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## Exploring School Administrators' Perceptions of Zero Tolerance Policies for African American Female Students

Keysha D. Knight  
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# Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Keysha D. Knight

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

Abstract

Exploring School Administrators' Perceptions of Zero Tolerance Policies for African

American Female Students

by

Keysha D. Knight

MPhil, Walden University, 2024

MLER, Rutgers University, 2021

BS, Rutgers University, 2019

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

May 2026

## Abstract

Zero tolerance policies disproportionately affect African American female students and contribute to their accelerated entry into the school-to-prison pipeline. Existing literature indicated that these policies subject African American female students to harsher disciplinary practices and that their behaviors were often misunderstood by school administrators. However, there is limited research on how school administrators' discretionary implementation of zero-tolerance policies contributes to these disparities. The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore how school administrators interpret and exercise discretion when implementing zero tolerance policies affecting African American female students through the lens of Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory. Four themes were identified, which were: constrained discretion under policy mandates, discretion as situational judgment, organizational culture and policy implementation, and racial disparities in enforcement. Findings indicated that zero tolerance policies exacerbated racial and gender inequities by restricting discretion in state-mandated situations while allowing flexibility in nonmandated cases. Administrators' discretionary decision-making influenced disciplinary outcomes for African American female students. The implications for positive social change include promoting changes to administrative practices, such the use of collaborative disciplinary practices such as student involvement in decision-making, stakeholder dialogue, implicit bias professional development, and restorative justice approaches.

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## Dedication

Since the beginning, immigration has been an affirmation of our success, not a threat to it. People risk everything to reach the United States of America because they believe in our greatness, our fair laws, our good values, our promises, and possibilities. We should not worry when the striving and suffering arrive on our shores; we should worry when they stop coming at all. After all, every American who has ever lived, with the exception of one group, was either an immigrant themselves or a descendant of immigrants.

—John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*

This dissertation is dedicated to my dad, grandparents, and Dr. Bean-Folkes, who are no longer physically with me but are always with me in spirit. I made a promise to complete my degree in their memory. I express thankfulness to God for bequeathing me with the aptitude and wisdom to achieve this level of accomplishment. I would also like to say a special thank you to my mother, Doreather G. Knight; my fiancé, James C. Jennings; my son, Korey J. Knight; his sister, Eyanna Featherston; his brother, Zayon Smith; and my bonus loves, Jade, Briana, Isaiah, and Sydney Jennings for every encouraging word and prayer that was said.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Ensuring discipline in schools is a vital component for providing effective guidance to every student; however, for many African American female students, disciplinary actions frequently become an instrument in policing their conduct (Sevon, 2022). This disparity not only hinders their academic progress but also stresses the urgent necessity to reassess and improve school discipline practices critically. Historically, schools have unjustly relied heavily on punishment measures to enforce discipline as a way to maintain order within their environment and correct misbehavior. School discipline policies have continued to change significantly over time, moving away from harsh punishment and toward more restorative justice practices. The need to change discipline policies and an increasing understanding of the underlying reasons for student misbehavior may all be credited with the shift to restorative justice (Klevan, 2021). As nationwide conversations over school discipline reform surge, particularly around equitable school discipline practices, this study looked at how school administrators perceived zero tolerance policies and the disproportionate effects they had on African American female students (Sevon, 2022).

In society today, where zero tolerance policies were designed to facilitate safety and order within schools, the implementation of these policies signaled a disturbing conflict that undermined the voices of school administrators, as well as stifled the future of African American female students. However, these policies were extended to include minor discipline issues, which often resulted in severe consequences, including referrals to the juvenile justice system, expulsions, and suspensions (Henry et al., 2021). A large

portion of previous research suggested that these punitive actions had a disproportionate effect on African American students, particularly female ones, who tend to have received much harsher disciplinary actions than their peers for similar misconduct (Welsh & Rodriguez, 2024). These disparities have led to significant questions concerning equity, the existence of implicit bias, along with the wider societal impacts of exclusionary disciplinary measures, such as zero tolerance policies (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022; Hu & Hancock, 2024).

Zero tolerance policies have been prevalent since the early 1980s and late 1990s, and have led to the increased misuse of suspension for insignificant infractions for African American students, particularly female ones (Strickland, 2022). Modern discipline strategies prioritize restorative justice programs in order to reduce disparities and address the causes of student misbehavior (Cruz et al., 2021). This study explored the perceptions of school administrators with regard to zero tolerance policies and their effects on African American female students. To do this, a thorough examination of how school administrators exercised their discretion was necessary, with a focus on how they interpreted and made decisions when implementing discipline policies. Moreover, this study had a firm foundation in the restorative justice practice framework, presenting an alternative to zero tolerance practices (Uzzell, 2025). Uzzell (2025) argues that restorative justice approaches are considerably more effective than rigid exclusionary disciplinary practices such as zero tolerance policies because higher priority is placed on accountability, rehabilitation, and create meaningful connections with peers and school administration. This framework, adopted by schools over the years, promotes equity,

drives policy reform, and creates a more inclusive and supportive environment for African American female students.

According to the New Jersey Department of Education's annual report for the 2023–2024 school year, 9.0% of African American students received at least one suspension, the highest percentage of any group. Nevertheless, disciplinary actions pursuant to zero tolerance policies unfairly impacted African American female students for several reasons, including implicit biases exhibited by school administrators, inconsistencies in the application of zero tolerance policies, and complexities of intersectionality that affects these students. In addition, the school-to-prison pipeline is frequently associated with the enforcement of zero tolerance policies, which signifies a trend where students, specifically African Americans, find themselves going into the juvenile justice system due to disciplinary problems that arise within the school environment (Morgan, 2021).

The findings of the research conducted by Strickland (2022) reveals a troubling reality: that zero tolerance policies repeatedly result in disproportionately harsher form of discipline being administered to African American female students in comparison to other races and genders. Additionally, Lightfoot (2021) examined research related to the consequences of zero tolerance policies, which emphasizes the importance of a more thorough exploration of their impact on African American students, particularly female ones. In addition, Allen and Hilliard (2021) stated that African American female students continually face challenges unique to them and not fully understood by educational leaders, which leads to misinterpretations of their behavior and increases the risk of

severe disciplinary measures. The gap in the literature was that most research on zero tolerance policies focuses on African American male students. However, it often overlooks the way in which school administrators perceive and manage zero tolerance policies, which may greatly impact their implementation. One can observe how attitudes about policies influence school reforms and how perceptions of policies drive changes within schools, as well as promote equity. Understanding the methods by which school administrators implement these policies may help explain why African American female students are disciplined more severely and may foster a more supportive environment for them.

In the current research, I used Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory to explore the lived experiences of school administrators implementing zero tolerance policies toward African American female students. The use of Lipsky's theory enabled a thorough examination of school administrators' lived experience related to the implementation of such policies. By virtue of their frequent interactions with students, especially African American female students, frontline public service workers such as school administrators have a significant impact on policy outcomes, according to the street-level bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 2010). Analyzing the daily disciplinary practices of school administrators through the perspective of street-level bureaucracy theory indicates that those in these positions have a significant impact on policy execution and can serve as drivers for positive social change. Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory illustrates the manner in which frontline workers in public service comprehend zero tolerance policies and work in tandem with building stakeholder relationships, which

profoundly impacts the experiences of African American female students. This aligns with Walden University's (2025a) mission to empower diverse career professionals to develop as scholar-practitioners and promote social change in their communities.

Investigating the perceptions of school administrators in this study revealed possible pathways for reforming school discipline policies. The application of Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory to this research improved knowledge of how zero tolerance policies continue to evolve in schools and how these policies affect African American students, particularly females.

This chapter begins with background information regarding school discipline policies, such as zero tolerance policies, and school administrators' experiences implementing these policies, particularly on African American female students in public schools. I define zero tolerance policies as well as their historical background, discussing their implementation in schools. Additionally, this chapter includes a summary of the existing research literature regarding zero tolerance policies and their effects on African American female students. Moreover, I identify the gap in the literature as it relates to this topic. This chapter also includes the research problem, the study's purpose, and the research questions (RQs). The theoretical framework, Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory, is outlined. I also describe the nature of the study, specifically the general qualitative study design I followed (see Yadav, 2021). The chapter concludes with definitions of key terms and a discussion of the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of this research, before moving on to Chapter 2.

## **Background**

Schools with zero tolerance policies typically enforce harsh, predetermined consequences for unacceptable misconduct, disproportionately affecting African American female students. Over recent years, these policies have encountered considerable criticism due to their extreme disciplinary measures and troubling ethical implications (United States Government Accountability Office, 2024; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). Research conducted by Hassan and Carter (2021) confirms that zero tolerance policies constantly result in higher rates of suspension for African American female students. The findings of this study highlighted substantial issues at the intersection of race and gender in the disciplinary measures adopted by school administrators for these students. Even while zero tolerance policies are important, a better knowledge of their effects influenced the creation of alternate methods of school discipline, especially for African American female students (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2022).

An additional study by Henry et al. (2021) featured the significance of school administrators who enforced these policies; however, there was a notable lack of qualitative research examining their views and biases (see also Strickland, 2022). Most prior research has focused on quantitative analysis and overlooked the beliefs of school administrators that may have led to biased disciplinary actions. While these approaches focused on the scope of discipline disparities, they often missed background information about the fundamental beliefs, viewpoints, and biases of school administrators (Sabol et al., 2021). Performing qualitative studies that addressed this gap in the literature may

have generated profound insights into the mindsets and internal factors that led to disproportionate disciplinary actions against female African American students. A review of the origins of zero tolerance policies revealed a historical context tied to rising school violence in the 1980s and 1990s, and formalized by legislation such as the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (Muñiz, 2021; Johnson & Johnson, 2023). Additional concerns that were identified concentrated on the adverse effects of zero tolerance policies, especially their inequitable impact on African American students (Henry et al., 2021). The findings highlighted the importance of reevaluating zero tolerance policies and researching restorative justice practices as a viable alternative (Karaxha et al., 2021). Despite the significance of understanding school administrators' perspectives when implementing zero tolerance policies, school administrators faced disapproval for their lack of discretion, sweeping application, and damaging effects on African American female students due to their historical background (Peterson, 2021).

Currently, there is a movement among some school districts to reconsider these policies by exploring restorative justice practices, emphasizing support over punishment (Karaxha et al., 2021; Klevan, 2021). Although calls for more inclusive and impartial disciplinary strategies continue to be made, further research is fundamental to learn the effects of zero tolerance policies on African American female students and to promote equitable remedies within schools (United States Department of Education, 2023). This study explored school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies for African American female students and was needed to contribute new knowledge to the existing literature on this topic. Therefore, the knowledge gained may help to guide further

training for school administrators, reshape the development of disciplinary policies, and stimulate a school environment that promoted alternative approaches to discipline. As a result, this study may also stimulate transformative social change by prompting stakeholders to reconsider and change current policies as well as practices to support all students more effectively, particularly those who are most severely affected. Since school administrators are crucial to the implementation of zero tolerance policies, their perspectives are critically important to this study. Their viewpoints may have aid in describing the complicated discipline-related decision-making techniques, which make them essential for comprehending successful execution.

### **Problem Statement**

The research problem arose from the inadequate understanding of how zero tolerance policies were most often applied toward African American female students, negatively impacting academic performance and contributing to increased dropout rates among this group (Hassan & Carter, 2021; Henry et al., 2021). Even with existing discipline reforms aimed at reducing disparities, the problem of insufficient knowledge of how zero tolerance policies are disproportionately applied to female African American students continues, since these reforms often disregard the role of discretionary decision-making by school administrators. School administrators have considerable influence over discipline measures, and their personal perceptions may form the way these policies are put into practice. Not having a lucid understanding of these discretionary choices and foundational biases, disparities may continue to exist, as school administrators may unintentionally carry on promoting inequities even within reform efforts. This

intersection demonstrates the necessity for initiatives to reform to take into account not only policies but also the intricate decision-making processes of school administrators in order to encourage proportional discipline practices efficiently. Outcomes from research on zero tolerance policies display several major themes and implications, including that African American students are disproportionately impacted by these policies (Ford, 2021).

Additionally, gender disparities among African American students, since they are often subjected to harsher punishments compared to African American males and other racial groups, may contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (Sevon, 2022). Moreover, there is a need for alternative approaches, such as restorative practices, as a substitute to zero tolerance disciplinary measures (Klevan, 2021). Findings highlight the importance of training for school administrators on implicit bias, cultural competency, and alternatives to disciplinary practices in order to promote equity in school discipline (Scott, 2021). Despite the necessity of closely analyzing the disproportionate use of zero tolerance policies by African American female students, it is imperative to give these policies and the processes that go along with them careful consideration.

A report from the National Black Women's Justice Institute in 2024 revealed that kindergarten through Grade 12 African American female students accounted for over triple the rate of their share in school transfers, and more than doubled their share in expulsions (Williams, 2024). A recent report from the United States Government Accountability Office (2024) has backed this data, identifying that African American female students represented nearly half of all exclusionary discipline cases in recent

years. Also, Peterson (2021) identified other areas of concern, which include racial disparities in discipline procedures for students (e.g., African Americans and European Americans). This implies that the discretion of school administrators heavily influences the choice of appropriate discipline measures. African American female students are often barred from being involved in the learning process as a punishment for their disciplinary infractions, all of which may have a damaging effect and drastically increase the prospects of becoming entangled in the school-to-prison pipeline (Sorensen et al., 2023). The findings indicate that, across every individual state in the United States, African American female students experience disciplinary actions at elevated rates (United States Government Accountability Office, 2024), stressing how public policy systems repeatedly influence or neglect to address these ongoing inequalities. Despite the significance of many different reform initiatives, current policies may fall short in dealing with the fundamental biases and discretionary choices that lead to this disparity.

The problem of unequal implementation of zero tolerance policies affecting African American female students is continuous from previous investigations conducted over the last 5 years, which identified a pattern centered on racial and gender inequities in the application of zero tolerance policies, establishing their disproportionate, detrimental impacts on African American female students (Butler-Barnes et al., 2022). The results from these previous studies reiterate persistent systemic biases in disciplinary practices and emphasize an urgent need for sustained attention to confronting race and gender disparities in school discipline. Research from earlier years has consistently shown that African American female students contend with much more severe disciplinary methods

compared to students of other races, as well as their male counterparts (Strickland, 2022). Also, studies from 2021 to 2025 reaffirmed models of biased administration of discipline policies, which replicate findings from previous years that stressed many inequalities (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). More recent studies have progressively highlighted the intersectionality of race and gender, investigating how African American female students encountered distinctive challenges in schools (Butler-Barnes et al., 2022). The intersectionality of race and gender is built upon prior research by pointing out how stereotypes by society influenced the disciplinary treatment of African American female students and expresses the need for an understanding of their experiences (Strickland, 2022).

Another problem of disproportionate zero tolerance policies affecting African American female students is again covered by previous research findings from 2021 to 2025, changing student behavior, frameworks for accountability, and advocacy for policy reforms (United States Department of Education, 2023). This research focused on changing perceptions of student behavior, implying that schools were starting to embrace more advantageous options for exclusionary discipline practices (Welsh & Rodriguez, 2024). Doing so contrasts with past studies that considered zero tolerance equivalent to punishing without considering other discipline alternatives (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). One of the options schools have adopted is changing their discipline practices in response to earlier criticisms (Perera et al., 2023). Changing discipline practices challenged previous studies, which suggested that these disciplinary disparities were deeply entrenched (Perera et al., 2023). The successful administration of policy reforms such as

zero tolerance policies between 2021 and 2025 indicated an important transition in schools (Welsh, 2024). This indicated that they were moving away from the traditional zero tolerance policies and were adopting training for school administrators focused on equity and restorative justice practices (Davison et al., 2022). This paradigm shift reflects substantial progress in addressing the critical issues identified in earlier research. The findings highlighted that research conducted during this period reinforced the ongoing difficulties that African American female students contend with under zero tolerance policies while also drawing attention to emerging trends and potential reforms aimed at reducing these disparities (Sevon, 2022). Still, examining studies from 2021 to 2025 was crucial, as they spotlighted key results and perspectives related to this important social problem.

The recently published body of literature provided an immense void, concentrating on the pressing necessity for additional investigation into the unequal effects of zero tolerance policies on African American female students. Hassan and Carter (2021), as well as Henry et al. (2021), systematically displayed the significant position of exploring the viewpoints of educational staff on policy implementation, particularly in relation to their crucial role in fostering equitable treatment. Nevertheless, earlier studies primarily focused on African American males or provided broad staff perspectives, leaving a prominent gap in understanding how school administrators specifically perceived and influenced disciplinary practices affecting African American female students. By applying Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory, I was able to explore these school administrators' perceptions, thereby offering important

discoveries into the decision-making processes that may continue or reduce inequalities, fill an essential gap in the literature, and sought to advance systemic equity. In addition, previous research conducted by Green (2021) signified that the suspension rates among African American female students remain disproportionately high, as well as sometimes conclude with referrals to the juvenile justice system. When compared to their European American counterparts, this occurrence was remarkably consistent with the school-to-prison pipeline, revealing significant distinctions in discipline practices (Sevon, 2022). Additionally, Henry et al. (2021) noted that as African American students are disproportionately impacted by school discipline, additional research was needed to explore how zero tolerance policies were perceived, experienced, and addressed. By recognizing the value of taking into account the perspectives and lived experiences of school administrators who enforce zero tolerance policies, utilizing Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory, the request for more research will need to be fulfilled.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The qualitative paradigm of this study was specifically dependent upon different viewpoints and individual experiences of school administrators. This study aimed to comprehensively examine how school administrators perceived and put into effect zero tolerance policies, exclusively in relation to African American female students. To obtain detailed, descriptive data that clarified the fundamental assumptions, biases, and decisions affecting disciplinary procedures, I conducted semistructured interviews and engaged in reflective analysis. Interviews were the best way to understand how school administrators made decisions since they provided direct insights into their thoughts,

beliefs, and reasons for their choices. Utilizing this approach allowed an exploration of the complex perspectives that quantitative methods often miss (Tenny et al., 2022). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore public school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies as well as their impact on African American female students. While extensive research has spotlighted the disproportionate effects of zero tolerance policies on African American students, particularly males, the experiences of African American female students remain an overlooked area, often obscured by more overall conversations on gender and race (Ford, 2021). The study's ultimate purpose was to gain a more precise understanding of how school administrators perceived and implemented discipline, which may inform future policy changes, leadership development, and advocacy initiatives aimed at better supporting African American female students (United States Department of Education, 2023).

### **Research Questions**

The RQs related to the unique processes and factors that shaped the discretionary decisions made by school administrators, examining their decision-making and the potential effects of these choices on the students they were responsible for. The RQs were as follows:

RQ1: How do school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students?

RQ2: What organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators' discretionary decisions regarding the implementation of zero tolerance policies for African American female students?

### **Theoretical Framework**

I employed Lipsky's (2010) theory of street-level bureaucracy as a theoretical framework to critically examine the roles and functions of street-level bureaucrats in the implementation of policy. Lipsky's theory offered an effective framework for comprehending how frontline workers, including school administrators, exerted discretion while administering policies. Lipsky, who developed this theory in the 1980s, maintained that because these individuals exercised judgment based on their own beliefs, they frequently acted as decision-makers. I employed Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy to understand how school administrators, as frontline implementers of zero tolerance policies, exercised discretion in their interactions with African American female students. These street-level bureaucrats, including school administrators, are commonly regarded as the representatives of the government (Lipsky, 2010). The theory suggests that street-level bureaucrats possess a sizable amount of discretion while conducting daily operations. These propositions are explored in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Due to limited resources and high demands, these street-level bureaucrats are required to make instantaneous decisions that may conflict with established policies (Lipsky, 2010). According to Lipsky (2010), this discretion influences street-level bureaucrats' rate of service as well as the outcomes for the citizens they assist. Moreover,

street-level bureaucrats' decisions play a critical role in translating policy preferences into practice, which may lead to varying interpretations of how policies are implemented based on individual perspectives and personal experiences. In addition, Lipsky highlighted that street-level bureaucrats faced many challenges, such as dealing with inconsistent demands from higher-level supervisors, restricted resources, and the necessity to offset the goals of the supervisors with those they served. As a result, the actions of these street-level bureaucrats may have seriously affected policy effectiveness and perceptions of government services (Lipsky, 2010). Lipsky's theory fundamentally asserted that street-level bureaucrats transcended the position of ineffectual policy implementers who may vigorously influenced and shape policy outcomes through their engagements with the citizens they served. This perspective stressed the critical function of street-level bureaucrats with regard to the implementation process, illustrating their power to affect public policy's effectiveness when applied in practical situations.

### **Nature of the Study**

The rationale for this general qualitative study was to explore how school administrators perceived zero tolerance policies concerning African American female students and their discretionary decision-making (Tisdell et al., 2025). A qualitative research design aimed to understand human experiences through in-depth exploration and interpretation instead of relying on numerical measurement (Tenny et al., 2022). In this study, I investigated the phenomenon of how school administrators selectively applied zero tolerance policies toward African American female students in the realm of school discipline (Sevon, 2022). Although zero tolerance policies were designed to promote

consistency, school administrators had a certain level of discretion in how they interpreted and enforced these policies. Moreover, school administrators in this study conveyed concerns that harsh discipline measures did not address the underlying causes of behavior-related problems and instead created a negative school environment where impacted students felt marginalized and ostracized. African American female students' academic performance may have suffered as a result of this cycle of exclusion, which casts doubt on the efficacy and equity of zero tolerance policies (Ford, 2021).

The phenomenon that was investigated in this general qualitative design study was the school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies, the role of discretion by school administrators in policy application on African American female students, and the organizational, cultural, and system factors that impacted their decisions (Tisdell et al., 2025). This exploration delved deep into how school administrators used discretion to interpret and execute these policies. Through an examination of the lived experiences and viewpoints of these school administrators, the study aimed to shed light on the complex discretionary problem surrounding punishment procedures that disproportionately impacted African American female students. Also, this investigation aimed to illustrate the interplays between how zero tolerance policies tended to aggravate racial disparities in disciplinary measures further, increased suspension rates, and played a significant part in the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon, shedding light on potential areas for reform and advocating for more equitable disciplinary practices within schools.

The methodology for this study employed a general qualitative design, with a flexible, open-ended approach by collecting and analyzing data through semistructured interviews. This general qualitative design focused on understanding the "why" and "how" of the lived experiences of the school administrators to capture their unique perspectives. In addition, this methodology encompassed the reasoning for participant selection, the instrumentation, recruitment procedures, the data collection methods, and a plan for data analysis. The selection of the study's participants entailed the use of purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2024). I recruited participants for semistructured interviews, beginning with creating a flyer that included relevant information about the study, along with my contact details to distribute to a professional association for school administrators. Reaching out to this professional association as a recruitment avenue enabled me to engage with current members of the school community through a centralized and reliable organization. As a result, school administrators whose work responsibilities and lived experiences were closely related to the topic of my study were directly accessible.

After identifying and vetting five to 12 participants, I conducted semistructured online interviews to collect the data. When further data gathering from in-depth interviews stopped revealing new information on the perceptions of the school administrators, saturation was reached (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The six-phase thematic analysis process was meticulously guided by the rich frameworks established by Braun and Clarke (2021). Incorporating the groundbreaking coding strategies identified by Saldana (2021) allowed a comprehensive interpretation of the collected data, allowing for

a complete exploration of the phenomenon. Furthermore, journal notes were maintained throughout the study to document reflexivity and ensure that all perspectives were thoughtfully considered in the analysis.

### **Definitions**

*Cultural competency in education policy:* The practice of critically reflecting on one's cognitive and behavioral methods, understanding their impact on others, and adjusting actions to effectively engage with diverse student populations (Eden et al., 2024).

*Discipline bias:* The inconsistent application of disciplinary measures across various student demographics, particularly when incorporating factors such as race and ethnicity, which undermines equity and fairness (Abrams, 2021).

*Disproportionality:* The disproportionate number of children of color facing disciplinary actions, suspensions, and expulsions relative to the overall child population (Cruz et al., 2021).

*Ethical discretion:* The power of an individual to make decisions informed by personal judgment and conscience, guided by ethical principles and moral considerations, while also recognizing the constraints imposed by the law (Williams et al., 2023).

*Expulsion:* The long-term removal from school, typically lasting more than 10 days (New Jersey Administrative Code, 2025).

*Implicit bias:* The preconceived notions that influence comprehension, behavior, and choices in a subtle manner (Shah & Bohlen, 2023).

*Restorative justice:* The alternative method to conventional disciplinary actions emphasizes encouraging dialogue among those involved and fostering accountability instead of resorting to punishment (Uzzell, 2025).

*School-to-prison pipeline:* The policies and oftentimes practices that disproportionately funnel students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, from schools into the juvenile justice system (Berry, 2024).

