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## The Underrepresentation of African American Officers in a Large Midwestern Correctional System

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Julius O. Eyang

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2025

Abstract

The Underrepresentation of African American Officers in a Large Midwestern

Correctional System

by

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MSC, Saint Leo University, 2022

LLB, Yaoundé II University, 1993

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

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## Abstract

The correctional population in the United States remains high despite the implementation of various measures to reduce crime and recidivism. The primary goal of correctional establishments is to reduce recidivism and crime through effective rehabilitation programs. The role of the correctional officer is crucial in the rehabilitation process because they are the heartbeat of a prison. However, low staffing levels have a negative impact on the role of corrections officers. There is a gap in the relevant literature on the low staffing levels of African American correctional officers. This qualitative research, through the phenomenological approach, focused on the correctional culture and organizational barriers of a large midwestern correctional system to shed light on the underrepresentation of African Americans as correctional officers. The theoretical framework of behavioral theory was used to ground this study. Data from semi structured interviews with nine participants, along with qualitative data analysis, were used to identify codes, categories, and themes. Distrust of the criminal justice system by part of the African American population is one of the reasons why African Americans don't want to work as corrections officers. The findings may lead to positive social change by initiating valuable contributions that can improve the hiring, training, and retention processes of African American officers in the large midwestern correctional system and, by extension, the overall staffing situation.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to my father of blessed memory, who was one of the pioneer primary school teachers in my village and division (in Cameroon), for laying the educational foundation for his children. I am especially grateful to my wife, Vizzeteli Queen Nene, for encouraging me to embark on the Ph.D. journey, and my children for their moral support. I shall not forget my mother, Rose Bessem, for instilling in her children the spirit of hard work and resilience.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

The corrections department in the United States is constantly facing a high attrition rate among officers, despite various reforms aimed at improving their working conditions. The attrition rate remains high because of the difficult working conditions in a correctional facility as a result of low staffing, overcrowding, the unpredictable nature of offenders, correctional officers' fatigue and stress, and gang activities (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Goulette et al., 2020). The various incapacitation measures, such as the "Get Tough and War on Drugs" era, saw prisons flooded with offenders. Correctional facilities today are overcrowded, making rehabilitation measures difficult, hence a high recidivism and crime rate (Mingo & Haskins, 2020). The failure of the principle of incapacitation to reduce recidivism and crime led stakeholders to introduce rehabilitation. Correctional institutions' main objective is to reduce recidivism and crime rates. The goal of rehabilitation is to restore offenders to their pre-criminal activity status, thereby eradicating their criminal tendencies.

Rehabilitation notwithstanding, the rate of recidivism and crime remains high due to ineffective rehabilitation programs and/or policies. One of the leading causes of the failure of rehabilitation programs is the low staffing level of correctional officers, who are considered the pillar of a correctional facility. The corrections officers provide security to offenders, rehabilitation staff, and all programming within a correctional setting. However, due to staffing shortages, some programs are often canceled, scaled

down, or held under circumstances that render them ineffective (Mingo & Haskins, 2020).

Research on the high attrition rate of corrections officers is largely generalized, with very little specific research on any particular racial group. This study aimed to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the representation of African American officers in the corrections sector. The urgency of this research is underscored by the pressing need to address the high attrition rate and its impact on the correctional system. This chapter outlines the research questions that guided the study and the theoretical framework upon which it was grounded. Also included in this chapter are the nature of the study, a description of key words to avoid ambiguity, a reminder of the study's limitations and significance, and a summary.

### **Background**

The correctional officer is one of the correctional facility's most important human resources because they oversee security in living units, programming halls, dining halls, and recreational areas, and ensure that other staff and visitors on the prison grounds are safe. The role of the correctional officer is vital for every prison. Prisons always face low staffing levels because of the difficult prison environment, dangers posed by violent offenders, officers' fatigue, stress, burnout, and public negative perception (Goulette et al., 2020). These factors have led to correctional officers experiencing a high rate of attrition. A literature review shows that studies on the general causes of the high attrition rate of correctional officers have been conducted. However, limited research has been conducted on African American officers, which creates a gap in the study. The African

American offender population is about 45%, as compared to their 13% composition of the total United States population (Bagaric et al., 2020). Rehabilitation is negatively affected by low correctional staffing, including the low staffing numbers of African American officers (Mitchell et al., 2000). According to MacLean (2020), the public's perception of the legitimacy of law enforcement actions will improve positively if the number of minority law enforcement staff is increased. This study was crucial for understanding the dynamics of correctional institutions, enhancing the public's perception of corrections, and attracting more individuals to work as corrections officers. The study may also enable the staffing level to increase, which will help rehabilitation programs and their results. The vast African American offender population will no longer regard correctional institutions as an organ of white dominance, and this will help in making this group of offenders undergo effective rehabilitation.

### **Problem Statement**

The corrections departments in the United States are constantly understaffed despite a high offender population, and this understaffing negatively affects crime rates, recidivism, and rehabilitation. Understaffing of correctional officers creates the social problem of insecurity due to more recidivism, crime rates, and a low percentage of rehabilitation (Mingo & Haskins, 2020). The United States has a high offender population, which stands at approximately 20% of the world's prison population (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). The United States has approximately 5,407,000 individuals in prison or under various forms of supervision. Out of this number, approximately 3,688,000 are under probation or parole, and 1.8 million offenders are incarcerated in federal, state, and

county prisons/jails (Buehler & Kluckow, 2024). Rehabilitation programs are hindered by the overcrowded nature of prisons due to bad policies during the era of “Get Tough and War on Drugs” (Mingo & Haskins, 2020). Rehabilitation programs are negatively affected by gang activities, fights, and delays in mass movement within the facility caused by an overcrowded offender population. Additionally, security checks by officers are made more challenging by the already difficult correctional environment (Ravena & Mahmud, 2019). The role of the correctional officer in the smooth functioning of a prison and in the rehabilitation process is crucial, as they are one of the most important human resources within a prison. The role of correctional officers in a prison is significant as they ensure the safety of administrative, rehabilitation, and programming staff, offenders, and visitors present on correctional grounds. They also ensure that the movement of offenders within and out of the correctional facility on delegation status is without issues. Hence, the correctional officer is the most vital resource for any facility to function effectively.

The strenuous working conditions in a correctional facility are due to low staffing, overcrowding, the unpredictable nature of offenders, correctional officers’ fatigue and stress, and gang activities (Ferdik & Smith, 2017; Goulette et al., 2020). The difficult and strenuous job of corrections officers is exacerbated by a high officer attrition rate and consistent understaffing, which is a cause for concern (Ferdik & Pica, 2024). The applicant pool is limited because the corrections department is often considered the last resort or the bottom of the law enforcement hierarchy.

Another concern is the percentage of African Americans employed as correctional officers. Studies show that, although the number of African Americans employed in the corrections department is low, it has seen a significant increase over the past 2 decades (Wu & Cao, 2018). In 1994, according to the Bureau of Prisons, African Americans constituted 18.4% of correctional officers; meanwhile, this percentage has increased slightly to 21.5% as of 2024 ("BOP: Statistics," 2024). Confidence of the public in institutions, most especially the judiciary, is achieved through the representation of the various races in all departments. African Americans have this perception, especially those in cities with a minority African American population. African Americans in these cities and regions believe they are discriminated against and targeted because of their race. The correctional environment with a significant African American offender population has a worse perception (Bagaric et al., 2020; Datchi, 2022; Wu & Cao, 2018). Rehabilitation is negatively affected by the low representation of African American officers (Mitchell et al., 2000), and this is made worse by the perception of African American offenders who consider prisons to be a white domination instrument over African Americans (McDaniels, 2015). The lack of trust and confidence by offenders of African American descent in the system, the rate of recidivism, and crime amongst African American offenders will remain high. This aggravates the social problem of insecurity, high crime rates, recidivism, and low rehabilitation rates. Also, a high percentage of the African American offender population will negatively affect African American families in the community, such as a lack of parental control, especially for families with incarcerated

parents. Most of these families will always get involved with the judicial sector due to their perception and lack of respect for societal laws (Datchi, 2022).

The literature review shows that research has been conducted on the understaffing of correctional officers. However, limited research has been conducted on the representation of African American officers, creating a gap that needs further research. Rehabilitation programs will be positively impacted by an adequate correctional staffing level. The African American offender population is about 45% as compared to the 13% composition of the total United States population (Bagaric et al., 2020; Datchi, 2022). Rehabilitation is negatively affected by the low staffing of correctional staff, with the underrepresentation of officers of African American descent playing a vital role as far as staffing levels are concerned. According to MacLean (2020), the public's perception of the legitimacy of law enforcement actions will change positively if the number of minority law enforcement staff is increased.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative research explored what factors in a large midwestern correctional system influence the underrepresentation of African Americans as correctional officers. The study, employing a phenomenological approach, examined job stress, hiring processes, racial factors, training, burnout, the correctional environment, and correctional management to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of African American corrections officers. According to the literature review, a high officer attrition rate is a primary reason why corrections departments are understaffed (Ferdik & Pica, 2024). The literature is generalized or mostly about the white majority officers (Butler et al., 2019),

with very minimal research conducted about the representation of African American correctional officers. The study's findings may help policymakers develop laws and policies that enhance the retention of correction officers.

### **Research Questions**

Two research questions were used to understand the lived experiences of African American correctional officers of a large midwestern correctional system.

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of African American correctional officers about their workplace environment?

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of African American officers of a large midwestern correctional system that impact their intention to stay or leave?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The theory of behavior in organizations was constructed by Porter, Lawler, and Hackman in 1975. This theory examines how individual-organizational relationships emerge and grow, including how groups can exert influence on individuals in organizations and how social influences relate to work effectiveness (Porter et al., 1975, pp. 341, 368). This theory is necessary and correlates with the research topic because it examines the relationship between individuals and organizations, as well as how various groups within an organization/organizational policy can influence individuals, affecting their effectiveness and perceptions. In this study, the perception of correctional officers regarding their relationships with one another, the administration, public perception, and

organizational policy will constitute the most significant factors that provide an understanding of the phenomenon.

The study sought to examine the reason for the high percentage of failure of African American officers during the probation period, even though all officers are given equal opportunities. This theory was selected because it addresses the relationship between individuals within an organization and the organization itself, as well as the impact on employee effectiveness. An exploration of the lived experiences of staff through interviews, observations, and document review (Johnston et al., 2022), as well as the interpretation of valuable data, was conducted to determine why there is an underrepresentation of African American staff. The research results can help improve the staffing levels in corrections.

### **Nature of the Study**

The study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design, utilizing semi structured interviews and document review as research methods. The phenomenological qualitative research design was appropriate for this study because I obtained oral facts from participants that addressed the research questions, which sought to examine the reasons for the underrepresentation of African American correctional officers in the staffing of a large midwestern correctional system (see Williams, 2021). One-on-one interviews enabled the collection of diverse perspectives on participants' lived experiences. Phenomenology aims to make known the lived experiences of an individual or a group (Williams, 2021). This study examined the lived experiences of African American correctional officers. The corrections department has a culture that

influences the perceptions, motivations, and actions of correctional staff through their lived experiences. The topic of the study is relevant to criminal justice because its purpose is to find solutions that can alleviate the staffing problems of correctional departments. An adequate staffing level of corrections officers can increase the percentage of rehabilitation, which in turn can reduce recidivism and crime rates. The attainment of the main objective of corrections, which is the reduction of recidivism and crime through effective rehabilitation and an adequate staffing level, is essential. Methodical recruitment is necessary to get the right participants to yield quality results.

### **Definitions**

*African American:* In the study, African Americans refer to Americans of African descent with a darker skin complexion, whether they are first-generation Americans or immigrants from Africa and other parts of the world (Renolis, 2020).

*Blacks:* In the study, Blacks refer to individuals with brown or dark skin coloration (Renolis, 2020).

*Social change:* Social change, in the context of this research, refers to the ability to transform lives, behaviors, and patterns through an impactful and improved criminal justice system that will make prisons safer, more rehabilitative, and more humane (Visher & Eason, 2021).

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions were taken into consideration during the research. African Americans are composed of first-generation Americans who were born to immigrants from Africa and other parts of the world who identify as Black. The

perception of Blacks born in Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world who migrated to the United States is very different from those born and raised in the United States because they grew up in various environments and cultures that are different ("Not all Black people are African American. Here is the difference," 2020). Additionally, there are cultural differences in Africa, which shape the perceptions of Africans who migrate to the United States differently from those born in the United States. Consequently, they hold distinct views on various factors that impact correctional officers. The perceptions and beliefs of African immigrants may blend negatively or positively, depending on the situation in the United States.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Working in corrections brings many challenges due to the unpredictable nature of the incarcerated population, the correctional environment, and the perception of society. A study of the lived experiences of African American officers can help stakeholders in corrections develop targeted solutions to mitigate these challenges. Recruitment of participants who yield quality data in a study is challenging, especially when using inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Chambers et al., 2020). The study's topic specifically applies to employees of a large midwestern correctional system. In the study, purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. The purposive sampling method targets individuals who have had lived experiences of the phenomenon being researched (Johnston et al., 2022). Today, the internet and social media are widely used by both the young and the old, making them effective communication tools; hence, reaching out to potential participants was a suitable medium. Additionally, most participants use a

specific internet browser for their daily work; therefore, this medium was the most effective way to contact them.

### **Limitations**

This study faced the limitation of how reliable the information given by participants was. In qualitative research, trustworthiness encompasses the rigor of the design, the researchers' credibility, the believability of the findings, and the applicability of the research methods (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Additionally, the degree of accuracy in the findings constitutes the validity of a qualitative study; that is, whether the researcher adhered to the design methods in investigating the research problem using the questions laid down (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The bias of participants was taken into consideration, as the topic pertains to a particular race, and all participants were from that race to share their lived experiences. A careful selection process must be conducted to identify reliable candidates who can provide facts that can pass the validity and reliability tests (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Purposive sampling allowed participants to provide rich information that can pass the validity and reliability test (see Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The researcher's bias also must be considered as an African American correctional officer. Hence, rigorous adherence and methodological observance of the forty questions on the Research Ethics Approval Checklist of the Walden University IRB were implemented honestly (see Walden University, 2021). Being aware of bias as a research participant in the study enabled me to avoid my opinion influencing the research results. This gives the results the rigor needed (see Johnson et al., 2020).

### **Significance**

The study is significant because it raises awareness of the reasons behind the high attrition rate in corrections. The study's findings may inform stakeholders of the reasons for the high attrition rate and enable them to seek lasting solutions that can help reduce it. The research findings can encourage positive social change by triggering effective strategies to increase corrections' staffing levels (see McMichael & Weber, 2020). An adequate staffing level in corrections can, by inference, positively impact the rehabilitation rate of offenders, thereby keeping society safe. The study's findings may fill the gap in understanding the causes of the high attrition rate of African American correctional officers in a large midwestern correctional system. This may help improve the hiring, training, and attrition rates of African American officers in the large midwestern correctional system, and, by extension, the overall staffing situation. Adequate staffing positively impacts facility programming and rehabilitation, which are key components in achieving a low recidivism and crime rate that fosters positive social change. The significance of the study is that it can bring social change in the workplace and society through increased rehabilitation due to balanced and adequate staffing. The community and society may also benefit because efficient rehabilitation of offenders can reduce recidivism and crimes.

