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Challenges Faced by Women Released from Prison Leading to Criminal Recidivism

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Abstract

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by

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MA, Walden University, 2017

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Women are more likely than men to leave prison and return to environments that are not stable, which increases the likelihood that they will engage in further criminal activities either because of being around others engaging in criminal activities or because of unstable living conditions and a lack of positive support from family and friends. This qualitative study used descriptive content analysis to analyze 30 peer-reviewed academic articles, with the purpose of understanding the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women who were released from prison and understanding their difficulties in re-entering society. The theoretical framework for this research was policy feedback theory, which is based on the idea that existing policies affect actors and society and ultimately affect future policies. The key research question for this study was as follows: What are the financial, social, and mental health challenges women face after release from prison? The results of this study showed that women who are released from prison face the financial challenges of finding employment, employment as a requirement for freedom and financial knowledge; the social challenges of housing instability, intimate partner relationships, and social support; and the mental health challenges of having a mental health diagnosis and obtaining mental health treatment. Based on these results, it is recommended that the courts and parole system provide more support and guidance to help women navigate the challenges they face after release from prison. The more significant implication for positive social change is to reduce the likelihood of criminal recidivism among women after release from prison.

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Dedication

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Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the problems for women released from prison is a general lack of family and social support. Researchers found that men report more positive social support from family and friends upon release from prison than women (Pettus-David et al., 2018). Women are more likely than men to leave prison and return to environments that are not stable. Living in unstable environments increases the likelihood that women will engage in further criminal activities because of being around others engaging in criminal activities or a lack of positive support from family and friends. Another challenge that women face after being released from prison that can make re-entry difficult and increase the likelihood of criminal recidivism is addiction and substance abuse. Women who are addicted to drugs are more likely to engage in criminal recidivism (Cimino et al., 2015). Researchers found that female convicts reported higher levels of substance use than male convicts (Mannerfelt & Hakansson, 2018). The economic conditions of women who are released from prison can also create challenges for successfully re-entering society. Women who face poverty and a lack of stable income are more likely to return to crime to support themselves (Solina-Saunders & Stacer, 2017; Berg & Cobbina, 2017).

The purpose of this chapter was to provide background information, and an overview of the study conducted regarding the challenges faced by women released from prison that resulted in criminal recidivism. This chapter begins with a brief background of the study, followed by the problem statement for this study. Next, the purpose statement and the study's research questions are presented. Then, the theoretical foundation of the study is provided, followed by the nature of the study. Important definitions of terms used

throughout this study are also provided. Finally, the theoretical, topical, and methodological assumptions underlying this study, as well as the scope, limitations, and significance, are explained. This chapter ends with a summary of the information presented and a transition into the focus of the literature review.

Background

One of the factors shown to be related to the challenges and difficulties that women face after being released from prison is the family and social support they receive. Berg and Cobbina (2017) found that the residential environment into which women return after being released from prison, such as living in poverty and living in environments in which criminal activity occurs, impacts whether they engage in additional criminal activity. In this regard, positive family support after being released from prison is associated with a reduced likelihood of criminal recidivism (Huebner & Pleggenkuhle, 2015; Schnappauf & DiDonato, 2017).

The problem of addiction and substance abuse is an important issue for women who are released from prison because women are more likely to return to environments in which friends, family members, and romantic partners engage in drug and alcohol abuse (Pettus-David et al., 2018). As women return to environments in which drug and alcohol abuse are regular, they are likely to use and abuse alcohol and drugs. The result is an increased likelihood of criminal recidivism (Solina-Saunders & Stacer, 2017).

Cimino et al. (2015) found that women who engage in criminal recidivism after being released from prison were likely to have experienced sexual trauma, such as sexual abuse or rape. Interestingly, women who have more sexual partners after being released

from prison have also been found to be more likely to engage in criminal recidivism (Scott et al., 2016). More broadly, female convicts were found to report higher levels of psychiatric problems as compared to male offenders (Mannerfelt & Hakansson, 2018). Mannerfelt and Hakannsson (2018) show that women have more trauma and more mental health issues than men, which makes re-entry into society after release from prison more difficult. It is these traumatic events and mental health issues that also result in an increased likelihood of engaging in criminal recidivism and returning to prison.

However, other factors contribute to women's lack of economic stability rather than simply being unable to find stable work. One such factor is the lack of reliable transportation. Bohmert (2016) found that reliable transportation was a problem for 43% of women released from prison. He argued that the lack of reliable transportation was a problem for women who have been released from prison because, without reliable transportation, it is not possible to find and keep stable employment. In this regard, the issue of economics is not just about being able to maintain a job. Instead, the question of employment is related to the ability to get to a career stably and consistently. Without reliable transportation, keeping a job to earn the money needed to avoid the urge to return to criminal activity is challenging.

This study filled the gap in the existing literature by examining the financial, social, and mental health challenges that Caucasian and African American women face after release from prison together rather than in isolation. By working to fill the gap within the academic literature, it was possible to better understand the lived experiences of women and the challenges they face as they re-enter society from prison. By filling

this gap in the literature, it was possible to provide lawmakers with data to consider programs specifically regarding women transitioning from prison and back into the community.

Problem Statement

Criminal recidivism among African American and Caucasian women released from prison is due to a lack of support upon release (i.e., mental health resources), as well as a lack of economic opportunities (i.e., stable employment; Tripodi et al., 2019; Willging et al., 2016). Researchers have found that the residential environments in which women live after incarceration, access to social support systems, economic issues, and mental health issues all impact whether women return to criminal activity after being released from prison (Berg & Cobbina, 2017; Cimino et al., 2015; Northcutt Bohmert, 2016; Pettus-Davis et al., 2018). Furthermore, women released from prison often face a social stigma that impacts the social, economic, and mental health support available to them, which may result in an increased likelihood of returning to criminal activities (Lyons & Cantrell, 2017). While research has examined the issues that can contribute to criminal recidivism among women released from prison, these issues have generally been examined in isolation. Researchers may examine the impact of drug and alcohol use or the impact of economic challenges on women released from prison. However, less attention has been given to the combined set of challenges, such as mental health, economic, and social support, that women face once they have been released from prison. Less attention has also been given to how those challenges work together to impact their lives and the potential for women to engage in further criminal activities. By

understanding the combined set of challenges that women face as they re-enter society from prison, better recommendations can be provided as to how to help women better meet those challenges to attempt to reduce the likelihood of criminal recidivism.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison to understand the difficulties they face in re-entering society. The reason for focusing only on African American and Caucasian women is because most of the data and previous research findings are predominately about African American and Caucasian women. However, this study differed from previous research because a single issue or challenge was not the focus of the study. Instead, the goal of the study was to understand the broad range of challenges that women face upon release, how those challenges interact to impact their lives, and the potential for them to engage in additional criminal activities.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the financial challenges women face after release from prison?

RQ2: What are the social challenges women face after release from prison?

RQ3: What are the mental health challenges women face after release from prison?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research was policy feedback theory, which is based on the idea that existing policies affect actors and society and ultimately affect future policies (Schattschneider, 1935). For example, policies regarding re-entry

assistance and support given to women in prison affect re-entry success and the rate of criminal recidivism. In turn, it is the impact of those policies on the rate of criminal recidivism that impacts future policies related to helping women re-enter society once released from prison.

Regarding the criminal justice system, policy feedback is important because implementing policies and programs provides practitioners and scholars with information and data about the impact of those programs. Once a policy has been implemented, such as the current policies for re-entry women back into society after release from prison, it is possible to gather information about the outcomes of those policies. With the information gathered about the impact of those policies, efforts can be undertaken to influence politicians and policymakers about changes needed to improve outcomes (Harvey, 2020).

The argument has been made that most of the societal challenges regarding public policies are part of the policy feedback loop in which current policies affect actors, society, and future policies (Schmid et al., 2020). In this way, current prison policies and programs to help women re-enter society and avoid criminal recidivism have an impact on society. When those policies impact the larger society, citizens are affected in terms of the perceptions that they have about the government. Those perceptions may influence citizens to become involved in voting or lobbying politicians for policy changes (Bushouse, 2017). It is this impact that the information from this examination of the challenges that women face after release from prison can be provided that may ultimately influence future prison re-entry programs and policies.

The policy feedback theory was selected for this research because it provides a foundation from which to understand the impact of current policies that largely ignore the needs of women once they are released from prison. Then, based on the data collected and analyzed in this study, suggestions can be made for new policies to better assist women with the challenges they will face once they are released from prison. Advocacy groups, politicians, and even individual citizens may use the results of this study to demand policy changes that better prepare women for the social, economic, and health challenges they face after being released from prison.

The conceptual framework for this study was that criminal recidivism among Caucasian and African American women is a result of financial, social, and mental health challenges that they face as they leave prison and re-enter society. There is a large body of research in which investigators have found that criminal recidivism among women is related to the financial, social, and mental health challenges they face as they re-enter society (Berg & Cobbina, 2017; Lyons & Cantrell, 2017; Pettus-Davis et al., 2018; Tripodi et al., 2019). The problem, however, is that most of the studies that have been conducted have focused on a single issue rather than focusing on the combination of these issues.

From a scientific standpoint, if researchers have identified that women must deal with financial, social, and mental health challenges to re-enter society and not engage in additional criminal activities, then it is worthwhile and even necessary to examine these issues in relation to each other. For example, women who are released from prison may have great difficulty in finding jobs, which creates financial challenges and can also be

made worse by the social stigma of having been to prison, often demonstrated by a lack of trust by others in the community (Schnappauf & DiDonato, 2017). In this regard, examining criminal recidivism from a contextual lens in which financial, social, and mental health challenges occur concurrently was appropriate, as one type of challenge may be related to or impacted by another challenge. Through this framework, it was possible to examine the complete lived experience of women who had been released from prison. In turn, it was possible to provide recommendations for helping reduce recidivism among Caucasian and African American women based on their total lived experiences.

Nature of the Study

The research design for this study was a descriptive content analysis of previously published academic articles. The goal was to describe and understand the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society. The use of the descriptive research design allowed for the ability to examine the phenomenon of the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in comprehensively re-entering society (Roberts et al., 2019). Qualitative data were needed to analyze women's experiences and the challenges and issues they faced after being released from prison (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The analysis of existing academic articles about the challenges faced by women released from prison made it possible to gain access to a much more extensive range of data than would have been possible for this type of study if a small amount of data were obtained through interviews with women who had recently been released from prison. By analyzing a broad range of academic articles for themes about the challenges that African

American and Caucasian women faced in re-entering society, it was possible to draw broader conclusions and to make wider inferences than would have been possible if a small amount of data were collected from a small number of women who had been released from prison.

Using a descriptive research design involving content analysis in which the findings of previous academic studies are analyzed does not mean that the analysis in this study was passive. The findings of previous studies were not merely reported. Instead, the research and findings contained in prior studies regarding the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society were interpreted through the combination of challenges and how those challenges may have impacted and influenced each other. Rather than individually examining the economic, social, or health challenges, it was possible to use the descriptive research design to examine these challenges together. In this regard, they were using a descriptive research design in which a thematic analysis was conducted regarding the findings of previous studies, allowing for the ability to examine the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society in a broader context (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). The result was a study that provided a broader context from the combined findings of previous studies.

The reason for conducting this study using a descriptive research design was because of the difficulty in obtaining an appropriate sample of African American and Caucasian women who had been released from prison. The ability to gain access to women who had recently been released from prison was limited. Even more, gaining

access to a large enough sample of women who had been released from prison for either a qualitative or quantitative study would have been very difficult, time-consuming, and costly. The limited time and financial resources meant that a research design appropriate for the resources available had to be used. The descriptive research design could be used to produce a scientifically appropriate study involving new information and a new understanding of the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison and re-entering society.

Definitions

***Criminal Recidivism*:** A return to criminal behavior generally after having previously been punished for engaging in criminal behavior, such as having been previously sent to jail or prison (Yorgancioglu, 2018).

Financial Challenges: The difficulties that women face after being released from prison related to finding stable employment and having enough income to support themselves and their families (Solina-Saunders & Stacer, 2017).

Family Support: The presence of a supportive and stable environment of family members and friends who provide assistance and support after release from prison to reduce the potential for recidivism (Sirois, 2019).

***Social Support*:** Interpersonal interactions involving family or non-family members that involve the exchange of resources to aid in personal well-being by providing a sense of stability and that positively influence adaptative behaviors (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017).

Assumptions

One of the theoretical assumptions of policy feedback theory is that the actors involved in policy feedback range from governments and institutions to organizations and individuals (Bandelow & Hornung, 2020). The assumption that policy feedback involves a wide range of actors is important because the issues and challenges women face after prison are related to a varied list of actors. The challenges women face after release from prison will not be solely about themselves or their decisions or actions. Instead, the challenges women face after prison will be related to and directly affected by the actions and behaviors of governments, institutions, public and private organizations, and even other individuals with whom they have contact.

Another theoretical assumption related to policy feedback theory is that implementing policies affects support for those policies due to impacts on people for whom the policies were designed (Teigen et al., 2019). For example, policies that are designed to help women re-enter society after prison have a direct impact on the women. In turn, women who are released from prison either support or oppose prison re-entry policies based on how such policies have either helped or hurt their abilities to avoid engaging in further criminal activities.

