

2-24-2026

## Understanding the Lived Experiences of Black Males Successfully Reintegrating Post Incarceration

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Ashley Whitney Smith

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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2026

Abstract

Understanding the Lived Experiences of Black Males Successfully Reintegrating Post

Incarceration

by

Ashley Whitney Smith

MA, Argosy University 2013

BS, Valdosta State University 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

February 2026

## Abstract

Black males remain incarcerated at higher rates than any other race. Those individuals trying to reintegrate into society face many challenges with little mental and emotional rehabilitation support. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology study was to improve the understanding of what contributes to successful reintegration and the mental health and emotional needs of formerly incarcerated Black males. Critical race theory (CRT) was used as a secondary lens to examine how race, systemic racism, and structural inequities shaped participants' experiences. This study examined the following research question: What are the experiences of Black males who were previously incarcerated and have successfully reintegrated into society? The sample included seven Black males throughout the United States. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT. Analysis of the findings indicated that successful reintegration was not a singular outcome, but an ongoing, dynamic process characterized by identity reclamation, emotional healing, spiritual grounding, and purposeful engagement. Faith, mentorship, entrepreneurship, and self-reflection emerged as key themes supporting participant resilience and accountability. Reintegration success was defined less by external markers alone and more by internal shifts in identity, dignity, and purpose. Implications for counseling include the need for culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and strength-based interventions that validate lived experience and support identity reconstruction beyond behavioral compliance. The findings contribute to positive social change by challenging deficit-based narratives and advancing the understanding of Black males' capacity for growth, agency, and resilience following incarceration.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to faith, family, and the friendships that sustained me throughout this journey. First and foremost, I dedicate this dissertation to God and my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I could not have completed this journey without my faith in His word. The scriptures that carried me through the most challenging moments were James 1: 2-4 and it states, “Consider it nothing but joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you fall into various trials. Be assured that the testing of your faith, through experience, produces endurance, leading to spiritual maturity and inner peace. And let endurance have its perfect result and do a thorough work, so that you may be perfect and completely developed in your faith, lacking nothing. These verses served as a constant reminder of God’s promises and provided me with peace that surpasses all understanding.

To my husband, thank you for always being there. Thank you for covering me in prayer during some of my darkest moments, for reminding me to rest when needed, and for supporting me as I pursued excellence in every area of my life. I love you, and I truly could not have completed this dissertation without the love, care, concern, and support you have shown me throughout this journey. To my son, thank you for the handwritten notes you left on my desk to encourage me. I appreciate and love you so much. Your joy, love, and positive energy were a constant source of strength. I pray that by watching me complete this journey, you know and believe that you, too, can accomplish anything. To my mom, I wish you were here to witness the completion of this journey, but your legacy lives on through the perseverance, strength, and determination you instilled in me. Watching you navigate life with resilience as you raised my sister and me continues to

inspire me to never give up. To my father, thank you for your love, encouragement, and for modeling the value of hard work and perseverance. To my Nanna, I am so grateful I got to read this dedication to you before you passed. I love you so much. Thank you for always believing in me and reminding me of what God has done and continues to do in my life. You showed me at an early age what it means to be a strong woman in the workforce who leads with humility and grace. To my sister, thank you for your unwavering love and encouragement. Our bond has been a source of strength, and I am deeply grateful for you. To my auntie, from a young age, I have been drawn to your spirit and compassion. Your love for people and the work that you do in our field have shown me what it means to instill hope where it is needed most. To my late uncle, your experiences within the criminal justice system inspired me to explore narratives of success. Your entrepreneurial spirit and the legacy you built continue to impact generations. To my friends, fellow alumni, and prayer warriors, Dr. Taylor and Dr. Payne, thank you for speaking life into me during moments when I felt like giving up. Your prayers, encouragement, and spiritual insights were invaluable, especially during times of loss and transition. Thank you to all my family and friends who encouraged and lifted me. Finally, to the Black men who participated in this study, thank you for trusting me with your stories and sharing your reintegration journeys. Your voices matter, your experiences are powerful, and I am deeply honored by your participation.

## Acknowledgments

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the guidance, support, patience, and encouragement of my dissertation committee members. Dr. Melinda Haley, I do not believe I have enough words to fully express my gratitude for the encouragement and unwavering support you provided throughout this process. You were more than my Chair, you were my advocate and mentor, and for that, I am forever grateful. Your approach and guidance will stay with me as I embark on my own professional journey, striving to offer the same hope and encouragement you gave to me. As Maya Angelou so powerfully stated, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Dr. Katarzyna Holloway, I am deeply thankful for your expertise and thoughtful contributions as my second committee member. You helped me develop a deeper understanding of hermeneutic phenomenology and ensured that my second theoretical lens was effectively used to situate participants' narratives. I am also grateful for your encouragement throughout this process, particularly for normalizing the emotional challenges of dissertation work and emphasizing the importance of self-care along the way. Truly, I am thankful for your guidance and support.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Background**

The topic of this study was the lived experiences of Black males who had successfully reintegrated into society post-incarceration. This topic needs to be studied because of this population's public health crisis of mass incarceration. Black males remain incarcerated at disproportionate rates compared to other racial groups. Mass incarceration of Black males affects them and the families and loved ones that remain connected to them while incarcerated and upon release. These men often had children of their own that they became emotionally disconnected from to cope with their lives while incarcerated (Williams et al., 2020). The emotional disconnection required for these men to sustain themselves in prison is crucial while confined; this ultimately influenced participants' ability to reconnect and engage with others upon release (Williams et al., 2020). Time in prison forces those incarcerated to adapt to this prison environment and often leaves them less equipped for life outside of prison (Buck et al., 2022; deWet, 2005).

The effects of incarceration are multifaceted and, for Black males, were interwoven within the context of a White patriarchal society that has created destruction and despair of Black males through systemic chokeholds (Kita, 2019; Madoshi, 2019; Ortiz & Jackey, 2019; Powell, 2018). Therefore, exploring this topic contributed to the development of restorative practices for working with this population during incarceration, post-incarceration, and potentially in prevention efforts. In addition, the findings informed counselors and counselor educators by identifying ways professional

practice may support restorative, ethical, and culturally responsive reintegration efforts aimed at reducing recidivism. In this chapter, I provide background literature on the social problem under study, along with the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the theoretical and conceptual framework, the nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study.

### **Background Literature**

The literature on Black males and mass incarceration is extensive. The research, however, on reintegration and successful reintegration is sparse in comparison. The origin of mass incarceration is pervasive and can be dated back to slavery. In the United States, laws and policies historically maintained and reinforced cycles of incarceration. In the literature review, I explored the origin of mass incarceration, racism in the criminal justice system, the effects of incarceration, barriers to reintegration, and factors that promote reintegration to establish a foundation for the present study.

Much of the existing research on this topic focuses on the material needs of formerly incarcerated individuals upon reentry. Still, it neglects to report on the mental and emotional needs defined by the Black males' experiences. Black males experience even more pressure in reintegration, partly due to societal barriers and race-specific social pressure (Kita, 2019; Madoshi, 2019). Studies identified tangible factors influencing reintegration outcomes, including the presence or absence of supportive relationships with family members and parole officers, and access to housing, clothing, and financial assistance (Cobbina, 2010; Strickland, 2016). These studies illuminated the need to

explore reintegration success through a deeper lens on mental health and emotional well-being.

Some studies explored and identified ways incarceration affected Black males' ability to achieve their basic needs upon reentry. Those Black males reported adverse effects of incarceration, including harm to education, housing, employment, and family and intimate relationships, in comparison to European Americans (Blankenship et al., 2018; Ward & Merlo, 2016). In addition, these studies showed that material items were the most significant factor in determining success in reintegration. However, other studies provided insight into Black males' deeper emotional and mental health needs connected to the criminal justice system (Bakken & Visser, 2018; Madoshi, 2019; Reingle Gonzalez & Connell, 2014; Strickland, 2016).

Literature depicts mental health and emotional treatment as critical to reintegration success. Strickland (2016) reported that formerly incarcerated individuals emphasized the importance of one-on-one emotional support conversations that inspired them to action. Strickland (2016) noted many challenges in reentry and the importance of offender programs and services that create reentry plans before release, which are also family oriented. The mental health and physical health issues of formerly incarcerated individuals are pervasive. Studies further documented pervasive mental and physical health challenges among formerly incarcerated individuals, including poor general health, suicidality, psychosis, continued engagement with negative people, re-engaging in violent or criminal behavior, substance use, and limited emotional capacity to manage post-

incarceration stressors (Bakken & Visher, 2018; Barrenger et al., 2017; Ward & Merlo, 2016).

Additional research indicated that treatment providers depict the issues of successful reintegration as less about gaining material items like housing, employment, and financial stability and more about using substances to self-medicate, engaging with toxic individuals, and not being treated adequately for mental and physical health needs (Mahaffey et al., 2018; Ward & Merlo, 2016). These findings informed the focus of my study and guided the development of the interview questions designed to examine how Black males experienced successful reintegration from a mental and emotional health perspective.

The research on recidivism rates and programs geared to reduce recidivism highlights the need to study this population more in-depth. Yesberg and Polaschek (2019) examined possible mechanisms of change in a sample of high-risk incarcerated men who completed intensive prison-based rehabilitation and were released from prison to parole. Researchers discovered that the amount of change made in a program was not statistically significant for recidivism rates. Berghuis (2018) also found that reentry programs of their sample of 8,179 studies did not show an increase or decrease in recidivism for formerly incarcerated adult males. Researchers noted the importance of evaluating programming outcomes, measuring the changes made by the programming, and how long those changes last. Researchers also reported a need to develop a tool that measures successful reintegration (Berghuis, 2018). These studies are essential because researchers have

suggested that further exploration of the lived experiences of the reentry process is needed to develop programs that promote change and desistance.

Semenza and Link (2019) analyzed data from the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, the most extensive United States prison reentry study to date. The researchers examined how the cumulative reintegration barriers related to self-rated physical health and depressive symptoms at three, nine-, and fifteen-months post-release. This sample included 1697 men with extensive criminal histories, substance use problems, low involvement in the legal labor market, and high levels of need across multiple domains. Researchers found that greater reintegration barriers contributed to lower ratings of self-rated health and increased levels of depression.

Being White was also seen as having fewer reintegration barriers. Researchers did not find that reintegration barriers influenced depression after 15 months post-release, which suggested that the stress of reentry was experienced more after initial release. This initial stress after release was also reported in DeVaux's study (DeVaux, 2022). It was found that after a year, those formerly incarcerated men could manage their reintegration challenges. The results from this study are critical to my research because they highlight the challenges post-release and how crucial it is for formerly incarcerated men to receive mental and emotional support immediately after release.

In this section, I provide insight into the topic and the gap in the literature in exploring the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated post-incarceration. Although material resources remained important, existing research demonstrated that incarceration produced pervasive mental and emotional effects

requiring further exploration. In Chapter 2, I review the literature highlighting key factors that perpetuate the cycle of mass incarceration of Black males, systemic racism, barriers to reintegration, and factors that promote reintegration. More specifically, I present research from a critical race theory (CRT) lens and critique the literature that influenced my research design.

### **Problem Statement**

The issue that prompted the literature review and development of this study was the disproportionately high rate of mass incarceration among Black males in the United States. In addition to incarceration, Black males faced significant societal pressures upon release, which motivated an examination of how individuals who successfully reintegrated navigated these challenges. According to the Prison Policy Initiative (2023), Black individuals comprised 38% of the prison population but 13% of the United States population. The incarceration rate for Black Americans was 2,306 per 100,000 compared to 450 per 100,000 for White Americans. Similarly, arrest rates remained disproportionately higher for Black Americans, with 6,109 per 100,000 compared to 2,795 per 100,000 White Americans. In 2018 alone, the number of arrests of Black Americans was 2.8 million (Prison Policy Initiative, 2023).

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2021) reported the recidivism rates for individuals released from prison between 2012 and 2017. Within one year of release, Black individuals experienced a re-arrest rate of 39%, compared to 38% for Hispanic individuals and 35% for White individuals. At the end of the five-year follow-up, White individuals' rates of re-arrest were at 70 %, Hispanic individuals at 67 %, and Black

individuals had the highest rate of 74 %. The steady rise in recidivism demonstrated the urgent need for advocacy to address this ongoing problem.

The high incarceration rates of Black males have affected the Black family by increasing the number of single-parent homes, which affects the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of the family left separated by incarceration (Western & Wildeman, 2009; Wildeman & Wang, 2017). Thus, the problem affects the Black male incarcerated and those connected to him. Brown (2021) reported that the absence of a Black father in the home has detrimental effects on Black boys. These effects subconsciously cause the son to act more like his mother, and when the son realizes this, he seeks to become extremely masculine, which is often found in inappropriate or inadequate male role models that foster destructive and negative behaviors (Brown, 2021). These destructive behaviors strongly impact their futures and are also linked to increased vulnerability to criminal justice involvement. Wildeman and Wang (2017) reiterated this point by stating that the effects of paternal incarceration have been linked to their children's substance misuse, depression, anxiety, obesity, and asthma throughout adolescence and into early adulthood.

Despite the prevalence of mental health challenges and emotional trauma experienced by Black males while incarcerated, reentry programs largely reflected a deficit-based approach (Berghuis, 2018). Deficit-based approach programming focuses on material gains upon reentry, such as employment, housing, increased social support, and lowering dependency on drugs and alcohol (Berghuis, 2018). Berghuis (2018) reported that the strengths, capabilities, and agency to engage in the reentry process have

largely been ignored, focusing primarily on the deficits of formerly incarcerated individuals. Schlager (2018) further noted that a deficit-based approach to reentry did not demonstrate consistent reductions in recidivism. Schlager argued that focusing on individuals' strengths encourages people to address their own abilities, thus encouraging them to exercise agency and develop control over their lives and decision-making processes.

Examining the lived experiences of Black males who successfully reintegrated from a mental health perspective addressed a critical gap in the literature. This study contributed to the limited body of research emphasizing strength-based reintegration processes rather than deficit-focused outcomes. The findings offered implications for counselors and counselor educators by informing clinical practice, training, and program development aimed at supporting the psychological, emotional, and relational needs of formerly incarcerated Black males.

### **Purpose of the Study**

My purpose for this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to enhance mental health professionals' understanding of factors that contributed to the successful reintegration of Black males into society following incarceration. Through this study, I sought to explore the mental health and emotional needs of Black males who had successfully reintegrated and to examine how these needs influenced their reintegration processes. CRT served as a secondary analytical lens for me to examine the role of race, racism, and systemic inequities in mass incarceration and in Black males' reintegration experiences. Although prior research examined reentry and recidivism, limited studies

explored successful reintegration from a mental and emotional health perspective using the lived experiences of Black males. This study addressed that gap by providing an in-depth understanding of how participants made meaning of their reintegration journeys.

### **Research Questions**

What are the experiences of Black males who were previously incarcerated and have successfully reintegrated into society?

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study was guided by two theoretical frameworks: hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT. Hermeneutic phenomenology served as the primary framework, informing the exploration and interpretation of participants' lived experiences, with an emphasis on meaning-making and on understanding how Black men made sense of their reintegration journeys following incarceration. CRT functioned as a secondary framework that I used to examine the influence of race, racism, and systemic inequities within the criminal justice system as related to participants' reintegration experiences. Together, these frameworks guided the analysis and interpretation of participants' narratives.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Hermeneutics, defined as the theory of interpretation, has an extensive history dating back to the sixteenth-century Reformers, who developed manuals for scriptural interpretation (Guignon, 2012). Hermeneutics reached its contemporary philosophical form through the work of German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), whose ideas significantly influenced Martin Heidegger's development of hermeneutic

phenomenology. According to Heidegger (2021), Dilthey wanted to study the sciences of human life, society, and the state, which he later called *Geisteswissenschaften* (“human science”).

Dilthey believed that history creates the conditions and raw material for life to manifest itself (Guigon, 2012; Heidegger, 2021). Dilthey emphasized historical consciousness and the relativity of ideas, institutions, and attitudes as the defining features of modern intellectual life. This perspective challenged assumptions about absolute truths and allowed for greater appreciation of the diversity of human experience (Guigon, 2012; Heidegger, 2021).

Hermeneutic phenomenology served as the primary theoretical framework for my research topic. Researchers who employ phenomenological methods typically choose between Edmund Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology and Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology. In Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, the researcher cannot use other theoretical frameworks because this approach requires the researcher to suspend all judgments to focus solely on the phenomenon through a bracketing or *epoche* process (Peoples, 2021). Because this study employed CRT as the secondary theoretical lens, transcendental phenomenology was not appropriate.

Martin Heidegger, the founder of hermeneutic phenomenology, was interested in the uniqueness of individuals’ lived experiences rather than classification schemes observed across people (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Heidegger (2021) described phenomena as that which shows itself in itself or to manifest, bring to the light of day, or put in the light. From this perspective, phenomenological description is inherently

involved in interpretation (Heidegger, 2021). Hermeneutic phenomenology, therefore, focused on how individuals made meaning of shared life experiences rather than seeking a single objective reality (Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

Central to Heidegger's philosophy was the concept *Dasein*, or *being-in-the-world*, which described how individuals experienced existence within specific historical, social, and relational contexts (Heidegger, 2021; Peoples, 2021). Understanding *Dasein* required engagement with the hermeneutic circle, a reflective interpretive process in which understanding moved continuously between parts of experience and the whole (Heidegger, 2021; People, 2021). According to Suddick et al. (2020), "the hermeneutic circle reflects the ongoing, attentive, circular movement between part and whole" (p. 3). The task remains to harmonize the narratives from the parts and the wholes at each stage to achieve correct understanding (Suddick et al., 2020).

In this study, I applied hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret participants' narratives as meaning-laden accounts situated within personal, historical, and social contexts. This framework supported an exploration of how Black men understood their reintegration experiences and constructed meaning over time. I provide a more detailed discussion of hermeneutic phenomenology in Chapter 2.

### **Critical Race Theory**

CRT served as the second theoretical framework for this study. CRT emerged from the critical legal studies movement and Black feminist thought in the 1970s (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Stephens & Rock-Vanloo, 2022). According to Bell (1995), CRT is a body of legal scholarship from a majority of members who are both

existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law. Scholars of CRT also drew from intellectual traditions of European philosophers such as Antonio Gramsci, Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and American revolutionary figures such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Sojourner Truth, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Black Power and Chicano movements of the sixties and seventies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These influences contributed to CRT's focus on power, social construction, and resistance to oppression (Fornili, 2018).

According to Stephens and Rock-Vanloo (2022), scholars who developed CRT identified race and racism as the driving forces behind inequity in the United States. Through CRT, researchers identified race as a false concept and social construction but maintained that racism is a malevolent, persistent, and destructive cultural practice that has shaped and continues to define all aspects of American society (Stephens & Rock-Vanloo, 2022).

Emerging from critiques of critical legal studies, CRT scholars rejected claims that the law functioned as objective or neutral, instead arguing that legal systems historically maintained racial hierarchies and inequality (George, 2020). Although the law intensifies racial inequality, the founding theorist of CRT noted it could also be a tool for emancipation and promoting racial equality (George, 2020). Though CRT's roots were in law, over the years, it has expanded to other disciplines such as education, sociology, health care, psychology, film, theater, and other fields (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; George, 2020).

In this study, CRT provided a critical lens for how race, systemic racism, and structural inequities shaped Black men's incarceration and reintegration experiences. While hermeneutic phenomenology centered on participants' meaning-making, CRT contextualized those narratives within broader systems of racialized power. I present a more comprehensive discussion of CRT in Chapter 2.

### **Theoretical Frameworks Relation to Study Approach**

Reed et al. (2022) argued that CRT provided essential context for examining the structures and foundations of laws and societal norms that color the nation's fabric, whether good or bad. This contextual lens supported a deeper understanding of the social and structural conditions relevant to this study. CRT aligned with hermeneutic phenomenology because through hermeneutic phenomenology, I sought to develop a deeper understanding of how participants experienced and interpreted their world (Heidegger, 2021). By employing this combined approach, I examined the research question through participants' lived experiences and interpreted the phenomenon of successful reintegration as described by formerly incarcerated Black men in the United States. Hermeneutic phenomenology allowed me to interpret the data through different lenses. Following the pre-understanding phase, I applied CRT as a theoretical lens to deepen interpretation as I engaged in the hermeneutic circle. Chapter 2 provides a more detailed discussion of these theoretical frameworks.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative design to examine the lived experiences of Black males who had successfully reintegrated into society following

incarceration. This design supported an interpretive approach to analyzing participants' descriptions of their experiences (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Rudestam and Newton (2015) described the hermeneutical approach as complex because it required the researcher to engage in repeated, deliberate examination of data sources to identify core meanings. This process of investigating the data is known as the *hermeneutic circle*. Peoples (2021) described the *hermeneutic circle* as a process in which the researcher initially examines personal preunderstandings related to the phenomenon, then analyzes the interview transcripts as complete texts. From this point, the researcher must examine specific portions of the transcripts to identify themes that emerged across the data (Peoples, 2021). I conducted semi-structured interviews to examine participants' lived experiences related to successful reintegration. I collected data using audio recordings and field notes. This qualitative analytic approach enabled an in-depth examination of the factors contributing to Black males' successful reintegration into society.

### **Definitions**

I used the following definitions within this study:

*Critical race theory*: CRT is the theoretical framework I used with the conceptual framework to highlight the impact of race and racism on the participants' experiences of reintegrating into society post-incarceration. According to Bell (1995), CRT is both critical, inherited from its roots in critical legal studies, and committed to a vision of liberation from racism through right reason, inherited from traditional civil rights scholarship. CRT's ultimate vision is redemption, not destruction (Bell, 1995).

*Dasein*: *Dasein* is the state of being there, understanding of being (Heidegger, 2021; Peoples, 2021). *Dasein* refers to each person and their circumstances, making up their existence (Peoples, 2021).

*Dasein's thrownness*: Heidegger referred to thrownness as a being-in-the-world that one does not choose (Heidegger, 2021). Being in a world with pre-existing history, conditions, structures, social systems, identities, and relationships.

*Fore-having*: Heidegger described fore-having as something we already have in advance (Heidegger, 2021). This reflects what is already there in experience.

*Foresight/fore-conception*: Fore-sight or fore-conception describes the preconceived knowledge of a phenomenon (Peoples, 2021, p.34). Heidegger noted that through the process of interpreting our biases, judgments and understanding are revised. This term is critical to analyzing data because it captures the researcher's pre-understandings and allows the use of another theoretical framework to interpret meaning from the data.

*Formerly incarcerated*: An individual who is no longer incarcerated but is now released (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022).

*Hermeneutic circle*: The hermeneutic circle is the circular process used in data analysis for understanding. This way of analyzing describes the process of understanding between the participants' narratives and all of the narratives as a whole regarding the phenomenon (Heidegger, 2021; Peoples, 2021). The hermeneutic circle requires an ongoing movement of understanding between the whole transcript and the parts of the transcript.

*Parole:* Parole refers to those formerly incarcerated who are conditionally released from prison to serve the remaining portion of their sentence in the community. Those formerly incarcerated may be released to parole by a parole board decision (i.e., discretionary release or discretionary parole), according to provisions of a statute (i.e., mandatory release or mandatory parole), through other types of post-custody conditional supervision, or as the result of a sentence to a term of supervised release. In the federal system, a term of supervised release is a sentence for a fixed period of supervision in the community that follows a sentence to a period of incarceration in federal prison, both of which are ordered at the time of sentencing by a federal judge. Parolees can have several different supervision statuses, including active supervision, which means they are required to regularly report to a parole authority in person, by mail, or by telephone. Some parolees may be on an inactive status, which means they are excluded from regularly reporting, and that could be due to several reasons. For instance, some may receive a reduction in supervision, possibly due to compliance or meeting all required conditions before the parole sentence terminates and therefore may be moved from active to inactive status. Other supervision statuses include parolees who have only financial conditions remaining, have absconded, or have active warrants. Parolees are also typically required to fulfill certain conditions and adhere to specific rules of conduct while in the community. Failure to comply with any conditions can result in a return to incarceration. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022).

*Prison:* A prison is a long-term confinement facility run by a state or the federal government that typically holds felons and those incarcerated with sentences of more than one year (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022).

*Private prisons:* Private prisons are facilities run by private prison corporations whose services and beds are contracted out by state governments or the Federal Bureau of Prisons (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022).

*Probation:* Probation refers to formerly incarcerated adults who the courts place on supervision in the community through a probation agency, generally instead of incarceration. However, some jurisdictions sentence probationers to a combined short-term incarceration sentence immediately followed by probation, referred to as a split sentence. Just like those on parole, probationers can have several different supervision statuses for the same reasons.

*Recidivism:* Recidivism is when a person formerly incarcerated who has undergone rehabilitation relapses and re-offends. Recidivism usually occurs within three years of the person's release from prison. The individual usually commits a crime similar to the original crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022).

*Reintegration success:* Success after incarceration is mainly defined by whether a person released from prison manages to avoid re-arrest, new convictions, imprisonment for a new crime, or imprisonment for violating the conditions of their release (DeVeaux, 2022).

## **Assumptions**

The assumptions for this study included the following: (a) participants' provided narratives that actively reflected their lived experiences, (b) participants responded truthfully to the interview questions, (c) participants shared reintegration experiences that reflected sufficient similarity to allow for thematic analysis, and (d) participants engaged in the study voluntarily through informed consent rather than for personal or external gain. These assumptions helped limit the influence of factors outside of the researcher's control on the study's findings.

## **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of the study included an examination of how systemic racism within and beyond the criminal justice system influenced Black males' experiences of reintegrating into society. I specifically focused on formerly incarcerated Black males' lived experiences related to mental and emotional adjustment, and their ability to meet basic needs, including access to adequate food, shelter, clothing, and financial stability. The study included Black adult males residing in the United States who had been released from incarceration for a minimum of one year. This timeframe allowed participants to reflect on reintegration beyond the immediate reentry period. The exclusion criteria included individuals who did not identify as Black, individuals who have been out of incarceration for less than one year, and women. The findings of this study may be transferable to formerly incarcerated Black males across the United States. Additionally, participants' lived experiences may inform discussions related to the training of mental health counselors who work with this population, the role of mental health services in

supporting successful reintegration, and collaboration efforts between the criminal justice system and mental health counselors to promote social justice advocacy.

