being. In other words, these men had already faced physical and psychological health disparities in jail due to their marginalized status as African Americans and the overall lack of access to proper health care within the prison system even before the outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic only made their situation worse (Vose et al., 2020).

The results garnered from the interview data indicated that each of the study participants had to come to terms, in their own ways, with the extreme psychological and physiological effects of incarceration during the pandemic. The psychological impact of the experience encompassed attitudes, states of mind, and coping mechanisms that

included acceptance, anxiety and depression, courage and resilience, desperation, optimism, and regret. Figure 2 represents these psychological states.

Figure 1

Hierarchy of Themes

<input type="radio"/>	Lived experiences	0
<input type="radio"/>	Covid -19 ail	7
<input type="radio"/>	Isolation and l	5
<input type="radio"/>	Legal delays	1
<input type="radio"/>	Overcrowding	6
<input type="radio"/>	Poor healthca	5
<input type="radio"/>	Poor hygiene	6
<input type="radio"/>	Uncertainty	1

Note. Seven subthemes are listed (alphabetical order) under the primary theme, “Lived Experiences.”

Ultimately, employing computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to spot patterns and themes in the collected responses was beneficial in several ways. For example, the use of NVivo 14 enabled the researcher to determine the frequency of participants’ responses to the study’s central questions. With the combination of both manual and computer-assisted data analysis processes to identify significant themes that emerged across the interviews, this phenomenological qualitative research approach allowed for meaningful insights to be gained regarding study participants’ perspectives of their experiences in jail during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, and after

thoroughly reviewing the coded text, the researcher gleaned seven key themes from the participants' "lived experiences" as communicated during their interview sessions: (a) COVID-19-specific illnesses, (b) feelings of isolation and loneliness, (c) court/legal delays, (d) overcrowding, (e) poor healthcare and negligence, (f) insufficient hygiene standards, and (g) a sense of uncertainty.

Next, Table 1 provides an overview of the themes, showcasing the number of participants who contributed to them and the number of occurrences of each theme in the transcript data. The subsections following Table 1 provide a more detailed description of these themes.

Table 1

Overview of Themes

Themes	Number of interviewees	Frequency in the data
COVID-19 ailments	10	25
Isolation and loneliness	10	17
Court (legal) delays	10	2
Overcrowding	10	12
Poor healthcare and negligence	10	19
Poor hygiene	10	12
Uncertainty	10	3

Note. The table shows the key themes generated from interviews conducted for this qualitative study, along with how often these themes showed up in the transcripts.

Theme: COVID-19 Ailments and Deaths

"COVID-19 ailments and deaths" was identified as a prevalent theme that emerged across the interviews with study participants, all of whom had been incarcerated

during the pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 were far-reaching, as indicated by many of the men who recounted stories of getting sick themselves; at the same time, sharing their concerns for relatives, cellmates, and other prisoners in their facility who were becoming ill in masses. Some of the participants even experienced the deaths of their own relatives or fellow inmates due to the virus. In many cases, the men expressed feeling helpless because they were unable to help or comfort their loved ones. The effects of the pandemic experience during incarceration had been especially challenging for these men, on top of the fact that many of them had struggled to cope with pre-COVID quality of life issues within the prison system. Their stories of illness and death due to COVID-19 have further exacerbated their individual experiences of trauma that many formerly incarcerated African American men have faced due to incarceration during the pandemic (Saloner et al., 2020). One participant reported that I had COVID 19 twice. The first time I was sick with COVID 19 it was more of a threat to my health, because I did not have the shot yet. The second time, I had the shot, so it wasn't as bad. However, I am still suffering from the side effects of COVID-19. I still have lasting symptoms today from it.

Another interviewee lamented how he had about eight uncles and aunts die within one year, while others reported how traumatizing it was to see all that was going on behind the prison walls—people dying and not getting the treatment that they needed. Overall, the experience had a significant impact on them. According to Mia Armstrong, 2021 “Sudden cardiac death,” is the cause listed on my Uncle Bryan’s death certificate. But it didn’t feel sudden at all — not when you factor in his underlying mental and

physical health problems, years of poor prison medical care, and the fact that he caught COVID-19 in his Arizona jail.

Theme: Isolation and Loneliness

The theme of “isolation and loneliness” encompassed vital issues faced by formerly incarcerated African American men during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these men felt disconnected from the outside world due to the control measures implemented to curb the spread of the virus. Being confined to their cells for long periods of time and having no contact with family or friends was particularly difficult. During the pandemic, many of the men experienced hopelessness and despair, which only added to their loneliness. The lack of emotional and physical support also negatively affected their mental well-being, leading to an increase in feelings of isolation and loneliness (Cloud et al., 2020; Hummer, 2021). One participant shared,

Man, shit, it was so tough. Think about it. We were in jail, already imprisoned. They took away our communication. We couldn't see anyone. We had no visitation. We couldn't leave for court dates. We weren't even having our day in court. We were just stagnant in there. I was on the edge already because we didn't know what was going on. People were dying left and right on the inside, and the COs were sick, too. I was going through it. It was really hard physically, mentally, and emotionally. Felt like I was in hell.

Another participant reported that the prison in which he was confined was shut down, and family members were prohibited from visiting. He added that most of these family members did not even call him. Furthermore, he stated that because he did not

receive any support from them while he was locked up, he could not share anything about family members as they did not have a functional relationship. He explained, "I never got any calls or visits from them. We don't have a functional relationship because they weren't there for me when I needed them the most."

Theme: Court (Legal) Delays

Another prevalent theme that emerged from interviews with these formerly incarcerated African American men centered on their experiences with court and other legal delays. Many of these men were incarcerated for extended periods of time—beyond what would have been considered appropriate for alleged crimes committed. As a result, they were often unable to receive the justice they deserved. Court and other legal delays also contributed to decreased legal representation, leading to a longer wait for justice (Smith, 2022). One interviewee revealed,

We didn't even have court dates to attend because everything was shut down, and at that time, the court system did not have wireless court call out. All of our court dates were pushed back. It was very depressing. All you could do was sit and wait. It was brutal and inhumane the way we were handled doing that time.

