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Citizen Perceptions of Institutional Disparities and the Reintegration of Nonviolent Drug Related Offenders

Terrance Hinton
Walden University

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Walden University

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Citizen Perceptions of Institutional Disparities and the Reintegration of

Nonviolent Drug Related Offenders

by

Terrance Hinton

MS, Southern University and A&M College, 2009

BS, Wingate University, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

August 2018

Abstract

In 2017, Louisiana had the highest incarceration rate in the nation with 1,420 of every 100,000 adult males being placed in a state or local penitentiary. To address this issue, a series of criminal justice reforms were passed within the Louisiana legislature that released thousands of former offenders back into the community. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the attitudes, thoughts, and opinions of citizens in a single Louisiana city regarding ex-offender re-integration and disparities within the criminal justice system. March and Olsen's Rational Choice Institutionalism was used to explain how environment impacts individual perception and choices at the community and political level with policy implications. Data were obtained through interviews with 22 citizens from the selected city. Data were coded using a deductive iterative coding process, then subjected to thematic analysis. The findings indicated that the construction of perceptions on disparities within the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration was primarily formed through volunteerism, personal experiences, observations, conversations with others, exposure to different cultures, mass media, and family upbringing. Several factors were involved in residents formulating perceptions on the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration. These factors are embedded in the structures of mass media, community, political, educational, social, and economic systems. The results of this study may impact social change by informing policymakers about the necessity to construct policies focused on acknowledging and addressing current structural and systemic criminal justice policies that are respectful of the experiences and needs of restored citizens as well as citizens from all communities.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Louisiana currently has the second highest incarceration rate in the nation with 1,420 of every 100,000 adult males in jail (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). To address incarceration, the Louisiana legislature approved a series of bills that revamped the state's criminal justice system and released an initial wave of 1,900 prisoners who had been incarcerated for nonviolent crimes (Allen, 2017). While Louisiana Governor Edwards, criminal justice advocates, and legislators have praised these reforms Allen (2017), little is known among citizens within City N Parish regarding the perception of disparities within the criminal justice system and these reforms that released and will continue to release many ex-offenders back into the community.

Through this study, I examined citizen perceptions of institutional disparities and the reintegration of individuals convicted of nonviolent drug related offenders back into the community. The results of these findings in Chapter 4 may provide understanding for citizens, lawmakers, community leaders, scholar-practitioners, and social service providers into the perceptions of citizens from different communities regarding the re-entry of nonviolent drug offenders back into communities within one city. The findings in Chapter 4 may impact social change and inform policy by providing policymakers with more insight into understanding the concerns of citizens regarding ex-offender reintegration, as well as understanding the challenges facing nonviolent offenders who are returning back to their communities.

In this qualitative study, I used the rational choice theory of institutionalism to examine community perceptions of institutional disparities and practices related to the incarceration of individuals convicted of nonviolent drug related offenses and the

reintegration of these offenders back into the community. Using an investigative approach, I explored topics pertaining to the criminal justice system that included incarceration, ex-offender reintegration, socioeconomic differences, and the increasing racial divide between several local communities that have stemmed from perceived racial disparities and practices within the criminal justice system.

The following sections present the research literature regarding the study topic and problem, the purpose of the study, the theoretical foundation used to examine the issue, as well as potential implications for social change. In conducting this study, the findings and recommendations located in Chapters 4 and 5 could possibly contribute to social change by providing additional knowledge into understanding the perspectives of citizens from socially contrasted communities regarding inconsistencies within the criminal justice system, ex-offender reintegration, and its impact on policy outcomes.

Background

Incarceration has been an issue nationwide for several years due to standing policies from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that lead to an increase in the number of minorities incarcerated (Kerr & Jackson, 2016). In the past decade, states such as South Carolina, California, and Georgia have overhauled their criminal sentencing and prison structure to lower prison populations for fiscal purposes (Bagchi & Seales, 2018). In 2017, to address Louisiana's nation leading incarceration Louisiana's Governor Edwards signed into legislation 10 bills that overhauled the state's criminal justice system, which is expected to save millions in public dollars (Allen, 2017).

A number of these bills, highlighted by Senate Bill 139 Senator Martiny, not only expanded probation eligibility to offenders who are currently serving lengthy sentences for drug convictions and parole violations, but has also provided safeguards for ex-offenders once they are released back into the community (Allen, 2017). The new reforms take a versatile approach in attempting to save taxpayer dollars and then reinvesting them into offender release and victim programs. Ex-offenders, once released from prison, often have limited assistance upon reentry into the community (McKernan, 2018). Challenges such as housing, employment, child support, or even insurance can often obstruct ex-offenders from making any progress (McKernan, 2018). The hope is that the new reforms will mitigate these obstacles so that ex-offenders have a greater chance at finding economic stability in the community.

While these reforms have been viewed as an accomplishment in the Louisiana legislature, public perception has been unclear regarding their feelings on the criminal justice system and the new changes that will reintroduce a number of ex-offenders back into the community. History has shown that tough on crime policies of locking up criminals for minor offenses have led to the incarceration issue this nation now faces (Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014). The findings of this study in Chapter 4 may provide awareness into understanding the perceptions of citizens regarding government, race, prisoner reintegration, and the criminal justice system as a whole. The results may also contribute understanding into the relationship between public perception, policy processes and outcomes, and community unity.

Community division is high in City N due to civil unrest in response to the

number of minorities incarcerated within Louisiana prisons (Berman, Brown, & Cusick, 2016). These incidents have brought to the forefront many social, economic, and political issues that revert back to disparities within the criminal justice system especially when discussing incarceration and its impact on minorities, taxpayers, and how to successfully reintegrate former offenders back into the community. The community of City N was impacted by a series of tumultuous events in the summer of 2016, including the shooting of a citizen by police officers (Lau & Stole, 2016), the murders of three law enforcement personnel (Visser, 2016), and unprecedented flooding (Berman, Brown, & Cusick, 2016). The circumstances surrounding these events have raised a number of social and racial issues that point to the fact that there are a disproportionate number of minorities within Louisiana prisons.

Perceptions regarding the extent of racial disparities within the criminal justice system have differed among races within City N. There has been research and dialogue conducted locally within the community by one university and a nonprofit organization called Dialogue on Race that focused on public attitudes regarding the relationship between race and incarceration (Toohey, 2018). In particular, the African-American community has had a different perspective on the criminal justice system and its effectiveness in addressing the needs of the community. These views have polarized communities within Louisiana that have been magnified since the shootings.

The Louisiana State University Manship School of Mass Communication (2017) conducted a community resilience study regarding their perceptions on racial disparities within the criminal justice system. Among the findings from the administered surveys,

researchers found that half of all European-Americans felt that government should do more to reduce racial differences in punishment for people convicted of similar crimes, while 86 % of African-Americans felt the same way (Community, 2017). The study also found that generally, opinion in Louisiana leaned toward more government effort to reduce racial differences in society (Community, 2017). Individuals in the City N community also felt that government was responsible for addressing differences in criminal justice system. However, this aggregate opinion was primarily driven by the high level of support among African-Americans that participated in the study (Community, 2017). These recent trends highlight the difference in perceptions that remains embedded in communities in City N. The results of the community resilience study displayed different aspects of community perception that highlights the polarization between communities regarding race and the criminal justice system (Community, 2017). However, little evidence has been provided into understanding how citizens feel regarding the new criminal justice reforms that will release many ex-offenders back into the community.

Both the university and Dialogue on Race examined perceptions of racial disparities within the criminal justice system in Louisiana and the viewpoint that certain groups of people had social, economic, and political advantages (Toohey, 2018). As the issue continues to be debated, research provides the argument that when it comes to incarceration, minority males are more likely to be placed in prison both impacting their families and communities (Mauer, 2008). Crutchfield & Weeks (2015) argued that racial and ethnic groups use and distribute drugs proportionally to their representation in the

population. However, more than 50 percent of those imprisoned for drug sales or possession are minorities. In fact one study by the group Human Rights Watch found that African-American men are sentenced on drug charges at a rate that is more than 13 times higher than European-American men (Crutchfield & Weeks, 2015). With the stigma of a felony conviction or jail time now on their record, these barriers impact their ability to land suitable employment and support their families.

The current population of penitentiaries is a reflection of the argument that minority males are deeply impacted by the criminal justice system. African-American men are six times as likely to be incarcerated as European-American men, and Hispanic men are more than twice as likely to be incarcerated as non-Hispanic men (Sentencing Project, 2017). According to the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, there are at least 33,739 individuals in correctional facilities across Louisiana (Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, 2017). Of these individuals, 66.6 % of the males' incarcerated in the state of Louisiana are African-American, as opposed to 32.9 % European-American men (Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, 2017). The following statistics highlight a racial disparity that significantly impacts minorities within the criminal justice system. This evidence not only exists within the prison system, but also within the communities themselves.

Studies have shown that underprivileged communities are generally more impacted by incarceration than in affluent communities. According to Barthelemy, Chaney, Maccio, and Church (2016), race was highly correlated with incarceration, poverty, and low-income-neighborhood residences in the North section of Parish N. In

further researching the issue, Barthelemy et al. (2016) found that among community participants there was a lack of confidence in the ability of leadership to address these issues. The consensus among participants was that political leaders tended to take strong stances on criminal justice reform during election times, but often ignored the issue after they were elected (Barthelemy, 2016). The evidence within Louisiana prisons and in minority communities today continues to impact minorities at a higher rate. These disparities have led to continued dissention between communities in City N Parish.

Polarization between the most central issues of race is illustrated in the *Louisiana Survey* (2014) conducted by the Louisiana State University's Public Policy Research Lab. The longitudinal survey measured public opinion in Louisiana on contemporary policy issues that faced the state (Goidel, Davis, Climek, Means, & Hostetter, 2014). In the survey, Goidel et al. (2014) found that when citizens were asked the question: "Do you think everyone in Louisiana has a fair chance to improve their economic standing regardless of race or do you think some racial groups have an advantage over others?" (p.6), 75% of African-American respondents believed that some ethnic groups had an advantage compared to 43% of European-American respondents. The difference in perception highlighted a disparity in perception between races that has been common in Louisiana.

The following year, Henderson, Davis, and Climek (2015) found public perception of community race relations to be worse than the year before due in large part to due to socioeconomic differences and racial disparities within the criminal justice system that have incarcerated a higher proportion of minorities. These examples highlight the

differences in perception regarding social issues between communities from different racial backgrounds. While the racial gap has continued to widen between communities in City N, efforts have been made to unify communities by addressing these perceptions.

Dialogue on Race Louisiana was a 6-week class program created by former YMCA Board President and former journalist Crump who has been holding the sessions for over 20 years (Jones & Lau, 2016). The class was composed of individuals from different communities in the City N area who discussed their perceptions of racism and what could be done to combat these issues and bring communities together. The central argument of Dialogue on Race was that racism was more of an institutional problem powered by the government, school districts, transportation systems, PTA groups, law enforcement, and media organizations who were steered by policies that marginalized people of color (Jones & Lau, 2016).

According to Jones and Lau (2016), in their attendance of Dialogue on Race Louisiana, they discussed that minority citizens who participated in the class had perspectives different from those of European decent regarding the criminal justice system and its impact on their communities. This difference in opinion by participants was due in part to personal experiences that shaped their views of the criminal justice system (Jones & Lau, 2016). While Dialogue on Race Louisiana has been instrumental in providing a platform for dialogue between different communities, deeper insight is needed to understand the perspectives of all citizens on criminal justice reform.

Problem Statement

Incarceration is one of the most critical issues facing the criminal justice system in the 21st century. To address Louisiana's incarceration rate, several reforms were passed in June of 2017 that would release thousands of male offenders back into the community, many of whom were arrested for nonviolent drug offenses (Allen, 2017). While political leaders have been optimistic these reforms will address many issues with incarceration throughout the state of Louisiana, little is known within City N communities among citizens regarding the perception of institutional disparities and practices in incarceration, and their relation to the reintegration of nonviolent drug related male offenders (Allen, 2017).

Perception on institutional disparities and incarceration historically has been divided between minority and European-American communities in N Parish. Differences in opinion on racial disparities in sentencing, arrests, and incarceration have been documented by a few reports and quantitative studies within City N Parish (Community, 2017; Davis & Climek, 2015; Jones & Lau, 2016). Until the present study, there has been no evidence of qualitative research in City N Parish neighborhoods on examining the perceptions of citizens regarding institutional disparities and the reintegration of nonviolent drug related male offenders. A lack of research in this area provides an opportunity for expanding understanding into how different communities of people view the criminal justice system.

On November 1st of 2017 almost 2,000 former offenders walked away from Louisiana prisons, jails, and parole offices, the first wave to benefit from the new

criminal justice reforms (Toohey, 2017). The findings of this study will show how citizens from different neighborhoods in City N Parish, socially constructed their thoughts, viewpoints, preferences, and opinions about institutional disparities, prisoner reintegration, the role of government. This study also explained how attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, preferences, and personal interests impacts decision making and policy outcomes. These findings will provide possibilities for community unity and will clarify why individuals think the way they do about the criminal justice system in Louisiana.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate and understand the individual viewpoints, preferences, experiences, and attitudes of European-American, African-American, and Hispanic citizens within different neighborhoods in the City N Parish community on institutional disparities and the reintegration of nonviolent male ex-drug offenders. The intent of the study was to shed light on the viewpoints, thoughts, special interests, incentives, and opinions of citizens within different communities on incarceration, prisoner re-entry, disparities in the criminal justice system, government responsibility, and community unity. The data collection process incorporated in-depth interviews to discover the experiences that contributed to the participant's viewpoints.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was: What are the perceptions of citizens from different neighborhoods within City N Parish regarding institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of nonviolent drug related male offenders?

Theoretical Framework

Rational choice institutionalism (RCI) is a framework for researchers to investigate how institutional rules change the behavior of rational individuals within the policy process who are motivated by personal gain (Dudovski, 2013). Through the use of RCI, researchers argue that institutions matter because they generate incentives that shape the goal seeking behavior of politicians, parties, and citizens. (Dudovski, 2013). These goals impact policy choices, which in turn impacts social and political outcomes.

While RCI has been used mainly within the political realm, a number of these elements can also be used at the community level, in which the rules and incentives of the neighborhood impact behaviors, perceptions, special interests, and voting preferences (Sabatier, 2007). Because citizens ultimately select public officials who will serve their personal interests, political leaders make policy choices based on the consensus of their constituents in addition to their own political interests. This application highlights the relationship between perception, self-interest, rules, incentives, preferences, and behavior on the institutional, community, and individual level and its impact on policy choices and outcomes.

Using the RCI framework was appropriate for this study because of its ability to connect and highlight the relationship between perception, self-interest, preferences, behaviors, and policy regarding the perception of institutional disparities and the return of male offenders convicted of nonviolent drug offenses back into the community. This qualitative study, in conjunction with the RCI framework, provided understanding into

the impact of rules and incentives on perceptions, behaviors, personal interests, and preferences, which impact policy choices.

If the primary purpose of government is to formulate, implement, and enforce policies that serve the needs of the community, then this study is required to highlight and demonstrate how institutions must shape criminal justice policy that is comprehensive in addressing the needs, preferences, and interests of citizens in all communities.

Accordingly, this research question was seeking to capture the thoughts and opinions of citizens from different races who reside in different neighborhoods within City N to accurately capture and provide a comprehensive understanding of perceived institutional disparities within the criminal justice system and the reintegration of nonviolent drug male offenders within City N Parish.

Nature of the study

I used a general qualitative study to explore the citizen perceptions of institutional disparities and practices, and the reintegration of nonviolent drug offenders. Qualitative research provides insight into a problem to gain an understanding of the underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations of others regarding a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Kaninya (n.d.) provides the example of using qualitative research on the social effects of the habit of smoking on a certain sector of society. This type of research is not concerned with numbers or statistical facts that is gathered through the research and then analyzed to deduce a fact. The procedure aims at collecting evidences relevant to the original concern of the research and the fact that will support it (Kaninya, n.d). This constructed fact might be used to confirm or refute the question problem that was

established earlier in the research. It used systematically pre-determined procedures to find answers to the question posted at the beginning of the research (Kaninya, n.d). In trying to understand the perceptions of individuals regarding the criminal justice system, the use of a qualitative approach is necessary for this study.