### **Limitations**

Some limitations of this study included a focus on individuals who successfully reintegrated, which may have introduced bias into the results. Individuals who have experienced successful reintegration may have acquired personal characteristics that differed from those who did not successfully reintegrate. Addressing this limitation would require a quantitative research design to examine potential cause-and-effect relationships. This sampling focus may have limited access to participants, as recruiting Black males who had successfully reintegrated into society was challenging. The statistics showed more Black males recidivated in the first five years after release. To address recruitment challenges, I accessed this population in multiple ways, such as sending the flyers to various agencies that assisted with reintegration in the region, used social media, and employed snowball sampling, in which participants referred other Black males who met the inclusion criteria. For safety and to minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19, I offered participants the option to complete the interviews via Zoom.

### **Significance**

The study was significant because it addressed a gap in the literature related to understanding the components that contributed to Black males' successful reintegration into society after incarceration. By examining Black males' lived experiences, the study provided researchers and key stakeholders (i.e., mental health professionals, those

working in the criminal justice system, and those in government that offer funding for reentry efforts) with deeper insight into factors associated with successful reintegration and the mental health or emotional needs that supported it. Additionally, the findings of this study also informed counselors working in community settings, jails, and prisons by identifying approaches that may support Black males during and after incarceration. Additionally, the results underscored the relevance of CRT-informed perspectives in counseling and reentry-related services for this population, highlighting the importance of addressing race, systemic inequities, and structural barriers within reintegration efforts.

### **Summary**

Researchers have demonstrated that formerly incarcerated Black males experienced significant barriers to successful reintegration into society. However, the literature contained limited discussion of Black males who achieved successful reintegration following incarceration. The absence of this narrative further emphasized the need to center their voices within scholarly inquiry. Despite targeted reentry efforts, recidivism rates for Black males remained disproportionately high. Mass incarceration produced multi-dimensional consequences that affected Black men, their families, and their communities. These consequences reflected the enduring impact of a criminal justice system that continued to generate adverse outcomes for this population. In Chapter 2, I reviewed the literature addressing this systemic issue and examined how mass incarceration shaped the social, cultural, and structural contexts influencing Black males' reintegration experiences.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Incarceration produced pervasive and debilitating mental health effects, including but not limited to depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, enduring personality changes, paranoia, suicidal ideation and attempts, anxiety disorders, and drug and alcohol dependence (Williamson et al., 2016). Black males experienced higher incarceration rates than other racial and ethnic groups and demonstrated a greater likelihood of psychological consequences associated with incarceration (Madoshi, 2019). Madoshi (2019) reported that poor mental health contributed to increased recidivism rates. The reintegration process presented additional challenges for Black males due to societal barriers and race-specific social stressors (Madoshi, 2019).

Incarceration affected not only Black males but also their families. Brown et al. (2016) reported that the absence of incarcerated Black males increased the likelihood that mothers, partners, and children experienced poverty, poor health, and psychological distress. The mass incarceration of Black males altered social conditions within Black families and communities (Brown et al., 2016). Reintegrating into society presented multiple challenges for individuals with criminal records and minoritized racial identities (Madoshi, 2019). For some individuals, these challenges contributed to continued involvement with the criminal justice system and sustained the cycles of recidivism.

Brown et al. (2016) argued that limited scholarly attention to mass incarceration as a public health crisis reflected the devaluation of Black individuals lived experiences and reinforced systems of White supremacy. Although researchers examined recidivism and reintegration processes (Bakken & Visher, 2018; Berghuis, 2018; Cobbina, 2010;

Mahaffey et al., 2018; Semenza & Link, 2019; Strickland, 2016; Ward & Merlo, 2016; Yesberg & Polaschek, 2019), few studies focused on the mental health experiences of Black males who successfully reintegrated into society post-incarceration. Additional research was needed to examine the lived experiences of Black males who achieved successful reintegration. In this study, I sought to examine reintegration from a mental health perspective to gain deeper insight into the emotional and psychological processes experienced by Black males following incarceration. Examining these lived experiences contributed to a broader understanding of the role mental health professionals and counselors play in addressing mass incarceration as a public health concern.

This chapter includes a comprehensive review of the literature, the literature search strategy, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and key concepts relevant to the study. In this chapter, I examine the origins of mass incarceration, the effects of incarceration on Black families, the mental health consequences of incarceration, barriers to reintegration, and factors associated with successful reintegration.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I conducted a comprehensive literature search using Walden University Library databases and selected internet-based search platforms. The databases included the American Psychological Association PsycINFO, Sage Journals, Sage Premier, the Criminal Justice Database, ProQuest Central, Hein Online, and SocINDEX with Full Text. In addition, I used Google, Google Scholar, and The Legacy Museum to locate relevant scholarly and historical sources.

I began the search using key terms such as *experiences, formerly incarcerated, reintegration, Black males, and African American males*. I expanded the search to include additional terms, including: *mass incarceration, the origin of incarceration, history of incarceration, effects of incarceration, imprisonment, mental health effects, barriers to reintegration, CRT, Derrick Bell, recidivism, successful reintegration, rehabilitation, reentry, reunification, phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, deinstitutionalization, and mass incarceration, three-strike laws and the effects, reconstruction, Richard Nixon and the war on drugs, crime mapping, criminalization, neighborhood effects, neoliberalism, prison reform, urban space, government legislation, prison statistics, Lyndon Johnson and the Law Enforcement Act of 1965, and lived experiences*. I used these terms individually and in various combinations across databases and search platforms.

I initially limited the search to peer-reviewed literature published within the last five years. I expanded the publication range due to the limited availability of studies addressing Black males who successfully reintegrated into society following incarceration. To address gaps in the empirical literature, I broadened the search to dissertations and publicly available data sources, such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics, to obtain current and historical statistical information relevant to the study. I also reviewed literature from related disciplines, including social work, psychology, and criminal justice, to strengthen the interdisciplinary foundation of the review.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

Ravitch and Carl (2021) described a theoretical framework as the integration of existing bodies of literature used to frame a study's topic, goals, design, and findings. For this study, I used hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT as its theoretical foundations. I applied hermeneutic phenomenology to understand how participants described and interpreted their lived experiences and how they defined success following incarceration. I applied CRT to examine the role of race and racism in shaping Black males' reintegration experiences after incarceration. Together, these frameworks guided the literature review and informed the development of the research question. I expanded on each framework in the following section.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Martin Heidegger founded hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger (2021) defined phenomenology as the study of the being of entities and ontology. He stated that "phenomena, as understood phenomenologically, are never anything, but what makes up being, while being is in every case the being of some entity, we must first bring forward the entities themselves if it is [the] aim that being should be laid bare; and we must do this in the right way" (Heidegger, 2021, p. 61). Heidegger emphasized the importance of allowing what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself. This methodological stance required interpreting lived experiences to understand the essence of those experiences as they were described by participants.

Heidegger asserted that understanding moves in a circular process. He explained that as one moves back and forth between the description and the phenomenon being

described, understanding deepens (Wrathall, 2005). Peoples (2021) described this analytic process as beginning with a comprehensive reading of the entire interview transcript to gain an overall understanding. From this point, the researcher then examines the parts of the data, including codes and themes, which represent shared meanings across participants' individual experiences. The researcher then synthesizes these parts and returned to the whole transcript to refine the interpretation (Peoples, 2021).

Gadamer (2004) stated that language is used to learn experiences, interpret, and understand a phenomenon. For this reason, the hermeneutic circle played a central role in managing preconceived knowledge and interpreting phenomena. The hermeneutic circle is defined as the circular process of expanding meaning by "harmonizing all the particulars with the whole" at each stage of understanding (Gadamer, 1988, p. 68). This process valued prior understanding as an essential component of interpretation and required acknowledging the relationship between those who expressed experiences and those who interpreted them. In this study, I journaled about my preconceived understandings and documented them prior to analyzing the participants' narratives. I then revised my understanding through engagement with the participants' lived experiences.

Wrathall (2005) noted that Heidegger's philosophical method focused on defining the phenomenon underlying a philosophical problem in a manner free from distortion. This freedom from distortion occurred through repeated movement between the whole and parts of the interview transcripts until a refined understanding emerged (Peoples, 2021). Peoples (2021) explained that Heidegger viewed interpretation as an ongoing

revision process in which understanding changed as new information emerged. Within this framework, the phenomenological researcher prioritizes exploring lived experiences related to a phenomenon and examining how individuals described, explained, perceived, and interpreted those experiences (Patton, 2015, Peoples, 2021).

In this study, I applied CRT alongside hermeneutic phenomenology to examine the lived experiences of Black males who had successfully reintegrated into society following incarceration. Williams et al. (2020) described CRT as an analytic framework that required examination of how institutions operated in ways that harmed minoritized people. I used CRT to examine how structural and societal factors shaped participants' reintegration experiences and contributed to the themes associated with successful reintegration despite social and cultural barriers.

The combined use of these two theories allowed for a more comprehensive interpretation of Heidegger's (2021) concept of *Dasein*, or *being-in-the-world*. One aspect of *Dasein* involved how individuals understood themselves in social contexts. Another involved individuals' moods and emotional orientations towards their experiences over time. A third aspect involved individuals' relationship to death. Heidegger (2021) explained that individuals either confronted, avoided, or denied awareness of death, with authenticity involving acknowledgment rather than avoidance (Wrathall, 2005).

In contrast to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, Heidegger's (2021) hermeneutic phenomenology rejected the possibility of fully suspending judgment, as researchers existed as beings within the world and in relation to others. This position

aligned with CRT, particularly in its application to the target population, because hermeneutic phenomenology examined individuals within their social and historical contexts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Heidegger, 2021). Peoples (2021) identified *Dasein* as the central concept of this methodology. In this study, *Dasein* referred to the participants' lived experiences of successful reintegration as formerly incarcerated Black males. Whereas Husserl's transcendental phenomenology required bracketing to suspend judgment, Heidegger argued that deeper understanding emerged through engagement with prior understanding and interpretation within the hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 2021; People, 2021).

Heidegger referred to preconceived understanding as *fore-conception* or *fore-sight*. He argued that as understanding developed, these fore conceptions underwent revision (Heidegger, 2021; Peoples, 2021). Through analysis, I examined the whole narrative, then analyzed its parts, and integrated those parts into a revised understanding of the whole. This analytic process supported examination of the lived experiences that contributed to participants' overall success and clarified how specific elements of those experiences influenced successful reintegration.

### **Article Critiques**

In this section, I present peer-reviewed articles that used hermeneutic phenomenology as a research methodology. These articles demonstrated how qualitative researchers applied hermeneutic phenomenology to examine participants' lived experiences. The selected studies aligned with my research because they employed

hermeneutic phenomenology to explore meaning-making processes similar to those examined in my study.

Bradshaw et al. (2007) used hermeneutic phenomenology to examine the lived experiences of 44 adults with severe and persistent mental illness and their recovery over a three-year period. The researchers reported participant demographics 68% female and 32% male participants, with an average age of 37 years and a standard deviation of 10.57. The sample consisted of 75% Caucasian participants and 25% participants identified as persons of color. Diagnoses included schizophrenia or other psychotic disorders (53%), mood disorders (40%), and other diagnoses (7%). All participants received case management services provided by bachelor's and master's level mental health social workers. The researchers aimed to understand the recovery process over time and to examine interactions among individuals, illness, case managers, family members, and community contexts that either facilitated or hindered social inclusion.

Bradshaw et al. (2007) reported that hermeneutic phenomenology sought to describe and interpret participants' subjective experiences by identifying shared and enduring components of a phenomenon, such as recovery from severe and persistent mental illness. The researchers applied imaginative variation to conceptualize the essence of recovery. This process involved examining concrete examples of the phenomenon and systematically removing specific features to determine which elements remained essential across cases.

Giorgi (1997) described imaginative variation as a natural method for identifying essences. Giorgi explained that this technique involved altering aspects of a phenomenon

to assess whether the phenomenon remained recognizable. Giorgi further noted that each factual example represented one possible instance of the phenomenon. By expanding possibilities, one becomes more aware of those features that cannot be removed, thus what is essential for the object to be given to consciousness (Giorgi, 1997, p. 6).

Bradshaw et al. (2007) identified five central themes during the third phase of participants' recovery. First, reintegration into the community emerged as a critical component of recovery, with participants associating this process with a sense of normalcy. Second, reintegration with family and friends played a key role in social inclusion as participants relied on these relationships for support and monitoring of mental health symptoms. However, participants also reported tension related to autonomy, particularly when family members resisted allowing greater independence.

According to Bradshaw et al. (2007), in the third theme, reintegration with case managers underscored the importance of the case management relationship. Participants did not want to end case management services and described case managers as essential guides throughout recovery. Fourth, reintegrating self and illness reflected participants' experiences of shame related to past behaviors during periods of mental instability and their efforts to reconcile their identities with their diagnoses. Fifth, barriers to community integration reflected participants' desire for social inclusion and included limited access to social opportunities and reliance on public assistance and transportation, which restricted employment opportunities, mobility, and independence (Bradshaw et al., 2007).

Bradshaw et al. (2007) discussed implications for social workers and behavioral health professionals, emphasizing the need for resources that supported social integration

for clients with severe and persistent mental illness. The researchers identified four specific areas that could increase the likelihood of genuine social inclusion: housing, transportation, work, and parity in mental health funding.

Bradshaw et al. (2007) acknowledged some limitations to the study. Because the study employed a qualitative design, the findings did not support generalization beyond the participants or the historical context in which the data were collected. Additionally, the longitudinal, transient living arrangements and participants' fluctuating mental health limited the ability to corroborate themes across time. Despite these limitations, the longitudinal design was a strength, as it allowed the researchers to examine changes in recovery experiences over time and to provide a deeper understanding of social inclusion processes.

My study addressed one of these limitations by recruiting participants across the United States. This study informed my research by demonstrating how hermeneutic phenomenology facilitated rich descriptions of participants' experiences. Although the participants in Bradshaw et al.'s (2007) study were not formerly incarcerated, social inclusion also represented a significant challenge for formerly incarcerated individuals. My study examined how participants who successfully reintegrated navigated social aspects of reintegration.

Orjiakor et al. (2017) used hermeneutic phenomenology to examine the experiences of incarcerated individuals awaiting trial in Nigeria. The researchers sought to understand how prolonged pretrial detention affected participants' well-being. Orjiakor et al. identified this population as underrepresented in prison research and selected

hermeneutic phenomenology to examine the meaning of this experience. The researchers found that participants awaiting trial experienced many of the same hardships as sentenced individuals, along with heightened anxiety related to uncertainty about sentencing outcomes. Participants also described cold and unemphatic treatment by prison officials, which compounded distress, particularly in the absence of mental health-trained professionals.

These studies demonstrated the application of hermeneutic phenomenology to examine lived experiences in contexts involving marginalization and institutional control. Given the absence of studies that specifically examined the lived experiences of Black males who successfully reintegrated after incarceration, my study contributed original insight to counseling and social justice literature by addressing this gap through a hermeneutic phenomenological framework.

### **Critical Race Theory**

CRT served as the secondary theoretical framework for this study and guided the examination of Black males' successful reintegration into society post-incarceration. Bell (1995) defined CRT as both critical, drawing from its origins in critical legal studies, and committed to liberation from racism through principled reasoning, a commitment inherited from traditional civil rights scholarship. Bell emphasized that CRT pursued redemption rather than destruction. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) traced the origins of the CRT movement to a group of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars who recognized the need for new theoretical approaches to address subtle and systemic forms of racism. Foundational contributors to CRT included Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, Cheryl

Harris, Richard Delgado, Patricia Williams, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Taro Yosso. In this study, I applied CRT to analyze the role of race and racism in shaping Black males' experiences of successful reintegration into society following incarceration.

### **Tenets of Critical Race Theory**

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) identified six central tenets of CRT. The first tenet asserted that racism was ordinary, rather than aberrational, and, therefore, often remained unacknowledged in society. This tenet framed racism as a routine function of social systems rather than an abnormal occurrence. Delgado and Stefancic described racism as “the normal way society does business, the common, everyday experience of people of color in this country” (p.8). This condition persisted from the enslavement of Black people through contemporary social structures. Within the context of this study, the mass incarceration of Black males has become ordinary and the way society does business.

The second tenet addressed interest convergence, also referred to as material determinism. This tenet maintained that racial progress occurred only when it aligned with the material or psychological interests of White individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This alignment reduced the dominant group's incentives to dismantle racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). DeCuir and Dixson (2004) further explained that the permanence of racism sustained hierarchical structures across all political, economic, and social domains. These hierarchies privileged White populations while marginalizing people of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Developers of CRT argued that racism physically advances the interests of both White elites, materially, and working-class Whites; therefore, large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it (Delgado

& Stefancic, 2017, p. 9). The Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, highlighted the racial caste system that was created by enslaving Black people to assist in building wealth for the White elites while also allowing the working-class Whites to use enslaved people for physical labor on their land to harvest goods such as cotton, sugar, and tobacco. Material gain was so essential that laws like Jim Crow and vagrant laws were created to enforce incarceration for convict leasing.

The third tenet emphasized that race functioned as a social construction rather than a biological reality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT scholars argued that racial categories lacked objective or genetic foundations and instead reflected social invention and political utility (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Instead, developers of CRT noted that races are categories society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Although individuals with shared ancestry might exhibit similar physical traits, these characteristics accounted for only a minor portion of genetic variation and bore no relationship to higher-order traits such as intelligence, morality, and personality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Societal failure to acknowledge these realities reinforced racial categories and endowed them with perceived permanence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The fourth tenet, differential racialization, described how dominant groups redefined racial groups over time to meet shifting social and economic needs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For example, dominant narratives once portrayed people of color as simple-minded, well-intentioned, and content with serving White people. However, due to a change in the labor market, this same group of people was depicted in cartoons,

movies, and popular culture as menacing, aggressively demanding, out of control, and in need of close supervision. These shifting representations supported practices of enslavement, containment, and criminalization (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The fifth tenet, intersectionality, rejected the notion of a single, unitary identity. One can be Black or White, gay or heterosexual, male or female. Kimberle Crenshaw, one of CRT's founders, highlighted the importance of recognizing that inequalities persist as multiple forms of discrimination overlap (i.e., racism, classism, and sexism). This intersectionality further exacerbated disparities to the detriment of already marginalized groups.

Lastly, the sixth tenet emphasized the centrality of people of color's lived experiences in scholarly inquiry. This tenet recognized the legitimacy and authority of marginalized individuals to speak about race and racism based on lived experience. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argued that narratives from Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latino scholars conveyed insights about oppression that remained inaccessible to those without these lived realities.

### **The Rationale for Choice of Theory and Article Critiques**

The tenets of CRT provided a necessary framework for contextualizing Black males' experiences of reintegration into society following incarceration. Analysis of race and ethnicity within the administration of justice required that U.S. legal systems historically reflected and maintained structural Whiteness to the detriment of people of color (Williams et al., 2020). This structural Whiteness functioned as a mechanism through which systemic racism devalued Black lives. Researchers across social science

disciplines have used CRT as an interpretive framework to examine these inequities.

Williams et al. (2020) reported that CRT supported the triangulation of historical and contemporary data to enhance the interpretation of participants' narratives. In this study, CRT guided the analysis and contextualization of participants' experiences.

Williams et al. (2020) examined the health implications of Black males' reentry into society after incarceration using a qualitative phenomenological design. Although the researchers did not explicitly state a research question, the inquiry focused on the interconnections among health, wellness, and reentry experiences. The study included 20 Black male participants whose incarceration periods ranged from several months to 30 years. Some participants experienced cyclical incarceration, whereas others reported uninterrupted sentences. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 62 years.

Williams et al. (2020) described multiple procedures for accessing the target population. Two researchers employed ethnographic strategies through the use of a *gatekeeper*. This gatekeeper, a formerly incarcerated individual who had successfully reintegrated into society, was highly respected within the community and maintained relationships with individuals inside and outside correctional facilities. Snowball sampling facilitated recruitment and supported the large sample size, particularly given the population's historical mistrust of researchers (Williams et al., 2020).

Researchers obtained written consent and conducted semi-structured interviews to collect data. The phenomenological design facilitated the collection of rich textual data on participants' reentry experiences as they navigated the challenges of reintegration into society. Interviews averaged 30 minutes, and participants received a \$10 CVS or

Walgreens gift card. Researchers also collected observational and ethnographic data to support triangulation during analysis.

Analysis revealed two primary themes: *divergent masculinity* and *mental health*. Participants described challenges related to the inability to achieve traditional markers of masculinity following incarceration. Prison conditions required emotional detachment from family relationships, which contributed to divergent masculine identities. Participants reported suppressing emotional distress to conform to hypermasculine norms. This environment fostered cycles of divergent masculinities, which had deleterious effects on them and their children. This adoption of divergent masculinity forced them to ignore or absorb mental despair to achieve hypermasculine ideals. Some participants reported extreme hopelessness after release, and the prison became a place for them to feel mentally strong (Williams et al., 2020).

Participants described adopting altered forms of consciousness to cope with discrimination and structural barriers. Many reported suppressing emotional vulnerability and assuming personal responsibility for systemic inequities rather than challenging oppressive structures. Williams et al. (2020) described this phenomenon as *institutional coerced abandonment of consciousness*, defined as state-mediated processes that psychologically disjoint individuals from their prior identities through racialized, gendered, and class-based pressure. These findings underscored the importance of examining mental health processes in reintegration research.

Study implications emphasized the importance of using CRT to examine Black males' health, wellness, and experiences within the criminal justice system. Researchers

also identified incarceration as a contributor to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness among this population. Williams et al. (2020) concluded that Black males positioned at the margins experienced heightened vulnerabilities to mental health challenges and highlighted the need for frameworks that addressed systemic social control.

This study informed my study by demonstrating the relevance of CRT when examining Black males' lived experiences. Williams et al. (2020) illustrated that these experiences remained inseparable from broader societal perceptions and structural constraints. However, the study did not examine experiences of successful reintegration. My study addressed this gap by examining how Black males achieved successful reintegration and how mental and emotional processes contributed to that success.

The strengths of the Williams et al. (2020) study included the collection of thick, rich narrative data and a large sample size for qualitative research. Limitations included geographic confinement to a Northeastern city, which may have influenced findings. Therefore, the results may differ depending on the participant's geographical location. This study also did not capture the individuals' experiences of successful post-incarceration. My study expanded the literature by examining successful reintegration across U.S. regions.

Ortiz and Jackey (2019) conducted an exploratory qualitative study using CRT to examine reentry experiences among formerly incarcerated individuals. Researchers collected data between 2014 and 2015 in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The researchers did not list a specific research question. However, they used interviews that sought to gain the lived experiences of those formerly incarcerated gang members. The

questions focused on formerly incarcerated individuals' experiences and the effect of their gang membership while confined. One section of questions also focused on the participants' life experiences post-incarceration.

In the first phase of data collection, the sample included all males with an average age of 29.48 years; no age range was provided. Researchers did not report additional demographic information. Ortiz and Jackey (2019) employed a purposeful respondent-driven sampling strategy as this was the best way to target hard-to-reach populations. The researchers conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals, lasting approximately 60 minutes each.

In the second data collection, the researchers conducted interviews between 2016 and 2018 in Indiana and Kentucky and included 27 formerly incarcerated individuals and 10 reentry service providers. The sample included 20 men and seven women, with an average age of 39.32 years; no age range was provided. Participants resided in urban, suburban, and rural areas in both liberal and conservative states. No other demographics were reported. Recruitment occurred through parole offices and reentry organizations. Interviews averaged 68 minutes. There were no other demographics reported for participants for each data collection group.

Ortiz and Jackey (2019) reported that themes from both sets of data were explained by how each state perpetuated structural violence and continued the cycle of oppression. The themes were *prison reentry programming*, *parole and post-release supervision*, and *fees*. Within these themes, the participants expressed how they felt the programs were a disservice and left them at a greater disadvantage in reintegrating, by

imposing additional requirements on them post-release. For example, one participant had to wait until 24 months or fewer remained in his sentence before participating in rehabilitation programming. At that point, he was incarcerated for 18 years; he asked how that short amount of time could genuinely prepare anyone for reentry after being imprisoned for so long. In addition, the time demands set by parole and post-release supervision made it difficult for many participants to sustain employment. Some of the fees imposed by the prison reentry industry include halfway house fees, restitution, parole or probation fees, drug testing costs, programming fees, and child support payments. Without adequate or stable employment, it becomes impossible to keep up with all financial obligations (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019).

This study highlighted the lack of research on successful reintegration and emphasized that structural systems perpetuated cycles of incarceration rather than rehabilitation. According to Ortiz and Jackey (2019), the system is not broken; it is intentionally set up for people of color to remain in the cycle of incarceration and re-incarceration. It is important to note that the prison reentry industry depicts itself as a tool to assist individuals in rehabilitation. Still, it is more of a hindrance, as evidenced by the oppressive supervision requirements while on parole or probation, the associated fees, and the debt incurred through these programs (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019).

One study limitation was the primary focus on East Coast and Midwest regions. However, there was strength in the number of in-depth interviews conducted to produce thick, rich descriptions of the participants' experiences. My study extended this body of literature by examining Black males across the United States in the Northern and

Southern regions. By centering participants' narratives of success, this research contributed to counseling practice, policy development, and advocacy efforts to disrupt cycles of incarceration and promote equity in reintegration services.