Another respondent added that he was on the edge during his prison confinement since he could not leave for court as originally scheduled. In other words, he could not leave according to the prepandemic court schedule because inmates were forced to remain in isolation during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. He expressed, "Being stuck in isolation and not knowing when I'd be able to go to court really pushed me to the edge."

Theme: Overcrowding

The first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about many challenges. One of the most pressing issues was “overcrowding,” which emerged as another key theme. Prisons were already overcrowded before the pandemic hit. That said, the issue of overcrowding under pandemic conditions brought a surge in new cases. Thus, due to being in shut down mode, with isolation being the chief strategy for dealing with infection/fear of infection—further impacted by court/legal delays—the pandemic led to more people being incarcerated in already-crowded prisons which, in turn, caused a critical lack of space and resources. Furthermore, with inadequate medical care in the prison environment, many individuals could not access the necessary care to stay healthy, exacerbating the issue (Julie, 2021).

Collectively, study participants described the living conditions in confinement as “horrible,” highlighting the issues of overcrowding and the lack of testing supplies for diagnosing COVID-19. One participant went into further detail, describing the environment as “intense” and “isolated,” noting that people were living in a confined space with up to 30 other men. He added that it was so overcrowded that predicting what would happen daily was hard. He explained, "Every day felt unpredictable because there were so many of us crammed into such a small space, it was impossible to know what might happen next."

Theme: Poor Healthcare and Negligence

As collectively shared by the study sample of African American men who had been incarcerated during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, “poor healthcare

delivery and negligence” within the prison system emerged as an alarming theme. Many of the men found themselves in overcrowded and unsanitary jails, with limited access to medical attention and no access to protective equipment. The lack of medical attention was an especially significant concern since inmates were at a higher risk of contracting the virus due to the proximity of other inmates and the lack of proper sanitation measures. In addition, the negligence of guards and prison medical personnel specific to providing the necessary medical care and attention to inmates underscored the acute need to prioritize the health and safety of all incarcerated individuals under pandemic conditions. The lack of adequate healthcare in prisons has been a significant issue and needs to be addressed to ensure the safety of all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds (Desai et al., 2021).

One participant recounted that, initially, and even as the cases of COVID-19 continued to increase, no testing was done which led to the rampant spread of the virus. He stated, "At the beginning, and even when COVID-19 cases kept rising, there was no testing happening at all. It spread like wildfire because they weren't testing anyone."

Everyone was scared and nervous, with every cough inducing fear. Another participant shared his experience of contracting COVID-19, stating that he felt as though he was going to die. He added that despite his suffering, the correctional officers failed to act for two days. He was left in his regular cell without any medical attention for that period. It took him a long time to recover, and he did not receive proper care even after his condition was known. Other interviewees reported that a mix of COVID-positive and

COVID-negative individuals circulated in the general population—with a lack of masks, and this made the men feel helpless.

Other interviewees reported that a mix of COVID-positive and COVID-negative individuals circulated in the general population—with a lack of masks, and this made the men feel helpless. The COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly devastating impact on African American men who had been incarcerated during the first six months of the pandemic. African American men are disproportionately represented in the U.S. criminal justice system. They are incarcerated at higher rates compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Incarceration itself can contribute to poorer health outcomes due to crowded living conditions, limited access to healthcare, and higher prevalence of chronic conditions among inmates. (A. Nellis, 2021). Even before the pandemic, African Americans, including those who have been incarcerated, experience higher rates of chronic health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and respiratory diseases. These conditions are risk factors for severe illness and complications from COVID-19. Upon release from incarceration, individuals often face challenges in accessing healthcare, housing, and stable employment. These factors can further exacerbate health disparities and increase vulnerability to infectious diseases like COVID-19. (M. Close et al., 2021). During the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, and mask mandates were implemented to mitigate the spread of the virus. However, for individuals recently released from incarceration, these measures posed additional challenges. They may have difficulty adhering to social distancing in

crowded living conditions or accessing masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) (M. Close et al., 2021).

As another key theme from the study findings, “poor hygiene” emerged as one of the most pressing issues faced by study participants who attested to the poor sanitary standards in the jail systems. The cells were overcrowded, and there was a lack of access to proper hygiene items, such as hand sanitizer making it difficult for inmates to maintain personal cleanliness and hygiene. Showers were infrequent and often inadequate, exacerbating the discomfort and risk of infections. Laundry services were also insufficient, with inmates sometimes receiving dirty or improperly cleaned clothing and bedding. Issues with food sanitation and the cleanliness of utensils were mentioned, highlighting concerns about the risk of foodborne illnesses. (Berk, R., et al, 2021). The general cleanliness of facilities was compromised due to overcrowding and a lack of regular cleaning schedules or adequate cleaning supplies. These conditions not only posed health risks but also contributed to a sense of helplessness among inmates, who struggled to maintain basic standards of cleanliness amidst challenging living conditions. This situation created an environment ripe for the spread of the virus. Furthermore, the inability to practice social distancing within the cells also increased the chances of infection (Desai et al., 2021; Saloner et al., 2020). One participant stated,

It was horrible. I can't begin to tell you how bad and unsanitary it was. I wouldn't let my dog stay in a living quarter like that. They think the worst of you in there, and if you never heard them say it, you certainly saw it. We had a lot of pests. The

air didn't work. It smelled like feces, urine, and throw-up. Mind you, this is jail, not prison. I can only imagine what that's like.

Another interviewee pointed out that he was not very pleased with the poor sanitary standards. His opinion was that the authorities did not care about the inmates. He wanted to be honest and share the truth about the poor living conditions that had been prevalent for years. He felt that no one paid attention to the plight of Black men in prison. The interviewee expressed his frustration, stating, "I'm not very pleased with the poor sanitary standards here. It's clear to me that the authorities don't care about us inmates. I want to be honest and share the truth about these conditions that have been going on for years. It feels like no one pays attention to the plight of Black men in prison."