There are several qualitative approaches that could inform practice for a wide range of social justice issues that impact communities. Traditional methodologies such as grounded theory, ethnography, case study, phenomenology, and narrative aim to describe and understand, and the research question will determine the methodology selection (Patton, 2015). In each of these concentrations the focus of the research, the researcher role, and the methods fluctuate according to the methodology. For example, observation of a learned values, behaviors, and beliefs in a culture-sharing groups in qualitative research is the central data collection approach in an ethnography (Creswell 2013; Harris 1968), whereas a phenomenological approach would be used to examine the lived experiences of participants during interviews (Manen, 1990; Moustakas,1994).

In case study research the researcher explores a real-life case through detailed inquires and data collection involving various sources of information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009), while narrative research is understood as a spoken or written text that expresses the stories lived experiences, events, and actions of individuals (Chase, 2005; Landinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In the final major traditional approach, grounded theory research goes beyond description to formulate or uncover a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

While some studies have research questions that point to employing a single methodology, other studies require a combination of methodologies. General qualitative research studies are those that refrain from declaring allegiance to a single established methodology and seek to observe and understand perspectives and viewpoints of individuals (Caelli et al, 2003; Kahike, 2014). General studies offer researchers flexibility within which to make advances by developing research designs that are appropriate for their research questions (Caelli et al, 2003; Kahike, 2014). In some cases, this approach can also include incorporating characteristics from different methodologies (Patton, 2015). For example, using a combination of a phenomenological and narrative approach may be applicable for understanding the lived experiences of a culture sharing group or select individuals within the group. The flexibility in using multiple methodologies broadens the topic under study, but provides readers different lenses in understanding the phenomenon under study.

The nature of the research question pointed to a qualitative mixture of a phenomenological, narrative, and ethnographic approach. This way, the methodology of this study was not bound to one single strategy. Data collection was in the form of semi-structured questions from citizens from different neighborhoods within City N Parish. I used a preliminary coding structure and NVivo data analysis software to complete my data analysis.

Operational Definitions

I will now explain the way in which some basic terms are understood and were used for this dissertation. These are not intended to be comprehensive definitions, but are

intended to provide the reader an understanding of the method in which this dissertation utilizes the terms. These subjects will be described with more detail in Chapter 2.

Actors: Actors are those individuals and groups, both formal and informal, which seek to influence the creation and implementation of policy (Cahn, 2012).

Bounded Rationality: Bounded rationality is a concept in decision-making, which states that actor rationality is constrained by time, information, and cognitive limitations (Jones, Boushey, & Workman, 2012).

Formulation: Formation refers to the gathering of ideas and formulating alternative policies that might serve as solutions (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

Institutional Racism: Institutional racism constitutes differential access to societal goods, services, and opportunities, which results in racial inequities for minority group members (Seaton & Yip, 2009).

Nonviolent Offenses: Nonviolent crimes are defined as property, drug, and public order offenses, which do not involve a threat of harm or an actual attack upon a victim (Bureau of Justice Statistics Fact Sheet, 2004). Typically, the most frequently identified nonviolent crimes involve drug trafficking, drug possession, burglary, and larceny (Bureau of Justice Statistics Fact Sheet, 2004).

Policy Processes: Policy processes are interactions between public policy, its surrounding actors, events, and contexts that determine policy outcomes (Sabatier, 2014).

Policy subsystem: A subsystem defined by its boundaries, a substantive topic, and hundreds of policy participants from all levels of government, interest groups, the media, and research institutions (Sabatier, 1993). To influence policy, members collaborate in an

administration subsystem to control their objectives. These actors maintain participation over extended time periods to meet their goals (Sabatier, 1993).

Rational Choice (RC): Rational choice assumes that individual actions or choices can be understood because of purposeful and thought out goals that serve in the best interest of the individual (Popa, 2015).

Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI): A family of frameworks that converge on how institutional rules change the behavior of rational people within the policy process, who are galvanized by self-interest (Dudovskiy, 2013).

Schedule II Drugs: Schedule II drugs are controlled dangerous substances (CDS) or chemicals with a high potential for abuse, with use potentially leading to severe psychological or physical dependence (Drug Enforcement Administration, n.d)

Socioeconomic status: The economic and sociological measure of a person's work experience or a family's economic and social position based on income, education, and occupation (United Nations Development Program, 2010).

Violent Offenses- In the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, violent crime is composed of four offenses: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010).

Assumptions and Limitations

When organizing scholarly research, several parameters must be established to deal with potential flaws and shortcomings. Simon (2011) defined assumptions as variables that are out of the control of the researcher but are critical for the relevance of

the study. In research and scholarly writing, assumptions must not only be stated by the author but also justified that each one is more than likely accurate for the study to develop (Simon, 2011).

My first assumption for this study was that political actors within the institutional setting have a predetermined set of preferences. These preferences are based on strategic cost-benefit analysis within the institutional environment that influences individual behavior and policy outcomes. My second assumption was that policy decisions made by actors are based on complete information regarding the most critical needs of communities. My third assumption was that some policy choices in the criminal justice area have produced inequalities that have affected minorities at a higher proportion than European Americans.

Along with this assumption I also believed, coming in to this study, was that minorities would have more understanding of the criminal justice system than other races, and that they would be more willing to participate in my study to share their thoughts and experiences. I also believed that minorities would be more open to ex-offenders reintegrating back into society, because there is a larger number of minority individuals incarcerated in City N Parish (Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, 2017).

These assumptions were necessary to document in this study because often policy makers must make choices based off incomplete information. These choices sometimes, even with the best of intentions, can unintentionally have the opposite effect. In many cases public leaders do make what they believe are to be the best decisions for the

communities they serve. However, the RCI approach is more accurate and realistic to the real world due in its assumption that individuals only make choices that provide them the best benefit. These circumstances will be discussed more in depth in the literature review.

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations are critical for narrowing the scope of the investigator's study so that their intentions are clarified and understandable to readers (Simon, 2011). Simon (2011) discussed how delimitations not only make clear the objectives of the researcher but also what areas will not be covered. Specific aspects of the research problem that were addressed in this study included citizen perceptions on racial disparities and practices within the criminal justice system. Because this research examined contrasting viewpoints of the criminal justice system, racial disparity refers to differences in arrests, sentencing, incarceration, probation, or parole due to extralegal factors such as race, class, and gender.

Other features of the research problem to be examined included the reintegration of nonviolent drug offenders back into the communities, the socioeconomic impact of incarceration on offenders, their families, and the communities within which they resided. These aspects were selected due to the new criminal justice reforms that passed in June of 2017 that released many ex-offenders who were convicted of nonviolent drug offenses back into the community (Allen, 2017). With a number of these ex-offenders being minorities and being released back into the community, combined with the existing racial division between communities within City N Parish, and the polarization surrounding the

perception of institutional disparities within the criminal justice system, questions remained regarding public perception of these new reforms.

Questions that were somewhat related to this study that were not specifically addressed included the community perceptions on police brutality and shootings. While a few participants mentioned these topics during the interviews, there were no questions that asked about these issues. These questions are important for criminal justice policy, but they were beyond the scope of the research question. Populations in the study included citizens of European-American, African-American, and one member who was of Hispanic descent. These ethnicities were selected because they make up most residents within the city of Parish N.

As of July 1, 2016, the population estimate of this town was 447,037 with 48.8 % of individuals being European American and 46.1% being African American with the rest being split among those of Hispanic and Asian descent (U.S. Census.gov, 2017). Populations not included in the study were Native American, Asian, and Pacific Islander due to minimal representation, which would have also presented difficulties in capturing the appropriate sample size. The results of this research could potentially be applied in other communities within the state of Louisiana, along with communities in other states with populations of similar racial makeup.

Limitations

Limitations are potential areas of deficiencies that are an inevitable aspect of all studies. The researcher must not only state the limitations, but also state what methods will be used to deal with these restrictions so that they will not affect the integrity of the

study. Qualitative research seeks to explore for depth, understanding, and clarity, and is not necessarily concerned with applying the results to may only apply to the area under study (Patton, 2015). Quantitative research provides a numeric value to the research question understanding and does provide results that can be generalized to the population as a whole (Carr, 1994). The final results of this study only centered on the thoughts and opinions of 22 participants and may not be able to become generalized to an entire population. However, these results could possibly provide as a source of information for other researchers, policy makers, and community leaders in other cities and states.

The limitations of the RCI framework allow the researcher to focus on its deductive approach, which relies on the general model building to explaining real world policy outcomes (Ostrom, 2007). As a result, its foundation on abstraction and clear lines of reasoning oversimplifies human motivation and interaction. Specifically, Wyeland (2002) argued that in the political world, the RCI framework does not consider political change, but rather highlighted the relevance of institutions, formal rules, and suggested that political evolution was stagnant. From this perspective, RCI could be viewed as the universal framework that could be generalized across all political spectrums regardless of context.

No one theory, method, or model can comprehensively explain politics, communities, or other institutions due to contextual factors that are often complex and apply only in certain settings. The political environment in the policy world is often faced with obstacles such as budget constraints, red tape, and personal agendas, while the community environment deals with competing personnel interests (Billot, 2011). This

means that the cause and effect relationship between the RCI framework and research question may be clear in this study, but the results of this study cannot serve as the universal theory in explaining the policy outcomes, individual, and community decision making.

The nature of the today's world, people, and problems dictates that research continues to evolve in understanding complex issues. There can be many frameworks involved in exploring a research question. Deciding on which framework to use depends on the problem the researcher is inquiring about. It is possible however that the RCI framework could be used to compliment other frameworks in exploring similar problems in other populations. This strategy is not only pragmatic, but offers the opportunity for other complementary frameworks to contribute insight into the decision processes and communication strategies within and between institutions and communities in a social system.

As an African-American male, I have my own biases and preconceived beliefs regarding the criminal justice system and the social and economic impact on the incarceration of minorities. This bias can carry over into my questioning, sampling, and report. To eliminate personal bias, I had colleagues and dissertation committee members examine my questions, and several adjustments were made before I used them for my actual participants. I also documented my biases in my personal journal, which is referenced for discussion later in Chapter 4. This process was continued until duration of the study.

For data collection, interviews were conducted with citizens from different racial backgrounds from several different neighborhoods within City N Parish. A combination sample design consisting of homogenous, network, and maximum variation sampling, which both lie within the purposeful sampling technique was used for this study. The use of various sampling techniques provided more depth in understanding the perspectives of citizens from different neighborhoods. These results could potentially provide information to leaders and scholar practitioners in other communities within Louisiana and the United States.

Significance

This study examined perceptions of citizens regarding institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of nonviolent drug related offenders. Although Louisiana currently leads the nation in the number of individuals incarcerated with 1,420 of every 100,000 adult males in jail, a substantial portion of these people are minorities, including in City N Parish with 63.7 % of inmates being African-American males (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). This disparity has been a critical component of the racial divide that resides between minority and European-American communities in City N Parish.

This study provided deeper examination into the perceptions of citizens regarding ex-offender reintegration, the impact of drug policies on incarceration within the criminal justice system, and the institutional and community constructs that shape policy processes and outcomes. Potential contributions of the study could inform awareness to policymakers in understanding the opinions of citizens regarding prisoner reintegration. With the newly enacted criminal justice reforms set to release many offenders back into

the community, I hope the findings of this research will advance knowledge in criminal justice reform by illuminating the relationship between public perception, institutions, actors, policy choices, and outcomes. The implications of this study for social change included increased dialogue between communities, law enforcement, lawmakers, citizens, and ex-offenders who are returning back to their communities.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of citizens regarding institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of nonviolent drug related offenders. There is deep community polarization between communities in Louisiana due to racial disparities within the criminal justice system that have incarcerated a high number of minorities. Civil unrest from the shooting death of an African-American citizen by a police officer, the ambush killings of three law enforcement officers, followed by a natural disaster have highlighted disparities between communities that have resulted from pre-existing criminal justice policies that have incarcerated a high proportion of minorities. A series of ten reforms have been passed in the Louisiana state legislature that released many offenders back into the community. While there have been studies conducted in City N that have examined citizen perceptions regarding the criminal justice system, there is little understanding behind these perceptions considering the newly implemented criminal justice reforms.

In Chapter 2 I used the RC and RCI theory to explain policy choices of actors within the government. The literature review contains an overview of RCI and its use in the United States, along with research studies derived from scholarly peer-reviewed

journal articles, electronic sources, and books. The literature review also includes topics such as community engagement, incarceration, drugs, citizen perceptions of crime, mandatory minimums and the three strikes law, socioeconomic equality, institutional racism, community-based research, actor incentives, and policy processes. The literature review concludes with moral arguments that call for more examination and understanding of the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of others regarding racial disparities within the criminal justice system and the return of nonviolent drug offenders back into communities.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design, approach, instrument, materials, coding methods, setting and sample methods, and data collection and strategies. Following the conclusion of the study, Chapters 4 and 5 contain the results, findings, as well as the patterns and relationships between the themes, implications for social change, and recommendations for further actions and research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

City N Parish has experienced an increasing racial divide between communities that originate from disparities and practices within the criminal justice system that have resulted in racial, political, social, and economic implications for many minority males. On June 15, 2017 Louisiana Governor Edwards signed into law a series of bills that revamped the state's criminal justice system to address the incarceration rate that led the nation with 1,420 of every 100,000 adult males in jail (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The new mandates reduced mandatory minimums, decreased sentences, expanded probation, and made some individuals eligible for parole earlier (Allen, 2017). While lawmakers have praised these reforms, public perception has been unclear on the new reforms that will ultimately result in the release of thousands of ex-offenders (Allen, 2017). This research study will examine citizen perceptions on institutional disparities and the reintegration of minority nonviolent drug related offenders back into the community (Allen, 2017).

I used RCI as the theoretical framework because it helped explain the effects of public policy decisions on policy outcomes. Specifically, this theory provided the structure in expounding on policy processes, formulation and implementation, and decision making as it pertained to laws, judicial decisions, and administrative practices that have negatively impacted minority communities. Furthermore this research study sought to examine what institutional reforms if any, must be taken within Louisiana's

criminal justice system to eliminate racial disparities regarding drug sentencing laws and incarcerations for minority males.

In this chapter I summarize findings of the literature review conducted to serve as the foundational support for the overall purpose of the study and presents a clear association to the problem statement and theoretical framework. The framework for this study was the theory of RCI. This review will include pertinent literature in the areas of institutional theories, the criminal justice system, institutional racism, public policy, race relations, decision-making processes, government resources, behavior economics, community engagement and cohesion, and administrative practices. The results of this study may not be generalized to the population but may provide insight into understanding the opinions, impressions, and views of others regarding race and prisoner reentry. The findings may also provide understanding into how public perception, government, and policy outcomes reinforce one another and impact community unity.

Research Strategy

The research terms for the literature search included *RCT*, *rational choice institutionalism*, *three-strikes law*, *mandatory minimums*, *decision-making*, *game theory*, *institutional racism*, *public policy*, *policy processes*, *economic inequality*, *community engagement and cohesion*, and *policy formulation & implementation*. I used the Walden Library journal article research databases in public policy and administration. Under each data bank a further review was conducted in Academic Search Complete, Political Science Complete, SAGE journals, Business Source Complete, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Criminal Justice Data Base, EBSCOhost, and SocINDEX. I also reviewed

Google Scholar for scholarly journals, government websites for statistics, documentaries, books, and newspaper articles related to the theories and themes in the research. Chapter 2 provides a review of current literature related to RC and RCI.

Rational Choice Institutionalism

Although there are several variations of the new institutional school of thought, one of the most used theories today in examining policy processes and outcomes of governments and public organizations is called the theory of RCI (Shepsle, 2006). Scholars have suggested that institutions have played a critical role in affecting actor carriage, policy processes, decision making, and policy outcomes (Geyer & Rihani, 2010; Morcol, 2012; Room, 2011; Sabatier, 2007). This belief has opened the discussion of the RCI framework and its use in discussing issues within the public policy and administration field.