### **Literature Review**

This section presents the literature that builds upon the current research topic. First, I begin with the origins of mass incarceration to provide the reader with the history of this public health crisis. Secondly, it is essential to highlight racism and how it appears in the criminal justice system. Third, the effects of incarceration occur on multiple levels. Incarceration affects individuals, families, and the community; this section highlights these similarities and differences. Fourth, numerous barriers to reintegration remain experienced mentally, emotionally, physically, and financially; this section delves deeper into those barriers to reintegration post-incarceration. Finally, I highlight the scarcity of literature on the factors used to promote reintegration.

#### **Origins of Mass Incarceration**

The origin of mass incarceration reflected a complex and historically entrenched system of social control. This section traces the historical development of mass incarceration and its relationship to racialized symptoms of confinement. Wacquant (2000) noted that many peculiar institutions were used to confine and control African Americans. Wacquant first classified chattel slavery as one of those institutions that contained and controlled African Americans in the pivot of the plantation economy and the racial division from the colonial era to the Civil War.

Scott (2022) defined chattel slavery as the involuntary transatlantic trafficking and enslavement of African men, women, and children. Scott noted that chattel slavery in the United States was responsible for dehumanizing Black people regardless of whether they were direct descendants of African lineage. According to Scott, this tragedy led to the rise of an economic empire in the countries of the Atlantic. The enslavement of Black people allowed those White elites to obtain generational wealth through forced labor. These events led to various laws, such as the infamous Code Noir, introduced in Louisiana in 1724, which denied personhood and designated enslaved individuals as property. These laws produced a racial caste system that normalized Whiteness while commodifying Black bodies through measurement, pricing, and appraisal. This legal construction resulted in Black individuals being defined as three-fifths of a human being (Scott, 2022).

Scott (2022) reported that White supremacy became embedded within the institution of slavery. After emancipation, or the abolishment of slavery, years of institutionalized suppression and dispossession occurred through the enactment of Black codes such as the Jim Crow laws, peonage (i.e., paying off debt through work), convict leasing (i.e., forced penal labor, primarily African-American men), domestic terrorism, lynching, theft, and the destruction of Black homes, towns, and communities. These laws and policies were set to control and marginalize Black people and continued to shape society, leading to mass incarceration. The Legacy Museum (2018) reported that the formal end of chattel slavery in America failed to dismantle the racial hierarchy that sustained enslavement or establish a national commitment to racial equality.

The Jim Crow system is defined as the legal enforcement of discrimination and the segregation of Black people (Wacquant, 2000). Jim Crow remained in place from the close of Reconstruction to the Civil Rights movement. The Legacy Museum (2018) described this period as a century-long era of racial hierarchy, lynching, White supremacy, and bigotry. Reconstruction occurred after enslaved people's Emancipation between 1865 and 1877. During Reconstruction, "Black Codes" were developed that authorized convict leasing. Black Codes were used to govern the conduct of Black people. States used vagrancy laws that criminalized Black men who were not working or working for a business that Whites did not recognize (The Legacy Museum, 2018). Black people were criminalized, imprisoned, fined, and sold to private citizens or companies to work off their debts for state profit (The Legacy Museum, 2018). The Legacy Museum (2018) characterized this period as the second slavery. Between 1865 and 1950, at least 6500 Black people were killed in racial terror lynchings (The Legacy Museum, 2018).

Another form of confinement occurred through the descendants of enslaved people in the northern industrial areas, classified as the ghettos. This confinement happened during the conjoint urbanization and proletarianization of African Americans from the Great Migration of 1914 to 1930 until the 1960s through the ghettos' symbiotic and surrogate relationship with the prison system (Wacquant, 2000). This form of imprisonment speaks to the ever-so-prevalent problem of mass incarceration. Wacquant (2000) noted: "This growing disproportion in incarceration has afflicted African Americans for decades and can be understood as the extra-penological function that the

prison system has come to shoulder in the wake of the crisis of the ghetto” (Wacquant, 2000, p. 378).

According to Fornili (2018), mass incarceration refers to extreme levels of incarceration that remain heavily concentrated among some groups of people to the extent that this issue achieves some level of normalcy or ordinariness, as referenced in the first tenet of CRT. Mass incarceration originated from a change in policy due to political agendas that created harsher sentencing laws (Fornili, 2018). According to Western and Wildeman (2009), Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* provided essential insight into the beginning of this social problem. This report examined the issues associated with minority urban communities and the breakdown of African American families. Some of the breakdowns were attributed to the issues of addiction, chronic idleness, violence, high non-marital birth rates, divorce and separation, and single parenthood. Western and Wildeman noted this report gave a warning that was not considered by society. Although not followed through, the report encouraged society to increase its social investment in people to prevent problems of crime and poverty. This social investment also required more investment in treatment and resources. Although the report advocated for increased social investment and treatment, policymakers instead expanded punitive criminal justice approaches (Western & Wildeman, 2009).

First, looking back at the increase in crime rates, one must consider the time period and what shifted in the workforce. Some shifts were in employment and de-industrialization, impacting urban communities' unemployment rates. The variation in

imprisonment was linked to the variation in wages and jobs (Western & Wildeman, 2009).

Also contributing to the mass incarceration of Black males was a decline in education. This shift resulted in more idle young men in poor minority communities who supplied a large share of the prisoners, driving the prison boom. According to Western and Wildeman (2009), idle young men in poor minority neighborhoods supplied many inmates, which caused the prison boom. In comparison, victimization and offending were 25 times higher for Black men aged 18-24 than for White men aged 25 and older. It is unclear why this report highlighted two different age groups to compare this construct.

Violent crime remains a more serious problem in poor communities than in affluent ones. Violent crime occurred at higher rates in economically disadvantaged communities, increasing the likelihood of incarceration among young, impoverished men (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Persistent racialized narratives portraying Black men as inherently aggressive, savage, and needing to be contained still oppress Black men today and continue to perpetuate this cycle (Brown, 2021; Kita, 2019; Scott, 2022).

Politics also plays a significant role in the origin of mass incarceration. Under the republican governors and legislators, incarceration rates increased; however, the democrats also supported punitive criminal justice (Scott, 2022; The Legacy Museum, 2018; Western & Wildeman, 2009). As a result, the prison population expanded in the 1980s and 1990s as the political agendas perpetuated law and order and moved away from rehabilitative criminal justice policies. Western and Wildeman (2009) noted that in

the late 1990s, harsh sentencing policies and a punitive approach to drug control were two factors that prolonged mass incarceration.

According to Western and Wildeman (2009), the growth in numbers of those convicted on drug-related charges, parole violators, and public order law breakers reflected the use of punitive policy as a social policy in which a troublesome and unruly population was increasingly managed with incarceration. Researchers reported three significant contributors to mass incarceration: the war on drugs, punitive sentencing policies like the three-strike law, and deinstitutionalizing people with mental illness (Fornili, 2018; Wildeman & Wang, 2017).

The first contributing factor to mass incarceration was deinstitutionalization (Onah, 2018). Long-term inpatient mental health treatment began with a sensitive modality approach (i.e., relaxing activities, taking walks, and reading). This treatment changed to inhumane treatment due to inadequate staffing, lack of training, and required education levels to treat those with mental illness. As a result, these patients experienced extreme abuse and neglect. They were treated inhumanely in these facilities, the deinstitutionalization movement aimed to provide better treatment to low-income Americans with mental illnesses. First, stakeholders wanted to transition from a predominantly inpatient level of care to a more decentralized system of smaller outpatient service facilities. Secondly, stakeholders wanted to shift treatment from the state hospital to private community centers. Lastly, stakeholders aimed to change the source of government funding for low-income patient treatment from the state to the federal government. The deinstitutionalization movement began in 1955. However, federal

intervention catalyzed the movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The deinstitutionalization crisis also intersected with mass incarceration (Onah, 2018).

According to Onah (2018), in 2012, the United States imprisoned 356,268 individuals with severe mental illness in jails and prisons. However, that same year, state hospitals across the United States collectively held a meager 35,000 beds, down from the 558,922 beds in 1955. Most recently, 47 states were incarcerating vastly more people with mental illness than they were treating in a public hospital.

Onah (2018) noted in the 1980s and 1990s, local law enforcement adopted tough-on crime policies targeting low-level offenses like property crimes, lewd conduct, substance abuse, graffiti, and loitering. As a result, most of those targeted included panhandlers, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, and the mentally ill. In addition, most of those arrested were Black and Latino individuals (Onah, 2018). Given the overrepresentation of Black men among incarcerated populations, my address the gap in counseling research related to post-incarceration mental health needs.

Federal drug policies further accelerated incarceration rates. President Richard Nixon's declaration of the war on drugs in 1971 prioritized punitive approaches over social investment (Cummings, 2012; Fornili, 2018). After campaigning for the presidency, he declared war on drugs using a "southern strategy" that favored southern racism and opposed civil rights. This opposition to civil rights and preference for racism was the same strategy that fueled the Civil War and Reconstruction after enslaved people were emancipated. This legislation increased incarceration rates and the prison boom in minority communities (Cummings, 2012; Fornili, 2018). According to Cummings (2012),

politicians like Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater, and Nelson Rockefeller advocated for harsh drug laws and severe criminal sanctions because they argued that a strong correlation existed between drug addiction and crime. In 1986, Ronald Reagan enacted the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which criminalized drug addiction and led to a mass and disproportionate incarceration of non-violent offenders from marginalized communities (Cummings, 2012).

Comparatively, Kerrison (2017) noted that the Addiction Recovery Act of 2016 targeted opioid addiction and used a therapeutic rather than punitive approach, as seen in former efforts to control drugs in the United States. Kerrison also recognized that the only difference in the nation's addiction-related public crisis was the color of the individual's skin and the socioeconomic status of the individual addicted to the substance. In the opiate crisis, the individuals' sociodemographics were classified as White middle-class youth and professionals. Instead of punitive measures, the therapeutic approach highlights bias and racial inequalities in the criminal justice system.

Lastly, adding to mass incarceration rates was the "three-strike, you're out" law enacted between 1993 and 1995 in 24 states (Dickey & Hollenhorst, 1999; Marvell & Moody, 2001). The rationale behind this law was that prison terms would reduce crime by deterring and incapacitating the most active and dangerous criminals. The laws provided longer prison terms for some of those incarcerated with repeated felony convictions. While the laws varied among the states, most convictions led to a life sentence without the possibility of being released for at least 25 years upon a third conviction of serious violent crime. The crimes included murder, rape, kidnapping,

aggravated robbery, aggravated assault, and sexual abuse. A few states had additional crimes, most commonly burglary of occupied dwellings, simple robbery, and firearm violations. Researchers found no deterrent effect associated with these laws and identified increased homicide rates and substantial social costs (Marvell & Moody, 2001). The research showed that in the long term, the laws created an additional 3,300 homicides each year and have a long-term social cost of \$11 billion per year.

According to Dickey and Hollenhorst (1999), the three-strike laws disproportionately incarcerated Black men. Regarding the study's population, Black individuals comprised 31% of inmates in Georgia's state prisons, but 37% of those convicted under the two-strikes law and 44% of those convicted under the three-strikes law (Dicker & Hollenhorst, 1999). Dickey and Hollenhorst reported that Georgia's first strikers were predominantly young Black men, seven out of every 10 having a first strike under 30. The same racial disparities existed among those convicted of the second strike, with Black individuals representing over 68% of those convicted.

Fornili (2018) reported that Lyndon Johnson was the sitting president when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were passed. In addition, Lyndon Johnson introduced federal initiatives to address inequality, declared war on poverty and crime, and introduced the Law Enforcement Assistance Act. According to Hinton (2015), this political agenda was called Johnson's Great Society programs, a response to the civil rights movement. As part of the war on poverty, Johnson proposed the Housing and Urban Development Act, which subsidized private homes for low-income renters. The Voting Rights Act allowed Black Americans in the South to

participate in the electoral process as full citizens. Finally, the Law Enforcement Assistance Act expanded law enforcement presence and control in low-income urban communities. Hinton (2015) reported that combining anti-poverty and anti-crime programs laid the groundwork for contemporary mass incarceration.

According to Hinton (2015), this act allowed the federal government to fund state and local law enforcement, enabling more police, supplying officers with hardware, and paying for more prisons. Hinton (2015) reported that Johnson and other liberals viewed poverty as the root cause of crime, and due to Daniel Moynihan's 1965 report "*The Negro Family*," they also viewed community behavior and not structural exclusion as the cause of that poverty. The Law Enforcement Assistant Act further revealed that the federal government believed crime was an inherent problem of Black urban America (Hinton, 2015).

Events during this time exacerbated the narrative that crime was inherently a Black urban problem, including the Watts Riot of August 1965, which took place in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California (Edy, 2022). This riot was incited when a 21-year-old African American male was pulled over due to suspected drunk driving by a White California Highway Patrol officer. After being pulled over, the Black male resisted arrest, and a physical altercation ensued. Those who witnessed this began to protest, and the riot lasted for six days, resulting in 34 deaths, 1000 injured people, and an estimated \$40 million in property damage (Edy, 2022).

According to Hinton (2015), violent incidents were apparent by the end of the 1960s, not due to White hostility towards integration like earlier riots, but to the presence

of exploitative and exclusionary institutions in Black neighborhoods. During Johnson's presidency, more than 250 incidents of civil disorder occurred and resulted in the death of more than 200 Black Americans, 13,000 injured civilians and officers, and the destruction of billions of dollars' worth of property. The events resulted in the most significant period of domestic bloodshed the nation witnessed since the Civil War (Hinton, 2015).

Fornili (2018) reported that private prisons contributed to mass incarceration by prioritizing profit over rehabilitation, resulting in understaffing, inadequate physical and mental health care, unsafe conditions, and in some cases, inadequate meals. These prisons avoid incarcerating those who are sick and elderly to minimize the cost of health care. These facilities have higher inmate-to-guard ratios, which inherently make them more dangerous.

Fornili (2018) noted that at the heart of CRT remains the belief that American laws, including anti-discrimination laws, are structured to maintain White privilege. Fornili (2018) used CRT to examine four aspects of this problem, the school-to-prison pipeline, racialized mass incarceration, the for-profit prison system, and the war on drugs on families and communities of color. Fornili (2018) noted that collaborative partnerships between the school and the juvenile justice system, rigid discipline policies, and punitive approaches contributed to youth criminalization. This phenomenon is known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

Fornili (2018) also noted that the school-to-prison pipeline represented a shift from an education and rehabilitation paradigm to a punitive and detrimental disposition to

vulnerable children and adolescents. This shift showed the criminalization of school discipline as a growing pattern of forcing students out of educational institutions directly and indirectly into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems via suspension, expulsion, and arrest for minor infractions. These infractions increased the likelihood of school dropout.

In addition, Fornili (2018) reported that since the establishment of zero-tolerance policies, student arrests on school property have increased from 300% to 500% annually. This percentage is usually due to non-serious offenses like unruly behavior and disobedience. Black students were the primary target of the zero-tolerance policies and were three to four times more likely to be suspended than White students. Finally, Fornili noted that the education system perpetuated structural racism via the school-to-prison pipeline because so many minority students go directly from school to jail.

According to Western and Wildeman (2009), by 1999, incarceration became a joint-life event for Black men that sharply distinguished their pathway through adulthood from that of White men. Wildeman and Wang (2017) noted that incarceration was common and concentrated in the Black community. More than other life events, such as college graduation or engaging in military service, incarceration had become a rite of passage that typified African American men since the late 1960s (Western & Wildeman, 2009). The origin of mass incarceration has a deep history inextricably connected to chattel slavery, political agendas, and systemic racism. In the following section, I provide more context on racism and the criminal justice system.

## **Racism and the Criminal Justice System**

As I presented in the previous section, racial disparities existed throughout the criminal justice system. Racial disparity existed when the representation of a group in the criminal justice system exceeds that groups' proportion in the general population (Haley, 2007). Researchers reported that incarceration is concentrated among socially and economically disadvantaged (Bell, 1992; Madoshi, 2019; Western & Wildeman, 2009). By the end of the 1990s, incarceration had become common among young Black men. The Legacy Museum (2018) reported that one in three Black boys will encounter the criminal justice system through jail or prison. According to Buntman (2019), the moral failures of colonial law included differentiated rules and practices based on demographics such as race, tribe, or ethnicity. Under the rule of law, punishment or rewards should not be assigned based on either chosen or imposed identity (Buntman, 2019).

The Black-White imprisonment disparity is unmatched by other significant social indicators, such as socioeconomic and marital status. This pattern demonstrated that race outweighed other sociodemographic factors when assessing inequalities. Kerrison (2017) reported that White supremacy maintains a status quo of privilege even in the criminal justice system and asserted that Whiteness functioned as a normalized social standard. Individuals racialized as White were permitted to believe their lived realities was an ontological baseline, a condition reflected across criminal justice processes. Most recently, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2022) reported that Black men experienced the highest imprisonment rate, 1,807 incarcerations per every 100,000 individuals, reinforcing the persistence of racial disparity in incarceration.

Consistent with the tenets of CRT, race and racism functioned as central determinants in mass incarceration. Kita (2019) reported that mass incarceration operated as a collective response to social anxiety and ambiguity. Kita used a psychoanalytic lens to frame how dehumanization and criminalization of certain members of society unconsciously force them to function as receptacles for the unbearable aspects of humanity. These processes produced coercive and traumatogenic social conditions that contributed to behaviors subsequently criminalized. This mechanism shifted responsibility for structural harm from social systems to individuals designated for punishment (Kita, 2019). The depth of knowledge in this study further displayed the need to examine and understand how those Black men who have successfully reintegrated into society, despite the massive problem of mass incarceration, achieved this.

Statistics of defeat further highlighted the need to report on those who have achieved success. Fornili (2018) said that no group of people had unitary identities. Since the late 1960s, incarceration has become more typical than college graduation or military service for Black men (Bell, 1992; Western & Wildeman, 2009). Fornili also reported that Black men were 33% more likely to be arrested than their White counterparts after accounting for everyone having multiple identities that make up their personhood or intersectionality.

The incarceration rate for Black men was 6.5 times higher than that of White men. Incarceration surpassed other normative life-course events for Black men and remained both common and geographically concentrated within Black communities (Western & Wildeman, 2009, Wildeman & Wang, 2017). Kita (2019) reported that the United States

incarcerated more than 700 people for every 100,000 residents, and the impact remained disproportionately represented by African American men, Latino men, and people with a lower socioeconomic status. Kita further identified social projections onto poor and psychologically vulnerable populations, particularly people of color, as foundational to mass incarceration. Kita's notion of mass incarceration being society's way of projecting the Black man as vicious, dangerous, aggressive, and needing to be confined and contained was further represented in The Legacy Museum (2018) as exhibits displayed how White peoples' projection of this view of Black men programmed a justification of their treatment.

Haley (2007) reported discrimination in the criminal justice system related to sentencing bias. According to Haley, there remained different penalties in drug sentencing for rich and predominantly White drug users than for poor, predominantly ethnic minorities. The example used Haley's study was the difference in penalties for those apprehended for crack cocaine and those arrested for powder cocaine. Although both carry the same chemical composition and physiological effects, crack cocaine, typically distributed in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods, carries a minimum of 5 years for sentencing, whereas powder cocaine used in higher socioeconomic neighborhoods carries no minimum for sentencing (Haley, 2007). Haley also reported that sentencing disparities persisted even when Black and White individuals committed identical offenses.

Racism and the criminal justice system remained demographically captured through maps and statistics. For example, Story (2016) introduced the concept of million-

dollar blocks, defined as the spatially concentrated urban areas of origin of the nation's 2.3 million detainees, a disproportionate number of whom come from just a handful of neighborhoods in the country's biggest cities. The term million-dollar blocks were used to show how much the state spends to incarcerate individuals from these neighborhoods. The creators of this map intended it to be used to reduce incarceration by investing in restorative practices to prevent it. An example of this concept being used was to increase policing and arrests in Brownsville, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. This neighborhood was predominantly African American and low-income. According to Story (2016), this area was cited as having higher arrest and incarceration rates, but it is under more police surveillance and control due to this map.

Powell (2018) reviewed two books, *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* by Yale law professor James Forman Jr., and *Chokehold: Policing Black Men* by Georgetown law professor Paul Butler. Both books illuminated not only the disproportionate effect but also how decisional power and the procedural and punitive architecture of the criminal justice system advanced inequality as a societal norm.

Butler observed that the system was broken intentionally. *Locking Up Our Own* unpacks structural inequality as a series of incremental decisions by African American policymakers and offers an incrementalist approach to dismantling mass incarceration; by contrast, Butler advanced an argument for transformative social change through a radical restructuring of the criminal justice system (Powell, 2018). The structural dimensions of race were illuminated in both books to expand a central tenet of CRT; intersectionality and, precisely, societies move away from the limited conception of discriminatory intent

to a structural critique of how the criminal justice system functions to oppress African Americans disproportionately. In *Chokehold*, Butler reported stereotypical depictions of the Black male as a predator, societal menace, and perpetual threat to society, legitimizing state police violence against the Black male (Powell, 2018).

Racism within the criminal justice system continued to reinforce the mass incarceration of Black men (Kita, 2019; Powell, 2018; Wildeman & Wang, 2017). Sentencing bias and racialized narratives depicted Black men as dangerous and contributed to the maintenance of this cycle (Haley, 2007; Kita, 2019; The Legacy Museum, 2018). My study examined Black males' lived experiences of racism within the criminal justice system during incarceration and after release and documented how participants achieved successful reintegration despite these systemic barriers.

### **Effects of Incarceration**

The consequences of incarceration are complex and have a wide range of influences on the individual and those connected to them. Researchers demonstrated that incarceration created significant barriers to financial stability, stable mental health, and physical health for Black males (Blankenship et al., 2018; Wildeman & Wang, 2017). Wildeman and Wang (2017) conducted a comprehensive analysis of peer-reviewed studies and government-funded reports to assess the relationship between incarceration and health outcomes. Their findings identified adverse effects occurring before, during, and after incarceration. These outcomes affected not only individuals who experienced incarceration but also their families and their communities. The literature I reviewed in

this section described the multifaceted ways incarceration shaped Black males' social, economic, and health trajectories (Wildeman & Wang, 2017).

### **Financial Stability Effects of Incarceration**

Western and Wildeman (2009) reported that mass incarceration affected minority families beginning in the late 1990s. High rates of male incarceration and mortality altered gender ratios reduced the availability of partners for women in economically disadvantaged urban communities (Wester & Wildeman; Wildeman & Wang, 2017). However, these effects were minor compared to the high rates of joblessness, which left few Black men in inner cities able to support a family. Formerly incarcerated Black men experience employment discrimination related to criminal history disclosures (Buck et al., 2022). According to Buck et al. (2022), one participant reported that after selecting 'yes' to the question 'Are you a felon,' he rarely received a call for an interview.

Incarceration also altered life course trajectories. Western and Wildeman (2009) noted that the stigma of criminal records also created legal barriers to skilled and licensed occupations, rights to welfare benefits, and voting rights. Related to the deleterious effect on the family unit, children of the prison boom were at greater risk of poverty and violence and were more involved in crime themselves; they, too, risked following in their parents' footsteps (Brown, 2021; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Wildeman & Wang, 2017). This ongoing pattern meant that mass incarceration persisted over a lifetime and across generations (Brown, 2021; Western & Wildeman, 2009). Williams et al. (2019) noted that the over-policing of Black males and the removal of Black fathers from home due to incarceration contributed to the crisis of dismantling the Black family. These

factors have destroyed the formerly incarcerated Black male psyche while significantly limiting their employability.

### **Mental and Physical Health Effects of Incarceration**

Schnittker and John (2007) used longitudinal data to examine within-person changes in health status following incarceration. The researchers obtained data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which initially examined the effects of incarceration on wages. The survey began in 1979 with a nationally representative sample of male and female youth aged 14-21 and re-interviewed participants biannually. To minimize attrition, the researchers continued to follow respondents as they relocated, including transitions into jail or prison. Schnittker and John analyzed data collected between 1979 and 2000.

Schnittker and John (2007) reported that the first results table included descriptive statistics of the number of respondents interviewed in prison and those experiencing severe health limitations. Many respondents were neither persistently incarcerated nor persistently ill. However, incarceration interviews were far more common among Black people, appearing in at least 10% of the sub-sample. Approximately 14% of respondents reported at least one panel in which they described severe health limitations; most limitations were temporary. Severe health limitations occurred more frequently among Black respondents.

According to Schnittker and John (2007), the second results table included descriptive statistics for the mediating variables. The researchers stratified the mean variables by whether the respondent had any history of incarceration. Those respondents

with a history of incarceration had two fewer years of schooling, ranked 28 percentiles less in intelligence, and were twice as likely to use drugs. Those formerly incarcerated also had lower incomes and were less likely to be married.

In the third results table, Schnittker and John (2007) showed descriptive statistics using conditional logistic regression. The models were progressively more stringent, allowing the researchers to examine the effects of incarceration. The results for the relationship between incarceration and health were robust even with the most strenuous controls. For respondents at the highest risk of incarceration, time spent in prison might have some beneficial consequences. Still, for those at lower risk of incarceration, time spent in jail was harmful. These effects did not persist after release. The association between incarceration and poor health weakened after controlling for education and intelligence. Although drug use was more common among formerly incarcerated individuals, it only explained one percent of the effect of incarceration.

Finally, the fourth table of results applied the insight from the third table to health disparities. Black people and women are more likely to report severe health limitations. Results showed that incarceration did more to suppress gender differences than to explain racial differences in incarceration. Despite the researchers' assumptions, the association between race and incarceration was deemed insignificant. Results suggested that incarceration was a significant risk factor, but more complex than the researchers expected (Schnittker & John, 2007).

Schnittker and John (2007) reported that incarceration's effects might depend on the type of conviction because these influenced prison experiences and the stigma

experienced post-release. These researchers noted that convictions for violence, theft, or acts of conscience may have varying effects on employment, self-esteem, and social integration. Schnittker and John also reported defining mental health based solely on clinical criteria may mask the psychological coping needed in prison, proving dysfunctional in other contexts. The example these researchers provided was that the need to adopt skills like vigilance, blunted emotions, and mistrust might help inmates cope in a violent prison environment and elevate the risk for cardiovascular disease and other stress-related illnesses. In terms of health outcomes, the length of incarceration was determined to be less critical than incarceration itself (Schnittker & John, 2007). Schnittker and John (2007) further emphasized the need for future research to explore mental health as a mechanism linking incarceration and long-term health. They also called for empirical studies that further investigated the broader population-level consequences of incarceration.