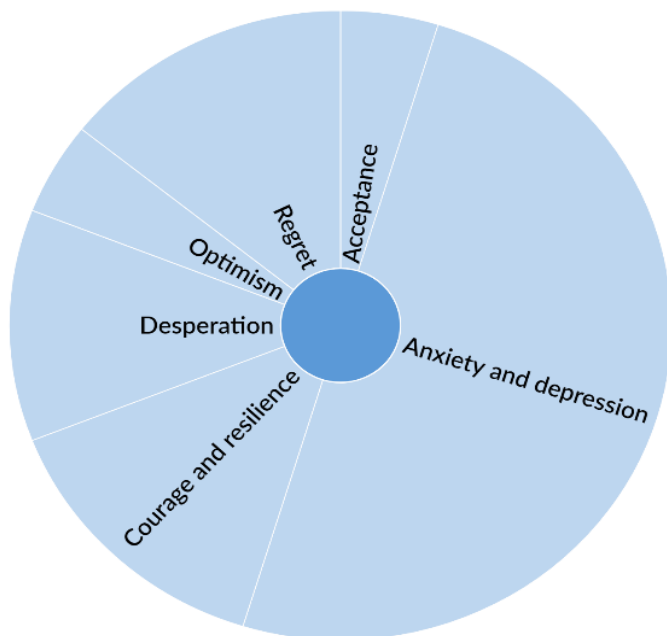
Theme: Uncertainty

Uncertainty about the duration and outcomes of the pandemic had a significant impact on study participants. Confinement under pandemic conditions left them feeling confused and anxious about their future states and living situations. Without clear guidance on the immediate future, they felt like their lives were in limbo. They had to adjust to the uncertain environment of the pandemic while also trying to navigate their already difficult situations involving legal issues, delay of court dates, and lack of access to family and other support systems. This state of uncertainty was a source of immense stress and frustration, as these men had no idea how long they would remain in prison at the time of their incarceration. The lack of structure and clarity added to their feelings of helplessness. Some respondents claimed they were constantly isolated, unsure of what would happen the next day. Meanwhile, others revealed that despite being kept in the

dark about what was happening, they were instructed to abide by the CDC guidelines and could only learn what was expected of them once released from jail.

Figure 2

Psychological States of Mind



Note. Figure 2 represents the psychological impacts of incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic on 10 formerly incarcerated African American males who served as study participants.

Next, Table 2 highlights these same psychological states as indicated by the data.

Table 2

Overview of Research: Psychological States of Mind, Influences, and Impacts

Theme	Number of respondents	Frequency
Acceptance	10	2
Anxiety and depression	10	21
Courage and resilience	10	6
Desperation	10	5
Optimism	10	2
Regret	10	6

Note. This table lists the key psychological states experienced by study participants, along with the frequency of their responses.

In the following subsections, the researcher addresses the psychological states identified by study participants as significant influences on their lives and sense of well-being while incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. These psychological states encompass various emotional and mental health challenges, including heightened anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and resilience. Examining these psychological states, the researcher aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the pandemic impacted the mental health of incarcerated African American men and the coping mechanisms they employed to navigate these unprecedented challenges.

Acceptance

Acceptance was a significant challenge for African American men in jail during the pandemic. This was due to their lack of control over the situation inside the jail environment and feeling utterly disconnected from what was going on outside the jail

walls. Many of these men had to learn to accept the fact that they were stuck in jail and that there was no way out of the situation. They had to accept that the pandemic was outside their control as well, and that they would have to endure whatever hardships came their way. For those individual participants who were able to practice this level of acceptance, the resulting psychological state enabled them to maintain their mental and physiological well-being despite the difficulties they faced (Vose et al., 2020). One respondent pointed out that he knew he was not perfect, but he was still human. On the other hand, another responded that he had done what was necessary to fulfill his obligations under the law and to society, but he felt there should have been more and better care for them. “I made mistakes, but I’m still a person who deserves dignity and respect.” On the other hand, another respondent expressed frustration with the care they received: “I did my time and followed the rules. The least they could do is ensure we had proper medical care and basic hygiene. It felt like we were forgotten.”

Anxiety and Depression

For African American men who were incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety and depression was the most commonly identified psychological state of mind specific to that experience. This mindset was often heightened by the uncertainty of when or if they would be released due to the COVID-19 lockdown procedures that were in place. Many of these men felt helpless in the face of pandemic living conditions, as they could not protect themselves or their loved ones from the virus. This emotional distress had a profound effect on their physical and psychological well-being, leading to

increased levels of stress, among other mental issues (Mohd Arifin, 2018). One respondent said,

Pandemic, to be honest, the living conditions weren't that bad, but the people made it bad. How they came at the inmates, telling them about what's going on with the COVID. What we're seeing on the news and newspaper, that kind of like had the majority of the that was incarcerated. They kind of like wondering all kind, they don't know what the outcome was going to be to the disease that they got floating around here killing people. And they kind of had a lot of people shook up, but a lot of people come up with that money to get them out of jail, you know what I'm saying? So, they wouldn't be stressed out like they would. I was one of them.

Other respondents pointed out that the combination of incarceration and pandemic fears was a shocking and heartbreaking experience for them. One of the participants even believed that the virus was spread deliberately to keep the general population down, causing more fear and paranoia. They all agreed that the first six months were the worst period of the pandemic, as people feared being near anyone coughing. Unfortunately, many of the men lost friends and family to the virus. The loss of family and friends had a profound effect on these men—mentally, emotionally, and physically. One participant shared, “Losing my brother to COVID while I was locked up broke me. I couldn't be there for my family, and it felt like a part of me died too.” The pandemic also left many feeling scared for their lives and unable to escape the nightmares associated with it. Another participant reflected, “Every night I'd wake up in a cold sweat, terrified that the

virus would get me next. It was like living in a constant state of dread.”

Study findings clearly indicated that such fearful and negative circumstances took a toll on their psychological well-being, and this was manifested through increased levels of anxiety and depression which also adversely affected their physiological health.

Courage and Resilience

Despite the pervasive feelings of fear, anxiety, and depression experienced by this group of men, several of them managed to maintain their courage and resilience while incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them shared inspirational stories and insights regarding their sense of self-worth and their ability to withstand the difficulties they encountered. "I found strength in knowing that no matter what, I am still worth something. This place couldn't take away my sense of self."

In fact, some of the study participants revealed that in facing the physical, emotional, and psychological impacts of lock-up during COVID 19, the ordeal had actually inspired them by strengthening their belief in fighting for their rights and remaining resilient during a difficult time. In these cases, the men had refused to let the circumstances of the situation prevent them from finding joy and hope in life.