The inception of the RCI framework was pioneered by March (1928) and Olsen (1939). RCI involves a family of structures that converge on how institutional rules change the behavior of rational individuals within the policy process who are galvanized by self-interest (Dudovskiy, 2013). These interests can include political aspirations or financial incentives that provide individuals certain benefits that they otherwise would not have. This stipulation is important in understanding the impact of contextual and social factors within the policymaking realm, which have social, political, and economic implications. This relationship between institutional rules, actor behavior, and personal cost/benefits, is critical for understanding because of the impact on policy choices and outcomes within a society.

Other methods that serve under the RCI framework include transaction cost economics, negotiation theory, democratic theory, and the modern game theory, which explains how institutions affect legislative behavior, veto points, veto players, and outcomes within the policy-making realm (Tsebelis, 2002). Each of these theories in some shape or fashion discusses the strategies and advantages used by policymakers in the policy process. These strategies portray characteristics similar to players in a game, which pit one individual against another for personal gain. While the goal of policy is to address an issue within society or in a community, there are many contextual, social, and economical factors that can impact final outcomes.

The idea that institutions impacted policy choices and outcomes has been long been discussed in the political realm. Prior the birth of the RCI framework, Olsen (1965) argued that political scientists needed to rediscover institutional analysis to better understand the behavior of individual political actors within political institutions. The thought process at the time was that studying individual political behavior without examining the institutional constraints on that behavior was giving scholars a skewed understanding of political reality (Olsen, 1965).

Following this shift in concept, scholars began offering several assumptions regarding the new RCI framework that discussed the relationship between institutions, behaviors, actors, and policy preferences. Shepsle (2006) distinguished between institutions as exogenous and institutions as endogenous. The first view examined the rules and practices of an institution as fixed and external to the individuals who operate within them, while the second view examined rules and practices as being the net result

of the intentions and actions of those individuals themselves (Shepsle, 2006). While institutions differ from one another in culture, context, values, and behaviors, from both perspectives, rules and practices serve as the common denominator in how they impact actor behavior.

In their study of institutions, Halls and Taylor (1996) proposed that RCI was based on three assumptions. First, the RCI framework used a set of behavioral assumptions that presumed that actors had established inclinations that shaped their behavior in such a way that maximized their utility (Halls & Taylor, 1996). Second, actors tended to make policy choices based on personal preferences were more likely to have outcomes that were substandard when it came to be benefitting their communities (Halls & Taylor, 1996). Third, RCI theorists postulated that actor decorum was shaped by a calculated thought process that took into consideration the behavior of other actors (Halls & Taylor, 1996). Because institutions arranged these interactions, while also providing selected information that diminished ambiguity regarding correlating behavior in other players, these exchanges benefited actors that moved them toward making appropriate decisions that had conceivably improved outcomes (Halls & Taylor, 1996). From this view, Halls and Taylor (1996) believed that policy choices were based on personal needs, which dictated their choices due to the social, economic, and political implications. This premise highlights the reinforcement of perceptions, values, and preferences and brings to the forefront the challenges of social change.

According to Peters (2014), the underlying rationale behind RCI was that institutions were structures of arrangements of rules and incentives that shaped actor

behavior. Thus, a system could reform its nature and effect on individuals based on the enticements being offered (Peters, 2014). Caballero and Soto-Onate (2015) took a similar approach as they described the RCI approach through the perspective that actor behavior was determined by an accepted set of regulations and enticements that prohibited the choice alternatives of political actors who pursued personal inclinations within their respective institutional frameworks. This belief indirectly concludes that rules and regulations can be difficult to change due to the fact that the individuals who formulate them either financially or politically benefit from them.

Ostrom (2007) believed that a lack of adequate institutional agreements not only prohibited actors from incorporating better practices, but also led to opportunism, in which actors exhibited deceitful behavior toward each other with the intention of improved personal profit. This phenomenon was best exemplified in Tucker's (1983) prisoner's dilemma, which was a favorite puzzle that illustrated that group members who sought out self-interest would end up in a worse position than other team members who did not. The prisoner's dilemma was born in mathematical analysis and proved to be so useful that it became part of the conceptual framework of the social sciences (Tucker, 1983). The use of this framework added the human element within policy making that takes into account the fact that humans by nature will make choices based on personal profit even at the expenses of others. This understanding can still be seen today within public institutions at all levels, and must be taken into account when analyzing the policy making process.

Hardin's (1968) tragedy of the commons was another prominent economic theory that highlighted how individuals (actors) sometimes refused to cooperate with each other, although doing so would have been within their own best interest and the interest of the public. Ostrom (2007) claimed that this category of behavior could materialize in any institutional setting depending on the environmental norms used to regulate relationships within that environment. The common denominator in each of these perspectives of the RCI framework suggests that while actors bring their own behaviors, preferences, and agendas into policy decisions, it is the institutions that ultimately shape these characteristics, which in turn impact policy outcomes.

Old and New Institutional Framework

From the early stages of the Great Depression through the 1950's, well-known scholars in the United States were engaged in what was termed as the old institutionalism approach (Stinchcombe, 1997). This framework analyzed the structures and guidelines of governmental institutions such as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches (Stinchcombe, 1997). Specifically, this method of approach explained how traditional institutions established government, laws, and politics, such as comparing presidential and parliamentary systems (Peters, 2000). Beland and Cox (2010) noted that as more research became concentrated on individual behavior, perceptions, as opposed to interests, became the primary variables in deciding actors' goals, preferences, and political behavior. This change in thinking has been critical to understanding the formulation and implementation of policy choices as well as the outcomes.

The movement of studying institutions facilitated the birth of the new institutionalism approach that differed in theory from the old perspective in its focus on how decisions were formed within individuals, groups, organizations, and companies (Schepfle, 1989). This movement happened as researchers expanded their understanding of institutions by examining almost all tenets of the political, social, and economic realm that impacted or constrained actor behavior such as norms, cultural practices, belief systems, and rules of the game (Berman, 2013). Because institutionalism covers so many subject areas, scholars today have employed a host of institutional approaches in the social sciences including the RCI framework.

Forms of Institutionalism

Although I am using the RCI institutional framework for this study, it is important to provide a brief overview of other traditional sub-fields within the new institutionalism framework. While the RCI framework provides the most effective foundation for this study, it does not necessarily serve as the universal structure for analyzing institutions and actor behavior. Institutions are composed of individuals from different backgrounds, agendas, values, and preferences. These components combined under the umbrella of a single institution can present ethical dilemmas, power struggles, and other underlying issues that are often too complex to be analyzed under the lens of a single theory. As a result, touching on some of the other common sub-fields within the institutionalism framework will not only illustrate its diversity in analyzing complicated issues, but it will also assist in clarifying my choice of using RCI for this study.

Berman (2013) discussed how scholars had attached many concepts toward

defining what exactly constituted an institution, which ranged from concrete variables such as a legislature or bureaucracy to variables that constructed actor behavior. As the new institutionalism era came about, several new institutionalism schools of thought arose that highlighted the linkage between institutions and political outcomes, while others discussed how institutions influenced behavior.

Some of the more significant subfields of the new institutional framework include normative, sociological, rational choice, historical, empirical, actor-centered, constructivist, and institutionalism (Vielba, 2006). Each of these subfields is similar in scope, but examine different aspects of institutions regarding environment, actor behavior, policy preferences, and incentives. As these approaches have become more advanced, more understanding and thus more research has become centered on the institutions themselves.

According to Peters (2000), the normative approach focused on both individual and collective behavior that explained that people within institutions act the way they do due regulatory standards, as opposed to having personal inclinations to do so. Also, these standards of behavior stemmed from interactions with individuals from various other institutions (Peters, 2000). Peters (2000) also described historical institutionalism as a framework that examined how policy and organizational choices implemented at the genesis of a system could have a permanent effect on individual behavior. This point of view takes a panoramic picture of understanding policy by measuring big structures and large processes, which is a critical component of understanding public policy in the modern world.

According to Hewlett and Ramesh (2009), actor-centered institutionalism also called neo-institutionalism, accentuated the liberty of government from the surrounding community, and assumed greater impact on human conduct coming from within the social-political setting. In the analysis on empirical institutionalism, Peters (2000) examined the effects of institutions in policy choices particularly within the conventional constructions of government. From this perspective, actors ultimately determined the institutional climate irrespective of any governing rules and regulations. Policy choices therefore in this respect, became an extension and reflection of the existing actors within the institutions themselves.

In a similar arena, Dodds (2013) discussed constructivist institutionalism from the perspective that social, political, or policy dialogue between actors could lead to social changes because it provided a system for actors to come together, define, and agree on shared norms and values. The advancement of additional institutional frameworks brought forth several new approaches that promoted a differing strategy to the previous idea of examining institutions (Dodds, 2013). Communication, coordination, and collaboration have replaced silence, ambiguity, and individuality in identifying clear solutions to societal problems that serve as barriers to social change. As the complexities of decision-making have become more impactful, these strategies offer a more versatile approach to studying institutions and understanding policy choices.

As the new institutional approach has evolved into many different methods, some scholars have advocated for a unified approach within the institutional framework that addressed policy decisions. Peters (2000) argued that there was no single institutional

approach, but rather a consolidated institutional approach within the several variations that could be employed for examining policy. In alignment with Peters' argument, Daspit and Zavattaro (2013) introduced the institutional evolution framework (IEF) that proposed how contrasting theories could be exercised to categorize political decision-making, and reiterated the fundamental constraints surrounding individual decision makers in the policy process. Nilsson (2015) also used multiple theories from the RCI and sociological institutionalism framework that examined decision-making principles among elected politicians from Sweden about other policy issues. Their results indicated that although Swedish politicians still relied on the party law when making decisions, there was a significant difference as to what extent they did so in regard to policy decisions (Nilsson, 2015). Hall and Taylor (1996) also noted how an approach that combined different perspectives of institutionalism was necessary for conveying a clearer assimilation of actors' interests and motivations and how they influenced behavior and decision-making. These schools of thought can still be seen in public policy and administration today. The above examples highlight the complexities involved in the policy making process, as well as the need for using multiple theories in examining the main contributors and their impact on policy choices.

The previous examples show the use of an integrated approach to understanding institutions that is becoming more of the norm in addressing the complexities of today's policy-making processes. However, some scholars have argued that a unified approach does not necessarily equate to elucidating variations in policies or structures, and that policy directives and initiatives should be tailored to address specific obstacles in

different communities (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). The frameworks mentioned above each offer distinct perspectives on the practicalities of institutions and their effects on policy makers. This provides promise in offering future solutions to managing the complexities within institutions that impact policy choices.

Due to the complexities of communities in modern day society regarding ethnicity, political ideology, social status, religious beliefs, and family background, the suggestion of a unified framework for addressing policy has been seen by some scholars as inadequate. For example, Lowndes (2010) described feminist institutionalism as a perspective that examined gender standards and the institutional mechanisms that formulate and sustain gender sovereignty. From this aspect if a researcher were interested in exploring the role of female policy makers in a predominately male dominated government, incorporating a practical, and or historical perspective to explaining preserved gender power within institutions would be insufficient. With our world becoming a melting pot of individuals from different political, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, the implementation of a unified framework for understanding policy has become imperative in the evolution of public policy.

While each of these perspectives gives some insight into the role institutions play in actor behavior, the RCI framework is appropriate for this study because it accordingly connects institutional arrangements, actor behavior, personal preference, and incentives with decision-making and policy outcomes. My use of RC as a broad approach in many disciplines to explain human behavior, RCI takes the next step in further analyzing how institutions have influenced human behavior and decision-making in public policy.

Advancing this theoretical framework will allow for a thorough examination of Louisiana's state and city government, and how current institutional processes have contributed to the creation of policies and practices within the criminal justice system that have created vast differences in the number of minority males incarcerated within City N Parish. With personal interests being a main factor in decision-making, the RCI foundation will be appropriate for explaining the revolving process of public perceptions, institutions, actor behavior, policy processes, and outcomes.

Limitations & Criticisms

While RCI has frequently been employed in explaining policy processes and outcomes, there have been several noted limitations. Olejniczak and Śliwowski (2015) argued that the RC institutionalism approach to public policy research in general offered limited support due to the fact it assumed perfect rationality in policy decisions and overlooked the reality of systematic errors and biases in human decision-making. Shepsle (2006) took a similar approach in which he noted RCI's overdependence on the idea of unbounded rationality, and its assumption of several perfect conditions, while Basel and Bruhl (2013) argued that the premises of unbounded rationality was too impractical of a concept to be applied in society. The limitations of the RCI framework highlight the fact that utopian conditions rarely exist within society. However, this assessment does not impede the effectiveness of the RCI foundation in explaining the underlying factors surrounding policy making.

Under the umbrella of the RCI framework the idea of unbounded rationality assumes that individuals have complete knowledge of all available strategies, and an

unlimited amount of time to make policy choices that maximized net benefits (Basel & Bruhl, 2013). In the policy world specifically, unbounded rationality assumes that decision makers have all the appropriate and correct information needed to establish sound policy choices regarding drug-sentencing laws (Basel & Bruhl, 2013). However, scholars have argued that these assumptions are unrealistic due to the fact that policy decisions often are made under different circumstances (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). Furstenberg (2016) countered that taking a bounded rational approach in the political realm was more feasible since information is often limited, policy options and circumstances surrounding policy issues are often complex, and decision makers often moved toward policy choices with unknown outcomes. This approach assumes an inevitable margin of error in policy choices that must be considered from the beginning due to constraints in time, and the cognitive limitations of individuals involved in the policy process. These limitations again highlight the realities of policy making, but also provides a platform for policymakers to implement new ideas and strategies to address these realities.

Despite these limitations, Ward and Riveria (2014) emphasized that "cultural competency," the ability to interact with people of different cultures played a critical role in policy decisions (p. 108). This suggests that policy decisions even with limited time, information, and resources are often disconnected from the very communities they are trying to address. Whether this is due to the lack of representation within government leadership from individuals who reside from isolated communities or from lack of community engagement, it is important to note that information can mean different things

for decision makers and the communities they impact, including personal benefits and costs associated with individual decisions. Therefore, effective leadership must include engaging and connecting with communities on a more personal level in order to have a better understanding of their current needs, and how these needs should be addressed by informed public policy.

Another limitation of the RCI framework is that it assumes all political institutions to be structures of voluntary cooperation that resolve collective action problems to help all communities (Caballero & Soto-Onate, 2015). As it has been noted however, this assumption is more of an exception than the norm as governments fail to operate this way on a consistent basis. The rule, in which personal interests combined with limited information, choices, and a short time frame, has often resulted in unintended consequences for individual communities (Caballero & Soto-Onate, 2015). While these barriers are a part of policy-making within any institution, acknowledging the reality of these assumptions must be highlighted.

Another restraint of the RCI framework is its failure in considering the current environmental, political, and social constructs. In analyzing the limitations of RCI for the study of Latin American politics, Weyland (2002) discussed how RCI fell short in explaining the complicated, various, and fluid patterns of Latin American politics. Weyland (2002) argued that politics, in general, were too complex to be bound by a single theory and that those institutional frameworks that were applicable in explaining U.S. policy choices may not be suitable for explaining policy choices in other countries. The argument that RCI can be applied universally within any political setting is

impractical, however it remains capable of contributing knowledge and understating even in a limited role.

Although the RCI presents many limitations, this framework is essential for explaining institutions and their effects on policy choices. Institutions are composed of individuals how each has their own interests and the interests of their constituents to take into account during the policy formulating process (Vielba, 2006). The RCI framework does have a number of limitations that must be accounted for in examining institutions and the impact on public policy. As RCI begins to attract more attention and constructive criticism however, limitations will subside as scholars examine additional methods to further improve upon this evolving framework (Weyland, 2002).