More research highlighted the mental and physical health effects of incarceration. Wildeman and Wang (2017) reported that formerly incarcerated individuals experienced poorer mental health, worse physical health outcomes, and elevated mortality risk. Mass incarceration contributed to racial health disparities in the United States across various outcomes because of its direct and indirect consequences for health and the disproportionate concentration of imprisonment among Black communities (Wildeman & Wang, 2017).

Udo (2019) used a representative sample of 36,133 noninstitutionalized adults in the United States. Udo examined the differences in health impacts of incarceration after

reentry among Non-Hispanic Whites, Non-Hispanic Blacks, and Hispanics. Udo noted that few studies had examined incarceration's effects on individuals who have reintegrated into society. Udo found that a history of incarceration was associated with having experienced childhood abuse and other traumatic events, and individuals experienced more significant stress in the past year.

According to Udo (2019), the prevalence of various health conditions remained significantly higher among those incarcerated. These health conditions included hepatitis B and C, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, high blood pressure, arthritis, cancer, and other chronic medical conditions (Udo, 2019; Wildeman & Wang, 2017). Udo reported that these diseases were primarily due to the inhumane conditions of correctional facilities.

Udo (2019) also revealed that non-Hispanic Blacks with a history of incarceration displayed an increased risk of diabetes, hypertension, anemia, obesity, and AIDS/HIV compared to non-Hispanic White individuals. Similarly, formerly incarcerated Hispanic individuals demonstrated elevated risk for hypertension, anemia, diabetes, and AIDS/HIV than non-Hispanic White individuals. However, Udo reported lower mortality rates among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black individuals compared to the general Black population, a finding partially attributed to increased access to medical care during incarceration. A significant contribution to these conditions was the privatization of correctional facilities that occurred through mass incarceration (Udo, 2019).

Massoglia and Pridemore (2015) identified overcrowding, isolation, exposure to infectious diseases, violence, poor nutrition, and lack of physical activity as contributors

to debilitating health during incarceration. Massoglia and Pridemore demonstrated a lower mortality rate across research due to various external factors that impacted Black males outside the prison system. For instance, in the general population, young Black males were more susceptible to external causes of death seen in the general population, such as violence and automobile accidents. Also contributing to this mortality rate was the general population's lack of access to healthcare, which was more accessible for Black males during incarceration. This research showed that due to the conditions of society in predominantly Black areas, access to overall healthcare was limited, and a person can receive care that might not exist in their communities while being incarcerated.

The physical health effects of incarceration were debilitating, but the psychological impacts were also. Kita (2019) noted that more people met the criteria for mental illness in prison than in the nation's psychiatric facilities. This notion highlighted how deinstitutionalization became trans institutionalization (Kita, 2019). Trans institutionalization referred to the increase in imprisonment of individuals suffering from severe and persistent mental illness from psychiatric facilities and jails and prisons.

Madoshi (2019) reported that Black individuals faced increased risk for mental health disorders due to harsher barriers and circumstances as compared to the general population. These circumstances and obstacles included exposure to violence, trauma, poor healthcare, and poverty (Madoshi, 2019). Collectively, these findings underscored the importance of examining the lived experiences of Black men who achieved successful reintegration following incarceration.

### **Article Critique on the Privatizing Prison Industry**

Montes et al. (2020) argued that profiting and focusing on cost rather than care in a system historically exploiting Blacks and other minority groups increased the racial and ethnic disparities within the criminal justice system. Proponents of the private prison industry have stated that this industry was more equipped to provide comparable or better services and reduce recidivism. Still, these notions have not been found in empirical research. The profit incentives in private prisons contributed to longer incarceration times. Those opposed to the private prison industry argued that its primary objective of profit-making created the potential for corruption, distorted the focus of corrections, and reduced the likelihood of appropriate punishment or rehabilitation (Montes et al., 2020).

Montes et al. (2020) used administrative data from the Florida Department of Corrections to examine racial and ethnic disparities in placement within privatized prisons. The sample included individuals released from prison between 2004 and 2011. Adult males and females were incarcerated between 1995 and 2011, while youthful offenders entered custody between 1997 and 2011. The archival dataset included 19,987 adult women, 139,287 adult men, and 13,933 youthful male offenders. Among these individuals, 76% received their first private-prison placement within four months of incarceration.

The researchers' first goal for this study was to examine whether age or ethnicity influenced the likelihood of being placed in a private prison. The researchers' second goal was to test whether racial or ethnic minorities who were young and violent were more likely to be placed in private prisons. The researcher's first hypothesis was that racial and

ethnic minorities would be more likely to be placed in private prisons. Results from the study found that Black women were 32% more likely to be positioned in a private prison than White women. Results remained the same after controlling for age, violent history, prior record, and other potential confounders. This pattern differed for Hispanic women, as they were less likely to be placed in a private prison than White women. Black men were 32% more likely to be incarcerated in a private prison and Hispanic males were 26% more likely (Montes et al., 2020).

The researchers' second hypothesis reported that the effect of race and ethnicity would be more significant among younger males and violent offenders. The results showed a statistically significant curvilinear relationship between age and private prison incarceration. The youngest and oldest women were least likely to be placed in a private prison. Also, women convicted of a violent offense were less likely to receive placement in a private prison. In contrast to women, men convicted of a violent crime were more likely to be placed in a private prison (Montes et al., 2020).

Montes et al. (2020) found that Black men and women experienced higher likelihoods of placement in private prisons, whereas Hispanic women and Hispanic youthful offenders experienced lower likelihoods of private prison incarceration. These placement patterns suggested differential perceptions of threat across racial and ethnic groups, which influenced correctional decision-making. This finding held relevance for my study because placement in private versus public prisons may have shaped participants' incarceration experiences and influenced post-release reintegration outcomes.

Montes et al. (2020) acknowledged several limitations such as more research was needed on the patterns of private prison placement for Black and Hispanic offenders. This research was needed to hold correctional systems accountable and to reduce the potential for racial and ethnic disparities. There was also a need to understand the differences between private and public prisons. Researchers have consistently reported that private prisons had worse conditions than public prisons and provided worse services.

Montes et al. noted that empirical research had not supported these accusations. The researchers could not assess how prior decisions about cases influenced placement decisions made by the prison system but noted an investigation of these cases was needed. Lastly, there was a need to explore the salience of social contexts, such as communities' social and demographic composition, to understand placement decisions (Montes et al., 2020). My study contributed to this body of literature by examining how formerly incarcerated Black men understood their incarceration and reintegration experiences and whether correctional facility placements influenced their perceptions of their post-release trajectories.

### **Barriers to Reintegration**

Researchers have identified several barriers that impeded successful reintegration for Black men following incarceration. Williams et al. (2019) used critical ethnography and semi-structured interviews to capture Black males' reentry experiences. Participants described the stigma associated with a criminal record as a metaphoric castration, as it limited their ability to secure employment and provide financial and emotional support for their families. This inability to secure and provide for the family goes against society's

hetero-patriarchal view of men (Williams et al., 2019). Williams et al. linked the psychological distress associated with these barriers to historical processes rooted in slavery, during which systems deliberately devalued Black men in front of his wife and children to keep him in bondage, perpetuating the cycle of unworthiness. Williams et al. also reported that some participants felt useless to their children and disconnected from the mother of their children.

Additional collateral consequences of incarceration that limited Black males' successful reintegration included disenfranchisement, public service ineligibility, and restrictions in student loans, child custody, employment, housing, and felon registration laws (i.e., those convicted of sexual offenses must register in their state; Williams et al., 2019). Williams et al. (2019) termed this as "othering," where society places a person in exclusion from the rest of the population based on their status as being formerly incarcerated. This notion meant that Black, formerly incarcerated males experienced an intersection of social inclusion due to their race and criminal record. The narratives of the participants in my study highlighted the suffering post-incarceration.

Kerrison (2017) noted that a disparity in reentry experiences remained due to the lack of rehabilitation-oriented political and organizational resources in communities of color. Extended incarceration disrupted family systems and weakened social support networks necessary for successful reintegration. These structural deficiencies contributed to long-term instability for men of color returning to their communities (Kerrison, 2017).

Blankenship et al. (2018) examined the effects of mass incarceration on social determinants of health using a longitudinal study of 302 adult men and women recently

released from jail or prison for drug-related offenses. The sample included Black, White, Hispanic, and other racial groups; however, the analyses focused on Black ( $n = 146$ ) and Whites ( $n = 97$ ) participants. Participants completed computerized self-administered questionnaires at baseline and during six-month follow-ups over a two-year period to assess measures of well-being, including education, employment, housing, relationships, and used of services. Participants in this study reported that their criminal justice history restricted their access to employment, education, housing and family and intimate relationships. Black participants reported these adverse effects more frequently than White participants.

Blankenship et al. (2018) identified several limitations, including reliance on a convenience sample from New Haven, Connecticut, and a focus on individuals with non-violent drug offenses. The researchers also measured criminal justice involvement at the individual level, limiting its ability to capture broader systemic effects. Blankenship et al. also noted that future research should explore the heterogeneous experiences of different criminal justice-involved populations, including their interactions within the criminal justice system, differences in offenses, and the subsequent impacts on their well-being and that of their family members. My study addressed these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of Black men who had successfully reintegrated at least one-year post-release across geographic regions and offense histories.

One of the most significant barriers to reintegration is the amount of money profited from the prison-industrial complex. Cummings (2012) reported that the political will to normalize criminal sanctions in the United States by bringing incarceration rates

back in line with appropriate violent behavior appears to be nonexistent. The War on Drugs has become an integral component of the penal system, and the prison-industrial complex relies on an ever-lasting stream of criminals to maximize profit flow. Story (2016) asserted that prison reform efforts like drug court and mental health court programs created the illusion that it was merely a repackaging of mass incarceration. Individuals released into these programs and into probation or parole often had extensive obligations and demands to meet for years, and even decades. So, although these individuals were no longer incarcerated, they were still imprisoned outside the carceral facilities.

Community supervision constituted another significant barrier to successful reintegration. Moyd (2021) indicated that approximately four to five million people are on community supervision, which outnumbered the 2.3 million individuals incarcerated. Black individuals represented 28% of those on probation and 38% of those on parole. In 2018, Black individuals were 2.6 times more likely to be on probation and four times more likely to be on parole than White individuals. Moyd identified parole boards as fragmented institutions that operated in fear of releasing the “wrong person,” so instead, they denied release to so many who deserved a second chance. Because most boards operated without transparency, there was little accountability to the communities they served (Moyd, 2021).

Moyd (2021) also reported that many Black individuals came from communities that had been resource-deficient with substandard education, leaving many with limited marketable skills. These deficits created a barrier to enrollment in institutional programs

that required a certain level of comprehension. This truth also existed in drug treatment programs that required a strict regimen of group participation and workshops, completing life-skills education workbooks. Another barrier existed in many people entering prison who had behavioral health issues that had not been acknowledged or went untreated due to increased mental health stigma within the Black family (Moyd, 2021). Collectively, the research in this section further highlights the need to examine the factors that support successful reintegration among Black men. My study responded to that need by centering the lived experiences of Black men who had achieved sustained reintegration post-incarceration.

### **Factors that Promote Reintegration**

In this section, I will discuss the factors that promoted successful reintegration. I highlight the programs that are still used to reduce recidivism. The reviewed studies also revealed gaps in the literature on reintegration among Black men, which informed my focus for my study.

Cobbina (2010) examined factors contributing to reintegration success and failure among formerly incarcerated women. Cobbina found that successful outcomes depended on supportive or unsupportive relationships with family members, parole or probation officers, and the competing demands they faced while reintegrating. Cobbina noted that family support in terms of financial, emotional, and childcare contributed significantly to successful reintegration. Given women's greater emphasis on relationships, the rapport between the woman and her supervising officer needed to be one in which she could feel comfortable disclosing barriers or challenges that might affect successful reintegration

(Cobbina, 2010). Cobbina also reported that the reintegration process was gendered and should be considered when assisting those formerly incarcerated successfully reintegrate into society. The findings from this study informed my research by raising the question of whether similar factors supported successful reintegration among Black men who have not reoffended.

Research on factors that promoted successful reintegration for Black men is scarce. Mass incarceration has had a devastating and debilitating effect on the Black community by creating a sense of hopelessness, destroying communities, causing joblessness, educational inequities, family breakdowns, and demanding social change (Thomas, 2013). According to Thomas (2013), there was a need to gather the lived experiences of those men of color who were formerly incarcerated and have not re-offended to inform educational policies. It was crucial to understand the factors that contribute to not re-offending.

Doleac (2019) noted that cognitive behavioral therapy and family-based multi-systemic therapy have effectively reduced recidivism. Doleac indicated that cognitive-behavioral treatment was successful even without the added wraparound services. Doleac reviewed empirical evidence on programs designed to reduce recidivism. Doleac reported that wrap-around services were ineffective and, in some cases, more detrimental to participants. Wraparound services for formerly incarcerated individuals reintegrating into society are defined as multiple services delivered through a single program to address multiple deficits (Doleac, 2019). These services included substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, employment, and case management.

Doleac (2019) noted several reasons these programs might not result in successful reintegration. First, the individual program elements might not be practical; therefore, combining multiple services into one program would likely be ineffective. Doleac determined that more research was needed on the individual services before combining them into a single program. Second, the programs failed to do anything well by trying to do everything simultaneously. Third, the comprehensiveness of the wraparound program might be the problem, inadvertently causing participants to feel overwhelmed and drained. Finally, the intensity of multiple services might remind some participants that the community views them as a risk and unstable. Doleac also noted that comprehensive programming might convey that much help was needed to survive outside prison. If that was the case, less intensive services might be more beneficial, allowing those participants psychological freedom to rebuild their lives outside of incarceration.

### **Article Critiques on Factors That Promote Reintegration**

Buck et al. (2022) conducted a descriptive qualitative study to examine lifestyle dimensions of formerly incarcerated individuals following release from prison. Although the researchers did not explicitly state a research question, they identified their purpose for the study was to explore participants' roles, daily routines, living situations, activity participation, and current and future plans after incarceration. The sample included 14 formerly incarcerated adults from the Offender Alumni Association. The sample consisted of 11 men and three women. Twelve participants identified as Black, and two identified as White. Participants' ages ranged from 41 to 60 years, with a mean age of 51 years ( $SD = 6.1$ ). The mean length of incarceration was 8.6 years ( $SD = 9.4$ ), ranging

from 5 days to 31.5 years. The mean time since release from prison was 5.6 ( $SD = 4.8$ ), ranging from 4 months to 15.3 years.

Buck et al. (2022) reported that the director of the Offender Alumni Association asked individuals if they would like to participate in the study. The researchers used a two-part interview for their data collection process. Participants first completed a demographic questionnaire, followed by a semi-structured interview consisting of ten open-ended questions.

According to Buck et al. (2022), the data analysis identified facilitators and barriers influencing successful community reintegration. Four facilitator themes emerged: strategies for visualizing and committing to an ideal future, establishing a daily routine, upholding a life of balance, and discovering and connecting to external supports. Participants also reported adverse experiences that inhibited their growth. Those emerged as the six barrier themes: impediments to employment opportunities, lack of financial resources, social stigma, regulations imposed by the judicial system, disconnection from social advancements, and addiction to drugs and alcohol. Consistent with prior research, participants reported that their spiritual connection and belief in a higher power were central to their success in reintegrating (Buck et al., 2022).

Buck et al. (2022) reported several limitations in the study. The temporal aspect was one limitation, as each participant only completed one interview with no follow-up. The sample was limited to only those individuals in the transitional program in the Southeastern region of the United States. These researchers suggested that future studies should include those formerly incarcerated from different states across the country who

did not participate in a transitional program or a similar one to this study. This study is essential to my research because it identified the importance of understanding the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated minorities and the factors that contribute to successful reintegration. My study addressed these limitations by recruiting participants from multiple regions across the United States and by recruiting both engaged and unengaged individuals in transitional programs.

DeVeaux (2022) examined how Black men in New York City defined success after incarceration using a qualitative research design. DeVeaux reported that the research questions were intended to better understand the post-release experience of Black men who have remained outside the prison for three or more years. Research questions for this study included: How do they define success after prison? What were participants post-prison experiences pursuing success as they define it? How and in what ways did in-prison experiences shape participants pursuit of success post-release?

DeVeaux (2022) reported that the study's inclusion criteria were: participants were at least 25 years of age at the time of the interview, self-identified as a US-born Black male, and was incarcerated for at least 5 years in a New York state prison. The final sample included 17 participants age range was from 33 to 79 years, with a mean age of 53.9. Participants' age at incarceration ranged from 16 to 42 years, with an average age of 22.3 years. The average age at release was 39.5 years, ranging from 28 to 67 years. On average, participants spent 16.6 years incarcerated, 4.1 years under parole supervision, 15.4 years since release from prison (including time spent under community supervision), and 11.3 years since sentence completion (DeVeaux, 2022).

DeVeaux (2022) recruited participants through snowball sampling and obtained informed consent before interviews. The researcher conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes and analyzed the data using NVivo II qualitative data analysis software. To protect confidentiality, DeVeaux assigned pseudonyms and alphanumeric codes for each participant. The numbers represented the age and most recent incarceration, the second number represented the duration of incarceration, and the third number represented the elapsed time since release; the example provided was Senate (22 [9] 5) (DeVeaux, 2022, p. 6).

According to DeVeaux (2022), the results from the study produced the following themes for Black males' description of success post-incarceration: (a) attaining a satisfying quality of life which encompassed sustaining basic needs and obtaining housing and tangible symbols such as a high paying job, education, and employment; (b) family reintegration and family support (sub-themes: building family, intimate relationships); (c) other relationships and support (sub-themes: relationships, friendships, social supports, and in-person relationships); (d) community reintegration and engagement (sub-themes: civic or community activity, serving the in-prison community); (e) self-concept (sub-themes: self-worth, self-reflection, sense of humanity, dealing with stigma, re-defining self, personal autonomy); (f) Coping (sub-themes: spirituality, maintaining mental health, maintaining physical health, and remaining drug-free; and (g) fitting in (DeVeaux, 2022).

The implications of this study displayed that definitions of success encompassed material, physical, and psychological components. This study informed my research by

demonstrating that Black men defined post-incarceration success not only through tangible achievements but also through their emotional and mental well-being. DeVaux (2022) also identified a lack of empirical research examining Black men who achieved sustained success post-incarceration.

DeVaux (2022) identified several limitations, including limited transferability due to eligibility criteria requiring participants to remain out of prison for at least three years. DeVaux noted that the longer a person had not been incarcerated, the less apparent their level of stability and the stress of reintegration might be. DeVaux recommended that future research was needed to compare the experiences of men during the one-to-three-year phase of reentry who recidivated with those who have moved beyond the three-year mark. DeVaux also reported there was also a need to account for potential influence on time served in prison, time since release from prison, time served under community supervision, total time in the community, age at incarceration, age at release, and other potentially influencing variables related to time upon success or achievement.

DeVaux (2022) also emphasized the need to develop a conceptual definition of deinstitutionalization from the prison system, perhaps deinstitutionization. DeVaux defined deinstitutionization as the process of reversing or undoing the extent to which an incarcerated person has been socialized to prison culture, prison life, its dimensions, and activities such that at some point following release, men appeared in their minds as men that had moved beyond prison rather than becoming an ex made to endure hazards of another sort (DeVaux, 2022).

My study extended this literature by examining how Black males achieved success after reintegration and further conceptualized deinstitutionalization through participant narratives. Guided by CRT, I explored how experiences of race and racism within and beyond the criminal justice system influenced post-release social, emotional, and psychological adjustment and contributed to sustained reintegration success.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 2, I described how I conducted my literature search, defined my theoretical foundation and conceptual framework, and identified literature related to the critical aspects of this study. I used multiple databases, search engines, and terms related to the research topic. Hermeneutic phenomenology was the primary theoretical framework I used for the study (Heidegger, 2021; Wrathall, 2005). CRT was the secondary theoretical foundation I used for this research study (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). I used CRT and hermeneutic phenomenology to understand Black males' experiences of successfully reintegrating into society post-incarceration. The literature I reviewed contained information about the origin of mass incarceration, racism within the criminal justice system, the effects of incarceration, barriers to reintegration, and factors that promote reintegration. I included articles not published in the last five years because they provided relevant information on the topic, given the limited current data. I completed an extensive literature review. There remains a gap in the literature on understanding the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated into society and what contributed to their overall mental and emotional stability. In Chapter 3, I describe the research methodology I employed to examine the lived

experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated into society and to address this gap in the literature.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I conducted new research on the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated post-incarceration. Based on the findings of this study, I sought to understand the themes that contributed to Black males, to inform professionals and programs that assist this population in re-entering society. My main goal in this study was to address the research questions regarding understanding the themes present in formerly incarcerated Black males' success in reintegrating into society. This chapter describes the research design and rationale, followed by the methodology, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Finally, I discuss the role of the researcher, instrumentation, recruitment procedures, and data collection, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

According to Peoples (2021), phenomenological research is a philosophy to understand an individual's experience of a phenomenon. In this hermeneutic phenomenological study about Black males' successful reintegration into society post-incarceration, I examined their perspectives on what contributed to their success. I chose this qualitative research method for this study to capture lived experiences and provide thick, rich descriptions of themes that capture the essence of successful reintegration for Black males' post-incarceration. The research question was: What are the experiences of Black males previously incarcerated who have successfully reintegrated into society?

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, my role was to act as an observer. As the only researcher in the study, I realized how my background might influence the study. I am a Black female and have a master's degree in community counseling. Since beginning my career, I have worked in the community and within carceral structures, gaining experience working with my target population. To reduce bias, as a hermeneutic phenomenology researcher, I kept a journal to monitor *foresight* or *fore conception* (Peoples, 2021). Furthermore, I did not recruit participants from the community agencies with which I am affiliated.

I used semi-structured interviews to gather information on the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated post-incarceration. As a researcher employing hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT, I used each lens to analyze and understand the experiences of Black males in their successful reintegration into society. As the researcher, I kept a journal of thoughts related to this population and the process of analyzing data. I used the hermeneutic circle by analyzing the answers to all the research questions by participants and then separating the themes inherent in each participant's experience and continuing to move back and forth between the whole picture of Black males who have successfully reintegrated into society and the parts that contributed to each participant's experience of success.

### **Methodology**

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2021), an estimated 3.89 million adults are under community supervision, males accounted for 73% of adults on parole and 55% of adults on probation. Of those percentages of males, Blacks made up 21% of

those on probation and 29% percent of those on parole. The participants for my study consisted of Black males over 18 who were formerly incarcerated and achieved success after reintegrating into society. My inclusion criteria for my study included adult Black males who had not experienced recidivism after one year or more of being released from prison or jail. The participants were on probation or parole or had been removed from probation or parole. The study incorporated participants from the United States. Given the hard-to-reach research population, I tried to capture as many participants' narratives as possible.

According to Peoples (2021), a range of participants between eight and 15 is typical for a qualitative study. Williams et al. (2020) noted a substantial sample size of 20 due to the use of a gatekeeper; in this case, a formerly incarcerated Black male who has fully reintegrated into society. According to Williams et al., this sample size was substantial because this population is hard to reach due to typically not being accustomed to, or trusting of, researchers. The researchers in that study did not report whether it took 20 participants to reach saturation (Williams et al., 2020). DeVeaux (2022) reported using a snowball sampling technique to recruit Black males who had successfully reintegrated and were able to recruit 17 participants who met the inclusion criteria. Guest et al. (2006) presented research on sample size and data saturation using purposive sampling and reported that a sample of six to 12 participants should suffice.

Further, if the sample was a homogenous group and the aim of the study was to understand common perceptions and experiences, 12 interviews should suffice (Guest et al., 2006). I was able to obtain a sample size of seven and reached saturation. I knew that

saturation was reached when no more new data was obtained from the participants (Peoples, 2021). Before considering participants for my research study, I used a questionnaire to assess their eligibility for the specific inclusion criteria. This questionnaire was available on paper and via a link or QR image code to complete and submit electronically.

### **Sampling Strategy**

I used purposeful sampling in this study. In qualitative research, purposive sampling provides information-rich content that will assist in understanding the research questions (Patton, 2015). Compared to random sampling, purposive sampling selects participants with the most appropriate and valuable information for the explored phenomenon. For this strategy, I also used snowball or chain sampling. According to Patton (2015), snowball sampling is the technique that begins with a few relevant and information-rich interviewees and then asks those interviewees for pertinent contacts who could provide different or confirming perspectives. This strategy was the best for this population, as this is a limited population, and those Black males who have been successful in their reintegration process may know of others who might also be interested in helping with this study. Williams et al. (2020) also noted that members of this population often lacked trust in researchers, so having a referral source or “gatekeeper,” someone who has experienced this phenomenon, aided in participation in the study.

### **Instrumentation**

In this section, I describe the instrument I used to gather information from the participants to answer research questions. Patton (2015) reported that standardized open-

ended interviews consist of the exact wording of questions, where all participants are asked the same questions. Murray and Hwang (2015) reported that this open-ended format for interview questions promotes significantly less interviewer bias and allows for the comparison of data among participants, strengthening the information's validity and credibility. However, a weakness of this approach is limiting the conversational aspect of the interview.

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), there are four basic categories of qualitative interviewing focus groups, internet interviews, causal conversations and in-passing clarifications, and semi-structured and unstructured interviews. The semi-structured interview is recommended as it allows participants to explore beyond the interview questions for richer data (Peoples, 2021).