Desperation

Desperation was a psychological state of being felt by many of the 10 African American men serving as this study's participants. Locked up with little to no communication with their families and limited access to resources, the physical and psychological toll of being incarcerated was palpable. Fear of the virus spreading in the overcrowded facilities, ongoing stress from past traumas, and a lack of access to

necessities all contributed to a feeling of desperation and helplessness among these men. One participant revealed that he was surrounded by a sense of “every man for himself.” The response shows the sense of helplessness these individuals felt in terms of lacking emotional and practical support from both jail staff and other inmates; thus, having to deal with the immense pressure of making wrong day-to-day decisions due to lack of information and guidance. At the same time, many of the men expressed the feeling that they did not deserve to feel so alone. They further added that the only thing they could do was pray and ask for the best.

Optimism

Optimism is a mental attitude and approach to living that emphasizes positive thinking and the belief that good things will happen. It involves looking at the brighter side of life and maintaining hope, even in the face of challenges. (Britannica, 2023). Optimistic individuals tend to focus on solutions rather than problems, and they believe that their actions can influence outcomes favorably. This mindset can lead to increased resilience, better mental and physical health, and overall life satisfaction. (Britannica, 2023). Two of the study participants demonstrated how they maintained a sense of optimism during their experience of incarceration under pandemic conditions. In particular, they pointed out that they had to learn how to protect themselves to ensure their safety. One participant shared, “I made sure to always wear a mask and kept my area as clean as possible. I also tried to stay away from crowded areas.” Another participant emphasized the importance of self-advocacy: “I realized I had to speak up for

myself. I asked more questions about the health protocols and demanded better conditions. Staying silent wouldn't get me anywhere.”

The men also spoke of realizing the importance of standing up for their rights and making their voices heard. Both found that asking more questions and making sound arguments for their rights, rather than remaining silent, was necessary to ensure that their rights would be respected.

Regret

Regret was another prevalent thematic finding that emerged from the interview data. Due to the harsh impacts of incarceration and pandemic living conditions, regret represented an unavoidable emotion that resulted from being away from family and loved one's while being confined to a jail cell. In addition to the consequence of confinement for their particular actions, the pandemic was also a reminder of how their living circumstances could have been different/better had they not gone down the wrong path. Regret, in the sense of wishing things could be done differently, was a thorn in the side of these African American men—one they were reminded of daily during the pandemic lockdowns. (M. Close et al., 2021). Some of the respondents were adamant in their opinions that incarceration was an experience they never wanted to go through again. Even after their release from incarceration, and despite having made it through that traumatic situation, they were still affected by the experience. One respondent noted, “Even now, I find it hard to trust people and feel safe. The fear and isolation from that time still haunt me.” Others faced difficulties in reintegrating into society, struggling with

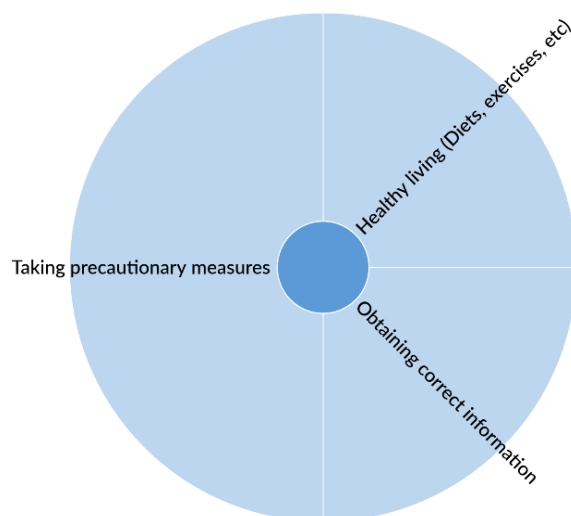
unemployment and lack of support: “Finding a job has been nearly impossible. The stigma of being incarcerated during the pandemic just makes everything harder.”

Coping Mechanisms

The results of this study also indicated that study participants relied on three primary coping mechanisms to manage the negative influences on their psychological and physiological well-being. The following are the identified coping mechanisms: (a) healthy living (diets, meditation, and exercises), (b) obtaining correct information, and (c) taking precautionary measures. Figure 3 visually represents these coping mechanisms.

Figure 3

Coping Mechanisms



Note. This figure illustrates three primary categories of coping mechanisms used by study participants to handle daily life while incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Healthy Living (Diets, Exercises, Etc.)

Many of this study’s participants—African American men—had taken to healthy living strategies so as to cope with the stress and anxieties of the pandemic while they

were incarcerated. They embraced healthier diets, exercised more, and developed healthier habits to stay mentally and physically fit. (M. Close et al., 2021). For example, by engaging in these activities, some of study participants were better able to manage the stress and anxiety of incarceration during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the resolution to make lifestyle adjustments for better health in the future was evident when a respondent pointed out that he had decided to take better care of himself after incarceration.

Obtaining Correct Information

The effort to obtain correct information—legal, health-related, and other types of information—proved to be a critical coping mechanism used by several of the study participants. during incarceration. The ability to get accurate information enabled them to make informed decisions on health and safety matters and look after their well-being while living in confinement. Participants noted that access to the correct information was an invaluable resource and also served as a source of solace for many of them. One participant remarked, “Having access to reliable information about my health and legal rights gave me a sense of control. It was a small comfort amidst all the uncertainty and fear.”

The importance of having credible and accurate information about the pandemic became especially clear when respondents indicated that they had initially been receiving much misinformation from people around them. These men expressed that the level of misinformation was so severe that they were unaware of how bad the pandemic was until they saw that other inmates stopped returning to the jail after visiting the doctor. One

participant explained, “We were hearing all kinds of rumors, but it wasn’t until I saw people disappearing after their doctor visits that I realized how serious things were. The lack of real information made everything scarier.”

The result of this aspect of the incarceration experience was that those study participants who exercised the coping mechanism of obtaining correct information came to realize the importance of researching and reading extensively to ensure that the information received was accurate.