One other theoretical assumption of this study based on the use of policy feedback theory was that women's experiences should be taken at face value. The use of policy feedback theory requires assuming the examination of understanding of the perceptions and behaviors of women in this study is based on their experiences (Qutoshi, 2018). Suppose women who have been studied have considered or have even engaged in

criminal activities since being released from prison because they have been unable to find stable employment. In that case, it must be assumed that such behavior is based on the experience of being unable to find stable employment. The perceptions and actions of the women who have been studied and the information they provided about their challenges must be taken as real and based on their experiences.

Another assumption in conducting this study was that the women who participated could recognize and explain the social, financial, and health challenges they faced since release from prison. It must be assumed that the participants recognized the challenges that they faced and could discuss those challenges. At the same time, it also was assumed that if the participants did not have particular challenges, such as not having health challenges or a lack of family support, they could explain why they had not faced those challenges. Furthermore, if the participants did not have specific challenges, it was assumed that they could explain the benefits gained from having strong family support or finding stable employment.

One of the methodological assumptions using the descriptive research design is that the researcher must differentiate between the actual data and his or her interpretations and opinions. A clear distinction was made in this study to demonstrate the difference between content obtained from previously published studies and inferences drawn from those data. When data from previously published studies were analyzed, the data were presented and drawn from previous studies. Once the data were presented, then interpretations and analyses of those data were provided with a clear explanation of the interpretations being made. In this way, there was a clear distinction between the data and

the interpretations made from those data. The reader will be clear about that distinction and will be able to determine whether he or she agrees with the interpretations made.

Another crucial methodological assumption of descriptive research is that the analyzed content is credible. In performing an analysis of previously published studies regarding the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women who are released from prison, it is necessary to establish the credibility of the studies that are examined. The role of the researcher in performing content analysis is to establish that the previous studies included in the analysis are credible in terms of their content and their relationship to the phenomenon being studied (Roller, 2019). In this study, the credibility of the chosen previous studies was established as the studies had been published in academic, peer-reviewed journals.

Another assumption of descriptive research is that the goal is not to prove something but to describe events and experiences. It is undoubtedly true that descriptive studies can be used to understand experiences across groups of people and to see patterns in experiences based on the larger body of academic literature that is present. However, the focus of descriptive research is to describe the experiences of the people being studied. it is assumed that the focus of the data analysis was to describe the experiences of those being studied rather than attempting to prove a theory or to confirm or deny specific research hypotheses (Kazanjian, 2018).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was to examine the challenges that African American and Caucasian women face after release from prison. More specifically, this study focused on

women's financial, social, and health challenges after release from prison. Previous research regarding the challenges that women face after release from prison has generally focused on a single issue, such as financial challenges or social and family challenges. The scope of this study was to examine all three of those issues together as part of the larger goal of understanding the challenges women face after release from prison.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was that it was conducted as a content analysis of previously published academic studies. As such, it was only possible to examine the data and findings of those studies. In this regard, this study was limited to the type of data, the samples of women from whom data were gathered, and the locations of the women who took part in those studies. However, this limitation was reduced because the use of content analysis of previously published studies was likely to increase the sample of participants and the characteristics of the participants than would be possible if original data were collected.

Conducting original data collection on a topic involving women released from prison would result in a tiny sample size. A sample of only a few participants might be possible because of the difficulty in gaining access to women released from prison who would be willing to participate in a scientific study. The analysis of previously published academic studies increased the ability to generalize the findings of this study. In addition, it was possible to draw broader conclusions about the challenges that women faced after release from prison, and the types of programs and support that women need after release from prison to reduce their potential for criminal recidivism.

Significance

Many researchers have investigated where there are direct and indirect relationships between trauma experienced during childhood and criminal recidivism among a sample of women (Tripodi et al., 2019). Other researchers have investigated structural inequality and social support among women released from prison (Willging et al., 2016). However, the goal of this qualitative study was to qualitatively explore the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women who have been released from prison regarding the resources that are needed to become productive in society once released from prison. The findings of this study can be used to make specific suggestions for how prisons can assist women in handling the challenges they may face as they re-enter society before being released from prison, as well as how pre-release prison programs can be used to address these problems and issues.

The results of this study might contribute to social change at the local or regional levels because the leaders of non-profit organizations, as well as politicians, will have information that can be used to provide better support for women who are leaving prison. The results of this study may be used to implement interventions that provide African American and Caucasian women with the financial, mental health, and social support they need so they do not recidivate. Furthermore, the results of this study might demonstrate to politicians and the public the social, financial, and mental health problems that women face once they are released from prison. These results might also encourage citizens to advocate for women who have been released from prison as a way of reducing criminal recidivism.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide background information and an overview of the study regarding the challenges faced by women released from prison that result in criminal recidivism. An examination of the challenges that women face after release from prison is needed because much of the existing literature has focused on single issues, such as only financial challenges or only social and family challenges. The goal of this study was to examine the financial, social, and health challenges that women face after release from prison together to understand how they impact the lives of these women and their potential for engaging in criminal recidivism.

Based on the problem outlined, Chapter 2 of this study presents an in-depth review of the literature regarding the financial, social, and health challenges women face after release from prison. In addition, a discussion of the conceptual framework for this study is provided. Literature is also reviewed about the factors that are related to women choosing to engage in additional criminal activities after being released from prison. Finally, literature is presented regarding how prisons assist women before they are released with re-entry into society and how those programs impact female convicts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study aimed to understand the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women reentering society after being released from prison. From the available literature, there is evidence to show a variety of reasons exist for the challenges women face when they are released from prison that can result in criminal recidivism, such as a lack of economic opportunities, living conditions, a lack of social support systems, and mental health issues (Berg & Cobbina, 2017; Lyons & Cantrell, 2017; Pettus-Davis et al., 2018; Tripodi et al., 2019). There is an understanding that financial challenges, social challenges, and mental health challenges can cause women to feel the need to engage in additional criminal activities that may result in them returning to prison.

The available literature on this research topic only focuses on the causes of criminal recidivism among women in isolation. In other words, research conducted about the financial, social, or mental health challenges women face when released from prison is done in a way that these issues remain separate from each other. However, there has been little research in which all these issues are examined as a combined set of challenges that impact criminal recidivism.

The goal of this review was to present recent literature regarding the financial, social, and mental health challenges women face after being released from prison. The following review begins with an examination of policy feedback theory, which serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. A review of recent literature about the financial, social, and mental health challenges faced by women after being released from prison is provided. Finally, literature regarding the factors that impact the decision of women to

engage in criminal recidivism, as well as literature about how women may be assisted while still in prison to reduce the potential for criminal recidivism, is presented.

Literature Search Strategy

In order to ensure the most recent research was included in this review, only peer-reviewed studies published in the past five years were included. By including studies published in the past five years, there is a greater assurance that the reviewed literature is up-to-date and includes the most current findings and available information. Literature regarding the challenges faced by women released from prison is published in various disciplines. I relied on academic databases containing peer-reviewed articles from various academic disciplines to ensure that all relevant and recent research on the topic was reviewed. The primary databases used were EBSCO and Google Scholar. These databases contain a broad range of peer-reviewed studies from all academic disciplines and doctoral dissertations from major universities.

Various search terms were used to identify potentially relevant peer-reviewed articles published in the past five years. The search terms used included *women and causes of criminal recidivism, social problems and women released from prison, financial problems and women released from prison, mental health problems and women released from prison, social challenges and women released from prison, financial challenges and women released from prison, mental health challenges and women released from prison, living conditions and criminal recidivism among women, unemployment and criminal recidivism among women, programs in prison to prevent*

criminal recidivism, and *preventing criminal recidivism among women before leaving prison.*

Once the initial search of literature occurred, the process began to find the relevant articles from the search results. The articles drawn from the search results were read and examined to ensure they were directly relevant to this study's topic. Many articles were excluded from the literature review because they were deemed irrelevant. Table 1 shows the steps that were followed to search for articles for the literature review.

Table 1

Process of Conducting Literature Review Search

Step	Description
Step 1	Input search terms into Google Scholar and EBSCO databases
Step 2	Set search limiters to peer-reviewed articles published within the past five years.
Step 3	Read articles returned from the academic databases.
Step 4	Make final determination of articles to include in the literature review.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework for this study is policy feedback theory. This theory is based on the idea that existing policies affect actors and society, which ultimately affect policies and politics (Schattschneider, 1935). In policy feedback theory, the creation of policies affects politics, which, in turn, affects government organizations. At the same time, policies also affect actors in the form of the general public, advocacy groups, and others involved in politics (Sabbagh, 2018).

Schmid et al. (2019) explained that political decisions are rarely based on outside influences. Instead, political decisions are often based on previous policies' results and outcomes. The results and outcomes of political decisions may cause actors to become

involved in the political process to influence future policies (Goss & Lacombe, 2020). For example, in previous decades, laws were implemented that were primarily focused on punishing criminals as opposed to attempting to prevent recidivism when criminals were released from prison. However, some members of the legal and law enforcement communities and advocacy groups saw a problem in that criminal recidivism remained high, even with the use of prison as a deterrent because of the challenges that people faced when released from prison. Through presenting information to politicians, changes began to occur in which politicians set aside funds for programs to be implemented in prisons to help people transition back to society to reduce recidivism (Harvey, 2020).

Another aspect of policy feedback theory is the involvement of actors and how those actors may affect future politics. Within the policy feedback theory, a distinction has been made between what has been called positive feedback and negative feedback. Positive feedback occurs when the feedback to a policy strengthens the policy that is in place, while negative feedback is feedback that weakens an approach that is in place (Moore & Jordan, 2020). It is essential to understand that positive and negative feedback is related to whether the feedback about an existing policy strengthens the existing policy so that it is likely to remain in place, or whether the feedback undermines the policy so that it is likely to be changed. The labeling of policy feedback as positive or negative does not indicate the policy's impact, only whether the feedback is likely to result in the policy being changed (Moore & Jordan, 2020).

Policy feedback theory is instrumental as a theoretical framework for this study because it is an integral part of implementing changes in the criminal justice system

(Harvey, 2020). How criminal justice policies impact the public impacts how the public perceives the criminal justice system and how they choose to interact with politicians and public agencies to change those policies (Walker, 2020). The policies that have been implemented regarding how prisoners are treated, and the services provided to them to prevent criminal recidivism impact society.

The argument has also been made that policy feedback theory is often utilized within academic literature to examine the interaction between citizens and government agencies and the impact of those interactions on how citizens view themselves (Plott-Buckner, 2018). This is an important argument related to the current study because the issues examined in this study were based on the challenges African American and Caucasian women face after being released from their interactions with the prison system in the United States. Also, this study's findings can be used to make recommendations for how prisons may implement additional programs to help African American and Caucasian women prepare for re-entry into society while they are still in prison. These recommendations are based on the participants' information about the challenges they faced after release from prison and the types of support they might have received in prison that would have aided in their re-entry to society so that they would have been less likely to engage in additional criminal activity.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables

Financial Challenges

Women re-entering society face significant challenges. Women released from prison face financial challenges due to a lack of employment and stable incomes (Berg &

Cobbina, 2017; Solina-Saunders & Stacer, 2017). Researchers have found that women who are released from prison have more incredible difficulty than men in finding stable employment because of being excluded from the labor market, as well as due to the amount of time they were removed from the labor market (Sheely, 2020). When women have interactions with the criminal justice system, they immediately face exclusion from the labor market. That exclusion serves to create further problems in finding employment because of a lack of work experience. Beyond a lack of experience, women who have been in prison face difficulties finding stable employment because of having a criminal record. Women who have been in prison have reported that potential employers focus on the fact that they have been in prison instead of any job skills or motivation to work (Carter, 2017).

Foster (2018) argued that this disparity between African American women and Caucasian women is due to African American women having higher levels of unemployment and poverty than Caucasian women. In this regard, African American women, even without having been in prison, are already at a disadvantage in terms of job opportunities and financial conditions. The addition of a criminal record and time in prison only makes the financial challenges of African American women worse once they are released from prison.

The financial challenges faced by women after they are released from prison can also manifest in other ways beyond the discrimination they face having a criminal record. Financial challenges stemming from a lack of stable employment can also make it difficult for women who are released. One study found that a lack of reliable

transportation was a problem for 43% of the women interviewed who had been released from prison (Bohmert, 2016). Also, women with children who have been released from prison may face additional challenges as they try to care for a child(ren) or to regain custody of a child(ren) by demonstrating gainful employment and the ability to provide for their family (Stone et al., 2017). In turn, the inability to find steady employment because of a lack of transportation also impacts other areas of the lives of women who have been released from prison, such as being able to regain custody of their children.

Roddy et al. (2018) analyzed women's interactions with their parole officers. One woman stated that her parole officer did not recognize that a lack of reliable transportation made it difficult to find employment (Roddy et al., 2018). Another woman explained how a lack of transportation combined with a lack of education and being a mother made her feel as though she faced multiple obstacles that prevented her from finding a job even though her parole officer made finding a job a condition of her parole.