Rational Choice

An analysis of several public policy theories revealed a need to examine deeper within selected theoretical frameworks that centered on the impact of institutions in policy process and outcomes. An institution according to Peters (2011) was defined as a constructed feature of a city that was calculable, established, affected actor behavior, and provided a sense of mutual principles between peers. In other words, institutions such as governments, represented a unification of norms and practices that established policy processes, choices, and impact outcomes (Peters, 2011). Some researchers have used a single theory to explain policy processes, while others have proposed multiple theories to explain the decision-making and implementation processes within policy making due to their coinciding and different relationships (Sabatier, 2007) In both cases, each theory

offered great foundations for explaining policy choices while also noting the limitations of each.

The theoretical framework that was used for this study to best explore the relationship between institutions, policy processes and outcomes was the RCI theory. To have a more comprehensive understanding of RCI, explanation must be given to the parent theory of RC, which is a combination of behavioral economics and decision-making theory. Within the RC theoretical foundation lies the theory of RCI framework, as put forth by Schepfle (1989) a self-described proponent of the New Institutionalism approach to the study of politics. Although RCT has been used in the field of economics, sociology, and philosophy, it has also served as a framework in the political to explain political outcomes concerning the choices of actors who pursued their preferences under conditions (Dudovskiy, 2013).

According to Popa (2015), RCT assumed that individual actions or decisions could be understood because of purposeful and thought out goals that served the best interests of the individual. In similar terms Ogu (2013) described the basic premise of RCT as a social behavior that resulted from the behavior of individual actors, each of whom choose preferences that were based on available options, information, and potential costs and benefits. While RCT has evolved in its application of different disciplines, the overall framework has remained consistent since its inception.

The origins of RC and decision-making trace back to several different eras in American history, in which first RC theorists debated on whether the general principles of RC used in economics could be used to understand human interactions (Crossman,

2016). Specifically, Crossman (2016), credited Homas (1974) and Durkheim (1912), as having laid the basic framework upon which rational theory was formulated. While the RCT as undergone several evolutions, the foundations of this framework have remained consistent throughout its history.

In Hume's (1739) account of agency from the eighteenth century, Dietrich & List (2013) discussed how RCT offered a framework for analyzing how agents made decisions in various environments and situations. Ogu (2013) referenced RC theorists from the 50's, 60's, and 70's (Blau, Coleman, and Cook) who used tenants of RCT to examine individual behavior. More recent contributions to the RC framework have been credited to individuals such as American economist Becker (1992), who pioneered the utilization of rational actor models in areas such as crime, drug addiction, and racial discrimination (Ogu, 2013). The evolution of this theory has opened a number of avenues for examining and understanding public policy and administration within the political arena, and continues to be used in society today.

The last few decades have the seen an expansion in the application of the RC framework. RCT has been critical to the fields of public policy and administration, economics, political science, philosophy, and sociology in understanding how leaders in government institutions make strategic decisions with a limited budget, time constraints, and under high-pressure (Dietrich & List, 2013). Olson (1965) used RC about community unity to explain how individuals with self-interest often refused to partake in collective action to accomplish common goals, such as in people who committed income tax evasion although taxes were used to progress their respective communities. This

perspective was valuable in explaining how personal interests has always been a common factor in the policy making process.

Page (2013) employed a different approach by using multiple concepts and theoretical traditions in understanding basic policy formulation and implementation. This technique highlighted the argument that an aggregation of theories in addition to RC was often necessary in explaining strategic decisions that crossed organizational, social, and cultural boundaries (Page, 2013). While the idea of promoting a variable theoretical approach in public policy has been widely used today, RCT has continued to be an instrumental framework in many concentrations. This theory also ran parallel to the beginning of the institutionalism framework era in which political institutions became the focus and foundation upon which policy decisions were based. Marais and Turpin (2004) discussed the availability of the rational model to explain human behavior and decision-making due to its integral role in public policy and administration in managing public resources. Today RC has been applied in teaching decision making within policy processes. However, more research is needed in addressing how institutions impact actor demeanor, which ultimately affects policy-making decisions.

While RC and RCI are analogous in scope, both frameworks are distinct in their degree of decision-making and preferences. RC examines preferences from an individual level, while RCI analyzes preferences from a cultural and environmental perspective (Ostrum, 2007). The relevance of discussing RC is to highlight the evolution of the framework to RCI, which takes the next step in understanding the impact of environment (institutions, cultures, communities) on human behavior, perceptions, and preferences.

RCI in Politics & Policy Process

Since its inception RCI has been used across numerous platforms and disciplines, which can be traced back to the 1970's when American political scientists studied congressional behavior within the U.S. government (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Researchers were curious to understand how the preferences of U.S. congressmen and women in passing and rejecting bills tended to stay consistent despite transitions between parties that had conflicting value systems and political ideologies (Hall & Taylor, 1996). It was then that scholars began to look at institutions and argued that solidity existed within legislation due to the structure of rules within Congress that organized the choices and information available to its members (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Because of these explorations, the concept of RCI was born with the intention of demonstrating how congressional guidelines influenced legislator behavior and its effect on policy decisions and outcomes.

Since the scope of RCI has broadened to a level that encapsulates institutions, actors, and policy processes, scholars have discussed these issues along and their impact on policy outcomes (Cahn, 2012). In examining the relationship between institutions and the impact on policy outcomes, Sabatier (2009) described the policy process as a set of interactions between components over a length of time that involved governmental agencies, interest groups, researchers, and legislatures at every level of government. Sabatier (2009) claimed that regarding policy choices, economic initiatives, individual interests, values, policy preferences, observations, causes, and solutions to a problem played a significant role in the intricacies of the policy process. These factors highlight

many of the variables involved in policy making that take place at all levels of government, and how they are all interconnected in their impact on policy choices.

McElfish (2015) described public policy as the course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern that can have different effects on different populations groups. Regarding institutions, Ogu (2013) discussed that citizens give power to institutions to run society, trusting that they will make sound public policy decisions for the benefit of their communities. This includes working with actors from a diverse range of backgrounds, perspectives, and ideologies, which not only challenges previous ideas, experiences, and beliefs but also gives birth to new ideas that better addresses all communities (Ogu, 2013).

Communities are composed of institutions such as governments, school districts, universities, law enforcement, and media. Each of these establishments give expression to the organized activities of a community, and are interconnected through their common task of helping society to function (Ostrum, 2007). Because of these relationships and the common goal of public service, institutional reforms have been an integral part of public policy.

The RCI framework has been used in examining the institutions themselves and their influence on human behavior and decision-making between actors in the public policy arena (Room, 2011). Although policy choices can impact citizens economically, legally, and socially, RCI argues that institutional environment will ultimately impact policy outcomes (Schepfle, 1989). This is because the decision makers within institutions often make choices for personal gain, even at the expense of others. With this being a

common characteristic in all levels of government, self-interest then becomes a major factor in determining the direction of policy makers.

Carlson (2017) combined theoretical and methodological insights from sociological and interest-group studies to investigate how and why non-federally recognized Indian groups used administrative and legislative strategies for federal recognition from 1977 to 2012. By detailing the circumstances influencing Indian groups to employ differing strategies, Carlson (2017) provided a more detailed understanding of the dynamic interplay among the goals, motivations, and constraints influencing groups to use administrative and legislative processes over time. These findings not only highlight the interaction between goals, motivations, and constraints in strategic decision-making, but how they can impact policy choices.

Although there is widespread agreement that institutions shape the behavior of actors, there are disagreements over the extent to which they actually influence individuals and the degree to which people can shape them. Friel (2017) argued that these disagreements derived from the fact that scholars were studying different institutions at different levels. Williamson (2000) contended that institutions existed at four different levels in any society, with their own characteristics. Each of these levels contributes to understanding the integration of policy, actors, and the institutional rules that govern them, by taking note of the existing environmental atmosphere surrounding the institutions (Williamson, 2000).

The first level was the most general and consisted of customs, traditions, norms, religion, etc.(Williamson, 2000). The second level, the institutional environment,

consisted of formal rules such as constitutions and laws (Williamson, 2000). These laws emerged partially out of an evolutionary process and partially out of design. Governance, the third level, is the creation of contracts and agreements between a limited number of groups in society. They are designed to reduce conflicts and set the basis for mutual benefits within these respective groups (Williamson, 2000). The fourth level is resource allocation. For companies, it is the level of the production function and consists of institutions that guide the operation of an organization (Williamson, 2000). By contrast, governance describes the regulation of operations between independent organizations. Lower levels can have only limited influence on those levels immediately above them, whereas upper levels impose clear limits on lower ones (Williamson, 2000). Due to the complexities of social, political, economic, and racial factors involved in criminal justice reform, the RCI framework for this study was employed to examine each of these levels in some fashion.

Policy choices must always be comprehensive and in line with the public interests of all communities (Room, 2011). By highlighting the connection of institutions to policy outcomes and public perceptions, my research may provide insight into possible measures that can be taken to establish a renewed form of government in which policy goals and ideals are aimed at benefiting all communities. If the primary purpose of government is to formulate, implement, and enforce policies that serve the needs of the community, then this study is required to highlight and demonstrate how institutions must shape criminal justice policy that is comprehensive in addressing the needs of all communities.

Institutional Disparities: A Historical Narrative

Institutional racism has been a highly debated and polarizing topic in the U.S. today especially when discussing social inequality. Scholars have noted the complexities involved in institutional racism and have offered several perspectives in providing an accurate definition (Travis, Bruce, & Steve, 2014). Ward and Rivera (2014) defined institutional racism as a complex of embedded, systemic practices that have disadvantaged racial and ethnic minority groups. Better (2008) added that institutional racism was denoted patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that operated within social institutions so that it consistently penalized, disadvantaged, and exploited individuals who were members of Non-European-American, racial/ethnic groups. Chaney (2015) assessed institutional racism to be specific policies and procedures of social and political institutions (law enforcement agencies, government, business, schools, churches, etc.) that can have implications for particular groups. These examples provide just a few of the many terms used to define institutional racism. While the term has different meanings to different individuals, the central concept remains consistent in that it acknowledges the impact of systematic practices on underprivileged groups.

Ward and Rivera (2014) separated institutional racism into two categories, Individually Mediated and Standard of Practice. Individually mediated refers to the substance of institutional policies and practices shaped by individuals who (knowingly or not) are motivated by racial prejudice. Standard of practice includes systemic institutional practices that directly or indirectly restrict the educational, vocational, economic access and advancement of individuals or groups by race or ethnicity (Ward & Rivera, 2014).

While both categories examine policy and practice from different social contexts, the common factor between the two is the relationship between systemic racism and its impact on policy.

This literature review will briefly examine institutional racism from the standard of practice view by looking at the history of criminal justice policy and practice regarding drug sentencing and its impact on the incarceration of minorities. The purpose of the literature serves a number of purposes. First it is important for understanding why a disproportionate amount of minorities reside within U.S. prisons including City N Parish (LA Department of Public Safety & Corrections, 2016). Currently 67.5% of prisoners within Louisiana prisons are of African-American descent, which brings many questions in regard to the effectiveness of current criminal justice policy (LA Department of Public Safety & Corrections, 2016). Keeping this in context with the literature review and framework will provide a foundation for understanding citizen perceptions on the new criminal justice reforms within the state of Louisiana that will release a number of offenders who are minorities. The literature review will also provide awareness to understanding the extensive impact of institutional racism and how it has contributed to some of the social inequalities that are seen in communities today.

To understand the deep rootedness of institutional racism, Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol (2016) examined structural racism through a socio-historical context of institutional oppression and how it has affected modern society. Historical accounts of institutional oppression of minorities particularly African-Americans in the United States can be dated back to colonial Virginia (Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). To maintain

power among the people of African descent, oppression and internal colonialism emerged through legislative actions by the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1692 (Mellen, 2009). Although several laws (Fair Housing Act, Civil Rights Movement) have sought to bring equality between races, several interdependent institutional practices and governmental policies have led to continued social inequalities that have marginalized minority communities and increased community division (Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). These social inequalities have existed in areas such as wealth, employment, housing, health care, education, and the criminal justice system, and still exist today.

Several scholars have described institutional racism as a phenomenon in a society that at times encompassed imperceptible characteristics (Ward & Rivera, 2014). Because institutional racism has been embedded within social institutions, which served as fundamental mechanisms, the concept is spoken of but has frequently been obscured in today's society (Mauer, 2006). While it is true that minorities have made progress in comparison to their position during the Jim Crow era, a broad division continues between minorities and European-Americans today across all social situations (Mauer, 2009) In fact scholars believed these obscurities have further preserved systematic belief systems that have stymied minority communities and remain embedded within public and private institutions today (Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol, 2016).

Huber and Solorzano (2014) argued that lack of historical acknowledgment of institutional racism as a mechanism that strategically guided policies and processes within education, government, politics, law, and the criminal justice system has set up major roadblocks to systematic reforms. Farmbry (2009) also discussed that lack of

genuine dialogue and acknowledgment regarding historical thought processes that brought about the systemization of policies that debilitated some communities has further prevented any civil advancements. The communication and study of these perspectives in public policy and administration have led to changes within all levels of public and private institutions. Although institutional racism continues to be obscured in today's society, more research is needed to illuminate these practices and its impact in communities.

Contemporary Institutional Racism

There have been several theories used to explain institutional racism in its modern state. Scholars have argued that research into solving racial inequalities at the individual level failed to take into account how this phenomenon functioned at the structural, institutional, and organizational levels (Mauer, 2011). It was from these levels scholars argued, that certain behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs have bred and permeated throughout the institution in question (Mauer, 2011). From this analysis, social change can only take place when racial inequality is addressed individually before being addressed collectively.

Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol (2016) contended that racism, criminal behavior, and brutality were adapted practices that were enforced under traditional institutional structures that mirrored the values and beliefs of those in power. The authors then presented a challenge to readers that concluded that learned behaviors such as racism could be eradicated and replaced with new ways that incorporated equality, opportunity, and inclusivity. This perspective in many ways aligns with Ward and Rivera's (2014)

division of institutional racism into individually mediated and standard of practice due to its acknowledgment of the interrelationship between institutions and individual behavior. While these terms are intertwined, equal attention should be geared toward both behaviors within institutional settings due to their impact on individual behaviors. Left unchecked, addressing individually mediated behaviors and ignoring standard of practice behaviors can provide a false sense of security that institutional racism no longer exists.

When policy outcomes negatively impact communities, attention is geared toward modifying the policy, while institutions themselves are ignored in regard to the cultures, norms, and processes that ultimately guide actors in policy making (Ostrom, 2007). For example, Ward and Rivera (2014) argued that in addressing inequality more research should be dedicated to focusing on policy choices that have resulted in social, political, and economic differences between communities. Utilizing this approach they argued, would be more efficient for public policy in serving all communities equally (Ward & Rivera, 2014).

Other scholars have leaned more toward community involvement and less toward government in addressing policy issues that affected communities (Weine et al, 2013). Barthelemy et al. (2016) recommended increases in school and parental involvement, more robust community policing practices, and greater participation from local leaders in addressing societal problems. As a democratic nation, citizens empower institutions to formulate and implement laws and policies that address issues in society. While community engagement is important in addressing community issues, institutions themselves play the primary role in policy formulation, implementation, and outcomes.

Doubters of the existence of institutional racism point to the election of the first African-American President Barack Obama in 2008 as proof that racism had declined (Mauer, 2011). Barriers that once seemed immobile suddenly, were perceived to be removed by the fact that an African-American male was elected to lead the United States. Shams (2015) argued however that advocates of the decline of race argument applied defective procedures that failed to capture the clandestine ways in which structural racism functioned against minorities. For policy makers to address racial inequalities in any area Shams (2015) presented that a deeper examination of the structural patterns affecting minorities was necessary. This view points back to understanding the foundational constructs of racism, which is necessary in implementing new solutions to address this issue.

In viewing institutions that exhibit racial equality, the American military has been regarded as a model of positive race relations. However, Burk and Espinoza (2012) analyzed five different areas within the military: racial patterns in enlistment, officer promotion rates, administration of military justice, risk of death in combat, and health care for wounded soldiers. Burk and Espinoza (2012) found in three of the five cases evidence of racial bias and institutional racism and highlighted the need for identifying the structures through which the bias and racism occurred. The results suggested that no arena, whether it is military, public, private, or non-profit, was without institutional defects or disparities. These findings also reveal the depth of institutional racism, which must first be understood before it can be challenged.