*Suspension:* A short-term exclusion from school lasting less than 10 days (New Jersey Administrative Code, 2025).

*Zero tolerance policies:* The disciplinary methods that impose predetermined punishments, usually suspension or expulsion, for specific infractions, whether or not the behavior is severe or there are other mitigating circumstances (Johnson & Johnson, 2023).

### **Assumptions**

I had three primary assumptions when conducting this study. According to Khoa et al. (2023), assumptions are fundamental ideas that serve as underlying premises and are not testable. These assumptions were expressed clearly and did not constitute the study's substantiated facts. The three assumptions pertained to the influence of biases held by school administrators, limitations in available resources, and the degree of flexibility they possessed in executing policies (Frisch Aviram et al., 2021). The first assumption implied that school administrators, as street-level bureaucrats, had considerable discretion, and personal biases may have influenced decisions regarding the discipline of African American female students under zero tolerance policies (de Boer &

Raaphorst, 2021). The rationale for the first assumption is that school administrators, who served both as frontline workers and decision-makers, possessed a unique level of discretion. This interplay of discretion when implementing zero tolerance policies, along with the documented disparities in school discipline as it relates to race and gender, may have constructed an environment where personal biases could have impacted discipline outcomes. Therefore, addressing these biases and how they may have affected their decision-making is vital.

The second assumption contended that school administrators may have encountered limitations in available resources, which could have significantly impacted decision-making and overall effectiveness in their schools (Cohen & Aviram, 2021). The rationale for the second assumption was that school administrators may have faced limitations in available resources, which could have significantly influenced their decision-making. Public schools often function on limited budgets, which may have affected their ability to fund essential resources such as adequate staffing and to provide the necessary support for students exhibiting behavior issues, as well as intervention programs that address these issues. Resource constraints were an essential factor that school administrators must consider, as they influence decisions and the overall effectiveness of the school in fulfilling its mission.

The third assumption addressed street-level bureaucrats' flexibility as it related to the creation of policies, particularly their discretion in interpreting and administering policies at the basic level (Frisch Aviram et al., 2021). The rationale for the third assumption is that it is established on the presumption that school administrators were

flexible in developing and implementing zero tolerance policies due to their discretion in interpreting and administering these policies. This flexibility was due to their role as street-level bureaucrats in which they had direct interaction with students, particularly African American female students. School administrators faced unique challenges that required them to use judgment and adapt policies to suit specific situations. Their decisions may have greatly affected the school climate and student outcomes through the execution of zero tolerance policies. All of these assumptions were essential to guarantee the effectiveness of this study.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this research was limited to public school administrators due to their experience in handling discipline, including suspensions and expulsions, that involved African American female students. A key delimitation of this study was that it exclusively examined public school administrators. Also, this study specifically looked into African American female students who had been disciplined under zero tolerance policies. This delimitation is significant for the reason that it is confined to exploring only one rationale for discipline. Finally, the study concentrated solely on zero tolerance policies without considering other disciplinary approaches. Zero tolerance policies were often associated with the rapid entry of students into the school-to-prison pipeline (Henry et al., 2021). Therefore, it was vital to examine the implications these policies had on both school administrators as well as their related consequences on African American female students. The specific aspects of the research problem concentrated on the

consequences of zero tolerance policies on female African American students, which highlighted an essential concern given the critical intersection of race and gender.

The first specific aspect of the research problem was to understand the way in which biases contributed to the administration of zero tolerance policies. The second aspect was the emotional impact of zero tolerance policies on African American female students. The last aspect highlighted an underexplored area in current literature regarding zero tolerance policies, especially concerning African American female students, who were disproportionately disciplined, as well as the interplay of race and gender. Although existing studies had explored discipline disparities across different student groups, the distinctive circumstances of African American female students remain largely unexamined (United States Government Accountability Office, 2024). This study emphasized the distinct challenges African American female students faced in school. Moreover, recognizing these peculiar challenges may have made it less difficult to implement the necessary reform policy that promoted a more supportive learning environment, including initiatives for restorative justice programs.

The initial boundaries of this study focused on the primary population of interest, school administrators, which included principals, vice principals, and deans. The excluded populations in this study primarily consisted of students, teachers, support staff, paraprofessionals, parents or guardians, and community members. While these groups were not part of the school administrator category, they may have been directly or indirectly affected by zero tolerance policies. Additionally, security personnel and resource officers involved in discipline determinations are also excluded from the study

since the focus was expressly on school administrators. The subsequent boundaries of the study specifically targeted African American female students, who were the focus of the zero tolerance policies under examination.

Also, this study focused on discipline policies in public schools, mainly zero tolerance policies that served the general population. Public schools were the focus because they are governed by standardized policies such as zero tolerance policies, which made it easier to analyze systemic issues related to discipline, race, and gender disparities on a more expansive scale. On the other hand, private schools are excluded because they operate under a different set of discipline policies, which may allow them more autonomy in setting policies and may have a distinct demographic makeup. Moreover, private schools may implement disciplinary practices that differ significantly from those in public schools, which may introduce variability that complicates direct comparisons. This study focused on specific school districts that have zero tolerance policies and a significant number of African American female students. Determining the scope of this study helped better comprehend how school administrators perceived the implementation of zero tolerance policies that impacted African American female students.

In addition, this study is limited to African American female students rather than African American male students due to the individual experiences and challenges faced by this population. I acknowledged that gender differences significantly influenced how students interact with zero tolerance policies, social expectations, and educational opportunities. African American female students were often confronted with stereotypes that may have affected discipline actions as well as perceptions held by school

administrators, resulting in excessive consequences compared to their African American male students. This study was limited to concentrating on African American female students, with the aim of enhancing the understanding of the way in which the interplay of gender and race may have impacted the disciplinary experiences, learning achievement, and future educational trajectory tracks for these students. Therefore, this study provided the necessity for specific behavior interventions and changes to policy in order to advance equity in discipline.

Relevant frameworks for this study included Bell's (2021) critical race theory and Lewis and Williams' (2023) Black feminist theory. Critical race theory examines how systemic racism and structural inequalities influence disciplinary practices, and Black feminist theory examines the unique experiences of Black girls and women, acknowledging that their experiences of gender inequality are intertwined with race and other forms of oppression (Bell, 2021; Lewis & Williams, 2023). Furthermore, Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory was a better choice for this study because it emphasized how frontline school administrators interpreted and implemented zero tolerance policies through their daily interactions with African American female students. This theory stressed the discretionary power that school administrators hold and defined how zero tolerance policies were put into practice, which was often influenced by their perceptions or biases. Moreover, this study centered on how school administrators made decisions and the way these decisions affected discipline practices for African American female students.

The study's potential transferability was given careful consideration, which called for a thorough description of the participants as well as the methods involved. Each method allowed the reader to assess the findings' relevance in relation to the educational setting (Ahmed, 2024). Lincoln and Guba (1985) affirmed that this principle is essential for proving the integrity of the study's findings in order to improve transferability; this study also included a thorough description of the public school under investigation, including its unique demographic details. Additionally, the research conducted enabled the identification of similarities within the study, as well as understanding how these findings may have overlapped or differed. In addition, collecting detailed descriptions of the school administrators' lived experiences and comprehending their perceptions provided awareness of their decision-making processes with regard to the implementation of zero tolerance policies. Details such as these helped other school administrators and policymakers recognize the situation in which these views were formed, facilitating their use in a broader context.

Also, it was imperative to explore how race and gender intersect, primarily as they affected how African American female students were perceived to be disciplined by school administrators. This study's examination of how cultures interacted identified elements that were frequently relevant in different situations, which encouraged school administrators to take into consideration these elements when evaluating their school districts' policies and disciplinary procedures. Exploring these dimensions indicated crucial opportunities for transferability, enabling various educational stakeholders to forge meaningful connections from the information gained. Nevertheless, the results of

this study are not applicable to private schools, where the disciplinary frameworks often vary considerably from those in public schools. Also, the results may not have been applied to schools located in other geographic regions that exhibited specific cultural, policy, or demographic attributes, which affected administrative perceptions and procedures.

### **Limitations**

This study came across several limitations that affected the veracity of its findings; however, the emphasis was on two key limitations. The primary limitation of this study was the small sample size, as it focused exclusively on school administrators with a minimum of 3 years of experience in public schools. These school administrators played a fundamental role in managing the discipline applied to African American female students. Recruitment occurred through a professional educational association, which restricted eligibility to members only. This approach may inadvertently exclude a broader range of perspectives from school administrators who do not engage with this professional educational association.

The second limitation of this study was the potential for bias. Numerous factors may have contributed to these potential biases; however, the key factor was selection bias, in which the participants selected for this study may not have correctly represented the larger population. Other factors that may have contributed to potential bias included how participants were selected and how they understood the data obtained, which affected the veracity of this study. As a result, finding research subjects depended on purposeful sampling, which was designed to properly reflect the variety of perspectives

and the lived experiences of school administrators. Identifying with this most often unrepresented group of school administrators was the goal of this selection process and may have reduced the probability of selection bias. Since this study examined the decision-making for discipline made by school administrators, any underlying biases were acknowledged and addressed ahead of time to understand the research's limitations fully and accurately interpret the findings. Thus, the conclusions that came from this study may not be applied to other school districts that enforce different discipline policies. The findings of this study were not easily applicable to a variety of situations due to differences in school settings, cultures, and discipline policies that had an effect on the school administrators' perspectives. Key elements, such as the geographic location and the demographic characteristics of the school, especially influenced the perceptions and implementations of discipline procedures by school administrators. Also, the dependability of this study's findings was challenged by personal biases inherent in the methods of data collection, the interpretations conducted by the researchers, and variations in participants' responses across different situations. These issues brought to light the significance of documentation transparency and rigor in this study to ensure the credibility of the findings, which may have limited their transferability.

Researcher biases could have significantly influenced the interpretation of data in this study, particularly on such a sensitive topic as exploring school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies for African American female students. Preset concepts by the researcher related to race, gender, and discipline practices may have additionally inadvertently altered how the participants' responses are interpreted, which

may have also affected the study's credibility. Reflectivity is crucial for overcoming biases. It necessitated diligently evaluating and recognizing the perspectives and possible influences of the research participants at each phase. By keeping a reflective journal, employing peer debriefing strategies, and practicing reflexivity, which involves questioning how their viewpoint may have impacted the data collection and analysis, as well as reduced the effects of personal biases. However, complete objectivity was difficult to achieve, and unchecked biases may have subtly influenced findings. Therefore, it was imperative to have transparency and self-awareness within this study in order to establish the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings.

Using peer reviews and member checks greatly improved the reliability and accuracy of this study by confirming that the findings accurately reflected the participants' viewpoints and by decreasing personal biases. I accomplished this by giving participants a summary of the trends that were discovered at the end of the interviews with the school administrators. This provided the participants with an opportunity to verify or dispute their interpretations. Engaging in this practice mitigated the chances of misrepresentation. Also, peer reviews involved sharing the coding techniques, thematic classifications, or analytical methods with a colleague to assess whether they accurately grasped the data critically. These collaborative processes were helpful in uncovering contrasts, which also improved reflexivity to ensure that the conclusions drawn were grounded in the participants' objective viewpoints.

### **Significance**

In this general qualitative design study, I explored school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies on African American female students. This study's significance was rooted in its ability to clarify for stakeholders, such as policymakers, the potential consequences of zero tolerance policies and to draw attention to the complicated facts that school administrators, as street-level bureaucrats, had to deal with while managing these stringent regulations. This study examined how individual lived experiences and policy enforcement interacted in an effort to find important insights that may have led to positive social change in school discipline procedures. Additionally, by shedding light on how street-level bureaucrats viewed their roles and responsibilities as well as the effects of their decision-making processes on African American female students, this study offered a substantial contribution to current debates concerning zero tolerance policies and their need for reform. They were able to perceive and implement disciplinary regulations relevant to everyday situations with significant perspicuity attributable to their lived experiences. This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the complex decision-making processes of street-level bureaucrats, the challenges they encountered when implementing zero tolerance policies, and when interacting with African American female students.

Understanding the experiences of street-level bureaucrats was necessary, as it uncovered the daily challenges they faced when dealing with discipline policies. Information such as this played a vital part in informing future policies that focused on the needs of African American female students. Through the examination of these

perspectives, stakeholders such as policymakers were able to recognize significant challenges, including implicit bias, drawbacks within the school framework, and misconceptions about culture that resulted in disproportionate discipline measures. One proactive approach was to provide professional development training for school administrators to help address implicit bias. An alternative approach was to modify discipline policies to incorporate restorative justice initiatives instead of solely depending on punitive actions. The integration of the perspectives of street-level bureaucrats ultimately guaranteed that interventions had foundations in daily discipline situations. This study had the prospect of advancement in a more thorough knowledge of intersectionality in schools by identifying the way gender and race informed these street-level bureaucrats' viewpoints. In the process of developing policies to improve school discipline and cultivate student equity, it was vital to draw attention to gender and race, which held major significance to all those affiliated with education, offering persuasive suggestions for changes in policy that focused on school discipline.

Even though equitable school discipline policies were fundamental to promoting students' academic achievement and well-being, this study sought to improve equal opportunity for African American female students by addressing inequalities. Creating equitable school discipline policies may have potentially enriched the personal experiences of African American female students in their academic pursuits while also having important implications for society. In the end, addressing structural biases may break the cycle of social exclusion, promoted social justice, created long-lasting societal benefits, as well as improved racial objectiveness, thus fostering positive social change.

## Summary

The study's background, problem statement, purpose, RQs, theoretical framework, and significance have been addressed in this chapter. The implications of zero tolerance policies on female African American students emerged as a critical issue within the educational landscape of the United States (Strickland, 2022). In recent decades, zero tolerance policies were linked to an increased probability of suspension, expulsion, and immediate involvement in the juvenile justice system (Ford, 2021). It was essential to examine the implementation and consequences of zero tolerance policies in schools along with their perceived impact on African American female students. This chapter explored the gap in existing literature regarding how school administrators provide their justification for their discretionary decisions when implementing discipline policies. Such research may have informed public policy by revealing potential weaknesses of zero tolerance approaches, which may have encouraged the development of public policy that enables equity and inclusivity.

For school administrators, the study may further their understanding of their decision-making methods and spotlight areas for reform in order to create a more equitable school environment. Also, I sought to understand the perceptions of school administrators as street-level bureaucrats who enforced zero tolerance policies on African American female students. In this chapter, I outlined the theoretical framework based on Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory, presented the RQs, and described the nature of the study. I investigated the distinctive challenges faced by African American female students and the need for future advocacy in implementing discipline policies that

ensure equity. The chapter concluded with the research's assumptions, delineations, scope, limitations, and significance.

Chapter 2 includes the literature review as it relates to zero tolerance policies and school administrators' discretion by providing a comprehensive overview of the significant themes in existing research. I explore the historical background of zero tolerance policies and their intended purposes, as well as how they came into school discipline policies. The next section of the chapter looks into current issues that surround equity, illustrating the exorbitant impact that zero tolerance policies have had on African American students, especially female students. In the review, I also examine school administrators' roles and decision-making processes as street-level bureaucrats, accenting how their discretion involves policy implementation and student outcomes. These themes mutually establish a primary comprehension of the intricate issues relating to zero tolerance policies and the essential influence of school administrators in determining their impact.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Zero tolerance policies' effects on female African American students have become a significant problem in American schools (Strickland, 2022). The term "zero tolerance" can be traced to the national initiative, the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which made public school financing contingent upon adopting strict zero tolerance policies aimed at addressing destructive behavior on a societal level (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). According to Ford (2021), this evidence indicated that zero tolerance policies were implemented disproportionately for African American adolescent students. More precisely, African American female students frequently encountered increased disciplinary consequences compared to African American males nationwide, a pattern replicated in the juvenile justice system (Henry et al., 2021).

The study findings highlighted that over the years, zero tolerance policies have had a damaging influence on student outcomes since they were developed to serve as more of a system of social control employed by school administration and policymakers; therefore, there was an urgent need to mitigate how zero tolerance policies were administered (Lacorazza & Siaba, 2023). Despite their significance, zero tolerance policies negatively influence student outcomes. It was crucial to explore the copious extents of concern that led school administrators to implement these policies and the potential drawbacks and unfair outcomes in order to understand this issue and work toward a solution (Johnson & Johnson, 2023).

Prior researchers identified numerous areas of trepidation regarding zero tolerance policies (Lightfoot, 2021). These areas of concern related to the disparities in disciplinary practices involving African American and European American students indicated that the perspectives of school administrators shaped the choice of their discipline approaches (Williams et al., 2023). This is an ongoing problem that impacts African American female students more than any other student population because of the increased disproportionate use of school suspensions (Ford, 2021). Another area of concern was the loss of classroom participation resulting from student disciplinary infractions (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). Also, a lack of classroom involvement had a negative impact on African American female students, such as a higher prospect of dropping out of school and significantly increased the chances of becoming associated with the school-to-prison pipeline (Sorensen et al., 2023). The school-to-prison pipeline describes the pattern of students on the fast track from public schools to the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Ford, 2021). Findings indicated that school administrators were a crucial factor when using discretion, which may have contributed to the inequitable enforcement of discipline within schools. Despite the importance of zero tolerance policies, numerous factors added to the problem in the execution of discipline against African American female students.

Several possible factors contribute to disparities in applying discipline, including school administrators' biases (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). Implicit biases, cultural misconceptions, and stereotyping were a few examples of these biases (Hu & Hancock, 2024). These biases impacted school administrators' employment of zero tolerance policies, resulting in discrepancies in disciplinary actions. Nevertheless, the philosophical

ideas articulated by German philosopher Immanuel Kant regarding autonomy, moral responsibility, and respect provided a consequential framework for the analysis of school discipline policies, including zero tolerance policies, as well as the viewpoints of school administrators (Kant, 2008). Kant (2008) proposed that a just society is characterized by policies and procedures that advance the well-being of all individuals. Findings showed that developing fair policies protected students in schools from disruptive behaviors and provided a safe environment for everyone (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2022). Despite the significant concerns surrounding school administrators' personal biases, it was essential to explore the positive qualities that enhanced real-life experiences through a qualitative study.

Additional qualitative studies were needed in order to explore the lived experiences of school administrators and the effects of zero tolerance policies on disciplinary actions involving African American female students (Butler, 2022). Conducting future general qualitative studies provided helpful information that school administrators, school districts, and other stakeholders could utilize in establishing more equitable discipline policies as well as detecting ways to decrease the frequency of suspensions, especially for African American female students (Hendren et al., 2022). The current research focuses on the impact of zero tolerance policies on African American students overall (Henry et al., 2021). Nevertheless, current research shows that there is a need to address the unique aspect of explicitly focusing on the perceptions of school administrators as street-level bureaucrats regarding the impact of zero tolerance policies on African American female students (Lipsky, 2010). Although findings from earlier

research showed that stereotyping minority students' behavior led to inequitable disciplinary actions, more in-depth studies were still needed to examine the factors contributing to implicit and explicit bias in the implementation of disciplinary policies (Cruz et al., 2021).

It was fundamental to study ways to address the factors that influenced implicit and explicit biases in order to be able to offer a valuable understanding of the interpretation and application of these policies in actual educational environments (Breese et al., 2023). Addressing these biases provided that zero tolerance policies were applied consistently and equally to every student, regardless of their race or gender (Scott, 2021). Moreover, examining the influence of biases yielded results that suggested more effective approaches for addressing student misconduct (Balwin et al., 2022). It was essential to acknowledge that additional research had notable value in the creation of future discipline policies, which promoted a more inclusive school atmosphere for students (Young et al., 2024). The findings enhanced awareness of bias within the school system, including recommendations for culturally and linguistically sensitive professional development training for school staff (Breese et al., 2023). Despite studying ways to address implicit and explicit biases, understanding the role they play in executing zero tolerance policies was crucial for promoting fairness, equity, and school improvement, particularly for African American students (Scott, 2021).

Strickland (2022) documented the disproportionate use of discipline on African American female students in numerous ways. According to one prior study, statistical data on African American preschoolers, who comprised less than 20% of the population,

represented nearly half of the exclusionary discipline, which was connected to additional issues across the Kindergarten through 12th-grade trajectory (Sevon, 2022). In addition, Jabbari et al. (2022) performed research that took an intersectional approach by examining how race and gender were interconnected to the experiences of African American female students. These students faced distinguishable challenges arising from the intersection of their racial and gender identities. The findings highlighted that the overuse of suspensions was connected to various adverse results for these students, including reduced academic performance, increased dropout frequencies, and augmented likelihood of involvement with the juvenile justice system (Sorensen et al., 2023). Although there were considerable concerns connected with the inconsistent use of discipline on African American female students, it was critical to seek out potential solutions in order to bring about successful methods of punishment (Vyvijal, 2022). The inconsistent application of school discipline to African American female students is a significant problem that has been well documented in the literature (Bell, 2021).

Still, there are ways that the inconsistent application of school discipline to African American female students can be resolved. Restorative justice practices continue to be a suggested alternative for addressing and reducing the issues that preceded school suspensions (Cruz et al., 2021). Restorative justice practices meaningfully help address the issues many African American female students face by promoting dialogue, understanding, and community building rather than punitive measures (Davison et al., 2022). Additionally, the research findings highlighted restorative justice practices that had the potential to contribute to policy equity and provide solutions that positively

impacted the lives of African American female students (Leithwood, 2021). For school administrators to effectively discipline African American female students, further examination of the literature is required to determine the appropriateness of restorative justice practices as an alternative to the inconsistent use of school suspension under zero tolerance policies (Stewart & Ezell, 2022).

The literature review involved multiple sections and justified the reason to conduct this study. The literature review started by explaining the theoretical framework employed in this study (Luft et al., 2022). Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory is an excellent theoretical framework that explores the functionality of street-level bureaucrats. Another literature review emphasized the necessity for school administrators to consider restorative justice practices when disciplining African American female students, even in light of the notable irregularities in the use of school suspension linked to zero tolerance policies (Stewart & Ezell, 2022). The findings suggested that varying disciplinary practices perpetuated disparities and caused harm to the educational experiences of African American students in general. Despite the arduous task of examining prior literature to justify the study on zero tolerance policies, evaluating the valuable features related to this topic was required to assess its practical benefits and drawbacks.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search strategy is a methodical, clear, and straightforward approach to locating, assessing, and summarizing documented work by researchers, scholars, and practitioners (Hendren et al., 2022). Choosing preexisting literature from various search

engines helped locate information on the study topic (Kraus et al., 2022). The term *zero tolerance policies* was initially searched across various search engines in order to ascertain its origins (Booth et al., 2021). During this iterative search process, I selected and utilized Google Scholar's search engine, which produced a diverse range of terms that were grouped into the following categories: disciplinary policies, policy theory, and bureaucracy, as well as sociocultural impact. A search of these terms was conducted for individual usage in conjunction with Boolean operators, which can be found in Appendix A. Subsequently, Walden University's library was accessed, which provided Thoreau, Taylor, and Francis, as well as Emerald Insight databases. Also, after modifying the search terms to include Public Policy and Administration Abstracts, ProQuest and JSTOR databases proved extremely helpful. Ultimately, the search was filtered to specific keywords from peer-reviewed journal papers in the Sage Journals, ERIC, EBSCO, and Google Scholar databases. These keyword searches were limited to the last 5 years due to the abundance of information associated with zero tolerance policies, which dates back to the early 1990s (Lacorazza & Siaba, 2023). The authenticity of the articles was confirmed by cross-referencing them with the bibliographic database Ulrich's Periodical Directory, which identified peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed journals (Brown, 2021). Spijker et al. (2023) noted that conducting targeted searches for the specific sources cited in the articles is essential. The sources searched comprised many forms of literature, from books to government reports, laws, and legislation (Adu & Miles, 2023).

In light of the limited research concerning the perspectives of school administrators, the stereotyping of minority students' behavior, and the implications of

zero tolerance policies on African American female students, a range of strategies was employed to locate peer-reviewed articles. Upon facing resource constraints, the employment of library databases, the implementation of search filters, broadening search terms, and the validation of the selected journals' credibility were conducted. Moreover, examining policy reports and conference proceedings was advantageous when faced with an inadequate amount of existing research. Although research on school administrators' perspectives was scarce, undertaking new research in this area offered a chance to provide original insights into the field of study.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The primary theoretical framework for this study was Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory. The background for Lipsky's theory emphasized the crucial significance of school administrators in influencing the execution of zero tolerance discipline policies. Their use of discretionary power and comprehension of the social environments in which students were situated may have resulted in a capacious range of consequences when policies were applied, specifically impacting African American female students. Street-level bureaucracy theory was employed to elucidate how public workers, by their substantial autonomy in implementing decision-making daily, effectively assumed the role of policymakers (Camillo, 2022). Direct engagement enabled street-level officials to independently interpret and implement regulations in real-time, which often made the decisions have a direct impact on the lives of the public (Hassan et al., 2021). The street-level bureaucracy theory acknowledged frontline public workers' essential role and significant discretion in fulfilling public policies (Chang,

2022). The importance of street-level bureaucrats in the policy process was partly attributed to their discretion and decision-making, which significantly impacted how the public experienced policies (Chang, 2022). According to Chang (2022), these factors may possibly contributed to recognizing the vital role of frontline public workers and their significant judgment in carrying out public policies. Lipsky (2010) asserted that although street-level bureaucrats generally perceived their work as detached from political ideologies, their beliefs and interactions with the public may have been shaped by personal interests. These effects may have impacted their decision-making process as well as the successful implementation of policies at the lowest level of the bureaucratic system (Gershgoren & Cohen, 2023).