Aside from parole officers not understanding the difficulty of women finding jobs once they are released from prison, (Gurusami, 2017) explained that women's inability to find steady employment can also cause them to be perceived as unwilling to do what is necessary to remain out of prison. The women may be told, either directly or indirectly, that their inability to find employment will result in them being returned to prison. Women who are released from prison may be unable to find work while at the same time fearing they will go back to prison for no other reason than being unable to find work.

The lack of stable employment and the resulting financial problems can lead women to engage in other ways of making money that increase their likelihood of

returning to prison. Bachman et al. (2019) noted that women who had been released from prison may begin to engage in sex work because they are unable to find legal employment. Research shows that having stable employment after being released from prison reduces the likelihood of a person engaging in additional criminal activity (Ramakers et al., 2017). Other researchers found that women who went to prison for retail theft and fraud expressed that they might have to engage in such activities again because of their inability to find work and afford to live (Stone et al., 2018). Women who are released from prison may want to avoid engaging in further criminal activities but may feel compelled to do so because of their inability to find work.

Hong (2018) argued that the disproportionate levels of incarceration between Whites and African Americans in the United States are often discussed in terms of African American men, which overlooks the problems African American women face in re-entering society. Hong (2018) explained that re-entry into society after prison is particularly difficult for African American women because they face a more significant barrier to steady employment while at the same time being (often) expected to care for children or other family members. Gurusami (2019) also explained that the differing needs of African American women with children and the need to care for them after release from prison could put them at odds with the criminal justice system because these women are told or even required to obtain jobs. The need to care for children, often without assistance from friends or family, coupled with the need to find workplaces additional strain on African American women after release from prison, which impacts

their financial challenges and how they are perceived by parole officers and others in the criminal justice system.

Interestingly, research shows that even for women who obtain jobs after being released from prison, the income generated is lower as compared to before going to prison (Agboola, 2017)). For women who were employed before going to prison, the income earned after being released is significantly lower than the jobs held before going to prison (Agboola, 2017). In this regard, women who are released from prison not only face the stigma of having a criminal record but also face having to take lower-paying jobs or unemployment. Once women are released from prison, they often lack trust, even in communities where they may be known. Without the local community's trust, women may be unable to find work to earn money or only find work that pays meager wages (Schnappauf & DiDonato, 2017).

Released women may also have a low level of financial literacy, which is defined as knowledge of financial concepts and the skills and motivation to implement that knowledge to make financial decisions (Lusardi, 2019). Glidden et al. (2018) found that women who had been released from prison were 14 times more likely to use check-cashing institutions as compared to women in the general population. Glidden et al. (2018) also explained that women who were released from prison were more likely to use an average of three predatory lending institutions as compared to women in the general population who were likely to use less than one such institution. The argument could be made that the reliance on check-cashing businesses and predatory lending institutions that charge high interest rates is not solely due to a lack of financial literacy but also due to a

lack of access to loans and banking services through traditional banks after being released from prison.

There is a gap in the literature regarding how financial challenges may be combined with other challenges. Some discussion was provided in the existing literature about social support issues, but these were limited and were often related to childcare issues. More research is needed about the broader range of financial challenges that women face after release from prison.

Social Challenges

Pettus-Davis et al. (2017) explained that the concept of social support is defined as the formal and informal social interactions that involve an exchange of social resources, such as assistance with housing and childcare, living situations and interactions with intimate partners, and help with drug and alcohol use. The social support women receive after being released from prison can be formal- through government agencies or informal- through personal social networks such as family members.

The social challenges that women can face as they leave prison and re-enter society can be many and can make it difficult for them to leave prison and avoid engaging in additional criminal activities successfully (Harding et al., 2017). Women who have been to prison often face a more significant social stigma than men as it is viewed as going against traditional female roles. Furthermore, women who go to prison are often blamed for causing problems in their families, particularly if they have children (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017).

Living Conditions and Homelessness

Another challenge that women face after release from prison is finding stable and secure housing. While this challenge can be considered a financial challenge, it can also involve social challenges. The stigma that is associated with having a criminal record and having been to prison often makes it difficult for individuals released from prison to find housing, as landlords often do not want to rent apartments or homes to ex-offenders (Keene et al., 2018). The ability of ex-offenders to find safe and stable housing can be challenging as they are generally viewed with suspicion and feared to be troublemakers who will engage in additional criminal activities (LeBel, 2017).

Research shows that stable and safe living conditions after release from prison are associated with a reduced likelihood of criminal recidivism and a higher probability of employment in the first six to twelve months after release (Sirois, 2019). Researchers found that the residential environment into which women return after being released from prison impacts their re-entry into society and whether they engage in additional criminal activity (Berg & Cobbina, 2017). One of the ways that women can find stable and safe housing after release from prison is by receiving positive support from family members (Huebner & Pleggenkuhle, 2015; Schnappauf & DiDonato, 2017). One aspect of a cheerful family and social support is having stable housing and a stable living environment. Women who return to an environment where they have permanent housing are less likely to engage in criminal activity (Sirois, 2019).

However, one of the problems for women released from prison is a general lack of family and social support. Researchers found that men report more positive social

support from family and friends upon release from prison than women (Pettus-David et al., 2018). Women are more likely than men to leave prison and return to unstable environments, which increases the likelihood that they will engage in further criminal activities. The increased likelihood of engaging in further criminal activities can be due to being around others engaging in criminal activities or because of unstable living conditions due to a lack of positive support from family and friends.

Furthermore, women who are released from prison are often unable to turn to government agencies for secure housing. State and federal housing authorities that provide free or low-income housing have rules that may prevent ex-offenders from receiving housing support (Gunn et al., 2018). Women might be told to seek out housing from the local housing authority after release from prison only to find they do qualify due to their records.

Women who were with an abusive partner before going to prison may return to the abusive partner to obtain stable housing (Pettus-David et al., 2018). Women who cannot find stable housing from local agencies or family members after release from prison may use sex in exchange for a place to live (Schneider, 2018). Women may be forced to place themselves in dangerous and abusive situations when they leave prison to avoid homelessness. Suppose formal or informal social support is unavailable to assist with stable housing. In that case, women who are released from prison may have to do what is necessary, such as use sex, to gain access to housing.

Addiction and Substance Abuse

Another challenge that women face after being released from prison can make re-entry difficult and increase the likelihood of criminal recidivism is addiction and substance abuse. Research has shown that the prevalence of drug abuse among men in prisons is between 10% and 48%, while the prevalence of drug abuse among females in prison is 30% to 60%. (Mannerfelt & Hakansson, 2018). The connection between substance abuse and prison for women is a significant factor regarding why women go to prison. More women than men go to prison for drug-related offenses, and more women than men report needing substance abuse help upon entering prison (Grace, 2017).

The challenge of addiction and substance abuse may not seem like a social challenge. However, for women who are released from prison, addiction and substance abuse are social challenges because it is often related to the social environments to which women return after being released from prison. Women who are released from prison have a high probability of returning to environments in which friends, family members, and romantic partners engage in drug and alcohol abuse (Mannerfelt & Hakansson, 2018; Pettus-David et al., 2018). As women return to environments in which drug and alcohol abuse are regular, they are likely also to use and abuse alcohol and drugs. The result is an increased likelihood of criminal recidivism (Solina-Saunders & Stacer, 2017).

The issue of returning to environments in which drug use is every day is essential for women who have been released from prison. The presence of a conviction for a drug-related crime can cause women to be ineligible for public housing assistance (Nyamathi et al., 2017). If women are unable to find stable housing, they are likely to return to the

same environments in which they lived, which may have contributed to them going to prison in the first place. This also demonstrates the connection between living situations, homelessness, and substance use after release from prison. The social challenges of living situations and substance use/abuse among women released from prison are not separate from each other. Instead, they are related and demonstrate the need for current research to investigate these issues together rather than treating them separately.

As mentioned previously, social support can come either formally or informally. While informal social support from family and friends can contribute to the problems associated with substance abuse among women who have been released from prison, formal social support, or the lack thereof, can also contribute to problems for women who have been released from prison. Abbot, Magin, Davison, and Wu (2017) found that one of the formal social support problems women have after being released from prison is receiving help from medical professionals. Women have explained that when physicians discover they have been released from prison for drug convictions, they are often stereotyped as drug-seeking when attempting to receive treatment.

Researchers have noted that help from parole officers and probation services can be mixed in terms of what is provided to women who have substance abuse problems when released from prison. Holmstrom et al. (2017) found that women on parole who received supportive messages from parole officers about the importance of avoiding substance use perceived those messages to be positive and helpful. Holmstrom et al. (2017) also found that women who had been released from prison reported mainly receiving informational support from parole officers in the form of positive messages and

information about substance use avoidance but did not receive actual tangible support, such as referrals to substance abuse programs. Even more, Odio et al. (2018) found that the assessment tools used for women on probation were often not effective at identifying the need for substance use support. Based on this information, the formal support women receive after being released from prison related to substance abuse is either detrimental or simply not practical.

Researchers have made suggestions about the types of social support that women might receive after prison release to assist with substance abuse issues. Johnson et al. (2017) have suggested a focus on the use of 12-step programs because they provide women with face-to-face interactions to help address substance abuse issues and because such programs are generally provided without cost. McLeod et al. (2020) found that peer mentoring effectively helped women who had been released from prison to access community support services, such as substance abuse treatment programs, to help them as they transition back into the community. However, it should also be noted that researchers who have studied the effect of post-release substance use treatment programs found that ex-convicts who participated in post-release substance abuse programs did not have a significant decline in substance use (Mowen et al., 2020).

From the literature, it can be concluded that substance abuse is a major social problem for women who have been released from prison. In this regard, it might also be concluded that women need better access to substance abuse treatment after prison release. However, there is a question of whether treatment programs effectively help women deal with substance abuse issues after release from prison. Finally, there is also

the need to examine the issue of addiction and substance abuse and other social challenges, such as homelessness and living situations. What is demonstrated from the literature on addiction and substance abuse issues related to women after release from prison is that more research is needed in which these issues are examined and that they are examined within the context of other challenges faced by women as they re-enter society after prison.

Childcare

One other social challenge that women face after being released from prison is how to engage in the role of being a mother. One of the problems women with children face after release from prison is how to balance caring for children in a way that does not negatively affect their conditions for release from prison, such as finding employment (Ng et al., 2019). Women who have children may face great difficulty finding and affording childcare, which can make other aspects of re-entry into society, such as finding employment, very difficult (McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2019). Once again, what is shown is that the social challenges that women face after release from prison are also combined with the financial challenges that are faced after release from prison. Women who have children need childcare to find employment. However, finding employment can be difficult or impossible if women cannot find affordable childcare.

The help of family members is often vital for women who have been released from prison and who have children. The presence of family members who are willing to provide childcare services means that women can seek out and maintain employment without finding affordable childcare (Fash, 2018). However, even with family members'

assistance, women also face the struggle of how to connect with their children, who were cared for by others while they were in prison and who may not view them as mothers once they are released from prison. Researchers have found that women who are released from prison find that their children, particularly children who are teenagers or young adults, do not respect them as parents or simply view them as strangers (Fashakin, 2018).

Mothers who are released from prison have to face the added social challenge of trying to reconnect with children who may be angry that their mothers went to prison. Women may want to step back into the role of mother after being released from prison, only to find that their children are distant from them or even openly hostile to their presence (Fashakin, 2018). Feelings of not being respected as a mother add social challenges to the lives of women who have been released from prison. The desire to regain a sense of personal identity by providing care for their children only to find themselves unable to take care of their children or a lack of desire on the part of the children to be cared for by their mothers is another challenge that some women face as they re-enter society from prison.

Once women are released from prison, they face the need and even demand from parole officers to find employment and stable living conditions. At the same time, also have criminal records that can prevent them from quickly obtaining jobs and housing. Women with children also face the struggle of how to care for children while also needing to find work. In some cases, women with children may be released from prison only to find that their children do not respect them. In addition, the challenge of caring for children while finding work or the feeling of needing to return to an abusive or unsafe

environment to avoid being homeless are both social and financial challenges. This further demonstrates the need for the present study in which financial and social challenges are studied together rather than being studied independently of each other.

Mental Health Challenges

A third challenge that women face after release from prison is dealing with mental health issues. A recent study involving data collected from the North Carolina Division of Adult Correction and Juvenile Justice found that 20% of the 2,311 whose data were analyzed met the criteria to be diagnosed with several mental disorders (King et al., 2018). Unfortunately, women released from prison often face great difficulty in gaining access to mental health treatment. One of the reasons that women have difficulty in obtaining mental health treatment after prison is that they face the stigma of being labeled as ex-convicts who do not need immediate treatment and care. Furthermore, many women with mental health issues also have substance abuse issues, which causes healthcare providers to view them simply as drug addicts or people who are drug-seeking (Abbott et al., 2017). All of this is made worse by the fact that women who are released from prison generally receive less support from government organizations and community agencies as compared to men to help them address mental health issues (Schnappauf & DiDonato, 2017).

There is often little pre-planning upon release to connect women with mental health services once they are released back into the community. At the same time, mental health services may be limited to a few agencies that often lack the necessary funding or necessary services to meet the unique needs of women who have been released from

prison (Pantalone et al., 2018). Also, when mental health treatment is combined with the supervision of parole officers and case management personnel, tension can occur. While receiving mental health treatment, ex-convicts may be evaluated for potential recidivism risk (Ricciardelli & McKendy, 2020). In this regard, the mental health services may be welcomed by the ex-convicts receiving the treatment. Also, it may be viewed with some concern because parole officers and case managers are evaluating the mental health conditions of the ex-convicts and using that information to assess future criminality.