### **Summary**

This phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of correctional officers of African American descent to understand the high attrition rate in corrections, and this race in particular. In this first chapter, the background of the study

was highlighted, along with the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the theoretical framework, and the significance of the study. Additionally, Chapter 1 examined the study's assumptions, limitations, scope, and delimitations. The next chapter, Chapter Two, will examine the literature that grounded this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The understaffing of corrections officers in the United States is a social problem because it negatively impacts rehabilitation. Ineffective rehabilitation is a significant contributor to high recidivism and crime rates, which in turn contribute to societal insecurity, as evidenced in the existing literature (Arbour et al., 2024; Ferdik & Pica, 2024; Ganapathy, 2018; Ginneken & Palmen, 2022; Latessa et al., 2020). There has been limited research on the low attrition rate of correctional officers across various racial groups. The history of corrections in the United States has revealed that it is a profession dominated by Whites and males (Patenaude & Golden, 2000). Although more minority races have gained entrance into the correctional field over the past 3 decades, studies are still limited in their representation and probable causes. Research on the low staffing of correctional officers is generalized. Hence, there is a need to conduct further research on the lived experiences of diverse racial groups, including the African American community. The result of this research may inform stakeholders about the specific factors contributing to the attrition of African Americans in correctional officer roles, thereby opening avenues for potential solutions to the attrition problem in corrections. African Americans have unique experiences that make them perceive life and other events differently. An understanding of the lived experiences of African Americans as correctional officers will be a step forward in the search for solutions to the staffing problems constantly plaguing the correctional department.

In light of the foregoing, this study, employing a qualitative phenomenological method, aimed to explore the lived experiences of African American correctional officers with at least 5 years of work experience or those recently retired from a large midwestern correctional system. Through the phenomenological approach, the research looked into the aspects of burnout, stress, effects of correctional environment, training, violent prison environment, and negative public perception to analyze the various coping mechanisms of African American correctional officers. Through the lived experiences of African American correctional officers, this study aims to contribute to the development of various strategies that address the high attrition rate among correctional officers.

To conduct the study, an in-depth review of the literature was conducted through various databases to identify the existing gaps. A thorough review of the literature helped formulate excellent research questions based on peer-reviewed studies that are available. The following topics will be discussed in the chapter: the theoretical framework, high attrition rates, low staffing, burnout, stress, overcrowding, negative public perception, violent environment, research gaps, and the purpose of the study.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

A rigorous literature review explored the lived experiences of African American correctional officers within a midwestern correctional system. The keywords searched included *corrections officer burnout*, *offender rehabilitation*, *stress*, *underrepresentation of correction officers*, *attrition*, and *African American correction officers*, and the databases I used included Walden University Library, APA PsycNet, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, Springer, Sage, Elsevier, Research Gate, Wiley Online Library,

and American Psychological Association. A specific gap was identified in the literature: the limited research on the underrepresentation of African American corrections officers. This gap in the literature necessitated the present study to gain insight into the lived experiences of African American correctional officers and to help search for solutions to the high attrition problem in corrections.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theory of organizational behavior served as the theoretical framework for this study. The theory of behavior in organizations was constructed by Porter, Lawler, and Hackman in 1975. This theory examines how individual-to-organizational relationships emerge and grow, including how groups can exert influence on individuals in organizations and how social influences relate to work effectiveness (Porter et al., 1975, pp. 341, 368). According to Porter et al., the structure and functioning of an organization have a significant influence on the behavior of individuals and groups. An organization's culture and society influence the perception of individuals or groups, which in turn affects their efficiency. This theory is necessary and correlated with the research topic because it examines the relationship between individuals and organizations, as well as how various groups within an organization/organizational policy can influence individuals, affecting their effectiveness and perceptions. In the study, the perceptions of correctional officers regarding their relationships with one another, the administration, public perception, and organizational policy constitute the factors that provide insight into the phenomenon.

Employees in corrections are expected to maintain a high level of efficiency to ensure a secure and safe environment for staff, offenders, and the public (Ryan et al., 2021). In behavioral theory within an organization, employees are influenced by their perceptions of management, other employees, groups, and external factors, such as public perception. The study sought to examine the reason for the high percentage of failure of African American officers during the probation period, even though all officers are given equal opportunities. This theory was selected because it addresses the relationship between individuals within an organization, including the organization itself, various groups, management, and the public, which affects the effectiveness of employees. Interviews, observations, and document reviews were used to gather data on the lived experiences of staff (see Johnston et al., 2022), and the resulting data analysis addresses the research questions.

The research results can help improve staffing levels in corrections by guiding stakeholders and policymakers on strategies to address the low staffing levels of correctional officers. The corrections department constantly faces a low staffing level; however, the percentage of representation of African Americans as officers makes the staffing situation worse. Hence, the study may inform policymakers on the causes of the underrepresentation of African Americans. Diagnosing the causes is a step in seeking solutions to the staffing problem. The behavioral theory in an organization provides the theoretical framework upon which the various factors affecting the behavior and perception of African American officers in corrections are examined. The behavioral theory in an organization focuses on the impact on employees due to their perception,

interaction with other employees, groups, the organizational culture, and external influences. These features aligned with the study's research questions, which focused on the impact of correctional culture, employees, and management on the number of African Americans willing to work in corrections and the percentage that, when hired, become officers.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts**

#### **Correctional Officer Training**

Corrections officers must be adequately trained to perform their duties efficiently. Training after recruitment and annual training are necessary to ensure corrections officers possess the required skills and tools to perform their duties effectively. The correctional officer is tasked with providing security to ensure that the prison facility is safe and protects staff, infrastructure, and visitors from violent offenders. Correctional officers must deal daily with individuals who have been convicted, and some of whom are deemed to be dangerous. Hence, their job is very delicate and often demanding. Adequate training is necessary from recruitment to retirement to equip correctional officers with the right skills to perform their duties effectively (Ryan et al., 2021). The duties of a corrections officer range from providing security, ensuring the safety of staff, offenders, visitors, and structures in a correctional facility, as well as writing reports, engaging in effective communication, locking and unlocking cell doors, managing offenders, and performing other supporting duties concerning the rehabilitation and well-being of offenders (Ryan et al., 2021). The duty of the correctional officer is made more difficult by an overcrowded prison environment, challenges dealing with all categories of

offenders, and working with the high probability of violence erupting at any moment.

The demanding nature of the correctional officer job necessitates that the modalities for recruitment and training be unified and improved to ensure better hiring and training of officers (Miller et al., 2022).

Although the job of a corrections officer is demanding, research has indicated that the training curriculum and recruitment criteria should be standardized across various corrections departments (Ryan et al., 2021). There is no standard qualification for recruitment, though most states rely on the minimum qualification of a GED. However, as reported by 12 states, the number of training hours for new officers ranges from 200 to 299 hours (Burton et al., 2018). The working shift in corrections is 8 hours; hence, a training period of 300 hours will be equivalent to 38 days of training. The demands of the corrections officer job are so challenging that training new officers within 38 days is insufficient for them to execute their duties effectively. According to Burton et al. (2018), most states require new officers to shadow, which helps increase their on-the-job knowledge. However, most states do not require an examination after training to determine if candidates are the right fit for the job. The results of the studies have shown that the training period is too short for new officers to master the curriculum. According to Koedijk et al. (2019), recruits in the Netherlands reported an improvement in self-defense skills immediately after training. However, they needed help applying those skills correctly during follow-up scenarios.

The limitation in training new correctional officers leads to a lack of confidence in their ability to perform their duties effectively. According to Miller et al. (2022), the

self-efficacy index of most correctional officers needs to be higher, and a training module, particularly for officers who lack this area, should be developed. High self-efficacy will lead to the completion of tasks and resilience in the face of more complex challenges. More training will give corrections officers a high self-efficacy index. A unified recruitment and training policy will enable the easy identification of new officers whose motivation for the job is primarily financial. Such officers require the self-efficacy index and may need assistance with duties such as cell searches, checking visitors to prevent the entry of contraband, and other security aspects (Ricciardelli et al., 2021). In summary, the job of a corrections officer is highly complex; therefore, establishing uniform recruitment and training standards across all departments will enhance officers' efficiency and increase job satisfaction, which is a key factor in avoiding low staffing levels.

### **Low Staffing**

According to the existing literature, the understaffing of corrections officers is a cause for concern (Ferdik & Pica, 2024). Correctional officers are the pillars of a correctional facility because they form the life wire of the smooth functioning of any prison. However, despite the importance of the role of a correctional officer, correctional facilities are constantly understaffed (Ferdik & Pica, 2024). The staffing problem with corrections has existed for decades and could be attributed to several issues. According to Hilal and Litsey (2019), turnover in law enforcement is an essential issue for all departments. Replacing new officers is time-consuming because they must be trained, and it is costly, as equipment and other administrative aspects, such as background

checks, must be conducted. Replacing new officers is also time-consuming, as they must undergo training; however, the training is often inadequate because the new officers are thrown into the job due to staff shortages. According to Balsamo and Sisak (2021), nonofficers are often assigned to positions typically held by security staff due to the need for more officers in most facilities. The correctional officer is often faced with problems related to job satisfaction, job stress, issues with supervisors and management, and conflicts with colleagues and offenders (Patenaude & Golden, 2000). These conditions prompt officers to seek alternative coping mechanisms or consider leaving their jobs.

The violent nature of correctional facilities places officers at risk because they are in constant contact with violent offenders. Most correctional facilities have gang activities with violent gang members who are a constant threat to any officer whom they see as an impediment to their activity (Harney & Lerman, 2021). Officers are not only charged with dealing with violent offenders, but they also have to deal with offenders who have mental illness and other psychiatric problems (Ferdik & Pica, 2024). Such adverse working conditions place a high percentage of correctional officers at risk of also developing mental illness, depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Harney & Lerman, 2021). The violent environment is one of the reasons for some officers quitting their jobs voluntarily. Another issue with the consistently low staffing levels in correctional facilities is the poor management of facilities, particularly in conflict resolution. A lack of management skills, coupled with a hostile environment, leads officers to voluntarily leave their jobs (Vickovic et al., 2022).

Officers in correctional facilities are exposed to many traumas, which is one of the reasons they experience mental illness. Correctional officers rank highest amongst law enforcement and other professions that witness traumatic events daily (Carleton et al., 2020). Most officers experiencing mental illness either take many absences or have a high probability of quitting their jobs (Bufquin et al., 2021). Also, according to Hillhouse et al. (2021), some officers suffering from mental health issues continue to work, thereby putting their colleagues and the facility at risk because they are not fully engaged due to their sickness. Such conditions can cause other healthy staff members to become easily stressed and, consequently, develop burnout down the road, especially those with low coping mechanisms. Officers experiencing mental illness will eventually want to leave their jobs, which they see as the cause of their stress or illness, causing staffing to be low. According to Dietz (2020), resilience is a virtue that acts as a coping mechanism, and officers without resilience have a high probability of developing mental health issues. According to studies, a way to improve resilience and staffing levels is to engage in peer support programs facilitated by colleagues. Most officers trust such programs because they are managed by peers, not superiors. Another solution to the low staffing problem is to screen employees during the hiring process for resilience, enabling only officers who are high in resilience to be employed (Opie et al., 2020). However, most correction agencies do not utilize critical incident stress management programs and solutions, such as conducting a resilience test during pre-employment screening.

According to studies, most officers who quit their jobs within the first few years cite a lack of support from supervisors and colleagues as one of the reasons for leaving

(Hilal & Litsey, 2019). The morale of every workplace is essential for a good working environment. When the relationship between colleagues, employees, and supervisors is not good, the work environment becomes less conducive to employees (Hilal & Litsey, 2019). Lack of support and the hostile workplace environment in a correctional setting are among the significant causes for officers to quit their jobs.

The corrections department is affected by the public's perception, influenced by stereotypical conspiracies that paint a negative picture of correctional officers. Such stereotypical ideas are depicted in movies and other social media outlets, affecting the public's perception of correctional officers. This negative perception is one of the reasons that the employment pool for correctional officers is low compared to other law enforcement agencies (Higgins & Swartz, 2020). Correctional stakeholders struggle to recruit new staff due to the public's negative perception of the correctional officer profession, combined with a high turnover rate and consistently low staffing levels in correctional facilities. The large prison population exacerbates the low staffing level, further complicating the correctional officer's job.

### **Prison Overcrowding**

Studies have shown that the population in most prisons exceeds the official capacity, resulting in overcrowding. Overcrowding is one of the causes of ineffective rehabilitation, and with it comes high recidivism and crime rates (Baffour et al., 2023). Prisons all over the world are overcrowded due to policies geared towards incarceration as a deterrence for crime (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). According to Coyle et al. (2016), the total global prison population stands at approximately eleven million offenders, with the

United States, Brazil, China, and Russia collectively responsible for more than half of the total offender population. Prison overcrowding occurs when the offender population is above the official capacity of a prison facility (Baffour et al., 2023). The United States has a high prison population, with about 20% of the prison population in the world, despite having only about 5% of the world's population. The United States has approximately 5,407,000 individuals in prison or under various forms of supervision. Out of this number, approximately 3,668,000 are under probation or parole, and 1,800,000 offenders are incarcerated in federal, state, and county prisons/jails (Buehler & Kluckow, 2024). Rehabilitation programs are hindered by the overcrowded nature of prisons due to bad policies during the era of "Get Tough and War on Drugs" (Mingo & Haskins, 2020). Prison overcrowding is a fertile ground for gang activities, fights, and even slow mass movement that causes delay or cancellation in rehabilitation programs (Ravena & Mahmud, 2019). Overcrowding in prisons negatively impacts offender rehabilitation as well as the working conditions of officers.

Overcrowding in prisons is a significant cause of unsanitary conditions and health problems among offenders as well as officers. Due to the overcrowded nature of prisons, the environment is fertile ground for the spread of diseases (Malataliana, 2021). Correctional officers come in close contact with offenders in their daily routine and are not spared if there is an outbreak of an epidemic. The overcrowded nature of correctional facilities is one of the causes of officers suffering from stress, fatigue, burnout, and mental health issues. A reasonable percentage of officers are forced to quit their jobs due to health issues, and the root cause is the overcrowded nature of prisons (Bufquin et al.,

2021). The perception of officers is negatively affected by the problems caused by overcrowding, leading to them quitting their jobs and thereby lowering the staffing level.

The large offender population in prison is a fertile ground for gang activities, riots, and even extortion of offenders by other offenders to take place (Ravena & Mahmud, 2019). These activities make the work of the corrections officer difficult, forcing many to quit within the first few years. The job of a corrections officer involves conducting physical checks and enforcing laws; however, with a large offender population and a high offender-to-officer ratio, these tasks are challenging and physically demanding. Officers are easily burned out due to their working conditions, and as a result, they often develop the mindset to quit.

Ravena and Mahmud (2019) postulated that a possible solution to the overcrowded nature of correctional facilities is to use other alternative measures in place of incarceration as sanctions for less severe crimes. Reducing the number of offenders in correctional facilities to match their capacity will not only improve the rehabilitation success rate but also ensure the safety and well-being of officers, the public, and the community (Baffour et al., 2023). An overcrowded environment is a conducive place for gang activities, thereby turning prison facilities into a violent environment.

### **Violent Environment**

The violent environment in correctional facilities is a recipe for assaults and gang activities, which all negatively affect rehabilitation, creating a social problem (Butler et al., 2019). The environment in correctional facilities is often overcrowded and unpredictable, requiring officers to perform their duties under challenging circumstances.