Michael Lipsky's book *Street-Level Bureaucracy* provided the primary source of the theory applied to this study. According to Hupe (2022), the street-level bureaucracy theory is derived from the term "street-level bureaucracy." This theory is related to the importance of school administrators in influencing the application of zero tolerance discipline policies. Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory emerged from observational analyses of public service workers' roles and behaviors, such as educators, social workers, and police officers who interacted directly with the public. Lipsky's research began with an examination of public administration and policy implementation to explain how government programs were applied and controlled. Lipsky focused on the pragmatic challenges that frontline workers encountered while working in their public service positions. Rossi et al. (2024) stated that street-level bureaucracy theory is helpful in researching frontline workers' interactions with the public.

Since street-level bureaucrats have direct interaction with the public as well as authority in implementing policies, both may have significantly influence the nature of services delivered to public citizens (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2023). In addition, the application of discretion could have been susceptible to various challenges, namely scarce resources, excessive workloads, and the complex nature of specific situations (Charman & Williams, 2022). The findings associated with street-level bureaucracy theory highlighted the complicated role of individual discretion in shaping the execution of school discipline policies. Despite the significance of the application of the street-level bureaucracy theory to this study, describing the theoretical propositions that formed the foundation of Lipsky's (2010) theory, guiding research and analysis was vital.

The major theoretical propositions of street-level bureaucrats played an integral part in public policy implementation (Hassan et al., 2023). These key propositions included street-level bureaucrats with substantial discretion in implementing policies and authority that may have resulted in inconsistencies in policy outcomes. Street-level bureaucrats possessed distinctive roles and were often underscored by their substantial discretionary power in policy implementation (Macena & Oliveira, 2022). In this instance, street-level bureaucrats determined what constitutes suitable policy interpretation and application for every circumstance (Rossi et al., 2024). In order to meet the requirements of the public they served, they had to navigate complex relationships and ensured that their decisions followed the governmental agencies they were employed by (Eriksson & Johansson, 2021). Another key proposition was the discretionary power

of street-level bureaucrats, which may have resulted in differing policy outcomes given their peculiar opinions (Andreotti et al., 2023).

Such autonomy displayed by street-level bureaucrats allowed them to tailor policies to specific situations; however, it also implied that various bureaucrats may have interpreted and implemented policies in contrasting ways (Yuan et al., 2022). Altering policies toward unique circumstances may have led to varied policy execution, whereby street-level bureaucrats' choices and activities may have substantially impacted public policies' success and impartiality (Guimarães et al., 2022). Nevertheless, discretion may have impacted the operation of disciplinary policies by street-level bureaucrats, resulting in severe disadvantages for specific populations, such as African American female students (de Boer & Raaphorst, 2021). The findings in the major theoretical propositions of street-level bureaucrats emphasized that street-level bureaucrats made decisions based on their perceptions of their work environment and personal convictions (Chang, 2022). Despite the numerous challenges associated with the many aspects of street-level bureaucrats' theory, comprehending its past applications and evolution may have guided future research, which still requires further exploration.

There are four fundamental principles associated with the street-level bureaucracy theory. Discretionary decision-making was the first, which highlighted the substantial autonomy that street-level bureaucrats possessed when dealing with the public (Lipsky, 2010). Frequently, public workers made several conclusions that impacted how they carried out public policies by deciphering and adjusting policies to fit their particular position (Lipsky, 2010). Second was the direct engagement with the general public since

street-level bureaucrats represented the government to this population (Lipsky, 2010). The regular interaction between street-level bureaucrats and the public gave them a distinct comprehension of the significant needs of the people (Lipsky, 2010). Third was the actual delivery of public policy, which occurred at the grassroots level and where street-level bureaucrats often made impromptu decisions (Ningrum & Lotta, 2024). Within this setting, the hierarchy approach opposed the conventional perspective on policy application, which often allowed policies to be completed precisely as the government intended (Shahi, 2024). Fourth was how street-level officials used coping strategies to handle their workload due to the limited resources available (Chang, 2022).

Allocating the priority to what street-level bureaucrats perceived as most important may have resulted in a skewed interpretation of public policy (Chang, 2022). When street-level bureaucrats prioritize work according to their subjective assessments of effectiveness, it may have resulted in a deviation from the policy's intended objectives. Additionally, Lipsky's (2010) research was conducted during a period of heightened examination of government structures because of their efficacy. The findings indicated that public entities such as schools had to establish lucid guidelines and supervision to ensure street-level bureaucrats' discretion was consistent with policy goals. Despite the significance of the four primary principles of the street-level bureaucracy theory, it had value in delineating any assumptions related to its utilization.

The application of street-level bureaucracy theory delineates assumptions on the impact of biases of school administrators, constraints on resources, and flexibility in enacted policies (Frisch Aviram et al., 2021). The underlying premise was understanding

the impact school administrators, who acted as street-level bureaucrats, possessed substantial latitude in enacting zero tolerance policies (de Boer & Raaphorst, 2021). The delineation of this assumption included the resulting variances in discretion by school administrators due to their viewpoints and potential biases, which may have influenced the application of these policies toward African American female students (Sorensen et al., 2023). According to Breese et al. (2023), school administrators may have had personal biases that were not recognized or acknowledged. Addressing these biases and how they may have affected their decision-making was one approach to delineate any assumptions they may have. School administrators first recognized their biases through self-examination and colleague feedback (Gonzalez et al., 2021). Also, evaluation tools such as implicit association tests may have assisted in detecting unconscious biases (Melnikoff & Kurdi, 2022). Killen and Rutland (2022) asserted that recognizing potential biases is critically important, as is addressing and acknowledging them. The findings demonstrated that recognizing biases can greatly foster an environment of openness in schools. Despite the significance of biases, school administrators often participate in continuous training to gain insight into the impact of biases and acquire methods to reduce them.

Addressing individual biases gave school administrators the opportunity to establish a more analogous and inclusive school that effectively served all students. Another assumption was that school administrators operated within mixed resource constraints, which had the capability to impede their capacity to enforce zero tolerance policies efficiently (Cohen & Aviram, 2021). Johnson and Johnson (2023) distinguished

this assumption as a direct disciplinary instrument that heavily relied on zero tolerance policies rather than examining more delicate approaches, which may have been due to insufficient resources. Street-level bureaucrats have the potential to give precedence to situations they are faced with over others, which commonly result in inconsistent utilization of policies (Park, 2022). Moreover, street-level bureaucrats facing limited resources require additional support to provide the public with comparable levels of care. As a result, the emphasis on discretion holds considerable importance in the field of public administration (Chang & Brewer, 2022). The last assumption addressed the flexibility street-level bureaucrats were afforded in relation to the development of policy, namely the degree of their discretion in translating and carrying out policies at the basic level (Frisch Aviram et al., 2021). A major task of street-level bureaucrats was how they went about creating and instituting policy amid uncertainty (Gofen & Lotta, 2021).

The fundamental concept of flexibility suggests that street-level bureaucrats needed the skills to assess and adjust policies to address the urgent challenges they were confronted with (Rossi et al., 2024). Having flexibility is significant as it empowers street-level bureaucrats to make decisions that satisfied the community's needs, possibly contributing to more improved as well as favorable outcomes. A review of the presumption of flexibility in policy execution by street-level bureaucrats highlighted the critical role these individuals had in exercising discretion and revising policies to align with factual situations (Chang, 2022). According to research by Reidy (2021), to guarantee the fair and uniform implementation of policies, flexibility was crucial and needed to be balanced with an accountability framework. This equilibrium plays an

important role in preserving confidence among citizens and achieving the objectives of the policy (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). The findings displayed that each one of the named assumptions emphasized the intricacies of using the street-level bureaucracy theory when applying zero tolerance policies and their effects on African American female students. Despite the significance of these assumptions, it may have been critical to answer how and why discipline was disproportionate for African American female students and explore whether previous uses of the street-level bureaucracy theory may have been better executed for these students.

The street-level bureaucracy theory has been applied in diverse milieus, such as schools, to learn how school administrators applied policies at their discretion (Hall & Hampden-Thompson, 2022). Davidovitz and Schechter (2024) conducted a comprehensive study of school administrators as street-level managers. These researchers explored how school administrators can enhance comprehension of the application of public policy at the operational level and the considerable discretion exercised in this process (Davidovitz & Schechter, 2024). In the study of Davidovitz and Schechter (2024), school administrators possessed the authority to reinforce teachers' sense of security and encouragement inside the school environment. Consequently, these circumstances significantly impacted school administrators' discretionary use and the techniques for coping in relation to employing discipline to students (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022). The findings showed that school administrators, positioned between local government officials, students, and parents, acted as intermediaries for institutional influences and politicization processes within schools (Davidovitz & Schechter, 2024).

Additionally, public administration studies suggested that school administrators were essential in fostering a positive organizational climate by supporting teachers in a manner that permitted them to perform their duties effectively (Davidovitz & Schechter, 2024). Previous research has shown that school administrators' responses to external demands may have led to differences among service users and compromised equity in service allocation (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2023). There was also evidence that school administrators could have identified schools that displayed discriminatory practices in disciplining minority students (Oberfield & Incantalupo, 2021). The Davidovitz and Schechter (2024) conclusions drew upon the need for additional data collection on the relationship between school administrators as street-level managers and discretion in schools. Analyzing school administrators through the street-level bureaucracy theory framework augmented an understanding of their role as liaisons who were capable of fostering social justice and inclusion in education.

Ford (2021) examined how African American male students were disproportionately affected by the execution of zero tolerance policies, which also increased suspension rates. The research by Ford (2021) indicated that zero tolerance policies created definitive consequences for particular violations, irrespective of the situation. Minor infractions, such as student misconduct, had been subjected to zero tolerance policies originally intended to target serious infractions, such as bringing weapons to school (Ford, 2021). Although most researchers have African American male students, it is essential to acknowledge that zero tolerance policies also have a substantial effect on African American female students as well (Strickland, 2022). Applying street-

level bureaucracy theory in school discipline is related to discretion in enforcing zero tolerance policies (Nieto-Morales et al., 2024). Using discretion improperly may have caused various repercussions for African American students, especially those from vulnerable communities (Ford, 2021). Applying street-level bureaucracy theory in this circumstance exposed the role of school administrators' discretionary actions as well as the ways in which they may have influenced discipline decisions and the broader consequences for educational fairness (Oliveira & Peixoto, 2021). The findings suggested that understanding street-level bureaucrats' decision-making processes was central to future policy implementation. Despite the significance of appropriately applying the street-level bureaucrat's theory in order to understand how African American students were disproportionately affected by the execution of zero tolerance policies, it was important to unfold the rationale for the use of this theory as well.

In the current study, I examined the profound impact of zero tolerance policies in schools on African American female students, revealing the significant challenges they faced as a result. Thus, street-level bureaucracy theory was the strongest fit for this examination since this theory focused on the role of school administrators as street-level bureaucrats, their application of zero tolerance policies for African American female students, and how their discretionary power may have influenced the outcomes for these students (Lipsky, 2010). School administrators served as the ultimate authority when administering discipline within the context of zero tolerance policies in schools, which normally impose stringent consequences (Huang & Cornell, 2021). In this case, African American female students may have been disproportionately impacted by these zero

tolerance policies attributable to implicit biases and the autonomy of the school administrators distributing these policies (Strickland, 2022). Employing the street-level bureaucracy theory helped analyze how the personal convictions, biases, and judgments of school administrators affected their implementation of zero tolerance policies. Doing so facilitated an examination of the potential inequalities in the introduction of these policies to African American female students in relation to European American female students, consequently exposing the inequities within the school system (Peterson, 2023). In addition, emphasizing the street-level bureaucracy theory furnished a framework that had the opportunity to impact larger structural issues, which made this theory a suitable basis for this research.

Despite the significance of the rationale for examining street-level bureaucracy theory, there have been continuous debates among scholars regarding this theory. A primary dimension of the topic of the debate revolved around the measure of discretion that street-level bureaucrats possessed in carrying out public policy (Herd et al., 2023). Given that street-level bureaucrats' status was the pinnacle of policymakers, these public workers wield substantial influence over implemented policies, especially in schools (Herd et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the ability to exercise discretion empowered those who worked in education and gave them the ability to modify policies according to particular situations, which may have resulted in more efficient policymaking (Herd et al., 2023). Excessive discretion may have potentially resulted in disparities when executing policies and propelled inequitable treatment of the people served by street-level

bureaucrats (Herd et al., 2023). Superfluous discretion was a central area of debate in the street-level bureaucracy theory.

The next area of debate was the definition and function of street-level bureaucrats. According to Gershgoren and Cohen (2023), not all public workers within street-level bureaucracies were classified as street-level bureaucrats, and not all street-level bureaucrats were employed within street-level bureaucracies. This classification added complexity to understanding their function, and their discretion influenced policy execution (Gershgoren & Cohen, 2023). The essence of the discourse on street-level bureaucracy theory centered on the equilibrium between discretion and uniformity, the characteristics and roles of street-level bureaucrats, and the interaction between discretion and organizational regulations (Hassan et al., 2021). It is necessary to participate in continuous conversations regarding the definition and role of street-level bureaucrats in order to comprehend the real implementation of public policies and maximize their efficacy when serving the public. This stressed the challenging reality faced by street-level bureaucrats; despite being equipped with limited resources, they were continually expected to meet the growing demands of the public in order to achieve important policy objectives. (Lipsky, 2010).

The street-level bureaucracy theory was instrumental in this study since it highlighted the role of discretion in policy execution, which could have impacted objectivity in disciplinary practices (Chang, 2022). The discoveries underscored a factor contributing to disparate outcomes for African American female students in school administrators' discretionary practices and a significantly higher proportion of

suspensions that resulted from the use of zero tolerance policies on these students (Strickland, 2022). The findings depicted that there are disproportionate outcomes for African American female students by school administrators' discretionary-based methods, which may have been linked to varying interpretations of behavior by these school administrators (Chang, 2022). Despite the significance of the amount of research on the use of street-level bureaucracy theory, it offered a valuable framework for analyzing the disciplinary measures employed by school administrators in the enforcement of zero tolerance policies against African American female students.

Moreover, the street-level bureaucracy theory related to the study of exploring school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies for African American female students is due to two significant factors. First, the topic was consequential because of the substantial presence of public administrators in leading positions, which may have caused administrative burdens and frontline discrimination (Bell & Meyer, 2024). Additional burdens and discrimination may have had an extensive influence on the implementation of policies (Peterson, 2023). Second, street-level bureaucrats possessed considerable discretion in carrying out their tasks since they possessed greater formal authority, which could have considerably impacted those they served (Chang & Brewer, 2022). Despite the street-level bureaucracy theory's notable challenge to applying it to all public workers, it was fundamental to explore its origins to discover strategies for enhancing organizational efficiency, as well as the overall quality of life for all individuals, especially school students (Lipsky, 2010).

Additionally, the pertinency of Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory for exploring school administrators' perspectives on zero tolerance policies for African American female students was complex. Primarily, the street-level bureaucracy theory centered on public workers' discretionary power and decision-making procedures, which was particularly pertinent in the study of school administrators and their responsibility in the way in which they enforced disciplinary policies (Gershgoren & Cohen, 2023). Lipsky's (2010) theory is multifaceted due to the political and social milieu, wherein institutional culture shapes school administrators' perceptions and adherence to policies. The institutional culture of an environment such as this may have resulted in inequalities in policy fulfillment among a number of schools (Peeters & Campos, 2023). The findings suggested that Lipsky's (2010) framework from the street-level bureaucracy theory highlighted the alignment of this study's objectives, which explored the general qualitative study of how school administrators manage zero tolerance policies for African American female students, mainly concentrating on the unique challenges encountered while enforcing these policies. Despite the significance of executing zero tolerance policies, applying street-level bureaucracy theory to this study revealed that school administrators have considerable discretion when interacting directly with students in their schools.

The study's first RQ was, How do school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students? Related to understanding the many aspects of street-level bureaucracy theory. This RQ was essential since it examined

school administrators' discretionary practices based on the street-level bureaucracy theory with regard to implementing zero tolerance policies specifically for African American female students (Lipsky, 2010). The RQ expanded upon the current theory of street-level bureaucrats by examining the convergence of their bureaucratic discretionary practices (Lotta et al., 2021). Particularly in the circumstances where ethnicity and gender played a role (Sorensen et al., 2023). Consequently, clarifying zero tolerance policies had the prospect of bringing up the question of whether African American female students were excessively affected by school administrators' discretionary practices. Regardless of the significant discretionary behaviors of school administrators based on the street-level bureaucracy theory, it was critical to investigate systemic inequities, how zero tolerance rules are implemented, and the long-term societal consequences.

The study's second RQ was, What organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators' discretionary decisions regarding the implementation of zero tolerance policies for African American female students? This question examined the reasons and methods behind school administrators' decision-making when they have discretion and flexibility in the application of zero tolerance discipline policies, particularly in relation to their impact on African American female students. This RQ was crucial because it related to the internal structures, such as expectations from superintendents and school boards, as well as the written disciplinary guidelines in the school district's code of conduct. All of which may have shaped administrators' decisions regarding disciplining African American female students. Through an examination of school administrators' decision-making procedures, this study demonstrated the

complexities of discretion in bureaucratic roles as well as their individual perspectives and their impact as they implemented policies (Davidovitz & Schechter, 2024). The RQ was built upon existing theory by broadening the concept of discretion beyond conventional environments, such as those involving police officers and social workers, to include educational staff members (Larsen, 2021). Additionally, the RQ advanced discussions on zero tolerance policies, frequently attacked for their limitations, by emphasizing the significance of individual discretion in their application (Huang & Cornell, 2021).

Although there had been considerable scrutiny about the misuse of discretionary power by school administrators in the interpretation of zero tolerance policies, it was necessary to have a more profound knowledge of how these policies were practically adapted in order to combine policy trustworthiness with equitable results. Each RQ sought to address the problem of the disproportionate use of school discipline toward African American female students and aimed to build upon existing research. The study's RQs were structured in a way that future scholars or practitioners may further expand on later. The classification of school administrators as street-level bureaucrats was based on their direct interaction with students and their responsibility for enforcing zero tolerance policies (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). Larsen (2021) highlighted the work of school administrators who make discretionary decisions that impact students' lives and academic experiences. Despite the significant impact of discretion on school administrators, the street-level bureaucracy theory proposed that frontline workers, such as school

administrators, maintain substantial discretion in their regular duties and decision-making processes (Chang, 2022).

Discretionary practices, in this instance, related to the final decisions and actions school administrators make, which were grounded in their subjective assessment and understanding of policies (Winter et al., 2022). Exercising discretion may have resulted in disparities in the fulfillment of policies, especially concerning diverse student populations, such as African American female students (Strickland, 2022). Hence, the RQs focused on how these discretionary practices affected African American female students. It was important to examine how the discretionary actions of school administrators affected the experiences of African American female students, particularly as they faced discriminatory discipline practices (Lotta et al., 2021). The application of street-level bureaucracy theory enhanced understanding of the ambiguities and potential biases involved in implementing zero tolerance policies, which gave rise to unjust disciplinary actions against female African American students.

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

In the present literature review, I examine school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies toward African American female students. Recent literature suggests that African American female students often endured inequitable disciplinary actions due to three key factors that arose from the rigorous enforcement of zero tolerance policies (Peterson, 2021). The first factor was that zero tolerance policies tended to emphasize harsh consequences even for minor infractions that involved African American female students and did not allow room for discretion by school administrators

in administering discipline (Gonzalez et al., 2021). These severe actions may have adversely affected African American female students in several ways, including their academic success and sense of inclusion in school (Ikhrom et al., 2023). In addition, research indicated that the personal viewpoints of school administrators may have led to discriminatory disciplinary actions (Scott, 2021). The second factor was that African American female students may have been stereotyped as hostile, which may have led to more serious disciplinary actions for behavior that may not have elicited the same reaction for students from other ethnicities (Butler-Barnes et al., 2022). Also, African American female students may have been criminalized in schools due to perceived hostility, exposing them to the significant peril of being erroneously funneled into what was described as the school-to-prison pipeline (Strickland, 2022).

The school-to-prison pipeline arises from exclusionary discipline policies, such as zero tolerance policies, that impact African American students and are a significant concern (Berry, 2024). The school-to-prison pipeline relates to the multiplying trend of students from disadvantaged communities going into the juvenile justice system at a swift rate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). This not only severely hinders African American female students' educational opportunities but also starts a relentless cycle that can suppress their potential progress. The last factor stemmed from the historical background, in which systemic racism played a role in the school discipline process (Peterson, 2021). Historically, African American female students often faced discrimination within schools, and the reinforcement of zero tolerance policies may have exacerbated these disparities (Allen & Hilliard, 2021).

Additionally, the enforcement of zero tolerance policies sometimes resulted in automatic suspension, which may have been more successfully addressed through restorative justice programs (Battjes & Zane Kaplan, 2023). The findings indicated that school administrators could have used a comprehensive reformatory discipline strategy that prioritized equal treatment for students in order to address the observed disparities (Ford, 2021). Despite the issues associated with implementing zero tolerance policies, the literature review substantiated the need for additional research centered on the fair execution of zero tolerance policies along with their effects on African American female students.

### **Zero Tolerance Policies**

Zero tolerance policies are the hallmark of school discipline in America and were designed to make schools safe by instituting robust consequences for student misconduct (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). The formation of zero tolerance policies began during the Reagan-Bush drug enforcement measures of the late 1980s and early part of the 1990s (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). The development of these policies led to the emergence of the term *zero tolerance*, which refers to strict disciplinary measures in schools that allowed little flexibility, particularly regarding drug-related and violent incidents (Miller et al., 2022). Subsequently, school leaders began implementing zero tolerance policies in the first half of the 1990s following the endorsement of the Gun-Free Schools Act (Irby & Coney, 2021). Therefore, the practice of zero tolerance policies expanded from drug-related issues to incidents of school violence (Muñiz, 2021). In passing the Gun-Free Schools Act, legislators sought to establish a protected environment for students and staff

by mitigating the risk of violent offenses on school grounds, which led many public schools to adopt zero tolerance policies (Degutis & Spivak, 2021).

Due to the increasing rate of drug use among students in public school systems and the number of students consuming drugs early on, schools became a critical element in the war on drugs (Cohen et al., 2022). Nonetheless, illicit drug use among students may have negatively affected academic achievement and increased the likelihood of involvement in the juvenile justice system, thereby reinforcing pathways linked to the school-to-prison pipeline (Cohen et al., 2022). Over time, zero tolerance policies were expanded to address a wider range of infractions, including minor instances of student misconduct (Huang & Cornell, 2021). The findings emphasized the primary purpose of zero tolerance policies: to create safe, secure, and orderly schools (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Despite the good intentions of zero tolerance policies, they are often criticized for being disproportionately harmful to African American students; therefore, more studies related to the construct and interests are needed in order to distribute these policies fairly.

### **Gender and Racial Disparities in School Discipline Practices**

Relevant studies on this topic involve inconsistencies in school discipline practices and school administrator perceptions. According to a study by Strickland (2022), African American female students are more inclined to have encountered a higher number of inequitable discipline measures, which may be attributable to implicit biases. Implicit bias describes the attitudes or ingrained biases that unknowingly influence an individual's views, behaviors, and choices, potentially resulting in biased conduct

(Shah & Bohlen, 2023). Strickland (2022) also suggested that implicit bias may have influenced disciplinary decisions, which was a crucial reason for further research. Moreover, a study from the Bookings Institute found that schools with predominantly European American populations were significantly more inclined to enforce zero tolerance policies on African American students at a rate of 82% compared to 68% (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). Also, a study by Battjes and Zane Kaplan (2023) indicated how zero tolerance policies affected African American students and that these students were more susceptible to being suspended from school. However, restorative justice programs have emerged as an alternative to zero tolerance policies, aiming to support students and improve interactions between school administrators and marginalized student populations.

Additionally, a study conducted by Sevon (2022) revealed that zero tolerance policy practices harm African American female students more than gender or race issues. Improvements in disciplinary practices and policies are necessary in order to maintain student educational engagement instead of funneling the same students into the juvenile justice system (Burch, 2022). Comprehending how school administrators perceived discipline and how it may have influenced policies within the schools was crucial. The findings demonstrated the importance of conducting additional research concerning the ways African American female students were affected by school administrators' use of zero tolerance policies (Lightfoot, 2021). Despite the relevance in public policy and administration research, particularly with sensitive topics such as zero

tolerance policies as well as their influences on female African American students, it was important to select the appropriate methodology when exploring this topic in depth.