Morse et al. (2017) examined a program in which a primary healthcare clinic provided healthcare services, including mental health and substance abuse treatment, for women who have been released from prison within the past nine months. The researchers found that the healthcare clinic program successfully provided necessary healthcare services to women who had been released from prison and addressed the women's specific needs. In this regard, it is possible to provide necessary mental health services for women released from prison. However, the services may need to be provided with a specific focus on the mental health needs and other medical needs of women who have been in prison.

One other issue that might not be considered when discussing the mental health issues of women released from prison is facing financial obligations in the form of legal, and financial obligations in the form of fines, child support payments, and other debts. People who are released from prison may have significant legal debts that have to be repaid. The financial burden of having to repay large legal debts, particularly court fines imposed upon them as part of the criminal convictions, can cause feelings of

hopelessness, anxiety, and stress on top of the other financial, social, and mental health challenges that may be present (Harper et al., 2020).

The issues that have been discussed about the mental health challenges faced by women when they are released from prison are often related to financial and social challenges. As has been discussed regarding the financial and social challenges, women who have been in prison face stereotypes and stigmas about whether they can be trusted and whether their needs are even necessary. In addition, women may have few options for mental health treatment in the areas in which they live after being released from prison. Furthermore, the mental health issues that women face as they re-enter the community from prison may be, at least in part, related to feelings of anxiety or hopelessness as they navigate other financial and social challenges.

Once again, the literature also shows how the mental health challenges faced by women who have been released from prison do not occur in a vacuum separate from financial and social challenges. Instead, mental health challenges are related to the financial and social challenges that women face as they re-enter society. This is further evidence for the need for the current study to examine the financial, social, and mental health challenges that women face after they leave prison as being related to each other rather than as entirely separate issues.

Why Women Engage in Criminal Recidivism

With an understanding of the challenges that women face after being released from prison, it is worthwhile to discuss further the reasons why women engage in criminal recidivism. Miller-Roenigk (2017) examined the predictors of criminal

recidivism among a sample of women living in a rural area six to 12 months after prison release. The researcher found that women who had a higher number of children, who did not have a romantic partner, and engaging in drug use were associated with an increased likelihood of criminal recidivism. Morash et al., 2014) found that women who have unmet economic needs also often face an increased risk of substance abuse and the increased likelihood of criminal recidivism. Wilfong (2018) argued that poverty is an essential factor associated with an increased likelihood of criminal recidivism among women. The economic challenges women face after being released from prison compound other problems that increase the likelihood of recidivism (Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020).

However, it is essential to note that the geographic location to which people return after prison release impacts their economic outcomes. Research has shown that people who are released to geographic areas in which there is higher pay for low-skilled jobs have a lower probability of criminal recidivism (Yang, 2016). The association between higher-paying, low-skilled jobs and a lower likelihood of criminal recidivism may be related to the difficulty people find employment once they have a criminal record. It is the difficulty that women face in finding jobs that also leads them to prostitution when they are released from prison. It has been noted that women who have been released from prison can often make more money by engaging in prostitution than in legal employment (Koegler et al., 2019).

Beyond economic issues, another factor related to criminal recidivism among women is whether they have a spouse or romantic partner (Miller-Roenigk, 2017).

Having a spouse or romantic partner might seem to decrease the likelihood of criminal recidivism among women because of the potential for a stable place to live. However, Kendler, Lonn, Sundquist, and Sundquist (2017) explained that another reason why marriage is associated with a reduced risk of criminal recidivism among women is that marriage takes up time that women might otherwise use to be around deviant friends. In this regard, marriage may help women who have been released from prison avoid being around people who engage in deviant behaviors. One of the risks that women face after release from prison that increases recidivism rates is associating with friends who engage in criminal activities (Lanica, 2019)—having social support, such as from a spouse, can help to prevent women from associated with deviant peers can decrease the potential for criminal recidivism.

It is important to note that the research regarding the impact of marriage on the potential for criminal recidivism among women is not conclusive. Lee, Gillespie, Slocum, and Simpson (2020) found that being in either a high-quality or low-quality marriage did not significantly impact whether women engaged in criminal recidivism. Instead, the researchers found that it was the behavior of the spouse, such as whether they engaged in drug use or other illegal activities, that impacted the likelihood of criminal recidivism among women. In contrast, Nielsen (2018) noted that the literature regarding whether being in a marriage protects women from re-offending and whether the criminal behavior of the spouse impacts the likelihood of re-offending is inconclusive.

The ambiguity regarding whether marriage is a factor in whether are likely to re-offend after being released from prison demonstrates another reason for the importance of

this study. The information provided by the women in this study may indicate that being married or strongly connected with a romantic partner has decreased their likelihood of engaging in additional criminal activity. However, the information provided by the women in this study may also demonstrate that the actions and behaviors of their husbands or romantic partners, such as being involved in drug use or other criminal activity, may be related to whether they have engaged in other criminal activities. This study has the potential to expand upon what is known about the relationship between female criminal recidivism and the presence of romantic partners.

One other issue that has been shown to impact women and whether they engage in criminal activity and criminal recidivism is drug use and engaging in other risky or illegal activities due to drug use (Jones et al., 2018). About 70% of incarcerated women reported engaging in weekly drugs or alcohol in the month before they were arrested (Scott et al., 2017). In addition, Staton et al. (2018) found that drug use among female criminals is often associated with other problems, such as family relationships, romantic partner relationships, and being victims of physical or sexual abuse. In this way, drug use might be viewed as another social challenge that women must address to avoid engaging in criminal recidivism.

Wu and Ming-Chi (2019) explained that female drug users face dual stigmas in society when they are in prison because they are viewed as both drug addicts and criminals who have not lived up to gender stereotypes. Female drug users who have been to prison are viewed as having engaged in activities that are not socially appropriate for women while also viewed as not being trustworthy. The argument could be made that

women who have been to prison and who have drug use problems must not only overcome the stigma of having been criminals but also the social stigma that is associated with drug use.

One of how the criminal justice system has chosen to deal with drug-addicted criminals is with drug courts in which criminals are sent to drug treatment programs and monitored for completion of the programs while also being monitored to ensure that they are not engaging in further drug use (Jones et al., 2018). However, drug courts can present other social challenges for women who have been released from prison. For example, Gallagher, Nordberg, Daranek, and Minasian (2019) found that female offenders who were sent to drug courts perceived that the judges were acting as advocates for them and perceived that the treatment they received through the drug courts was not gender specific. In this regard, the women reported that receiving drug treatment that was not specific to the needs of women was a barrier to completing the drug treatment programs.

Jordan (2019) reported in her research that completion of drug treatment programs was higher among female offenders who were married and explained that further research regarding the relationship between marital status and drug treatment for female offenders was necessary. This finding is interesting because it further raises the question of how marital status may be related to other social obstacles that women who have been released from prison face as they re-enter society. The relationship that women have with husbands or romantic partners may have an impact on their abilities to meet the

conditions of their release from prison, as well as whether they engage in behaviors that may result in them returning to prison.

More broadly, the recent research on the reasons why women engage in criminal recidivism provides further evidence for the social and financial obstacles that can cause women to engage in additional criminal activities after release from prison. Even if women have social support from family members and romantic partners, they are likely to face larger social obstacles due to the stigma of having been in prison and stigmas related to drug use and addiction. This study will serve to provide more understanding of how various social and financial obstacles and challenges come together to impact whether women engage in criminal recidivism after release from prison.

Assisting Women with Re-Entry While Still in Prison

One other area of review that is important for this study involves the literature regarding how women can be assisted while they are still in prison and the challenges and obstacles they will face once they are released. The focus of re-entry into society from prison is often framed as an individual task, which ignores the social and economic factors that impact criminal recidivism (Burch, 2017). Women are often released from prison with little support and with the expectation that they can manage the obstacles that may lead them back to criminal activities (Hart, 2017).

One of the areas that have been discussed within this review of the literature regarding why women engage in criminal recidivism was drug use. Researchers who have studied drug use and mental health prison programs found that program success for female inmates was due to a variety of factors, including social support, housing, and

continuity of care from prison to after being released from prison (Kendall et al., 2018). In addition, research regarding the outcomes of mental health therapies in prisons has shown limited success, particularly for people who have PTSD and other severe trauma (Yoon et al., 2017). Other researchers have found that participation in programs designed to improve psychological skills training for female inmates is well-received by female inmates (Lo et al., 2020). However, the issue regarding successful social re-entry is not whether a program is well-received, but whether it reduces the likelihood of criminal recidivism.

Unfortunately, continuity of care from pre-release to post-release has been found to not occur often, meaning that women are released from prison without a plan for how they will continue to receive healthcare services (Abbott, 2018). In addition, female inmates with drug use problems who are released without social support are more likely to relapse to drug use (Andersen, 2017). The conclusion drawn from these findings is that even if women are given access to drug use programs and mental health treatment while in prison, a lack of continuity of care and social support assistance after release reduces the potential for long-term success.

Beyond problems with drug use and mental health, the literature review showed that finding employment after prison is a major problem for women. Unfortunately, this is another area in which it seems that prison programs may not be successful, as research has shown that participation in pre-release employment training programs did not result in a reduced likelihood of re-incarceration (Moore, 2019). However, Jung and LaLonde (2019) found in their investigation of the impact of a work-release program in Illinois that

the longer that female inmates participated in the work-release program, the higher their employment rates and their incomes. The researchers also found that for women who did not complete the work-release program, there was an added stigma that resulted in more difficulty in obtaining employment after release from prison.

The ambiguity in the existing literature about the outcomes of pre-release employment training programs for women raises questions about whether such programs are beneficial, as well as how the programs are administered might impact the benefit for female inmates. In the case of the program that was investigated by Jung and LaLonde (2019), the women were involved in a work-release program in which they worked in the community instead of only receiving job training within the confines of a prison setting. The specific characteristics of a job training program and how it is administered may impact whether it is effective at helping women navigate the challenge of finding work once they are released from prison.

Another way in which an attempt is made to help women find stable employment after being released from prison is through pre-release educational programs. Bozick, Steele, Davis, and Turner (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of 37 years of research studies on the impact of prison education programs and found that inmates who were through educational programs in prison were no more likely to obtain employment after being released than inmates who did not complete educational programs. Furthermore, Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine (2017) argued that pre-release educational programs designed to provide women with college credits while in prison with the expectation that the women will continue their college education after release ignore the more significant

social and financial struggles that women face when they are released from prison. Expecting women to be able to continue their education at a local community college or university ignores other issues, such as the need to find immediate work and the social struggles that they face with family, friends, and children that can be difficult to overcome.

The prison programs seem to be disconnected from the social and economic challenges that women face once they have a prison record. The idea behind many of these programs appears to be that female inmates will learn skills to allow them to take on social, financial, and even mental health challenges by themselves without additional support (Burch, 2017). It seems that prison programs are designed to make women learn to take care of themselves while ignoring the external factors that affect their abilities to re-enter society and remain out of criminal activities successfully.

Some jails and prisons in the United States have also implemented programs that are designed to help women learn parenting skills and better connect with their children once they are released (Melander, 2020). While there are challenges in investigating the nature of these parenting programs, it has been noted that there is some evidence to suggest that they are successful at helping mothers who are in prison learn parenting skills to help them connect with their children when they are released (Collica-Cox & Furst, 2018). Furthermore, Carlson (2018) found from his examination of the prison nursery program in Nebraska that women who participated in the program had a 28% reduction in criminal recidivism and a 39% decline in returning to prison.

While the limited research that is available on the outcomes of prison nursery and parenting programs is limited, there may be a caveat to the benefits of these types of programs. Kwarteng, Svoboda, Bachynsky, and Linthicum (2019) noted that the number of children in the household of a mother who had been in prison affected the bonds between a mother and child. Specifically, when there were more children in the house, the bond between a mother and child was reduced. In this way, there may be other factors and family dynamics that impact the benefit that may be achieved from providing prison nursery programs. A mother may be allowed to bond with a child while in prison, but other factors may influence the longer-term outcomes of the bond that is developed and maintained between a mother and child.

In addition, it should be noted that only eight states have implemented prison nursery programs (Carlson, 2018). The ability of mothers who are in prison to be able to take advantage of bonding with their young children while in prison is dependent upon where they are imprisoned. In this way, there is a structural factor that impacts whether women can take part in these types of programs. In many states, nursery programs do not exist in prisons to allow women to bond with their infant children while in prison.

Overall, the recent literature regarding the assistance that women are given in prison to help them re-enter society once their sentences are complete ranges from mental health treatment to jobs and education programs to nursery and parenting programs. However, the research that has been reviewed has shown that these programs are often implemented without a focus on continuing the mental health treatment or the education of the women once they are released from prison (Burch, 2017; Sokoloff & Schenck-

Fontaine, 2017). Instead, the programs are often structured with the idea that women can take care of themselves once they are released without any consideration for the larger social and economic obstacles that exist.