I conducted semi-structured interviews using the format of open-ended questions. I also recorded all interviews via Rev App. I used the interviewees' verbatim transcripts as part of the data analysis process. I also used observation notes and memos. I stored all recorded interviews on my computer, protected by a password. I emailed each participant a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy. I gave participants ten days to respond to the email so that I could identify any discrepancies. If I did not receive a response to these outreach attempts, I used the original transcript. If the participant reported discrepancies within those ten days, I set a 30-minute member-checking interview to review the discrepancies. While interviewing participants, I maintained a reflective journal to keep biases in check.

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

I recruited participants for this study by posting flyers at barbershops, as the IRB denied recruitment from probation and parole offices. I contacted re-entry organizations such as Equal Justice Initiative, National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, Offender Alumni Association, and The Innocence Project and asked them to post the flyers. I also posted flyers using social media sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram. I reached out to current leaders of organizations who were themselves formerly incarcerated individuals but were active in advocating for this population.

Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Along with the audio recording, I took notes. I debriefed each participant upon completion of the study and provided community resources if needed. I also used follow-up interviews as needed. In hermeneutic phenomenology, researchers use follow-up interviews to clarify preconceptions and incorporate data analysis steps two and three (Peoples, 2021).

Participants received informed consent before the interview process and were notified of any risks and benefits. I reassured the participants that they could end the study at any time. Before scheduling the interviews, I asked potential participants to complete and return a brief demographic form via Qualtrics. I conducted interviews in person or via the Zoom platform. I hand-coded and analyzed the interviews. I used pseudonyms for the participants in this study to protect their identities.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

Through this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I aimed to understand the experiences of formerly incarcerated Black males' successful reintegration into society.

The main research question was: “What are the experiences of formerly incarcerated Black males who have successfully reintegrated into society?” In considering an analysis plan for this study, I sought to capture the phenomenon's essence using a combination of hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT. I analyzed the data using the hermeneutic circle. Using journaling and memos, I first wrote out my biases about the phenomenon, then examined the whole transcript of the interview data. I then went back and forth in a circle between the descriptions and answers to the questions to understand the core meanings or essence. I also analyzed any discrepant participant experiences and incorporated them into the results section.

According to Peoples (2021), researchers should be immersed in the descriptive world when analyzing phenomenological data. Peoples provided the following steps for phenomenological data analysis:

1. Read the entire transcript and delete irrelevant information.
2. Create preliminary meaning units.
3. Break down the meaning units into final meaning units.
4. Organize situated narratives under each interview/survey question.
5. Create general narratives.
6. Create a general description: (Peoples 2021, pp. 59-62).

### **Explanation of Data Analysis Steps**

In the above section, I provided an overview of the data analysis steps. Here is a more detailed explanation of the steps:

### **Read Transcript and Delete Irrelevant Information**

In this initial step, I used hand-coding to transcribe all the participants' data from the audio recordings. I immersed myself in the data to understand the participant's full story. In this step, I omitted any irrelevant information, such as repetitive statements like "um," "you know, or "well" (Peoples, 2021).

### **Create Preliminary Meaning Units**

In this second step, I created preliminary meaning units by focusing on the research topic. In this step, I began to reveal features and traits of the phenomenon from the participants' narratives. I began to understand the narratives and how they connected to the tenets of CRT to begin triangulating the data using observation notes and reflexive journaling. According to Peoples (2021), triangulation refers to using various sources of information, methods of data collection, or several researchers in the analysis.

### **Breaking Down Meaning Units into Final Units**

In the third step, I broke down the preliminary units into final ones. I labelled these last units as the themes from the participants' narratives. I triangulated the final units with CRT. I did this by analyzing the participants' themes derived from the meaning units with the tenets of CRT.

### **Organize Situated Narratives**

For the fourth step, I organized each participant's situated narratives under the specific interview questions. These narratives came from each participant's answers to the interview questions. Following Peoples (2021) guidelines, in this step I highlighted the meanings of each participant's experience through direct quotes.

### **Create General Narratives**

In this step, I extracted all participants' general narratives from the situated narratives and unified their accounts into a single description (Peoples, 2021). Through this step I organized the essence of the phenomenon through the participants' stories.

### **General Description**

In the final step of the analysis, I discussed the inherent themes in all the participants' experiences. This step united significant phenomenological themes into a cohesive general description (Peoples, 2021). Throughout data analysis, I used the hermeneutic circle to promote a deeper understanding of participants' narratives. As I moved through the hermeneutic circle, I continued journaling and immersing myself in the participants' narratives, using CRT as a grounding theory. I used this method to capture the true essence of the phenomenon.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Rose and Johnson (2020) explained various techniques to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research. In evaluating trustworthiness, there are four measures: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is defined as believable analyses and displaying internal validity (i.e., member checking and detailed descriptions). To ensure credibility, I used member checking by sending the data to participants to check for accuracy. According to Rose and Johnson (2020), triangulation addresses a phenomenon from multiple directions, enabling researchers to locate the phenomenon more accurately. I used CRT, my

observation notes, and notes from journaling my preconceptions and conceptions to assist in triangulating the interview data.

### **Transferability**

Transferability explains if the analyses can be transferred to another context. I captured narratives using thick, rich descriptions to achieve transferability. I selected participants in various ways, using a gatekeeper, someone who has succeeded in reintegrating into society post-incarceration, and their referrals. Some of these referrals came from organizations that assisted this population with reintegration, like the Equal Justice Initiative, Offender Alumni Association, and the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform. In addition, I recruited participants from barbershops.

### **Dependability**

Dependability means the analyses are consistent or reliable and could be repeated by other researchers. Peoples (2021) reported that a detailed explanation of the research process should be provided and followed. I used triangulation between CRT and journaling to achieve trustworthiness through dependability and confirmability.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability means the data supported the analyses. Using a reflexive journal assisted in confirmability because I took notes of any biases, preconceptions, conceptions, and experiences working with this population. In this reflective journal, I used the hermeneutic circle to move from my preconceptions to the participant's understanding of the phenomenon and move back and forth between their experiences and the tenets of CRT.

## **Ethical Procedures**

To maintain the ethics of the study, I followed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Walden University's policies and procedures. I received IRB approval before participant recruitment: approval number 05-07-24-1008875. After obtaining approval, I sent each potential participant an informed consent before engaging in the study. Depending on participants' abilities and computer access, informed consent was available as both a paper copy and electronically. To prevent potential dual relationships, I recruited participants outside my work agency's coverage area to reduce this risk. I ensured participant confidentiality by creating pseudonyms (i.e., fictitious names for participants to keep their identities confidential).

I made participants aware that all information remained confidential unless they reported any risk of harming themselves or others, or if any abuse or neglect was reported of children, adults with disabilities, or the elderly. I sent the informed consent form to each participant, highlighting the purpose of the research study, asking whether they would be willing to participate, and asking whether they would like to be interviewed in person if local or virtually. I stored the data on my computer and will protect the information with a login password for 5 years.

## **Summary**

I used a hermeneutic phenomenological design to address the research question: *What are the experiences of Black males previously incarcerated and who have successfully reintegrated into society?* This hermeneutic phenomenological research design allowed for rich, thick narratives to explain the phenomena. Additionally, I used

purposive and snowball sampling to reach and recruit from this population. I sought to recruit participants through accessing gatekeepers, specifically Black males who have successfully reintegrated into society. I also posted flyers in barbershops and organizations assist Black males as they reintegrated back into society. I also reached out to those Black males who have created YouTube platforms sharing their stories on reintegration and life after incarceration.

I conducted interviews with participants using semi-structured open-ended interview questions. I used member checking, triangulation using CRT and observation notes, and reflexive journaling to ensure trustworthiness. After immersing myself in the participants' narratives, I used the hermeneutic circle to examine any biases, preconceptions, and conceptions. I will keep all information obtained in the study confidential. I will follow IRB guidelines as well as the guidelines of Walden University. In Chapter 4, I report on the results of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The overarching problem that prompted my research was that Black males remain incarcerated at higher rates than other races (Berghuis, 2018; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022; Prison Policy Initiative, 2023; Yesberg & Polaschek, 2019). In general, those individuals trying to integrate back into society face many challenges with few supports. Black males have less access to these limited supports than do White males. Furthermore, some Black males have successfully reintegrated, but little is known about the components needed for successful integration and their mental and emotional health needs (Bakken & Visher, 2018; Berghuis, 2018; Semenza & Link, 2019). My purpose in this hermeneutic-phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated post-incarceration.

In Chapter 4, I present the research findings and connect the findings of the study through hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT. The data and analysis answer the main research question: What are the experiences of Black males who were previously incarcerated and have successfully reintegrated into society? In addition, I categorized the interview questions into three sub domains: overall experience reintegrating into society, race, racism, and participants perceptions of race-specific social stressors on reintegration, and growth after incarceration. In this study, I explain the lived experiences of success and those core themes that were illuminated for successful reintegration. The participants' openness and awareness of themselves provided insight into the core

components of this population's success. This further facilitates insight into key focus areas for counselors working with this population.

In this chapter, I will provide information on the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the study's results. I will explain my process of coding the data and identifying the themes. The participants' responses to the interview questions revealed emerging themes, which led me to identify commonalities in the participants' experiences, as well as any discrepancies in the data.

### **Research Setting**

I collected the data for this hermeneutic phenomenological study by conducting semi-structured interviews using the Zoom platform or in person with seven formerly incarcerated Black males. After responding to the research flyer, I set up a time to interview the participants via Zoom or in person, depending on their preference. I gave each participant the option to choose the day and time of the interview. Further, I encouraged participants to be in a private location for the interview. I provided all participants with informed consent, and they agreed to the interview being audio recorded on a separate device. I reminded participants that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Finally, I provided a brief description of the study through the research flyer and through the Qualtrics survey. There were no personal or organizational conditions that unduly influenced my participants or their experience at the time of the study.

### **Data Collection**

I interviewed seven participants regarding their experiences of successful reintegration post-incarceration. Four participants completed their interviews via the Zoom platform, and three completed the interviews in person. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes. After recording each interview, I wrote in my reflective journal and made notes on note cards. I listened to the audio recordings of each interview and reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. I omitted identifying information, including the participants' names and correctional facilities, to ensure participant confidentiality. To my knowledge, all participants engaged in the virtual interviews in a private location. All in-person interviews took place in a private area, such as a local community center, a private room, or a private designated area within a barber shop. Before agreeing to the interview, all participants provided consent after completing the Qualtrics demographic questionnaire.

After the interviews, I used member checking to ensure that the transcripts were an accurate depiction of the participants' lived experiences. I employed various techniques to gather participants' lived experiences, including semi-structured interview questions, summarizing, paraphrasing, reflecting on the content, taking notes, and asking follow-up questions to clarify any unclear information. Follow-up interviews were not needed; minor modifications were required for one of the interview transcripts.

There were variations in data collection from what I stated in Chapter 3 due to recruitment issues. The IRB declined my request to recruit potential participants at probation and parole offices, so I filed for a change of procedure and after obtaining

permission from the IRB I went to barbershops and placed the flyer there to recruit the population. Some specific organizations that I contacted declined to share the flyer as well. The challenges I experienced with recruiting this population also aligned with what prior researchers faced in their recruitment efforts (Williams et al., 2020).

### **Data Analysis**

I grounded the data analysis of this study in both hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT. I used the hermeneutic phenomenological method to conduct and record seven in-depth interviews. I transcribed the interview transcripts using the Rev App. I analyzed each interview transcript by listening to the audio file for accuracy. As described in Chapter 3 I used the following data analysis steps, according to Peoples (2021): (a) I read the entire transcript and removed all irrelevant information, (b) I identified missing information during the interview and used member checking to ensure accuracy, (c) I created a final transcript for each interview, (d) I journaled throughout the analysis process, (e) I created preliminary meaning units, (f) I established final meaning units, (g) I identified themes, and organized situated narratives, (h) I created general narratives, (i) I created general description, and (j) I completed a phenomenological reflection and summary.

First, I read the transcripts while playing the audio recordings of the seven transcribed interviews. I deleted any irrelevant or redundant information. I then generated the initial codes based on the responses from the participants' interview questions and wrote these initial codes in the journal. The codes from each question generated preliminary meaning units, including identity and self-perception, emotional and

relational healing, spiritual grounding and faith, navigating racism and social barriers, coping and resilience, relationships and community, systemic mistrust and adaptation, and meaning making and growth.

Then I re-read the interviews, notes, and reflective journal, in which I discussed the process of my pre-understandings of the phenomenon and any *fore conceptions* that I had prior to the interviews. I re-read all the transcripts and separated them into the final meaning units. I used each research question, codes, and themes to help me conceptualize the final codes for all the interviews. I created situated narratives for each participant's responses to the interview questions. These situated narratives use the participants' lived experiences, as expressed through their voices, within the context of their specific backgrounds, cultures, environments, and relationships, as well as the moment in which the experiences occurred. I formulated the general description by describing the themes in all or most of the participants' descriptions of their experiences (Peoples, 2021). Next, I put the major phenomenological themes into an integrated general structure.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was a critical focus throughout the data collection and analysis process. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, there are four measures to evaluate trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Rose & Johnson, 2020). These measures assure validity and reliability in qualitative research.

#### **Credibility**

As I described in Chapter 3, credibility is defined as believable analyses and displaying internal validity (i.e., member-checking and detailed descriptions). I actively

listened and took notes while conducting the interviews. I employed member checking by sending participants their transcripts and asking follow-up questions throughout the interview to clarify the information obtained. I used member checking to review the accuracy of the interviews and to give participants a chance to provide additional feedback (Vella, 2024).

Additionally, I employed theoretical triangulation with CRT by critically examining the racist structures that shaped some of the participants' experiences. CRT served as a complementary lens, situating participant interviews within the broader realities of systemic racism, racialized control, and historical inequities (Fornili, 2018). My use of hermeneutic phenomenology captured the essence of Black males' reintegration success and the sociocultural forces that shaped it, enhanced credibility by honoring participants' voices, amplifying counter-narratives, and guarding against interpretive blind spots that may have arisen from a single-theory perspective.

One of the participants required minor modifications to their transcript. I verified themes, codes, quotes, and similarities in each of the participants' interviews to ensure credibility. I completed debriefing and reflective journaling after each interview to verify the preliminary findings against the data to confirm consistency and limit biases. In my reflective journaling, I captured my impressions of the interviews, wrote down notes on participants' responses, and made my biases explicit as I interpreted the participants' experiences.

**Transferability**

Drisko (2024), defined transferability as a process of extraction used to apply data drawn from specific persons, settings, and eras to others that have not been directly studied. For my study, I captured the participants' narratives using rich, thick descriptions. I used purposive sampling to enlist Black males who have experienced reintegration into the community for at least a year. Research participants represented a range of 4 to 45 years since release, allowing for the inclusion of both recent and long-term reintegration perspectives. This range enriched the findings by revealing themes that have persisted throughout the decades, such as the role of faith, resilience, and identity reclamation, while also highlighting elements shaped by changing social, economic, and political contexts, including shifts in parole policies, racial climate, and employment landscapes. I provided detailed descriptions of these contexts so readers and key stakeholders could judge which aspects may apply to present-day reintegration or other settings. The application of CRT to situate individual meaning within systemic and historical realities further enhanced the potential relevance of these findings for mental health counselors and researchers working with other marginalized populations navigating reentry under racialized and structural constraints.

**Dependability**

Dependability equates to the analysis being consistent or reliable and the ability to be repeated by other researchers. Dependability was strengthened through my use of a transparent and replicable research process. A documented audit trail included interview protocols, transcription process, coding frameworks, and reflective notes, which provided

transparency in the movement from raw data to final themes. I consistently applied the integration of CRT as a secondary lens across all stages of analysis to ensure methodological coherence.

### **Confirmability**

Tobin and Begley (2004) stated that confirmability was concerned with establishing data and the interpretations that are clearly derived from the data and not fabrications of the inquirer's imagination. I established confirmability through reflexive journaling, which captured my evolving assumptions, positionality, and interpretive decisions throughout the study. This reflexivity reduced the risk of personal bias indefensibly shaping the findings. Triangulation between hermeneutic phenomenological analysis and CRT interpretations provided a balanced view that honored participants' voices while critically situating their experiences within broader socio-structural realities.

### **Results**

My purpose for this hermeneutic phenomenological study, framed by CRT, was to understand the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated post-incarceration. The results presented in this chapter represent co-constructed meaning units derived from in-depth interviews, that I analyzed thematically, and interpreted through the dual lens of lived experiences and systemic racial analysis.

### **Demographics**

I used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants for this study. I recruited participants through various channels, including social media sites: LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram; direct contact with reintegration organizations and community

leaders, mental health professionals, and outreach at barbershops. Participants in this study met the following inclusion criteria: Black Males, 18 years or older, who had been released from prison or jail for one year or longer. I asked participants four demographic questions. The questions included the participant's contact information, state of residence, age, and years since release. Participants ranged in age from 40 to 70 years old. Participants' years released from incarceration ranged from 4 to 45 years. Two participants resided in New York, and the remaining five resided in Georgia. Table 1 provides the demographic details for the research participants. The first participant was assigned the alpha-numeric code PT 1, and this pattern continued for each additional participant.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Data*

Participant	State of residence	Age	Years released from incarceration
PT 1	New York	56	26
PT 2	New York	48	8.5
PT 3	Georgia	47	14
PT 4	Georgia	65	4
PT 5	Georgia	60	19
PT 6	Georgia	70	45
PT 7	Georgia	40	18

**Introduction to Themes**

I present the themes with supporting participant narratives to preserve the authentic voice of the participants and to highlight how individual transformation and systemic realities intersect in the reintegration process. I organized the results into ten themes: *mindset shift and identity reclamation, engagement with support systems: trust*

*and tension, faith as foundation and moral compass, strategic adaptation and agency in face of structural barriers, finding and sustaining purpose, experiencing and managing racism and social stressors, emotional healing and relearning vulnerability, restoring and building supportive relationships, sustained resilience through purposeful engagement and structural racism softened by community diversity (see Table 2).*

**Table 2***Participant Themes*

Themes	PT 1	PT 2	PT 3	PT 4	PT 5	PT 6	PT 7
Theme 1: Mindset Shift and Identity Reclamation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 2: Engagement with Support Systems: Trust and Tension	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 3: Faith as Foundation and Moral Compass		X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 4: Strategic Adaptation and Agency in Face of Structural Barriers	X		X	X	X	X	X
Theme 5: Finding and Sustaining Purpose	X	X	X		X		X
Theme 6: Experiencing and Managing Racism and Social Stressors	X	X	X	X	X		
Theme 7: Emotional Healing and Relearning Vulnerability	X	X	X	X	X		
Theme 8: Restoring and Building Supportive Relationships		X	X		X	X	
Theme 9: Sustained Resilience Through Purposeful Engagement		X	X	X			X
Theme 10: Structural Racism Softened by Community Diversity		X					

**Theme 1: Mindset Shift and Identity Reclamation**

All participants described reintegration as more than a physical return to society; instead, it was a process of reclaiming their personal identity, redefining self-worth, and setting intentional goals. This empowerment came from shifting mindsets, embracing personal agency, and building a future anchored in their purpose. The experiences in this section portray those participants' lived experiences of success after reintegration in this area, PT 1 stated,

The success was starting my own family and being able to try to instill some of the experiences that I have in my kids, so they don't make the mistakes that I made. That's my biggest success. I've always kept a job, but that's nothing compared to having a family.

For some, that purpose was found in education and in their professions, PT 2 reported (after release):

I stayed focused on growth, school, culinary training, staying productive, and I didn't let negativity distract me. Some people don't want to see you succeed, but I just keep moving forward. I acknowledge it, don't feed into it. And stay committed to my path. Some people recognize my talent, others try to dim it, but I remain grounded in who I am.

The mindset shift seems to fuel purpose, and a deeper connection to family PT 3 added,

I think once I made up my mind to do the right thing, that I wasn't going to take that path anymore. The path was kind of easy, and I think it was easy. I just made

a conscious decision to do the right thing. With that choice, I was granted that opportunity because my network was criminals, but my wife and her family wrapped their arms around me and showed me a different way.

PT 4 expressed:

I was determined to rebuild myself when I got out, I got my G.E.D. and went and took some college courses. I was going to take the competency test, and I passed all that, and I had the chance to go to college, but I didn't want to invest that time. I just wanted to prove to myself that I could do it.

According to his old mindset before success, one participant was able to identify his mindset before and shared the shift. PT 5 articulated,

Before prison, manipulation was a survival tool; I used it with anyone to get what I wanted. I carried that mindset into incarceration and even after release. But I had to unlearn it and choose honesty instead. Now I try to be straightforward, own my mistakes, and do what I need to do without relying on manipulation.

Some participants' mindset shift focused on work and doing anything to prevent them from going back to being controlled in incarceration, PT 6 related:

I just picked up where I left off. I always had a job, and I always kept a job working for myself in construction. I don't want to go back. Stupid. They tell you when to go to bed. They tell you when to get up. They beat you when they get ready. You've got to do everything they tell you to do.

PT 7 revealed,

I didn't really have the job situation, but I usually take small and I invest with something and sell shirts, so I always just try to figure something out, so I won't go back to other stuff. God also gave me this journey, and I wrote about it in my book.

## **Theme 2: Engagement With Support Systems: Trust and Tension**

This theme represented most participants' experiences of working with probation or parole officers, mental health providers, and any reentry services. The results were mixed, with some participants having good and trusted experiences, while others experienced tension or a lack of adequate support. PT 1 shared the experience being one that lacked support,

As far as helpful, yes and no, parole gave a piece of paper with all these different organizations that are supposed to help you, but really it's all a money thing. They get money for your participation in their programs, so it really doesn't help you, and all your parole officer says is get a job, keep a job, and that's it.

PT 2 shared more about a program that had some benefits, and he essentially became a favorable participant in the services.

I was in a program where we talked openly about triggers, drugs, and staying on track with peers and outside facilitators offering guidance. Being surrounded by people who cared made reentry programs like anger management and drug counseling easy to engage with. The counselors treated me like a human being and genuinely wanted to see me succeed, even looking to me to lead discussions.

Even though not all participants interacted with mental health providers, some still recognized the possible benefit. PT 3 reported,

I didn't. And not saying that I'm crazy or anything like that, but I know I got some post-traumatic stress somewhere. I know I'm dealing with some things that I've done and seen and had to overcome. I probably do. Personally, I need to go seek some type of attention or help. But us as Black men, what we do is we fight through it, and that's not normal to us. You know what I mean? I tell my wife all the time, what she doing. She might be analyzing me. And I say, using that stuff you learned in school on me. I didn't go through any of those type of facilities or programs. I just leaned on God.

PT 4 explained a positive experience with his parole officer that reveals the value of amiable connections within the criminal justice system,

Only somebody I dealt with was a parole officer, and this was a great guy. He treated me like a man. He explained a lot to me, talked to me, like I said, I haven't seen him but twice since that time. And I talked about everything, and the main thing he told me, and this right here was all parole officers. Everybody said, Tell a man that you're not a convict, you're not a person, you are a man when you walk out these doors, and you're not in jail. And that man promised me, he told me, he said that if you get out here and do the right thing, he said, you never have to see me.

PT 5 communicated a positive experience with counselors,

But being in a depressed state while I was incarcerated, it really was kind of hard for me. But talking to mental health and once I got out, I still went and seen mental health and seeing my parole officer and them, they understood what I was doing because I was trying to stay out. Probation was hard for me. Parole was very easy because see, parole is set up well, they want to keep you out, but probation will keep you locked up.

PT 6 added,

When I got out, I had a parole officer, never will forget him, he was nasty, showed up at my house uninvited, he was just hard to deal with. He told me that he didn't have to get along with me. He had a bad attitude, and everything was negative.

PT 7 expressed about the probation officer, "he was nice."

Reintegration required participants to interact with multiple systems, probation, parole, counseling, and reentry organizations in ways that were both supportive and fraught with mistrust. Participants' reactions to mental health providers had some mixed results. There was a mixture between trust in the systems or providers in that system or tension. The participants who received mental health services PT 1, PT 2, and PT 5 had either no benefits from the services or benefited greatly.

### **Theme 3: Faith as Foundation and Moral Compass**

For many participants, faith emerged as the central organizing principle of their transformation. Spirituality was more than personal comfort; it functioned as a moral compass and a means of resisting the pull towards old habits. PT 2 shared,

It was a great opportunity being spiritually aligned, I got shifted and guided to a man that introduced the Bible to me. I wound up getting baptized. The fella submerged me under water and baptized me in the name of Christ. I came up. I just felt like everything that I had done was a clean slate and from that point on it was just like being around great people, I guess people see something in you sometimes you don't even see what people see in you. They like, yo, you could do it.

Participants shared that their faith is what made them feel and act as if anything was possible PT 3 disclosed,

God is amazing, so the transition wasn't easy, but it was easy, with the most high anything's possible. So, it may have been difficult, but it was an easy transition.

Once I made my mind up, it was game over, and God blessed me.

PT 4 stated that his relationship with God provided him with caution in situations,

It's just some things I have to let go altogether, because it seems like the more I give myself up, something happens to bring me down, and sometimes you just need to back up, slow down, and look at what God's doing.

The moral compass was shaped for some participants by their faith in God. PT 5 revealed,

God plays a major role in every man that's incarcerated, the first thing you do well manipulation and bargaining like God, if you help me with this here, I won't do it no more. You're lying and he knows you're lying, it's stinking thinking. So, after a period of time doing your manipulation and stuff, you start to realize that

it's not manipulation. God really cares about what you do and really wants you to gain your salvation. Because you plan, but its time to set the plan aside and get real about it. I am more closer to God right now than I've ever been.

The relationship with God was a personal one and was developed individually, PT 6 shared,

I had to find a meaning. I had to find out my meaning of God. My counselor told me that I don't think God does for a man what a man can do for himself. That makes sense to me. If you can do it, why should God intervene? So, I start living that way, my relationship with God is, I believe, maybe I don't believe as strongly as some people, but I believe that there's a God, just like my counselor told me, I don't believe He helps me do what I can do. If I can do it, I'm willing to do it. I'm not going to sit up and pray for what I can do. That's my relationship with God. I believe He protects me, he's always there, and I think he helps me when I can't do it. That's my belief.