### **Methodological Approaches for Examining Disproportionate Discipline**

Studies that examined the disproportionate implementation of discipline for African American female students concerning zero tolerance policies applied quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches to describe and investigate this ongoing problem. Also, researchers had previously examined the implementation of school discipline policies, which concentrated primarily on the outcomes of school administrators' discipline choices and not on their discretion in making such decisions (Davison et al., 2022). Utilizing these approaches may have offered an all-around analysis of the ways in which school administrators understood and employed school discipline policy structures, as well as the effects these policies had on marginalized students. This section clearly outlined the approaches used to study the implementation of zero tolerance policies, specifically focusing on the role of school administrators and their discretionary application. Applying a qualitative approach was best for the proposed study in order to thoroughly examine how school administrators perceived the implementation of zero tolerance policies (Tenet et al., 2022). Also, this methodological overview sought to clarify existing knowledge and highlight areas that required further investigation, laying the groundwork for this study. The methodological overview helped define a concrete foundation for comprehending the intricacies associated with the perspectives of the school administrators who implemented zero tolerance policies by

meticulously studying current knowledge and determining areas that necessitated more exploration.

Quantitative studies examining school discipline using administrative data, including suspension rates and disciplinary referrals categorized by race, gender, and other relevant factors, were reviewed to illustrate how school discipline policies were implemented (Anyon et al., 2023; Campbell, 2020; Cruz et al., 2021; de Boer & Raaphorst, 2021; Hassan et al., 2023; Leithwood, 2021; Pandey et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2023; Welsh & Rodriguez, 2024). These quantitative studies revealed important outcomes and patterns concerning the disparities between the races of students as well as the increased rates of discipline, which often indicated that school administrators' decision-making is shaped by recognized patterns instead of exploring the fundamental structures of their processes. While the significance of the various methodologies may have been used in this study of school administrators' perceptions, a qualitative approach may have provided additional detailed insights from a distinct perspective.

Qualitative studies explored the implementation of school discipline policies, emphasizing how school administrators perceived and enforced these policies within their institutions, which were also reviewed (Andreotti et al., 2023; Cohen & Aviram, 2021; Ford, 2021). In addition, qualitative research proved beneficial in researching school administrators' perceptions of disciplinary procedures, power of discretion, and external elements that may have affected their decision-making processes. Additionally, it was important to note that previous qualitative studies emphasized teachers' (Rodriguez et al., 2024) and students' (Bell & Puckett, 2023) experiences while giving inadequate attention

to school administrators. Moreover, qualitative studies portrayed school administrators' complex stories and showed how their personal opinions and past experiences may have affected their judgments regarding school discipline policies (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2022; Smith, 2021). Researching the challenges school administrators faced in creating equitable and productive discipline procedures highlighted the connection between the demands of policy and the particular settings in which they operate.

Mixed-method studies that merged quantitative and qualitative methodologies entailed school discipline applications that successfully integrated quantitative data from school discipline records (Stark & Bettini, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Gerlinger et al., 2021) with qualitative insights obtained through in-depth semistructured interviews (Breese et al., 2023; Butler, 2022; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Lim, 2024) or focus groups (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2023; Wahman et al., 2022), which provided an in-depth grasp of school discipline practices. Studies using a mixed methods approach to discipline in schools offered important new perspectives on both qualitative and quantitative processes. However, they commonly disregarded an extensive investigation of the discretion of school administrators as a vital factor in determining disciplinary actions. This indicated that some mixed methods studies included interviews with school administrators in more extensive research structures.

The existing literature demonstrates a unique pattern in which quantitative studies mainly promoted outcomes and disparities in school discipline, emphasizing the statistical effects of discipline policies on students over time. Yet, qualitative studies that involved school administrators tended to spotlight their perspectives on zero

tolerance policies instead of their discretionary decisions. However, mixed methods studies seldom explored school administrators' discretionary conceptualization as their main goal, limiting an in-depth awareness of how school administrators dealt with policy implementation. Most earlier studies have looked at zero tolerance policies by examining suspension rates and disciplinary referrals, often breaking down the data by race and gender. Yet, there is limited research on how school administrators explain their choices when they use their own judgment to enforce discipline. Therefore, conducting qualitative research could offer deeper insights into how school administrators think and make decisions, especially in relation to disciplining African American female students under zero tolerance policies. This gap in the literature indicates a need for qualitative research that studies intricate decision-making processes involved in the disciplinary actions taken by school administrators. Qualitative methods are especially useful for exploring administrators' lived experiences and perspectives. The next section provides a rationale for the selected concepts and highlights their connection to equity, discretion, and the policy implications for African American female students.

I employed semistructured interviews as a form of qualitative methodology to collect and evaluate nonnumerical data in order to record the various perspectives of school administrators about zero tolerance policies. Qualitative methodology illustrated the importance of understanding individuals within their specific environments and identified how personal experiences shaped their viewpoints (Welsh & Rodriguez, 2024). In addition, qualitative research enabled participants to share their experiences, what drives them, and challenges (Tenny, 2022). The findings highlighted that qualitative

methods were used to collect in-depth insights to better understand the intricate effects of zero tolerance policies in schools, especially regarding African American female students. Despite the significance of applying a qualitative methodology in this study, it was just as essential to consider the aspects of meticulous planning, reflection, and ethical issues in the discourse surrounding discipline policies.

### ***Theoretical Framework & Literature Justifications***

The theoretical frameworks and literature supported the justification in the selection of concepts, such as the school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies for African American female students in this qualitative study. Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory is a robust theoretical framework that examined the operations of school administrators as street-level bureaucrats. The street-level bureaucracy theory elucidated the considerable influence that the discretion exercised by school administrators may have had on enforcing zero tolerance policies. School administrators' implementation of zero tolerance policies demonstrated notable correlations with street-level bureaucracy theory since their personal views, biases, and experiences could have significantly impacted their decision-making processes (Chang, 2022). Disparities in discipline procedures may have resulted from school administrators' varying implementation of the zero tolerance policy practices with African American female students (Ford, 2021). Acquiring an extensive understanding of the socioeconomic and cultural environment in which these administrators operate was therefore crucial. The attitudes of the stakeholders, including parents or guardians, teachers, and students, with regard to the manner in which disciplinary procedures were

implemented may have significantly influenced school administrators' decisions regarding zero tolerance policies (Costa et al., 2021). The findings indicated that Lipsky's (2010) theory offered a framework for comprehending how the discretion exercised by school administrators results in varied employment of zero tolerance policies. Despite the substantial harmful effects that zero tolerance policies have on students, especially African American female students, it was necessary to look more thoroughly into the selection of concepts for this study.

Having previously established the theoretical framework, this section outlined and justified the selection of concepts that guided the study. The selected concepts were based on school administrators' lived experiences and perceptions of zero tolerance policies as they related to African American female students. It was supported by three main components discovered in the current literature. These elements involved the exercise of discretion in executing policies, the presence of racial and gender biases, and the adoption of restorative practices (Davison et al., 2022). The street-level bureaucracy theory pointed out the discretionary power exercised by school administrators in enacting zero tolerance policies (Lipsky, 2010). Current evidence demonstrated that school administrators often reflected on the complex nature of their own narratives as well as beliefs, which may have considerably influenced the rigorous standards they enforced zero tolerance policies (Stewart & Ezell, 2022). The discretionary power exercised by school administrators often raised issues about the implementation of disciplinary measures for African American female students (Larsen, 2021). The convergence of racial and gender biases posed a significant challenge for African American female

students (Billups et al., 2022). Prior research by Welsh and Rodriguez (2024) suggested that these students frequently experience extremely harsh disciplinary repercussions compared to their European American counterparts, even in cases of analogous infractions.

Learning about the perceptions held by school administrators with respect to these biases may have helped explore the influences through lived experiences related to implementing zero tolerance policies (Henry et al., 2021). In addition, the existing literature has progressively acknowledged the effectiveness of restorative justice practices as a plausible alternative to severe punitive measures (Lodi et al., 2021). Lodi et al. (2021) asserted that school administrators who employed restorative practices may have yielded positive results in student relationships and reduced disparities related to disciplinary measures. The findings highlighted that the selection of these concepts is based on research that illustrated the experiences and decisions of school administrators regarding zero tolerance policies (Henry et al., 2021). Despite the importance of each concept, the existence of racial and gender biases, as well as incorporating restorative practices, may have explained how the experiences of school administrators influenced their perspectives on zero tolerance policies affecting African American female students.

Furthermore, examining zero tolerance policies from the perspective of administrative discretion may have identified potential policy changes and clarified the factors that influenced school administrators' decisions. Comprehending these factors was essential for revealing differences in policy application, especially in relation to African American female students (Welsh, 2024). Researching discretion may have

revealed implicit biases in how African American female students were treated under zero tolerance policies (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). Identifying implicit biases in this research may have led to modifying zero tolerance policies to promote cultural awareness for school administrators (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024). The findings of this study may have pointed to specific circumstances in which school administrators used discretion and disclosed trends in their decision-making process. Despite the significance of concentrating on the role of discretion by school administrators in policy application, this study is also related to the phenomenon under investigation, as it may pave the way for policy progression for African American female students.

### **Overview of Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools**

Zero tolerance policies in schools are disciplinary approaches that demand set consequences for certain behavioral infractions, which often result in suspensions or expulsions (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). These policies originated to address severe public offenses but quickly made their way into school policy (Battjes & Zane Kaplan, 2023). Nevertheless, what is known about zero tolerance policies has eventually broadened to include less severe discipline infractions in schools (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). The primary purposes of zero tolerance policies are multifaceted since they seek to address various discipline concerns within schools (Stewart & Ezell, 2024). Ford's (2021) study indicated that zero tolerance policies tended to end in stiff punishments for many African American students. Additionally, harsh punishments continue to be particularly true for African American female students (United States Government Accountability Office, 2024). A pivotal purpose of zero tolerance policies is to safeguard every student within

learning environments (Robers et al., 2021). Therefore, school administrators controlled the atmosphere where safety is prioritized (Stronge & Xu, 2021). Moreover, Ford's (2021) study also asserted that zero tolerance policies may deter students from engaging in harmful actions by clearly communicating the specific behaviors that may result in stern consequences. Removing disruptive students altogether in an effort to prevent others from doing the same was another deterrent (Gregory et al., 2021). Historically, zero tolerance policies emerged as a response to numerous concerns about school violence, such as physical altercations and threats (Ford, 2021). The study conducted by Santiago-Rosario (2023) showed that zero tolerance policies had a disproportionate impact on marginalized populations, with a special focus on African American female students. Zero tolerance policies fail to account for the unique circumstances of students and rely on subjective criteria, which makes them easy targets for implicit bias and disparate racial enforcement, particularly affecting African American students (Ford, 2021). Moreover, Muñiz's (2021) research examined the association between schools and correctional facilities within the framework of the school-to-prison pipeline. This research showed that zero tolerance policies were on the rise in many schools and have the opportunity to progress countless African American students rapidly in the school-to-prison pipeline (Muñiz, 2021). Davison et al. (2022) encouraged a student discipline approach that emphasized restorative justice programs to alleviate severe punitive measures. Research indicated that restorative justice programs effectively reduced suspension rates; thus, addressing imbalances in race-related disciplinary actions is of the utmost importance (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Also, studies exposed that zero tolerance

policies tended to aggravate racial disparities in disciplinary measures further, increased suspension rates, and played an influential role in the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon (Henry et al., 2021). Despite the importance of zero tolerance policies in addressing school discipline, there was considerable controversy surrounding these policies, including unresolved issues.

### **Unresolved Issues with Zero Tolerance Policies**

Many unresolved issues with zero tolerance policies still exist, and they are connected to a substantial body of studies on unfair discipline policy execution (Ford, 2021). The controversies involve racial disparities, implicit biases, and the prevailing individual perceptions associated with zero tolerance policies. According to research by Losen et al. (2021), African American students faced a disproportionate number of disciplinary measures in comparison to their European American peers. This trend has been a major factor in the constant growth, and the inconsistency in applying firm punishment exacerbated ethical issues related to the impartiality and effectiveness of zero tolerance policies. The inconsistency in applying overly firm punishment goes against ethical issues and is related to the overall effectiveness of zero tolerance policies (Johnson & Johnson, 2021). In addition, Okonofua and Eberhardt (2022) performed research that supported their belief that implicit biases among school personnel are also a factor in the inconsistent disciplinary practices that were directed at African American students, specifically female students. Frequently, school administrators are more likely to interpret certain behaviors as student misconduct when they are displayed by African American students, which in turn causes them to impose more severe punishments

(Barrett et al., 2021). Moreover, Skiba (2021) performed research indicating that perspectives of zero tolerance policies were diametrically opposed, with certain individuals supporting rigorous safety measures while others linked them to injustices that may have led to student suspensions or expulsions. Furthermore, perceptions by school administrators may have varied since they may have perceived defiant behavior as problematic when African American students acted out compared to European American students. The findings provided insight into the three areas at the heart of the issue surrounding zero tolerance policies: perceptions, implicit biases, and racial inequities. Despite the necessity of discussing the need for a zero tolerance policy, it was beneficial to look at other approaches that filled in the qualitative data gaps for African American female students.

### **Addressing Zero Tolerance Policies Unknowns**

One way to address the unknowns about zero tolerance policies was to examine the gaps in qualitative data on African American female students. To fill the qualitative data gap with regard to African American female students, the present study aims to look more closely at the effectiveness, disproportionate impact, biases, and long-term implications of zero tolerance policies. First, to better understand how school administrators applied zero tolerance policies, further study was required concerning their effectiveness for African American female students (Henry et al., 2021). Second, additional research was needed on whether or not African American female students are disproportionately reprimanded under zero tolerance policies (Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020). Third, bias presented in the perspectives of school administrators concerning the

execution of zero tolerance policies warranted more research (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). Fourth is the long-term impact of zero tolerance policies on African American female students, particularly their future opportunities (Henry et al., 2022). The findings indicated that further research was required to grasp better what is still unknown regarding zero tolerance policies. Despite the importance of examining gaps in qualitative data on African American female students, closing the existing gaps remained fundamental in order to further discussions around how zero tolerance policies affect these students.

### ***Continuing Zero Tolerance Policies Discussions***

The continuing discussions around zero tolerance policies pointed out the important need to research other disciplinary strategies, such as restorative justice initiatives. A restorative justice initiative exposed the underlying causes of student misbehavior instead of relying exclusively on extreme disciplinary actions. Studies by Zehr (2021) drew attention to restorative justice initiatives that decreased suspension rates, enhanced student behavior, and improved the school environment for African American students. Many schools around the country utilize restorative justice initiatives, which promote preventative measures and incorporate relationships of support that have the potential to lessen disciplinary inequities instead of promoting punitive methods (Elrod et al., 2021). The findings demonstrate that zero tolerance policies have enormously influenced school discipline procedures over the last several decades. Despite the fact that zero tolerance policies were put in place to promote school safety,

there is a need to look into studies regarding zero tolerance policies by delving into asking RQs specifically focused on school administrators' perspectives.

### **Related Studies and Methodology**

After examining the phenomenon under investigation, the next section explored studies relevant to the RQs and the methodological approaches used to guide this study. A review of related studies disclosed meaningful themes that address each of the RQs: How do school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students, and what organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators' discretionary decisions regarding the implementation of zero tolerance policies for African American female students? Welsh's study (2024) related to the RQs, as it found that while zero tolerance policies are designed to enforce strict disciplinary measures, street-level bureaucrats do exercise discretion in their application. Asking school administrators about the RQs in this study concerning their perceptions of how much discretion was needed in response to disciplining African American female students provided a unique viewpoint. Discretion allowed street-level bureaucrats to consider individual student circumstances, past behaviors, and backgrounds in their decision-making process (Hall & Hampden-Thompson, 2022). A study by Strickland (2022) indicated that discretionary discipline practices were heavily influenced by race and gender. This study presented that African American female students were frequently associated with stereotypes that labeled them disrespectful and disruptive (Strickland, 2022). Race and gender intersected and may have shaped how

students were treated in disciplinary contexts since African American female students often experienced both racial and gender-based discrimination concerning school discipline policies (Butler-Barnes et al., 2022). In a report by from the National School Climate Center (2024), Villenas and St. Bernard Jacobs argued that the school's climate contained many interrelated factors that influenced the perceptions of school staff and students. School administrators played a fundamental role in forming the atmosphere of a school, which may have impacted the dissemination of discipline to students as it related to zero tolerance policies. Another study by Sorensen et al. (2021) described how the discretionary actions of school administration had significant implications for African American female students. Their study linked stark disciplinary practices with increased dropout rates and a higher likelihood of involvement in the school-to-prison pipeline (Sorensen et al., 2021). The impact of disproportionate disciplinary measures in this context may have widened educational gaps between European American and African American students (Sorensen et al., 2021). The findings had a commonality: a call for change to mitigate the negative impact of discretionary practices. Despite the implications of studies related to the RQs, additional research that examined specific gaps, particularly school administrators' perceptions of implementing zero tolerance policies on African American female students, may have provided meaningfulness to the approach selected for this study.

### **Gaps in Zero Tolerance Policies Implementation**

This study explored the specific gaps that the RQs aimed to fill concerning the discretionary practices of school administrators as street-level bureaucrats in the

implementation of zero tolerance policies on African American female students. While each RQ explored discretionary practices, there was a specific gap in the varied perspectives that school administrators held as street-level bureaucrats. Also, another specific gap was an insufficient focus on the direct impact of discretionary practices on African American female students' academic and social outcomes. Investigating African American female students' academic and social outcomes illuminated the consequences of zero tolerance policies. The next specific gap was that since this RQ examined only the perspectives of school administrators, the voices of stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and the students themselves, were not adequately addressed. The opinions of the stakeholders could have influenced the way in which zero tolerance policies were understood and executed. The findings displayed that considering alternative disciplinary approaches, namely restorative justice initiatives, could have closed specific gaps in the broader topic of school discipline. Despite the need to address specific gaps revealed by the RQ, this study may have provided more knowledge of school administrators' narratives, which may have helped institute discipline policy reform.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In Chapter 2, I extensively reviewed the literature on school administrators' perceptions of the effects of zero tolerance policies on African American female students within public schools across the United States. The literature reviewed aligned with the study's objective by examining the effects of zero tolerance policies on African American female students and contributing to ongoing discussions about equity in school discipline. The review started by describing the theoretical framework of Lipsky's (2010) street-level

bureaucracy theory, which offers an analytical perspective for evaluating the role of school administrators in implementing zero tolerance policies (Lipsky, 2010). The literature review draws on research from 2020 to 2024, centers on zero tolerance policies and their effects on African American female students (Gullo & Beachum, 2020; Peterson, 2021; Berry, 2024). From there, three significant themes surfaced from the literature review: the impact of zero tolerance on African American female students specifically, issues of equity and disparity that may shape outcomes for these students, and the viewpoints of school administrators regarding the efficacy and impartiality of zero tolerance policies. The literature review also exposed what is known and unknown about the current literature. What is known is that the widespread implementation of reactionary zero tolerance policies resulted in a significantly higher proportion of suspended and expelled students entering the juvenile court system (Strickland, 2022; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). On the other hand, the limited understanding of the specific processes by which school administrators made decisions regarding enforcing zero tolerance policies, specifically regarding African American female students, is what is unknown about the current literature (Henry et al., 2021). Chapter 3 provides a layout of the research design and rationale, details the data analysis plan, clarifies the role of the researcher, and describes the methodology. Details of the research design and rationale were explained by clearly outlining these components. The data analysis plan defines the approaches for gathering data, addresses issues related to credibility, and specifies critical ethical aspects of the research. During the interview process, I led an interactive discussion to ensure that ethical standards were respected and, in the end, provided

reliable results. Chapter 3 proceeded with a summary of the methodology, which outlined the application of purposive sampling for choosing participants. It also covered the instrumentation, which included semistructured interviews and a reflexive journal, along with methods for recruiting, participation, and data collection procedures.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the extenuating factors that influenced school administrators in their decision to adopt zero tolerance policies for African American female students. More research was required to thoroughly understand school administrators' perceptions as they applied discipline measures (Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020; Henry et al., 2021; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). A general qualitative design was employed in this study to look into the importance that school administrators placed on their own discretion while they enforced zero tolerance policies (Tisdell et al., 2025). I sought to shed light on the fundamental ramifications of this significant event. Several essential stakeholders, such as parents or guardians, school administrators, and legislators, found the study results valuable (Leung-Gagné et al., 2021). The outcomes of this research also acted as a driving force for immediate and necessary positive change in schools by fostering equity for African American female students, who were often disproportionately impacted by punitive measures.

However, the majority of the present literature focused primarily on school administrators' execution of zero tolerance policies on African American male students, not their viewpoints on administering these policies to African American female students (Ford, 2021; Henry et al., 2021; Strickland, 2022). Moreover, this study was vital due to the adverse consequences, such as the disproportionate use of zero tolerance policies on African American female students by school administrators. Examining the lived experiences of school administrators provided a deeper comprehension of the problem of

the unequal application of zero tolerance policies for African American female students, which transcended numerical data (Ford, 2021; Peterson, 2023; Strickland, 2022).

In addition, the study's research design and the rationale for its implementation were described at the start of the chapter. Also, this chapter provided an explanation of the researcher's role in the research process (Lim, 2024). The chapter then continued with an illustration of the methodology, containing the selection logic for participants, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection (Dahal et al., 2024). Next, the strategy for thematic data analysis was depicted in this chapter (Byrne, 2021). The chapter culminated in a discussion about trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and conformability, which threatened validity; ethical procedures were also considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I used a general qualitative study design to answer two RQs. The RQs probed how school administrators made discretionary decisions. The RQs also delved into the distinct processes as well as factors that influenced how school administrators made discretionary decisions, including their decision-making and the potential impact of these decisions on the students they served. The RQs were as follows:

RQ1: How do school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students?

RQ2: What organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators' discretionary decisions regarding the implementation of zero tolerance policies for African American female students?

Disproportionate student discipline, such as the erroneous implementation of zero tolerance policies, is a highly complex issue in schools (Strickland, 2022).

Disproportionate discipline refers to the unequal likelihood of certain groups of students, such as African Americans, facing suspensions, expulsions, or other disciplinary actions for similar offenses compared to their peers (Maeng et al., 2024). In addition, zero tolerance policies are defined as decisive school disciplinary strategies that mandate specific, predetermined punishments for particular violations of school rules, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the behavior (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). This general qualitative design study centered on understanding the participants' viewpoints and meaning-making. The phenomenon at the focal point of this study was the disproportional impacts of zero tolerance policies on African American female students, which frequently resulted in elevated suspension rates and increased interaction with the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is a troubling process where certain school policies (such as zero tolerance policies) disproportionately affect marginalized students and push them toward incarceration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). Earlier research into zero tolerance policies indicated that African American female students were substantially more likely than their male counterparts to face removal from school because of their misconduct (Peterson, 2023). Although African American female students were being removed from school for misconduct more

frequently, the amount of zero tolerance policies enforced by school administrators fluctuated across schools nationwide (Strickland, 2022).

School discipline policies were crucial for parents, guardians, school administrators, and community policymakers, as they provided a foundation for a safe and productive learning environment (Welsh, 2024). Zero tolerance policies significantly impacted student achievement, raising important questions about the fairness of disciplinary procedures for parents and guardians (Ford, 2021). School administrators play a key role in applying and executing these policies (Huang & Cornell, 2021). For this reason, their perspectives were needed in order to understand the implementation, execution, and rationale behind them. In addition, policymakers created the laws that dictated school discipline regulations, and their point of view influenced future modifications in disciplinary methods (Welsh, 2024). Therefore, it was imperative that these stakeholders were included in the final decisions of these policies in order to understand the different degrees of zero tolerance policies and their varying effects on African American female students. Doing so promoted a cooperative approach to creating equitable disciplinary procedures that support a welcoming learning environment for all students.