Summary and Conclusions

The goal of this literature review was to examine the recent literature regarding the financial, social, and mental health challenges women face after being released from prison. In addition, literature was reviewed regarding the reasons why women engage in criminal recidivism after release from prison and the programs available in prison to help them re-enter society. Women face a variety of financial, social, and mental health challenges when they leave prison. Some of those challenges are personal, such as having mental health issues or not having friends and family they can rely upon (Lanica, 2019; Pettus-David et al., 2018). However, many of the challenges women face upon release from prison are out of their control, such as the social stigma associated with having a criminal record (Wu and Ming-Chi (2019). In addition, women often face greater stigmatization when they have a criminal record because being involved in criminal activity is perceived as being unfeminine.

The inability to obtain stable employment, which also affects other aspects of life, such as the inability to find stable housing and care for children, can result in women returning to criminal activities to support themselves (Koegler et al., 2019; Schneider, 2018). Women may also place themselves in harm's way by engaging in prostitution or living with abusive romantic partners. Even more, women who are unable to find stable

employment and housing may face pressure from parole officers to find jobs regardless of whether stable jobs are available to them (Gurusami, 2017).

While prisons may offer programs to help women re-enter society, such as mental health programs or job training, these programs are often implemented without focusing on continuing assistance once women are released from prison. When women are released from prison, the burden of overcoming personal and social obstacles to successful re-entry is placed primarily on them. The lack of continued assistance combined with broader financial, social, and mental health challenges can result in criminal recidivism (Koegler, Preble, Cimino, Stevens, & Diehl, 2019; Lanica, 2019; Pettus-David et al., 2018; Schneider, 2018).

The literature reviewed provides a foundation for understanding what is known about the obstacles women face as they re-enter society from prison. From this literature review, it is clear there are important gaps in what is known about women's obstacles when they are released from prison. The primary gap that exists is how social, financial, and health challenges come together to impact women's lives after release from prison. Most of the previous research has examined the challenges that women face after being individually released from prison. Issues of living conditions, finding a job, or facing mental health challenges have been examined in isolation. In this study, these issues will be examined together to better understand women's challenges as they attempt to re-enter society. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the methodology used to conduct this study. A discussion of the research design, the sampling and recruitment of

participants, the role of the researcher, data instrumentation and collection, and ethical issues involved in conducting this study is undertaken.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This qualitative study aimed to understand the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison to understand their difficulties in re-entering society. Researchers have found that access to social support, the residential environments in which women live after incarceration, financial challenges, and mental health issues can all impact whether women return to criminal activity after reason from prison (Berg & Cobbina, 2017; Cimino et al., 2015; Northcutt Bohmert, 2016; Pettus-Davis et al., 2018). In addition, the social stigma that women who have been in prison often face after being released from prison impacts the social, financial, and mental health support that is available to them (Lyons & Cantrell, 2017).

While a large body of research is available regarding the social, financial, and mental health challenges women face after release from prison, less attention has been given to the combined set of challenges women face. Research has generally examined social, financial, or mental health challenges individually, rather than examining them together to understand how these challenges impact women's lived experiences as they attempt to re-enter society. This study was significant because it was carried out to examine the combined effect of social, financial, and mental health challenges that women face after release from prison rather than studying each of these challenges individually.

This chapter aims to discuss the research design, methodology, role of the researcher, and any potential issues with the study. This chapter begins with a detailed explanation of the qualitative research design and a rationale for why this particular

design was chosen. Next, the role of the researcher in this study is discussed. Then, a detailed explanation of the methodology is presented, including the sampling procedure, how the participants are recruited, the instrumentation used to collect the data, the data collection process, and the data analysis process. Finally, a detailed discussion is provided regarding issues of trustworthiness for the study, including the ethical procedures used in conducting this study, the protection of human subjects, establishing credibility, the transferability of the data, and the dependability of the data analysis.

Research Design and Rationale.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

RQ1: What are the financial challenges women face after release from prison?

RQ2: What are the social challenges women face after release from prison?

RQ3: What are the mental health challenges women face after release from prison?

The research design for this study was a descriptive design in which existing academic studies were analyzed to describe and understand the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society. The use of the descriptive research design allowed for the ability to examine the phenomenon of the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in comprehensively re-entering society (Roberts et al., 2019). By analyzing existing academic articles, it was possible to gain access to a more extensive range of data than would have been possible for this type of study if a small amount of data were obtained through interviews with women who had recently been released from prison. Through

analyzing a broad range of academic articles for themes about the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society, it was possible to draw broader conclusions and to make wider inferences than would have been possible if a small amount of data were collected from a small number of women who have been released from prison.

An important aspect of descriptive research is understanding that this research design is not passive. Rather than passively describing the work and findings of other researchers, descriptive research can be conducted in an interpretative manner in which prior research and findings can be interpreted through the particular purpose and goals of a new study (Braun & Clark, 2020). For this study, the research and findings contained in prior studies regarding the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society were interpreted through a lens of understanding the combination of challenges that women faced and how those challenges may have been impacted by each other and influenced each other. In this regard, using a descriptive research design and thematic analysis allowed for the examination of the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society in a broader context (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). The result was a study that provided a broader context from the combined findings of previous studies.

Furthermore, the descriptive research design does not merely repeat previous studies' findings or ideas. Using the descriptive research design allows for expanding upon previously identified ideas and categories related to a phenomenon (Mayring, 2019). While researchers who have conducted previous studies about the challenges that

African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society may have identified specific issues or problems, new themes may be identified by examining several of those studies together. Examining multiple studies in which issues related to economic, social, and health challenges were previously examined in isolation may result in new themes being identified about the broad range of challenges women face as they re-enter society.

Another benefit of the descriptive research design was the ability to provide thick descriptions of a phenomenon. Using the descriptive research design to examine themes related to a phenomenon makes it possible to examine data so that thick descriptions of the phenomenon can be provided (Kibiswa, 2019). In terms of this study, the examination of the research and findings related to previous studies regarding the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society were used to provide in-depth descriptions of the challenges that women faced, why those challenges may have existed, and how women may have overcome those challenges as they re-entered society.

Using descriptive research to identify and interpret themes in prior research requires a researcher to describe the experiences and perspectives of prior findings rather than ascribing opinions or values to them (Qutoshi, 2018). In this regard, the role of the researcher was not to pass judgment about why the findings of previous studies showed that women released from prison may have acted in one way or another after being released from prison. Instead, the role of the researcher in this study was to describe the collected data and draw conclusions based on those data. This study remained objective;

judgments were not made about the women, their experiences, or their actions concerning those experiences. Instead, descriptions were provided to understand the social, financial, and mental health challenges they faced after leaving prison.

One other reason for conducting this study using a descriptive research design was because of the difficulty in obtaining an appropriate sample of African American and Caucasian women who had been released from prison. The ability to gain access to women who had recently been released from prison was brutal. Even more, gaining access to a large enough sample of women who had been released from prison for either a qualitative or quantitative study would have been exceedingly difficult, could have taken months, and required a large amount of financial resources. The limited time and financial resources meant that a research design appropriate for the resources I had available was used. The descriptive research design could be used to produce a scientifically appropriate study in which current information and a new understanding were obtained about the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison and re-entering society.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, it is essential to recognize the researcher's role in conducting the research and the data analysis, as the researcher must differentiate his or her interpretations and opinions of the data from the collected data (Neubauer et al., 2019). Collins and Stockton (2018) argued that it is not possible for researchers to completely set aside their previous knowledge, ideas, and perspectives on a topic to focus only on the participants' information. Instead, the researcher must remain objective,

recognizing the need to separate his or her knowledge and perspectives on a topic from the participants' perspectives.

Even in using a descriptive research design involving an analysis of the content of previously published studies, the researcher must differentiate between the actual data and his or her interpretations and opinions. In order to demonstrate the difference between content obtained from previously published studies and inferences drawn from those data, I made a clear distinction in this study. When data from previously published studies were analyzed, the data were presented so that it was evident the data were drawn from previous studies. Once the data were presented, I provided interpretations and analyses of those data, along with a clear explanation of why the interpretations were being made. In this way, there was a clear distinction between the data and the interpretations made from those data. The reader was clear about that distinction and could determine whether he or she agreed with the interpretations made.

In performing an analysis of previously published studies regarding the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women who are released from prison, it was also necessary to establish the credibility of the studies that were examined. The role of the researcher in performing content analysis is to establish that the previous studies included in the analysis are credible in terms of their content and their relationship to the phenomenon being studied (Roller, 2019). In this study, the credibility of the chosen previous studies was established because the studies had been published in academic peer-reviewed journals.

One other aspect of the role of the researcher is to manage personal and emotional responses to the information analyzed from previous studies. The content that was analyzed was likely to contain emotional information about the challenges and potential traumas that women have faced as they have left prison and re-entered society. My challenge was to manage personal emotional responses to the potentially traumatic information that may be obtained as part of the data collection process (Mallon & Elliott, 2019). It was necessary to be self-aware of reactions to the information and to be able to manage those emotions to ensure personal well-being while also ensuring that harm was not done to data collection in a professional and scientifically appropriate manner.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

An essential aspect of conducting a content analysis is to determine the content that will be used. For this study, the content used was academic, peer-reviewed studies about the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison. However, even when identifying the content to be analyzed, it was necessary to specify the content in terms of the number of items included (Lee et al., 2020). For this study, 30 peer-reviewed studies were selected to be analyzed. The rationale for choosing 30 previously published studies to be included in the analysis was that this should be a large enough sample of studies to allow for the research questions to be answered.

In addition, a sample of 30 peer-reviewed articles selected for the content analysis were published within the past 10 years. Analyzing studies published in the past 10 years made it possible to examine the most current scientific research available about women's

challenges after being released from prison. In this way, the inferences made from the content analysis were based on current issues facing women after release from prison as opposed to older issues and factors that may not have been as relevant in the current era.

Another aspect of selecting the sample of articles included in the content analysis is that the studies were empirical, meaning that data were collected using either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods methodologies. This analysis did not include Studies conducted as in-depth literature reviews or editorial articles published in scientific journals. Only empirical studies were included in the sample of articles used so that empirical results are available for the analysis.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation that was used to collect and record the articles that were used in this study is shown in Appendix A. The title of each article, along with the purpose of the article, whether it was peer-reviewed, the sample size, and the article's theme, were recorded. Recording basic information about each article ensured that the articles met the inclusion criteria for this study and provided an overview of the articles used. In addition, the recording instrument provided a list of the specific articles used in the content analysis and an overview of the nature of each of the studies examined. Finally, the information that was ultimately contained in this instrument was used as a starting point for the complete thematic analysis.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The articles to be included in the content analysis were obtained by thoroughly searching two databases: Google Scholar and EBSCO. These two databases were used

because they are broad databases of academic, peer-reviewed articles from a wide range of academic disciplines. Searches were conducted with those databases to find empirical articles about the economic, social, and health challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women after release from prison.

Only empirical, peer-reviewed articles were included in the content analysis. Any articles published as literature reviews, explanations, or editorials in peer-reviewed academic journals were not included in this study. By including only peer-reviewed studies, it was possible to analyze the content from empirical studies rather than from other researchers about their opinions or interpretations of previous studies. This way, the inferences and interpretations made in this study were based solely on empirical findings rather than existing interpretations of previous studies.

If more than thirty empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals in the past ten years were identified, the list of possible articles for inclusion was further narrowed. The narrowing of the articles involved examining the articles for the methodologies used to conduct them, as well as the sample size of the studies. The goal was to have 30 articles with larger sample sizes and methodologies involving broader sample selection methods. The reason for preferring articles with larger samples and broader sample selection methods was to be able to draw broader inferences from the results of the studies.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis strategy was generally used in coding and analyzing qualitative data from transcripts to perform thematic analysis (Lester et al., 2020). The data analysis

began with familiarizing the articles chosen for inclusion in the analysis. Next, an initial set of codes was generated based on the content and findings of each of the studies. Then, the initial set of codes was examined to create a smaller list of themes. Once the list of themes was created, it was reviewed to ensure that the list encompassed all the data that was available from the articles. Once the list of themes was finalized, each of the themes was given a name for presentation (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

After the identification of the themes, the data analysis involved presenting the themes based on the findings of the studies. Each of the themes was presented individually to highlight the similarities and differences between them. The goal of the data analysis was to present the challenges that African American and Caucasian women faced after leaving prison, as well as how they managed those challenges. Similarities between the themes regarding how women have handled similar challenges, such as financial, social, and mental health, were identified. Also, differences in women's challenges and how they may have impacted their actions and behaviors were identified.

The coding and analysis of the data will be performed by both hand-coding and using the software. Researchers have found that the use of computer software can complement hand coding but is not ideal for fully replacing hand coding because of the complexity of information and ideas that are part of the coding process (Nelson et al., 2018). In this regard, both hand-coding and NVIVO software were used in the coding and analysis of the data so that the most thorough examination of the data occurred.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

When the researcher's personal opinions and biases can impact how the data are analyzed, and the conclusions drawn from that analysis, credibility may be an issue (Shufutinsky, 2020). One way to establish credibility in a qualitative study is to be transparent about the data collection and analysis process (Ospina et al., 2018). Credibility will also be established in the data analysis process by presenting information from the research studies to establish the specific challenges identified in previous research. Rather than only providing an interpretation of the information gathered from the previous studies, quotes from the studies were presented when appropriate to establish a basis for interpreting the data and conclusions drawn from those interpretations.