Similarly, PT 7 shared, "I have always felt God in the midst of everything. I don't fake promises to God, and I feel free because of that."

#### **Theme 4: Strategic Adaptation and Agency in Face of Structural Barriers**

In this theme, participants described another key component to their success captured from their lived experiences reintegrating back into society. Participants shared glimpses of cautious navigation, using respect as a tool, and becoming self-empowered to adapt to structural and systemic barriers. The experiences during incarceration prepared some participants in ways to fuel hypervigilance and cautiousness. PT 1 revealed,

I was looking for ulterior motives because I couldn't take anything on face value; I had to analyze everybody, even family members. That's why we are always more standoffish than anything because we are analyzing everything, how this conversation is going, or how am I going to get around this? You are just weary of everybody, especially White people, and I am sorry to say it's the White women that scared us the most, because if you are too friendly to them, you'll catch flak from our sisters. If we're very standoffish with them, we catch it from the White community.

Participants' acceptance of strategic adaptation was displayed over and again through their narratives. Participants' stories reflected embracing a conscious act of resistance against systemic oppression. PT 3 shared this about the industry that he chose to work in,

I think in the game that we playing now, in this film game, because we are doing it independent I don't think it's a race game, it's more of a status game, because we doing it independently and we don't have the big names and that same roadblock in our way, but I don't think it's due to race. Again, I'm not going to sit here and play the victim; I'm the victor. So again, if it is some discrimination, I don't even see it because I'm going to create my own path. I mean, I ain't waiting for them to give me an opportunity. I'm going to go take my opportunity.

PT 4 shared similarly that undercurrent of racism, and the need to set a boundary of being intolerant of disrespect.

I mean you got this old stuff out here, but as far as it just hitting me boldly, no. Because I think when you show a person who you really are they don't really

want to play with you like that on that racist stuff. Some people I was working for the guy thought he was going to talk to me any kind of way. I had to break it down to him and let him know because I don't care who he is, what culture he is. I'm still a man and he got to treat me like a man every day.

Similarly, PT 5 shared noticing a difference in how racism progressed over time and the progression of Black people. He shared,

Things have changed because Blacks have gotten where they can further their education, but you still have a lot of racism there, but it's just not as bad as it used to be. And dealing with stuff when you get out of incarceration, well that's something that you have going on with you even before you get incarcerated. See growing up I remember when we still had to go through the back door to get food. So I remember that Blacks didn't go to the restaurant, you didn't go to the front, you go to the side or to the back.

Similarly, PT 6 divulged,

Discrimination was there before incarceration; it has always been like this. As Black people, we've got to prove ourselves more. You can see discrimination in some of the places you work. It is just there, and I always dealt with it, and that's why I started doing my own thing. Living by the value that if you respect me, I respect you.

Similarly, PT 7 shared his experience of the ability to adapt and decode the systemic racism, but by also anchoring his stance through his faith,

Race and racism really didn't effect my reintegration, but being a Black man it keeps you on guard because we're not liked by the law and we have done a lot of things I can understand on certain things, but you can't judge every book by the cover. I mean you got to at least open the book first. So by seeing other people experience it, I don't experience it. I know how to keep my boundaries in the spirit praying. I'm not no softy, but I know how to say Yes sir, No sir. Because once they pull us over, get up on us that is a setup from the enemy sometimes. So you just have to breath and say Yes Sir, No Sir. I've learned that I get better by the day. So that's my whole thing, getting better by the day.

#### **Theme 5: Finding and Sustaining Purpose**

For most participants, purpose was not a vague ideal, but a daily motivator for resilience. These narratives showed a shift from merely surviving after release to actively building a meaningful, self-directed life especially when this purpose was linked to self-preservation and personal growth, work or career, family, community, or faith.

Working in a healthy environment provided crucial to some for purpose, PT 1 communicated,

Was working in an environment where they talked down to me and I just couldn't do it anymore, so I switched to something and that transition was so easy from working in the office to actually doing something, even though it seems menial, but I'm needed and that's what every male, especially Black men, we want to feel needed.

Similarly, PT 2 recognized the importance of self-work,

You've got to come home and take, as a wise person will say, take your position. Take your position and do what you need to do for yourself and your family. But that only comes from when you take the time to confront those areas where you are weak and you are vulnerable. You've got to confront those areas. If you don't, then you just remain the same. So, it's not an easy thing to do. That's why so many of us out here, generally speaking, stay in the position that they are in because it's hard to do that homework. But you have to do it, though. It's very important that you do it. Can you imagine if I didn't take the time to reinvent or touch those areas where I'm weak or vulnerable or having a tough time with, I wouldn't be able to be around my niece.

A purpose was found from work completed while incarcerated PT 3 reported,

I wound up finishing the book and was in the process of trying to get everything transcribed onto a Word document, and one of my friends told me about a movie that some guys made in my hometown. I went to school with the director, and he wanted to meet me. They also wanted me to be in their next movie. I brought my writing to the meeting, and he read a couple of paragraphs. He said, "You've got to write the next script." We took the book, which was still on prison paper, we started taking scenes out of the book and started filming a movie. Make a long story short, I'm six movies in now."

PT 5, shared,

I am learning more about myself and doing more for myself. Every day is exciting to me because I learn something different about myself every day. Things I never

thought I could do, I can do. I don't have to have a female around me, but I do have to have the Lord right there with me.

Family and taking what happened to you and sharing it with others sustains purpose.

PT 7 expressed, "I intend to raise my daughter right, and if it's God's will, have a wife, stability, buy land, and do what I am doing now, motivational speaking.

### **Theme 6: Experiencing and Managing Racism and Social Stressors**

The descriptions for this theme displayed the overt and covert racism experienced during incarceration and post-release. While some participants reported experiences related to work, personal matters, and institutional settings, others revealed how participants leveraged their self-awareness, strategic adaptation, and inner resilience to mitigate these challenges. Many recognized that racialized social stressors were persistent and deeply embedded in the fabric of societal structures, yet they also described ways of resisting their impact. In terms of experiences of racism while incarcerated PT 1 shared,

The racism wasn't because we were Black. It was because the stories that they've heard of the inner city, Blacks are wild and we just ignorant. So, they'll take that perspective. And so, when they meet you, it's like, Hey boy, do this, do that. It's like, no, we are not doing that. So, our take on that was like, nah, you're not doing that. So, a lot of us get into fights with the officers until you get one officer that doesn't think that doesn't have that preconception of you, can start talking to me and be like, ain't nothing wrong with him, he's normal. He's not an animal. He's just normal. You push that button, this is what you get. If you leave him alone,

he's happy. But the racism in prison said it mostly comes from the White guards. No, the Black guards too. Because they have to conform to their White counterparts. So, they have to, even though they feel it's wrong, they will still join in.

PT 2 shared a perspective aligned with CRT, racism is ordinary,

You're in a part of town where it's predominantly White America. It's just what it is. They are the majority in those necks of the woods. So, you're in their house. We are not stupid to it. Prisons are built in these towns and that's the main income for the towns is the prison and things are built around it. Come on, we're intelligent people, right? And people that look like me, they're not up there. Only reason why people that look like me is up there is because we're in prison. I mean I have one thing that stood out to me and I will never forget this. So one day after working. I was going to recreation and a few officers were standing there and one officer stated to me before I went to recreation, he said, yo, you know what? I just want to thank you, your father, your uncles, your cousins, all the guys like you for coming to prison because you allowed me to help put my kids through college. And I use it as a tool to help me to press forward doing all that I need to do in prison, get my G-E-D whatever the case may be, passed that, conquered that, thank God I conquered that.

PT 3 added about racism during incarceration,

Of course. Or that's what we think. I don't know if they were treating the White guy or the Mexicans the same, but of course, I might think that they act in a certain type of way because I'm a Black man.

PT 4 reported having to leave a job he had because of how he was treated,

I worked for Indians and see I have one, the Indian wasn't the problem, but they had this White girl, young girl, junkies running their store and a little managerial position looking down on me because I'm a Black guy. And I had to just show them I'm not the man. I mean, I don't care who the boss is, who the manager is, nobody else. I don't take all of that, you don't make me do nothing. I'm a grown man. I don't have to work for y'all. And right today I quit each store, and I liked it, liked the people, I still get along with them, but, as a matter of fact, they had offered me to come back to the store down there, I wouldn't go back to that no more.

Similarly, PT 5 reported this normalcy in the context of society and the workplace,

It is nothing abnormal because growing up you learn that White people always want to be on top, even though they don't like the thing of Black people having the same type of education. They don't like some of 'em. I ain't going to say all of 'em. Some of 'em don't like it. But there are some Whites that help Blacks to get up in the world. But it's so few of them. The White guy that I worked with, he's my manager, me and him, we were cool. We were real cool. And he helped me along showing me things how to do things. And I came quick at doing what I was

doing. See now they had me doing raw meat, so I'm prepping for raw meat. That's basically what they had me doing. And now I was a cook, but they had me just prepping.

### **Theme 7: Emotional Healing and Relearning Vulnerability**

Emotional growth was a critical area for most participants. PT 1 reported, My growth has been more emotional than anything because I was always guarded. So now I've grown, and I don't hold a lot in anymore. I used to hold it all in, and my mother used to tell me that I held it in to the point where I exploded. It is like the straw that broke the camel's back. I would always hold everything in and then explode.

Some participants realized that there were some benefits to restricting emotions that were learned while incarcerated, and the need to still have some boundaries because some of those same people were out here as well. PT 2 divulged,

I had one friend who told me I had no emotion on my face, and it made me go into myself and analyze that stuff. So I realized there are people who feed off people being vulnerable, and that's just the case. Not all do it, but people do it. And you get that outside, too. Co-workers who are super nosy, acting like they want to know you, and they're just using it for a piece or a pawn or whatever, they really don't actually care. They just want to get close to you so they have something to say. So you have to guard yourself, protect yourself. It doesn't mean that you stop being social. You just have to be wise about things.

PT 3 added that a huge reason why his emotions were restricted while incarcerated was out of respect for others that had a longer time to spend incarcerated or to also protect himself from becoming prey and how he had to learn to allow emotional vulnerability to happen.

It is difficult to see your people leave out the door, and you can't leave with them. You feel some type of way. But I can't sit back and cry on my pillow when this man got a life sentence in here and I got two or three more years. I can't sit up here and cry about two or three, or even 10 years when this man might die in here. So you have to set your emotional off. You got to understand some of these institutions got 2,500 people, 3,000 people so you got to be able to swivel at all times. So you got to be emotionless. So I'd rather be predator than prey, and not to say that I was the predator, but I refuse to be the prey. So, even I may have to carry this rough exterior as a defense mechanism. And right now I can still turn it off. I'm the most generous, most lovable person. And people be like why you don't smile. I think it comes from that defense mechanism that I had so long ago.

PT 3 also shared that relearning emotional vulnerability was pivotal to his relationships with his family,

Sometimes I have to suffer in silence to allow them to get their point across. I had to learn how I'm not always right. I don't always have to prove my point. In the last two or three years, I've learned, I don't even know if I've learned, I've just become more vulnerable. I'm where I can cry or I can show a more softer side of myself. I can be transparent without feeling like someone's going to judge me.

Again, I don't think I don't do it consciously. I think it just happened. I can't identify when it happened, but I don't do it consciously it just kind of happened.

PT 4 viewed his emotions as turned off that helped him cope with the inevitable,

I had to learn how to strive to be able to move on in the situation I was in. All the stuff that's happening, people getting hurt, people dying, all that stuff is happening in prison, too. So it ain't that my emotion turned off, but I just can't dwell and worry about this and that. I look at this right here like this, all this is going to come to an end soon.

PT 5 related and shared,

While incarcerated, you don't want to have a lot of emotions because emotions show signs of weakness. Even though a lot of stuff that hurts you, you just want to suck it up, keep moving, playing hard, even though it's killing you, tearing you up on the inside, but you don't let anything show. And I guess in a sense that's why I'm like I am now. Even though my mom died, I talk about it sometimes, and I get emotional when I talk about it. But the reason I get so emotional is because of family that say they were going to be there, but weren't there. So with incarceration, you have to have that toughness. And I brought that with me when I came out, still having that toughness. So nothing really just bothers me.

### **Theme 8: Restoring and Building Supportive Relationships**

For some participants, growth was often displayed in reestablished or strengthened connections with family, community, and faith communities. PT 2 reflected

on the rebuilding and restoration of supportive relationships, helping him overcome challenges,

Having great people around me saying, Listen, man, you've come too far to go backwards, brother. Some people were family, friends, and some were friends slash criminal slash family who lived the criminal life, and they're not living it anymore. Those who live that criminal life were saying, We did that already... don't you want to be out there for your family, your nieces, your cousins? Don't you want to be outside for them? You want to go back inside? And it's a wake-up call because sometimes it's a thought, man, like listen, I can't do anything with a hundred dollars. But then you also realize, as I'm looking back hindsight is 20/20 that when I was in prison, I was only making like \$15, \$20 every two weeks. I think it is a little different because you're in society and you quote-unquote free. And I had a roof over my head, and I didn't have to pay anything. I was staying with family at the time. So all I needed to do was just slow down to hold my horses and stay the course through. And I'm just so happy that I had people around me that was like, Yo, listen, you can't go back. You can't resort to doing that. That's not an option for you.

Similarly, PT 3 reflected on the support from his wife and the growth he experienced in recognizing what his oldest son missed from him,

My wife is one of my biggest supporters, and she can also be one of my biggest critics. I struggle with my oldest son out of all my children. But it has gotten a lot better. But I think we are the most distant out of all my kids. And I think that

comes from because I'm hands on with my kids. My kids get me all the time. I'm very hands on. And he missed that. He didn't get that me. So he see me with the younger boys, and I'm playing football. I'm doing all the things that he missed out on. But I told him I was a different person then. What you want me to do? You 20 years old, you want me to tickle you? You know what I'm saying. I can't tickle you, bro. But he missed that. He missed that person. So I think that affected him in more ways than one, in his growth. As he became a man and he came into himself, he struggled with some things. I think that's because I wasn't there too. He was in the house with nothing but a whole bunch of females. So he was the only male in the house. And they can't teach him things that I can teach him. In my feelings, I struggled with realizing that. But our relationship has gotten better, and he is really receptive to me. He had some resentment there for a while, but again, I think that our relationship has gotten a hundred percent better.

Building supportive relationships for one participant meant being more aware of environments that were positive, and recognized that being around good people was helpful, PT 5 shared,

As long as you have something to help you indulge yourself in something positive that will help you...See, my communication skills were never like they are now. I couldn't talk to anybody about stuff. But as time goes on, you learn that everybody's not bad. Everybody's not out to get you. But there are some people who are good people, but you have to weigh it out, though, because everybody ain't good. Doing the things I used to do before I got incarcerated, before doing

drugs, anything. I was a musician. I played the base that helped me so much. I started playing for my church, and I didn't get any pay. I told them I wasn't worried about being paid. I just wanted to play; that was my talent.

PT 6 reported that he was absent in his kids' life, but they forgave him "I wasn't really the father I was supposed to be, but them guys forgave me. I have grand kids and I have good relationships with them and the grandkids today."

### **Theme 9: Sustained Resilience Through Purposeful Engagement**

Some participants described their lived experiences of sustaining their success through stability and structure, avoidance of past patterns, and the healing and growth that came from a blend of internal strength, external support, and purposeful action. This theme highlighted how a meaningful, structured, and spiritually grounded life could support and uplift individuals as they navigated the challenges of reintegration and their life after.

PT 2 shared his internal strength, increasing through education and knowledge, which fueled accountability and responsibility to sustain resilience.

Other than having my spirituality realigned, education, higher learning, set a broader lens for me. Being able to go to college and sitting there with these professors and just reading and writing and expressing yourself. And mainly learning and learning history of things that are actual, things that are documented that I did not know of. And you start to look through life through a broader scope through a broader lens. So once you're able to basically see things on a different

plateau or from wherever you're standing, you are not standing in the same place, you're looking from a different place. It broadens your horizons.

PT 3 also shared how his sustained resilience was found in his discovered purpose, faith, and family.

I've published four books since I've been home. I've written three. I produced six movies in three of em'. So God is amazing. My kids keep me going. I'm blessed I can say they get on my nerves sometimes, but the other day I was just looking at all of them together. I'm just like man, God just blessed me. I am so thankful.

PT 4 found purpose in encouraging the younger generation from what he learned about himself through his lived experiences,

I had a chance when I was around pastors and stuff and we had a chance to go to juvenile facilities...I seen a lot of little kids, and I sat down and spoke with them, let 'em know a lot of stuff. You don't have to be out here like this right here.

Understand you still got life. Your too young to let your life go. And that's what a lot of folks don't understand today. Your life is not over. But a lot of people think it is. A lot of these young guys give up thinking I'm not going to make it past... I

said what the hell make you think like that? That's the stupidest thing in the

world. Don't never let nobody tell you what you can't do. People always looked

at me and, looked down on me and looked at me and don't know me. And,

consider he ain't nobody, he ain't got nothing. He ain't more educated than us.

You know what, I've been climbing all my life off of what people compared me

and said what I can't do. I've been doing what I want to do all my life, do the opposite, prove 'em wrong, strive at it, and keep it going.

PT 7 shared that his sustained resilience was found with the help and support of his partner at that time, and when he and his girlfriend separated, his ability to not go back to old habits that led to incarceration was strengthened by what he learned.

She gave me a clothing idea from what we talked about, scribbling stuff down, and she started selling the clothes. I started modeling a little bit, but when we split, I still had a hunger for that. I finally did one brand, and it went crazy. It reached 30 states. That helped me. Me learning from her, she brought it back to me because otherwise I was gonna be out here just working at the job still trying to figure it out. But I learned how to get the cost of the hoodies...how much I'm going to make on the profit. So I learned that from her, and when I tell you it brought something out, it was a beautiful thing. That's why my book describes all this. The pressure I went through to make it. Even when we split up, I found myself because I kept certain things going that I never thought I could keep going as a man, certain bills, certain cooking, certain things. So that's when I said I miss that dude. I almost went back to it because I went through a season of pain. So it's like don't let a season of pain make you go through. Going back to getting into that.

### **Theme 10: Structural Racism Softened by Community Diversity**

Returning to a diverse community served as a grounding and protective experience, one that softened the racial strain one participant became accustomed to while incarcerated.

One participant denied any experience of racism or race-specific social stressors while reintegrating. PT 2 shares, “No, I’ve been fortunate to be around a diverse group of people, and you name it, all ethnic backgrounds, and I haven’t witnessed any racist.”

### **General Narrative**

Seven Black male participants discussed their overall experiences successfully reintegrating into society after incarceration. There were several examples that were revealed throughout the interviews. Most participants' experiences demonstrated that reintegration was not a static achievement, but a continuous, dynamic process. The participants' experiences revealed a layered, deeply interwoven journey of reclaiming selfhood, navigating systemic injustices, and cultivating holistic growth.

Most participants discussed that reintegrating into society was a process of their minds shifting in a way that promoted personal identity and redefining self-worth. All participants identified a transformed mindset focused on rebuilding, goal setting, building family, entrepreneurship, and pulling completely away from old, unhelpful patterns. All participants also shared the trust or tension they experienced in working with mental health providers, probation or parole officers, and any reentry services. The experiences with these support systems ranged from encouraging to demeaning. Participants experienced a range from words of affirmation to other times the interactions reinforced a sense of surveillance.

Most participants (PT 2, PT 3, PT 4, PT 5, PT 6, PT 7) shared that their faith in God became both a moral compass and an anchor guiding decisions, sustaining resilience, and offering a renewed sense of accountability. Many participants shared their

experiences of developing a deeper relationship with God, being infused daily with meaning and direction, allowing them to reframe past hardships as stepping stones toward growth. Many participants (PT 1, PT 3, PT 4, PT 5, PT 6, PT 7) discussed experiences of strategically adapting despite structural barriers. The participants described the undercurrent of racism and the need for developing enough awareness to navigate systems strategically. The discrepant case in this theme, PT 2, noted being in a diverse community of all backgrounds and ethnicities, negated experiencing racism while reintegrating.

For many participants (PT 1, PT 2, PT 3, PT 5, PT 7), finding and sustaining purpose was a deeper inner work that was realized after reflecting more on themselves, their weaknesses, and vulnerabilities. These experiences led many to use their lived experiences to sustain themselves, but also to inspire others. For many participants (PT 1, PT 2, PT 3, PT 4, PT 5), discussion around experiencing and managing racism and social stressors was described overtly and covertly while incarcerated and while reintegrating. PT 1, PT 4, and PT 5 reported instances of experiencing covert and systemic racism while working during reintegration.

Emotional healing and relearning vulnerability were experienced by many participants (PT 1, PT 2, PT 3, PT 4, PT 5). Participants shared the benefits of restricting emotions while being incarcerated and how these benefits translated into interpersonal relationships with family, loved ones, and co-workers while reintegrating. The emotional guard and restriction of emotions for many participants was a protective factor that continued while they reintegrated. Participants also shared experiences of emotional

growth that allowed vulnerability and connections with family and loved ones to be enhanced in ways that allowed for deeper expression of emotions.

Some participants (PT 2, PT 3, PT 5, PT 6) shared experiences of restoring and building supportive relationships with family, community, and faith communities as a factor in their successful reintegration. PT 3 and PT 6 reported the vulnerability that came with acknowledging the effects of being absent in their children's lives and doing the work to rebuild those relationships. PT 2 and PT 5 shared the experience of having positive people and environments that increased their connection and motivation to continue in a positive direction.

Some participants (PT 2, PT 3, PT 4, PT 7) shared their sustained resilience through purposeful engagement through entrepreneurship, mentorship, being spiritually aligned, and obtaining higher education. PT 3 and PT 7 shared how their resilience was sustained by their entrepreneurial endeavors, leveraging their creative abilities. PT 4 found resilience through mentorship, knowing he could share what he learned with the younger generation who was now facing, or headed, the path he left. PT 2 shared how elevating his education and going to college broadened his horizon and provided the opportunity to learn things that he never received in grade school.

### **General Description**

In the context of Black males' experiences of successful reintegration after incarceration, several examples were revealed throughout the interviews. Most Black males who experienced successful reintegration after incarceration demonstrated that reintegration was not a static achievement, but a continuous, dynamic process. Black

males' experiences revealed a layered, deeply interwoven journey of reclaiming selfhood, navigating systemic injustices, and cultivating holistic growth.

Most Black males who experienced successful reintegration shared a process in which their minds shifted, promoting personal identity and redefining their self-worth. Most described a transformed mindset focused on rebuilding, goal setting, building family, entrepreneurship, and completely pulling away from old, unhelpful patterns. Most Black males also experienced trust or tension in working with mental health providers, probation or parole officers, and reentry services. The experiences with these support systems ranged from encouraging to demeaning. Black males' experiences with these support systems encompassed a range of experiences from words of affirmation to other times the interactions reinforced a sense of surveillance.

Many Black males who experienced successful reintegration shared their faith in God as both a moral compass and an anchor guiding their decisions, sustaining resilience, and offering a renewed sense of accountability. Many Black males experienced a deeper relationship with God, infused with daily meaning and direction, allowing them to reframe past hardships as stepping stones toward growth. Many Black males adapted strategically despite structural barriers. Many described the undercurrent of racism and the need for developing enough awareness to strategically navigate systems. Others shared that being in a diverse community of all backgrounds and ethnicities negated experiencing racism while reintegrating.

Black males who experienced successful reintegration after incarceration found and sustained purpose, which was a deeper inner work that was realized through

reflection on themselves, their weaknesses, and their vulnerabilities. These experiences led many to use their lived experiences to sustain themselves and to inspire others. For many Black males, the experiences and management of racism and social stressors were overt and covert while incarcerated and while reintegrating. Some Black males experienced covert and systemic racism in the areas of employment during reintegration.

Many Black males who experienced successful reintegration post-incarceration embraced emotional healing and relearned vulnerability. Black males shared the benefits of restricting emotions during incarceration and how these benefits translated into interpersonal relationships with family, loved ones, and co-workers while reintegrating. The emotional guard and restriction of emotions for many Black males was a protective factor that continues while reintegrating. Many Black males reached a level of emotional growth that allowed vulnerability and connection with family and loved ones, which enabled a deeper expression of emotions.

Some Black males who experienced successful reintegration after incarceration restored and built supportive relationships with family, community, and faith communities. Some Black males expressed the vulnerability that came with acknowledging the effects of being absent in their children's lives and doing the work to rebuild those relationships. Black males conveyed the importance of having positive people and environments that increased their connection and motivation to continue in a positive direction. Some Black males described their sustained resilience through purposeful engagement, including entrepreneurship, mentorship, being spiritually

aligned, and obtaining higher education. Some also described how their resilience was sustained by their entrepreneurial endeavors, leveraging their creative abilities.

### **Final Analysis**

Black males who experienced successful reintegration post-incarceration represented a layered and deeply interwoven journey of reclaiming identity, navigating systemic inequities, and cultivating holistic growth. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, these experiences showed how individuals came to understand themselves and their worlds again, interpreting their journey through prior understandings, shifting mindsets, and emerging meaning. The ongoing movement achieved this process of understanding and interpretation through the *hermeneutic circle*. The final analysis was further enriched by CRT, which illuminated the racialized structures and systemic forces that shaped their interpretive perspectives.

At the core of these narratives is *Dasein*, the human experience of *being-in-the-world*. For Black males, successful reintegration after incarceration, *Dasein* was expressed through how they navigated societal structures, family roles, purpose, faith commitments, racial realities, and emotional vulnerabilities. Black males' reintegration reflected an ongoing negotiation of identity, responsibility, accountability, and belonging. They did not simply enter the world; they reentered a racialized world that interpreted them before they interpreted themselves. Their lived experiences demonstrated *Dasein's thrownness*, being thrown into circumstances not of their choosing (e.g., incarceration, surveillance, historical anti-Black racism), while still using agency to move forward.