Despite the challenges presented by institutional racism, scholars have offered

several strategies to addressing the issue within the community such as dialogue, deeper dissection, and acknowledgment of historical thought processes (Murji, 2007) In the political realm, Donnelly (2017) proposed the concept of national disparity reform policymaking within the criminal justice system. This idea stemmed from the fact that systemic racism often times went undetected within institutions because it was so deeply imbedded within its own structures and practices (Donnelly, 2017). By examining current policies, procedures, and incentive structures within the criminal justice system on a consistent basis, legislators could spot and address any potential discrepancies (Donnelly, 2017).

Many of the strategies suggested by scholars, while not explicitly stated, implies that reforms must address both the individually mediated and standard of practice forms of institutional racism (Ward & Riveria, 2014). Iverson and Jagers (2015) argued that change was necessary at both the individual and institutional levels in which cultural dispositions regarding race were challenged, along with reforming more widespread practices and habits that were more inclusive. This analysis distributes responsibility across the board by holding both individuals and communities accountable in addressing structural racism.

From a similar frame of reference, Mohammed and Williams (2013) concluded that a deeper understanding of how cultural norms, institutional policies, and procedures about race impacted inequalities in an expansive range of social, political, and economic outcomes. In a different context, Aligica (2015) argued that executing public policy reforms often not only required changes to rules, processes, and incentives but more often

a comprehensive understanding of the institutional and incentive structures of the administration that affected decision making in the first place. Aligicia (2015) believed the institutional constructs that formulate the infrastructure for policy choices must be reformed before undertaking certain public policies and initiatives. This viewpoint reinforces one of the most important aspects of the RCI framework that highlights the interrelationship between decision-making and personal interest as well as its impact on policy (Ostrom, 2007).

One strategy that has proven to be instrumental in addressing systemic racism is the application of the Institutional Evolution Framework (IEF), a concept that explains how institutions not only have the proficiency to evolve through learning and critical self-reflection, but to also impact public opinion and policy (Burk & Espinoza, 2012). Burk and Espinoza (2012) referenced recent policy changes regarding sexual orientation as an example of the application of the IEF framework in real life. While understanding the long term effects of policy on communities and implementing policy changes to undertaking societal issues is critical to reducing racial disparities, this strategy is only the first of many steps that must be taken in addressing the systematic constructs that ultimately form policy choices. The fundamental concept that seemed to be recognized by scholars was that social change could not transpire until communities and institutions began to change their thought processes concerning cultural norms that were embedded into policies that intently isolated minority communities (Philips, 2010). This concept challenges individuals cognitively regarding cultural differences, but doesn't necessarily offer any specific direction with regards to how to implement these changes.

Institutional racism continues to be a polarizing topic. Marginalized communities have viewed institutional racism as a significant barrier in their quest for equality, while natural communities have questioned its authenticity (Philips, 2010). While institutional racism continues to be debated in the political realm among policymakers, leaders, and scholar-practitioners, the idea of discussing and implementing a checks and balances approach to finding and addressing racial discrepancies within any institution or community highlights the relevance of this issue and continues to be a major topic within the public policy and administration field (Berard, 2008).

Government Impact on Community Engagement and Cohesion

So far the perspectives discussed regarding institutions held the viewpoint that institutions were ultimately responsible for policy choices that impacted their communities (Ostrom, 2007). In their discussion of systems, Caballero and Soto-Onate (2015) provided a different landscape, which examined a globular relationship in which citizens affected the decisions of government institutions that were responsible for implementing policies. This examination like many others discussed in this chapter, shifts responsibility on citizens by holding them more accountable for whom they chose to select as public leaders to represent them in office.

While this concept is on track in regard to its importance of civic participation, it is incomplete in its assumption that all communities have equal power and opportunities to effect social change. For it is widely known that not all communities have equal authority and influence on policy choices (Berardm, 2008). For example, a study within the City N community found that a number of citizens felt unheard by their leaders and

policymakers in government (City N Area Foundation, 2016). When surveyed regarding their perception on their level of influence on leaders in city-parish government? 51% of City N residents surveyed said they had little or no influence over their elected leaders (City N Area Foundation, 2016). These findings reveal a number of issues including a disconnect between leaders and the communities they serve. However the results offer little in solving how to bridge the communication gaps.

In another case scholars found that isolated communities attempted to make their obstacles known to their public leaders, only to be turned away (Blake et al, 2008). Blake et al. (2008) used three separate case studies in England that explored policy and practice debates in the areas of community engagement, diversity, and population churn. In their key findings, they found that deficiencies in the structures of the local government leaders to some communities being isolated, thus limiting their access to power and services despite their attempts to speak up regarding issues in their community (Blake et al, 2008) These findings not only feature the importance of a strong foundation within an institution, but also offers solutions, which can be formulated and implemented in bringing public leaders and communities closer together.

While government structures in England are inherently different from public institutions in the U.S., the central question remains. If some citizens feel powerless in being heard by their public leaders the question that must be asked is who has these powers and why? Participation in the voting booth is one thing, but impact and inclusion after the votes are in is another when discussing community cohesion. Scholars and citizens alike have always debated the belief that government institutions must equally

address the needs of all communities (Hillips, 2011). This belief is often spoken, but rarely practiced in communities today. For citizens and communities to truly be invested, inclusivity in making policy choices that impact all communities must be practiced, in order for social cohesion to take place.

Power exhibits many characteristics of energy in that it cannot be created or destroyed, but merely transferred from one place to another (Hartley, Momsen, Maskiewicz, & D'Avanzo, 2012). One of the most common arguments made by scholars for deficiencies in public institutions is the theory that only the elite and connected in society have the power to influence policy (Chomsky, 2015). In their study of American Politics and public perceptions on over 1700 policy issues, Gilens and Page (2014) found that corporate interests and wealthy individuals governed U.S. policy to the point that mainstream citizens appeared to have a statistically non-significant impact upon public policy. This study appropriately aligns with Chomsky (2015) who commented that public opinion on policy was sharply disconnected due to policy becoming more focused on the private interests of powerful groups who funded campaigns (Hutchison et al., 2015). Both findings reveal a need for re-examining the structure of our institutions and eliminating the financial incentives and interests that dominate politics and public policy today.

Research has shown that community engagement and cohesion is more likely to exist among communities of citizens who felt that their voices were heard by public leaders (Wu, 2011). This was also true of communities that had minority representation in public office. Ward and Rivera (2014) argued that institutional structures could

reverse the trend of isolating individual communities and repressing opportunities for community engagement and cohesion by hiring minorities in positions of leadership within public institutions. They found that cities such as Cincinnati had improved relationships with minority communities due to the increased number of African-Americans as decisions makers within the city government (Ward & Rivera, 2014). The findings reveal that there was a greater community concern and input when it came to policy decisions because all communities felt equally heard and represented.

Citizens elect public leaders to address societal issues that are often times complex and obscure. Power is entrusted to public servants with the expectation that decisions will be made in the best interest of constituents. The following examples previously discussed in this section have highlighted the point that cities are better off when communities are united, and yet often times this is the exception rather than the norm. Community unity is often desired, but addressing the social, racial, and economic barriers to achieving this goal must first be addressed before progression is possible.

Community Accountability

While government institutions continue to struggle in addressing policy issues that affect all communities, scholars have argued that communities have the power themselves to unite and address the existing inequalities in isolated communities (Wu, 2011). In their research of two case studies in San Diego and Los Angeles that centered on health policy initiatives to eliminate racial health inequities, Stone-Cacari, Wallerstein, Garcia, and Minkler (2014) found linkages between civic engagement, and political participation to be critical in influencing policy strategies and outcomes. The

outcomes of these studies revealed a need for more effective solutions in addressing community unity and participation.

In similar research, Levine (2011) referenced three case studies from San Ant, TX Hampton, VA, and Bridgeport, CT to make the argument that communities can be more productive than government in promoting and maintaining community cohesion/engagement. In each case study Levine (2011) found that improvements in each of these cities was due to citizen-centered programs that fostered community involvement. Levine (2011) maintained that while government is necessary, civic work had more of an impact on community engagement and cohesion. As a consequence, the power and responsibility to foster change lied with the people. These conclusions follow a similar theme to Liu (2013) who claimed that the concentration of power lied with the individuals in a democracy. Liu (2013) acknowledged that far too many Americans were uneducated on power due to institutional factors that were driven by human behaviors whose evolution long preceded the appearance of institutions themselves. This thought process has allowed many marginalized communities to feel that their lot is what they deserved, rather than the immediate result of a prior arrangement an inherited allocation of power (Liu, 2013).

One additional note was that while the case studies of San Antonio, Hampton, and Bridgeport exemplified the point that communities have the power to foster social change it also assumed an equal power to all communities when in reality this is only assigned to particular groups of people (Stone-Cacari, 2014). Stone-Cacari et al. (2014) even acknowledged in their conclusions on community cohesion that other factors such

as wealthy special interest groups with larger political and economic resources could have also influenced the political decisions of society's elites. This acknowledgment drives home the point that civic engagement doesn't necessarily equate to actual social change if it only addresses certain groups in society. While citizens should have the power to deal with racial disparities in all areas, reality points to the fact that they do not. For this reason, it's imperative that government does its part in equally addressing issues in all communities so that all citizens are heard.

Community Unity in City N Parish

Communities who are united across all institutional spectrums and public spheres have the ability to address inherent issues better than communities in which trust, citizenship, and collaboration are lacking (George & Stark, 2016; Leontsini, 2013; Junger, 2016). U.S. democracy has empowered citizens to vote for their public leaders who are accountable to understanding the thoughts, feelings, and concerns of constituents. Whether the issue concerns areas such as criminal justice, health care, immigration, or housing, social change can only be impactful when policies are comprehensive and applicable to all communities.

In examining the relationship between community and personal well being, Junger (2016) explained that humans, in general, needed three essential things for happiness and contentment: to feel proficient, credible, and united with others. Community support and participation has always been a vital component to unity and social well-being, whether it be in times of personal tragedy or in soliciting input for new infrastructure that will impact economic activity within the area. In a study on

community unity, Richardson and Maninger (2016) found that the inclusion of marginalized communities in community unity activities such as information sharing, communal coping, and social support, following the devastation of Hurricane Ike was critical for community disaster recovery. These results point to the importance of communication and building relationships, a prerequisite in establishing community unity.

Saito and Truong (2015) noted in their research on community unity how a Los Angeles community coalition negotiated a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) with a developer in 2001 for the L.A. Live sports and entertainment district, which was the largest project in downtown Los Angeles. The L.A. Live CBA, which was negotiated by citizens from various neighborhoods within the community, was substantial because it not only formulated a compendious blueprint that included arrangements for affordable housing, local hiring, and living wages, but also increased tax revenues and improved relationships within community groups themselves (Saito & Truong, 2015). The point illustrated in each of these studies was the importance of inclusion vs. exclusion. Although the evidence is clear on the impact of community unity, division between communities in City N Parish remains high (Berman, Brown, & Cusick, 2016). Citizens who feel that their voices are heard by their politicians and community leaders will tend to be more involved than citizens who are marginalized (Richardson and Maninger, 2016). If social cohesion is to have any long-term success, then leaders must devote equal attention to all communities.

While public policy is supposed to address complex societal issues and institute change, sometimes these changes can yield undesirable results for certain communities, such as the War on Drugs campaign from the 1980's and 1990's that incarcerated a large proportion of minorities (Averick, Barish, & DuVernay, 2016). These policies have had negative social, economic, and political implications for minority communities throughout the U.S. that have lasted for decades (Mauer, 2011). The following section will discuss the War on Drug campaign to illustrate how perception, politics, and policy can impact communities for generations.

War on Drugs: The Nixon-Reagan Era

In order to provide insight into understanding perceptions and the incarceration issue that has imprisoned a disproportionate number of minority males within City N Parish, an examination of the history of drugs and incarceration in the United States is necessary (Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, 2017). Landmark policy decisions that sought to eradicate the perceived crime problem in America has had a generational impact on minorities, which has culminated in the racial disparities seen today within the criminal justice system (Hillips, 2011)..

Legislatures at the federal, state, and local levels formulated the criminal justice system by constituting the laws that defined restricted behavior, the penalties for violating those laws, the processes by which cases were to be disposed of, and sentences to be determined (Gill, 2008). These laws known as mandatory sentencing law and policies were then carried out by law enforcement and the criminal courts (Gill, 2008). The Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914 was the United States' first federal drug policy

that restricted the manufacture and sale of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and morphine. The act was originally intended to address the use of prescription medications that were provided to addicts by physicians and pharmacists (Redford & Powell, 2016). However as time went on, drug abuse began to be criminalized as early as the 1950's beginning with mandatory sentencing laws that became the genesis of expanding incarceration within the U.S. (Gill, 2008).

Mandatory sentencing laws were first legislated by the U.S. Congress by The Boggs Act of 1951, which penalized marijuana possession with either prison time or a fine (Gill, 2008). These sentencing guidelines were produced through legislation and were instituted to speed up sentencing processes that also took judicial discretion away from judges and juries (Bedford & Powell, 2016). Mandatory minimums required that offenders served a predestined term for certain crimes and fines depending on the type drug that was used (Gill, 2008). Supporters of the Boggs Act contended that the elimination of judicial discretion maintained fairness in sentencing individuals who committed the same crimes, while opponents suggested that the law presented a power imbalance by granting more discretion to the prosecutors (Gill, 2008). Decades later the Federal Sentencing Guidelines was developed by the U.S. Sentencing Commission that stressed the importance of equality, deterrence, fairness, and consistency in sentencing (Morson & Kelley, 2008). Under these standards, offenders with congruent backgrounds who committed similar infractions would receive similar sentences impartial to race or status (Spohn, Kim, Belenko, & Brennan, 2014). These policy actions brought increased

stability to the criminal justice system, which had been plagued with racial disparities for decades (Spohn, Kim, Belenko, & Brennan, 2014).

The Supreme Court decision *U.S. v. Booker* (2005) however, weakened the sentencing guidelines and re-shifted the degree of judicial discretion to judges in sentencing, by striking down the federal sentencing decree that mandated federal judges to order sentences within the established Federal Guidelines (Yang, 2015). Despite the Supreme Court ruling, judges were still required to examine the guideline range in deciding a final sentence, while also presenting a rationale if the penalty fell below the minimum standards (Spohn, Kim, Belenko, & Brennan, 2014). This shift in policy required judges to exercise both discretion and knowledge of applying the law in all cases.

Alexander (2010) contended that the reduction or repeal of mandatory drug sentencing laws may have resolved state budgets, but did not address the racial ideologies that gave birth to sentencing policies. The history of structural racism within the criminal justice system from this view had to be addressed in order for any long lasting change to take place. This argument not only provides a critical view on criminal justice reform by examining the financial motives behind these changes, but also calls for a deeper examination of racial disparities within the criminal justice system.

The difficulties in achieving power balance between each branch of government with regard to mandatory minimums have been a prevalent issue within local, state, and federal institutions. Gonzales (2009) contended that mandatory federal sentencing guidelines was essential for verifying public safety and equality within the criminal

justice system when it came to sentencing for similar crimes. Conversely, Schanzenback (2015) argued that the overall effectiveness of mandatory minimums was inconclusive and that more studies should be dedicated in the circumstances of how the mandatory minimums are applied, such as criminal history, drug quantity, and offense seriousness. Despite the stated objectives clarified by the U.S. Sentencing Commission, Mohammed and Williams (2013) argued that the shift in drug policies from the Nixon era was racism in an institutional form. This declaration took the position that the implemented drug policies have resulted in generational implications for minority groups, which can be seen today within penal institutions and minority communities across the U.S. (Mohammed and Williams, 2013).