Triangulation also increases the credibility of qualitative studies. Researchers have argued that triangulation increases the credibility of qualitative research (Vogl et al., 2019). In this study, the analysis of multiple studies in which various samples of women and various research designs and methodologies were used will allow for interpretations and inferences to be drawn from a wide array of data. In this regard, the credibility of the interpretations and inferences in this study will be increased.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the idea that a study's findings are relevant and can be generalized to other settings about the people or situations being examined (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). In this study, transferability was established

by presenting the findings of multiple studies regarding the challenges women released from prison face in their efforts to transition back into society. In addition, transferability was established by providing an in-depth review of the existing literature on the challenges women face after they are released from prison. The findings of this study were explained in relation to the larger body of literature that exists to provide a broader context for these findings, how they applied to other women, and the challenges they face after release from prison.

Researchers have argued that one aspect of achieving transferability in qualitative research is to ask research questions based on existing knowledge (Guenther & Falk, 2019). The research questions for this study were formulated from an in-depth review and examination of the body of recent literature regarding the challenges women face after release from prison. The transferability of the findings of this study was established by the work that occurred in placing this study, the methodology used, and the conclusions drawn within the larger context of what is known about the problem being studied.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research is defined as the appropriateness of the data collection process to the clarity of the research questions and the research design used to answer those questions (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). This study established dependability by utilizing extensive recent literature to create research questions directly related to the problem being studied. Furthermore, the research design chosen for this study was appropriate based on the data needed to be collected to answer the research questions. Using a descriptive research design and data analysis with thematic content

analysis allows for the ability to collect the rich data needed to answer the research questions about the social, financial, and mental health challenges women face after leaving prison.

In addition, the problem investigated in this study and the research questions formulated for this study require a broad range of information and data about the challenges faced by women who have been released from prison. Using a descriptive research design provides appropriate data to answer the research questions that are the basis for this study. The result is that this study's dependability has been established because of the efforts undertaken to ensure the data collection process was based directly on the research questions for this study, which were based on the existing body of literature reviewed.

Ethical Procedures

Another consideration that must be made when conducting any research, even research that does not directly involve human subjects, is the ethical considerations related to how the research is conducted. In this study, while there were no human subjects, it was still essential to ensure that proper ethical considerations were considered. One of the ethical considerations of this study was ensuring that the time and resources placed into conducting this study were worthwhile for the benefits that are expected to be achieved. The effort to undertake this study was considered to be appropriate because the benefit is to expand upon existing research about the challenges faced by women who are released from prison. There is a lack of research in which economic, social, and health

challenges faced by women who are released from prison have been examined together. This study helped to address a significant gap within the existing literature.

Another important ethical consideration was ensuring that the researcher's ideas and opinions were separate from the analyzed data. Every action was taken to ensure that any opinions that were put forth in the study were separate from the actual data analysis. In addition, any opinions put forth were based directly on the data analyzed and the limitations of those data.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the research design, methodology, role of the researcher, and issues of trustworthiness related to this study. A detailed explanation has been provided about the research design for this study, why the research design was chosen, the data collection methods for the study, and the precautions to be taken to protect the participants. Information was also provided about this study's credibility, transferability, and dependability. In Chapter 4, a detailed presentation of the results of the data analysis is provided. Information about the data and a detailed analysis of the data are provided.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Criminal recidivism among African American and Caucasian women released from prison is due to a lack of support upon release (i.e., mental health resources), as well as a lack of economic opportunities (i.e., stable employment; Tripodi et al., 2019; Willging et al., 2016). This qualitative study aimed to understand the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison to better understand their difficulties in re-entering society. The research design used for this study was a descriptive design in which existing academic studies were analyzed with the goal of describing and understanding the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society.

Three research questions were used as the basis for the analysis to study the phenomenon of the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society:

RQ1: What are the financial challenges women face after release from prison?

RQ2: What are the social challenges women face after release from prison?

RQ3: What are the mental health challenges women face after release from prison?

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the descriptive content analysis that was performed on previously published academic studies regarding the financial, social, and mental health challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison. Information is presented about the academic articles that were included in the analysis, as well as the process by which the articles were chosen. In

the data analysis, the specific themes that were identified related to each of the three research questions are presented, along with an analysis of how the themes are used to answer the research questions. A brief discussion is also provided about the trustworthiness of the results of the data analysis.

Setting Discussion

No personal or organizational conditions influenced this study because participants were not recruited. This study was conducted as a thematic analysis of previously published peer-reviewed academic studies involving women released from prison. In this regard, I had no direct contact with participants, and no conditions impacted participants concerning this study.

Demographics

This thematic analysis focused on women who had been released from prison. However, some of the studies that were included in the thematic analysis were conducted with both men and women. In this regard, the number of participants who were considered to have been part of this study was only the women who took part in the study.

Table 2 shows the total number of female participants in the 30 studies included in this thematic analysis, along with a breakdown of the number of female participants for each of the three areas of interest: financial challenges, social challenges, and mental health challenges. The studies that were analyzed included a total of 81,147 female participants. There were 5,090 female participants in the studies that were used to analyze the financial challenges of women released from prison. There were 75,710 female

participants for the studies used to analyze the social challenges of women released from prison. Only 347 female participants in the studies that were used to analyze the mental health challenges of women released from prison.

Table 2

Female Participants in the Analyzed Studies

Categories	Female Participants
Financial Challenges	5,090
Social Challenges	75,710
Mental Health Challenges	347
Total	81,147

Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted using the PRISMA flow diagram, which is a visual method of summarizing the screening process of selecting academic articles for analysis (PRISMA, 2024). The PRISMA flow diagram consists of three steps: identification of articles to potentially be used in the analysis, screening of the articles to determine those that are eligible for the analysis, and the final inclusion of articles.

Two academic databases were searched for articles related to the financial, social, and mental health challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison: Google Scholar and EBSCO. The reason that these two databases were used is because they contain peer-reviewed academic articles from a broad range of academic disciplines and academic journals. By using these two databases, it was possible to review articles from a broad range of disciplines in which researchers may have investigated the challenges faced by women released from prison.

It is important to note that specific criteria were established before the searches began. In addition to using only Google Scholar and EBSCO to search for articles, a specific timeframe was also established for the age of articles that would be included in the analysis. It was decided that articles published in the past 10 years would be included in the analysis.

Figure 1 shows the PRISMA diagram of how the data collection was conducted. Of the identified 38,400 records, 17,900 were removed because they were duplicated, and another 8,700 were removed for other reasons. The remaining 9,200 records were screened, with another 8,500 records excluded; of the 700 records that remained, all of them were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. From the 700 reports screened, 476 were excluded because they consisted of literature reviews or systematic analyses, 125 were excluded because they were unrelated to the purpose of this study, and 69 were removed because they did not focus on women who were released from prison. The 30 records that remained were included in this study.

Figure 1

PRISMA Diagram

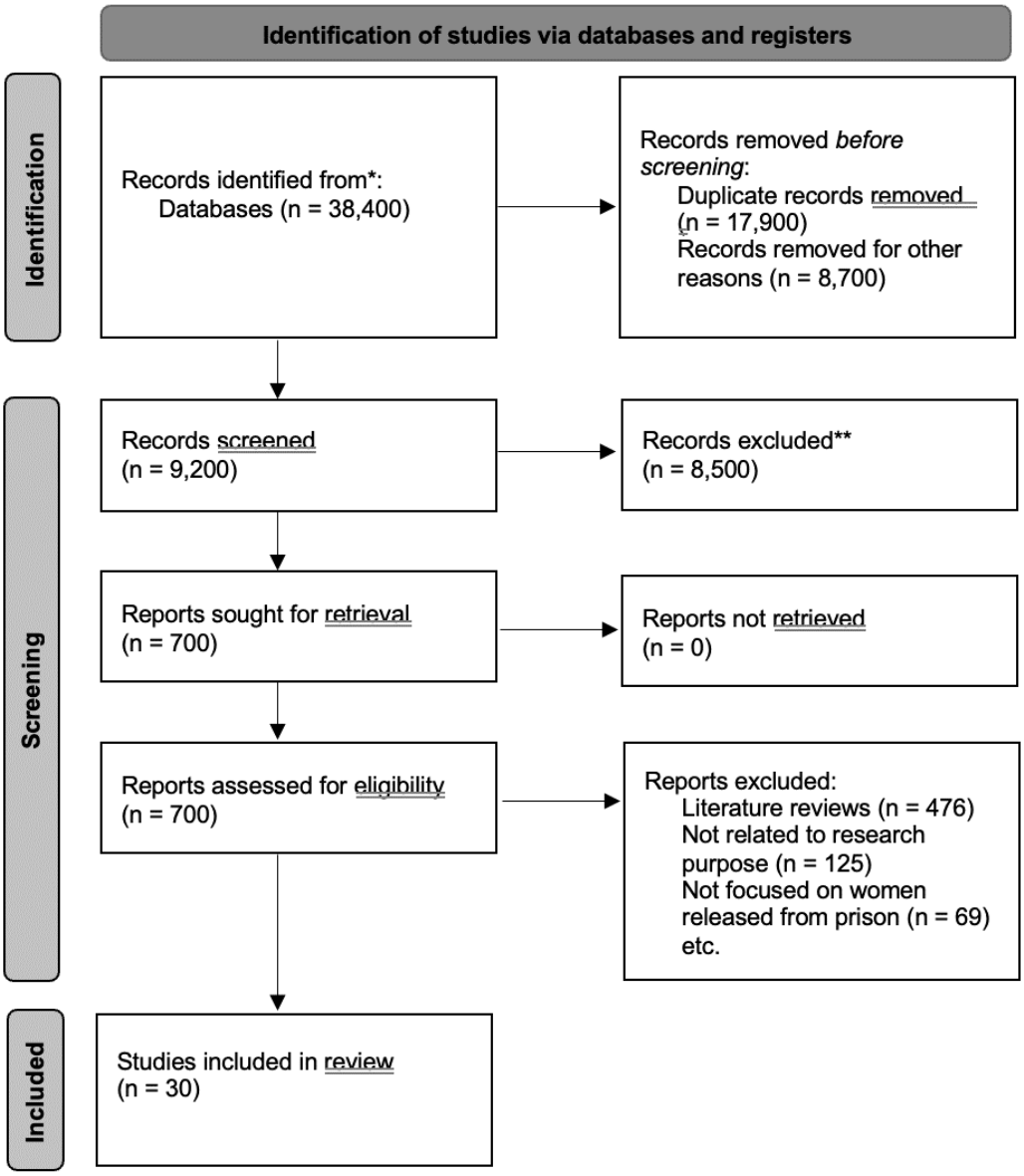

Figure 1 shows the number of articles that were related to each of the three areas of interest for this study. Of the 30 articles chosen for the study, seven were related to the financial challenges women face after release from prison. In addition, 16 articles were related to the social challenges faced by women after release from prison. Another seven articles were related to the mental health challenges faced by women after release from prison.

Table 3

Number of Articles Included in Each Section of Data Analysis

Categories	Articles Included in Analysis
Financial Challenges	7
Social Challenges	16
Mental Health Challenges	7

Data Analysis

Financial Challenges

The first research question that was analyzed was, "What are the financial challenges women face after release from prison?" Of the 30 articles included in this study, seven were studies in which the financial challenges faced by women after release from prison were investigated. After examining those seven articles, three themes were identified: employment challenges, employment as a requirement for freedom, and financial knowledge.

Within the theme of employment challenges, the studies that were examined concerning the financial challenges that women face after release from prison showed that finding steady employment with a criminal conviction and a prison record is difficult

for women. Curcio and Pattavina (2018, p. 386) explained from their research that "males with a criminal record have 14% more weeks of employment than their female counterparts." Sheely (2019, p. 16) found in her study of women who had been released from prison that "being arrested was associated with a 9-percentage point increase in the probability of dropping out of the labor market." Curcio and Pattavina (2018, p. 386) also explained that one reason for the reduced employment of females released from prison as compared to men "is that having a criminal conviction undoubtedly limits one's employment opportunities and likely does so more for jobs that are in traditionally female-dominated fields, such as childcare, cosmetology, the medical field, and many others."

When women who are released from prison are unable to find steady employment, they may turn to illegal forms of work, such as prostitution and other types of sex work. The problem with turning to prostitution is that it is illegal, which means that women who are released from prison who turn to prostitution are engaging in further illegal activities, even though it may be the only steady employment available to them. Bachman et al. (2019, p. 600) explained that "the vast scope of collateral consequences attached to their offender status exacerbated reintegration hurdles and further distanced these women from pro-social ties and gainful, steady, and legitimate employment."

The difficulty for women released from prison to find steady employment leads to the next theme identified in the literature: employment as a requirement for freedom. One of the requirements for women who are released from prison on parole is to find steady employment (Wilfong, 2018). Women may receive negative or unrealistic messages from

their parole officers, such as not finding steady employment, which is an indication of laziness or an unwillingness to work, along with threats of being returned to prison (Roddy et al., 2018). The problem, however, is that women may not be able to find work even when they want to find work, which means they face increased stress because of being under the threat of having their parole revoked (Wilfong, 2018).