Black males returned home with experiences of incarceration, criminalization, family separation, and survival-oriented emotional constraint. These prior experiences formed the foundation of understanding through which they navigated and made sense of reintegration. Their long histories of navigating racialized systems led to an awareness of how institutions viewed and positioned Black men. This *fore-having* shaped their vigilance, their aspirations, and their desire for change.

Black males who have successfully reintegrated adopted a dramatic shift in perspective through educational attainment, spiritual grounding and alignment, fatherhood, emotional healing, and exposure to diverse communities. Several Black males shared the experience of seeing life through a broader lens, indicating a transformation in *fore-sight*. Faith became an interpretive lens for many Black males and infused their experiences with meaning, direction, and accountability. CRT helped to clarify that *fore-sight* is racialized from their interpretations of employment, community interactions, and policing, which were filtered through lived awareness of anti-Black bias, whether encountered or anticipated.

Black males approached reintegration with expectations shaped by both incarceration and race. These expectations included being surveilled, misjudged, or limited in some way. Other Black males held spiritual beliefs or familial expectations of redemption, purpose, or responsibility. These *fore-conceptions* shaped how they understood interactions with probation or parole officers, employers, mental health providers, and support networks. For some, assumptions of racism were confirmed; for

others, living in a diverse community altered their *fore-conceptions* by softening expectations of discrimination.

Black males' consistently described encounters with structural barriers in employment discrimination, biased assumptions, and institutional surveillance while they tried to reintegrate. Reintegration occurred within racialized structures that did not disappear upon release. Some experienced overt or covert racism, while others reported no racist encounters because their diverse communities shifted their interpretive horizon. CRT strengthened this dimension by showing that racialization existed even when not directly perceived; it was embedded in systems, expectations, and opportunity gaps. Black males' *fore-sight* and *fore-conceptions* were shaped by this racialized reality, even when their personal experiences varied.

Black males who successfully reintegrated after incarceration experienced a profound internal shift that allowed them to view themselves differently, envision new futures, and redefine self-worth. They refused to remain confined to prior limitations. This shift reflected *Dasein's* movement toward authenticity, choosing a self-directed future rather than living under the constraints of past identities or systemic expectations. CRT helped to illuminate how identity reclamation also countered racialized narratives that position Black men as dangerous, incapable, or destined for recidivism. These men's new self-understanding resisted these social scripts and they reclaimed their agency.

For many Black males, who experienced successful reintegration described their faith as the stabilizing force that provided meaning, accountability, and purpose. Spirituality shaped their *fore-sight*, which enabled them to reinterpret suffering, shame,

and past decisions through a hopeful and restorative lens. In hermeneutics, faith offered a *Dasein* in which Black males could understand themselves differently, as capable, purposeful, and valued.

Black males who successfully reintegrated described experiences of emotional restrictions they learned during incarceration, along with emotional guardedness, stoicism, and self-protection. However, reintegration brought opportunities to expand these emotional capacities. Many Black males experienced a gradual softening that allowed for vulnerability, connection, and deeper relational engagement. This also reflected a shift in their *Dasein*, moving them from survival to relational authenticity. Black males who experienced successful reintegration learned to navigate emotional expression in contexts where vulnerability fostered connection rather than danger.

Family, community, and faith communities were central components of Black males' successful reintegration. Many Black males described rebuilding trust with children, receiving encouragement from loved ones, and finding meaningful acceptance in supportive networks. These crucial relationships reshaped their *fore-conceptions*, which further replaced any expectations of rejection with experiences of affirmation and accountability.

Black males sustained their resilience by discovering purpose through entrepreneurship, mentorship, creativity, education, and community engagement. Black males purpose deepened their sense of *Dasein* by anchoring them in meaningful action and future-oriented possibility. This *Dasein* had transformed their reintegration from mere survival to intentional contribution.

Black males who experienced successful reintegration after incarceration, *fore-sight*, remained shaped by the understandings formed from incarceration, racialization, faith, trauma, and aspirations. Their *fore-sight* structured how they viewed themselves and the world upon their release. Concurrently, their *fore-conceptions*, or pre-existing assumptions about how systems, communities, and relationships would receive them, influenced how they made sense of opportunities and barriers. These *fore-structures* demonstrated that reintegration was not experienced in a vacuum; it was always interpreted through prior understanding, which was reshaped and expanded as these Black males reconstruct their lives.

Black males who have experienced reintegrating both aligned with and complicated the central tenets of CRT. Many Black males' experiences aligned with CRT's tenet that racism is ordinary and embedded within societal structures. This was evident in Black males' descriptions of covert discrimination, employment barriers, and the racialized surveillance of probation and parole systems. Their narratives functioned as counter-narratives that resisted deficit-based assumptions about formerly incarcerated Black men, thereby aligning with CRT's emphasis on exposing structural inequities through lived experience. However, some Black men challenged CRT's framing, particularly those who described reintegrating within diverse and supportive communities where racism was not explicitly experienced. These narratives complicated CRT by suggesting that diversity, community belonging, or personal transformation could soften the felt impact of structural racism. This divergence did not negate CRT; instead, it

revealed the nuanced ways that Black men navigated racialized systems sometimes consciously, sometimes without naming their experience as racial.

Interpreted through hermeneutics, these tensions signified the multiplicity of Black male reentry experiences and underscore that racism, while structurally present, was not uniformly perceived or interpreted across contexts. Black males who reported experiencing racism described reintegration through a *fore-sight* shaped by past structural harms and racialized interactions, making systemic inequities more visible and more readily interpreted as racial.

Conversely, those Black males who did not report racism brought different *fore-conceptions*, such as a belief in personal transformation, faith, or the protective nature of diverse communities, which shaped a different interpretation of similar societal structures. This variation reflects *Dasein's situatedness*. Black males interpreted racialized conditions from the standpoint of their unique *being-in-the-world*. Thus, misalignment with CRT was not a theoretical flaw, but a glimpse into the lived interpretive process by which Black men made meaning of reintegration, structural barriers, community belonging, and racial dynamics.

The lived experiences of Black males who successfully reintegrate after incarceration emerge as a holistic process. The combination of Hermeneutic Phenomenology and CRT reveals that successful reintegration for Black men is a dynamic, interpretive, and meaning-making process shaped by *Dasein, fore-structures*, racialized realities, personal agency, purpose, and relational restoration. This

interpretation honors both the elements of human meaning-making and the realities of Black men who navigate reintegration within historically racist structures.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the results using themes that reflected the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated after incarceration, providing insight into this phenomenon. Overall, the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated after incarceration reveal a multifaceted journey of resilience and transformation, where faith, purposeful living, and strategic navigation of systemic and racial barriers enabled them to reclaim identity, foster personal growth, and define success on their own terms. These findings not only highlight the individual and collective strategies employed to overcome barriers but also invited more profound exploration into how strategies intersected with broader structural realities. In Chapter 5, I delve into the interpretation of the findings, the limitations of the study, recommendations, implications for social change, and conclusions.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Introduction

My purpose for this hermeneutic phenomenology study was to improve the understanding of the factors that contributed to the successful reintegration and positive mental health and emotional needs of formerly incarcerated Black males who reintegrated back into society. I conducted this research to address the persistent problem of Black males being incarcerated at disproportionately higher rates than other racial groups and the need for research to obtain more information on what components are needed for successful reintegration (Bakken & Visser, 2018; Semenza & Link, 2019). For this reason, I used hermeneutic phenomenology to explore how Black males experienced and interpreted themselves in the world during reintegration. I also used CRT as an additional lens to examine how race, racism, and race-specific social stressors affected their reintegration journey.

Participants' accounts indicated that reintegration was experienced not only as a social process but also as an existential one, in which Black men interpreted, resisted, and reconstructed meaning while strategically navigating systems shaped by race, history, and power, yet were also softened by connection, insight, and intentional purpose. Participants described being situated within social, economic, and racialized conditions beyond their control, while simultaneously exercising agency in how they responded to those conditions. Many participants demonstrated awareness of structural barriers influencing their reintegration, while others described experiencing a reduced impact of racism through community diversity, faith, and relational support. In this chapter, I

interpret and compare the research findings presented in Chapter 4 with some key literature that I reviewed in Chapter 2. I also describe the study's limitations and provide recommendations for future research and discuss the implications for counseling practice and the potential impact on social change.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

I interpreted the findings using hermeneutic phenomenology as the primary lens and CRT as the secondary lens. Based on analysis of interviews with seven participants, I identified 10 themes: mindset shift and identity reclamation, engagement with support systems: trust and tension, faith as foundation and moral compass, strategic adaptation and agency in face of structural barriers, finding and sustaining purpose, experiencing and managing racism and social stressors, emotional healing and relearning vulnerability, restoring and building supportive relationships, sustained resilience through purposeful engagement, and structural racism softened by community diversity. Together, these themes reflected participants' descriptions of a dynamic, holistic, and interwoven process through which Black males reclaimed agency and worked to restore their lives post-incarceration. In this chapter, I describe how the findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge in the counseling profession by comparing the data from my study to the peer-reviewed literature in Chapter 2. I present my interpretations of the findings and examine them within the interpretive frameworks of hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT.

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 documents the origins of mass incarceration, racism within the criminal justice system, effects of incarceration, barriers to reintegration, and factors that promote reintegration. Much of the existing literature has

focused on Black men remaining trapped in cycles of recidivism, and viewed reentry as only deficit-filled, identity loss-dominating, and a life defined by surveillance (Berghuis, 2018; Brown et al., 2016; Buonoua et al., 2024; Madoshi, 2019; Semenza & Link, 2019; Ward & Merlo, 2016; Williams et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2016; Yesberg & Polaschek, 2019). The findings from my study extended current knowledge by centering narratives of successful reintegration, applying a dual interpretive lens of hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT, and illuminating the roles of meaning-making, faith, identity reconstruction, and foresight in participants' reintegration experiences. In the following sections I describe how these findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend existing literature in the counseling field.

### **Origins of Mass Incarceration**

The findings of my study supported and, through interpretation, extended the existing scholarship on the origins of mass incarceration as a historically constructed, racially stratified system rather than as a neutral response to crime. Hinton (2015), the Legacy Museum (2018), Wacquant (2000), and Scott (2022), establish an uninterrupted line from chattel slavery, Black codes, convict leasing, Jim Crow, and to the War on Drugs and mass incarceration. Researchers have demonstrated that mass incarceration is a racialized and politically constructed system rooted in the historical oppression of Black bodies (Hinton, 2015; Kita, 2019; Scott, 2022; Wacquant, 2000). Participants' narratives revealed that although many did not initially conceptualize their incarceration within these historical terms, however, their lived experiences ultimately aligned with the structural realities outlined in the literature. Black males from the current study were born

into and shaped by this historically situated world, aligning with Heidegger's concept of *thrownness*. Participants' narratives provided evidence consistent with CRT's tenet that racism is ordinary, normalized, and embedded in systems (Pajak, 2024; Reed et al., 2022).

Consistent with CRT, participants' accounts reflected how mass incarceration functioned as a modern extension of racial governance. For example, Buntman's (2019) examination of colonial law highlighted how differentiated rules and punitive practices were historically applied on the basis of race and identity, an inequity that persists in contemporary criminal justice systems. Participants described sentencing practices, surveillance, and institutional treatment that reinforced a sense of racialized containment, confirming Haley's (2007) findings regarding sentencing bias and unequal punishment. These experiences affirmed CRT's assertion that mass incarceration was not accidental, but was the result of intentional legal and political choices that normalized racial inequality (Bhopal, 2023; Pajak, 2024).

Participants developed their understanding of incarceration through iterative reflection consistent with the *hermeneutic circle*, moving between past experiences, present reflection, and evolving meaning. Initially, many participants interpreted incarceration through individualized explanations such as personal failure or poor decision-making. However, through reflection, education, faith, and post-release experiences, participants began to reinterpret their incarceration as part of a broader structural phenomenon. This shift demonstrated how participants gradually revised *fore-*

*conceptions*, (i.e., initial assumptions shaped by dominant societal narratives), as they made sense of their lived experiences.

Participants' narratives also aligned with Kita's (2019) psychoanalytic framing of mass incarceration as a societal defense mechanism. Several participants described feeling dehumanized, disposable, or projected upon, reflecting Kita's assertion that Black men were often unconsciously positioned as repositories for society's fears, aggression, and moral anxieties. These projections were not only experienced as punitive but also as traumatogenic, and shaped participants' psychological and emotional development during incarceration. The findings thus extended the literature by providing lived, experiential accounts of how these projections were internalized and later renegotiated during reintegration.

The concept of Dasein, or being-in-the-world, is particularly salient for interpreting participants' descriptions of incarceration as a totalizing environment that reshaped identity, agency, and relational existence. Participants described incarceration as a rupture in their life trajectory, constraining their possibilities while simultaneously forcing adaptation to survive. This reflected Heidegger's notion of thrownness, wherein individuals were cast into conditions not of their choosing. Participants did not choose incarceration, yet they were required to make meaning, decisions, and adaptations within its constraints. Analysis of participants' accounts demonstrated how mass incarceration fundamentally altered these men's existential orientation to time, self, and future possibilities.

Notably, the findings extended existing literature by highlighting how participants' awareness of mass incarceration's origins emerged more fully during reintegration rather than during the incarceration itself. Education, such as exposure to historical knowledge, spiritual reflection, and engagement with diverse communities facilitated participants' reinterpretation of their incarceration as structurally situated rather than solely personal. This aligned with Bell's (1992) and Western and Wildeman's (2009) assertions that incarceration has become a normative life event for Black men, surpassing milestones such as education or military service. Recently, Robey et al. (2023) found that, although the overall lifetime risk has declined, incarceration continues to be unequally distributed, with Black men still incarcerated at higher rates than other groups and facing disproportionate criminal justice involvement.

The historical transition of incarceration into a significant institutional influence in Black men's early adulthood, as documented in earlier cohorts, still shapes social and structural contexts today, even if its frequency relative to other life events has decreased (Robey et al., 2023). Participants' narratives brought this statistical reality into a lived context, illustrating how the normalization of incarceration shaped identity formation and expectations.

For the counseling field, these findings underscored the importance of contextualizing incarceration experiences within historical and structural frameworks. For example, Morrison's (2024) mass incarceration trauma framework conceptualized trauma as embedded in the ecological and structural context of individuals who experienced incarceration. This framework directs counselors to recognize the

interrelation of poverty, discrimination, violence, and systemic harm rather than situating distress solely in individual pathology. Counselors who approach reentry solely through an individual-deficit lens risk reinforcing internalized blame and obscuring systemic harm. Integrating psychoeducation about the origins of mass incarceration can support clients in reframing their experiences, reducing shame, and fostering empowerment. Counseling interventions grounded in cultural humility and critical consciousness can assist formerly incarcerated Black men in reconstructing meaning and agency following structurally imposed disruption (Benjamin et al., 2025; Coleman, 2024; Morrison, 2024).

In summary, the findings confirmed that mass incarceration originates from racially stratified legal and political systems, while extending the literature by illuminating how Black men came to understand this reality through lived experience and reflection. By my integrating hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT, this study revealed mass incarceration, not only as a historical and structural phenomenon, but also as an existential condition that profoundly shaped Black men's being-in-the-world during and after incarceration.

### **Racism and the Criminal Justice System**

Extensive research has documented that racism was structurally embedded within policing, sentencing, incarceration, and community supervision, generating disproportionate harm to Black men (Bell, 1992; Bounoua, 2023; Buntman, 2019; Haley, 2007; Kerrison, 2017; Madoshi, 2019; Wildeman & Wang, 2017; Wong, 2025). Analysis of participants' narratives affirmed that racism was a salient and often unavoidable feature of Black men's experiences while incarcerated and during early reintegration.

However, participants' accounts also revealed variability in how they perceived racism, and in how they encountered, and navigated post-release, particularly within diverse community contexts.

Consistent with CRT, participants described incarceration as occurring within a system that operates under a racialized logic of suspicion, punishment, and control. Participants' experiences aligned with Kerrison's (2017) assertion that White supremacy functioned as an ontological baseline within the criminal justice system, positioning Black men as inherently suspect and in need of regulation. Several participants recounted experiences of heightened surveillance, harsher treatment, and limited institutional support, reflecting Haley's (2007) findings regarding racialized sentencing and enforcement practices. These experiences provided evidence consistent with CRT's central tenet that racism was not aberrational but ordinary and normalized within criminal justice structures (Bhopal, 2023; Pajak, 2024).

From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, participants entered incarceration already shaped by *fore-conceptions* about racism derived from prior life experiences, community narratives, and historical awareness. These *fore-conceptions* informed how participants interpreted interactions with law enforcement, correctional officers, and institutional authorities. Through repeated reflection consistent with the *hermeneutic circle*, participants developed a more complex understanding of racism that evolved as they reflected on past experiences considering present meaning-making. Therefore, Black men's interpretations of racism were not static but continuously reshaped as they moved between incarceration, reintegration, and reflection.

While the findings confirm much of the literature on systemic racism, they also extended current knowledge by illuminating how racism was not experienced uniformly during reintegration. According to Bounoua et al. (2024), structural barriers such as blocked employment and neighborhood violence contributed to negative reentry perceptions and increased motives for illegal behavior among formerly incarcerated, street-identified Black adults. My research identified and described the risk environment and how structural disadvantages shaped maladaptive outcomes.

My study extended this by shifting the analytical lens to those who have successfully reintegrated, demonstrating that structural barriers do not uniformly determine reintegration outcomes. While Bounoua et al. (2024) focused on risk and constraint, the findings of the current study indicated that some individuals navigate, interpret, and overcome these barriers through meaning-making, strategic adaptation, and supportive networks. Some participants reported that residing in racially and ethnically diverse communities mitigated their direct experiences of racism post-release. These findings complicated dominant CRT-informed assumptions that racism was always overtly encountered during reintegration. Instead, participants described contexts in which diversity fostered a sense of relative acceptance, safety, and reduced racial hostility. However, this interpretation did not negate the existence of structural racism, but rather suggested that local social ecologies could influence how racism was experienced and perceived.

Notably, participants' accounts demonstrated an awareness of covert and systemic racism, even when overt discrimination was not immediately visible. This finding aligned

with Kita's (2019) assertion that mass incarceration operated through psychological projection and dehumanization rather than solely through explicit acts of discrimination. Participants described developing strategic awareness to navigate institutions, often modifying their behavior, communication, and presentation to avoid racialized scrutiny. This strategic navigation aligned with what CRT scholars described as racial realism, which is an acknowledgement of the persistence of racism alongside pragmatic adaptation (Bhopal, 2023; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Analysis of the findings also revealed how racism shaped participants' *Dasein*, or mode of *being-in-the-world*. Participants described their post-incarceration existence as marked by vigilance, caution, and anticipatory awareness of racialized judgment. Even in the absence of overt racism, participants remained attuned to the possibility of racial harm. This existential orientation illustrated how racism operates not only as a structural force but also as a lived, embodied reality that shaped how Black men moved through social spaces.

For the counseling field, these findings suggest the necessity of addressing racism as both a systemic and phenomenological experience. Counselors working with formerly incarcerated Black men must recognize that the clients may simultaneously acknowledge racism's pervasive influence while also expressing gratitude for contexts that felt less racially hostile. Therapeutic work should allow space for this complexity, avoiding both minimization of racism and over-pathologization of racial vigilance. Incorporating culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches can support clients in processing

racialized experiences while fostering adaptive meaning-making and psychological resilience (Benjamin et al., 2025; Rubio, 2025).

In summary, the findings of my study confirmed existing research on systemic racism within the criminal justice system and extended the literature by highlighting how context, diversity, and individual interpretation shaped reintegration experiences. By integrating hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of racism as a structural condition that is lived, interpreted, resisted, and navigated in varied ways by Black men during reintegration.

### **Effects of Incarceration**

Prior scholarship has identified profound psychological, relational, and existential effects of incarceration on Black men. Existing research has consistently documented that incarceration disrupts identity development, fractures family systems, and imposes lasting emotional and social consequences that extended beyond the period of confinement (Blakenship et al., 2018; Kerrison, 2017; Wildeman & Wang, 2017; Williams et al., 2020). Analysis of participants' narratives illustrated these effects as lived, embodied experiences that shaped how these Black men understood themselves, related to others, and navigated the world during and after incarceration.

Participants described incarceration as an environment that required emotional suppression, hypervigilance, and psychological adaptation to survive. These experiences aligned with William et al.'s (2019) assertion that incarceration produced psychological harm rooted in historical and racialized dehumanization. Many participants articulated that restricting emotions was a necessary protective strategy while incarcerated. This

emotional suppression, while adaptive within the carceral environment, often persisted into reintegration, affecting participants' ability to engage vulnerably with family, partners, and children. These findings were also consistent with the literature's recognition of incarceration as a trauma-producing environment while extending it by illustrating how survival strategies developed in prison become relational barriers post-release (Morrison, 2024; Rubio, 2025).

From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, participants described incarceration as fundamentally altered *Dasein* or *being-in-the-world*. Participants described how imprisonment disrupted their sense of time, agency, and identity, creating an existential rupture in their life narratives. Participants experienced incarceration not merely as confinement, but also as a transformation of how participants understood themselves in relation to others. This reflected Heidegger's concept of *situatedness*, wherein meaning is always shaped by context (Heidegger, 2021). Participants recalibrated their understanding of masculinity, fatherhood, responsibility, and self-worth within the restrictive and surveilled conditions of incarceration.

The findings also aligned with Kerrison's (2017) assertion that incarceration irreversibly disrupted family structures in communities of color. Participants expressed grief, guilt, and regret related to being absent from their children's lives and missing critical developmental milestones. Many participants described strained relationships with their oldest children, marked by emotional distance and unspoken resentment. Interpretation of these accounts confirmed the literature on familial disruption and extended it by revealing how participants actively engaged in reflective processes post-

incarceration to repair and renegotiate these relationships over time (Muentner & Charles, 2023; Wildeman & Wang, 2017).

Consistent with CRT, participants' experiences demonstrated how incarceration operated as a racialized system that produced differential harm. Blakenship et al. (2018) reported that Black individuals experienced greater post-incarceration barriers in employment, housing, and relationships than their White counterparts. Participants in this study endorsed these findings and described how the stigma of incarceration compounded racial marginalization, reinforced feelings of exclusion and surveillance even after release. These experiences reflected CRT's assertion that racism was embedded in institutional practices and persists beyond formal punishment (Bhopal, 2023; Pajak 2024; Wong, 2025).

*Fore-conception* was evidenced in participants' initial understanding of the effects of incarceration. Many entered prison with internalized beliefs that emotional detachment and self-reliance defined strength and survival. Through reflection and reintegration, participants revisited and reinterpreted these assumptions and engaged in the *hermeneutic circle* as they moved between past experiences, present insight, and future aspirations. This interpretive process allowed participants to recognize both the costs and adaptive functions of their emotional strategies, facilitating growth and healing.

Notably, this study extended the literature by highlighting participants' agency in transforming the effects of incarceration into sources of insight and resilience. While the literature often emphasized pathology and deficit, participants described how incarceration prompted introspection, spiritual awakening, and motivation for personal

change. These findings should not be interpreted as negating the harm of incarceration but illustrated how meaning-making processes can coexist with structural trauma. Participants reframed incarceration as a turning point that compelled them to reassess values, priorities, and life direction.

For the counseling field, these findings point to the necessity of trauma-informed, culturally responsive approaches when working with formerly incarcerated Black men (Benjamin et al., 2025; Morrison, 2024). Counselors must recognize that emotional restriction, mistrust, and guardedness are not signs of resistance but can be adaptive responses to correctional trauma. According to Benjamin et al. (2025), interventions that honored clients' lived experiences, validated survival strategies, and supported gradual emotional reintegration were critical. Additionally, incorporating existential and narrative approaches may help clients reconstruct disrupted life stories and reclaim agency post-incarceration, as cognitive behavioral therapy in the Benjamin et al. study was often perceived as too structured and rigid, leaving little room for collaboration (Benjamin et al., 2025).

In summary, the effects of incarceration as revealed in this study confirmed the existing research regarding psychological harm, relational disruption, and racialized trauma, and extended the literature through a phenomenological lens that centers lived experience and meaning-making. By integrating hermeneutic phenomenology and CRT, the findings illuminated incarceration as both a structural mechanism of racial control and an existential event that reshapes Black men's being-in-the-world long after release.

## **Barriers to Reintegration**

Prior research has identified numerous collateral consequences of incarceration, including employment discrimination, housing instability, restricted access to public resources, and prolonged community supervision (Cummings, 2012; Kerrison, 2017; Moyd, 2021; Williams et al., 2019). I analyzed participants' narratives to develop a deeper phenomenological understanding of how these obstacles were lived, interpreted, and internally managed over time.

Consistent with Williams et al. (2019), participants described reintegration as occurring within a social context marked by stigma and exclusion. Participants articulated how a criminal record functioned as a persistent social marker that limited opportunities and shaped interpersonal interactions. Like Williams et al.'s findings, participants noted difficulty securing stable employment and housing, which directly affected their sense of dignity, autonomy, and ability to fulfill socially prescribed roles associated with masculinity and provision. These findings were consistent with prior literature indicating that reintegration barriers were not isolated challenges, but interconnected stressors that simultaneously disrupted multiple domains of life (Fahmy & Mitchell, 2022).

The findings were also consistent with Moyd's (2021) assertion that community supervision functioned as an extension of incarceration rather than a pathway to freedom. Many participants described probation and parole requirements as restrictive, anxiety-provoking, and ever-present, requiring constant self-monitoring to avoid technical violations. This experience reflected Moyd's characterization of community supervision as a system that prioritized surveillance over rehabilitation. From a hermeneutic

phenomenological perspective, participants described how their being-in-the-world remained shaped by punitive rationalities even after release. Participants described their Dasein as structured by hyper vigilance, fear of reincarceration, and a constrained sense of possibility, suggesting that incarceration continued to shape their lived reality beyond physical confinement.