In connection with mandatory sentencing, Moran (2009) further added that taking discretion from judges, in fact, had the opposite effect in not only increasing the role of the state and federal prosecutors but also leading to the racial distinctions in imprisonment. From this perspective, the argument can be made that these mandatory minimum sentences in essence, were a reinforcement of the institutional constructs that ultimately shaped policy decisions leading to the current racial discrepancy in incarceration. While the debate of discretion in sentencing between the judicial and executive branches remained a constant variable, the mandatory minimums established by the Boggs Act became a critical component of incarceration as the drug era of the 60's, 70's altered public and political perceptions of drug policy (Gill, 2008).

The drug epidemic of the 70's and 80s served as the genesis of the incarceration era for minorities (Ward & Rivera, 2014). Richard Nixon was credited as the first

American President who declared a “War on Drugs” in the early 1970’s, which was marked by a series of drug policies that had repercussions for minorities who were incarcerated for drug offenses (Ward & Rivera, 2014, p. 103). The War on Drugs campaign was continued by the Reagan administration that incorporated a bottom line resistance approach to the crack cocaine epidemic, which had skyrocketed in minority communities (Burke, 2014). The approach to this problem criminalized the abuse of drugs, which imprisoned a large number of minorities, while ignoring the substance abuse dilemma, which was widespread within impoverished communities.

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 passed by the U.S. Congress during the Reagan administration, altered the general directed release from a rehabilitative system to a punitive system that constituted a different set of mandatory minimum sentences for drugs (Burke, 2014). The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 expressed Congress's perspective that crack cocaine was more dangerous than the powdered form of cocaine (Averick, Barish, & DuVernay, 2016). As a result, the act incorporated a provision that created a distinction between federal punishments for crack cocaine and powder cocaine offenses. Specifically the law required a minimum sentence of 5 years without parole for possession of 5 grams of crack cocaine, while also requiring the same sentence for possession of 500 grams of powder cocaine, thus making it a 100:1 weight ratio (FAMM, 2010). However, comprehensive research by experts and other organizations including the United States Sentencing Commission found little difference between the two drugs and found the sentencing disparities to be racially unjustifiable due to its impact on the disproportionate incarceration of thousands of minority citizens (ACLU, 2014). This

discovery led to changes in sentencing guidelines by the Federal Government to address the racial component in sentencing.

The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 reduced the disparity between crack cocaine and powder cocaine amounts needed to produce specific federal penalties from a 100:1 weight ratio to an 18:1 weight ratio, which eliminated the five-year mandatory minimum sentences for simple possession of crack cocaine (FAMM, 2010). This shift in policy led to thousands of individuals, who were sometimes serving life sentences, becoming eligible for early releases (FAMM, 2010). The Act has improved the integrity of the federal criminal justice system, but further reforms are needed to completely eliminate the disparity, by enacting a 1:1 sentencing ratio.

While leaders and concerned citizens have welcomed these new policies, some scholars maintained that the War on Drugs resulted in the formation of a permanent underclass. Nellis, Greene, and Mauer (2008) argued that many of the laws, policies, and decisions formulated in the 70's and 80's involving drug usage, had a consummate impact on minority communities in the U.S. Specifically, Averick, Barish, and DuVernay (2016) contended that the War on Drugs campaign resulted in the creation of a permanent pecking order of minorities today who have few educational or job opportunities as a result of being incarcerated for prior drug offenses. This is supported by the fact that government surveys have continuously shown that minorities have used drugs at roughly the same proportions as European-Americans (Ward & Rivera, 2014). While these findings do not absolve minorities from drug abuse, they do highlight a racial disparity that continues to impact minority, individuals, families, and communities.

More recently Jones and Mauer (2013) held that minorities and European-Americans had about the same rate of drug use, but yet African-Americans and Hispanics made up a larger percentage of drug arrests. This was corroborated by the National Research Council report, which showed that the preponderance of drug use was marginally higher among African-Americans than European-Americans for some illicit drugs and slightly lower for others (NRCP, 2014). Furthermore the report noted that there was little evidence to support that minorities sold drugs more often than European-Americans when all drug categories were combined. While evidence can provide policymakers with important information in making policy choices, it is perception and preferences that ultimately determine policy outcomes. The following section will discuss how the War on Drugs campaign transitioned into a political machine that ultimately determined votes and defined political careers for many public leaders.

Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994

Policy is often connected to actors who are tasked with making decisions to address a phenomenon in society, which creates social change. As mentioned in previous sections, research supports the fact that institutions ultimately structure the who, what, when, where, and why of policy making. Ward and Rivera (2014) argued that institutional practices, in general, are aggregations of individual behaviors, attitudes, and actions that manifested themselves in policies that can have long ranging effects on some communities. This belief takes into account the human element in decision-making that must be minimized by adopting implementing a system of checks and balances similar to the ones created by the three branches of government.

The lack of implementing a checks and balances system in policy-making can result in policy choices that have generational implications. These long-term effects can be seen in minority communities across the United States, where many minority fathers are absent in households due to long incarceration sentences. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 set the stage, for the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 that was signed into law under the Clinton administration that greatly expanded incarceration to depths that can still be seen today in many local and state penitentiaries (U.S. Sentencing Commission, 1994).

Following several revisions of the 80's Anti-Drug Abuse Act, the approach on drugs and crime shifted to a politicized stance between liberals, conservatives, the media, and organized advocacy groups that encouraged tougher crime policies by the nation's leaders (Jones & Mauer, 2013). This instituted The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 by the Clinton Administration, which increased billions in funding for law enforcement, prisons, and prevention programs, including The Three-Strikes Law for repeat offenders (Jones & Mauer, 2013). The passing of these laws continued the objectives of the War on Drugs campaign, which expanded incarceration rates to levels never witnessed in the criminal justice system (Ward and Rivera, 2014).

The Three Strikes statute under The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 was the first mandatory sentencing law to gain national publicity, particularly in the state of California in 1994 (Hillips, 2011). Several states including Louisiana also begin to follow suit in 1994 by passing the mandatory sentences mandates of The Three Strikes statute (Hannaford, 2016). The objective of these statutes was to

increase the punishment of those convicted of more than two serious offenses.

Specifically offenders who were found guilty of a third felony were required to serve a minimum term of 25 years to possibly life without parole (Jones & Mauer, 2013). This shift in policy not only kept many individuals behind bars, but also disrupted millions of families who relied on these individuals for financial support.

Alexander (2010) argued that mandatory sentencing laws most often enforced penalties against drug offenders and those who were guilty of nonviolent crimes. A fictional example highlights an 18-year-old father, who has been arrested as part of an undercover operation and is charged with two counts of selling cocaine to minors. Several years later he is arrested for robbing a corner store, which normally would not result in a severe punishment. However under mandatory sentencing laws, because of his two prior felony convictions, he is now eligible for life imprisonment (Alexander, 2010). This brief analogy illustrates real-life situations that have occurred under the mandatory sentencing structure. The implementation of these laws did maintain success in placing a number of individuals in prisons that were caught with drugs. However, these laws also presented new challenges that have led to present day questions regarding the effectiveness of prison time for a substance abuse issue.

The implementation of long-standing drug policies for crack and powder cocaine, and the Three Strikes and Mandatory Minimums has been the subject of much criticism for the racial disparities they produce (Donnelly, 2016). The state of California often serves as a model to illustrate the interconnectivity of institutional and political processes in the 1970' and 1980's and its effect on incarceration. Campbell (2014) argued that

California lawmakers changed the institutional structures that regulated sentencing guidelines for convicted prisoners in the state for political purposes. This perspective was shared by Donnelly (2016), who discussed that partisanship and racial threats made criminal justice a permanent issue on national and state political agendas that resulted in the election of politicians who were tough on crime. With criminal justice turning into a political forum for soliciting votes, the approach to reforms became more aggressive by criminalizing drug usage, which further increased incarceration rates nationwide.

The War on Drugs Campaign sparked not only public outrage on crime, but also spearheaded political and policy changes that favored legislators who embraced and implemented increased incarcerations. Additionally, Nellis et al. (2008) argued that the racial discrepancies resulting from these laws could have been foreshadowed and replaced with responses to the drug problem as a substance abuse issue as opposed to a criminal issue, had legislators been committed to a rational assessment of likely outcomes. These responses should have instead been centered on financing toward education, prevention, and treatment programs in the communities where the drug problem was most pronounced (Nellis et al., 2008). This insight into criminal justice reform as more of a rehabilitative approach to drug use has become more apparent today, as policymakers attempt to address the opioid crisis that has impacted the U.S. (Kolodny, Courtwright, Hwang, Kreiner, Eadie, Clark, Alexander, 2015).

Although scholars have noted the impact of politics on producing harsher criminal justice policies, Donnelly (2016) argued that existing literature provides a limited explanation as to why elected officials have continued to address racial disparities

in the criminal justice system inadequately. One possible suggestion was offered by Gottschalk (2016) who argued that the discussion of reinvestment, recidivism, cost-benefit analysis, and fiscal responsibility were concepts that shifted attention away from the institutional disparities and discriminatory practices within sentencing guidelines that had served as some of the main factors for the mass incarceration of African-Americans. From this perspective, policy decisions that were based on fiscal issues did not even scratch the surface of what was a much more complex societal issue, but instead ignored the structural components that were embedded within the criminal justice system (Gottschalk, 2016).

From a similar but broader overview, Donnelly (2016) highlighted ideological beliefs in civil rights ideals and political interests as factors that often drove policy choices. Donnelly (2016) also argued that shared powers between the state, legislature, and executive branches of government had the potential to serve as the platform for more racially similar criminal justice practices. The number of factors involved features the complexities surrounding the issue of incarceration within the U.S., and illustrates why the process of decriminalizing a substance abuse issue was gradual.

Incarceration and Substance Abuse in Minority Communities

Perceptions on incarceration have varied from being an effective deterrence to crime, to creating social, political, and economic imbalances that have divided communities. While it is true that imprisonment can be an effective tool for deterring crime and putting away violent crime offenders, both instances have had an unbalanced impact on minority communities. Many scholars have noted that decades of incarceration

have impacted men of color, their families, and the communities to which they return (Ward & Rivera, 2014). African-Americans constitute 6% of the U.S population, but 40.2% of the prison population (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014). With the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for African-American men being 1 and 3 (1 and 17 for European-Americans), these racial inequalities have resulted in communities being disproportionately socially, economically, and politically impacted (Carson, 2015).

In order to address ongoing discontent among community members and citizens on issues such as racial inequality, Kapucu (2016) argued that community-based research was needed to bridge the gap between theory and practice regarding policy choices, implementation, and changes. These inequalities can be seen in a number of studies, which highlight the ineffectiveness in addressing socioeconomic and drug abuse issues in African-American communities through incarceration (Doherty, Swick, Green, & Ensminger, 2016). This shift in addressing crime to a substance abuse within communities is becoming more prevalent today due to the prescription pills and opioid crisis (Kolodny et al, 2015).

Decades of research support the claim that lengthy sentences do not dramatically discourage lower level drug crimes and can in fact galvanize them. In a quantitative study on arrests and incarceration, Doherty, Cwick, Green, and Ensminger (2016) evaluated the long-term implications of criminal justice intervention on substance use and offending into midlife among an African-American community utilizing propensity score matching and multivariate regression analyses. The results suggested that the high currency of incarcerations among African-Americans was not only counterproductive,

but also suggested that the role of the criminal justice system further perpetuated criminal careers as opposed to serving as a preventative measure (Doherty, Cwick, Green, & Ensminger, 2016).

This study was further supported by Snyder & Stinchomb (2009) who maintained that the high incarceration of drug related and low-level offenders would not only have minimal impact on reducing crime rates, but could also increase crime as a result of low-level offenders being incarcerated for longer sentences. Applying a qualitative approach, Zaller, Cheney, Curran, Booth, and Borders (2016) conducted a study to explore the relationships between ongoing involvement in the criminal justice system and continued drug use in a population of urban and rural African American cocaine users in a southern state. The interviews were semi-structured and administered among African-American cocaine users in Arkansas between 2010 and 2012. They found that these participants became habitual offenders of the law, continued to access have drugs while incarcerated and had the lack of access to effective drug treatment (Zaller et al., 2016). The study illuminated the need for identifying more effective alternatives to incarceration such as community-based substance use treatment and supportive services (Zaller et al., 2016).

Incarceration has presented a variety of social injustices in minority communities, especially for those who have been imprisoned for drug abuse. Proponents of incarceration have accepted the need for alternative solutions to prison for those who have committed nonviolent drug offenses (Hillips,2011). Wilson (2009) argued that incarceration was an effective deterrent for reducing crime, irrespective of race, gender, or socioeconomic status, but acknowledged errors in the imprisonment of drug offenders.

Wilson (2009) further suggested community treatment programs for serious drug offenders as a more optimal preference to incarceration. This alternative in addressing drug use is gaining more traction as states have implemented policies that are releasing thousands of ex-offenders who have been convicted of past drug offenses.

Other scholars have agreed with the assessment that drug offenses should be treated as a substance abuse issue as opposed to a criminal issue (Kolodny et al, 2015). Gottschalk (2016) identified solutions such as community-based mental health and substance abuse programs as critical foundations of incarceration reforms that could, in fact reduce the number of individuals who are sent to prison in the first place for drug abuse. Each of these cases demonstrated the diametric effect of incarceration on minority communities, while also advancing the need to explore other effective alternatives, such as increased funding for prevention programs. While creating alternatives to prison time has been instrumental in addressing substance abuse, more examination has been geared toward drug reform within local and state legislatures to supplement existing criminal justice reforms.

Drug Crime

In the U.S., it is a crime to use, possess, manufacture, or distribute drugs classified as illegal (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994). Drug-defined offenses occur when someone violates a law that prohibits the possession, use, distribution, or manufacture of illegal drugs. Alternatively, drug-related offenses are other crimes that result from the effects of drugs, such as theft motivated by the desire to buy drugs or violence against rival drug dealers (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994). Penalties for drug crime are primarily based

on the type and amount of drug. However, there are a great variety of roles people play in drug trafficking, from a courier (someone who simply transports drugs) to a drug kingpin. Each of these roles and their functions resemble that of a business organization, in which each member has a specific job description that impacts the sale and distribution of products sold.

Schedule II Drug Policy

State laws vary widely on what constitutes criminal behavior when it comes to drug use and sales. For example, marijuana cultivation is legal in some states due to medical and personal use exceptions, and there has been a recent trend towards marijuana decriminalization (Maier, Mannes, & Koppenhofer, 2017). Even as several states such as Colorado, allow marijuana, the federal government still strictly prohibits pot. Under the scheduling system, the federal government classified marijuana as a schedule 1 drug, meaning it's perceived to have no medical value and a high potential for abuse (Chilkoti, 2017). This restriction has further complicated state law in regards to consistency on how marijuana use is punished

Although Louisiana has one of the highest incarceration rates in the country, a significant portion of those incarcerated involves the use of drugs (Louisiana Department of Corrections, 2016). In 2015 the Louisiana penal system took in 16,504 admissions with more than half of them being for drug possession of Schedule I and II drugs (Louisiana Department of Corrections, 2016). According to the Louisiana Task Force Report (2016), the most common crime and top nonviolent drug offense in Louisiana in the year 2015 was for possession of Schedule II drugs including cocaine,

methamphetamine, and some prescription opioids (Task Force Report, 2016, p. 19).

These numbers highlight the significance of drug abuse in Louisiana and reiterate the importance of substance abuse programs in favor of incarceration.

An abundance of research has argued for a more rehabilitative approach to drug abuse in favor of incarceration for commercial purposes (Maier, Mannes, & Koppenhofer, 2017). Miller and Miller (2016) highlighted that an expansion of drug addiction resources could decrease recidivism and relapse rates, which could preserve billion in taxpayer dollars. With \$625 million being allocated in Louisiana for adult corrections for the fiscal year 2017, changes in policy will be critical for the criminal justice system (Louisiana Task Force Report (2016)

As incarceration increased in the 1980's and 1990's due to mandatory sentencing policies, judges found that protracted prison sentences not only were unsuccessful in prohibiting lower-level drug crimes, but also found drug offenders of all races to be engulfed in a continuous cycle of incarceration and release (Contrino, Nochajski, Farrell, & Logsdon, 2016). This realization has led to further scrutiny in drug scheduling laws that have sometimes incarcerated offenders for decades.