Taking Precautionary Measures

As indicated by this study, taking precautionary measures within the jail environment was a third crucial coping mechanism used by study participants in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. (M. Close et al., 2021). In their collective interviews, they indicated how they came to believe that it was essential to take preventative measures such as wearing a mask, washing hands often, practicing social distancing, and avoiding large crowds and gatherings. The respondents reported that taking caution was paramount to their lives during the pandemic, and the effects of that experience are still felt today. Some of them pointed out that the experience of incarceration during COVID-19 had influenced them to take better care of themselves in general. One participant added that post incarceration, he has become more vocal with his loved ones about his feelings and tells them he loves them more often.

Summary

This chapter covered the lived experiences of 10 African American men who had been incarcerated in jails located in the southeastern United States during the COVID-19

pandemic. Here, the researcher restated the research questions, discussed the study's data collection and data analysis processes, addressed issues of trustworthiness, and explained the research results. Overall, the findings of this qualitative investigation established that there were key themes of significance that emerged from study participants' perceptions of their experiences while in confinement under pandemic conditions. In their interviews, participants described the salient experiences that impacted both their psychological states of mind and their levels of physiological well-being. These lived experiences included pandemic trauma, overcrowding, deaths, isolation, poor healthcare standards in jail, poor hygiene due to lack of resources, delays in court dates due to lockdowns, lack of access to accurate and credible information about COVID-19, and more.

The acute trauma experienced by these 10 formerly incarcerated African American men was the result of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the lack of preparation for such a situation. Overcrowding in the prisons led to increased physical and mental distress, with the lack of social distancing making it difficult for these individuals to keep themselves safe. The deaths of some inmates due to the COVID-19 virus, along with the high risk of infection due to poor prison hygiene standards, further compounded the trauma these men experienced. Moreover, findings indicated that the isolation experienced by these study participants had a significant psychological effect on them, leading to feelings of depression and anxiety, even a sense of desperation. Despite this, some reported feeling optimistic for the future. Still others spoke of the importance of exercising courage and resilience in the face of challenges presented by confinement under pandemic conditions. Additionally, in order to cope with these challenges while in

jail and after serving time, participants reported utilizing various mechanisms—healthy living strategies, use of accurate information, taking precautionary measures— and the support of their families to better ensure their overall well-being.

In the next chapter—Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations—the researcher completes this investigation with discussions addressing the following chapter components: (a) Interpretation of the Findings, (b) Limitations of the Study, (c) Recommendations, (d) Implications, and (e) Conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Using a qualitative phenomenological approach to conduct this study, I aimed to explore the perceptions of 10 African American men regarding their lived experiences of incarceration during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, I conducted semistructured interviews, comprised of open-ended questions, with each of the participants. The design of the interview instrument allowed for expanded discussions according to each participant's desire to share more about their incarceration experience. In particular, I was interested in learning about the ways in which everyday occurrences within the jail environment—for these men, under pandemic living conditions— influenced their psychological and physiological well-being. Essentially, the study's design and implementation enabled each of the participants to share how they were directly affected by COVID-19 during their respective periods of confinement. In turn, study participants also shared their reactions to the experience of witnessing how other inmates were affected by the pandemic in the crowded and underserved space of the jail setting.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, previous studies of the American prison system commonly focused on the experience of incarceration and its impact on inmate health and well-being in a more general sense; that is, without factoring in the possibility of dealing with a major crisis, such as a global pandemic, during confinement. As a result of exploring the existing literature, I determined that any studies focusing on the effects of incarceration during an occurrence such as COVID-19 were close to nonexistent.

Therefore, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, I purposed this study to investigate the pandemic's impact on individuals, specifically African American men, who were jailed during the first 6 months of the outbreak in 2020. To align with its purpose, the study encompassed two key criteria that needed to be met by study participants: (a) identification as an African American male and (b) the experience of incarceration during the first 6 months of COVID-19.

Finally, as to my interest in this area of research, there was a lack of information in this particular area. COVID-19 changed life in every area, including school, work, family, doctor's appointments, and so on. Every area of life was impacted, and over time, stories emerged of every area. However, in this area, I felt that knowledge was lacking. The formerly incarcerated men who were affected by this had not been heard from, and I felt that their story was just as important as the next because they were affected by this too. I decided to conduct this research to shed light on what formerly incarcerated African American men experienced during this time.

These findings showed that while incarcerated during the pandemic, the former inmates experienced severely elevated levels of anxiety and fear surrounding COVID-19. Collectively, participants cited the following fears and concerns: (a) ailments and deaths, (b) poor sanitation, (c) substandard healthcare, (d) overcrowding, (e) isolation and loneliness, and (f) uncertainty, among other challenges. Findings also established that these formerly incarcerated African American men felt especially lonely. They acknowledged the fact that they had lacked emotional support from their families since visits were prohibited during the pandemic due to governmental restrictions regarding

human contact in the effort to minimize the spread of infection and higher death tolls. Thus, due to the delay of court dates and other legal complications caused by closures and social distancing policies, the men were isolated from their friends and family for longer periods of time than they would have been prior to the onset of COVID-19. In particular, the inability to attend court in order to move the process of confinement and eventual release forward caused a sense of helplessness among the men while they were incarcerated. In addition, participants discussed the trauma of witnessing how the pandemic led to severe illness and even the deaths of fellow inmates, which caused a deep sense of despair among them. Even worse, many of these men shared that they were unable to bid farewell to their own family members who had passed away due to the pandemic.

Findings further indicated that study participants continued to experience the negative effects of incarceration during the pandemic following their release from jail. In other words, these men collectively expressed the sense that after their release and return to society, they were still grappling with the lingering psychological and physiological effects of the ordeals they endured during confinement (Shames & Desgranges, 2019). As a result, they found it difficult to meet the daily challenges of life outside of confinement. In addition, many of the men reported feeling regret for being in jail. Some admitted asking themselves what they would have done had they known what they would have to face in prison during the pandemic. In contrast, others expressed a newly found sense of caution regarding health and a greater sense of care and self-preservation.

The respondents also reported their desire to obtain more accurate and current information about COVID-19 during their time of incarceration. This desire for more credible information about the virus was compounded by their realization that they had, initially, received a lot of misinformation about the pandemic, which tended to increase inmates' fears and anxieties on this point; they realized that it was essential to their well-being to stay properly informed so they would not be influenced by misinformation about COVID-19 in the future. This particular finding highlighted the importance of access to accurate information and educational resources within the jail environment, under all conditions and circumstances. Overall, the men spoke out against the various ways in which prisoners were neglected or mistreated during the pandemic. For example, they were not given adequate access to necessities such as masks, gloves, and other protective gear, leaving them vulnerable to the virus.