These findings were also consistent with existing literature and extended knowledge by revealing the internalization of correctional control as a psychological and existential phenomenon (Benjamin et al., 2025; Morrison, 2024; Williams et al., 2019). Participants did not merely encounter external barriers; they described an ongoing internal negotiation in which they monitored their speech, movement, associations, and emotional expression. This internalized surveillance reflected what Cummings (2012) and Story (2016) described as the broader reach of the prison industrial complex, wherein control extended into communities and individual subjectivities. Participants communicated how systemic barriers became embedded within the self, shaping identity, decision-making, and self-perception. Analysis of participants' narratives revealed that incarceration reshaped their emotional expression and masculine identity, resulting in what aligned with Williams et al.'s (2020) concept of divergent masculinity, which is an adaptive yet psychologically costly response to the penological environment.

From a CRT perspective, these barriers cannot be understood as race-neutral or incidental. The findings were consistent with CRT assertions that racism is embedded within policies governing employment, housing, and community supervision (Bhopal, 2023; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Kerrison, 2017). Participants' experiences illustrated

how these systems disproportionately burdened Black men, and reinforced racialized patterns of exclusion and social control. However, the findings also complicated deterministic narratives such as those in Williams et al. (2020) by showing that participants actively interpreted and resisted these constraints through meaning-making, strategic compliance, and long-term planning.

In contrast to literature that emphasized barriers as predictors of recidivism (Blankenship et al., 2018; Bounoua et al., 2024), participants in this study demonstrated that successful reintegration could occur despite persistent structural obstacles. These results contributed to counseling knowledge by shifting the focus from deficit-based models of reentry toward an understanding of resilience as an ongoing, effortful process. Participants' success did not result from the absence of barriers, but came from their capacity to endure, reinterpret, and navigate these barriers over time.

For the counseling field, these findings suggest the importance of adopting a contextualized, culturally responsive approach when working with formerly incarcerated Black men. Counselors must recognize that reintegration stressors were not solely individual challenges, but manifestations of broader systemic forces (Morrison, 2024). Therapeutic interventions should move beyond symptom reduction to include validation of lived experience, exploration of identity reconstruction, and support for managing chronic vigilance and institutional mistrust (Benjamin et al., 2025). By acknowledging both the structural nature of reintegration barriers and the agency demonstrated by participants, counselors can better support sustainable reintegration and psychological well-being.

In summary, the barriers to reintegration identified in this study confirmed existing literature regarding structural and psychological impediments while extending knowledge by centering Black men's lived experiences through hermeneutic phenomenology. By illuminating how these barriers were embodied, interpreted, and navigated over time, this study provided critical insights to the counseling field. It emphasized the importance of interventions that address systemic oppression, support individual healing, and adopt more strength-based perspectives.

### **Factors That Promote Reintegration**

The findings of this study indicated that successful reintegration for Black men post-incarceration was not driven by a single factor, but rather by an interwoven constellation of internal transformations and external supports. Consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, my analysis of participants' accounts demonstrated that reintegration was experienced as a way of being-in-the-world rather than a linear outcome. Black men reinterpreted reintegration as a dynamic, meaning-making process shaped by identity reconstruction, purpose formation, faith, relational repair, and strategic navigation of structural barriers. This study both confirmed and extended existing literature in the counseling field by illuminating how Black men actively cultivated resilience despite historically oppressive systems.

### **Purpose, Meaning, and Identity Reclamation**

A central factor promoting reintegration was participants' ability to find and sustain a sense of purpose. Many participants described a deliberate shift in mindset marked by redefining self-worth, embracing responsibility, and distancing themselves

from prior patterns associated with incarceration. These results aligned with DeVaux (2022), who reported that Black men defined post-incarceration success through self-concept, autonomy, and meaning-making, rather than solely through material achievement. Participants in this study similarly framed success as becoming dependable, self-aware, and intentional.

This study extended the literature by illustrating how purpose was not merely discovered but actively constructed through lived experiences, including employment, entrepreneurship, creative expression, mentorship, and motivational speaking. For several participants, purpose emerged directly from skills developed while incarcerated, such as writing, reflection, or leadership: demonstrating a form of deinstitutionalization consistent with DeVaux's (2022) conceptual framework. From a counseling perspective, this highlights the importance of meaning-centered and strengths-based approaches that support identity reconstruction rather than deficit-oriented reentry models.

### **Education, Self-Knowledge, and Cognitive Expansion**

Participants repeatedly identified education and self-learning as catalysts for sustained resilience. Participants described higher education and self-directed learning as transformative experiences that broadened their worldview, enhanced accountability, and generated a sense of responsibility to apply knowledge meaningfully. These findings were consistent with Buck et al.'s (2022) identification of future visualization and structured routines as facilitators of reintegration and extended the literature by highlighting education as a moral and existential responsibility rather than solely an economic tool.

Participants articulated that increased knowledge disrupted prior limitations placed upon them by social systems, which allowed them to re-interpret their life trajectories. Through a hermeneutic lens, participants experienced education as a fore-conception-shifting experience, enabling participants to reinterpret past failures and envision alternative futures. These findings have direct implications for counseling practice, suggesting that educational engagement supports not only vocational outcomes but also cognitive liberation and self-authorship.

### **Faith, Spirituality, and Moral Grounding**

Faith emerged as a foundational factor promoting reintegration for most participants. Participants described spirituality as a moral compass, a source of accountability, and an anchor during moments of instability. This finding was also consistent with prior research indicating that spiritual connection played a central role in successful reintegration (Banfield, 2019; Buck et al., 2022; DeVeaux, 2022). Participants framed their relationship with God as providing daily structure, ethical guidance, and emotional grounding.

This study extended the counseling literature by illustrating how faith operated as a counter-narrative to structural racism. From a CRT perspective, spirituality served as a site of resistance, enabling participants to reject deficit-based societal narratives and to reframe their lives as purposeful despite systemic exclusion. For counselors, this highlighted the importance of culturally responsive practices that honor spirituality as a legitimate and empowering source of resilience.

### **Supportive Relationships and Community Connection**

Reintegration was further promoted through the restoration and development of supportive relationships with family, romantic partners, mentors, and community networks. Participants described relational accountability as a motivating force that sustained behavioral change and discouraged relapse into old patterns. This finding was consistent with Kerrison's (2017) assertion that social support was critical for reintegration, particularly in communities with limited institutional resources.

However, this study extended existing knowledge by emphasizing that relationships were not merely supportive but transformative. Participants described learning vulnerability, responsibility, and emotional regulation through relational engagement. In contrast to Williams et al.'s (2020) concept of divergent masculinity as an effect of incarceration, participants' successful reintegration was facilitated by intentional emotional healing, spirituality, and relational repair, which suggested that these adaptations were reversible rather than fixed. Several men identified fatherhood as a central motivator for maintaining stability, confirming Williams et al.'s (2019) findings on masculinity and provision, while reframing fatherhood as a matter of presence and emotional availability rather than solely financial. This shift suggested important implications for counseling interventions focused on relational repair and family reintegration.

### **Entrepreneurship, Creativity, and Purposeful Engagement**

Participants identified entrepreneurship and creative pursuits as key mechanisms for sustaining resilience. Engaging in business ventures, writing, film production, and

developing clothing brands allowed participants to bypass traditional employment barriers often imposed on formerly incarcerated Black men. Interpretation of this finding aligned with CRT's emphasis on structural constraints within labor markets (Bhopal, 2023; Fornili, 2018; Kerrison, 2017) and extended reintegration literature by positioning entrepreneurship as both economic survival and identity affirmation.

Participants described purposeful engagement, such as entrepreneurship, creative expression, and community involvement, as a central component of successful reintegration. This engagement served as a mechanism for reclaiming identity, asserting agency, and resisting deterministic narratives of incarceration (Bounoua et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2019). Participants described initiating businesses, pursuing creative projects, and leveraging their skills to contribute meaningfully to their families and communities, and demonstrated how self-directed action reinforced psychological resilience and promoted holistic growth.

From a counseling perspective, these findings suggest the value of integrating vocational creativity, goal setting, and entrepreneurial thinking into re-entry-focused mental health interventions. Purposeful engagement provided participants with autonomy, visibility, and dignity; factors often denied through conventional employment pathways. According to Rocque et al. (2023), the construction and management of identity within prison settings shaped behavior and adaptation. The current study extended these findings by showing how formerly incarcerated Black men actively engaged in entrepreneurship, creative pursuits, and purposeful community involvement as mechanisms of post-release identity reconstruction. These strategies were portrayed as

mitigating the effects of structural barriers and supporting psychological resilience and meaning-making aligned with self-defined success.

### **Strategic Adaptation and System Navigation**

Finally, participants demonstrated sustained resilience through strategic adaptation to structural barriers. Most men explicitly acknowledged systemic racism, while others described learning how to navigate systems pragmatically without becoming immobilized by them. This finding was consistent with CRT literature that emphasized the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992; Bhopal, 2023; Fornili, 2018) while extending it by illustrating how individuals exercised agency within constrained environments.

Participants' ability to adapt reflected Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* as situated and thrown into preexisting conditions, yet capable of projecting meaning forward. Reintegration success was not framed as the absence of barriers, but rather as the capacity to remain purposeful despite them. These insights are particularly relevant for counselors working with formerly incarcerated Black men, as they emphasized empowerment, *foresight*, and adaptive coping rather than unrealistic expectations of systemic fairness.

Collectively, these findings were consistent with the existing counseling literature, which emphasizes purpose, spirituality, education, and social support as facilitators of successful reintegration (Banfield, 2019; DeVeaux, 2022; Fahmy & Mitchell, 2022). More importantly, this study extended current knowledge by demonstrating how Black men actively constructed meaning, resilience, and identity within racially stratified systems. As experienced by participants, reintegration was not an endpoint but an ongoing, intentional practice of becoming, one that counseling

professionals are uniquely positioned to support through culturally responsive, phenomenologically informed care.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although I employed strategies to enhance qualitative rigor, I identified several limitations in trustworthiness during the study's execution and should be acknowledged. First, due to the extended duration of the dissertation process, some of the references I included in the literature review and interpretation of findings may not reflect the most current research. However, I made every effort to integrate recent studies. Since scholarship in areas such as mass incarceration, reentry, and culturally responsive counseling continues to evolve, a few sources may now be dated. Future research should continue to incorporate emerging studies to ensure ongoing relevance and applicability.

Second, participants reflected on their experiences of incarceration and reintegration. While consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology's emphasis on meaning-making over time, retrospective accounts could be influenced by memory reconstruction and current stability, which might affect the immediacy and precision of recalled experiences.

Third, participants self-identified as successfully reintegrated, which may have resulted in the overrepresentation of adaptive coping strategies and the underrepresentation of unresolved challenges or experiences of recidivism. The findings primarily represent pathways of success rather than the full spectrum of reentry outcomes.

Fourth, consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher's *fore-conceptions* and interpretive stance inevitably influenced the interpretive process. While I did employ reflexivity, findings represented a co-constructed interpretation rather than a fully bracketed account. Additionally, my use of CRT as a secondary lens placed greater analytic emphasis on structural racism, which may have influenced the interpretation of participant narratives toward systemic explanations.

Finally, transferability was limited by the sample population's specificity and size. Participants were Black men who, by definition of success, met criteria for successful reintegration. The findings may not be readily transferable to individuals early in reentry, those who recidivated multiple times, or other formerly incarcerated populations. Despite these limitations, this study offers a credible, contextualized understanding of Black men's lived experiences of successful reintegration and offers meaningful insights for counseling research and practice.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this hermeneutic phenomenology study contributed to the counseling literature by centering Black males lived experiences of successful reintegration after incarceration. While the study offered meaningful insights, its strengths and limitations, along with gaps identified in the existing literature, suggested several directions for future research.

#### **Longitudinal Research on Reintegration as a Dynamic Process**

A core strength of this study lies in the conceptualization of reintegration as an ongoing, evolving process rather than a static outcome. However, because the data I

collected was through single, retrospective interviews, future researchers should employ longitudinal qualitative designs to examine how reintegration unfolds over time.

Following Black men from the first-year post-release through later stages of reintegration would allow researchers to capture potential shifts in identity, emotional regulation, spirituality, and meaning-making as they occur. This recommendation is consistent with DeVeaux's (2022) call to examine reintegration across temporal stages and would extend counseling knowledge by illuminating critical periods of vulnerability and growth.

### **Comparative Studies Across Stages of Reintegration**

I focused present study on Black men who self-identified as having successfully reintegrated. While this strength intentionally countered deficit-focused literature, it also limited understanding of how experiences differed across reintegration trajectories.

Future studies should compare individuals in early reentry (1-3 years), later reintegration (5+ years), and those who have recidivated. Such comparisons would help counselors identify protective factors and intervention points that distinguish sustained success from ongoing instability, responding directly to gaps noted by Blankenship et al. (2018) and DeVeaux (2022).

### **Intersectional and Within-Group Analyses**

Consistent with CRT and intersectionality frameworks (Bhopal, 2023; Fornili, 2018), future researchers should explore within-group differences among Black men, including age at incarceration, length of sentence, type of offense, type of prison or jail (i.e. private or not private), geographic location, parental status, educational level, relationship status, religion, sexual orientation, and engagement in reentry services.

While I captured rich narratives, it did not separate experiences across these variables. Such exploration would extend counseling research by moving beyond vast representations of Black male reintegration and tailoring culturally responsive interventions.

### **Examination of Counseling and Therapeutic Relationships Post-Incarceration**

Participants in this study reported varied experiences with mental health providers, probation officers, and reentry personnel, ranging from supportive to surveilling. Future researchers should explicitly examine Black men's perceptions of counseling relationships during and after reintegration, including factors that foster trust, safety, and engagement. This I drew this recommendation from Kerrison's (2017) findings regarding institutional mistrust and extended counseling practice by identifying culturally responsive therapeutic approaches that reduced retraumatization and power imbalances.

### **Expanded Research on Spirituality and Meaning-Making in Counseling**

Spirituality emerged as a central factor that promoted resilience and accountability among participants and confirmed findings by Buck et al. (2022) and DeVaux (2022). However, the counseling literature remains limited in its integration of spirituality into evidence-based reentry interventions (Banfield, 2019; Fahmy & Mitchell, 2022). Future researchers should examine how spiritual meaning-making can be ethically and culturally incorporated into counseling practice for formerly incarcerated Black men, particularly in trauma recovery, identity reconstruction, and relapse prevention.

### **Community-Level and Structural Interventions**

While this study illuminated individual strategies for navigating structural barriers, future researchers should examine community-level interventions that reduce systemic obstacles such as employment restrictions, housing discrimination, and prolonged community supervision. Mixed-methods or participatory action research designs could evaluate the effectiveness of policy-informed counseling programs that integrate advocacy, case management, and therapeutic support. This direction aligns with CRT's emphasis on structural change and responds to critiques raised by Story (2016), Moyd (2021), and Cummings (2012).

### **Inclusion of Family and Relational Perspectives**

Participants emphasized family repair and relational accountability as integral to the success of reintegration. Future researchers should include the perspectives of family members, partners, and children to better understand relational dynamics during reentry. Such studies would contribute to counseling research by supporting systemic and family-based interventions that address the intergenerational effects of incarceration, as highlighted in Williams et al. (2019).

In summary, future researchers should build upon the strengths of this study with its depth, interpretive rigor, and strengths-based focus, while addressing limitations related to temporality, sampling, and scope. Collectively, these recommendations are intended to advance counseling scholarship and practice by deepening understanding of Black males' reintegration as a culturally, relationally, and structurally embedded process.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

Through this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I explored the lived experiences of Black males who reported successful reintegration after incarceration. Although the findings did not provide transferability or causation, the insights gained helped clarify how meaning-making, identity reclamation, and purposeful engagement might inform positive social change on multiple levels.

#### **Individual Level**

At the individual level, this study demonstrated how successful reintegration was experienced by participants as an ongoing process of self-reclamation rather than a singular achievement. Participants described shifts in mindset, increased accountability, spiritual alignment, emotional healing, and purpose-driven engagement as central to sustaining resilience. These findings might have implications for counselors, educators, and reentry practitioners by emphasizing interventions that support identity development, self-reflection, and meaning-making rather than focusing solely on behavioral compliance or risk reduction.

For individuals currently navigating reintegration, this study's results provided narrative representations of possibilities that could potentially foster hope and counter the dominant deficit-based portrayals of formerly incarcerated Black men. While not prescriptive, the findings indicated that fostering agency, purpose, and self-understanding might support individuals' sense of dignity and long-term stability.

**Family Level**

At the family level, participants' narratives revealed how reintegration was deeply relational. Many described rebuilding trust, reclaiming fatherhood, and addressing the emotional consequences of absence. These findings may be used to support family-centered counseling approaches that acknowledge the intergenerational impact of incarceration while validating the vulnerability involved in relational repair.

The study's findings also suggested that when Black men engaged in reflective self-work and emotional growth, families might experience renewed connection and stability. Although the study results did not measure family outcomes, my analysis of participants' stories indicated that supportive family relationships can both motivate and sustain reintegration efforts.

**Organizational Level**

At the organizational level, findings might have implications for reentry programs, counseling agencies, and faith-based or community organizations by underscoring the importance of respectful, affirming, and non-surveillant engagement. Participants described experiences with systems ranging from empowering to demeaning, which indicated that the organizational climate was associated with differences in reintegration experiences.

Organizations serving formerly incarcerated individuals might benefit from integrating trauma-informed, culturally responsive practices that honor lived experience, support autonomy, and reduce stigma. While I did not evaluate specific programs, the

narratives indicated that environments emphasizing trust, purpose, and personal growth may better support sustained reintegration.

### **Societal and Policy Level**

At the societal and policy level, this study adds qualitative depth to ongoing conversations about mass incarceration and reintegration by centering the voices of Black men who have successfully navigated systemic barriers. While the findings did not directly challenge existing policy outcomes; however, they provided insight into how structural conditions intersected with personal meaning-making.

These insights might support policymakers, educators, and advocates in reconsidering deficit-based frameworks that portray formerly incarcerated Black men as inherently high-risk. Instead, the findings suggested that policies and public narratives that recognize capacity, growth, and purpose may be better aligned with lived experiences of successful reintegration. Importantly, these implications remain interpretive and exploratory rather than evaluative or causal.

In summary, across all levels, the potential for positive social change associated with this study lies in shifting understanding rather than prescribing solutions. By illuminating how Black men experience reintegration as a process of becoming, shaped by identity, relationships, faith, and purpose, this study has meaningful implications for counseling practice, reentry discourse, and social understanding without exceeding its methodological boundaries.

### **Methodological Implications**

This study provided evidence of the methodological value of hermeneutic phenomenology for examining reintegration among Black males who have successfully reintegrated after incarceration. By prioritizing meaning-making, interpretation, and context, this approach facilitated my examination of what participants experienced, as well as how they understood and lived those experiences over time.

The findings indicated that reintegration was best examined as a process rather than a discrete outcome, reinforcing the suitability of longitudinally informed or retrospective qualitative designs. My analysis indicated the importance of engaging participants who are beyond the immediate reentry period, as deeper reflection, identity reconstruction, and purpose formation often emerged after a prolonged time in the community.

Additionally, the findings illustrated the usefulness of combining hermeneutic phenomenology with a secondary CRT lens, which could enable researchers to honor individual lived experiences while situating them within structural and racialized contexts. These methodological considerations could support future qualitative studies that integrate interpretive phenomenology with critical frameworks to avoid decontextualizing lived experience.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Theoretically, this study contributed to hermeneutic phenomenology by illustrating how concepts such as Dasein, thrownness, situatedness, fore-conceptions, and the hermeneutic circle were lived and negotiated by Black men during reintegration.

Participants' narratives demonstrated how meaning evolved through ongoing engagement with their social worlds, past incarceration, and future possibilities; this interpretation aligned with Heidegger's view of understanding as dynamic and relational.

The findings could add nuance to CRT by showing that while structural racism remains embedded in the criminal justice system, participants' experiences of racism during reintegration were not uniform. Some participants reported ongoing surveillance and discrimination, while others experienced racism as muted or less salient due to the buffer of being in a diverse community. This complexity contributed to CRT by highlighting how race operates structurally and situationally, rather than as a monolithic or constant experience.

For the counseling field, the findings challenge deficit-based reintegration models and support theoretical frameworks that center on resilience, purpose, meaning, and identity reconstruction. Participants interpreted reintegration not as compliance with social expectations, but as an existential process of becoming.

### **Empirical Implications**

Empirically, this study added to a limited body of research focused on successful reintegration rather than recidivism or failure. The findings were consistent with existing literature on barriers such as surveillance, stigma, and systemic inequities, while adding to existing knowledge by documenting how Black men actively sustained resilience through faith, education, entrepreneurship, mentorship, emotional healing, and purposeful engagement.

The study added to empirical knowledge by illustrating that emotional restriction that participants learned during incarceration could function as both a protective strategy and a relational challenge post-release, requiring intentional relearning of vulnerability. This finding provided additional depth to prior research that has primarily framed emotional suppression as maladaptive. Furthermore, the findings empirically supported calls in the literature to examine heterogeneous reintegration experiences and demonstrated that success was not defined solely by employment or housing stability, but by internal shifts in self-concept, accountability, and purpose.

### **Conclusion**

The central finding of this study was that successful reintegration for Black men post-incarceration was not a singular outcome but rather it was a lived, evolving process of becoming one, shaped simultaneously by structural constraints, personal agency, and meaning making over time. Participants' narratives indicated that reintegration was experienced as a continuous negotiation between the enduring effects of incarceration and the intentional reconstruction of identity, spiritual alignment, purpose, and relational life.

Through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, the findings illustrated how Black men experience reintegration as an embodied and situated journey in which mindset shifts, emotional healing was sustained, faith was strengthened, and purposeful engagement operated not as an isolated factor but as interwoven responses to incarceration-shaped realities. Participants described emotional suppression as resulting from incarceration, identity disruption, and adaptive forms of masculinity necessary for

survival. However, successful reintegration was marked by the capacity to reflect upon, reinterpret, and selectively release these adaptations to reintegrate with family, community, and selfhood with greater intentionality.

Viewed through the secondary lens of CRT, the findings further indicated that participants' success occurred not in the absence of structural racism, but in conscious awareness of it. Structural inequities in employment, surveillance, and social perception remained present. Nevertheless, participants described developing strategic foresight, resilience, and accountability, which allowed them to navigate these systems without internalizing deficit-based narratives. Notably, some participants' experiences within diverse communities complicated monolithic portrayals of racism and illustrated how context and relational environments shaped the salience and effect of racialized stressors during reintegration.

Ultimately, this study contributed to existing literature by centering Black men's voices of success by reframing reintegration away from risk-reduction models toward meaning-centered, relational, and identity-restorative processes. My interpretation of the findings suggested that sustainable reintegration was less about compliance or service use alone and more about the reclamation of identity, dignity, agency, and purpose within, and despite, structurally constrained systems. For the counseling field, these insights highlighted the importance of culturally responsive, strength-based approaches that honor lived experience, support emotional healing, and recognize reintegration as an ongoing process of becoming rather than a fixed endpoint.

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## Appendix A: Data Collection Interview Protocol and Questions

### **Interview Protocol**

Hello, my name is Ashley Smith and I want to thank you for taking the time to participate in this research study. I am currently a doctoral student at Walden University enrolled in the Counselor Education and Supervision Program (CES). My dissertation focuses on the lived experiences of Black males who have successfully reintegrated into society post-incarceration. I want to reiterate that you can terminate your involvement in this interview at any time, and I also want to remind you that this interview is being recorded on a separate device. The interview is planned to run for about an hour, and I would like to follow up with you once I have had the opportunity to analyze and process our conversation for further clarification. My goal is to make this conversation comfortable, but I do have some prepared questions to guide the conversation. Do you have any questions before we get started? Are you ready to start?

### **Interview Questions/Guide**

#### **Overall Experience Reintegrating into Society**

1. Describe for me your overall experience reintegrating back into society.
2. Describe your experiences of success since reintegrating.
3. Describe your experiences working with any mental health providers, health providers, probation/parole officers, and/or organizations while reintegrating into society.

4. Tell me about your experiences related to what has helped overcome any challenges experienced while reintegrating.

**Race, Racism, and Race-Specific Social Stressors Effects on Reintegration**

5. Describe any experiences of discrimination since reintegration began.
6. Tell me about your experiences of race-specific social stressors and racism while incarcerated.
7. Tell me about your experience of any race-specific social stressors and/or racism while reintegrating back into society.
8. How did the experiences of race and racism affect your ability to reintegrate successfully?

**Growth after incarceration**

9. What areas in your life have you experienced growth since reintegrating?
10. Describe your experience of emotionally and mentally detaching while incarcerated and your current emotional and mental attachment to others.
11. Describe your current relationships with family, friends, and loved ones.

**Final Question**

12. Is there anything else you would like to add to the questions you have already answered?

## Appendix B: Research Flyer

## UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BLACK MALES SUCCESSFULLY REINTEGRATING POST INCARCERATION

- Seeking Black Males
- Must be 18 or older
- Must be released from prison or jail for one year or longer



To confidentially participate in the study, scan the QR code to complete the questionnaire to verify that you meet the above criteria.



STUDY PARTICIPANTS WILL BE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN A CONFIDENTIAL ZOOM INTERVIEW (AUDIO-RECORDED ON A SEPARATE DEVICE) TO SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES RELATED TO SUCCESSFULLY REINTEGRATING POST-INCARCERATION



**To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you.**

THIS INTERVIEW IS PART OF THE DOCTORAL STUDY FOR ASHLEY SMITH, A PH.D. STUDENT AT WALDEN UNIVERSITY.

Walden University approval number for this study is 05-07-24-1008875