Drug Schedule Laws

The Controlled Substances Act (CSA) is the federal statute establishing policy under which the manufacture, importation, possession, use, and distribution of certain substances is regulated (DEA, 2003). It was passed as part of the Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970 and signed into law by President Nixon. The legislation created five classifications (Schedules), while the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and

the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) determines which substances are added to or removed from the various schedules (DEA, 2003). Crack cocaine is categorized as a Schedule II drug, which the DEA defines as controlled dangerous substances (CDS), or chemicals with a high potential for abuse, with use potentially leading to severe psychological or physical dependence (“DEA,” n.d.). Other examples of Schedule II drugs are Vicodin, methamphetamine, methadone, hydromorphone, meperidine, oxycodone, fentanyl, Dexedrine, Adderall, and Ritalin (“DEA,” n.d.). In 2015 for possession of Schedule II drugs, the most common offense at admission, the average time served was about one year and five months, with an additional six months in pretrial detention on average before being sentenced (Task Force, 2016, p. 21). These highlights represent a small portion of a number of laws that classify and address drug usage differently across the U.S.

Every state regulates and oversees the sale of CDS even though each state varies in its definition the penalties for distribution. Louisiana not only categorized conventional drugs like marijuana, heroin, and cocaine as CDS, but also the compounds used to manufacture them (Task Force, 2016). In Louisiana, CDS are classified into five categories called schedules. Schedule I classifies the most dangerous drugs, which have a high prospect of abuse and addiction, while Schedules II, III, IV, and V decrease in hazard and chances of violence. The charge for being arrested for distribution or possession of a CDS is predicated on the type of drug (Task Force, 2016). If one has been arrested for sale or possession of a CDS, the Louisiana Code will tell what the charges will be depending on the type drug (Task Force, 2016). The implementation of

this code provides one of many examples of how mandatory sentencing eliminates discretion, along with any contextual factors involved when convicting and sentencing individuals accused of drug use, sale, and distribution.

According to Louisiana law R.S. 40:967 (2011), it is unlawful for any person knowingly or intentionally to possess a controlled dangerous substance as classified in Schedule II, unless such substance was obtained directly or pursuant to a valid prescription or order from a practitioner, as provided in R.S. 40:978 (2011), while acting in the course of his professional practice, or except as otherwise authorized by this part. Regarding cocaine, Section F1a, stipulates that any person who knowingly or intentionally possesses 28 grams or more, but less than 200 grams, of cocaine or of a mixture or substance containing a detectable amount of cocaine or of its analogues as provided in Schedule II(A)(4) of R.S. 40:964 (2011), shall be sentenced to serve a term of imprisonment at hard labor of not less than five years, nor more than 30 years, and to pay a fine of not less than \$50,000 nor more than \$150,000. These examples are one of many laws that determine the fate of many individuals who have been convicted of nonviolent drug offenses.

Crack Cocaine Sentencing & Minorities

While a number of offenders are incarcerated for the abuse of Schedule I drugs, this study will examine on Schedule II drugs. The rationale for this decision is because the top violent drug offense in Louisiana in the year 2015 was for possession of Schedule II drugs including cocaine, methamphetamine, and some prescription opioids (Task Force Report, 2016). In addition, Schedule 2 drugs such as crack cocaine have historically had

an asymmetric effect on minority communities, particularly African-American males (Alexander, 2010).

Among the sentencing policies that most impacted minorities was the federal policies in the late 80's implemented by Congress governing powder and crack cocaine (Burke, 2014). The 100:1 drug quantity proportion was introduced between charges of crack cocaine and powder cocaine, which meant that distributing 500 grams of powder cocaine activated a required 5-year prison sentence, while possession or distribution of 5 grams of crack cocaine produced the same 5-year sentence (Mauer, 2011). The racial impact of this law was seen in the high number of arrests of African-American men, with 80% of them being charged with a crack-cocaine offense, while powder cocaine perpetrators were more likely to be European-American or Latino (Mauer, 2011). Although Congress decreased this disparity in 2010 by raising the weight limit for crack cocaine to 28 grams. Several scholars (Mauer, 2011; Oleson, 2014; Shappert, 2009) argued that this ratio still produces racial disparities nationwide, such as in Louisiana that has incarcerated a high number of minority drug offenders serving long prison sentences. Decreasing the drug ratio again is another possibility among policymakers that could gain momentum as states continue to look for alternatives in decreasing incarceration rates.

Other scholars (Blume, 2016; Palamar, Davies, Ompad, Gleland, & Weitzman, 2015) argued that more attention and substance abuse research should be conducted within minority populations. Specifically, Palamar, Davies, Ompad, Gleland, and Weitzman (2015) examined the correlation between race, crack and powder cocaine possession, and arrests in the United States to determine who was at the most risk for

arrests and imprisonment. The methods included secondary data analyses on the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2009–2012 on adults' age ≥ 18 to determine associations between use and arrest. Socioeconomic correlates of lifetime and annual use of powder cocaine and crack were characterized using multivariable logistic regression and associated with frequency of recent use were examined using generalized negative binomial regression. The results indicated that African-Americans of lower socioeconomic status that used either powder cocaine or crack tended to use at higher frequencies and were also at greater risk of arrest (Palamar et al., 2015). The findings highlighted the need for addressing other societal factors such as poverty, which contributed to the substance abuse issues seen in underprivileged communities. While many states have instituted effective policy reforms to decrease incarceration, more examination and reforms are needed to address the racial disparities in drug sentencing guidelines.

Social and Financial Impact of Incarceration

Incarceration presents a number of challenges to offenders that begin immediately upon being release. Minorities in particular, who have incarcerated for extended periods of time, stand a number of barriers in accessing public services and benefit upon their release from prison (Alexander, 2010). Resources such as voting rights, student loans, housing, and life insurance are off limits for many individuals with a prior criminal history. Job applications that contain prior misdemeanor or felony history serve as scarlet letters for former offenders and thus scare away potential employers. If criminal justice reforms include reduced sentencing for individuals, then addressing some of these

barriers will be critical for ex-offenders reintegrating into society.

In a phenomenological study that explored the lived experiences of African-American male ex-offenders regarding their employability for public sector jobs, Porter (2017) found that ex-offenders were often unable to vote or find work due to their criminal history. Faced with poverty and few other options, these individuals ultimately end up back into the prison system again, which begins a continuous cycle of incarceration and release.

Prior research has shown that the incarceration of people with families and children brings greater ramifications than those for the offender alone, especially when it comes to poverty. Miller and Barnes (2015) examined the associations between paternal incarceration during childhood and health, educational, and economic outcomes in young adulthood. Results suggested that parental incarceration was significantly related to some outcomes in early adulthood, including educational attainment, physical and mental health, and receipt of public assistance (Miller & Barnes, 2015). This phenomenon highlights the impact of incarceration and its potential contribution to poverty, crime, and drug abuse.

Impact of Incarceration on Minorities

The War on Drugs campaign serves as one of many social, economic, and political factors that have contributed to the large number of minorities incarcerated. African-Americans in particular have been among the hardest hit when it comes to incarceration (Alexander, 2010). The Demographic Profiles of the Adult Correctional Population in Louisiana (Appendix E) represents the most recent demographic snapshot

of the adult inmates in the state correctional system as of December 31, 2017 (LA Department of Public Safety & Corrections, 2017). The total number of people incarcerated within Louisiana penitentiaries is 33,739 with 94% (31,782) being male and (6%) 1,957 being female. Presently there are 15,152 adult inmates incarcerated in state prison facilities, and an additional 18,587 adults, sentenced to the Department's custody and housed in local jails (LA Department of Public Safety & Corrections, 2017). These numbers reflect some of the disparities that continue to exist today within the criminal justice system.

As a total population, African Americans presently account for 66.6% of the state's adult correctional population in state and local facilities, as well as transitional work programs, while European-Americans account for 32.9%. Other ethnicities accounted for the remaining 0.5%. In other statistics African-Americans account for 67.6% of the current State's Death Row inmates (31% European-American) 73.9% of adults serving life sentences (25.6% European-American), 79.2% of youthful offenders in the state correctional system (20.5% European-American), and 79.3% of adults serving time as habitual offenders (20.4% European-American) (LA Department of Public Safety & Corrections, 2017). The implications of these statistics have impacted African-American families in regard to poverty, because of the loss in income, as well as the mother being forced to serve in both roles as parent and provider. These breakdowns in the family structure can last for generations due to the absence of the father, and can be seen in many communities today.

Poverty remains high in City N Parish, particularly among African Americans and

children with nearly 20 % of African Americans being classified as poor (BR Area Foundation, 2016). In addition to poverty, income disparities are common with African Americans earning 46 cents for every dollar earned by a European-American household in 2014, (BR Area Foundation, 2016). These factors are part of a list of other societal challenges in minority communities, but have served as major variables that have contributed to the frustrations and dissension between minority and European-American communities within City N Parish.

Voting Participation

The number of minority male incarcerations within City N Parish has presented a stigmatism that has had social, political, and financial implications on offenders, families, and communities. In December of 2016 City N Parish voters rejected four out of five tax propositions on the ballot, which put to a halt several plans that parish leaders had for proposed projects (Jones & Gallo, 2016). One of the defeats involved a 10-year, 1.5-mill property tax that would have generated \$5.8 million annually for a 30-bed mental health facility offering drug rehabilitation services and psychiatric care (Jones & Gallo, 2016). With mental health and substance abuse being an issue within several low-income communities, this defeat was deemed a significant loss to the community. What's critical to note was that the only successful tax proposal on the ballot that passed was the additional 2% hotel tax on occupants who stayed in hotels within the North City N Economic Development District, which was composed of predominately African-American communities (Jones & Gallo, 2016). Political experts attributed these results to residents in outlying communities who felt disenfranchised by the government's

downtown focus. Only voters who lived within the commercial district's boundaries could cast ballots on the proposal, which was approved it by 55% (Jones & Gallo, 2016). The failed tax ballots of 2016 serve as evidence of a larger societal issue, in which African-American communities have fought back by employing several opportunities such as voting in order to voice their opinions.

Research has shown that government institutions that implement policies that address problems in all communities especially traditionally marginalized communities have a higher chance of positive social change that impacts areas across all policy spectrums (Caballero & Soto-Onate, 2015). In their examination of institutions and community networks, Friedman, Kadlec, and Birnback (2007) found that over a decade, the city of Bridgeport improved and maintained community cohesion and engagement by focusing on some community issues that affected all communities specifically among lower-income and working-class individuals. These results highlight the importance of establishing and maintaining communication and collaboration between communities of all backgrounds.

Community Unity

The shootings of three police officers impacted communities of all races as officers of both ethnicities lost their lives in the line of duty. The natural disaster of 2016 displaced thousands of families from their home and communities, which posed unprecedented challenges for Louisiana State and local governments (Richardson & Maninger, 2016) In spite of these challenges, communities, churches, non-profit

organizations with people of all ages, races, gender, socioeconomic status, political, and religious affiliations came together to help one another.

Junger (2016) discussed post combat psychological problems among U.S. military veterans and their struggles with returning to civilian life. The sense of brotherhood that existed between American troops overseas in which racial, political, religious, and socioeconomic lines were set aside, ceased once they returned home. Personal and private interests came at the expense of team unity. Hence, the real struggle was dealing with the prevalence of individualism and isolation that existed in many communities upon returning home. Junger (2016) concluded that communities were stronger when they were united especially in times of war and calamity. Tragedies that impact communities can ultimately serve as catalysts for positive social change. The police shootings while tragic have been catalysts in promoting dialogue between communities, in which a major component of the dialogue concerns perceptions of disparities within the criminal justice system.

Community Perceptions of Criminal Justice System

While the statistics support the claim of racial and institutional disparities within incarceration, a number of studies have used a number of court cases that have highlighted the racial differences in perception regarding the criminal justice system. Mauer (2011) highlighted historical cases such as the 1992 police beating of motorist Rodney King in Los Angeles, and the high profile criminal trial of O.J. Simpson as examples of the disparities between minority and European-American communities

regarding their perceptions of the criminal justice system. These views have remained consistent throughout communities in the U.S.

These same differences also exist within communities in Louisiana as residents have begun voicing their opinions on the current criminal justice system. In a recent Louisiana Survey regarding the 2017 criminal justice reform proposals, almost 34% of respondents said that they agreed with the statement that "Louisiana's current criminal justice system was fair," with a sharp divide between how black residents' answered compared to their white counterparts (Para 4). Seven out of ten African-American respondents said that they disagreed with the statement that while just four out of every ten European-American respondents did not agree with the declaration (Crisp, 2017). The Louisiana survey was based off responses from 1,012 residents in live interviews by cell phone or landline from Feb. 23 to March 23 with a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points. This survey suggests that in Louisiana, criminal justice reform runs deeper than high incarcerations and wasted tax dollars and instead touches on racial disparities.

To better understand perceptions within the community, the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University employed the Community Resilience Study (Manship, 2017). The study consisted of a survey distributed to a sample of adult Louisiana residents in City N, Ascension, and Livingston Parish, and focused on perceptions about race, the protests, and law enforcement in Louisiana (Manship, 2017). The results found that overall opinion in Louisiana leaned toward more government effort to reduce racial differences in society – especially in reducing differences in criminal justice system (Manship, 2017). 86% of African-Americans believed that government

should do more to reduce racial differences in punishment for people convicted of similar crimes, as opposed to 62% of state residents (Manship, 2017). A high level of approval among African-Americans largely shaped the composite opinion, which provides further evidence of the racial contrast in views on how punishment is administered within Louisiana's criminal justice system.

In previous surveys regarding community perceptions of social well-being in N Parish, researchers found polarizing differences between racial groups in regard to social, economic, and political advantages, but did not highlight specific reasons behind their opinions (Henderson, Davis, & Climek, 2015). Similar to the community resilience survey conducted by LSU Manship, the findings found numerical differences in perception on racism, community, government, and the criminal justice system, but lacked further explanation into these differences (Henderson, Davis, & Climek, 2015). The surveys provide support the argument that perspectives of the criminal justice system run deep along racial lines. However, the rationale behind these perspectives must be captured and understood before effective public policy can take place.

Louisiana's Justice Reinvestment Task Force

City N Parish is an urban area with a diverse population of 446,753 located in the southeastern part of the U.S. on the east bank of the Mississippi River (U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). Due to its proximity to the Mississippi, this city serves as a major center of commercial and industrial activity, especially in the petrochemical industry. Regarding the local government structure, the city of N and City N Parish are jointly administered by the Mayor-President Broome, a 12 member municipal council, and the

governor of Louisiana former United States Army veteran Governor Edwards (U.S. Census Bureau). (n.d.). These officials have been tasked with taking charge of a community that has been deeply divided by race and class, while also addressing demands for equality and fairness in the criminal justice system (Jacobs, 2017).

Attempts to implement institutional reforms in Louisiana were put in place before in 2008 when Governor Jindal instituted and signed a large bundle of bills that sought to address ethics, economic, and social issues (Nossiter, 2008). As part of these changes, Governor Jindal credited Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as the genesis that spearheaded the opportunity to implement reforms, due to the fact that the aftermath effects forced communities to reexamine the blueprint of their social institutions and the delivery process of social services (Nossiter, 2008). While these reforms did diminish the interests and social habits that have prevailed Louisiana lobbyists, state legislators, and state agencies for decades, these institutional reforms focused mainly on public assistance and largely ignored the criminal justice system and its disproportionate impact on marginalized communities.

Criminal justice reform was one of the top policy areas discussed by legislators within the Louisiana state and city-parish government in 2016 (BRAC, 2016). Louisiana currently has the second highest incarceration rate in the nation with 712 of every 100,000 adults in jail (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The state of Oklahoma now leads the nation by incarcerating 719 people per 100,000 residents, according recent inmate figures and the latest state population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau jail (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). This change in being the most incarcerated state, while small on the

surface, provides additional momentum for legislators in further improving criminal justice reforms.