Lastly, study participants indicated that their incarceration experiences continued to serve as a reminder that no one should be subjected to inhumane treatment, even if they have been convicted of a crime. They emphasized the belief that they deserved to be treated like human beings despite their past actions. Ultimately, study findings supported their perspectives on showing resilience in the face of adversity and speaking out against the injustices they faced during incarceration. Collectively, they also stated their intentions to continue to use their voices to stand up for what is right and fight for a better future for themselves and others impacted by the prison experience.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this research have affirmed and enlarged previously existing understandings of the problem concerning quality of life issues within the American prison system. By shining a light on the experience of incarceration during a worldwide pandemic, this study's findings have dramatically reinforced the reality of substandard living conditions as experienced by the formerly jailed individuals who participated in this study. The findings supported the fact that these former convicts were unable to contact the outside world due to practical difficulties involving isolation and social distancing measures. Under these circumstances, longstanding issues concerning prison living conditions were further exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in magnified surveillance and censorship efforts within the prison system. Generally, and under more "normal," pre-COVID circumstances, personal encounters/interactions with family members could take place within the prison environment along with other forms of family communication, although limited and dependent on resources such as money, transportation, and time for organization of schedules. That said, the pandemic made the situation even more difficult because prison visits were suspended to contain the virus (Attar, 2023; Hanan, 2021).

Prisoners living in jailed isolation or in high-security prisons are often cut off from the outside world and, as a result, lack access to reliable information (Pekala-Wojciechowska et al., 2021). This study's participants addressed the issue of misinformation across their interviews, confirming their experiences of dealing with incorrect and fear-inducing information about COVID-19 that negatively impacted their

mental health and overall well-being. A larger study, conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 2020, concluded that the issue of misinformation was particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many inmates in the United States facing rampant misinformation while in jail. The situation was even worse for prisoners living in isolation due to being infected with COVID-19, as they were able neither to socialize with their fellow inmates nor get updates on what was going on. This lack of access to information and medical help posed increased health risks to inmates in isolation, highlighting the need for improved communication and access to healthcare in the U.S. prison system (Bagaric et al., 2021; Kincaid, 2023; O'Neil, 2022).

During the pandemic, those who were already suffering from societal disadvantages were at the most significant risk of developing severe complications once exposed to the virus. Specific to correctional settings, the risk of infection was significantly higher due to overcrowding and lack of capacity to maintain social distancing measures, resulting in some of the most devastating outbreaks.

During times of crisis, those who are members of minority groups and who lack a powerful voice, such as the 10 African American men who served as this study's participants, have often been overlooked. Medically vulnerable inmates have frequently been disregarded due to their status as criminals, an issue further complicated by systemic racism impacting people of color. According to a number of researchers on the topic of criminal offenses and conditions of incarceration, committing a crime does not and should not warrant excessively harsh punishments, regardless of the severity of the offense (Hanan, 2021; O'Neil, 2022; Ponder, 2022).

O'Neil (2022) further asserted that even though any criminal justice system must take responsibility for the actions of those who have committed crimes and provide punishment accordingly, the punishment should be proportionate and justifiable. Unfortunately, and as revealed in this study's interviews, participants experienced substandard healthcare, overcrowding, poor hygiene, and other challenges to their psychological and physiological well-being while incarcerated during the pandemic. In the end, my analysis and interpretation of the study's findings yielded a fundamental assessment based on participants' collective, personal perspectives of the incarceration/pandemic experience. That is, they perceived their living conditions as fundamentally inhumane—environmentally, socially, physically, and mentally. In other words, the standard of living in the prison environment during the global pandemic represented an unacceptable and unsuitable form of justice, even for a human being who had been arrested and subsequently incarcerated for committing a crime.

Limitations of the Study

This study was designed as a qualitative, phenomenological study of the experiences of 10 African American men who had been incarcerated in jails located in the southeastern region of the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 10 states considered for this study were primarily concentrated in the southeastern region of the United States. Specifically, these states encompassed the Deep South, the Carolinas, and the Border States. The Deep South included Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana, known for their distinct cultural heritage and historical significance. The Carolinas, comprising North Carolina and South Carolina, offered a blend of coastal and

inland environments. Finally, the border states of Kentucky and Tennessee provided a transition between the South and the Midwest.

To further refine the participant pool, the research considered factors such as population density and incarceration rates. States with notably high incarceration rates, such as Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi, were prioritized due to their potential to offer rich data on the experiences of incarcerated African American men. Additionally, states with significant urban populations, including Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina, were considered to capture the diverse experiences within metropolitan areas.

I aimed to uncover the influences of the pandemic on participants' psychological and physiological well-being. While the study findings have provided insights into the participants' lived experiences, several limitations impacting the study process should be noted. First, the study was limited to a small sample size of 10 participants, meaning that the results cannot be confirmed as representative of the larger population of formerly incarcerated African American men in the United States. Specifically, I confined this study to African American men because this population experiences disproportionately higher rates of incarceration compared to other racial and ethnic groups in the United States, suggesting unique and potentially more severe impacts of incarceration.

Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the research means that the results are not generalizable and cannot be used to make conclusions about the entire population of African American men who were incarcerated during the first 6 months of the pandemic. To clarify, for research results to be considered generalizable, they must be applicable to a broader population beyond the specific sample studied. This typically requires a larger,

randomly selected sample and the use of quantitative methods to establish statistical significance and probability.

Generalizability refers to the extent to which the findings from a research study can be applied to a larger population or different context. For example, if a study finds that a new medication is effective in treating a specific condition in a group of participants, it is generalizable if the findings are likely to be similar in other groups of patients with the same condition.

Additionally, this study was focused on study participants' experiences while in confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic, which means that the impact of the pandemic on the participants in jail after the pandemic or after release was not fully explored. While the semistructured interview instrument included questions about participants' experiences of incarceration during the pandemic, the long-term impact of the pandemic on their quality of life, post incarceration, was minimally addressed.