Officers have to interact with offenders daily to perform their duties, and among offenders, we have gang members, those suffering from mental health issues, and those who are violent. The violent nature of offenders and the harsh conditions, such as overcrowding, staff shortages, and involuntary overtime, to name a few, under which officers are subjected to the performance of their duties, are the causes of officers' injuries and, in some cases, fatalities (Goulette et al., 2020). Due to the violent nature of a prison environment, officers must always be alert and conscious of their surroundings. Some officers quit their jobs due to the perception that correctional facilities are violent (Butler et al., 2019).

The violent nature of correctional facilities contributes to most officers being burned out, developing stress, and, as a result, decreasing their performance and even making most officers quit their jobs. According to Goulette et al. (2020), male officers suffer from injuries and fatalities more than female officers. Some of the reasons why offenders assault officers are the complacency of officers, the mental health of offenders, gang activities, and offenders' manipulation when they use attacks on officers to be placed in restrictive housing to escape being harassed or assaulted by other offenders. In some cases, officers are attacked due to gang initiation, where a new gang member is asked to assault an officer as a condition to be admitted into the gang (Goulette et al., 2020). In August 2019, Officer Joseph Gomm with the Stillwater correctional facility in Minnesota was attacked and killed in an industry shop while conducting a security round by offender Edward Johnson. Johnson later stated that his purpose was to retaliate against any officer for an incident in 2008, where he lost one of his eyes after an attack by a rival

gang member. Officer Joe Gomm was a victim because he was a correctional officer doing his job (Browning, 2020). Officers must supervise both violent and nonviolent offenders, enforcing rules while supporting their rehabilitation efforts. Some officers find it challenging to balance their prison life and family life, thereby running into conflict with either, which increases the likelihood of job stress (Miller et al., 2022).

Corrections officers frequently encounter disrespectful behavior from offenders. In most cases, these offenders suffer from mental health problems that make them consistently violate rules and escalate minor incidents into violent confrontations (Rembert et al., 2022). Officers must remain ethical and refrain from using excessive force against offenders, even when they are abused and disrespected. The constant disrespect from offenders every day creates a hostile environment, with a ripple effect on the number of officers who quit their jobs (Rembert et al., 2022).

Prison overcrowding makes criminal activities like gangs and contraband smuggling challenging to detect. Its overcrowded nature also makes prisons a suitable habitat for the spread of diseases and limits the distribution of resources. When performing their duties, officers often come into contact with the environment and are exposed to the same conditions as offenders (Baffour et al., 2023). The violent nature of the correctional environment is a significant contributing factor to officers' stress, burnout, mental health problems, and their tendency to quit their jobs.

## **Stress**

Correctional officer stress refers to the emotional and psychological pressure experienced by officers due to the adverse and demanding nature of the prison

environment and job (Taylor & Swartz, 2021). Corrections officers fall under the category of public service personnel, tasked with ensuring society is safe from criminals. The correctional environment is a difficult one to work in due to its violent nature, which exposes officers to traumatic events (Taylor & Swartz, 2021). Corrections officers face a higher percentage of stress than other professions because of the type of clientele they supervise, such as violent offenders and mental health offenders, and also coupled with the fact that they work with limited resources. According to Butler et al. (2019), employees develop stress due to exhaustion when job-related and environmental expectations exceed the employee's potential, resulting from limited resources. Studies have shown that female officers are more susceptible to experiencing stress than male officers (Butler et al., 2019).

A significant problem with corrections is the consistently low staffing level of officers, forcing existing staff to work voluntary or mandatory overtime. Sometimes, staff are required to cover areas they are not trained in or familiar with, which increases their stress levels (Goodwin, 2021). The shortage in staffing levels limits the amount of training staff receive, limiting their ability to perform their duties efficiently. Because officers are limited in their ability and potential to perform their duties, they often become stressed. Low staffing levels cause officers to be under strain in performing their duties, leading to stress, especially for more experienced staff who must continuously train new employees (Vickovic et al., 2022).

Stress acquired from officer employment due to the violent environment and traumatic events witnessed are some of the causes of health issues such as mental illness,

heart problems, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) faced by many officers, and high levels of suicide (Ferdik & Pica, 2024). Traumatic events such as offender suicides or attempted suicides and violent assaults on other offenders, as well as staff, are also other causes of stress (Page & Robertson, 2021). Some officers continue to work despite experiencing symptoms of mental illness, fatigue, and stress. Such behavior puts other officers at risk because those officers who are experiencing illness, stress, and fatigue will be disengaged and need other staff to cover their lapses (Hillhouse et al., 2021). According to Jaegers et al. (2021), corrections officers rank high in mental health compared to other public safety personnel and other high-risk occupations.

Another cause of officers' high-stress levels is the disorderly nature of the offenders. Most offenders disregard authorities and show disdain towards any authority. This attitude is carried into prison, and officers become the target of offenders' disregard for authority. Some offenders are violent, while others are disorderly due to mental health issues. Officers with low resilience develop stress, and some are forced into adopting destructive coping methods, such as excessive drinking and self-medication (Walters, 2020).

The conflict between an officer's role in a correctional setting and family life often leads to stress. Events at work can negatively impact relationships at home and vice versa, leading to tension and stress in both (Walters, 2020). Corrections officers must remain unemotional, firm, consistent, and direct in their communication with offenders. The situation is different at home; hence, most officers are involved in work and family dissonance. Stress brought home from work can disrupt officers' sleeping and eating

patterns, affecting their emotional and psychological behaviors at home (Walters, 2020). Most officers operate under a code of silence, believing that asking for help is a sign of weakness. The work environment and relationships with colleagues and supervisors are other sources of stress. Most supervisors and colleagues are uncooperative and provide very little support to employees, leading to mistrust in the administration and the system. A lack of trust in the system and the work environment leads to stress (Taylor & Swartz, 2021).

A way to avoid stress is to train officers on resilience and employ officers with a high resilience quotient. Additionally, an assessment of the various stress levels and factors that cause stress among public safety personnel will enable the development of effective training on how to manage stress (Carleton et al., 2020). Resilience is a defense mechanism in stress (Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2020). Additionally, peer support programs are highly effective, as colleagues can easily relate to one another and learn from each other's past experiences. In the absence of resilience, most officers become burned out due to the demanding nature of their job.

### **Burnout**

Corrections officer burnout occurs when officers are physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted due to the demanding nature of their duties, leading to disengagement (Tavella & Parker, 2020). Correctional officers work in an unpredictable environment that presents numerous physical and psychological challenges. These challenges and administrative pressures are stressors that contribute to officer burnout. Burnout is defined as the harmful effects of prolonged exposure to a stressful work environment,

resulting in negative mental and physical well-being for employees. Unlike stress, burnout results from prolonged exposure to stressors within a work environment and is more noticeable in public safety professions. According to Jaegers et al. (2021), the following stressors in a correctional work environment contribute to burnout: traumatic events, inadequate staffing, a lack of job autonomy for employees, and mandatory overtime. Employees affected by burnout will exhibit fatigue, a lack of emotional engagement, disconnection from their job, a diminished capacity for empathy towards clients, and thoughts of not being able to accomplish their job responsibilities (Tavella & Parker, 2020). Burnout is a significant issue in corrections, as it affects officers' well-being and reduces their effectiveness.

The work environment's stressors and the high public demand for corrections personnel trigger frustration, fatigue, exhaustion, feelings of lack of accomplishment, and a lack of empathy in officers, leading to burnout. Officer burnout is a significant issue because it negatively impacts the mental and physical well-being of officers, resulting in increased demands for time off and absences from work (McCarty et al., 2019). According to Tavella and Parker (2020), burnout should not be confused with depression, as the former has a known cause while the latter often is without a specific cause. However, some scholars think that burnout often results in depression (Tavella & Parker, 2020).

Burnout in correctional officers significantly contributes to the high staff turnover rate due to a loss of job motivation (Taylor & Swartz, 2021). Besides influencing officers' decisions to quit their jobs, burnout negatively affects officer-family relations and

offenders' rehabilitation (Mack & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2019). Negative supervisor support, a lack of effective colleague collaboration, and daily interactions with offenders are significant stressors that contribute to burnout (Mack & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2019). Working in a violent environment like prison makes officers always perceive the threat of imminent danger; this perception of the threat of violence makes most officers experience burnout (Forman-Dolan et al., 2022). This is more so due to the overcrowded nature of most correctional facilities and the violent/manipulative nature of some offenders. Correctional settings are structured so officers working under stressful conditions are not permitted to exercise self-autonomy due to organizational demands and inadequate tools. The compensation received by correctional officers is a problem, as most officers believe they are not adequately compensated for their job; these perceptions often lead to frustration, which in turn results in burnout (Forman-Dolan et al., 2022).

Correctional staff are subjected to direct violence, which is violence between offenders and staff, or indirect violence, which is violence between offenders and other offenders. The subjection of violence creates a sense of insecurity in officers, resulting in burnout (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020). Violent offenders, especially young offenders, subject officers to constantly witnessing violent scenes if the officers are not at the receiving end of the violence. This aggressive behavior leads officers to perceive their workplace environment as insecure, which can contribute to job burnout.

Promoting a good work environment, including supervisor support, collaboration with colleagues, and training on job safety, effectively prevents officer burnout (Vickovic et al., 2022). Also, training in psychoeducational programs is effective in reducing

burnout. Corrections officer burnout is a significant contributor to the high attrition rate among corrections officers and the negative public perception of the profession.

### **Public Negative Perception**

The public's negative perception of corrections officers refers to the unfavorable view of corrections officers held by the public due to past incidents, stereotypes, and media narratives (Ferdik & Smith, 2017). The public has a negative perception of correctional officers, fueled by misinformation in the media. The news media, music, and the movie industry often portray correctional officers as less educated, racist, inhuman, and brutal to offenders. The news media often give misleading information about prisoners' escapes, further creating more negative perceptions about corrections officers in the minds of the public. Such depictions misinform the public, who have minimal contact with and knowledge of correction officers and the correctional environment (Ferdik & Smith, 2017). To the public eye, corrections officers are viewed negatively, with a hazardous work environment and low pay compared to other law enforcement jobs; such perceptions deter potential candidates from applying to become corrections officers. Additionally, existing corrections officers often shy away from the public due to the negative perception of officers. There are limited interaction and discussion between correction officers and the public regarding correctional issues. The perception of African Americans about law enforcement is due to the long-rooted mistrust of law enforcement by African Americans. The history of slavery and inequality that was practiced prior to the sixties is the genesis of this mistrust of law enforcement by African Americans (MacLean, 2020). African Americans and other minority groups see law enforcement

agencies as tools of oppression against minorities and have a negative perception of these agencies, especially corrections that are placed at the bottom of the pecking order in law enforcement (Wu & Cao, 2018).

Correctional officers' perceptions of their workplace safety and the general environment, often seen as violent and unpredictable, play a pivotal role in officers' performance and tendency to leave their jobs. Most corrections officers see their work environment as hostile due to the violence perpetrated by some offenders on other offenders and some officers. Additionally, some supervisors and colleagues are perceived as uncooperative, making work in a hostile environment even more challenging. Officers' perceptions of a problematic workplace and the risk of being victimized are among the reasons they quit their jobs (Ferdik & Smith, 2017). These negative perceptions not only deter the public from becoming a correctional officer but also influence the decision of existing officers to quit their jobs, resulting in a high attrition rate.

### **High Attrition**

The corrections officer attrition rate is the number or percentage of officers who leave and are not replaced, creating a vacancy. This vacuum not filled creates understaffing, one of the causes of ineffective rehabilitation (Vickovic et al., 2022). The job of a correctional officer is essential to the success of a correctional facility; however, it is also very precarious due to the violent and unpredictable nature of the correctional environment. Though correctional officers have an essential role in a correctional facility, most prisons are constantly understaffed due to a high attrition rate. Issues such as stress, mental illness, job commitment, officers' negative perception of supervisors, safety

issues, and officers' demographics influence corrections officers to voluntarily or involuntarily quit their jobs. In 2018, it was reported that the Tennessee Corrections Institute lost about fifty percent of the officers hired the previous year, while another county jail had to close and relocate all offenders to another facility due to a staff shortage (Ferdik & Pica, 2024).

Studies have shown that attrition can be influenced by organizational commitment, officer demographics, and the organization's functioning. According to Butler et al. (2019), officers with longer service, older officers, and female officers are more committed to the department than younger officers and those with fewer years of service. Job satisfaction also makes officers more committed, and the salary is a key factor in why more veteran staff are committed than younger staff. Additionally, a good working relationship between staff and supervisors will make staff members more satisfied and committed to the agency. Studies show that most correctional staff perceive their supervisor as not supportive enough and their workplace environment to be hostile due to adverse treatment from some colleagues (Hilal & Litsey, 2019). Race might also affect attrition if officers perceive their treatment by supervisors and peers to be racially related. Before the early 1970s, most correctional officers were White. However, other races have been employed in the ranks today. African American corrections officers, contrary to their White counterparts, see their supervisors as non-supportive and have a negative perception of their jobs (Patenaude & Golden, 2000).

The violent environment and stressful conditions corrections officers work under make a reasonable percentage of officers have a mental illness. Corrections officers rank

high in symptoms of mental illness when compared to other public safety personnel and other high-risk professions (Fusco et al., 2021). In another study, it was found that corrections officers had higher rates of PTSD compared to other public safety personnel, emergency response personnel, and other high-risk professionals (Regehr et al., 2019). The issue is that most officers suffering from mental illness and PTSD will desire to sever their employment because they see the corrections department as the cause of their illness, and at times, they might be involuntarily terminated due to health reasons or poor performance.

A high attrition rate negatively impacts the facility's security, as the offender-to-officer ratio will be unbalanced. Such an unbalanced ratio might cause serious security breaches and place pressure and strain on veteran staff tasked with continuously training new employees. Also, a high attrition rate creates a negative impression on the public, making it challenging to recruit new officers (Vickovic et al., 2022). Another problem is the high cost of replacing departing officers, including background checks, uniforms, training, equipment, overtime, and other indirect costs, such as productivity losses (Hilal & Litsey, 2019). By creating a positive working environment and promising programs to inform the public, the stigma that the corrections environment is undesirable will be conquered, and it will attract more applicants. It has been proposed that corrections agencies hire highly resilient officers with a passion for the job so that when faced with adversity, they will not quit (Burton et al., 2022). However, the problem is that the recruitment pool for potential officers is tiny, leaving management with a minimal choice regarding whom to hire.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Chapter 2 focused on the study's theoretical foundation, the literature search strategy, and the literature review upon which the study is grounded. The literature review on the underrepresentation of African American officers in a large midwestern correctional system focused on the causes of a high attrition rate in corrections. Aspects such as inefficient correctional officer training, constant low staffing, prison overcrowding, violent environment, burnout, stress, and public negative perception are contributing factors to the high attrition rate in corrections. The literature review revealed a gap in the literature about the representation of African American correctional officers. Understanding this gap may help create a more balanced racial composition among staff. Also, it may create more legitimacy and acceptance of the correctional system by the public, especially as a significant percentage of offenders are of the African American race. The literature review provides insight into the reasons behind the high attrition rate in corrections. It opens the door to more research on various racial groups of correctional officers represented in corrections. In Chapter 3, the research method of the study, comprising the introduction, research design, and rationale, the role of the researcher, participant selection, research instrumentation, data collection and analysis, issues of trustworthiness, as well as the ethical procedures of the research, will be discussed.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to research the lived experiences of African American correctional officers within a large midwestern correctional system. A review of the literature revealed that the corrections department is constantly plagued with understaffing due to a high attrition rate, with a gap in the literature concerning the reasons for the underrepresentation of African Americans despite African Americans forming a significant percentage of the incarcerated population. Aspects such as burnout, stress, violent correctional environments, prison overcrowding, and correctional officer training all contribute to the high attrition rate in corrections. Exploring the lived experiences of African American officers in a large midwestern correctional system can help shed more light on the exact causes of the attrition of the targeted population and propose strategies to address the underrepresentation of African American officers. This chapter will focus on research design, the rationale behind the design choice, methodology, the role of the researcher, data collection and analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and the method of participant selection.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

In a qualitative study, the researcher must clearly define and articulate the research questions, which will guide the study's purpose and focus. This study was based on two research questions that were used to understand the lived experiences of correctional officers of African American descent in a large midwestern correctional system.