The use of a general qualitative design allowed for the collection of rich descriptions of school administrators' discretionary decision-making authority and their perceptions of the policies they administered (Tisdell et al., 2025). This design was crucial to the study as it aligned with Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory, which examined the discretionary power held by school administrators (Lipsky, 2010). As a

result, there was coherence between the research purpose, which sought to comprehend school administrators' perceptions of the execution of zero tolerance policies concerning African American female students, and the research tradition of a general qualitative design (Tisdell et al., 2025). General qualitative designs were a part of the research tradition, centering on characterizing the lived experiences of individuals in a specific circumstance. This study identified the general qualitative design tradition in order to grasp the real meaning of the experiences lived from the participants' viewpoint. In addition, researchers conducting general qualitative design studies predominantly employ open-ended, semistructured interviews as a primary method for collecting in-depth qualitative data from participants. Previous beliefs concerning the phenomenon had to be set aside during the course of the study (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Moreover, the primary emphasis was on the RQs, making sure that participants were not unnecessarily affected in order to secure a complete understanding of their experiences.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My primary role as an observer-participant researcher was crucial to this research since it involved directly communicating with the participants throughout the study. Examining the participants' viewpoints and feelings in this capacity enabled me to better understand their lived experiences. Throughout the research process, I maintained constant, direct engagement with the participants, encouraging an active discussion that improved the caliber of the data collected. My objective was to completely involve myself in the views of the participants in order to reveal their multifaceted thoughts that influenced their lived experiences. Through doing this, this method promoted a more

successful, genuine portrayal of their experiences, ensuring that the results were precise and understandable.

The participants engaged in semistructured interviews that involved scripted questions and unscripted follow-up questions, which were amended during the study due to vicissitudes in the research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). However, implicit biases may influence the data collection process (Tisdell et al., 2025). Given the sensitive nature of the study's topic, participants may disclose distressing experiences related to their professional responsibilities. Therefore, constant observations of the participants' reactions, such as their body language, were assessed during and after they provided their responses (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Personal or professional relationships were not present in my role as the researcher. Nor was there a position of power over any of the study's participants. Nevertheless, biases may have affected the study's outcomes and limited the study. The first potential issue in obtaining information in this study was the possibility of bias. In order to lessen potential bias, I clearly documented my assumptions with regard to the research topic, participants, and outcomes prior to initiating data collection. This included creating a list of beliefs or expectations related to the study. Additionally, I was actively engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process, reflecting on my own biases to better understand how they may have influenced the study. The second potential issue involved possible challenges concerning the methodology employed for data collection, which were addressed by ensuring trustworthiness through rigorous adherence to high standards such as credibility, reliability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The last potential

issue related to the study's sample size, which was addressed by employing purposive sampling to guarantee that the sample was adequately represented.

I identified no other ethical issues. I did not conduct the study within my own work environment. It was key for me to effectively manage potential participant distress throughout the interview phase of the study since it was essential to keep the participants' well-being safe and the research integrity intact. Creswell and Poth (2024) asserted that the best way to handle participant distress when exploring sensitive conversations was to pay close attention to both verbal and nonverbal cues. Many of these cues included observing changes in voice tone, body movement, or signs regarding responses (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Keeping in tune with these signals allowed me to respond appropriately when necessary.

The informed consent process was critical to this study since it established adherence to ethical research practices and procedures. The process began with a clear and concise introduction of this study, which focused on the significance of interpretations and perceptions of the discretion of zero tolerance policies by school administrators. Next, I explained how the interviews were conducted, including the expected length of the interviews as well as the sensitive nature of the topic of the study. I reiterated that participation in the study was totally voluntary and that participants may have chosen to withdraw at any time without being faced with any harmful consequences. In addition, I clearly described the way in which the participant's confidentiality was maintained, including how the data collected was stored. I also explained where the collected information may be published or presented. Also, I identified any potential

emotional risks associated with participating in the study and discussed how these risks were minimized. At the same time, I focused on the many potential benefits that the participants and the broader educational community may have gained from the study's findings.

Finally, I provided a written consent form, which had to be completed before the study began. This form had all of the information discussed, including a section for participants to date and sign, indicating their comprehension and willingness to participate. Moreover, the participants also received a copy of the consent form for their records (Creswell & Poth, 2024). By ensuring that all participants were fully informed of their engagement in the study, the informed consent method promoted ethical standards in the research. I had no intention of providing any incentives for taking part in this study, such as cash or a gift card for participation. Participants were invited only if they were interested in the study's topic and ready to contribute to its development. A comprehensive overview of the strategy utilized during the study was helpful to fully comprehend what steps were taken to complete this research successfully.

### **Methodology**

The methodology is explained in detail in this section to enable other researchers to replicate the study. Specifically, this section highlights the logic for participant selection, the instrumentation employed, the recruitment and participation procedures, the data collection methodologies, and the subsequent strategy for analyzing the information (Tenny et al., 2022). To align with the study's goals, the methodology is also described the overall structure and rationale behind the research. The reason for this purpose was to

clarify the justification for the selection of specific approaches in order to answer the RQs that guided the study. Still, a lucid methodology ensured the validity and dependability of the study by enabling the reader to comprehend and assess the research process objectively (Tenny et al., 2022). Also, NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), was applied to the study to help answer the RQs (Freitas et al., 2022). Applying NVivo facilitated in collecting, organizing, analyzing, visualizing, and describing the data (Alam, 2020).

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The target population for this study consisted of principals, vice principals, and deans who worked at public high schools in New Jersey for at least 3 years and were currently responsible for implementing discipline in accordance with the school's zero tolerance policies. In addition, since school administrators had a direct role in implementing zero tolerance policies, their perspectives and experiences were significant in comprehending how zero tolerance policies affect African American female students. Zero tolerance policies often disproportionately affected these students (Ford, 2021). A population sample was necessary to get essential data and participant access for qualitative research, as asserted by Creswell and Poth (2018). The minimum goal for participant recruitment in this study was to include between five and 12 school administrators. According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), a sample size that ranges from five to 12 participants was suitable for a study utilizing semistructured interviews, as this permitted for more of an in-depth and intricate insights, encouraging a thorough examination of participants' discretionary practices. In addition, as noted by Creswell and

Poth (2018), themes reached saturation with a sample size between five and 12 participants.

However, if the initially conducted interviews revealed a need for a broader range of perspectives, the sample size may be expanded in order to reach saturation. Nevertheless, recruitment efforts were ongoing until no additional themes or insights arose from the data, signifying that saturation had been achieved. Additionally, purposeful sampling was employed to allow for the selection of participants based on their direct involvement in enacting and interpreting policy. Using this approach ensured that the sample aligned well with the RQs (Stratton, 2024). Additionally, this study addressed biases and ambiguities of zero tolerance policies executed by school administrators by concentrating on how these practices affected African American female students in particular. Considering the viewpoints of school administrators, stakeholders may also have identified areas for reform that may possibly have led to a more equitable disciplinary approach.

Purposeful sampling was essential when recruiting participants based on their experiences related to the specific phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Tisdell et al., 2025). Purposeful sampling was chosen since it enabled me to select participants based on their direct involvement in enacting and interpreting policy. These participants, who were also considered street-level bureaucrats, played a major role in the way zero tolerance policies are applied and executed. Focusing on this specific group of participants helped me obtain a deeper insight into their lived experiences as well as their daily decision-making processes. Oftentimes, qualitative research employed purposeful

sampling (Bekele & Ago, 2022). Purposeful sampling was used in this general qualitative design study to select participants consciously rather than arbitrarily, ensuring that the sample was appropriate for addressing the RQs (Stratton, 2024). Additionally, purposeful sampling may have been used when comparing various samples in a study, such as research on a gender-specific group (Pusey-Reid et al., 2022). This study justified using purposeful sampling since it facilitated a deliberate selection of participants and offered rich information about how school administrators perceive zero tolerance policies. Even with this focused method, it may have improved the validity of this study and the breadth of knowledge about the intricacy of zero tolerance policies.

The study's inclusion criteria included participants who were school administrators, which consisted of principals, assistant principals, and deans who had worked for a public high school for at least 3 years and who were currently in charge of implementing the school's zero tolerance policies. Yadav (2021) asserted that the above criteria helped to ensure that the information obtained was relevant, helpful, and appropriately represented the participants' perspectives. In addition, a requirement for the participants in this study was for them to have worked for schools with a diverse population, including African American female students. This criterion was in place, given that it ensured that school administrators have a perspective that took into account the unique difficulties African American female students experienced. Defining the selection criteria for participants validated that useful information was obtained from school administrators who were knowledgeable about the complexities of zero tolerance policies and how they affected African American female students. Although the extensive

participant selection process was necessary, the selection criteria were followed to improve the validity and comprehensiveness of the general qualitative design study findings.

Several identification and verification techniques were performed to determine how the participants fulfilled the designated study criteria. In order to verify their present position, years of experience, and pertinent duties connected to school administration and policy enforcement, participants were asked to submit their resumes or curricula vitae (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The necessity of the research participants to supply their professional resumes or curricula vitae was another verification technique aimed at the enhancement of the credibility of the data-gathering process. Collecting this supplementary information allowed me to authenticate the participants' credentials and guarantee that the data acquired is trustworthy and appropriately represents the study group. Confirming the credentials of the school administrators via school district websites was another method of verification that satisfied the professional requirements for this study. Using these methods to find and confirm the chosen participants guaranteed that they met the study's requirements. Granting the significant value of this comprehensive strategy verified that the information acquired accurately represented the perspectives of school administrators concerning zero tolerance policies and how they affected African American female students.

Hennink and Kaiser (2022) assert that a small sample size of participants was appropriate for qualitative studies. This allowed for a deeper exploration of the participant's discretionary practices. This approach aligned well with Lipsky's street-

level bureaucracy theory, which emphasized comprehending the decision-making processes of school administrators who acted as street-level bureaucrats daily through their direct experiences and perspectives on zero tolerance policies. Smaller sample sizes enabled detailed interviews, potentially yielding more knowledge of participants' viewpoints, experiences, and decisions of zero tolerance policies. Greater in-depth interviews were conducted with fewer research participants, which created an atmosphere where school administrators felt free to express their views and firsthand experiences (Tisdell et al., 2025). While there was significance in having more than 12 participants in this general qualitative design study, the smaller sample size struck a healthy balance between the need for diverse perspectives, the qualitative goal of in-depth comprehension, and the feasibility of comprehensive data analysis.

An organized approach was required to successfully identifying, contacting, and recruiting participants in this study (Negrin et al., 2022). The first step in identifying prospective participants was to precisely explain the selection criteria, including the school administrator's background with zero tolerance policies and applicable school population demographics (Webber-Ritchey et al., 2021). Second, contacting professional educational associations by drafting a professional letter that introduced the research study helped gain access to a pool of prospective participants (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Third, coordinated virtual and in-person sessions that included an overview of the research objectives, methods, and potential impacts, where potential participants learned more about the study. To maintain neutrality and avoid coercion during recruitment, I clearly stated that participation is voluntary and did not offer incentives that may have

unduly influenced the decisions of potential participants. By demonstrating carefully followed approaches, school administrators offered insightful information about zero tolerance policies and their impact on African American female students, who were successfully identified, contacted, and recruited as participants. I understood that establishing trust with potential volunteers may still have been challenging, even with this methodical approach.

In this general qualitative design study, the relationship that existed between saturation and sample size was essential. Saturation was the point in general qualitative design research when data collection no longer yielded new insights or themes (Wutich et al., 2024). This concept was intricately linked to Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory, as achieving saturation allowed me to comprehensively understand how various discretionary decision-making processes among school administrators, who are street-level bureaucrats, held discretionary power in the way they influenced the implementation of policies like zero tolerance in practice. Saturation indicated that enough information to understand the phenomenon being studied has been achieved and that additional data would be redundant (Stewart & Ezell, 2022). Reaching saturation in this study was necessary for verifying the accuracy and thoroughness of the research's conclusions since it established a complete portrayal of the participants' perceptions and lived experiences (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Saturation and sample size in this study had an evolving, contextually specific connection (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The findings revealed that the sample size facilitated recruiting and that saturation was an important indicator that sufficient information had been obtained to accurately assess how school

administrators viewed zero tolerance policies for African American female students. Considering the relevance of achieving saturation, a confident interpretation of the findings reflected the topic in this study.

### **Instrumentation**

Qualitative instruments in the interviewing process are tools and techniques used to gather detailed, descriptive data from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Tisdell et al., 2025). Also, Creswell and Poth (2024) asserted that interviews are an excellent method for obtaining data in general qualitative design studies. The data collection instruments for this study included the interview protocol, which consisted of semistructured interviews via Zoom, audio recordings on the iPad, and reflective journal notes. The interview protocol entailed semistructured questions aligned with the study's theoretical framework and RQs (Tisdell et al., 2025). The RQs were developed based on previous literature on zero tolerance policies that pertained to African American female students. The theoretical framework for this study was Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory. Semistructured interviews that employed a combination of preset and open-ended questions allowed for flexibility and thorough exploration of the participants' responses (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Applying Zoom for the interviews yielded a wealth of data, which allowed the analysis of nonverbal cues, offering beneficial insights (Howlett, 2021). The data collection instrument allowed for audio recording of the one-to-one, semistructured interviews, which were later coded during data analysis (Santhosh et al., 2021). The Zoom virtual platform was a practical choice because it helped lessen certain expenses for the study's participants, such as travel costs, and

expanded the recruitment scope that included additional participants for the study (Oliffe et al., 2021). Keeping reflective journal notes contributed to the study's transparency and clarity by documenting ideas, experiences, and interpretations, which also assisted in refining both the research design and analysis (Saldana, 2021). A reflective journal was another form of data collection instrument used in this study. A reflective journal was a helpful way to record one's thoughts, feelings, experiences, and observations about the research process throughout the study process (Draissi et al., 2021). Furthermore, a reflective journal was a beneficial way to document biases and assumptions in order to gain deeper insights into the data and ensure reflexivity in the study (Tisdell et al., 2025).

The source for the data collection instruments was researcher-produced since interview protocols were developed based on themes from existing literature and theoretical frameworks (Tisdell et al., 2025). The researcher-produced data collection instruments were customized to address the unique aspects of this study, such as the specific challenges faced by African American female students regarding zero tolerance policies in their schools. Additionally, the interview questions were written to align with the study's objectives and theoretical frameworks in order to make sure that the data collected effectively answers the RQs (Tisdell et al., 2025). To explicitly map the data collection instruments in this study, I clearly stated the instruments that were used. These instruments included semistructured Zoom interviews, audio recordings on the iPad, and reflective journal notes (Wakelin et al., 2024). In RQ1, the focus was on how school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students;

semistructured interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth perspectives from school administrators concerning their decision-making processes and discretion when implementing zero tolerance policies for African American female students. Interviewing via Zoom allowed me to grasp school administrators' physical responses throughout the interview, which provided a broad comprehension of the surrounding circumstances regarding their discretionary practices (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The reflective journal notes were recorded of the school administrators' reflections on their lived experiences, which illustrated consistent or inconsistent examples in their discretionary practices.

In RQ2, the focus was on what organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, when they applied discretionary decisions to African American female students; semistructured interviews were performed to explore in what way school administrators interpret zero tolerance policies as it related to particular demographics, which allowed for probing into the reasons behind their interpretations. Interviewing via Zoom was utilized to analyze the expressive element of the school administrators' interpretations, which influenced how zero tolerance policies were applied to African American female students. The reflective journal notes provided comprehension into any developing interpretations that pertained to zero tolerance policies and their application to African American female students. This study mapped the instruments used to establish alignment with the RQs, highlighting the decision-making processes and the effects of school administrators' zero tolerance policies.

Designing researcher-produced interviewing protocols guaranteed that the terminology utilized during the semistructured interviews was culturally acceptable as well as sensitive to the participants' experiences, thereby improving the accuracy of the data (Tisdell et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the importance of using the researcher-produced data collection instruments in this study was that several factors, such as historical or legal documents, had to be considered to show their reproducibility and to support their position as the study's best data source. Determining if the data collection tools were appropriate for this study required establishing that these tools addressed each RQ. Therefore, it was of the utmost importance to make sure that each of the RQs for the study was directly related to the data gathering instruments. To illustrate this, interview questions explicitly inquired about the expertise and understanding of zero tolerance policies that school administrators possessed if a RQ pertained to their comprehension of these policies. Also, it was beneficial to ask semistructured, open-ended interview questions of the school administrators so they could express their views in their own way. Open-ended questions resulted in further information and observations into the participant's thoughts and reasons. Data collection instruments needed to be continuously reviewed and improved based on the initial results. Additionally, being receptive with regard to the information discovered during the data collection process of this study promoted sufficiency.

Interview Protocol Step 1 included the current literature on school discipline disparities, particularly in relation to zero tolerance policies and the discretionary practices employed by school administrators, and provided a crucial foundation for the

development of the interview questions in this study. Previous studies depicted the manner in which zero tolerance policies disproportionately affect African American students, especially female students, which led to significant discipline inequalities (Ford, 2021; Henry, 2021; Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). This literature provided substantial evidence that school administrators, as street-level bureaucrats, possess considerable discretion in how zero tolerance policies are interpreted and applied, which also shaped the discipline experiences of African American female students (Chang & Brewer, 2022; Eriksson & Johansson, 2021; Hassan et al., 2023). The interview questions in this study were relevant and rooted in academic research, allowing for a thorough exploration of zero tolerance policies and equity issues since they were designed to explore school administrators' decision-making processes and their knowledge of their discretion power.

Step 2 included posing the following interview questions to the participants:

1. Could you describe any personal experiences regarding implementing zero tolerance policies within your school?
2. How would you conceptualize zero tolerance policies, and which fundamental principles do you believe underpin these policies?
3. In what ways do zero tolerance policies impact African American female students compared to female students of other racial backgrounds? Please provide an example.

4. Do cultural factors impact the implementation of zero tolerance policies differently for African American female students than for female students of other racial groups?
5. How do you assess the fairness and equity inherent in the zero tolerance policies implemented at your school? The follow-up question was, Are there particular issues regarding these policies that raise your concerns?
6. How do zero tolerance policies influence the educational outcomes of African American female students?
7. Could alternative disciplinary approaches, such as restorative justice programs, be more effective for African American female students?
8. In what ways does your school engage with the community in conversations about its zero tolerance policies? The follow-up question was, Have the perspectives of community stakeholders, such as parents and guardians been taken into account throughout these conversations?
9. Have you ever taken advocacy measures to propose changes to your school's zero tolerance policy? The follow-up question was, What was the outcome of such advocacy efforts?
10. What modifications could be instituted in zero tolerance policies within your school to enhance support for African American female students?

I conducted the interviews to gather detailed responses that reflect the lived experiences of school administrators concerning zero tolerance policies on African American female students. Also, Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory

provided a solid framework for understanding the intricate dynamics that school administrators are faced with on a daily basis when implementing zero tolerance policies, especially with regard to African American female students. According to Lipsky, street-level bureaucrats functioned between policy and practice, where they had considerable discretion in their role when making decisions that affected the lives of the students they served. This theory was directly relevant to the interview questions in this study, as it spotlighted how school administrators, as street-level bureaucrats, exercised their discretionary power in applying zero tolerance, stringent policies as well as interpreting these policies within their school environments. Therefore, clearly understanding the discretionary practices of school administrators shed light on the broader implications for African American female students, showing the challenges they face in schools and the complexities of policy implementation that may have worsened disciplinary disparities. Regarding Step 3, Table 1 illustrates the alignment of each instrument with the RQs, showcasing the contribution of each source to addressing these questions.

**Table 1***Alignment of Research and Interview Questions*

Research question	Interview question	Related concept in Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory	Focus of interview question
1. How do school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students?	1. Could you describe any personal experiences regarding implementing zero tolerance policies within your school?	Discretion	The lived personal experiences with zero tolerance policies, focusing on the decisions made by school administrators during the implementation of these policies
	4. Do cultural factors impact the implementation of zero tolerance policies differently for African American female students than for female students of other racial groups?	Discretion	How cultural factors influenced the understanding and application of zero tolerance policies
	7. Could alternative disciplinary approaches, such as restorative justice programs, be more effective for African	Discretion; policy interpretation	Alternative disciplinary approaches for African American female students

Research question	Interview question	Related concept in Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory	Focus of interview question
2. What organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators' discretionary decisions regarding the implementation of zero tolerance policies for African American female students?	American female students?		
	9. Have you ever taken advocacy measures to propose changes to your school's zero tolerance policy?	Discretion	The actions taken by school administrators to influence policy
	2. How would you conceptualize zero tolerance policies, and which fundamental principles do you believe underpin these policies?	Discretion; policy interpretation	How school administrators theorized and interpreted zero tolerance policies
	3. In what ways do zero tolerance policies impact African American female students compared to female students of other racial backgrounds? Please provide an example.	Discretion: policy interpretation	The impact of zero tolerance policies on African American female students based on school administrators' applications
	5. How do you assess the fairness and equity inherent	Discretion; policy interpretation	Whether zero tolerance policies were

Research question	Interview question	Related concept in Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory	Focus of interview question
	in the zero tolerance policies implemented at your school?		equitable for all students
	6. How do zero tolerance policies influence the educational outcomes of African American female students?	Discretion; policy interpretation	How zero tolerance policies influenced educational outcomes for African American female students
	8. In what ways does your school engage with the community in conversations about its zero tolerance policies?	Discretion; policy interpretation	How schools engaged in zero tolerance policies within the community, which delved into their implications for schools and stakeholders
	10. What modifications could be instituted in zero tolerance policies within your school to enhance support for African American female students?	Discretion; policy interpretation	The importance of how changes to existing policies were implemented to better support African American female students

Step 4 included the expert review process for the suggested interview protocol, which was described in order to demonstrate content validity in this study. Two content experts participated in this process and offered input to improve the research instrument's credibility and relevance. First, I selected a faculty member from St. Peter's University in New Jersey, specializing in equity in education and qualitative research methods, as well as an experienced retired assistant principal with practical knowledge of educational discipline policy, particularly zero tolerance policies, who qualified as a content expert. Next, I provided the experts with a draft of the interview protocol. I also shared the alignment table, which detailed the research and interview questions alongside the theoretical framework. Then, I requested detailed expert feedback regarding the clarity and relevance of the interview questions, their alignment with the RQs, and the cultural sensitivity concerning the target audience. Lastly, I reviewed the feedback that I gathered from the experts and integrated them in order to help produce a well-structured and transparent interview protocol. This expert review process enhanced the content validity of the protocol by ensuring it is comprehensive and appropriately tailored to address the RQs effectively.

Step 5 included mapping the interview protocol directly to the RQs and theoretical framework, which was critical in ensuring that this study effectively gathered relevant data. RQ1 was, How do school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students? This question examined how school administrators exercise their discretionary power with regard to executing zero tolerance policies

involving African American female students. RQ2 was, What organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators' discretionary decisions regarding the implementation of zero tolerance policies for African American female students? To answer this question, I solicited the school administrators' reflections on interpreting their discretionary power as well as how school administrators perceived the effect of their decisions on the broader interpretation of zero tolerance policies within their schools.

I chose Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory as the theoretical framework for this study because it engages with the concepts related to how public frontline workers, such as school administrators, make decisions in regard to the implementation of policies. Moreover, questions within the interview protocol addressed the belief that school administrators did not merely enforce policies but also interpreted and adapted them according to their discretion. The interview protocol was mapped directly to the RQs, and the theoretical framework for this study explored the various ways school administrators' perceptions and discretionary practices were viewed regarding zero tolerance policies. Doing so not only ensured that relevant data was collected but also helped to maintain a clear focus on the study's objectives, facilitating meaningful analysis and interpretation of the findings.

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

I recruited participants for the semistructured interviews, which began with creating a flyer that included relevant information about the study, as well as contact information on the website of a professional association for school administrators. I also contacted Walden University's research participant pool manager and sent a draft

recruitment message that explained the study and its requirements. I gathered information from school administrators who met the specified criteria and demonstrated a readiness to participate in the study. I obtained data from participants who met the specified criteria needed to maintain the validity, reliability, and richness of the research outcomes.

Recruitment played a primary part in general qualitative design studies, as the quality and depth of the data rely heavily on the experiences and viewpoints of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

The recruitment process persisted until an adequate number of participants was reached. I then scheduled the interviews contingent upon the final decision of school administrators regarding participation. I then conducted data collection with each participant. The frequency of data collection with each participant held significance, as it affected the depth and richness of the gathered data, the prospect for saturation, and the general reliability and validity of the research results (Tisdell et al., 2025). Each participant engaged in in-depth, one-on-one, semistructured interviews on Zoom that lasted between 30 and 60 min. I scheduled individual Zoom meetings with prospective school administrators to discuss the study's prerequisites.

Utilizing the Zoom virtual platform was a pragmatic solution, as it effectively reduced costs for both the researcher and the participant, including travel expenses, while broadening the recruitment potential to encompass a larger demographic (Olliffe et al., 2021). I used an iPad to record data, which was an effective instrument for capturing audio documentation of the semistructured interviews, as well as organizing qualitative research data surrounding this study. Moreover, I utilized handwritten notes to facilitate

detailed note-taking during the semistructured interviews, which was the best practice for recording and documenting the interviews. Also, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. I crafted a detailed follow-up plan that involved expanding recruitment channels, such as considering school administrators from various educational communities, to promote the study since the initial recruitment yielded a small number of participants.