Finally, the study was limited, specific to its focus on the physical and physiological well-being of the participants. Other aspects of their experiences, such as the use of coping mechanisms, were not fully explored as to how certain skills could support the individual's capacity to address and withstand similar challenges in the future. Ultimately, the study's limited scope and lack of generalizability leave room for further research that might help to fill the gaps in the existing literature regarding the incarceration experiences of African American men during critical situations involving health and other critical issues.

Recommendations

Due to this study's limited sample size, the regional location of the southeastern United States, the lack of generalizability to the entire population of formerly incarcerated African American men, and the narrower exploration of other aspects of participants' experiences of incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic, I recommend that future studies employ larger sample sizes with participants representing different regions of the country. Additionally, and post pandemic, future research might explore the residual impacts of the pandemic on any of the study participants still in jail or after release from jail. Future research might also consider a more concentrated focus on other aspects of their study participants' incarceration experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak, such as investigating coping mechanisms used by participants to help them withstand both the inevitable psychological and physiological impacts of the experience. By doing so, researchers could gain a better understanding of the ways in which incarcerated individuals managed themselves and aspects of their environmental circumstances during the pandemic. Going further, researchers might conduct studies from which to gain greater insights into the difference in prison living conditions during times of acute crisis versus "normal," everyday circumstances. Finally, future studies might broaden their focus on adverse living conditions that continue to exist within the American prison system and their impact on larger and more diverse groups of individuals.

Implications

Beyond confirming the long-standing crisis of substandard living conditions within the American prison system due to mass incarceration and lack of needed resources, this study has gone a crucial step further by highlighting the extremes of these issues for individuals who were incarcerated during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, such issues had contributed to a multitude of inequities and vulnerabilities for the incarcerated population. By highlighting these same issues under pandemic living conditions, the researcher sought to inform readers of the more extreme challenges that 10 formerly incarcerated African American men faced while incarcerated during the height of the pandemic. In other words, the researcher's purpose in conducting this study was to explore how longstanding issues became magnified during the pandemic, negatively impacting study participants' physical and mental health in heightened ways.

Regardless of the fact that this study was focused on the impact of incarceration specific to pandemic living conditions, findings strongly implicated the necessity to address inadequate resources and inhumane treatment within the prison environment during more "normal" times as well as during times of acute crises. Therefore, the findings of this study can be used to encourage social reform and create better living conditions in prisons to foster a healthier atmosphere for inmates in general. With policy changes that prioritize human rights and safety, the researcher suggests that it is possible to envision and create an environment that would be more conducive to the well-being of the incarcerated population as a whole. For example, policy changes should include

increased funding for health services to ensure that inmates have access to adequate healthcare, including mental health services, to address their physical and psychological needs. Improving living conditions by enforcing standards for hygiene, nutrition, and living space is crucial to prevent overcrowding and ensure a humane environment. Additionally, providing enhanced training for correctional staff on human rights, crisis management, and de-escalation techniques would reduce instances of inhumane treatment. Finally, implementing robust educational and vocational training programs would aid in the successful reintegration of inmates into society post incarceration.

Importantly, this study demonstrated that it is possible to gain valuable insights directly from formerly incarcerated individuals—in this case, 10 formerly incarcerated African American men—on how their experiences of confinement under COVID-19 living restrictions have impacted their lives. The implication here is that such insights can help prison officials and administrators better evaluate and understand existing policies and regulations, identify potential weaknesses or ineffective practices, and demonstrate institutional commitment to making positive changes that prioritize inmate well-being. Such understandings and actions can help administrators formulate strategies with which to implement more effective policies that could break the cycle of dysfunction and recidivism among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Finally, this research proved to be valuable in terms of demonstrating that behind the label, “inmates,” are individuals who are African American fathers, caregivers, and significant others to their partners, friends, and family members. Study participants’ interview responses confirmed that when their well-being was neglected while incarcerated, the consequences of that

neglect reverberated within their families and the wider community. Thus, the findings from this study could be utilized to improve the lives of these people, their families, and society at large.

The following subsections highlight two key areas in which implementation of productive strategies and actions for change could generate real improvements to the living conditions in the prison system: (a) intervention strategies and (b) policy reformation.

Intervention Strategies

Study findings confirmed that the pandemic had a severe impact on the mental and physical health of the formerly incarcerated African American men who served as study participants. Based on their feedback, more should have been done to ensure that they had access to the resources and support they needed. (Bertsch et al. 2020). Relative to what society has learned from the COVID-19 experience, support should start with authorities recognizing the influence such pandemics have on the psychological and physiological well-being of incarcerated individuals; hence, the need to address issues such as anxiety and depression right away. In the future, intervention strategies should include providing more immediate access to proper healthcare, comprehensive mental health services, and access to other resources to help inmates manage their physical and mental health and recovery processes.

Other, more routine ways to address inmates' psychological and physiological health issues in the future include the following: (a) providing a daily, balanced diet; (b) providing opportunities to engage in regular exercise, and (c) improving night-time

routines so as to ensure that inmates are obtaining enough sleep to be mentally and physically fit. Additionally, and specific to acute outbreaks of disease, authorities should take preventative measures such as providing/wearing masks and developing a doable social distancing strategy within the prison environment. These kinds of strategies and interventions can help mitigate the negative impacts in such critical health situations. Ensuring that these individuals can access correct information about such outbreaks is also essential. Access to information includes staying current on the latest news, avoiding rumors and misinformation, and understanding the risks associated with the virus. Additionally, inmates should be made aware of any court delays or changes to the criminal justice system when crises arise.

Finally, it is essential to directly address the psychological and physiological issues that inmates face as a result of isolation and loneliness, overcrowding, poor healthcare, negligence, poor hygiene, the risks of disease-related ailments, and even deaths. By taking steps to address these issues, it is possible to provide a greater level of support and security to incarcerated people.

Policy Reformation

The death penalty and life imprisonment—extreme, legally imposed consequences for commission of a crime—differ from the unanticipated incidence of an inmate dying of COVID-19 during incarceration. However, the same exact underlying causes of injustice can be found at their root. The injustices to which we refer include systemic racism, where African American men are disproportionately incarcerated compared to other racial groups. Socioeconomic biases also play a significant role, as

individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often lack access to quality legal representation, leading to harsher sentences. (Bertsch et al. 2020). There is also a pervasive societal tendency to view convicted criminals as subhuman, which can lead to neglect and poor treatment within the prison system. Furthermore, the punishment often does not fit the crime, with minor offenses sometimes resulting in severe penalties. Inequities in legal representation for those with limited resources exacerbate these issues, leading to a cycle of disadvantage and mistreatment. Addressing these injustices is crucial for creating a more equitable and humane prison system.