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of African American correctional officers about their workplace environment?

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of African American officers of a large midwestern correctional system that impact their intention to stay or leave?

The qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach was chosen for this study to explore the reasons for the underrepresentation of African Americans as correctional officers in a large midwestern correctional system. Phenomenology is the most suitable approach when studying the lived experience of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). To better understand the phenomenon, in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis were conducted, enabling the researcher to gather valuable data about the lived experiences of African American correctional officers in a large midwestern correctional system. Phenomenology aims to gather data about participants' knowledge about the phenomenon being researched. Personal knowledge, though subjective, is the substance of the study and will enable comprehension of the actions and experiences of a people about the phenomenon (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Phenomenology, through in-depth interviews, provides a platform for understanding the particularities of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020).

I chose the phenomenological approach to understand the underrepresentation of a particular group (African American officers) within a large midwestern correctional system. The phenomenon under study can be best understood through the phenomenological approach, which enables the gathering of valuable data from

individuals who have experienced it. The correctional setting has a distinct culture, and the functioning and environment of the large midwestern correctional system differ from those of other agencies. Hence, only people who have lived the experience of correctional officers within the large midwestern correctional system could provide valuable data that will enable the understanding and exploration of how African American correctional officers in this system interpret their world. As Williams (2021) stated, a phenomenological approach aims to make known the lived experiences of individuals or a group. Through phenomenology, the impression and personal experience of each participant will be captured (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020). The personal experiences of correctional officers from a large midwestern correctional system will be recorded to provide an in-depth understanding of how African American corrections officers in this department are impacted in their jobs. The culture of the correctional field and the lived experiences of correctional officers will impact their actions, motivation, and even their perception of the department, which are key ingredients in attrition. Additionally, the choice of a qualitative study through the phenomenological approach was suitable due to its use of non-numerical variables, including open-ended questions, which enabled me to capture participants' perspectives and particularized experiences (see Howarth et al., 2024).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The correctional officer holds a vital role in any correctional setting; hence, the role of every researcher is paramount for obtaining quality data. The actions and interactions between the researcher and participants significantly influence the study's

outcome (Collins & Stockton, 2022). The researcher needs to establish a firm connection with study participants to create a trustworthy and effective working relationship. In this study, I was the lone instrument for collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data. The topic of the study, the research participants, and my demographics needed to be considered to avoid bias in data interpretation. My position as a corrections officer and, at the same time, an African American might have interfered with my judgment when interpreting the data. Qualitative thematic analysis was employed to minimize bias by maintaining an open mind, being reflective and critical towards the data, and ensuring the meaning of the data was understood by avoiding my own knowledge and preconceived ideas about the phenomenon, thereby impacting data collection and analysis (see Sundler et al., 2019). Through bridling, I improved my reflexivity and purposefully reflected on my preconceived notions about the phenomenon being researched (see Stutey et al., 2020). I am a corrections sergeant with no authority or supervisory powers over the targeted participants; consequently, I was not in a position to influence participants. At my agency, sergeants do not have any authority over staff and are not supervisors. Lieutenants and higher administrators, such as captains, program directors, associate wardens, and wardens, have supervisory roles over staff. Additionally, to avoid bias, the facility where I work was excluded from the selection of participants; therefore, the participant pool was drawn from other facilities within the Midwestern correctional system. My affiliation as a corrections sergeant and my demographics were considered to help me avoid bias by being conscious of and accepting assumptions that might negatively impact the data. Additionally, I must ensure rigor and transparency, which can

enhance the credibility of the study's findings (see Salter et al., 2023). This was achieved through triangulation and the maintenance of a reflective journal throughout the data collection and analysis process. Further triangulation, peer review, and participant verification of their transcribed interviews were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the study, as well as reduce the effects of researcher bias (see Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

An important aspect of data collection was establishing a good rapport with the participants, which fostered mutual trust by creating a receptive and convenient environment that facilitated free and open communication for each participant. Additionally, practicing empathy and active listening skills while avoiding judgmental attitudes facilitated open and accessible communication with participants (see Rubin & Rubin, 2021). Creating mutual trust and recognizing my position as an insider who works for the department helped avoid bias and made me conscious of the researcher's position (see Nguyen et al., 2021). During the interview, open-ended questions accompanied by probes, where necessary, enabled the participants to express themselves and provide rich data on their lived experiences (see Salter, 2023). Additionally, attention was paid to the participants' verbal and nonverbal cues, which were documented, as they played a crucial role in data analysis. In analyzing the data, I transcribed the interview, as this enabled me to become immersed in the collected data, allowing me to identify rich themes that reflect the narratives of the participants (see Braun & Clarke, 2022).

## **Methodology**

The study's methodology was qualitative, employing a phenomenological design, as this approach enabled an understanding of a social problem through the perceptions of individuals or a group (see Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The phenomenological design involves collecting data in a natural setting, allowing participants to express their subjective perceptions.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

In this phenomenological study, participants were selected from various facilities within a large midwestern correctional system and had to meet specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The sampling technique used to select participants was a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling, which enabled the selection of sufficient participants who met the study's criteria and research questions (see Campbell et al., 2020; Iliyasu & Etikan, 2021). Snowball sampling is using already recruited participants to recommend acquaintances as participants of the study (Darko et al., 2022) Snowball sampling, though one of the popular methods to recruit participants in a qualitative study, might lead to selection bias since this method may probably rely on a few who sometimes recommend only those in their inner circle (Delello et al., 2021). However, snowball sampling would have been used if the desired number of participants was not obtained, and efforts were made to recruit participants from all midwestern correctional system facilities to achieve a balanced perspective on the phenomenon. The purposive sampling technique was used to select participants from the said large midwestern correctional system who met the following inclusion criteria. Firstly, participants needed to be

corrections officers of a large midwestern correctional system with 5 or more years of experience, or retired corrections officers of a large midwestern correctional system who served for 10 or more years and retired within the past 5 years. Secondly, these or former employees had to be of African American descent because race was the study's primary determinant. The lived experiences of those within the inclusion criteria, as gathered through interviews and observation (Johnston et al., 2022), provided rich data to determine the reasons for the underrepresentation of African American officers in a large midwestern correctional system. The exclusion criteria were any employee of the said large midwestern correctional system who was not of African American descent, and those of African American descent with less than 5 years of service.

Information-rich cases are the methods of identifying and selecting individuals, participants, or a group of highly knowledgeable participants about a phenomenon being researched due to their experience (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion and exclusion criteria that were established helped target participants with a high level of knowledge about the lived experience of African American officers. Purposive sampling is the most effective technique for identifying and selecting participants in information-rich cases. Purposive sampling, also known as selective sampling, enables participants to be selected based on their qualifications and the specified criteria (Curtis & Keeler, 2021). The participants selected were of African American descent and either a present corrections officer with 5 or more years of service, or a retired officer from a large midwestern correctional system, excluding the facility where I worked. The lived experiences of participants were gathered through interviews and the observation of verbal and

nonverbal cues (see Johnston et al., 2022), which constituted the data to answer the research questions.

The number of participants recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, using flyers and other social media, was initially anticipated to be between 10 and 20, but ultimately reached nine when data saturation was achieved. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), saturation is the stage at which no new themes emerge if further data collection and analysis are performed, ensuring that the collected data adequately address the research questions. According to Marjan (2017), a large sample size is not a necessary criterion for getting valuable data in a phenomenological study, especially as an individual is capable of generating several themes and concepts.

### **Instrumentation**

The data collection was conducted through semi structured interviews, following the interview guide that I had drafted. Semi structured interviews in qualitative studies enable a flexible and interactive approach that yields rich information and allows the methods of data collection to be linked to the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). A semi structured interview was the most appropriate method for the study because it is considered the best approach for collecting people's perceptions and opinions about a phenomenon (see Kallio et al., 2016). A solid theoretical foundation and literature review were established, which helped in developing the interview guide. The questions were designed to seek answers through the how and why of the research questions (see Bryant, 2024). Caution was taken to ensure proper alignment between the interview guide and research questions. Theoretical saturation was employed because it allows for the

collection of data to the point where no new facts emerge from further data collection (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Theoretical saturation notwithstanding, the quality of data collected is determined by the type of research questions and the professionalism of the interviewer (Roberts, 2020). Triangulation, researchers' reflexivity, peer debriefing, and thick, detailed descriptions were used to gain credibility and rigor. Data triangulation, which involves the use of multiple sources of data from interviews, peer debriefs by other researchers (Presti et al., 2020), and a rich, detailed description of the participants lived experiences, were employed to achieve rigor, credibility, and validity. A thick, rich description enabled a detailed explanation of the phenomenon by providing a detailed account of the participant's lived experiences, thereby enhancing comprehension, increasing credibility, and promoting transferability (see Geertz, 2008). Additionally, my reflexivity was practiced by maintaining a journal of notes on verbal and nonverbal cues, as well as my biases. This helped me avoid influencing the data with personal perception during analysis, as this made me conscious of my biases.

The purposive sampling technique was used to determine the participant sample (see Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling enabled the recruitment of participants who met the inclusion criteria. The snowball sampling technique was also used to supplement the sample size. Participants lived experiences were gathered through interviews and observation of verbal and nonverbal cues (see Johnston et al., 2022), which constituted the data to answer the research questions.

A semi structured interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed in accordance with the recommendations for semi structured interviewing outlined by Dejonckheere and

Vaughn (2019). According to Hall (2006), interview questions in a qualitative phenomenological study concerning a group of people in a profession should gather information focusing on recruitment, retention, satisfaction, and the benefits received. The choice of a semi structured interview with an interview guide comprising mainly open-ended questions enables the exploration of critical points in the study, while also adapting the questions to the participant's responses to gather rich data through open-ended questions and probes as necessary (Salter et al., 2023). This choice fully enabled the exploration of the lived experiences of African American correctional officers within a large midwestern correctional system. I developed open-ended questions, which underwent peer review by the department's content and methods expert. The instruments developed were based on the themes and research objectives, drawing inspiration from the literature review's identification of the race factor in correctional officers (see Patenaude & Golden, 2000; Wu & Cao, 2018). The questions are focused on the study's objectives, which were to gather the correct information that will provide answers to the research questions. When developing the questions, care was taken to avoid using acronyms and jargon that might obscure participants' understanding of the questions (see Ikart, 2019). Fifteen open-ended questions served as a guide, tailored to ensure consistency across all participants and to answer the research questions. However, flexibility during the interview permitted variation in asking questions and interjecting with probes whenever necessary (see Rubin & Rubin, 2021).

The interviews were one-on-one conversations between each participant and me, conducted either face-to-face or via the Zoom video platform, at the participants'

convenience. Although it has been traditional to conduct qualitative interviews face-to-face, the COVID-19 outbreak has led to numerous innovations in communication, resulting in a preference for virtual communication among the majority of people (Wellock & Tarpey, 2023). According to Gray et al. (2020), virtual communications, especially during research interviews, are preferable because participants feel more comfortable in a setting that is safe for sharing information and protecting their privacy. Participants in the study were selected from many facilities of a large midwestern correctional system. Hence, the Zoom platform was the most convenient format for recording interviews, allowing flexibility in scheduling and being cost-effective for both the researcher and participants. These interviews were recorded using a voice recorder or audio recorded, as applicable to the Zoom platform interview, with the prior authorization of each participant. Additionally, a backup voice recorder was used in case any principal recorder malfunctions. The interview with participants lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, following an interactive, conversational pattern that allowed participants to freely express themselves and share their perspectives on their experiences within the large midwestern correctional system. Active listening skills, combined with empathy, helped create a rapport with participants (see Rubin & Rubin, 2021). To maintain rigor and consistency during data collection and analysis, excellent observation skills are required to note nonverbal cues and write field notes, as these aspects will enhance data interpretation (Johnson et al., 2020).

## **Expert Review**

Expert review is often used to evaluate a questionnaire or question guide in a study to detect errors and improve the question guide. Experts with excellent knowledge in the subject matter are often requested to provide an appraisal of the draft questions and offer suggestions as needed. This exercise provides the opportunity to use fresh eyes that can detect errors and questionnaire problems that may be overlooked due to the developer's familiarity, which can lead to problems and errors being missed. Through this review, the opportunity to identify linguistic and structural errors and ensure that questions are understood equally by all respondents (Ikart, 2019). Such reviews can be conducted by either an individual or a group of experts, who review the draft questions and provide their opinions based on their respective expertise. Experts knowledgeable in the area of study have published professional papers in the field of research or the targeted population of the study (Davis, 1992). Through expert review of the interview guide and research questions of the study, critical Internal validity concerns were addressed, thereby increasing the study's credibility.

As the study was a qualitative phenomenological one, an expert in qualitative research methods conducted a review of the interview guide and research questions to ensure they aligned with the research purpose. The drafted research questions and interview guide were submitted to the department's review committee for validation through the committee chair. Members of the review committee, who are experts in qualitative research, after a careful review of the research instruments, validated the

interview guide and research questions as proposed; therefore, no revisions to the said instruments were needed.

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

A systematic data collection method using semi structured interviews with correctional officers of the said large midwestern correctional system that falls within the inclusion criteria was adopted in this study. The outcome of research is largely influenced by the instruments used to collect data; therefore, it is crucial to employ the most effective methods of instrument collection (Davis, 1992). The data collection process was structured but flexible to ensure that rich data were collected. Participants were recruited through public flyers and various social media platforms. The identification of the targeted group was conducted by posting flyers in conspicuous areas around the facilities of the large midwestern correctional system. After this phase, the snowball sampling technique was used to recruit additional participants as needed, enabling the acquisition of participants with more experience and enriching the data for recruitment purposes. The use of various social media platforms (Leighton et al., 2021), such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, was employed to contact participants recommended through snowball sampling and those who had retired.

The pool from which participants were recruited comprised African American corrections officers with the said large midwestern correctional system with at least 5 years of experience, or a former officer with the large midwestern correctional system who served for at least 10 years and retired within the last 5 years. The study excluded African American corrections officers with the said large midwestern correctional system

who are below 5 years in their employment, African American officers from the same facility where I worked, officers of other races other than African American, and former officers who were African American and did not work for 10 or more years before retirement.