I then implemented snowball sampling, which was an effective strategy. The snowball sampling method required the initial participants to recommend other school administrators who may be interested in joining the study, and it helped to expand the participant pool (Sharma et al., 2024). I successfully executed a structured follow-up plan that resulted in achieving the desired number of participants while promoting the acquisition of rich, insightful data for the study. Although the study's participant recruitment procedures were significant, it was necessary to provide trustworthy research findings that have the potential to one day advance the understanding of how zero tolerance policies affect African American female students. I explicitly linked each instrument, such as interviews, handwritten notes, and audio interview recordings, to the RQs to show how they contributed to answering them.

RQ1 was, How do school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students? Interviewing school administrators provided a comprehensive look at the way in which they used discretion when applying zero tolerance policies to African American female students. The employment of interviews

allowed for inquiries into discretion, reasoning, and other factors that influenced school administrators' decisions, which were essential for this study. In addition, handwritten notes taken during the interview provided related understandings by capturing impulsive thoughts that mirrored the school administrators' attitudes toward discretion and its application, particularly regarding African American female students. Audio recordings of interviews enhanced the ability to review the school administrators' responses in detail and took into account their mannerisms, which revealed broader perceptions of how they interpret and utilize discretionary power.

RQ2 was, What organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators' discretionary decisions regarding the implementation of zero tolerance policies for African American female students? Questioning school administrators during the interview process assisted in understanding the effect that the discretionary power had on shaping their decisions regarding interpreting zero tolerance policies on African American female students. Moreover, handwritten notes used during the semistructured interviews displayed new themes involving the implications of school administrators' discretionary interpretations. Additionally, analyzing audio recordings of these interviews explained the school administrators' narratives around how their discretionary choices influenced policy outcomes for African American female students. Linking each of these instruments to the RQs added to the collection of ample, detailed data that explained the intricacies of school administrators' discretionary practices, as well as their impacts on zero tolerance policies relating to African American female students. Each instrument

served a distinctive purpose, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

The participants exited the study upon following the debriefing processes described. A thorough debriefing process was required to evaluate the data collected from participants. This process included a number of crucial actions that were necessary to maintain ethical standards in this study. To make sure the debriefing process is in line with the objectives of the study, a review of its purpose was done first (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Second, at the end of the interview, the last few moments were designated to allow the participants to ask final questions and provide additional insights. Third, I highlighted the confidentiality of the participants, which included ensuring their identities remain anonymous, highlighting that participation was voluntary, and informing them of their right to withdraw from this study at any time. Fourth, given that the research addressed sensitive information, which included experiences with discipline and zero tolerance policies, participants were offered resources for counseling concerning the matters discussed. The debriefing process was important for maintaining ethical standards (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). It provided participants with information about the study's objectives, outcomes, and the implications of their participation in it. The debriefing process made it possible for participants to address questions or concerns and strengthened the importance of what they contributed (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). A solid debriefing process protected the participants' ethical treatment and maintained the research's integrity (Whitney & Evered, 2022). Although the debriefing procedures of the

study held great importance, participants were permitted to depart with a clear understanding of their role and involvement.

To ensure meaningful participant engagement and strengthen the study's validity, the follow-up procedures employed in this study were essential (Aurini et al., 2021). I sent participants a thank-you email and stated that I would share a summary of the findings within 3 months after the final analysis. This message strengthened our relationship, emphasized the significance of their perspectives, and cultivated goodwill by establishing explicit follow-up procedures.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I followed a systematic approach for interpreting and analyzing the data in this study. The data analysis plan was key for maintaining a structured, forthcoming analysis firmly rooted in the RQs (Creswell & Poth, 2024). I followed Saldana's (2021) coding guidelines to analyze the collected data. The data analysis plan encompassed multiple steps and was essential for synthesizing findings and extracting valuable insights. The first step involved meticulously transcribing each interview with the study's participants verbatim in order to have a precise representation of the data (Hill et al., 2022). The second step involved selective coding, which organized the various codes and enhanced the understanding of the central phenomenon being studied (Saldana, 2021). Selective coding was suitable for this general qualitative study because it allowed me to focus on the core themes and concepts that guided the RQ. The selective coding and thematic analysis rigorously sought to pinpoint how school administrators conveyed their discretionary practices and interpretations of zero tolerance policies in their schools.

Additionally, by refining and integrating different codes and categories, selective coding enabled the development of a cohesive and unified narrative that explained the observed phenomena.

Moreover, open coding preceded selective coding since it was the primary step for recognizing extensive concepts in qualitative studies. Also, open coding permitted a more comprehensive exploration of the data gathered, which generated a wide range of initial codes and categories. In contrast, selective coding focused on the most salient and relevant concepts to develop a coherent narrative. In addition, Braun & Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis process was an iterative and reflexive process in which codes were generated and refined throughout the analysis. The thematic analysis was suitable for a general qualitative design for its flexibility, accessibility, and ability to uncover meaningful patterns within data. Thematic analysis was a frequently utilized method for exploring diverse RQs and was often applied to a myriad of qualitative research designs. The third step focused on synthesizing the themes into a unified narrative (Naeem et al., 2023). The fourth step included analyzing the coding to pinpoint essential themes that encapsulated the perspectives of the participants on zero tolerance policies (Rodríguez-Dorans, 2022). Also, the participants' comprehensive explanations of each theme were backed by direct quotations in order to effectively convey their viewpoints (Eldh et al., 2020). The fifth step utilized NVivo, software designed for qualitative data analysis, to assist in addressing RQs (Alam, 2020). The NVivo software aided in gathering, organizing, visualizing, interpreting, and synthesizing the data collected (Tang, 2023). Additionally, NVivo made it less difficult to handle substantial amounts of qualitative

data (Allsop et al., 2022). A discrepant or outlier data point stood out from the rest and greatly differed from the prevalent pattern or selected trends within the data set (Patton, 2001).

Discrepant or outlier data were valuable in understanding a study's scope of lived experiences or perspectives. I addressed discrepant or outlier data by acknowledging them, exploring the reasons for straying from the standard, and possibly using them for additional research or to develop new themes. These were examples of what constituted discrepant or outlier data, illustrating to the audience the implications and applications of using this approach. Rather than just removing or changing discrepant or outlier data, it helped to uncover brand new themes, refine their understanding of the RQ, and even challenge existing theoretical frameworks. The sixth step comprised member checks to strengthen the trustworthiness and reliability of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Malmqvist et al., 2024). The seventh step consisted of performing a cross-case analysis to examine and differentiate perceptions among various school administrators, since the study involved multiple participants (Plugge & Nikou, 2024). Throughout the cross-case analysis, special attention was paid to determine patterns in how discretionary power was used differently across participants and circumstances (Plugge & Nikou, 2024). A cross-case analysis uncovered wider trends regarding the shared comprehension of zero tolerance policies (Plugge & Nikou, 2024). The eighth step reviewed the outcomes of existing literature as well as theoretical frameworks related to this study (Busetto et al., 2020). The ninth step involved preparing a comprehensive report that outlined the themes and supporting evidence and discussed the implications of the results (Naeem et al.,

2023). A structured data analysis plan ensured a methodical approach that augmented rigor and credibility in understanding school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies and their implications for African American female students. Although having a structured data analysis plan for this study was pivotal, there was also a chance that several issues with trustworthiness may have occurred (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Coding, synthesis, and thematic development played a crucial role in addressing the RQs regarding the discretionary power of school administrators as street-level bureaucrats and their effects on African American female students in the framework of zero tolerance policies. Coding consisted of sorting and classifying the data accumulated from interviews in this study, which identified key patterns and themes associated with how school administrators enacted their discretion. This process enabled me to detect specific behaviors, views, and reasons of school administrators since they traversed the workings of zero tolerance policies. Subsequently, synthesis combined coded information to systematically understand the primary subtleties at play (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Synthesizing the data revealed that school administrators' discretionary actions reflected their individual interpretations and influenced discipline practices and responses to African American female students. Doing so directly addressed the RQ of how discretionary power influenced policy implementation and interpretation. Lastly, thematic development depicted the broader implications of these findings, illustrating the universal factors that affected disparities in educational outcomes for African American female students under zero tolerance policies. Analyzing the themes that emerged from the data explained how the discretionary power exercised by school administrators had vast

effects, extending to African American students and the widespread school culture. Through careful coding, synthesis, and thematic analysis, this study improved the understanding of the challenges related to discretionary power, the execution of zero tolerance policies, and the disparate impact on African American female students.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was necessary for general qualitative design studies as it guaranteed the results' veracity and general integrity, thus strengthening confidence in the findings and their possible implications (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were significant in establishing trustworthiness in general qualitative design studies. The purpose of trustworthiness in this study was to make significant contributions to the topic explored. Multiple strategies were employed to tackle issues related to trustworthiness, which were essential to the general qualitative design. General qualitative design research should be conducted in a trustworthy manner that others can verify. While the significance of creating trustworthiness in this study was major, describing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability within this study was most important. Trustworthiness strategies were vital because they addressed the inherently subjective discretionary decisions made by school administrators. This illustrated the importance of utilizing the member checks approach, conducting peer reviews, and reflexivity in balancing subjective components. These strategies ensured that I truly represented the authentic perspectives of the participants versus reflecting my own interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Credibility**

Establishing credibility was fundamental, as it sought to ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of the outcomes obtained in this study (Williams, 2024). This study used several strategies to strengthen its credibility. These strategies, including member checking, point of saturation, triangulation, and peer review, were used to verify the study's reliability. Initially, I utilized a member check approach. Using this strategy permitted participants to agree or explain interview results so that data correctly reflected their perspective (Lloyd et al., 2024). The following strategy involved achieving the point of saturation. Reaching data saturation was important for establishing the credibility of the study's findings, as it signified that enough data had been collected to totally analyze the research topic and identify all relevant recurring themes (Alam, 2020). Triangulation was utilized across a diverse range of data sources, enhancing the research's reliability and depth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2024; Denzin, 1978). This approach was complemented by the inclusion of researcher reflexivity, which ensured that my perspectives and biases were acknowledged and thoughtfully addressed throughout the study. The final strategy was to conduct a peer review. Severin and Chataway (2020) stated that peer review encourages the exchange of valuable critiques as well as distinct perspectives on information and its interpretations. When adopting credibility strategies, it was essential to consider the transferability issue related to this study to produce reliable research.

## **Transferability**

Transferability provided in-depth descriptions of the circumstances, participants, and processes so that the audience may assess the findings' applicability to other settings besides schools (Ahmed, 2024). It was considered a key aspect of ensuring the trustworthiness of this study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study used two strategies to enhance transferability. The first strategy was thick descriptions, which provided detailed descriptions of the research factors, which included specific settings, such as the demographic characteristics of the schools and the qualifications of the studied participants. The audience can better comprehend the details influencing participants' perspectives if the surroundings are adequately portrayed. Purposive sampling, which was the variant of participant selection for this study, constituted the second strategy. Purposive sampling was a nonprobability sampling method pivotal to adding to transferability by thoroughly selecting participants with distinct perspectives that were appropriate and useful for each RQ (Subedi, 2023). Purposive sampling allowed for variation in selecting participants with specific knowledge related to the research topic (Robinson, 2023). Providing detailed demographic and background descriptions was essential for helping future researchers assess applicability to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2024). Selecting participants with relevant knowledge on the topic assisted in identifying the factors that influenced the phenomenon in question. The audience may use this knowledge to determine how these elements worked in multiple settings. Therefore, the audience may be able to evaluate the impact of these factors on transferability through transparency. Applying these strategies

may be invaluable in addressing the issue of dependability in order to improve the trustworthiness of the research being conducted.

### **Dependability**

Dependability was required to attain trustworthiness, as it ensured that the research study's conclusions remained consistent, reproducible, and grounded in the data collected (Nguyen et al., 2021). Verifying dependability in this study was essential to maintaining that the findings were credible and resilient to criticism. Two approaches were employed in this study to enhance transferability further. The utilization of audit trails was the first approach. The audit trail process was a complete record of each step taken during the research process, from the preliminary RQ to the closing stages (Ahmed, 2024). In addition, audit trails documented the choices, reflective thinking, collection of data, and analysis processes, which ultimately were beneficial in establishing trustworthiness by permitting others to follow the reasoning for the study and possibly duplicate the results (Enworo, 2023). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), audit trails play a critical role in completely documenting every decision made during the research process, such as recruitment, interview design, coding, and analysis, which enriched transparency and ensured the integrity of the research findings. Also, conducting multiple peer reviews significantly improved reliability and provided a higher quality standard (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Triangulation was the second approach, which involved employing multiple strategies or sources of data to gain extensive knowledge of a phenomenon and to assess validity by examining the commonality of data from different viewpoints (Patton, 2014).

Four distinct areas of triangulation were identified by Denzin (1978): methodological triangulation, which included methods to conduct a study and validated the results; investigator triangulation, which uses several researchers to study a particular phenomenon such as theory triangulation, which applies multiple perspectives in order to decipher the results of the study; and data triangulation, which uses multiple data sources within one study. Triangulation techniques were commonly used to increase the credibility of the study, according to Denzin (1978). Triangulation also increased the study's credibility, reduced the possibility of overlooking viewpoints, and guaranteed the validity as well as the dependability of the results. Considering the necessity of triangulation implementation, conformability was addressed to confirm the study's accuracy and efficacy.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was the degree to which the data collected supported the findings of a qualitative study (Tenny et al., 2022). Confirmability highlighted the significance of objectivity, ensuring the findings were primarily influenced by participants' responses instead of being swayed by biases stemming from the researcher (Bingham, 2023). Confirmability was achieved through reflexivity, which involved self-reflection on biases, beliefs, and lived experiences that may have impacted the research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Reflexivity was a prominent strategy that involved ongoing self-reflection throughout the research process, achieved through journaling thoughts and feelings related to the research topic. (Berten & Wolkenhauer, 2023). Reflexivity was a continuous process throughout this study and was a vital component of the reflective

journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2024). I, as the sole coder, utilized reflective journaling and peer debriefing to improve the reliability of my work. Additionally, I explored AI-assisted coding tools, such as auto-coding features in NVivo and other AI text analysis tools, which served as a form of secondary coding. AI-assisted coding tools used AI algorithms to help write code by providing real-time recommendations. This approach helped enhanced both dependability and transparency in the coding process (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Nowell et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2024).

In examining school administrators' perceptions regarding zero tolerance policies targeted at African American female students, the ability to grasp discretionary power developed was critically interlinked with participants' capability to articulate their reasoning and interpretations in their own words. This account was essential for creating a complete description that encapsulated the participants' lived experiences and perceptions, demonstrating the essential function reflexivity has in the research process (Tenny et al., 2022). This study maintained data integrity by aligning with Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory, which suggested that individual interpretations significantly affect policy application. This study drew attention to individual stories designed to demonstrate how intricate interpretations affect zero tolerance policies. It also highlighted the need for thoughtful discussion concerning the broader impacts of these practices on African American female students. By clearly identifying the influence of biases, beliefs, and lived experiences, I demonstrated awareness of how my personal viewpoints may influence data interpretation and worked to ensure that the conclusions

were grounded in the participants' perspectives (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). The data collected acknowledged these factors because they affected how the data was interpreted and how participants interacted. Employing the reflexivity strategy ensured that the findings regarding school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies reflected participants' authentic voices.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Acknowledging ethical procedures concerning matters of trustworthiness was important to this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Obtaining consent to access participants was a crucial ethical procedure that had to be completed before any study began (Klykken, 2022). The consent agreement to gain access to the study's participants emphasized the importance of obtaining each participant's informed consent, ensuring that they understood the objectives, methods, potential risks, and benefits of the study before participating (Newman et al., 2021). There were three key steps in clarifying the formal agreement process with the professional associations for this study. First, relevant professional associations were identified, and their membership criteria and research support guidelines were reviewed (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Second, the study's goals, methods, and importance were outlined in a thorough research proposal that was formally submitted to the educational association for review. Third, once the association showed interest, conditions were established for distributing an announcement asking members to take part in the study.

Throughout this process, I ensured adherence to ethical standards, pursued necessary approvals, and maintained frequent communication with the association, with

the hope of benefiting the broader educational community. The ethical procedures provided by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) were followed, and data collection only began after obtaining IRB approval (Walden University, 2025b). The IRB assures that all research performed at Walden University adheres to the university's ethical standards and aligns with U.S. federal regulations. Before the research began, each participant received an email with a comprehensive informed consent form that contained the study's details, contact details, and statements about their security and privacy rights. Following ethical procedures throughout this study was a substantial element; therefore, a description of the treatment of human participants was also provided.

Prioritizing the safety and treatment of human participants was paramount to this study. I followed the ethical standards established by Walden University (2025b), which included obtaining authorization from the IRB (no. 10-14-25-1138434). To obtain full IRB authorization, a complete proposal was submitted. This proposal included the study design, participant recruitment strategies, data collection protocols, and ethical procedures (Walden University, 2025b). Authorization from the IRB was obtained before starting any data collection endeavors. Considering the backgrounds of the participants and the group of students being studied, it was important to be certain that the recruitment materials were culturally sensitive and thoroughly reviewed in order to avoid coercion and addressed ethical concerns (American Psychological Association, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2024).

I designed each of the RQs in a manner that minimized any possible harm and took every precaution to safeguard those involved. As a result, two important safeguards were in place to protect research participants. The first safeguard was to remind participants that they were under no obligation to complete the interview if they were uncomfortable. Participants in the research were made aware of their freedom to stop at any moment if they wanted. Also, the procedures were followed to handle distress during the interview, which included pausing the interview, the option to withdraw, and providing resources for counseling if they exhibited signs of increased stress. Whereas participant safety during this study was of the utmost importance, it was particularly important to maintain the participants' data, since this was extremely important in maintaining the privacy and authenticity of the participants' information. The second safeguard was to carefully examine each of the semistructured open-ended questions posed during the interview. The RQs were structured according to the study's design in order to avoid eliciting unpleasant feelings from the participants involved.

Implementing ethical procedures for the treatment of data in this study was significant. Only those participants that was responsible for making discipline decisions for African American female students were invited to participate in the data collection for this study. Certain measures were implemented to protect participants and assure their anonymity, which included the collection of signed informed consent forms. Two actions were implemented to address ethical concerns effectively. Firstly, I developed a detailed data management plan that described the methods for gathering, organizing, storing, assessing, as well as disposing of information with a high priority on maintaining

anonymity. Secondly, a detailed informed consent form that clearly outlined the way in which the information would be used so that the participants were able to make intelligent decisions regarding their participation in the study. The data assembled from the interviews were confidentially accumulated on a personal laptop, which was kept locked in a secure location. The participants were assigned the identifier Study Participant (SP) SP1, SP2, and so on.

All of the collected data will be kept for no more than a maximum of 5 years until the study's completion; after that time, it will be destroyed. By doing this, an intense adherence to ethical standards is upheld, and the continued confidentiality and integrity of participant information are guaranteed (Walden University, 2025b). Managing participant data according to ethical procedures was extremely important when researching how school administrators make decisions. Policy implementation was a sensitive topic that could have made participants feel vulnerable, especially for street-level bureaucrats, whose roles were often complex. Fully outlining how data was treated was paramount in this study since other ethical concerns may have surfaced, such as conducting research at an individual's workplace, conflicts of interest, power imbalances, and explanations for the use of incentives.

This study did not raise any additional ethical concerns. Furthermore, this study centered on school administrators in their authoritative roles, which decreased ethical risks connected to power imbalances with vulnerable participants. A clear recruitment criterion was established to avoid conflicts of interest by excluding individuals with whom I have a personal affiliation, as well as friends or family members. As a result, no

anticipated conflicts of interest were expected in this study. Moreover, this study underwent a rigorous evaluation by the IRB, which explored the research design and ethical considerations to verify adherence to all ethical guidelines (Walden University, 2025b).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influenced school administrators' decisions to implement zero tolerance policies impacting African American female students. I used a qualitative study design to answer the following RQs.

RQ1: How do school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students?

RQ2: What organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators' discretionary decisions regarding the implementation of zero tolerance policies for African American female students?

Chapter 3 began with the methodology utilized to investigate school administrators' perceptions and how these elements affected the application of zero tolerance for African American female students. This study involved school administrators from public school districts in New Jersey. The circumstances of African American female students were distinguished from those of students in other categories of gender and racial intersections, primarily due to the increased prevalence and scope of zero tolerance policies (Billups et al., 2022). I was committed to reflexivity and to managing potential biases, as my role as the researcher was pivotal (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). This role also involved building relationships and encouraging trust with participants to elicit accurate, reflective replies that accurately grasped their lived experiences and understandings (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Trustworthiness strategies, such as triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing, were necessary and applied in this study to enrich the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which were incorporated to ensure rigor. Ethical procedures, including informed consent and confidentiality, were closely followed to respect participants' rights and promote an open atmosphere for communicating sensitive acuties. Together, these factors aligned closely with the study's purpose and RQs, which facilitated an inclusive and rigorous examination of how street-level bureaucrats' perceptions shaped the implementation as well as the impacts of these policies on African American female students, ultimately contributing to a deeper acuity of systemic issues in discipline practices.

I collected data from school administrators who met the criteria at the time of the study. The data analysis plan encompassed a comprehensive data management plan that included conducting semistructured interviews with participants regarding their experiences with zero tolerance policies (Strydom et al., 2023). After that, the interviews were transcribed, a coding system was developed based on the main themes that showed up in the data, codes were used to identify recurrent patterns, and finally, those patterns were examined to obtain a better understanding of the experience as a whole (Tisdell et al., 2025). In addition, in Chapter 3, I outlined my research role in the study. This included accepting responsibility for self-reflection, being aware of any attitudes, biases, as well as personal experiences encountered throughout the research process. The chapter

detailed the approach, including how purposive sampling was used to guarantee that the sample correctly represented the community. Semistructured interviews and a reflective journal were used to assist in tracking the feelings and thoughts that may have surfaced and to anticipate how these emotions could have affected the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The process of recruitment, participation, and data collection involved engaging school administrators through online professional educational associations and conducting semistructured, one-on-one interviews via Zoom (Tisdell et al., 2025). Furthermore, NVivo, a CAQDAS, was applied to aid in collecting, organizing, and interpreting the data (Giesen & Roeser, 2020). In Chapter 4, I presented the findings of this study in relationship to the RQs (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies for African American female students in public high schools throughout New Jersey. Given the limited amount of research on school administrators' perceptions of discipline procedures affecting African American female students, this study aimed to fill that gap and improve understanding of how zero tolerance policies are perceived and implemented in school settings. Guided by this purpose, the findings presented in this chapter reflect administrators' perspectives on zero tolerance policies and their perceived impact exerted on African American female students. The RQs were

RQ1: How do school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise their discretionary power when implementing zero tolerance policies regarding African American female students?

RQ2: What organizational, cultural, or systemic factors influence school administrators' discretionary decisions regarding the implementation of zero tolerance policies for African American female students?

The findings of the study are presented in this chapter. I arranged the presentation according to themes that support the two RQs. Chapter 5 includes an interpretation of the results.

### Setting

The study's setting comprised five public high schools in suburban and semisuburban areas in New Jersey. These high schools range from small (100+ students) to large (1500+ students). All of the high schools were situated in residential communities with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, which included both middle and working-class households, as well as shared fundamental demographic characteristics such as race, income, and marital status. Although the schools had diverse demographic profiles, they all included a significant representation of African American students, particularly female students, whose discipline experiences were paramount to this study. During the study period, one of the five participating schools experienced financial constraints that resulted in staffing reductions and limited access to behavioral support services. School administrators at this school reported that the reduction in staffing increased their disciplinary workload, caused strain with regard to their discretion, and limited the availability of preventive and restorative interventions.

As a result, school administrators reported heightened stress as well as more infrequent opportunities to address student behavior through supportive or individualized approaches, which, at times, led to a greater reliance on more traditional disciplinary measures. School administrators characterized these conditions as contributing to an increased administrative burden and broader systemic strain that shaped their day-to-day disciplinary decision-making. Even though school administrators across all of the public schools described being committed to fostering a positive school climate, equity, and student-centered practices, they also acknowledged persistent

challenges related to behavioral disparities and disproportionate disciplinary outcomes for African American female students. Furthermore, school administrators stated that the availability of resources, especially the degree of staffing levels, affected how they enforced zero tolerance policies in their individual schools and dictated their disciplinary responses. These circumstantial conditions should be examined when understanding the findings reported in this chapter, as they shed light on the institutional restrictions that shaped school administrators' views and judgments.

### **Demographics**

I employed two sampling techniques, purposive and snowball, to identify potential participants who were directly responsible for implementing zero tolerance policies in their high schools. Recruitment efforts included emailing the recruitment flyer to a school administrators' education association, which forwarded it to its members. Several school administrators expressed interest, and eligibility was determined in accordance with established inclusion criteria, and informed consent was obtained from all of the eligible participants prior to scheduling interviews. Further information about recruitment processes and sampling techniques could be found in Chapter 3.