Moreover, policies that date as far back as the 1980s and 1990s have resulted in the U.S. prison population swelling with inmates aging in the system. (Shames & Desgranges, 2019). As learned from the COVID-19 experience, the growth in number of inmates has made it nearly impossible to implement the social distancing and cleanliness measures that have proven paramount to avoiding contagious diseases. As a result, the likelihood of infection and mortality rates among incarcerated individuals have become alarmingly high.

The spread of COVID-19 in jails and prisons directly resulted from inadequate and unhygienic conditions. (Bertsch et al. 2020). Inmates already living in vulnerable mental and physical states had no protection from the virus and limited access to medical care. Had the correctional facilities not been overcrowded; or, if they had access to essential, protective equipment to protect themselves; or even the ability to self-isolate, hundreds of infections and deaths could have been avoided. The researcher contends that, as a society, we should shift our approach to penalization in ways that address how to

better protect those who are incarcerated in the event of another pandemic. Doing so is essential to ensure the safety of those individuals in prison.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the globe, its effects on the 10 formerly incarcerated African American men who served as study participants were devastating. First, the excessive number of inmates contributing to overcrowded jails and prisons—coupled with already difficult, pre-COVID prison conditions—resulted in a mental and physical health crisis of unprecedented magnitude for these men. The pandemic brought with it many issues, including serious illness and long-term recovery ordeals, deaths, isolation, delayed court proceedings, and extended time spent in institutional confinement. Despite the immense challenges they faced, this study’s participants showed remarkable resilience and courage, with most holding onto a steadfast hope for a better future.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed many long-standing issues in the American criminal justice systems that are also reflected in society as a whole. Over generations, racism, cultural prejudices, and socioeconomic bias—among other manifestations of societal inequities—had led to the implementation of longstanding policies that contributed to the substandard living conditions in the prison environment. The pandemic had only exacerbated those existing problems. What the world has seen and experienced during the pandemic is a stark reminder of the deeply rooted issues that have been prevalent for years within the prison system and the greater society but overlooked in the past. This country’s response to the pandemic has demonstrated the urgent need for

changes in the criminal justice system and societal structures. Ultimately, the pandemic had presented the world with dire circumstances that have required authorities, officials, and citizens to revisit the current system's punishment and incarceration policies. The researcher contends that maintaining incarcerated individuals without regard for their emotional and physical well-being, especially during such times of crisis as a pandemic, is inhumane and unjust. Therefore, taking a step back to evaluate this society's methods of punishment for the commission of a crime is an essential initial step toward preparing prisoners for living in institutional confinement and better protecting them from any future pandemics or other critical crises. Despite the hardships COVID-19 had inflicted on this study's participants, they made it clear that their struggles with incarceration under pandemic conditions has not deterred them from overcoming adversity and aiming for a better future.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How old are you?
2. Where were you born and raised?
3. What is the highest level of education that you have?
4. Can you explain the living conditions inside the jail during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Tell me about your experience with COVID-19.
6. Can you describe your encounter(s) with COVID 19 regarding your family members?
7. Did you lose any friends inside or outside of jail due to COVID-19?
8. Tell me how (these) experiences (s) made you feel. What did you do?
9. What kind of rules were in place inside the prison to ensure that you all were safe?
10. What were the living conditions inside of the jail before the COVID-19 Pandemic?
11. What were the living conditions inside the jail during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic?
12. Tell me how your experience with the COVID-19 disease has influenced your life.
13. What kinds of rules did they set up to ensure that all the inmates were protected as well as themselves on the inside?
14. What, if anything, would you change about your experience of being incarcerated during the COVID-19- Pandemic?

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

August 31, 2023

Hello,

I hope that this correspondence finds you well.

My name is Iyasha S. Franklin, and I am a PhD student at Walden University studying Criminal Justice. I am conducting a qualitative study to explore the perspective of formerly incarcerated African American men who were detained in a jail in the southeastern United States during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic and the influences on their psychological well-being. I would like to interview a section of formerly incarcerated African Americans. Participation is voluntary, and you may decline to answer question(s) or stop the interview at any time. Interviews will be conducted face to face; however, due to the COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) pandemic, interviewing can be conducted via Zoom as an alternative. In addition, interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview will be approximately 45-60 minutes in duration. A password-protected copy of the transcribed interview will be provided to you to review the accuracy afterward. As mentioned above, your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and your identity will remain anonymous and confidential. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to share your lived experiences with witnessing or experiencing being incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic in only one interview. A link to the demographic study will be provided to determine participation eligibility, which will take less than 5 minutes. And demographic information collected will only be provided as it is relevant to the study, and you are free to ask any question(s) before, during, or after.

The study explores participants' lived experiences, and the data collected will aid correctional officials, the public, and, more importantly, the inmates since it will seek to determine some of the ramifications and implications of COVID-19 on their lives, as well as potential resolutions. Would you like to take part in this study? If so, please click on the link to complete the consent form and survey
<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScEerWCgji76GS7yBP71TX-dI-asIgCJI8d6cXtlCQsa6xFpw/viewform>

If you have any additional questions, please feel free to email me at [REDACTED]
Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Iyasha S. Franklin

Appendix C: Flyer

**Iyesha Shauntae**Just now · 

Hello everyone,

My name is Iyesha Franklin and I am a student at Walden University doing an interview study to explore the perspective of formerly incarcerated African American men who were detained in a jail in the southeastern United States during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic and the influences of their psychological well-being. I need 10 voluntary participants. The picture attached to this post is called "the invitation to participate" which provides more information in detail about my study. Should you decide to take part, it is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time and your information will remain confidential. Below there is a link for a participant interest survey for anyone who may be interested in participating. Thank you in advance.

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScEerWCgji76GS7yBP71TX-dl-aslgCJl8d6cXtlCQsa6xFpw/viewform>