Through purposive sampling and, to some extent, snowball sampling, the selection of participants provided rich data and enabled a comprehensive understanding and answers to the research questions. Steps were taken before the commencement of interviews to ensure all participants understood the purpose, procedures, benefits, potential risks of the study, and their rights. To ensure a better understanding of the study's purpose, participants were provided with an informed consent form that guarantees the confidentiality and privacy of their data. The consent form also informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study should it become inconvenient and outlined the debriefing procedure. This process allowed participants to ask questions, build trust between me and the participants, and promote transparency. Additionally, a semi structured interview guide comprising 15 questions (see Appendix A) enabled participants to introduce more related topics, depending on their perceptions and experiences, facilitating a flexible exploration of their lived experiences and guiding the interview process. Probes were interjected during the interviews to provide clarity and shed light on the participants' narratives. I avoided any pressure that might coerce participants into responding to questions by providing sufficient time for participants to reflect. If participants desired a break during the interview, I accommodated this request. The consent form also enumerated procedures for contacting the participants if any

follow-up was needed. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participant's identity and uphold confidentiality and anonymity in the study. Additionally, the full interview transcript will not be publicly released; only the coded data will be made available for publication. The full transcript of the interviews shall be securely stored for 5 years, after which it shall be destroyed. The intention is to protect the privacy of research participants and ensure that the collected data are used only for the purpose outlined in the study. Each participant was given the option to use a particular pseudonym; in the absence of this, I chose one. According to Lahman et al. (2022), the use of pseudonyms in qualitative research is a standard procedure. However, providing a choice for participants allowed those who attached particular importance to their names and might have preferred the use of their real names. This enhanced the protection of participants' privacy and morale, increased trust, and enabled them to provide rich information that enhanced the study's credibility (see Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Lahman et al., 2022). Assuring participants that their privacy and confidentiality were protected enabled them to provide accurate details of their lived experiences, thereby increasing the study's validity. The interview began with a brief social interaction to establish familiarity and mutual trust, which was essential for obtaining rich information during the interview (see Rubin & Rubin, 2021).

One-on-one face-to-face interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform, depending on the participant's preferences, logistical considerations, and comfort level. Consent to record the interviews using audio recorders only was sought prior to the interview. The recording allowed for an accurate capture of the participants' words and

narratives. Transcription followed immediately, but no later than 48 hours after each interview, wherein the content of the interviews, nonverbal cues, tone of voice, and expressions were all captured to help interpret the data.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis is crucial in qualitative studies, as it enables researchers to attribute meaning to participants' perceptions, draw conclusions, and make recommendations for future studies. This study employed Moustakas's (1994) descriptive coding process, in which words and phrases are labeled during the first and second coding cycles of data analysis, utilizing a multi-step process. Using the Moustakas coding process enabled me to be conscious of biases through bracketing, thereby permitting a comprehensible understanding of the participant's perspective. Moustakas's coding process is the most appropriate in a phenomenological study where the purpose is to understand a particular phenomenon through the lived experience of individuals or a group (Moustakas, 1994). The study aimed to understand the lived experiences of African American corrections officers within a large midwestern correctional system. Coding in qualitative data analysis enables labels to be given to specific words, text, or phrases to identify themes related to the research questions that will permit the researcher to easily identify when data saturation is reached, which is when the conduction of further interviews reveals no new facts or themes (Saldana, 2021). The data were transcribed and coded immediately after the interview, as this allowed for data saturation to be determined as soon as it was achieved. The line-to-line coding allowed me to immerse myself in the data, providing a deeper understanding for analysis. Furthermore, thematic analysis was employed to more

effectively identify, analyze, and interpret emerging themes during the analysis phase (see Braun & Clarke, 2022). The interviews were transcribed verbatim to accurately reflect the participants' perceptions. The transcripts served as the primary source of data for analysis, which was achieved through a line-by-line coding process, utilizing the first and second cycles of coding, thereby enabling immersion in the data (see Saldana, 2021).

Initial codes were assigned to words or phrases that convey similar messages, and then the data were reviewed three times during the first and second cycles of coding. This permitted the creation of codes that embody the participants' ideas, concepts, and perceptions (see Braun & Clarke, 2022). Codes with similar meanings were grouped together into categories. Then, categories with words or phrases that were similar were grouped together to form themes that reflect various patterns in the data (see Braun & Clarke, 2022). A rigorous review of the transcripts and codes, conducted through triangulation, permitted the comparison of codes, categories, and themes across all transcripts, ensuring that validity and rigor were maintained. A thorough investigation and comparison of the various codes, categories, and themes from the interviews and my diary notes enabled a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the lived correctional experience of participants (see Aguas, 2022).

To avoid influencing the results of the analysis, a reflexive journal was kept wherein actions and nonverbal cues during interviews were documented. This permitted the study results to have rigor, validity, and transparency in data analysis. To help organize the data, the NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used (Allsop et al., 2022). It is recommended to utilize qualitative data analysis software when data

management is complex or when the data is extensive and includes visual elements such as photos and videos (Dalkin et al., 2020). NVivo helped organize the data, enabling the quick interpretation of the results. NVivo also permits researchers to work on multiple projects or interviews simultaneously, simplifying the analysis process (Allsop et al., 2022).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a study encompasses the rigor of the design, the researcher's credibility, the believability of the findings, and the applicability of the research methods (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The trustworthiness of research results, built on the reliability and credibility of the research (Ahmed, 2024), is of paramount importance. Triangulation, which involves using multiple sources to validate the accuracy of information received, was practiced. In the study, multiple participants from different facilities were included, allowing their perspectives to be compared and verified against one another. The interpreted and analyzed data were shared with participants for them to verify the accuracy and ensure it aligned with their perspectives. Member checking was practiced because it is an essential tool in establishing the credibility of the study (see Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Participants were sent a copy of their transcribed interview via email and given 1 week to review, verify its accuracy, and make any necessary corrections or additions. If a response was not received within 1 week, the emailed transcript was presumed to be correct and authentic. In a qualitative study, reliability refers to how solid, consistent, and conformed the researcher is, regarding the chosen method. Reliability refers to the consistency of the approach with other researchers using

the same design. Validity refers to the degree of correctness of the research results, achieved using a suitable design and predetermined research questions that probe the research problem (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are four elements, also known as the pillars of a qualitative study, that are necessary to determine a study's trustworthiness.

Credibility refers to the accuracy of the findings and facts as presented in the data. The method used in collecting and analyzing the data, as well as conducting the entire study, is essential in determining the study's credibility (Connelly, 2016). For credibility, the participant's perceptions must be accurately captured and analyzed (Thomson & Crowther, 2022). Conducting one-on-one interviews, either on the Zoom platform or in person, enabled intimate and direct interaction with participants, as well as facilitated better observation of nonverbal cues and body language.

Dependability refers to the study results' ability to withstand the test of time. Similar results would be obtained if the same procedure were repeated with the same participant, methods, and context (Kakar et al., 2023). Providing details of the research methods and process enables the study to be replicated by other researchers, ensuring transparency in the research. Triangulation is often used to ensure the results are not due to errors or other factors. The transcripts, field notes, and other documents used in the study will be made available, along with an audit trail, ensuring that all processes are fully traceable.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the study results can be applied to similar situations. This was achieved by providing a detailed description of the study's

locations, participants, and procedures. The sample pool and strategy, along with the procedures used, were explained in detail, enabling other researchers to apply the study's findings to similar settings (see Ahmed, 2024).

Confirmability in research refers to the study being conducted with objectivity and without bias, thereby ensuring the study's credibility. Confirmability refers to the researcher's neutrality, which ensures that no bias is introduced during the gathering and analysis of data (Connelly, 2016). To establish confirmability in the study, excellent and accurate notes and observations were taken down, transcribed, and coded. Also, peers were engaged to review these notes, observations, and the recorded data, and hold several peer debriefing sessions. Furthermore, participants were shown a copy of their transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their interview and make corrections where discrepancies were found. These practices limit the researcher's perspective, influencing data interpretation and analysis, and thereby enhancing the confirmability of the findings (Thomson & Crowther, 2022). Strictly observing the above four aspects permitted the study to maintain rigor and trustworthiness.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Compliance with ethical procedures is not only essential in any research but is also a commitment to integrity and respect for the participants. Personal information about participants is collected, including recordings and observations of their private lives, which, if not protected, can compromise their integrity and honor (Zhang, 2020). Permission and clearance were obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) with authorization number 06-06-25-1051463, with expiration date of 06-05-2026 prior to

recruiting participants. All participants were given an informed consent form via email, wherein their rights, obligations, and expectations were explained in detail. In the informed consent form, I assured participants that their data will be kept confidential and their identities will be kept anonymous. Ensuring participants' data anonymity and confidentiality is essential in research (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). This was achieved by assigning pseudonyms to all names and ensuring that only authorized individuals have access to the data. The protection of participants' data was guaranteed, as steps were taken to ensure that it is not breached, lost, or stolen by storing it in a secure location (see Ross et al., 2018). The data will be destroyed after 5 years of research, and only me and faculty staff supervising the study will have access to the data within this period. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study if it becomes inconvenient. Participants were not put at risk by participating, nor did they personally benefit from participating in the study, thereby upholding the principle of beneficence (see Rana et al., 2022). Steps were taken to prevent harm to the participants, and modalities for addressing any harm that may occur were provided in the informed consent form (see Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). To minimize potential harm, such as physical harm, financial loss, social humiliation, and psychological distress, detailed explanations were listed in the informed consent form, and a detailed debrief was carried out (see Rana et al., 2022). Deceptive practice was avoided to maintain ethical standards. Participants were informed in the informed consent form about the purpose of the research, the reasons for their selection, and the entire interview process. Consent must be obtained without coercion, and participants must be informed

of their right to withdraw from the study at any time if they feel they are being prejudiced (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). The study does not fall under the exception of using deception; hence, all procedures were detailed to participants and followed by them.

The above ethical issues were avoided or minimized by providing a detailed explanation of the study's purpose and that participation is voluntary in the informed consent form. Additionally, a briefing with participants before data collection helped ensure that every participant understood their rights, obligations, and privileges.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 of the study outlined the research methodology and design. It detailed the qualitative phenomenological approach, which is best for examining the lived experiences of African American officers with a large midwestern correctional system and the rationale behind the choice. The selection of participants using the purposive sampling strategy, complemented by snowball sampling, followed, as it permitted a selection and recruitment strategy to provide valuable data.

Procedures for instrumentation and the researcher's role were elaborated upon. Data collection methods were conducted in a convenient environment, with open-ended questions being the primary aspect. The interview process was semi structured, with probes used as necessary, to enable an in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences. The transcription of the interviews followed immediately or not later than 48 hours. Data analysis was next after data collection, with descriptive coding using the first and second cycles. Line-to-line coding was adopted to immerse myself in the data.

Trustworthiness was then elaborated upon with the four principles or pillars: credibility, reliability, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter concluded with measures to ensure rigor and validity, examining ethical considerations. Issues such as anonymity and confidentiality, risk of harm, right to withdraw, protection of participants' data, avoidance of deception, and informed consent were all detailed. Chapter 4 will discuss the collection of data, data analysis, the trustworthiness of the data, and the results of the findings.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The phenomenological approach was used in this study to understand the underrepresentation of African American officers within a large midwestern correctional system. The phenomenon under study can be best understood through the phenomenological approach, which enables the gathering of valuable data from individuals who have experienced it. To better understand the phenomenon under study, two research questions guided the process, enabling us to gain insight into the lived experiences of correctional officers of African American descent within a large midwestern correctional system.

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of African American correctional officers about their workplace environment?

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of African American officers of a large midwestern correctional system that impact their intention to stay or leave?

In this study, I identified the problems and challenges faced by African American correctional officers in the midwestern region, as well as some coping strategies they use to navigate their daily duties in corrections. The chapter will focus on the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and the summary of the chapter.

## Setting

The research interviews took place in the midwestern region of the United States of America, where all nine interviews explored the lived experiences of African American correctional officers from a large midwestern correctional system. Following the approval of the Walden University IRB on June 6, 2025, with authorization number 06-06-25-1051463, and expiration date of 06-05-2026, I initiated the recruitment process. Flyers and posters (see Appendix B) announcing the recruitment of volunteers were posted near identified correctional facilities and in prominent areas of cities with a large concentration of correctional officers, which would easily catch the attention of the target audience. Additionally, flyers were disseminated on various social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn (see Appendix C), requesting that volunteers respond via the email addresses provided in the flyers. A total of 15 volunteers responded to the invitation, but 12 were retained after screening based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Chapter 3. After the screening exercise, the informed consent form was sent via the email addresses provided by the respondents.

The informed consent form was then sent to the 12 candidates. At this stage, one candidate declined to participate, and another did not respond to the informed consent form. All subsequent correspondence to his email address, as well as his phone number, became undeliverable. Ten participants responded with “I consent” to the informed consent form. The 10 participants were given the option of either a face-to-face interview or a Zoom meeting interview. All participants opted for the Zoom meeting interview, stating that it would save them travel time and provide sufficient privacy. However, one

of the 10 participants, due to other commitments and data saturation, was unable to participate in the interview. The dates and times of the various Zoom meetings were then agreed upon by me and the participants, often giving preference to what suited them most for their convenience and privacy.

### **Demographics**

Nine African American correctional officers from a large midwestern correctional system took part in the interview. The inclusion and exclusion criteria allowed for the selection of 12 volunteers, of whom nine ultimately participated in the interview. The nine participants were comprised of born African Americans and first-generation immigrants from Africa with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of the participants provided rich data concerning the phenomenon in question. The first-generation immigrants came from English- and French-speaking countries with tribal dialects. Also, the cultures of the various first-generation immigrants are diverse. The inclusion and exclusion criteria had participants who were corrections officers of a large midwestern correctional system with 5 or more years of experience, or retired corrections officers of a large midwestern correctional system after 10 or more years of service and retired within the past 5 years. Also, these officers or former employees were of African American descent. The participants lived experiences, as captured through interviews and observation (see Johnston et al., 2022), provided rich data that helped illuminate the experiences of African American corrections officers of a large midwestern correctional system and potentially shed light on their underrepresentation. The age range of the participants was

between 42 and 69 years. To ensure the confidentiality of all participants, codes were assigned to the nine participants, numbered P1 through P9. All participants, based on their ages and years of service, were seasoned or retired corrections officers with extensive knowledge of corrections and the criminal justice system.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted through interviews with nine correctional and retired correctional officers of a large midwestern correctional system. All interviews were conducted through the Zoom platform, as all participants preferred this method, as it saved travel time and ensured their privacy. Participants were recruited through the purposive sampling strategy. Notices and flyers were posted in conspicuous areas around facilities and public places in cities with a large concentration of corrections officers. The inclusion and exclusion criteria selected twelve volunteers, out of whom nine ultimately participated in the interview. The informed consent form was sent to all 12 selected participants; 10 responded with I consent and two declined. However, one of the 10 participants was unable to participate in the interview due to other commitments, and the interview had already achieved data saturation. I prepared the participants' files in advance and assigned pseudonyms to all participants prior to the interviews. The interview began with a brief social interaction to establish familiarity and mutual trust, which was crucial for obtaining rich information during the interview (see Rubin & Rubin, 2021). An introduction to the research was followed by an explanation of the research purpose, as well as the option for participants to withdraw from the interview at any time and request that any collected data not be used in the study.