While eight school administrators expressed interest in joining the study, only five satisfied the inclusion criteria and provided written consent, mainly due to their scheduling issues and workload restrictions, which then led to a sample focused on acquiring deep insights rather than breadth. In addition to providing valuable, experience-driven data that was essential to the study's goals, each participant was personally responsible for implementing zero tolerance standards. The five participating high school

administrators differed in race and ethnicity, had between three to 12 years of experience implementing disciplinary policies, and were assigned numbered pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Detailed participant demographic and interview information are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Interview date	Interview time	Interview duration	Race/ethnicity	Gender	Years of administrative experience
SP1	November 17, 2025	4:00 p.m.	52:22 min	White	Male	3
SP2	November 20, 2025	4:15 p.m.	1hr 40 min	—	Male	12
SP3	November 21, 2025	3:30 p.m.	49:26 min	African American	Male	4
SP4	November 23, 2025	5:00 p.m.	52:28 min	African American	Female	9
SP5	November 24, 2025	4:00 p.m.	58:43 min	African American	Male	7

*Note.* Participant identifiers are used to protect confidentiality. One participant declined to disclose their race or ethnicity.

### Data Collection

I conducted thorough, semistructured interviews with each participant in the study to collect data on their perceptions of zero tolerance policies for African American female students in their schools, with the aim of ascertaining their beliefs, decision-making, challenges, equity issues, and school culture as they relate to discipline. All of the interviews constituted the sole data source for this study. The selected participants were experienced school administrators, each of whom had a minimum of 3 years of experience in implementing discipline policies in public high schools across the state of New Jersey. To recruit these participants, I first emailed invitation flyers to New Jersey

education associations and then to a local education association. Additionally, I had a brief phone conversation or email interaction with each prospective participant to verify that they met the study's inclusion criteria. Moreover, I provided each participant with the opportunity to ask any questions they had regarding the study as well as to receive support if they experienced any emotional discomfort as a result of their involvement. Employing purposive sampling, I selected five participants for one-on-one, semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom. Each participant completed a single interview, and no follow-up interviews were conducted. Data collection occurred as planned and was consistent with the procedures outlined in Chapter 3.

Prior to the start of the interviews, I confirmed informed consent by asking participants to email the phrase "I consent." I emphasized the importance of confidentiality and informed participants that all data would be kept strictly confidential and accessible only to me. Data were collected using the Zoom virtual meeting platform, for which an email link was shared with each participant. Before the start of the study, both the dissertation committee and the Walden University IRB approved all interview questions. Interviews were audio-recorded using an iPad, and handwritten notes were taken during each interview session. I did not experience any scheduling disruptions, nor did participant cancellations occur during the data collection process. One participant (SP3) experienced a brief internet connectivity issue at the beginning of the interview, which was resolved immediately and did not affect the interview or the quality of the data collected. All electronic data compiled during the study were securely stored on an

encrypted, password-protected device in accordance with Walden University requirements.

I examined the audio recording after each interview to verify the accuracy of the transcription. Also, the handwritten notes were amended after one participant was contacted with two follow-up questions for clarification. No new categories or viewpoints had emerged by the final interviews; instead, recurrent themes did surface. Copies of the transcripts were distributed to each of the study's participant as part of the member-checking verification procedure. By lowering the possibility of researcher bias and giving participants to independently verify the veracity of their answers, this process increased trustworthiness. During late November 2025, interviews took place over several weeks, mainly over the weekends as well as the late afternoons. The interview times varied from 49 min to 1 hr 40 min. Following a final review, all audio recordings and transcripts were deemed complete and ready for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data collected from each of the semistructured interviews to comprehend the participating school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies affecting African American female students. I started by coding the data according to Saldana's (2021) thorough guidelines. Saldana's guidelines entail a rigorous analysis of the collected data to ensure that each section is correctly categorized and assessed against the specified criteria. These initial codes were then compared and grouped into broader categories based on common patterns and conceptual similarities, which served as an analytic bridge between coding and the development of themes. Next,

I used Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis to develop themes for this study. The six-phase thematic analysis process comprises familiarization, coding, generating, reviewing, and defining themes, as well as writing up and articulating the key themes that emerged from the study. Furthermore, thematic analysis was an effective method for examining how school administrators understand and implement zero tolerance policies for African American female students. This approach clearly identifies essential patterns in participants' lived experiences and carefully analyzes how they interpret disciplinary policies and exercise their discretionary powers in their positions.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) process, I assessed data saturation by examining whether each theme stood alone rather than merely replicating the same data. Saturation was achieved after continually examining all five interview transcripts, as no new ideas emerged, and participants' responses invariably reflected parallel patterns regarding school administrators' choices, disciplinary practices, workplace culture, and race-related differences in discipline. In the later stages of analysis, additional coding was employed to strengthen and clarify the four themes rather than to generate new insights. This indicates that the collected data were sufficient to address both RQs. Braun and Clarke (2021) argued that, in thematic analysis, saturation is defined by the richness and coherence of the themes identified opposed to the number of participants in the study. A detailed codebook outlining code definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and alignment with the study's RQs is provided in Appendix C.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

To enhance the rigor and quality of this study, I employed a range of rigorously selected strategies to establish trustworthiness in accordance with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These strategies confirmed that the findings accurately captured the diverse perspectives of the study's participants and their individual experiences. Using rigorous methods such as participant interviews and thematic analysis, I developed an extensive framework for interpreting their perspectives. Moreover, the analysis process was made clear by thoroughly documenting each phase, the coding methods employed, and the rationales for the decisions made.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility was firmly established through careful attention to the data, rigorous iterative analysis, and close attention to the language used by each participant in the study. I reviewed the interview transcripts, audio recordings, and handwritten notes multiple times to become deeply familiar with the participants' responses. Throughout the Zoom interviews, nonverbal cues, including facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture, were observed and recorded to enhance the interpretation of participants' perspectives in the study. Descriptive coding is closely aligned with participants' words to reduce the risk of misinterpretation. This method established that school administrators' perceptions accurately reflected their views on disciplinary decision-making regarding African American female students, rather than relying on broad assumptions. By privileging participants' language and meanings, the analysis honored

the specificity and complexity of the school administrators' lived experiences within their distinct school settings. Credibility was enhanced by pinpointing and examining cases that differed, which helped clarify the limits of the themes and confirm that the results accurately reflected the viewpoints of various school administrators' environments; this approach is aligned with the credibility strategy outlined in Chapter 3, which highlighted the importance of analyzing differing cases to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. This process validated that the findings reflected a diverse range of experiences and decision-making approaches among school administrators, rather than a single narrative. Implementing these strategies led to an accurate representation of school administrators' experiences with discretionary decision-making in disciplinary practices.

### **Transferability**

Transferability was supported by thick, comprehensive descriptions of the research setting, participants, and outcomes. Detailed descriptions of school administrators' roles, disciplinary policies, and school environments help the reader assess whether the findings apply to other types of schools. In addition, details of the school settings, such as district expectations, disciplinary guidelines, and the application of restorative and discipline procedures, offer sufficient background to assess the applicability of the findings across different educational settings. Moreover, using direct quotations from the study's participants enhances transferability by illustrating how disciplinary decisions are understood and applied. By featuring the participants, it provides clarity that helps readers assess relevance. Qualitative findings are not intended for statistical use. Still, the study's historical detail enables readers and practitioners to

evaluate its significance to similar schools and administrative positions, thereby benefiting African American female students. This study does not aim to generalize findings to all schools. Instead, the detailed descriptions of school administrators' experiences permit readers to determine whether the findings are pertinent to similar school settings and administrative roles serving African American female students.

### **Dependability**

Dependability was demonstrated through a systematic, transparent, and well-documented descriptive code process devised to promote consistency across all phases of the research. Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis process, which offered an organized, iterative method for becoming familiar with the data, first coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and refinement, was followed throughout the data analysis process. This framework ensured that the qualitative approaches were deliberate and reviewed as the analysis progressed. Saldaña's (2021) qualitative coding guidelines allow codes to remain closely aligned with participants' language while ensuring consistency and systematicity across all interview transcripts. To promote consistency in coding choices and theme development, codes were systematically applied across participant interviews, and prior transcripts were reviewed. An audit trail was created by detailing the documentation of the descriptive coding processes, including code notes, theme development, and iterative modifications. This documentation provides the process to be traced from raw data to final themes and offers insight into how interpretations evolved over time. The use of the NVivo 15 qualitative data analysis software provide a powerful tool that increases dependability by supporting

organized data management, rapid retrieval of coded segments, and uniform application of codes across participant interviews. Collectively, these techniques demonstrated that the results were based on a trustworthy and replicable data analysis process.

### **Confirmability**

I enhanced confirmability by ensuring that the research results derived directly from participant feedback and were not influenced by researcher bias or prior beliefs. Maintaining an unambiguous relationship between the beliefs described in the findings and the lived experiences reported by the school administrators was a significant focus of the study. Instead of representing my personal viewpoints, this data-focused approach sought to ensure that the conclusions reflected the participants' perspectives on disciplinary decision-making. Throughout the data analysis process, reflexive techniques were frequently employed to promote awareness of positionality and potential bias. Systematic memo writing and ongoing reflection during coding and theme development were used to examine, document, and bracket personal perspectives that could influence interpretation. These reflexive efforts enabled me to explore emerging themes critically and to remain focused on how assumptions regarding discipline, race, and administrative authority may have shaped descriptive code decisions; additionally, including direct quotes from participants enhanced confirmability by showing how their interpretations related to the original data. With verbatim excerpts, the reader can observe how themes originated from the school administrators' lived experiences and determine the accuracy of their statements. Also, examining cases that did not fit the norm required paying special attention to perspectives that differed, ensuring that the results were not selected

at random but reflected the full range of participants' experiences. The NVivo 15 program for qualitative data analysis helped organize materials, ensuring clarity and ease of follow-up. It facilitated the organization of data in a structured manner and made it easier to identify links among the interview data, the codes used, and the end themes. Collectively, these strategies reinforced the data-grounded nature of the analysis and strengthened the confirmability of the study's findings. Table 3 presents the descriptive codes and corresponding categories developed from the interview data during the initial stages of analysis.

**Table 3***Codes and Categories Derived From Interview Data*

Initial code	Code description	Category	Evidence example
Zero tolerance as mandatory	Policies must be enforced without discretion.	Policy rigidity	Participants described situations where consequences were required regardless of context.
Safety as a primary concern	Discipline justified by student and staff safety	Safety justification	Participants emphasized violence and weapons as nonnegotiable infractions.
Lack of school administrator discretion	Inability to adjust consequences	Reduced professional judgment	Participants reported limited flexibility in decision-making.
Consistency in discipline	Same consequences for all students	Equity through uniformity	Participants believed uniform enforcement prevents favoritism.
Perceived fairness	Belief that equal punishment ensures fairness	Policy rationale	Participants noted that policies were designed to avoid bias.
Disproportionate impact	Certain groups are affected more frequently	Disciplinary inequity	Participants acknowledged higher discipline rates among specific student populations.
Impact on African American female students	Policies affected African American female students differently.	Racialized gender impact	Participants discussed dress code and behavioral expectations.

Initial code	Code description	Category	Evidence example
Removal of the human element	Discipline lacking rational consideration	Dehumanization of discipline	Participants described discipline as automatic or impersonal.
Shift towards restorative justice practices	Moving away from zero tolerance	Policy evolution	Participants noted strict efforts towards restorative justice practices.
Data-driven reflections	Using discipline data to guide changes	Institutional awareness	Participants described reviewing suspension and attendance data.
Reentry challenges	Difficulty reintegrating students	Postdiscipline consequences	Participants discussed stigma upon student return
Emotional burden on school administrators	Stress of enforcing policies	Administrative strain	Participants described moral conflict in enforcement

Table 4 illustrates the themes that emerged from the clustered categories using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis.

**Table 4***Themes Derived From Analysis of Interview Data*

Theme	Theme description	Representative descriptive code
Constrained discretion under policy mandates	Participants articulated how constraints on their professional judgment in implementing zero tolerance policies, influenced by state mandates and safety regulations, resulting in fixed disciplinary outcomes.	State-mandated nondiscretion; safety-based justification; policy rigidity
Discretion as situational judgment	Participants mentioned that allowing discretion influenced disciplinary decisions based on specific circumstances, the judgment of school administrators, and efforts to maintain fairness and consistency.	Situational discretion; fairness as consistency; policy deferral
Organizational culture and policy implementation	Participants emphasized that both school and district norms shaped how zero tolerance policies were interpreted and enforced, including shifts toward restorative justice practices and the use of suspension and attendance data to inform policy decisions.	Policy as tradition; restorative justice practices shift; data-informed change
Racial disparities in discretionary enforcement	Participants identified disproportionate disciplinary outcomes affecting African American female students, particularly related to dress code enforcement, behavioral surveillance, and challenges associated with student reentry following discipline, including out-of-school suspensions.	Disproportionate discipline impact; dress code surveillance; stigmatized student reentry

*Note.* Themes were developed using inductive thematic analysis of school administrators' interview data.

Table 5 shows how the identified themes align with the study's RQs, demonstrating the connection between the analytic findings and the purpose of the study.

**Table 5**

*Alignment of Themes and Research Questions*

Theme	RQ addressed
Constrained discretion under policy mandates	RQ1
Discretion as situational judgment	RQ1
Organizational culture and policy implementation	RQ2
Racial disparities in discretionary enforcement	RQ1, RQ2

*Note.* Each theme addressed at least one research question; however, because administrative discretion is shaped by organizational context, some themes aligned with both research questions. RQ = research question.

## **Results**

This qualitative study's purpose was to examine how school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, exercise discretionary power while implementing zero tolerance policies that affect African American female students. Additionally, this study sought to analyze the organizational, cultural, and systemic factors that impact those discretionary decisions. Analysis of the semistructured interview data revealed four major themes reflecting school administrators' experiences with policy implementation, discretion, and disciplinary decision-making; these themes are presented in this chapter with supporting participant excerpts. The results in this study indicate that participants described their discretionary power as constrained. Participants frequently stated that they had limited discretion under state or district-mandated zero tolerance policies, particularly those infractions that include weapons, acts of physical violence, or other

serious violations. However, the participants reported that they could apply situational discernment in nonmandated situations, such as the student's intent and disciplinary history. The participants also described organizational culture as influencing the implementation of zero tolerance policies in their school settings. School district current discipline guidelines, as well as diverging perspectives, frequently influence how school administrators understand and apply policies. Additionally, participants reported that in certain schools, a larger emphasis on discipline statistics was often accompanied by a stronger focus on restorative justice programs. Furthermore, school administrators admitted that enforcing policies that were more subjective, like dress codes, on individual cases was thought to lead to disparate discipline for African American female students.

### **Theme 1: Constrained Discretion Under Policy Mandates**

Participants in this study frequently reported that district- or state-mandated zero tolerance policies influenced disciplinary decision-making and limited administrative discretion. This theme addresses RQ1 by describing how mandated disciplinary actions restricted school administrators' discretion and addresses RQ2 by explaining the legal and systemic requirements associated with policy enforcement. These school administrators reported that discretion was eliminated in situations that involve state-mandated misconduct, which include weapon possession, physical violence, and sexual assault. Additionally, participants noted that these cases require specific protocols and minimum disciplinary actions, regardless of individual circumstances. Moreover, school administrators stated that, in these cases, disciplinary actions followed a series of fixed, predefined consequences. One participant stated, "In such cases, there is an automatic 10-

day suspension, no discretion, pending a superintendent's hearing" (SP5). Participants correspondingly depicted safety as a primary consideration in mandated disciplinary decisions. One administrator stated, "My number one job is safety" (SP2), emphasizing the priority placed on student and staff protection when enforcing required disciplinary actions.

### **Theme 2: Discretion as Situational Judgment**

Participants oftentimes described situations in which they employed discretion when administrative judgment was permitted under the school district's standards. By demonstrating how school administrators execute discretionary decisions within the bounds of policy, this theme responds to RQ1. School administrators also clarified that they utilized situational considerations to inform their choices in cases where an established disciplinary action was lacking. These situational considerations included the circumstances around the incident, the intention of the student, as well as the past disciplinary record. One participant asserted that disciplinary decisions often "depend on the circumstances and what I know of the situation or the individuals involved" (SP2). Participants also acknowledged that discretionary power was not applied consistently across school administrators. In addition, several school administrators recalled instances in which teachers or fellow administrators hesitated to enforce policies due to discomfort, often shifting responsibility to others. One school administrator candidly remarked that enforcement was commonly "tossed your way because they do not want to have the uncomfortable conversations" (SP4). Participants further described how fairness was broadly understood in the context of making discretionary decisions. School

administrators said that fairness was often interpreted as applying equal consequences to all students, regardless of their specific circumstances. As one participant explained, “everyone is going to get the same consequence” (SP3). Participants indicated that this approach was used even when policy permitted discretion.

### **Theme 3: Organizational Culture and Policy Implementation**

Participants illustrated that organizational culture influenced how zero tolerance policies were implemented in their schools. These school administrators shared through discussions that expectations and established norms routinely shape disciplinary practices. Additionally, participants discussed how zero tolerance policies are considered normal and entrenched within their schools, with enforcement guided by established traditional practices. One school administrator referred to zero tolerance as “the way we have always done it” (SP4). Participants also stated that disciplinary practices have evolved. Moreover, school administrators stated that when talking about student conduct and school climate, they frequently go over previous disciplinary records, including suspension and attendance information. After these reviews, individuals recounted discussions about current disciplinary procedures among school administrators. Some school administrators reported that they had modified how disciplinary situations were handled following these discussions. One participant explained that reviewing suspension and attendance data led the school to “pivot in terms of how we deal with those situations” (SP4).

**Theme 4: Racial Disparities in Discretionary Enforcement**

Participants in the study reported that discretionary enforcement in subjective policy areas varied across student groups. School administrators reported that zero tolerance and discretionary disciplinary practices were experienced as disproportionately affecting African American female students. These school administrators frequently mentioned variations in personal judgment, particularly when it came to enforcing the dress code. Additionally, participants reported that African American female students were more likely to undergo disciplinary actions linked to appearance and to obtain citations for dress code infractions. One school administrator stated that African American female students were generally monitored differently because they were “built differently” (SP4), resulting in more significant attention to appearance-based rules. Participants also discussed student experiences following exclusionary disciplinary actions. Several school administrators reported that students returning from suspension often encountered difficulty reentering the school environment. One participant explained that students frequently felt “not part of the community anymore” upon returning to school (SP5). They also highlighted the availability of additional support to help students reintegrate after suspension. Table 6 presents a summary of representative descriptive codes associated with each theme.

**Table 6***Themes and Representative Descriptive Codes*

Theme	Representative descriptive code
Constrained discretion under policy mandates	State-mandated nondiscretion; safety-based justification
Discretion as situational judgment	Situational discretion; fairness as consistency; policy deferral
Organizational culture and policy implementation	Policy as tradition; restorative justice practices shift; data-informed change
Racial disparities in discretionary enforcement	Disproportionate discipline impact; dress code surveillance; stigmatized student reentry

*Note.* Descriptive codes were developed using descriptive coding in alignment with Saldaña's (2021) qualitative coding guidelines.

In subsequent sections, I describe each theme in detail, using participant narratives to illustrate how school administrators experienced and enacted discretionary power during the application of zero tolerance policies.

**Discrepant Cases**

Throughout the data analysis, special attention was paid to identifying cases that deviated from prevailing patterns in participant responses. These cases included school administrators' individual accounts that varied with respect to themes of discretionary power, perspectives on zero tolerance policies, and recognition of racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes. SP1 represented a discrepant case, as the participant in this study reported greater discretion in disciplinary decision-making and expressed less concern about the impact of zero tolerance policies on African American female students than most participants. This account differed from that of the majority of the study's participants, who reported both limited discretion and disproportionate disciplinary

outcomes. Rather than challenging the prevailing ideas, this unique example was investigated to comprehend the setting in which school administrators' function. The transcript was examined with an emphasis on situational elements, such as the position of the school administrator, their professional background, and the school environment, to investigate this discrepancy in more detail. Rather than disregarding this unusual case, it was included in the analysis to enhance theme development and to demonstrate the variations in how discretion was perceived and used among participants, including discrepant cases, which strengthened the credibility of the findings by ensuring that the themes represented differences in administrators' experiences rather than a single dominant perspective. These cases were examined in relation to the overall results and contributed to understanding the study's themes by illustrating how participants perceived discretion and policy implementation.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the study's findings through a reflexive thematic analysis of the one-to-one, semistructured interviews I conducted with New Jersey school administrators. The analysis addressed two RQs and yielded four themes related to discretionary decision-making and the implementation of zero tolerance policies. In response to RQ1, participants reported exercising discretionary power within clearly defined boundaries. According to school administrators, discretion was limited in circumstances when zero tolerance policies, whether enforced by the state or the district, applied, especially when it came to firearms, physical assault, or other significant violations. Participants in these cases stressed legal accountability, safety concerns, and

adherence to discipline regulations, which have often led to disciplinary measures as an instinctive response.

Participants observed that when action is not required, situational considerations, including intent and disciplinary history, justify discretion. Additionally, participants said that consistency in results, as opposed to individual judgment, is the main way that fairness is seen. In addition, administrators observed that diverse student groups had experienced discretionary implementation by school administrators in subjective policy areas, such as dress code enforcement. The results of RQ2 demonstrate how systemic, cultural, and organizational factors affect discipline-related decision-making. Participants indicated that zero tolerance policies were ingrained in the school culture and upheld by institutional traditions, accountability expectations, and district-set norms. Moreover, school administrators indicated that disciplinary procedures have evolved, with a stronger emphasis on restorative justice and the use of disciplinary data in decision-making. Participants also stated that organizational expectations and systemic demands still influenced their usage of discretion, irrespective of these advancements. Collectively, the findings indicate that disciplinary outcomes were jointly shaped by school administrators' discretionary judgment and by systemic limitations imposed by policy mandates, organizational expectations, and institutional culture. Overall, the findings reflected how school administrators used their discretion while adhering to organizational and policy constraints. By using a pertinent theoretical framework and examining its implications for practice, policy, and future study, Chapter 5 builds upon these findings.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the study was to use a general qualitative design to explore school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies and the importance they place on their own discretion regarding discipline procedures that disproportionately impact African American female students in public high schools throughout New Jersey. In-depth, one-to-one interviews enabled me to identify patterns in the school administrators' perspectives, the challenges they encounter, and the outcomes they observe following the implementation of zero tolerance policies. Guided by the core principles of the street-level bureaucracy theory, this study examined how zero tolerance policies are put into practice and how school administrators handled disciplinary decisions within these frameworks. The study also addressed a gap in the literature by focusing on school administrators' viewpoints and analyzing the organizational, cultural, and systemic influences on disciplinary decision-making. The study provides qualitative insight into the way in which discretionary decisions shape disciplinary outcomes for African American female students.

Four key themes emerged from the analysis. Constrained discretion under policy mandates showed that both state and district policies restricted school administrators' flexibility in serious violations, such as weapons or violence. Discretion as situational judgment reflected how school administrators exercised professional judgment in nonmandated cases, considering the student's intent, preceding behavior, as well as context. Organizational culture and policy implementation stressed how school norms

influence the application of zero tolerance policies, including the use of restorative justice practices. Racial disparities in discretionary enforcement revealed that subjective decisions, such as dress code enforcement, disproportionately affected African American female students. Therefore, these findings illustrate the complexity of street-level bureaucrats such as school administrators' decision-making, as described in street-level bureaucracy theory, and show how policy constraints, organizational settings, and administrative judgment intersect to produce inequitable outcomes. The next section interprets these findings, discusses the implications for policy and practice, as well as offers recommendations for future research.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The study's findings support earlier research, which indicated that zero tolerance policies greatly constrain school administrators' discretion when handling serious disciplinary issues, especially as it pertains to serious offenses such as weapon possession and physical violence. Participants noted that the disciplinary actions in these cases felt predetermined and nonnegotiable, resulting in minimal individualized decision-making. These findings also strongly affirm that zero tolerance policies are designed to prioritize consistency, strict adherence to established rules, as well as effective risk mitigation rather than allowing for either situational or case-by-case judgment (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2022). The accounts of the participants are consistent with earlier studies, indicating that zero tolerance policies were created to reduce personal interpretation and guarantee consistent implementation throughout school districts. Therefore, the findings support the

perspective that zero tolerance policies significantly reduce school administrators' autonomy in required disciplinary situations (Davison et al., 2022).

This study also confirms previous research documenting the negative impact of zero tolerance policies and practices on African American female students' academic experiences and sense of belonging in school (Strickland, 2022). Also, prior research connected zero tolerance policies to student disengagement, stigma, and difficulties following out-of-school suspension, as well as to the rising trends in the school-to-prison pipeline (Berry, 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Ikhrom et al., 2023). These findings reaffirm the harmful consequences of punitive disciplinary approaches for marginalized student populations such as African American female students.