Gurusami (2017, p. 451) explained that "yet reliable, recognizable, and redemptive employment are not just difficult conditions for formerly incarcerated black women to meet." They can also be in conflict with each other. Particularly for Black women who are released from prison, attempting to find work that is considered to be both legal and steady can be very difficult. However, when faced with the barrier to employment that occurs with a criminal record, it seems that parole officers often do not understand or are unwilling to understand why women who are released from prison may be unable to find steady employment.

The third theme identified within the literature regarding the financial challenges women face after release from prison is financial knowledge. Glidden et al. (2018, p. 20) found in their study involving women who were released from prison that "incarcerated females displayed lower levels of financial literacy when compared to females from the general public." The researchers also noted that the use of predatory lenders was disproportionally high among incarcerated females. This use, and sometimes dependence, though viewed as a short-term solution to lack of financial means, negatively affects the individual in the long run because of high interest rates, unreasonable payments, or hidden fees. (Glidden et al., 2018, p. 20)

Based on the recent academic literature regarding the financial challenges faced by women released from prison, three themes were identified: employment challenges, employment as a requirement for freedom, and financial knowledge. Women who are released from prison, particularly African American women, face the challenge of securing steady employment because of having a criminal record and having been in prison. This creates a situation in which some women turn to prostitution, which is illegal and increases the potential of returning to prison because of engaging in further illegal activities after release. Furthermore, women who are released from prison face the threat of having their parole revoked because of the challenge of not being able to find steady employment. In addition, even when women are able to find employment after being released from prison, they are often less financially knowledgeable than women in the general population, which leads to relying on payday loans that can harm their financial futures because of high interest rates.

Social Challenges

The second research question that was analyzed was, "What are the social challenges women face after release from prison?" Of the 30 articles included in this study, 16 were studies investigating the social challenges women faced after release from prison. After examining those 16 articles, three themes were identified: housing instability, intimate partner relationships, and social support.

Within the theme of housing instability, studies showed that women were not necessarily different from men in terms of the impact of housing on criminal recidivism. For example, Jacobs and Gottlieb (2020, p. 110) found that for both men and women, the

"effects are strongest for those who are relatively low risk and for low-severity offenses." In this regard, housing instability increased the chances of criminal recidivism for people who had been convicted for the lowest level criminal offenses. Similarly, Sirois (2019, p. 18) explained from the findings of his study that "household support is associated with reduced risks of a new criminal charge, social isolation, and unemployment" within the first year after being released from prison.

Keene et al. (2018) further explained why stable housing is a vital part of reintegration into society for both men and women who are released from prison, "Housing is central to participants' experiences of making life after prison as they seek to shed the stigmatized identity of incarcerated-Tion-Tion histories and represent themselves as decent and economically self-sufficient citizens" (p. 810). For women specifically, Agboola (2017, p. 45) found in their study of the challenges faced by women after release from prison that "Housing is a problem for women ex-prisoners and this, sometimes, influences the offending behavior of women." In addition, Nyamathi et al. (2017, p. 11) explained from the results of their study about women who were released from prison who had engaged in violent crimes that "during reentry, it is critical, particularly for women, to provide housing which is devoid of violence, substance use, and instability for those who are in recovery."

Without stable housing, it was more difficult for both women who had been released from prison to move beyond their pasts and begin a new life after prison. In this regard, the issue of housing instability is an important component for women not only because of the need for a place to live but also a place of stability that feels safe and free

from criminal influences. Otherwise, the potential to engage in additional criminal behaviors, including violent criminal behaviors, increases.

While both men and women have been found to face the issue of housing instability after release from prison, the second theme that was identified, which was intimate partner relationships, is particularly important for women after release from prison. Kendler et al. (2017, p. 6) found that marriage "was associated with a 67% reduction in criminal recidivism" for women. However, Lee et al. (2020) argued from their research that the benefit of a relationship for women may not be as strong as for men in terms of reducing the risk of criminal recidivism.

Instead, Lee et al. (2020, p. 518) argued that "partner behavior appears to play a more direct role than relationship quality in women's antisocial behavior." In this regard, if women who are released from prison return to relationships in which the intimate partner engages in illegal activities, then it is more likely that criminal recidivism will occur. Similarly, Mannerfelt and Hakansson (2018, p. 7-8) found that "Having a partner with substance abuse was found to be a gender-specific risk factor for criminal recidivism among female offenders." It may not be that women who are in relationships are less likely to engage in criminal recidivism. However, instead, women who are in relationships with people who engage in illegal activities will be more likely to engage in criminal recidivism.

The third theme that was identified within the studies that were reviewed was social support. The idea of social support can be defined as having positive relationships with family members, non-family members, and others who may help with housing, jobs,

and other social tasks to prevent further engaging in criminal activities (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017a).

The research that has been conducted shows several factors impact whether women who are released from prison receive positive social support. Pettus-Davis et al. (2017b) found in their study of social support received by people after release from prison that women who engaged in substance use were less likely to receive positive social support as compared to men after release from prison. The researchers explained that "Substance-abusing females may be more likely to become isolated from positive social networks because their substance abuse varies from female norms (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017b, p. 15).

Aside from social relationships with family and non-family members, the issue was raised in the literature about social support from social organizations, the type designed to help people after being released from prison, and the types of social support women need. Burch (2016) explained from her research of programs designed to help women transition back to society after release from prison. "When (re)entry practice is grounded in a critical and holistic framework, it can have a significant, positive impact by simultaneously supporting individual processes of healing and self-actualization and actively confronting oppressive structures" (p. 15).

Furthermore, Pettus-Davis et al. (2017a) explained their research on social support for men and women released from prison. "Social support providers have various skills and abilities to provide various forms of support. Some providers do not have the

capability to provide all forms of support, or the form of support needed by the recipient" (p. 1334).

Another issue that was identified within the studies that were reviewed related to social support for women released from prison was receiving actual support and assistance as opposed to only receiving information. Holstrom et al. (2017) explained from their study of interactions between women released from prison and parole officers that women received information support but were less likely to receive tangible support. The researchers stated, "Most tangible support took the form of offers of willingness to help as opposed to help itself" (p. 16).

However, Stone et al. (2016) found in their research that even supportive messages involving redemption and turning one's life around from parole officers "early in the supervision period led to avoiding arrests in the long run" (p. 16). Similarly, Morash et al. (2014) found in their study of interactions between parole officers and women released from prison that "more supportive POs elicit more positive outcomes—lower anxiety and reactance, and higher crime-avoidance self-efficacy" (p. 18). In this regard, while parole officers may be unable or unwilling to provide tangible support and assistance for women after they are released from prison, providing supportive messages may help female offenders transition back into society and have a greater potential for avoiding engaging in future criminal activities.

Furthermore, the support that women receive while still in prison in preparation for release may also be beneficial. For example, Anderson (2018) found in her study of the impact of pre-release drug treatment for female offenders:

> For women who participated in high-intensity programming while incarcerated-rated, increasing levels of emotional and social support dramatically reduced their probability of relapsing following release. However, emotional social support lacked a protective effect for those who participated in low-intensity programming while incarcerated (p. 90).

After release from prison, receiving support through drug treatment programs can have both positive and negative effects on women. Mowen et al. (2019) found that.

> Individuals who participate in substance abuse treatment programming during reentry experience significantly higher levels of stance use. A potential explanation for this could be that post-release treatment unknowingly provides users a way of getting associated with other users (p. 382).

However, Jones et al. (2018) found that women who had recently used crack or cocaine or had any type of substance use:

> They were more likely to re-offend than women who did not, [but] they were not at higher odds of engaging in more serious offenses. This may be a positive outcome associated with participation in a therapeutic justice program (p. 420).

One other type of support that female offenders receive is through the use of drug courts that are designed to help women re-enter society and deal with substance abuse issues in a less adversarial way than traditional criminal courts. Gallagher et al. (2019) found in their study of African American women who participated in a drug court that, "The African American women in this study viewed that drug court judge as an advocate

of motherhood. The women felt that the judge was proud of them and understood the importance of mothering" (p. 10).

However, the researchers noted that all of the women in the study had the same drug court judge. They noted that this was important because the benefit that the participants perceived may have been related to the actions and behavior of the judge and not because of the concept of a drug court in general.

The theme of social support seemed to be one of great complexity. Women who are released from prison need a variety of social supports, from housing and employment to assistance with substance use. The problem, however, may be that women lack the full range of social support that they need in order to make a successful transition back into society after release from prison. A few family or non-family members, along with parole officers and even support organizations, may not be able to provide the full range of social support that women need to avoid engaging in criminal recidivism.

Mental Health Challenges

The third research question that was analyzed was, "What are the social challenges women face after release from prison?" Of the thirty articles included in this study, seven of the articles were studies in which the mental health challenges faced by women after release from prison were investigated. After examining those four articles, two themes were identified, which were mental health diagnosis and barriers to mental health treatment.

In terms of the theme of mental health diagnosis, women who are released from prison have been found to have high rates of mental health issues. Morse et al. (2017)

conducted a study examining a primary care program for women recently released from prison. The researchers found that the participants had, on average, 2.5 mental health conditions. In addition, 94% of the participants had psychiatric disorders. McKendry and Ricciardelli (2019, p. 6) reported that among the participants in their study of females released from prison under community supervision, "around half of the sample had some mental health condition."

The prevalence of mental health conditions in women who are released from prison is important because it makes re-entering society and avoiding criminal recidivism difficult. King et al. (2018) found in their study of women who were released from prison that women who had a severe mental disorder had a 16% higher likelihood of engaging in criminal recidivism within eight years of being released. Furthermore, Pantalone et al. (2018, p. 723) explained from the results of their study of women released from prison in the Deep South that "mental well-being was tied to the economic well-being of secure livelihoods." In this regard, the presence of mental health disorders does impact the potential for criminal recidivism among women released from prison because it impacts their transition back to society and their ability to care for themselves in a pro-social manner rather than returning to criminal activities.

With an understanding of the presence of mental health conditions among women released from prison, the second theme that was identified in the literature was barriers to mental health treatment. Abbott et al. (2017) reported that based on the findings from women who had been released from prison, they "perceived their mental health care was suboptimal because they were not taken seriously by providers who suspected

exaggeration related to their addictions" (p. 7). The women perceived that healthcare providers did not take their mental health issues seriously because they were viewed as having behavioral issues related to drug addiction rather than actual mental health conditions.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility was established in the data analysis process by presenting information from research studies to establish the specific challenges identified in previous research. Rather than only providing an interpretation of the information gathered from the previous studies, quotes from the studies were presented when appropriate to establish a basis for the interpretation of the data and conclusions drawn from those interpretations.

Triangulation was also used to increase the credibility of this study. Researchers have argued that triangulation increases the credibility of qualitative research (Vogl et al., 2019). In this study, the analysis of multiple studies in which various samples of women and various research designs and methodologies were used allowed for interpretations and inferences to be drawn on a wide array of data. In this regard, the credibility of the interpretations and inferences in this study was increased.

Transferability

In this study, transferability was established by presenting the findings of multiple studies regarding the challenges women released from prison face in their efforts to transition back into society. In addition, transferability was established by providing an in-depth review of the existing literature on the challenges women face after they are

released from prison. Furthermore, the transferability of the findings of this study was established by the work that occurred in placing this study, the methodology used, and the conclusions drawn within the larger context of what is known about the problem being studied.

Dependability

This study established dependability by utilizing extensive recent literature to create research questions directly related to the problem being studied. Furthermore, the research design chosen for this study was appropriate based on the data that needed to be collected to answer the research questions. Using a descriptive research design and data analysis with thematic content analysis allows for the ability to collect the rich data needed to answer the research questions about the social, financial, and mental health challenges women face after leaving prison.

In addition, the problem investigated in this study and the research questions formulated for this study require a broad range of information and data about the challenges faced by women who have been released from prison. Using a descriptive research design provides appropriate data to answer the research questions that are the basis for this study. The result is that this study's dependability has been established because of the efforts undertaken to ensure the data collection process was based directly on the research questions for this study, which were based on the existing body of literature reviewed.

Confirmability

Confirmability was established in this study by demonstrating that the findings were based on the studies that were analyzed rather than any biases or opinions of the researcher. For each of the identified themes, quotes from the articles included in the study were presented. The inclusion of quotes allowed the ability of readers of this study to determine if they agree with the themes identified by the researcher and the importance of themes to the larger issue of challenges faced by women released from prison.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings of the descriptive content analysis that was performed on previously published academic studies regarding the financial, social, and mental health challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison. The following are themes identified concerning each research question for this study.