Participants were sent email and phone message reminders 1 day before and in the morning of the interview. I logged into the Zoom system 10 minutes before the interview and ensured everything was in order. Additionally, a text message was sent to the participant 5 minutes prior to the appointment, notifying them that the Zoom meeting was open. A 15-item semi structured interview guide was used to conduct the interview, with clarification and probes used whenever I did not understand, or the participant was not explicit. The choice of a semi structured interview, guided by an interview guide comprising mainly open-ended questions, enabled the exploration of critical points in the study, while also adapting the questions to the participant's responses. This approach yielded rich data through the use of open-ended questions and probes, as needed (see Salter et al., 2023). The interviews were all audio-recorded using Zoom recording software and Sembly AI application software. The Zoom and Sembly AI applications provided transcripts of the interviews; however, these transcripts were a summary report. The transcription of all interviews was manually conducted within 48 hours after the interview by me, after which copies of the transcripts were sent to the various participants for member checking. The practice of member checking was essential in establishing the credibility of the study (see Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Participants were then notified by email and text messages to review the transcripts and make any necessary additions or deletions using Microsoft Word editing, so that both the original script and the edited portions would be available. This process of member checking accurately reflected the participants' perceptions. I also kept a reflexive journal, which allowed me to avoid any bias, thereby ensuring the credibility of the study. I adhered to all research ethical

guidelines, including obtaining consent, assigning pseudonyms to all participants, ensuring the confidentiality of the collected data, and storing the data in a safe and secure location. According to the Walden University protocol, the stored data will be securely retained for 5 years and then permanently deleted (Walden University, 2021). All participants were notified to forward the corrected transcript via email within 7 days; otherwise, the first version was taken as the correct perspective of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

This phenomenological study employed Moustakas's (1994) descriptive coding process, wherein words and phrases are labeled during the first and second coding cycles of data analysis through a multistep process. Using the Moustakas coding process enabled me to be conscious of biases through bracketing, thereby facilitating a comprehensible understanding of the participants' perspectives. Bracketing and keeping a reflexive journal helped me be conscious of my preconceived notions and biases, especially being a corrections sergeant with experience in the correctional field. Keeping a reflexive journal and bracketing enabled me to conduct data collection and analysis with an open mind, taking the words of participants at face value without bias. Moustakas's coding process is the most appropriate in a phenomenological study where the purpose is to understand a particular phenomenon through the lived experience of individuals or a group (Moustakas, 1994). The study aimed to understand the lived experiences of African American corrections officers within a large midwestern correctional system.

Coding was done by giving labels to specific words, text, or phrases that identified themes related to the research questions. This process allowed me to easily identify when data saturation was reached, that is, when conducting further interviews would reveal no new facts or themes (see Saldana, 2021). The data were transcribed and coded within a few hours, but no later than 48 hours after the interview, which permitted data saturation to be determined as soon as it was attained. The line-to-line coding allowed for immersion in the data, providing a deeper understanding for analysis. Further, thematic analysis was employed to more effectively identify, analyze, and interpret emerging themes during the analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2022). The interviews were transcribed verbatim to accurately reflect the participants' perceptions. As the transcripts served as the primary source of data for analysis, the process of horizontalization was employed, wherein the transcript was read repeatedly to identify codes, which were then grouped into categories and ultimately into themes. According to Delve et al. (2022), horizontalization enables the researcher to accord equal value to all statements made by participants, thereby ensuring that no statement is disregarded before themes are identified. An example of this process is provided in Table 1 below.

Using open, axial, selective coding as well as thematic analysis coding the following themes emerge from the data: (a) inadequate training, (b) limited support and distrust of African American officers by other staff, (c) negative perception and distrust by part of the African American population, (d) ineffective equal opportunity slogan and admins impatience with African American officers, (e) divergent views on systemic racism, (f) Part of African Americans distrust for the criminal justice system, and (g)

diverse motivation to become a corrections officer. The NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software was used to determine the frequency of participants' responses using specific words or phrases. However, the data were manually coded and arranged using Microsoft Word and Excel.

**Table 1**

*Codes-Categories-Themes*

Themes	Negative perception & distrust by part of AA population.
Categories: Focused coding	Negative view and distrust, seen as the enemy, seen as a sellout, negative influence of media
Codes: Initial coding, open coding.	P1 said; "People look at us at times and term us sell outs and even call us derogatory names". P3 said; "At times I tried to encourage some blacks and talk to them about the department, but that is not what they feel on the outside". P2 & P9; "The public has the wrong notion about corrections officers". P1 said; "The population will still look at you as a cop and they don't trust you". P2 said; "Seeing a black man in uniform, they say this is one of them". P3 said; "When you want to enforce the rules, they look at you, saying you are doing too much following Whiteman's way". P1 & P3 said; "The things and stuff people see on TV, they think is reality".

**Evidence of Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a study encompasses the rigor of the design, the researcher's credibility, the believability of the findings, and the applicability of the research methods (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The trustworthiness of research results, built on the reliability and credibility of the research (Ahmed, 2024), is of paramount importance. Triangulation, which involves using multiple sources to validate the accuracy of information received, shall be practiced. In the study, multiple participants from different facilities were used, allowing their perspectives to be compared and verified

against one another. The interpreted and analyzed data were shared with the respective participants for them to verify the accuracy and ensure it aligns with their perspectives. In a qualitative study, reliability refers to how solid, consistent, and conformed the researcher is, with regard to the chosen method. Reliability refers to the consistency of the approach with other researchers using the same design. Validity refers to the degree of correctness of the research results, achieved by a suitable design and predetermined research questions that probe the research problem (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, also known as the pillars of qualitative study, were met to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

Credibility was ensured by accurately capturing and analyzing the participants' perceptions (see Thomson & Crowther, 2022). One-on-one interviews, conducted through the Zoom platform, allowed for intimate and direct interaction with participants, enabling a more accurate observation of nonverbal cues and body language. Member checking, an essential tool in establishing the credibility of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), was practiced. Participants were sent a copy of their transcribed interview and given 1 week to review it, verify its accuracy, and make any necessary corrections or additions.

Dependability refers to the study results' ability to withstand the test of time. Details of the research methods and process were provided, along with an audit trail, which enabled external scrutiny and ensured the study could be replicated by other researchers, thereby promoting transparency in the research. Triangulation was employed to ensure that the results were not due to errors or other factors. The transcripts, field

notes, and other documents used in the study were maintained with an audit trail so that all processes are traceable.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the study results can be applied to similar situations. This was achieved by providing a detailed description of the study's locations, participants, and procedures. The sample pool and strategy, along with the procedures used, were explained in detail, allowing other researchers to apply the study's findings to similar settings (see Ahmed, 2024). In some cases, direct quotes from participants were used, thereby allowing readers to hear the participants' voices and expressions.

Confirmability in research refers to the study being conducted with objectivity and without bias, thereby ensuring the study's credibility. A reflexive journal was kept, wherein the researcher's biases were examined to maintain neutrality in gathering and analyzing data (see Connelly, 2016). Excellent and accurate notes, as well as observations, were taken down. Also, the collected data were transcribed and coded by me. Furthermore, the participants were shown a copy of their transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their interview and make corrections where discrepancies were found. These practices limit the researcher's perspective, influencing data interpretation and analysis, and thereby enhancing the confirmability of the findings (Thomson & Crowther, 2022). Strictly adhering to the above four aspects enabled the study to maintain rigor and trustworthiness.

## Results

In this section, the results of interviews conducted with nine participants on their lived experiences as corrections officers in a large midwestern correctional system are presented. The study had two research questions to investigate how the lived experiences of corrections officers in a large midwestern correctional system determined the representation of African Americans as corrections officers in that system. The research was conducted through semi structured interview guides with nine participants who met the inclusion criteria and were available and willing to participate. It should be noted that 10 candidates who met the inclusion criteria, as indicated on the informed consent form, were invited to participate; however, one was unable to participate for reasons unrelated to the study.

The section below presents the study's results in response to the various research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of African American correctional officers about their workplace environment?

The lived experience of African American correctional officers of the large midwestern correctional system shows a combination of factors ranging from inadequate training, limited support by other staff, ineffective application of policies, and divergent views about systemic racism. Participants expressed their worries about the falling standards of training and that training needs to be tailored to adapt to the diverse cultural background of African Americans, especially the first-generation immigrants.

Additionally, participants stated that most of the African American staff receive very minimal support from the other staff. Support in corrections is essential as teamwork is the core of every correctional institution. In line with the lack of support, participants were of the view that the administration exercises limited patience with African American staff, as most are not given the opportunity to adapt and may not be given a second chance. Participants were also of the opinion that their lived experience is affected by the ineffective application of the equal opportunity slogan. Talking about perceived systemic racism, there were divergent views, with participants from one facility expressing that they experienced systemic racism, while participants from the other facilities reported the nonexistence of systemic racism. It is worth noting that a higher percentage of participants held the view that they received fair and equal treatment.

These challenges notwithstanding, many participants discussed various coping strategies, such as seeking support from another staff member if they could not receive it in their own area of work. Resilience was also discussed as another mechanism to bypass the numerous obstacles.

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of African American officers of a large midwestern correctional system that impact their intention to stay or leave?

The experience of African American corrections officers that impacts their intention to stay or quit was shaped by inadequate training, the negative perception and distrust by part of the African American population, lack of support from other staff, and the dislike by part of the African American population for law enforcement.

Inadequate training impacts the lived experience of African American officers as they are not equipped with the proper tools and training to work as corrections officers. On another note, a proportion of the African American population has a negative perception and distrust of corrections officers. This distrust is extended to African American corrections officers and, at times, discourages potential candidates from pursuing a career in corrections. According to participants, this distrust of corrections officers is a result of a proportion of the African American population's dislike for the criminal justice system, which they perceive as a tool of oppression of the African American population.

The use of mainly manual and, to an extent, computer-assisted data analysis processes resulted in the identification of seven themes from the interviews with the nine participants. After the interviews were conducted and the data transcribed, the next phase involved coding. According to Creswell and Creswell (2022), significant words or statements related to the research questions were then arranged into categories, which were subsequently grouped into themes. The following themes emerged from the interviews: (a) inadequate training, (b) limited support and distrust of African American officers by other staff, (c) negative perception and distrust by part of the African American population, (d) ineffective equal opportunity slogan and admins impatience with African American officers, (e) divergent views on systemic racism, (f) Part of African Americans distrust for the criminal justice system, and (g) diverse motivation to become a corrections officer. Issues such as discrimination, racism, and a lack of equal opportunity were not themes of unanimity, and an analysis of the data revealed that a

particular facility experienced such events. The question on participant demographics was excluded from the data analysis due to concerns about confidentiality. Each theme was then developed from the codes and categories, and in most instances, using direct quotes from participants to provide a realistic picture of their lived experiences with corrections officers in a large midwestern correctional system.

**Table 2**

*Overview of Themes*

Themes	Number of participants	Frequency in the data
Part of African Americans' hate of the criminal justice system	09	15
Distrust/limited support of AA by other staff	09	15
Negative perception & distrust by part of the AA population	09	14
Ineffective equal opportunity/admins' impatience	09	14
Inadequate training	09	13
Diverse motivation to become CO	09	09
Divergent views on systemic racism	09	10

The themes that emerged from the data included contributions from nine participants, who discussed themes such as distrust, systemic racism, collaboration, and equal opportunity, among others. In some instances, participants disagreed, while the majority agreed on the existence of certain practices. Table 2 lists the various themes, the

number of participants who contributed to each theme, and the number of occurrences of each theme in the data.

### **Theme 1: Inadequate Training**

The job of a corrections officer is delicate and crucial for the efficient functioning of a correctional facility; hence, the training provided to corrections officers must be of a high standard. All participants agreed that the training provided for new staff was inadequate, particularly in self-defense. Most African American officers, especially new staff, receive very little collaboration from veteran staff, especially their mentors who were of a different race. Training of new officers in the midwestern correctional system is conducted in two phases, each lasting six weeks, at the academy, where new officers are taught self-defense and other theoretical aspects of the job. After 6 weeks, the new officers are paired with mentors in various areas of the facility to undergo training in what is called “on-the-job training” (OJT). Participants believed that the training had become less shorter and not taken seriously, to this regards P2 stated,

Today the training is kind of shorter, but I don't think they get all the aspects of training but the only think a can remember is you have to get the training to use firearms, I don't think the training is enough today.

P5 stated,

The training for me was a little ehh, I don't think it was taken seriously. I think till today it was because of the people who were doing the training. Some took it seriously, some did not, and then it is either that the trainers did not care about the

people they were training, or they did not care about the aspect that they work in a prison.

P8 stated, “Ahh, as at the time I was hired, ahm the training was ok but over the years the standard became low, maybe because they were short staff and wanted more staff, so every Tom and Dick was hired.” Also, the problem was the lack of support African American new officers receive from their mentors, especially if they are not of the same race.

Though African Americans did not face racial discrimination overtly, most of the new African American staff do not get enough support from other staff. This point was pointed out by P5, who stated, “Support, as far as support, I did not feel the support from a lot of the guys, I think a handful of officers.” Additional training is also needed in communication, particularly with the increasing number of African American officers, especially first-generation immigrants from Africa. P1 stated, “I feel that there needs to be better communication and have more people of color because we have a different dialect of how we communicate with others, especially the incarcerated people.” The perspective of a Field Training Officer (FTO) P9 summed it all up when he stated, “My perspective, I felt the training was thorough, but to me it was not enough.”

## **Theme 2: Limited Support and Distrust for African American Officers by Other Staff**

The smooth functioning of a correctional facility necessitates that officers work as a team. However, most African American officers feel they don't receive enough collaboration from other staff, especially those of a different race. A lack of support from

other staff to new African American staff is one of the reasons they either quit or are terminated due to poor performance. P2 stated, “Support, I won’t say we have that much support, only if you have worked there for a while, then you know your way around. Support is not good enough.” P6 reaffirmed this position when he stated,

They never saw good in anything you did. Another thing is when you are new, they don’t know where you stand. Are you going to be one of the officers who will be bringing drugs to offenders? They will be skeptical about you until you prove yourself that you can do the job. However, some people, even if you prove yourself, it is still not good enough for them.

P2 was categorical when he stated, “Support, as far as support, I did not feel the support from a lot of the guys, I think a handful of officers.” Support that comes with familiarity, that is, after working for a while, will often work to the detriment of new staff who might quit due to a lack of support or be terminated due to poor performance. P4 believed African American new staff had to look out for themselves. P4 stated, “Well, I don’t think there is really a lot of support; they just let everyone look out for themselves.”

However, as far as collaboration goes, most participants from a particular facility believed that limited or no support was provided to new African American staff, whereas the majority in another facility held the opposite view. P7 stated, “Well, to the best of my knowledge, I don’t see any sort of discrimination or bias in that matter. Like where I worked, we don’t have any kind of discrimination as corrections officers.” P1 affirmed the position of P7 when he stated, “From my experience, it has been pretty good. Like 50 to 50, some are willing to help, but some are just kind of rare road you, but not giving

you that kind of information you need to succeed.” P9 was of the same opinion when he stated,

Personally, at the time that I was hired, there were very few African American, or I can say people of color. The minority officers at the time helped me a lot, but also, I was not discriminated against at all by the majority of officers.

African American correctional officers, especially those within their probationary period, are not trusted by the other correctional staff. Most new officers of African American descent find life in corrections difficult for the first 12 months because they are either pushed away or receive a lukewarm attitude from staff of a different race. The high Black offender population makes most new employees of African American descent not be trusted. According to veteran staff, confidence and trust in African American correctional officers is gained after some years. Although with time, most African American staff gain the confidence of their colleagues, issues of distrust are still observed. P8 talking about distrust stated,

The accent problem is mostly with first-generation African American immigrants, and for African Americans born here, there is always one excuse for the other.