This study supports earlier studies showing racial differences in disciplinary results by concentrating on African American female high school students, a demographic that is frequently disregarded in discussions about school discipline. At the same time, the research offers a more in-depth insight into how African American female students are disproportionately impacted by subjective policies, especially those pertaining to dress code enforcement (Butler-Barnes et al., 2022). Also, this study offers an intersectional perspective that is mainly lacking from conventional disciplinary frameworks by investigating how school administrators perceive the intersection of gender and race in disciplinary decision-making. Also, the findings indicate that inequalities are not strictly the result of colorblind policies; rather, they are influenced by racial and gendered perceptions of student behavior, appearance, and adherence to

expectations. The findings highlight how routine administrative practices, rather than just policy language, contribute to the creation of disciplinary inequities.

The research also extends prior studies by emphasizing that school administrators continue to rely on the existing organizational culture, established norms, and longstanding disciplinary practices when implementing policies that reinforce patterns identified in earlier research linking organizational culture to persistent racial disparities in school discipline (Allen & Hilliard, 2021; Peterson, 2021). In addition to highlighting how discretionary enforcement in subjective policy areas, such as dress code violations, disproportionately affects African American female students, a population that is still understudied in school discipline research, this study also makes a significant contribution to the literature. The findings highlight subjective disciplinary situations, which show how structural and cultural factors influence discretionary decision-making, resulting in persistent unequal outcomes over time.

Equally important, the findings refute the widely held viewpoint that zero tolerance policies eliminate school administrators' discretion. The participants reported retaining substantial discretionary power in nonmandatory and ambiguous policy areas, even though discretion is obviously limited in compulsory disciplinary situations. When using professional judgment, school administrators viewed situational characteristics, student background, and perceived purpose, which reinforces prior studies showing how their perspectives remain in situations with stringent policies (Scott, 2021). By redefining discretion as either present or absent, these findings collectively expand on previous research. They reveal discretion as situational, inconsistent, and policy dependent.

Moreover, zero tolerance policies do not completely eliminate administrative discretion; they redistribute it, which limits decision-making in mandated cases while keeping it in subjective policy areas that are formed by interpretation, institutional norms, as well as student behavior. The study also extends disciplinary scholarship by continuing to concentrate on African American female students to demonstrate that discretionary enforcement in subjective areas, such as dress code violations, can have disproportionate implications when filtered through racialized and gendered expectations. The findings reveal the impact of institutional culture on the implementation of regulations; school administrators contribute to discipline disparities by applying discipline policies aligned with existing practices and professional standards. In addition, the findings show that zero tolerance policies are systems composed of organizational context, policy norms, and personal judgment, which explains why different results continue to occur even when regulations are standardized. These findings immediately lead to the study's main conclusion: that administrative discretion is limited by zero tolerance policies.

### **Disconfirmation of the Assumption of Discretion Under Zero Tolerance**

Amid growing critiques of zero tolerance policies, the results show that administrative discretion is still present in practice, particularly in areas where policies permit individualized interpretation (Gonzalez et al., 2021). In nonmandatory disciplinary situations, the participants discussed the significance of employing their professional judgment, primarily when policy language is ambiguous or subject to situational evaluation. These reports call into question the idea that zero tolerance policies

completely eradicate discretionary decision-making. It appears that discretion is evolving, as opposed to being eliminated, particularly in situations where enforcement regulations are less stringent. The participants indicated that they considered various situational aspects, such as student situations and perceived motivations, when addressing infractions that were not subject to fixed consequences. This pattern suggests that strict frameworks limit flexibility in formal disciplinary cases; however, it does not entirely remove it from everyday decision-making processes.

Furthermore, the conversations with the study's participants in regard to restorative justice practices align with contemporary research that advocates for alternative disciplinary methods within zero tolerance policies (Battjes & Zane Kaplan, 2023; Ford, 2021). In environments where policies impose constraints, school administrators explored other options whenever there was an opportunity for flexibility, consistent with research suggesting that discretionary practices persist in addition to disciplinary policies. In general, these results indicate that zero tolerance policies limit, but do not solely remove the discretion of school administrators. Therefore, the belief that rigorous disciplinary frameworks eliminate professional judgment from the practice of school discipline is challenged by discretion, which depends on regulations that are flexible enough to address particular situations and handle ambiguity.

### **Interpretation of the Findings Through Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory**

The theory of street-level bureaucracy provides an important perspective on the results of this research by demonstrating how discretion functions in settings where policies create constraints during the execution phase. This theory suggests that frontline

public service workers commonly engage in decision-making as an essential part of their daily job responsibilities, even though formal policies are in place to restrict their authority in this area. The research spotlights the interaction of diverse factors, as school administrators shared their experiences of functioning within inflexible zero tolerance policies while also handling the complicated decision-making processes unique to their school settings.

First, the finding that school administrators have little discretion during state- and district-mandated disciplinary proceedings is consistent with the premise of street-level bureaucracy theory, which is that, while formal restrictions constrain discretion, it is not entirely erased. Participants conveyed both predetermined disciplinary efforts for serious violations of state-mandated policies, such as weapons possession, physical assaults, and sexual offenses, all of which indicate that zero tolerance policies serve as limitations on decision-making. These established standards that school administrators must adhere to emphasize compliance, risk mitigation, and institutional responsibility over individual discretion, from the perspective of the bureaucracy at the ground level.

Second, the use of discretion by school administrators in nonmandated disciplinary situations echoes the main premise of street-level bureaucracy theory: that discretion emerges most clearly to address specific circumstances. Additionally, participants stated that their interpretation of disciplinary policies is oftentimes based on considering student intent, disciplinary history, and situational circumstances, demonstrating that school administrators actively translate policy into practice rather than mechanically implement it. The finding supports a theoretical framework that even in

systems intended to encourage uniformity and standardization, street-level bureaucrats naturally adapt policies to the circumstances they face.

Third, the influence of organizational culture on disciplinary decision-making aligns well with the essential principles of the street-level bureaucracy theory, especially involving informal rules, professional standards, as well as institutional policies.

Organizational culture acts as an informal foundation for policy, since school administrators commonly state that their discipline decisions are influenced by the school district's standards, professional expectations, and disciplinary regulations. Cultural norms shape how discretion is understood and applied, reinforcing certain disciplinary responses while limiting the exploration of alternative approaches.

Furthermore, the findings show that discretionary enforcement in subjective policy areas disproportionately affects African American female students, reinforcing a major insight of street-level bureaucracy theory, which is that discretion is never value-neutral. The narratives shared by the study's participants regarding dress code enforcement and disciplinary reentry procedures reveal the various ways in which discretionary power, particularly in ambiguous policy situations, can lead to disparities based on race and gender, despite the policies seeming neutral at first glance. When applied in systems of power that are not equal, discretion can perpetuate inequity instead of alleviating it. The collective findings point out the role of school administrators as essential frontline public service workers. Also, their decisions are influenced not only by formal policies but also by prevailing institutional norms, social circumstances, along with interpretive assessments, which aid in comprehending the various and often

disproportionate results of zero tolerance policies. This interpretation clearly aligns with Lipsky's (2010) argument that those working at street-level practically assume the role of a policymaker through their routine discretionary decisions, as these decisions eventually influence the actual implementation of policy. The study theoretically contributes to the understanding of street-level bureaucracy by establishing that discretionary decision-making is far more than an aspect of policy implementation: it is an essential process through which street-level bureaucrats interpret policy, which ultimately shapes and reproduces racial and gendered inequalities within school disciplinary systems.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Even though efforts to ensure rigor were put in place, several trustworthiness-related limitations emerged during the data collection and analysis process. Rather than basic methodological presumptions, these limitations were connected to aspects of the study's implementation, such as data processing techniques, my viewpoint, and the use of NVivo. Recognizing these limitations supports a transparent interpretation of the findings.

### **Credibility**

*Credibility* refers to the degree to which the results of a study accurately represent the viewpoints of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Semistructured interviews made it possible to examine school administrators' experiences in great detail, although the use of self-reported data may have introduced bias due to selective memory. It is also possible that my beliefs about school discipline could affect how the participants' experiences were interpreted. Throughout the research process, reflective journaling was

used to both document and bracket my perspective in an attempt to lessen bias. The early challenges with NVivo 15 may have impacted my initial coding choices, as I became familiar with this software's coding functions which improved over time (Freitas et al., 2022). Codes were reviewed and refined numerous times to improve their consistency and alignment with the narratives provided by participants, as the ability to interpret qualitative data improved. This bolstered credibility but did not eliminate the associated limitations.

### **Transferability**

*Transferability* refers to the extent to which the results of a study can be utilized in multiple settings or among diverse populations, as assessed by the reader (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research employed a purposive sample of school administrators from various public high schools across the state of New Jersey as well as focused on reflecting on discipline policies and organizational settings. Although rich, detailed descriptions of the research setting, participant characteristics, and school conditions were provided in order to support contextual comparison, the relatively small sample size and single-state focus limited the breadth of applicability. Additionally, the findings may not be as applicable across different school environments, grade levels, or stakeholder groups, such as students, families, and other school staff, due to the sole focus on school administrators' perspectives. The sample and school-related constraints show the significance of meticulous analysis and suggest avenues for future studies with diverse participant groups and in other settings.

**Dependability**

*Dependability* refers to the research process's ongoing reliability and consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the study, a thorough audit trail was kept to support dependability. Codes were merged and rearranged when coding techniques were improved during analysis as NVivo 15 proficiency increased. Although the precise replication of the original coding structure may be limited by this repeated improvement, methodological inconsistency is replaced by a methodical, theoretically informed qualitative process. Previously coded data were reviewed and recorded in order to guarantee alignment with the refined coding framework and uphold rigor. All coding decisions and revisions were thoroughly documented in the audit trail, thereby preserving transparency, consistency, and trustworthiness across all phases of analysis.

**Confirmability**

*Confirmability* refers to how well the study's findings are based on the participants' statements instead of being influenced by my personal bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although NVivo 15 aided in structuring and retrieving data, the systematic decisions regarding descriptive coding, category formation, and theme organization were based on my interpretation. To sustain confirmability, reflexive practices, notes, and comprehensive documentation of coding decisions were preserved throughout the research process, thereby allowing interpretations to be traced directly to the data. Initial coding decisions were made as familiarity with the software developed; yet these decisions were reexamined and refined through ongoing comparison with the data. Although alternative analytic approaches within the software may have yielded

other thematic configurations, the transparent documentation of the rationale improves the confirmability of the findings. Nevertheless, my perspective could have influenced the interpretation of participants' statements, even with the use of reflective practices to mitigate potential bias.

### **Recommendations**

The study provides insight into how school administrators perceive zero tolerance policies and exercise discretionary decision-making that affects African American female students in public high schools in New Jersey. Based on the results of the study, limitations, and identified gaps in the literature, the following recommendations outline directions for future research. Future researchers should expand the geographic scope of the investigation by examining school administrators' perceptions of zero tolerance policies beyond the state of New Jersey. Addressing this constraint of being limited to a single state would allow future studies to further investigate RQ1 by exploring how school administrators, acting as street-level bureaucrats, interpret and navigate policy constraints across varied disciplinary and regulatory settings.

Given this study's exclusive focus on school administrators, future research should incorporate the perspectives of additional stakeholders, including students, their families, as well as other school staff (Hendren et al., 2022; Leung-Gagné et al., 2021). Broadening the population under investigation would extend RQ1 and RQ2 by capturing how the way in which discretionary decisions are perceived and experienced through various stages in the disciplinary procedure, addressing a persistent gap in the literature regarding diverse perspectives. Future scholars may also employ mixed-methods or

quantitative research designs to complement qualitative analysis and examine broader patterns associated with discretionary decision-making. This recommendation recognizes the constraints of qualitative design as well as promoting a more thorough exploration of RQ2 by placing school administrators' interpretations within expanded disciplinary patterns related to race, gender, and policy implementation.

Also, future researchers should focus more explicitly on subjective policy areas, such as dress code enforcement, which emerged as central to the theme of racial disparities in discretionary enforcement. To further understand how organizational norms, bias, and discretion combine to affect the disciplinary experiences of African American female students, it would be helpful to conduct a specific investigation of subjective policies. This would expand the analysis of RQ1 and RQ2. Finally, future research should explore how restorative justice practices are interpreted and implemented by school administrators within disciplinary frameworks. This inquiry builds on RQ2 and the findings associated with the theme of organizational culture and policy implementation, which focuses on interpretive and situationally relevant research instead of evaluating outcomes. Examining how the interpretation and implementation of restorative justice practices affect student outcomes, school administrators' discretion, and perceptions of equity may yield important recommendations for addressing disciplinary disparities.

### **Implications**

This section presents implications as interpretive considerations derived from the findings of the study, rather than framing them as prescriptive recommendations or policy

directives. Examined through the perspectives of school administrators and within the framework of street-level bureaucracy, these implications aim to encourage reflection and conversation about discretionary decision-making in environments regulated by zero tolerance disciplinary policies. Consequently, the conversation focuses on awareness, interpretation, and comprehension rather than assertions of direct influence or mandated change. Also, the findings of the study have important implications for individual, family, organizational, and societal policy. While the research does not assess outcomes or interventions, the perspectives offered by school administrators contribute valuable knowledge to current discussions with regard to disciplinary equity impacting African American female students. Methodologically, the study highlights the value of a qualitative research design for examining discretionary decision-making within complex policy environments such as schools. The narratives of school administrators are the main focus of the study, which demonstrates the way qualitative methods can capture both the situational and interpretive elements of discipline that are generally overlooked in quantitative studies. The use of in-depth, semistructured interviews allowed for exploration of how discretion is understood and enacted in practice, particularly in ambiguous or nonmandated policy situations.

In addition, these methodological findings highlight the significance of qualitative research for expanding knowledge of street-level policy implementation and directing future research designs that seek to investigate equity-related concerns in school discipline. The findings are analyzed through various levels of implication, viewing school administrators as essential frontline public service workers who utilize their

discretion while balancing formal policy mandates, organizational norms, along with situational constraints. Employing the street-level bureaucracy framework to examine the disciplinary decisions made by school administrators displays the way in which discretion is influenced by interpretive judgment and structural limitations, particularly in areas of policy that lack clarity or are not explicitly mandated. This point of view provides a cohesive framework for comprehending how discretionary practices operate in individual, organizational, and societal settings within strictly disciplined environments, which include schools.

At the individual level, the findings of this study may prompt school administrators to reflect critically on how discretionary decision-making operates within zero tolerance policy frameworks. Increased awareness of how discretion is exercised in subjective policy areas, such as dress code enforcement, may prompt school administrators to reconsider how disciplinary judgments are formed and whose experiences are most affected, particularly African American female students. As opposed to asserting changes in practice, these insights invite reflection on common or implied disciplinary responses and their potential social and emotional consequences. By giving priority to the perspectives and lived experiences highlighted in this study, the findings may support greater attentiveness to equity and inclusion in disciplinary reasoning. Such reflective awareness has the potential to inform ongoing professional dialogue and self-examination related to disciplinary decision-making.

At the family level, the results of the study could help clarify the elements that affect school administrators' decisions about discipline as well as how exclusionary

practices affect students' educational experiences. Given that the study concentrated on the viewpoints of school administrators, any possible implications at the family level are indirect and inferred, instead of being derived from the actual experiences of families. However, understanding the rationale behind administrative decisions may augment clarity in disciplinary processes, allowing families to grasp the reasoning behind the decisions made. This transparency could help alleviate confusion, distrust, and the sense of exclusion that families of African American female students may experience after disciplinary measures are taken. The findings encourage a thoughtful examination of how to strengthen discussions and relationships between schools and families by improving communication and clarity around disciplinary processes.

At the organizational level, the findings of the study may prompt school administrators to examine how disciplinary policies are interpreted and implemented through discretionary practices in everyday school settings. A heightened understanding of the impact of organizational culture, professional norms, and vague policy language on the discretion exercised by school administrators may prompt reflection on the uniformity and fairness of disciplinary decisions across schools. These insights may aid schools in detecting areas where policy language is vague, and professional development training may benefit from the deliberate and precise application of discretion. In addition, the results provide a reflection on the integration of different disciplinary approaches, such as restorative justice practices, into current policy structures and organizational norms. By establishing a connection between the interpretation of discipline policies and the discretionary measures implemented, schools may be able to consider how their

disciplinary actions align with their broader commitments to promoting inclusive schools and defined equality objectives.

At the societal policy level, the study contributes to ongoing discussions concerning the equity and implementation of zero tolerance disciplinary policies. The findings stress that discretionary decision-making persists even within highly regulated policy environments such as schools, therefore highlighting the importance of examining how discretion operates in practice and how it may be associated with disciplinary disparities affecting African American female students. The study also demonstrates the significance of qualitative research on the interpretive and situational aspects of disciplinary decision-making that may not be captured through quantitative data alone. Furthermore, the results reaffirm the importance of street-level bureaucracy theory as an insightful perspective for analyzing how school administrators navigate through policy limitations while using their discretion in unclear or nonmandated situations. The insights collected here aim to inform future research efforts and encourage meaningful conversations about fairness in school discipline, as opposed to imposing specific changes to policy.

### **Conclusion**

I explored how public high school administrators in New Jersey perceive zero tolerance discipline policies as they relate to African American female students. I employed the street-level bureaucracy theory for investigating the manner in which school administrators navigate and exercise their discretion within the constraints set by formal policies. The findings of this qualitative research indicate that zero tolerance

policies do not remove the discretion of school administrators; rather, they are reshaped by these policies. In line with the principles of the street-level bureaucracy theory, the key takeaway is that zero tolerance systems shift discretion from explicit decision-making toward practices that are mediated by policy and dependent on the situation. This implies that school administrators often adopt a uniform approach in mandated situations while applying their interpretive judgment in areas that are not mandated. Participants also described disciplinary actions as highly uniform as well as constrained when governed by explicit state or district mandates, particularly in cases involving serious offenses. On the other hand, where policies permitted flexibility, school administrators reported using organizational culture, professional norms, and situational judgments including the student's intent and disciplinary history.

This research extends the literature on disciplinary policy by illustrating how race and gender intersect to shape these discretionary practices. Focusing on African American female students, a group that is frequently excluded from studies of school discipline, the findings confront dominant frameworks that examine race or gender separately. Discussions with school administrators highlight the impact of racial and gender assumptions on discretionary decision-making, especially in subjective policy areas that include dress code enforcement, where obscurity permits more general interpretation. This intersectional perspective explains the operation of organizational norms and implicit biases function in discretionary areas reliant on policies and sheds light on the continuous disciplinary disparities in systems that are meant to be equitable. Together, these findings underscore the need for disciplinary policies and professional

development that explicitly address how intersectional bias is embedded in frontline decision-making.

In conclusion, in order to effectively enforce zero tolerance policies, school administrators must remain actively involved; these policies do not function on their own. This study illustrates that achieving equity in school discipline requires more than just policy language but also deliberate efforts to change how it is implemented. When discretion is allowed unquestioned, inequality may persist. However, when used with intention and understanding, equity may be achieved. Therefore, the path to equitable discipline involves not just transforming policies but also transforming practice as well.

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## Appendix A: Literature Search Strategy

### Examples of search terms in Google Scholar, categorized by focus area:

- *Disciplinary Policies*  
 zero-tolerance policies\* OR exclusionary policies\*  
 policy advocacy\*  
 school discipline\* AND suspensions\* OR expulsions\*
- *Public Policy and Administration Theories*  
 Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory\*  
 Policy Feedback Theory  
**Public Choice Theory**
- *Bureaucracy*  
 bureaucracy\* OR governance\*  
 school administrators\*  
 laws and regulations\*
- *Sociocultural Impact*  
 school-to-prison pipeline\* AND juvenile justice\*  
 restorative justice interventions\* OR restorative justice programs\*  
 disproportionate\* OR disparate\*

### Search Engine Databases

- Taylor and Francis
- Emerald Insight
- ProQuest

- JSTOR
- Sage Journals
- ERIC
- EBSCO

*Public Policy and Administration Abstracts*

## Appendix B: Participant Invitation

Dear Invitee,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Keysha Knight, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Public Policy and Administration program at Walden University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study, Exploring School Administrators' Perceptions of Zero-Tolerance Policies for African American Female Students. The goal of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of how school administrators perceive and implement discipline measures concerning African American female students. Your participation would involve responding to 10 semistructured, open-ended interview questions that are designed to align with the study's objectives. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, this study is entirely anonymous, and I assure you that your name or any other identifying information are only be used for the sole purposes of this study. If you are willing to take part in this study, please review the Informed Consent letter provided below. Your participation in this study is important because it may influence the development of future discipline practices that foster positive social change in public schools.

Thank you for your kindness and support.

Sincerely,

Keysha Knight

Doctoral Candidate at Walden University

## Appendix C: Qualitative Codebook Aligned to Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory

Code name	Theoretical code definition (street-level bureaucracy)	Inclusion criterion	Exclusion criterion	Aligned RQ(s)	Example (paraphrased)
State-mandated nondiscretion	Instances in which school administrators described their discretionary power as constrained by formal rules, laws, or mandates, reflecting the limited autonomy characteristic of street-level bureaucratic roles.	References to automatic consequences; mandated discipline; “no discretion” language	Situations where school administrators exercised judgment or flexibility	RQ1	A school administrator explained that suspension occurred because the policy required it regardless of the circumstances.
Safety-based justification	Situations where school administrators justified disciplinary decisions by invoking safety as a primary organizational mandate are consistent with street-level bureaucrats’ prioritization of risk management.	Mentions of weapons, violence, threats, or safety concerns	Discipline unrelated to safety rationale	RQ1, RQ2	A school administrator cited safety concerns as an overriding circumstantial factor.
Policy rigidity	Descriptions of disciplinary policies as inflexible, standardized, or prescriptive, limiting individualized responses and reinforcing routinized decision-making.	Statements indicating rules must be applied uniformly	Descriptions of adaptable or discretionary policies	RQ2	A school administrator described policy as “black and white.”
Situational discretion	Exercise of professional judgment in response to contextual factors,	Case-by-case decision-making; weighing circumstances	Mandatory discipline scenarios	RQ1	A school administrator considered intent, prior incidents, and relevant

Code name	Theoretical code definition (street-level bureaucracy)	Inclusion criterion	Exclusion criterion	Aligned RQ(s)	Example (paraphrased)
	reflecting the discretionary practices of street-level bureaucrats operating within policy constraints.				circumstances to determine discipline measures.
Fairness as consistency	Bureaucratic tactics for controlling perceptions of bias and legitimacy are reflected in the framing of fairness, as the implementation of consistent rules.	Statements of equality and fairness are synonymous	Differentiation or equality-based strategies	RQ1	A school administrator emphasized treating all students the same to avoid bias.
Policy deferral	Instances where administrators deferred responsibility to written policy as a coping mechanism to manage accountability and reduce personal liability.	Statements such as “the policy says” or “my hands were tied”	Independent decision-making without policy reference	RQ1	A school administrator justified the decision by citing handbook language.
Policy as tradition	References to disciplinary practices as longstanding institutional routines that reflect organizational norms that shape discretionary behavior.	Mentions of “how it’s always been done”	Discussions of newly implemented policies	RQ2	A school administrator noted discipline practices have remained unchanged over time.
Restorative justice shift	Descriptions of organizational efforts to modify traditional punitive routines through alternative practices, indicating evolving	Mentions of restorative approaches or alternatives to suspension	Strict zero-tolerance enforcement without alternatives	RQ2	A school administrator described restorative conversations replacing suspension.

Code name	Theoretical code definition (street-level bureaucracy)	Inclusion criterion	Exclusion criterion	Aligned RQ(s)	Example (paraphrased)
Data-informed change	bureaucratic norms. Use of organizational data to reassess or modify disciplinary practices, reflecting institutional accountability mechanisms influencing discretion.	References to discipline or attendance data review	Anecdotal decision-making without data	RQ2	A school administrator explained policy changes in response to suspension trends.
Disproportionate discipline impact	Recognition of patterned disciplinary outcomes affecting African American female students, highlighting systemic consequences of discretionary practices.	Mentions of disproportionality by race and/or gender	General discipline discussion without group reference	RQ1, RQ2	A school administrator acknowledged unequal discipline outcomes for specific students.
Dress code surveillance	Heightened monitoring of student appearance as a form of discretionary enforcement embedded within institutional norms.	References to dress code enforcement and body policing	Non-appearance-related discipline	RQ1, RQ2	A school administrator discussed frequent dress code referrals for certain students.
Stigmatized student reentry	Challenges faced by students reintegrating after discipline reflect the downstream effects of bureaucratic decision-making.	Mentions of labeling, isolation, or reintegration difficulty	Discipline without reentry discussion	RQ1, RQ2	A school administrator explained that enforcing out-of-school suspensions, as required by district policy, often stigmatizes certain students.

*Note.* RQ = research question.