Table 4

Themes

Category	Themes
Financial Challenges	Employment challenges
	Employment as a requirement for freedom
	Financial knowledge
Social challenges	Housing instability
	Intimate partner relationships
	Social support
Mental health challenges	Mental health diagnosis
	Mental health treatment

The first research question that was examined was, “What are the financial challenges women face after release from prison?” Through the thematic analysis, it was

shown that women face the challenges of finding and keeping steady employment, dealing with employment as a requirement for their freedom, and a lack of financial knowledge that can result in using financial institutions and methods that result in them paying high fees and interest rates. The second research question that was examined was, "What are the financial challenges women face after release from prison?" Through the thematic analysis, it was shown that women face the challenges of housing instability, the impact of intimate partner relationships on their actions and behaviors that can lead to criminal recidivism, and social support from family, friends, support organizations, and the criminal justice system. The third research question that was examined was what are the mental health challenges women face after release from prison?" Through the use of thematic analysis, it was identified that women released from prison face the challenge of living with a mental health diagnosis and being able to receive mental health treatment even when they have a mental health diagnosis.

In Chapter 5, a discussion is provided about the results of this study. The discussion includes an interpretation of the findings and the limitations that impacted this study. Recommendations are also provided about how the results of this study can be used to inform future studies and how social organizations and the criminal justice system can better help women as they are released from prison. The larger implications of this study are also discussed.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative study aimed to understand the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison to understand their difficulties in re-entering society. The research design used for this study was a descriptive design in which existing academic studies were analyzed to describe and understand the challenges that African American and Caucasian women released from prison face in re-entering society. While research has examined the issues that can contribute to criminal recidivism among women released from prison, these issues have generally been examined in isolation. Researchers may examine the impact of drug and alcohol use or the impact of economic challenges on women released from prison. However, less attention has been focused on the combined set of challenges, such as mental health, economic, and social support, that women face once they have been released from prison and how those challenges work together to impact their lives and the potential for them to engage in further criminal activities. The reason for conducting this study was to understand the combined set of challenges that women face as they re-enter society from prison so that better recommendations can be provided as to how to help women better meet those challenges to attempt to reduce the likelihood of criminal recidivism.

The results of this study indicated that women who are released from prison face a combined set of challenges related to economic, social, and mental health issues. From an economic standpoint, women released from prison face the challenges of finding and keeping steady employment, dealing with employment as a requirement for their freedom, and a lack of financial knowledge that can result in using financial institutions

and methods that result in them paying high fees and interest rates. From a social standpoint, women released from prison face the challenges of housing instability, the impact of intimate partner relationships on their actions and behaviors that can lead to criminal recidivism, and a lack of social support from family, friends, support organizations, and the criminal justice system. From a mental health standpoint, women released from prison face the challenge of living with a mental health diagnosis and being able to receive mental health treatment even when they have a mental health diagnosis.

Interpretation of the Findings

The results of this study largely confirmed the findings of previous studies regarding the economic, social, and mental health obstacles that women face after release from prison. In terms of the economic challenges, the findings of this study showed that one of the challenges women face after release from prison is finding and keeping steady employment. The data examined in this study indicated that women have difficulty finding steady employment because of their criminal records. Similarly, in previous studies, researchers found that women released from prison had greater difficulty than men in finding stable employment because of being excluded from the labor market, as well as due to the amount of time they were removed from the labor market (Sheely, 2020). Employers often focus on the fact that women have been in prison instead of any job skills or motivation to work (Carter, 2017).

The results of this study also indicated that another economic challenge faced by women released from prison was dealing with employment as a requirement for their freedom. One of the requirements that is often placed on women who are placed on

parole after prison is to maintain steady employment. However, previous research showed that women released from prison reported that parole officers often failed to recognize the difficulties in finding and keeping steady employment, such as a lack of reliable transportation, a lack of education, and a lack of desire among employers to hire people with criminal records (Gurusami, 2017; Stone et al., 2018; Roddy et al., 2018).

One other finding of this study regarding the economic challenges faced by women released from prison was a lack of financial knowledge that can result in using financial institutions and methods that result in high fees and interest rates. The data analyzed in this study indicated that women released from prison often relied on non-traditional banking institutions rather than banks and lenders. This result also mirrored the results of previous studies, which showed that women released from prison were more likely to rely on check-cashing businesses than traditional banking institutions. For example, Glidden et al. (2018) found that women who had been released from prison were fourteen times more likely to use check-cashing institutions as compared to women in the general population and were more likely to use predatory lending institutions when seeking out loans.

The results of this study also mirrored the results of previous studies regarding the social challenges women face after release from prison. This study showed that women released from prison faced the challenge of having stable housing. This result mirrored previous studies in which researchers found that women released from prison faced difficulties in finding housing as landlords often do not want to rent apartments or homes to ex-offenders (Keene et al., 2018). In addition, women were often unable to rent

affordable housing from state and federal housing authorities that provide free or low-income housing because of rules that prevent ex-offenders from receiving housing support (Gunn et al., 2018).

Another finding of this study was the impact of intimate partner relationships on the actions and behaviors of women released from prison that can lead to criminal recidivism. The findings of this study showed that women who had intimate relationships with partners who engaged in criminal activities were more likely to also engage in criminal activities. This result mirrors previous research in which it was shown that women who returned to environments in which drug and alcohol abuse were regulars were likely to also use and abuse alcohol and drugs, with the result being an increased likelihood of engaging in criminal recidivism (Solina-Saunders & Stacer, 2017).

The third finding of this study about the social challenges faced by women after release from prison was a lack of social support from family, friends, support organizations, and the criminal justice system. Women who were released from prison were found to have a lack of social support often to help them navigate the obstacles of returning to society. Researchers found that men reported more positive social support from family and friends upon release from prison than women (Pettus-David et al., 2018). Women who lack social support from families that could aid with safe housing and caring for children may return to criminal activities to financially support themselves (Koegler et al., 2019; Schneider, 2018). Furthermore, women may also place themselves in harm's way by engaging in prostitution or living with romantic partners who are abusive so that

they can have some social support, even if the social support is negative (Gurusami, 2017).

Women who are released from prison were also shown in this study to often lack strong formal social support from government and private organizations. This finding also confirmed the findings of previous studies in which researchers explained that women who attempted to seek treatment for drug or alcohol abuse were often stereotyped as drug-seeking by physicians and other medical professionals when attempting to receive treatment (Abbot et al., 2017). In addition, researchers also found that women who had been released from prison reported mainly receiving informational support from parole officers in the form of positive messages and information about substance use avoidance but did not receive actual tangible support, such as referrals to substance abuse programs (Holmstrom et al., 2017). In this regard, this study and previous studies showed that there is a general lack of formal social support for women who are released from prison and that lack of support can negatively impact the ability of women to re-enter society successfully.

In terms of the mental health challenges faced by women released from prison, one of the findings of this study was that women released from prison face the general challenge of living with a mental health diagnosis on a day-to-day basis. Women had high rates of mental health issues that needed treatment. This finding mirrored research conducted by Mannerfelt and Hakannsson (2018) that showed that women had more trauma and more mental health issues than men upon release from prison, which made re-entry into society after release from prison more difficult. This study confirmed earlier

studies that showed that women who are released from prison suffer from mental health issues that need to be treated.

The second finding of this study related to the mental health challenges faced by women released from prison was being able to receive mental health treatment even when they have a mental health diagnosis. The findings of this study showed that women released from prison often face great difficulties in receiving mental health treatment, and those difficulties can occur even when there is a mental health diagnosis. Researchers previously found that when women released from prison sought to receive treatment for mental health conditions, they faced the stigma of being labeled as ex-convicts who did not need immediate treatment and care or as drug addicts or people who are drug-seeking (Abbott et al., 2017). In this way, even women who have mental health issues may not receive the treatment they need because of biases on the part of healthcare workers about the motives of the women seeking treatment.

Overall, the results of this study provided additional confirmation for the idea that women released from prison face economic, social, and mental health challenges. As has been shown in previous studies, women who are released from prison face a variety of challenges as they attempt to re-enter society and avoid engaging in criminal recidivism. However, the importance of the results of this study is the ability to demonstrate that economic, social, and mental health challenges do not affect women after release from prison in a vacuum. Instead, the economic, social, and mental health challenges faced by women collectively impact the ability of women to avoid the need or desire to engage in further criminal activities after release from prison.

Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study was that it was conducted as a content analysis of previously published academic studies. By conducting a content analysis of previously published academic studies, it was only possible to examine the data and findings of those studies. In this regard, this study was limited to the type of data, the samples of women from whom data were gathered, and the locations of the women who took part in those studies. However, this limitation was reduced because the use of content analysis of previously published studies increased the sample of participants and the characteristics of the participants than would have been possible if original data were collected.

Another limitation was the lack of research for content analysis in certain areas of the study. Specifically, there was a lack of recent research about the mental health challenges faced by women after release from prison. While the lack of research regarding the mental health challenges of women after release from prison is a larger issue within the academic literature, it also impacted the nature of this study. It was not possible to conduct as much content analysis of the mental health challenges of women after they are released from prison as was possible with the economic or social challenges that they face.

The limitation involving recent research regarding the mental health challenges faced by women released from prison can be understood by the number of female participants in the studies that were analyzed. The total number of female participants in the studies regarding mental health included in this thematic analysis was only 347, as

compared to 5,090 for the studies involving financial challenges. Even more, the studies involving the social challenges faced by women after release from prison that were analyzed had 75,710 female participants. This is an area within the academic literature that is lacking in terms of understanding the challenges that are faced by women when they are released from prison.

Recommendations

The first recommendation that is made based on the strengths and limitations of this study is that more research about the mental health challenges faced by women after release from prison is needed. For this study, there was a lack of recent empirical data about the mental health challenges of women after being released from prison. In addition, the available research showed that female ex-convicts often face stigma and bias when attempting to receive mental health treatment. More research is needed about the challenges that women face in seeking out mental health treatment after being released from prison, such as how they are treated by healthcare professionals and the availability of mental health services to ex-convicts.

Another recommendation for future research is to examine the combination of economic, social, and mental health challenges faced by women after release from prison. One of the strengths of this study is that economic, social, and mental health challenges were not examined in isolation. Instead, the purpose of this study was to examine the economic, social, and mental health challenges faced by women after release from prison together. However, as this was conducted as a content analysis of previously published studies, many of the studies that were analyzed examined economic, social, and mental

health challenges by themselves. In this regard, more empirical research is needed in which these issues are examined together to better understand the totality of how they impact women after release from prison.

One other recommendation for future research is to examine the impact of the criminal justice system on the economic, social, and mental health challenges faced by women after release from prison. In this study and previous studies, it was discussed how parole officers and courts may make economic, social, and mental health challenges more difficult for women after release from prison. Parole officers and the courts may expect that women will easily be able to find steady employment and have social support regarding childcare and transportation to hold jobs once they find them. However, a lack of understanding about the difficulties facing women after release from prison and the threat of revoking parole for not having steady employment or the support to help with being able to maintain a job may only make economic and social challenges worse.

The lack of support regarding mental health treatment from the courts and parole officers may also negatively impact women after release from prison. There may be an expectation on the part of parole officers and the courts that women can or should manage their access to mental health treatment. In addition, there may be a lack of appreciation for the stigma and biases women face when seeking out mental health treatment. More research is needed about how parole officers and courts view the challenges of women receiving mental health treatment after release from prison and the type of assistance that they provide to women.

Implications

The potential impact of this study with regards to positive social change is an additional understanding of how economic, social, and mental health challenges combine to affect the ability of women released from prison to re-enter society successfully. The results of this study might be used to help judges, parole officers, and prison officials recognize the challenges the full range of challenges that women face after release from prison. With this information, it might be possible for the governmental leaders and the leaders of public and private agencies to plan better and implement services directed toward helping women as they are released from prison.

An increased understanding of the challenges facing women after release from prison also has the potential to increase the work performed by organizations that assist women with re-entry into society. As organizations that assist women with re-entry into society understand more about how economic, social, and mental health challenges have a combined impact on re-entry success, programs can be created and adjusted to serve this population better. The resources that are used to help women re-enter society might be better utilized because programs can be targeted to the combined set of challenges that women face after release from prison.

Another potential positive impact of this study might be the ability of advocates to use these findings to demonstrate a need for the criminal justice system to better prepare women for the challenges they will face after prison. Organizations that advocate for women in prison might use the findings of this study to advocate for better assistance programs for women while they are still in prison and immediately after prison to help

them prepare and handle the challenges they will face as they re-enter society. In this way, the findings of this study can be used as a way to motivate policymakers to prepare better and help women in prison with economic, social, and mental health challenges as a way to reduce criminal recidivism.

Another potential impact of this study might be for healthcare organizations to use these findings to train their staff about the needs of women who have been released from prison. The findings of this study and previous studies showed that women face stigma and biases from healthcare professionals when seeking mental health treatment. Healthcare organizations might use this information to train healthcare professionals that women who are released from prison face mental health conditions that deserve treatment rather than a preconceived notion that these women are drug-seeking.

Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to understand the challenges faced by African American and Caucasian women released from prison to understand the difficulties they face in re-entering society. The results of this study showed that women who are released from prison face a combined set of economic, social, and mental health challenges that impact their abilities to re-enter society successfully and to avoid engaging in further criminal behaviors. A significant problem that impacts women who are released from prison is a lack of understanding of the challenges they face as they re-enter society and how those challenges are often not easily overcome because of social stigmas about women who have been in prison. The ability to help women re-enter society after prison and reduce criminal recidivism will require an understanding of the challenges they face

and a willingness to provide support that realistically and adequately helps them to address those challenges.

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