They are always tagged as criminals; they have gang affiliation, or they are going to bring in drugs and contraband into the facility. They don't trust them, and even the ones they can trust, like African American first-generation immigrants, they claim that they have an accent.

P8 continued, “Apart from that, we have new staff who don't know who to talk to. There is that level of distrust.” P8 continued by saying,

When I started the job in 2007, I was told by a Caucasian that I looked like someone who was going to bring drugs into the facility. I have faced a lot of derogatory comments about my skin color from coworkers. I can tell you that more white Caucasians than any other race have brought in contraband than any other race.

Some new African American staff members get burned out within weeks or months of starting due to a lack of support or distrust from other staff. P5 stated,

Actually, I have seen African people who get tired of the job within weeks; they are done. Why, because somebody holds on to them, you are this, you are that, but the same individual who brings those concerns is known to do exactly what they are trying to prevent the other officer from doing.

The distrust of African American officers by other staff due to the high percentage of African American offenders and the nature of their offenses, in some cases, continues after many years of employment. Such distrust at times brings in frustration on the part of African American officers who might quit their jobs or act irrationally, leading to termination. P6 corroborated this fact in his statement:

Another thing is when you are new, they don't know where you stand, (are you going to be one of the officers that will be bringing drugs for offenders), they will be skeptical about you until you prove yourself that you can do the job. However, some people, even if you prove yourself, it is still not good enough for them.

The level of distrust makes African American officers feel targeted by the other races. P5 had this to say:

They even go to the extent of telling you that you need to go work somewhere else. When we have the same amount or perhaps a lot of other officers who are doing it, but for some reason, black officers are being targeted.

It was also witnessed that at one of the facilities, African American officers did not have any issues of mistrust from the other races. According to P3, 7, and 9, all races work in harmony as a team with no distrust. P7 stated,

But to talk about black officers, the rate of turnover is higher than that of whites. Well, the cause might be negligence of duty, personal integrity, or the way you carry yourself, but it has nothing to do with discrimination.

Talking about distrust, some minority officers interpret a lukewarm attitude as being pushed away or distrusted. P9 had this to say:

I was well received by the minority officers, but the other non-minority officers did not, not that they pushed me away or did anything to discourage me or anything, but did not really care much, as to them, I was just one more officer; they did not care.

### **Theme 3: Negative Perception and Distrust by Part of the African American Population**

African American correctional officers face a lot of negative reactions and, at times, rejection from part of their African American peers in the community. African American correctional officers are seen in uniform as part of the criminal justice system, which is seen as oppressive towards the African American population. The distrust for the criminal justice system by part of the African Americans originates from the harsh laws

against minorities in the past, the history of slavery and inequality (MacLean, 2020). The public has a negative perception of correctional officers, fueled by misinformation in the media. These laws saw the minority population in all the instances of the criminal justice system increase disproportionately to their percentage of the total population of the United States of America. The African American offender population in the correctional system is about 45%, compared to 13% percent of the U.S. population, causing the African American population to have hatred for the criminal justice system.

Correctional officers of African American descent are seen by their peers as part of the system oppressing African Americans. This has caused part of the African American population to lack trust in any of their own wearing the uniform. Such negative perception about being part of the system and the oppressor by part of the African American population makes most eligible African Americans shy away from law enforcement and corrections jobs. P1 summed up this point when he narrates,

At times you don't want to tell people what you do because the population will still look at you as a cop and they don't trust you, you know what I mean, at times they say I can't hang out with a cop.

P2 continued when he stated,

The negative perception is always there, and so far, as you are in uniform, you are seen as one of the law enforcement family. Each time you put on the uniform and step out, the public sees you as a police officer, and at times, seeing a black man in uniform, they say this is one of them.

The public does not understand the functions of corrections officers and holds a negative perspective about them due to the media's negative influence. Part of the African American population, in most cases, will not want to associate with any African American who is a corrections officer based on what they saw in the media, especially movies about prisons. P1 went further when he stated,

They think we bully and abuse incarcerated people because of our authority, which is not the case, because often inmates violate rules and then get in trouble. The things and stuff people see on TV, they think is reality, which is not. Maybe in certain states it might be a reality, but in my own state here in the Midwest, it is certainly not the case.

The high African American offender population also affects the mentality of some officers of African American descent, causing them to quit or commit professional errors, leading to their termination. In this line of reasoning, P3 stated,

The way the black inmates interact with you and look at you, at times using foul language on you. At a time when you want to enforce the rules, they look at you, saying you are doing too much following the Whiteman's way.

Most African American officers quit or get terminated within their first year, if not 6 months of employment. The high Black offender population in some way affects their psychological thinking, prompting them to quit or commit unethical faults. P3 buttressed this point when he stated,

The percentage of blacks in the midwest is 12% and the percentage of blacks in the correctional system is 44%. It kind of affects you, why the ratio doesn't match

what we have coming out of the prison system. What we have in the prison system, psychologically, affects you.

#### **Theme 4: Ineffective Equal Opportunity Slogan and Admins' Impatience With African American Staff**

The slogan equal opportunity has been given different interpretations and applied in several ways. African American correctional officers complained of the lack of transparency and ineffective application of this slogan. In the large midwestern correctional system, promotions are conducted on a seniority basis, rather than based on the highest-qualified candidate. In most cases, African Americans see this as being sidelined, and some make the decision to quit. P4 had this to say:

They don't do it the right way, I think how it used to be, if it is your time, it is your time. How sergeants are promoted, if you are the next guy for promotion in seniority, they don't pass you. If someone is qualified and not a senior, they cannot be promoted, regardless of whether they are a minority. Basically, you cannot promote except you are the most senior on the list.

According to P8, equal opportunity is a mere slogan: "Ahh, as far as I know, equal opportunity is just a slogan that is not being carried out, and the objective is not being achieved." However, P3, 7, and 9 held a contrary view; they saw equal opportunity as being effectively applied. According to them, employees must take the initiative to benefit from equal opportunities. P3 stated,

Equal opportunity means it will not be given to you on a platter of gold. You have to seek it. The equal opportunity, when you seek it, you give yourself the chance to get. But if you don't seek it, the equal opportunity will not be given.

P7 stated,

Well, I think I don't see any difference between white and black corrections officers. We are given equal opportunities, we are given equal training, we are given equal pay, or there is no discrimination, there is no difference in such terms.

P5 stated, "Equal opportunity does not mean that if you show up you will be given a job; you still have to demonstrate the ability to do the job, hold the job, and do it to the best of your ability."

The administration in the large midwestern correctional system exercises little patience with African American correctional staff than they do with White staff, according to most of the participants. According to the participants, the administration always takes quick action against African Americans but are hesitant or take no action when similar acts are committed by White staff. P6 stated, "Like I said earlier the way they look at African Americans. They look at them with higher scrutiny than Caucasians starting the job." The higher scrutiny makes the administration exercise little patience with African American officers. About exercising little patience, P5 stated, "I think from my experience, when you have a black officer who is fired, it is always done quickly." P2 continuing in the same line of administration, exercising limited patience with African American officers, stated, "African American and from my experience many African Americans are fired for very little mistakes and are not given the opportunity to correct

themselves, and that is a problem on its own.” P8 was not indifferent to administration intolerance and lack of patience with African American officers. He stated, “One thing I have not said here by mentioning the color of the skin is that there is so much high discrimination when it comes to administration, the African American is being discriminated against.” P8 again stated,

They cannot tolerate them because they claim that they have an accent, and every little mistake they make, they are fired. The same mistake they make, somebody who is white makes the same mistake, and they keep them on the job.

Though most of the participants were of the view that African American officers are not given the same opportunity to amend errors like other races by the administration, P3 held a contrary position when he stated, “So, when you expose yourself to all these, it gives the authorities or the administration the leverage, especially when you are on your probationary period.” Talking about committing errors or exposing yourself, P9 stated,

Secondly, most African Americans come to work, they forget that that is their job, and when they see the large number of African Americans who are inmates, they forget that they are officers and want to be friends or family with the inmates to help them out.

### **Theme 5: Divergent Views on Systemic Racism**

Systemic racism is a phenomenon in the United States of America society, and the large midwestern correctional system is not an exception. However, there are mixed opinions about the existence of systemic racism. A portion of the participants attested to the fact that they underwent systemic racism, while the other half said there is no

discrimination or racism at their workplace. It is worth noting that all the participants who said they underwent racial discrimination were from one facility, while the other half were from three different facilities. Officers who perceive a lack of support from their supervisor or a workplace environment to be hostile due to adverse treatment from some colleagues claim to be racially discriminated against (Hilal & Litsey, 2019). Race might also affect attrition if officers perceive their treatment by supervisors and peers to be racially related. African American corrections officers, contrary to their Caucasian counterparts, see their supervisors as non-supportive and have a negative perception of their jobs (Patenaude & Golden, 2000). P8 about racism said,

In this country and even in corrections, there is systemic racism. I will say this and stand to be corrected, I have about five people who got promoted ahead of me, but I had to train them after their promotion. Systemic racism is going on everywhere, but very high in corrections.

P5 was of the same opinion when he stated,

They are willing to put you down, willing to condemn you, and willing to show you that this is not for you. They even go to the extent of telling you that you need to go to work somewhere else. When we have the same amount or perhaps a lot of other officers who are doing it, but for some reason, black officers are being targeted.

The views of P1, P3, P7, and P9 showed no racial discrimination towards staff of African American descent. Their statements were categorical that at no instance did they

experience any racial profiling or discrimination throughout their career. P3 about not being discriminated against stated,

For all the years I have been with the department, I have been treated fairly, treated transparently. I have not come across any superior officer who thinks or treats me badly, who thinks that I don't deserve the position, or has tried to witch hunt me. So far, I have had a good harmony and working relationship with all races; all the people above me have gone well."

P9 was categorical in his statement when he stated, "I was not discriminated against at all by the majority of officers." P7 was of the same view when he stated,

Like where I worked as a corrections officer, we don't have any kind of discrimination as corrections officers. They have taken us one step further by giving us training together, and we enjoy the day-to-day activities as corrections officers.

P7 continued,

But to talk about black officers, the rate of turnover is higher than that of whites. Well, the cause might be the negligence of duty, personal integrity, or the way you carry yourself, but it has nothing to do with discrimination.

#### **Theme 6: A Portion of African Americans' Distrust of the Criminal Justice System**

Some portion of the African American population has a long history of distrust of the criminal justice system. This dislike dates to the end of the abolition of slavery and the passing of harsher laws on minorities. Laws and policies during the era of "Get Tough and War on Drugs" were very harsh on African Americans (Mingo & Haskins, 2020).

These unfavorable laws contributed to the large African American population in prisons and other criminal justice sectors. This distrust by part of the African American population hinders most African Americans from joining law enforcement and significantly corrections. At times, the few who venture to join are discouraged and may quit due to the negative treatment given to them by their peers and part of the African American population. African Americans have the perception that the criminal justice system and corrections are mere mediums that the majority White population uses to oppress the African American. Such negative perception has been passed down to the present generation from the post slavery generation and through the negative influence of the media, especially the movie industry, which portrays corrections as an oppressive instrument on civilians.

As a result of the history of African Americans and the criminal justice system, most African Americans shy away from working as corrections officers. An analysis of the data shows that the small percentage of Black officers is composed of more than 87% immigrants from Africa. P5 talking about this point stated,

So I think corrections will also benefit from black officers. If I could speak to the blacks in the US, they have not fully explored how to come in and work. Because we have seen how some have done really well and retired. When we talk of African American officers, we have a majority of African American corrections officers who are people who came from Africa, and their numbers are growing.

The distrust for corrections can be seen by the willingness of African Americans to be gainfully employed as private security rather than work for the corrections department. This point was buttressed by P3, who stated,

At times I tried to encourage some blacks and talk to them about the department, but that is not what they feel on the outside. I see blacks doing private security, and I talk to them that if that is what they are doing for a private person paying them peanuts, they will make better money with great benefits working for the Department of Corrections with a better retirement plan. Some listen, but most don't, maybe because of the perception they get from people who listen to

YouTube and other social media that discourage blacks from entering the system.

P5 had a similar observation about the unwillingness of African Americans to work in corrections when he stated, "I don't know the history of a lot of the blacks here in the United States, but I think most of them are not interested in corrections." P9 put his lived experience about African Americans not willing to work as corrections officers this way:

I have also had people I have tried to recruit, but they say they cannot be in that uniform because they have their brothers in prison and cannot come and work in prison to enforce rules against their own.

### **Theme 7: Diverse Motivations to Become a Corrections Officer**

The motivation to become an employee of a department is often fueled by the passion for a career in that department. However, the data collected from participants showed diverse reasons why they decided to become corrections officers. Studies have shown that the factors motivating people to choose a career in corrections are the criminal

justice career path, work environment, social connections, and the benefits (Higgins & Swartz, 2020). Career path is a huge motivator for those entering the corrections field. Though studies have shown that most people choose corrections as a second option, they were originally motivated to pursue a career in law enforcement (Higgins & Swartz, 2020). Out of the nine participants, only two (P4 & P8) had a passion to pursue a career in law enforcement. P4, in his interview, stated, “In high school, I played college football and basketball. I studied psychology, I went into criminal justice, and also studied psychology so I could get into law enforcement.”

Social connection refers to knowing someone who works or has worked in a particular department, and due to their career, one is attracted to pursue a career in the same field. P7 was the only participant who knew someone who worked in corrections and was attracted to the profession by this friend. P7 stated,

I had a friend who works with a corrections facility, and while discussing, he brought up the idea that I should join him in the department of corrections. He motivated me to join, and I joined, and one way or the other, I have no regrets.

According to Higgins and Swartz (2020), an energetic, flexible, and exciting work environment is another factor that motivates respondents to engage in a career in corrections. All the respondents in the study had no prior knowledge of the work environment in corrections. P3, for instance, went into corrections to test and see if it was a good career, while P2 and P9 went into corrections for the sake of money. Regarding money, according to Ricciardelli et al. (2023), some people are persuaded to pursue a career solely for the economic benefits it offers. P2 stated, “So I started to look for work,

I worked in a group home for about a year, then got into corrections, all just to be able to feed my family, all is just for money.”

The various statements from the participants reveal that most of them had no clear understanding of what a career in corrections entails and were motivated to join corrections for different factors rather than career-motivating reasons. This goes to attest to the fact that African Americans attach very little interest to a career in corrections.

### **Summary**

The data analysis of this phenomenological study on the lived experience of African American correctional officers in a large midwestern correctional system began with the description of the setting and demographics of the participants. This was followed by data collection through semi structured interviews on the Zoom platform. The coding phase then followed, where codes were merged into categories and categories into themes. Data analysis was followed by an explanation of the data's trustworthiness. The results of the data collected and analyzed elaborated on all the themes, followed by a concluding section.

The interview with the participants revealed many themes, as enumerated above, with some standing due to their unanimity amongst all participants. The theme African Americans distrust for the criminal justice system stood out amongst all seven themes, as all participants were in agreement in their interviews that one of the reasons why African Americans are underrepresented in the correctional system is their mistrust for the criminal justice system. Also, the distrust part of the African American population has of black correctional officers, fueled by a turbulent past with the criminal justice system and

negative influence from the media, discourages many eligible African American candidates from engaging in a corrections career. The distrust of fellow coworkers was another important point put across by participants. Aspects such as systemic racism and the equal opportunity slogan had divided opinion, and from the demographics of participants, it was clear that interviewees from a particular facility were the ones in favor of the practice, while the participants from three other facilities stated they enjoyed a good and cordial working relationship with all races and the administration. All participants believed that an organized strategy for recruiting African Americans would increase the number, especially since those who stayed in the department performed very well.

To conclude this study, the next chapter will interpret the findings by drawing conclusions based on the data and literature review, state the study's limitations, and provide recommendations to all stakeholders of corrections, particularly the midwestern correctional system. To bring the study to a close, the implications of the findings will be discussed, and a final concluding statement will be presented.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

This phenomenological study aimed to shed light on the underrepresentation of African American corrections officers in a large midwestern correctional system. Semi-structured interviews using a flexible interview guide made up of open-ended questions, focused on the problems and challenges faced by African American correctional officers in the midwestern region, as well as some coping strategies they use to navigate their daily duties in corrections. The flexibility of the interview guide permitted participants to fully share their experience. The inclusion and exclusion criteria, aligned with the study's purpose, permitted nine African American corrections officers to participate in the interviews, providing rich data to shed further light on the phenomenon under study. The study was grounded in the theory of behavior in organizations by Porter, Lawler, and Hackman.

Studies have been conducted on the representation of various races in corrections, but there have been limited studies on the reasons and mechanisms behind the underrepresentation of African Americans. Additionally, there have been limited or no studies conducted on African American corrections officers in the midwestern region of the United States.

This concluding chapter of the study examines the interpretation of the findings within a phenomenological context (see Creswell & Creswell, 2022), discusses limitations, provides recommendations, outlines the study's implications, and draws an overall conclusion. The perspectives of the participants revealed the following themes

from the data: (a) inadequate training, (b) limited support and distrust of African American officers by other staff, (c) negative perception and distrust by part of the African American population, (d) ineffective equal opportunity slogan and admins impatience with African American officers, (e) divergent views on systemic racism, (f) A Part of African Americans distrust for the criminal justice system, and (g) diverse motivation to become a corrections officer. A portion of African Americans' lack of trust for the criminal justice system and the distrust of African American officers by the African American population stood out as the themes in unanimity.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The research results confirm some existing notions about the criminal justice system and African Americans. Through the lived experiences of African American correctional officers, the findings of the study showed the unwillingness of most African Americans to pursue a career in corrections due to the historical past and distrust for the criminal justice system. The notion of African Americans' unwillingness to become corrections officers or enter the law enforcement career is further worsened by perceived systemic racism in the department and the distrust the African American population has for fellow African Americans who wear the uniform.

Participants in the study, in their interviews, addressed the issue of African Americans not willing to join corrections and law enforcement, which they see as a tool for oppression, confirming the facts in the literature review. Harsh laws against minorities in the past saw the number of minorities increase tremendously in prison, causing animosity between African Americans and the criminal justice system (Mingo &

Haskins, 2020). Talking about the distrust by part of the African American public of the criminal justice system and African American officers, P9 had this to say:

The public to me, like I said, most African Americans look at us, or minority officers, as hey, you are my brother, why are you with them. That is the main thing, you are with them, why do you have to go be with them? They look at us like we are on the other side.

This distrust by part of the African American population, coupled with the fact that some intending applicants might have someone they know who is incarcerated, discourages African Americans from seeking to become a corrections officer, or for newly employed African American officers to quit within a few months of being hired. African Americans and other minority groups see law enforcement agencies as tools of oppression against minorities and have a negative perception of these agencies, especially corrections that are placed at the bottom of the pecking order in law enforcement (Wu & Cao, 2018). The distrust by a part of African Americans can be exhibited by the low percentage of born African Americans and a high percentage of first-generation immigrants from Africa amongst the African American corrections workforce. Born African Americans are either under pressure from their peers and family not to become corrections officers or might even be affected by the large African American offender population. P5 in his interview stated, “When we talk of African American officers, we have a majority of African American corrections officers who are people who came from Africa, and their numbers are growing.” when talking about the growing percentage of first-generation African American immigrants in corrections.

The motivation to enter a profession is principally fueled by the passion for that profession, followed by the benefits such a profession offers (Higgins & Swartz, 2020). Of the nine participants, only one had an interest in making a career in law enforcement. The other eight were either pushed into corrections due to the pay, to provide for the family or maybe to try out and experiment if the department of corrections might be a good job. P3 in his statement had this to say:

I went in to test it to see that if it is good I will stay and if not, I will leave. But as time went on, I discovered that it was something or a job I wanted, went in and saw the benefits, and found out that they were so good.

The study's findings confirmed the existing literature on stress and burnout. African American corrections officers, due to the high percentage of African American offenders, face a lot of pressure. P4 captured the situation in the following words:

African American officers have a lot of pressure because some might feel that they should be doing a little more to help out in the rehabilitation of African American offenders, but you have to take into consideration that you cannot treat any inmate differently than anyone else.

Some officers of African American descent last only a few months due to the amount of pressure they encounter. P5 buttressed this point when he stated, "Actually, I have seen African people who get tired of the job within weeks they are done." The stressful correctional environment is further complicated for African American officers due to the large African American offender population. A lack of trust in the system and

the work environment leads to stress (Taylor & Swartz, 2021), one of the main reasons why African American corrections officers have a lot of stress.

Another finding of the study that corroborates the existing literature is inadequate training given to new officers. According to the literature, the duration of training of new officers is short, making officers forget most of the curriculum they are taught in the academy by the time they start working as officers (Koedijk et al., 2019). The participants were in agreement that the training standards have fallen and that new officers often begin the job without a mastery of the skills required of a corrections officer. P4, as concerns inadequate training stated,

But I don't think the training is enough, like you have the mental part of it, they give you a lot of written material and how to spot things, but I think the physical capabilities, like self-defense and all that, are lacking.

Concerning systemic racism, at times claimed by some people to exist in the United States, the findings of the study show no evidence of systemic racism in the large midwestern correctional system. Participants from all the other facilities, except one, attested that they had experienced no racial discrimination. Most participants have demonstrated that they received equal treatment compared to other races. P7 was emphatic about not being discriminated against when he stated,

Well, to the best of my knowledge, I don't see any sort of discrimination or bias in that matter. As a corrections officer, we didn't have any kind of discrimination among our colleagues. They have taken us as one, they give us training together, and we enjoy the day-to-day activities as a team. So, I personally don't have any

regret or any biased mind against whether you are a white or a black corrections officer.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study had nine participants of African American descent in a large midwestern correctional system, with a qualitative phenomenological design. African Americans were considered as participants because their representation as officers is low compared to the percentage of African Americans who are incarcerated and involved as defendants in other instances of the criminal justice system. The choice of the Midwest was due to the limited studies available in the region. However, the study's results cannot be generalized due to several limitations.

The first point is that the participation of nine African American officers cannot be taken as a reflection of the situation of all African American officers in the large midwestern correctional system. The lived experiences of the nine participants cannot be generalized as representative of the experience of all African Americans in the large midwestern correctional system or the entire United States. The study's results cannot be generalized to a broader population due to the limitations of the participants and the geographical area covered. For any study results to be generalized, they must be applicable to a broader population, not just the sample of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). However, a detailed description of the process and results was provided to enable the findings to be applied to similar conditions. The sample pool and strategy, along with the procedures used, when explained in detail, enable other researchers to apply the study's findings to similar settings, thereby enhancing the transferability of the results

(Ahmed, 2023). The concept of transferability refers to the extent to which the study results can be applied to similar situations. The study provided a detailed description of the locations, participants, and procedures used.

The study was also limited to the findings of the participants' lived experiences, which may have influenced their decision to quit or stay. Although the interview guide had questions covering most aspects of a correctional officer's daily routine, the focus was on the causes that might lead them to stay or quit their job. Aspects like the various coping skills used by participants to stay with the department were not explored. Another aspect of limitation might be participant response bias. Recruitment of participants was conducted through flyers posted in various correctional facilities and select areas of several cities. Some participants who were motivated to participate may have had different lived experiences than those who chose not to participate. Additionally, the responses of some participants may have been motivated by their desired or perceived expectations rather than their actual lived experiences. Additionally, comments from a few participants were clustered around a particular facility theme, as participants mentioned racial discrimination in their statements. This suggests that there may be issues of culture and leadership to address at the facility level, rather than being generalized.

### **Recommendations**

As a result of the study's limited sample size, geographical limitation, and non-exploration of some aspects enumerated under the limitation head above, the following will be recommended for future studies. Firstly, future studies should utilize a larger

sample size from different regions of the country to enhance generalizability. A larger sample size can enable the capture of the lived experiences and perspectives of many participants from different regions. Secondly, the coping mechanisms of African Americans who chose to stay or have a successful career in corrections should be explored, as this can better inform stakeholders about the various skills needed for African Americans to be successful as corrections officers. Thirdly, it is recommended that studies be conducted in one of the facilities where all participants in their statements mentioned racial discrimination, as there may be issues of culture and leadership to address in that facility. It should be noted that participants from the other facilities stated that no racial discrimination existed in their facilities. Lastly, I recommend that studies be carried out separately on born African Americans and first-generation immigrants from Africa. Findings of the study show that first-generation immigrants from Africa do better than born African Americans and to have a better understanding of both groups, separate studies should be conducted. Studies on the same topic with different groups with different cultural backgrounds will shed more light on which group thrives better in corrections.

### **Implications**

This phenomenological qualitative study has implications that go beyond the lived experiences of the participants. The implications of the study extend from individual officers to the midwestern correctional system, to the entire corrections department in the United States, and to society. Positive change can occur through actions or inactions that portray a standpoint on a particular subject. Positive social change can impact a small or

large societal group through an individual's or group's actions of kindness, positive creativity, or simply boycotting corporations with poor social practices (McMichael & Weber, 2020). Social change can be initiated by a single individual, group, or company through practices that benefit the public. Positive social change brings about changes to society, whether economically, socially, culturally, or even behaviorally. This can be achieved through acts of good work and service to the community, which will positively impact the lives of many and bring about change (Reupert, 2023). Providing services that make a difference aligns with good ethical research, focusing on areas that address the needs and challenges faced by society. The research questions and gaps must be oriented towards improving the community's quality of life and well-being (Reupert, 2018). Research geared towards the well-being of society will always yield solutions to the problems and challenges that society faces.

The study's findings may lead to a change in how African American officers navigate the correctional system. Officers of African American descent will be better informed about the reasons for their underrepresentation and will seek ways to improve their performance and mentality in corrections. By conducting research on the lived experiences of nine African American corrections officers, the purpose is to explore the challenges faced by African Americans in corrections.

Additionally, the study's findings aim to inform stakeholders who may be encouraged to implement policy changes that will attract more African American officers to corrections and retain them. A change in policy that will target a better communication style geared at encouraging more African Americans to join the corrections workforce,

and other policy changes to facilitate working conditions of African American officers. An improvement in the number of African American corrections officers will boost the confidence of the public as regards the corrections department and the criminal justice system, because, according to MacLean (2020), the public's perception of the legitimacy of law enforcement actions will change positively if the number of minority law enforcement staff is increased. A change in policy that can attract more African American officers to corrections and retain them can increase the staffing level of corrections, which can help stabilize the functioning of facilities and various programs.

In another development, the study's findings will serve as a groundwork for future research on the representation of minorities and other racial groups in corrections, particularly studies of born African Americans and first-generation immigrants from Africa.

### **Conclusion**

The corrections officer is a vital component in the functioning of a correctional facility, and adequate staffing is essential if all programs are to remain operational. The problem is the constant shortage of staff, among which is the underrepresentation of African Americans as corrections officers. To conclude this study of the lived experience of African American corrections officers in a large midwestern correctional system, several important factors emerge from the findings that may help alleviate the shortage of African American officers. The perceptions of nine participants corroborated the literature in Chapter 2 and went further to enumerate aspects that are specific to the African American officer. Chapter 3 laid down the methods of the study, modalities of

participants, data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 focused on the recruitment of participants actual data collection and analysis as well as the results of the study. Chapter 5 analyzed the results, made recommendations and the limitation of the study.

Among the findings, it is essential to highlight the theme of some African Americans' distrust of the criminal justice system, stemming from a tense historical relationship with the system. Not only does this distrust make some potential African American candidates avoid becoming corrections officers, but it also influences a percentage of the African American population to have a negative perception towards the few African Americans who brave the odds to wear the uniform. To address this issue, a different approach to communication is needed to help the African American public understand the benefits of the criminal justice system. Implementing the recommendations and revising certain policies of the large midwestern correctional system may have a positive impact on the number of African American corrections officers and the department's overall staffing.

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## Appendix: A: Interview Guide

### **The Underrepresentation of African American Officers in a Large Midwestern Correctional System**

#### **Qualifying Questions**

1. Are you an employee of the Department of Corrections?
2. What is your race or ethnicity?
3. Have you been employed in the corrections department for at least five years, or retired? If so, which year did you retire, and did you work for at least ten years with the department?

#### **Participants Questions**

1. What is your first name and last name (names will not be included in the transcribed data)
2. What pseudonym would you prefer to be identified by in the research report?
3. What is your preferred email address and telephone number at which you would love to be contacted?

#### **Interview Guide**

**Research Question #1:** What are the lived experiences of African American correctional officers about their workplace environment?

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
2. What factors and circumstances motivated you to become a Correctional Officer?
3. What is your perception of the hiring process?

4. What are your perspectives on correctional officer training?
5. Describe the support and collaboration African American officers receive from other staff and the administration?
6. What is your perception of the slogan equal opportunity in the large Midwest correctional system?
7. Describe the staffing level and how it impacts your output?
8. What is the retention rate of new African American officers? What might be the cause?
9. Tell us how the correctional and social environments impact officers, especially African Americans?

**Research Question #2:** What are the lived experiences of African American officers of a large midwestern correctional system that impact their intention to stay or leave?

10. Tell us how burnout influences the output of African American correctional officers.
11. Describe the effects of correctional stress on your output as an African American?
12. What are the impacts of the overcrowded prison environment on African American correctional officers?
13. What is your perspective on the public's negative perception of corrections staff, especially African American officers?

14. What are your perspectives on the attrition rate of African American correctional officers?
15. Before we close this interview, is there anything else I did not mention that you would like to share?

## Appendix: B: Flyer for Participation

# **Interview study seeks officers in a large midwestern correctional system.**

Caption: A new study on the underrepresentation of African American officers in a large midwestern correctional system could help stakeholders in corrections better understand and address staffing issues. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences as an African American Corrections officer.

About the study:

- One 60-90 minute phone interview that will be audio-recorded (no videorecording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Be an officer of a large midwestern correctional system with at least five years of service or a retired veteran of a large midwestern correctional system, retired within the past five years, and with ten years or more of service
- Be of African American descent.

This interview is part of the doctoral study by Julius Eyong, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during the month of June 2025.

Please message me privately to let them know of your interest, my contact is XXX@waldenu.edu.

**To confidentially volunteer, contact the researcher: Julius Eyong at  
XXX@waldenu.edu**

## Appendix: C: Social Media Invitation

**Study seeks African American officers in a large midwestern correctional system**

Caption: A new study on the underrepresentation of African American officers in a large midwestern correctional system could help stakeholders in corrections better understand and address staffing issues. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences as an African American Corrections officer.

About the study:

- One 60-90 minute phone interview that will be audio recorded (no videorecording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older

- Be an officer of a large midwestern Correctional system with at least five years of service or a retired veteran of a large midwestern correctional system, retired within the past five years and with ten years or more of service
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