With inmate costs in Louisiana rising to just over \$51 per day, the annual tally has cost millions in taxpayer dollars (Stole, 2016). To address these issues the Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Task Force, a team of legislators, judges, attorneys, law enforcement, community faith leaders, advocates, and criminal justice experts, was created in 2016 to study the state's criminal justice system and recommend strategic changes in preparation for the 2017 legislation (Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Task Force). The recommendations by the Task Force served as the foundation upon which the ten new laws were based that passed within the legislature in 2017 (Pew Charitable Trust, 2018).

Some states beginning with Texas in 2007, developed reinvestment task forces who were tasked with examining state's criminal justice system (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014).. What several of the task forces in these states found in their research of current prison populations was that a significant number of prisoners had been incarcerated for nonviolent offenses such as drug crimes (Pew, 2018). With prison rooms being in short supply, choices had to be made regarding what inmates would have the opportunity to be released back into the community. Based on this information, the thought was two fold in that states could recommend policy reforms aimed at decreasing sentences for nonviolent drug offenders, while also utilizing the prison space for more violent offenders (Task Force Report, 2016).

It is important to note that the Louisiana legislature has attempted to address

incarceration before. Due to policy and legislative changes passed when Louisiana first launched a Justice Reinvestment process in 2011 and 2012, Louisiana's prison population dropped 9 % from its peak between 2012 and 2015 (Task Force, 2016). Even with this reduction however, beginning in 2016 the impact of these reforms has weakened, and reductions in the prison population have also decreased.

Today Louisiana remains the state with the second highest per-capita use of prison beds in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics calculated Louisiana's imprisonment rate at 816 people in prison for every 100,000 residents, nearly double the national average, and significantly higher than the second- and third-highest states Oklahoma and Alabama (Carson, 2014). With millions of taxpayers' dollars being allocated to housing inmates, this rate of incarceration has no longer become sustainable.

Louisiana has had several examples to follow from other states in reducing incarceration. In the past decade there have been a number of states that have formulated and implemented their own set of reforms (Pew, 2017). While each state had its own particular issues, the overall outcomes of these reforms have led to decreases in incarceration rates and an increase in the available taxpayer dollars.

The state of California voted to equalize sentencing disparities for certain crack and cocaine powder offenses, while the state of New Jersey not only expanded the use of drug courts in favor of more substance abuse and treatment options, but also gave judges discretion to sentence low-level drug criminals to less than the mandatory minimum punishments (Liners, 2016). As a result of these reforms, New Jersey has cut its prison

population by 9.5 % from 2011 to 2014, second only to Mississippi for the highest percentage decrease (Hernandez, 2015). Alabama expanded sentencing options and eradicated federal lifetime public benefits bans for persons with felony drug convictions, while Connecticut addressed the collateral impacts of certain felony drug convictions (Porter, 2016). The above examples are just a few of the many new reforms that have been implemented within state legislatures across the U.S. With criminal justice reform costing millions in taxpayer dollars, these changes will continue for the near future, which could possibly bring new ideas in addressing criminal justice issues.

One area of promise is the initiative legislated by the state of Utah, which eliminated weight thresholds for all marijuana offenses and reclassified marijuana possession from a felony to misdemeanor (Porter, 2016). Georgia's HB 1176 Bill in 2012 instituted sweeping reforms that addressed state spending on corrections, which brought significant benefits to taxpayers (Report of the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform, 2015). Specifically, the Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform for Georgians recommended a set of policy modifications that concentrated prison space on violent offenders while enhancing probation, drug courts, and other sentencing alternatives for nonviolent offenders (Georgia Report, 2015). The reforms were embodied in HB 1176, which passed the General Assembly unanimously and was signed into law by Governor Deal on May 2, 2012. Since that time, the results have been positive with Georgia's overall prison population stabilizing, at 53,383 inmates at the start of 2015 (Georgia Report, 2015). Although there was no notable decrease in prisoners, before the implementation recommended policy reforms in 2012, Georgia's

prison population was expected to have increased by 8 % over five years, which would have cost the state \$264 million to expand prison capacity (Georgia Report, 2015). The positive outcomes from these states in addressing incarceration served as models for Louisiana in implementing their own reforms.

While a number of states have implemented sweeping criminal justice reforms that have saved millions of taxpayer dollars and decreased their prison populations, few states have discussed how these reforms have helped minority nonviolent male offenders. Several states such as Wisconsin and Delaware have adopted racial equity goals and structures that recognized the interrelated set of decisions that cumulatively produced racial disparities in imprisonment (Delaware Criminal Justice Council, 2010). These reforms took the next step in recognizing and addressing racism from a systemic perspective as opposed to a financial view.

In Georgia, researchers noted that one outcome of the reforms was the decline in the number of African-American adults incarcerated (Georgia Report, 2015). Although African-Americans still make up more than 60 % of the state prison population, the number of minority males sent to prison had declined 19 % over the past five years, while the number of minority women had dropped 33 %. The number of African Americans entering the prison system in 2013 was at its lowest level since 1988 (Georgia Report, 2015). These changes have signified the effectiveness of criminal justice policy within the state of Georgia when formulated and implemented correctly, and also provide a blueprint for other states to follow.

While it can be argued that several factors contributed to this decrease, changes in state policies and practices played a significant role. In reviewing past policies, the council found that drug offenders many of whom were at low risk to re-offend made up nearly 60 % of all prison admissions. As a result, policy changes were made to reinvest public dollars from first-year prison savings to accountability courts such as drug courts (Georgia Report, 2015). The findings highlighted the ability of policymakers to re-examine their approach to criminal justice reform by addressing the existing racial disparities within drug sentencing guidelines.

The final report from the Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Task Force was released to the public in the spring of 2017. In the final report, experts found that one of the leading causes of Louisiana long imprisonment was that it locked up people for nonviolent offenses far more than other states did (Task Force Report, 2016). Experts found that Louisiana sent people to jail for nonviolent offenses such as drug possession at twice the rate of South Carolina and three times the rate of Florida despite the fact that both states had nearly identical crime rates (Task Force Report, 2016). This led to lawmakers taking into consideration sweeping changes in regard to their sentencing structure and guidelines for individuals convicted of nonviolent drug offenses.

In fiscal year 2017, lawmakers allocated \$625 million for adult corrections, which was the third-largest state expenditure with healthcare leading the way, followed by education (Task Force Report, 2017). The task force recommended that Louisiana lawmakers utilize an extensive set of reforms to upgrade the function of its criminal justice system that would not only reduce the incarceration rate but also save millions in

taxpayer dollars. These recommendations included strengthening community supervision, revising drug penalties to target higher-level drug offenses, and clearing barriers to re-entry for nonviolent offenders who were returning back to their communities (Task Force Report, 2017). This included expanding incentives for inmates to participate in high-skilled workforce development and recidivism reduction programming (Task Force Report, 2016). The Task Force believed that their consensus recommendations would avert the projected growth in the number of prisoners in Louisiana and bend the prison population downward for an overall reduction in the inmate population of 13 % (4,817 prison beds) by 2027. This decline in the number of prisoners they believed would save Louisiana taxpayers \$305 million over the next 10 years (Task Force Report, 2017).

In June of 2017, Louisiana Governor Edwards signed into law a series of bills that will revamp the state's criminal justice system to in hopes of decreasing the state's prison population by 10 % over the next decade (Allen, 2017). Some of the changes will also suspend court payments and child support fees for offenders, providing them more time to secure employment. Other changes center on adjustments to drug distribution weights, mandatory minimums, and welfare benefits. The intent of these reforms was to decrease prison sentences for many nonviolent drug offenders, and provide them the opportunity to be released back into their communities and become productive citizens.

Some of the more notable bills include (S. 220, 2017) introduced by Senate President Alario, R-Westwego, tailors drug sentences to the weight of the drugs and

raises the felony theft threshold to \$1000. (S. 221, 2017) by Senate President Alario, R-Westwego, reduces the minimum prison sentence for a second felony conviction, and restricts life with parole sentences imposed for third or fourth convictions to those individuals convicted of multiple violent or sex crimes. (H. 519, 2017) by Rep. Emerson, R-Carencro expands opportunities for people with criminal convictions so that they can apply for and receive occupational licenses. The final (H. 681, 2017) by Rep. Moreno, D-New Orleans eliminates food stamp and welfare ban for drug offenders who are returning home from incarceration (Allen, 2017). With more offenders set to be released back into communities, (H. 116, 2017) by Rep. Stephen Dwight, R-Lake Charles was also passed to improve victim notification system to allow citizens to receive notification about an offender' release or parole hearings. While the new reforms may not address every issue within the Louisiana correctional system, collectively they seek to decrease incarceration over the next decade, while also increasing taxpayer dollars for reinvestment into ex-offender substance abuse and victim programs.

Model of Institutional Reinforcement

Society is composed of a significant number of institutions, which are all interconnected through their common task of helping the community to function. As previously discussed, institutions can shape the behavior of its members in various ways depending on the accepted norms, behaviors, and values. In public institutions such as the government, these rules and cultures regulate the policy processes, which determine policy outcomes (Peters, 2012). Public perceptions and values of citizens is also important to policy making because they direct voting preferences toward public leaders

who share similar views. While institutions can be thought of as a combination of norms and behaviors, reinforcement can be thought of as the process of strengthening, encouraging or establishing a belief or pattern of behavior (McLeod, 2015).

Model of Institutional Reinforcement



In examining the integration of these factors, the Model of Institutional Reinforcement was formulated to highlight the policy process that begins with perceptions and ends with policy outcomes, which further reinforce the previously held perceptions. In the model, I examine the integration of public perception and several variables (institutions, actor preferences, behaviors etc.) and their impact on policy outcomes. These outcomes present social, political, and economic implications that often can encourage or establish inaccurate perceptions, or belief patterns that further reinforce the norms and behaviors that have been created by the institutions.

In a study of racial disparities, Hetey and Eberhardt (2014) examined the relationship between racial disparities and policy reform and noted that disclosure to

these inequalities led European-Americans to support the very policies that perpetuated these differences. In two experiments the racial composition of prisons was managed by the authors, and unknown to participants. When the punitory institution was represented as “more African-American,” citizens were more concerned about crime and expressed greater acceptance of disciplinary policies than when the system was designated as “less African-American” (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014, p.1949). The final results of the study led to the conclusion that exposure to racial disparities could preserve an institutionalized cycle of inequalities by conducting citizens to support the very policies that produced these imbalances (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014).

The War on Drug campaign in the 70’s and 80’s followed a similar path that led to racial disparities in incarceration rates (Mauer, 2011). The outcome of these drug policies over several decades not only locked up thousands of minorities, but also established a belief pattern of associating minorities with crime and drugs (Alexander, 2010). The following examples illustrate the importance of perceptions and their impact on public policy. The relevance of the institutional reinforcement model highlights the importance of this study in understanding perceptions and what external factors reinforce these views that ultimately impact policy choices.

Summary

In this chapter I presented a historical review of the literature, research questions, substantiation for the use of the theory of RCI institution framework, and the literature research strategy. First, I discussed RCT in preparing for my introduction to the RCI framework. I then blended the fundamentals of these two structures, which stipulated

that individuals make decisions based on factors that serve personal interests. I then used the theoretical framework of RCI to expound upon the decision-making processes of actors in an institutional setting, and the impact of these decisions on policy outcomes. I explained that while much attention is often given to the impact of government policy on communities, little consideration has been given to the relationship between public perception, institutions, actor preferences, and their effect on policy choices.

The literature review presented background information from a historical reference that was imperative to explaining disparities in incarceration and the decision-making of actors within the government who were participants in the legislation and implementation phases of drug policy reforms within the criminal justice system. This dissertation presented evidence to suggest that the drug policies of the 70's and 80's contained institutional constructs, which led to disproportionate incarceration rates that negatively impacted a large portion of individuals within the African-American community.

I highlighted Louisiana's nation leading rate of incarceration, in which a disproportionate number of individuals are of minority descent. I also indicated the economic, social, and political impacts of incarceration on minority families, and how public perception in City N Parish regarding racial disparities within the criminal justice system remains divided. The summary of the literature included discussion of the reforms and recommendations released by the Louisiana Task Force to address the incarceration rate, which remains the highest in the U.S. I discussed how a number of states have overhauled their criminal sentencing and prison structures over the past

decade to lower the prison population. The new reforms passed within the Louisiana legislature will attempt to decrease state's prison population by 10 % over the next decade, which is projected to save the state \$262 million (Allen, 2017). I also expounded upon the long term effects of incarceration on community unity, minority communities, and its creation of a permanent underclass that keeps those who have been previously incarcerated at a disadvantage over those who have not.

This study illuminated the need for understanding perceptions and how they are reinforced through policy choices and outcomes. I introduced the institutional reinforcement model, which examined the circular process of public perception, institutions, actor preferences, and policy outcomes. These outcomes present social, political, and economic implications that can re-establish perceptions or belief patterns in individuals who then vote for public leaders who share similar views. In Chapter 3, I will expand more in depth the methodology process.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore citizen perceptions regarding institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of nonviolent drug offenders. The literature review covered the history of U.S. criminal justice policy, the relationship between perception and policy, and the social, economic, and political impact on minorities. In June of 2016, the Louisiana legislature approved a series of bills that revamped the state's criminal justice system and released several prisoners back into the community, many of who had committed nonviolent drug related offenses (Allen, 2017). These reforms were legislated with the goal of saving \$262 million in taxpayer dollars over the next decade.

While many legislators praised the reforms, little is known regarding citizen perceptions on these reforms that released many ex-offenders back into the community. The findings of this research were analyzed and synthesized into a summary regarding the thoughts and opinions of 22 participants from several different communities within City N Parish. The responses I collected from participants were based on questions regarding prisoner re-entry, media influence, government actions, actors, and disparities within the criminal justice system.

In this chapter I will present the research question, framework, and justification for the research design that I used. The next section will discuss the data collection method I used including the setting, interview style, participant selection criteria, ethical considerations, and how I addressed potential threats to validity, sampling size, and

strategy.

Research Design and Rationale

This research was guided by the following research question:

What are the perceptions of citizens regarding institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of nonviolent drug related minority offenders?

In June 2017, Louisiana Governor Edwards signed into law a series of bills that revamped the state's criminal justice system to decrease the state's prison population by 10% over the next decade (Allen, 2017). The objective of these reforms was to decrease prison sentences for many nonviolent drug offenders who will be eventually released back into their communities. With Louisiana having the nations' second highest incarceration rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018) and the prison population being disproportionately populated with minority males (Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, 2016), examining the perspectives of citizens from differently socially constructed neighborhoods regarding prisoner re-entry and institutional disparities may provide some clarity into understanding why perceptions matter, and how they impact institutions, actors, policy outcomes, and community unity.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is recommended for a study when a need exists to explain a thorough account of the issue through the viewpoint and lived experiences of participants (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2011). This method of

investigation involves reporting the views of participants and administering the study in a natural setting by analyzing words through interviews, field notes, and conversations.

The limitations of qualitative research include lengthy periods of collecting data and the inability to generalize findings to the study population (Patton, 2015). Despite these restrictions, using a qualitative approach was sufficient for this study because it provided data that uncovered trends in thought, feelings, and the opinions of citizens from different communities. While the results of this study may not be generalized to the entire population or community, the goal was to understand why people feel the way they do regarding disparities in the criminal justice system, prisoner reentry, policy choices, and community unity.

The use of a qualitative approach involving perceptions of the criminal justice system has been successfully used in communities before. Evidence from the literature review discussed how Zaller et al. (2016) used a qualitative approach to explore the relationships between African-American cocaine users in a southern state and the continuous involvement with the criminal justice system. The use of this method allowed the authors to not only identify several factors that contributed to the continued drug use in that community, but also identified alternatives to addressing this issue (Zaller et al, 2016).

Qualitative inquiries have also been successfully employed in other areas of interest to explain the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals. Shavel (2017) used a qualitative approach to examine the lived experiences of African-American fathers following incarceration, while Burns (2016) also employed a qualitative approach to

examine a community's perception of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections and prevention programs. In an entirely different subject, Jenkins (2016) employed a qualitative approach to explore an African-American community's perceptions of problems in mathematics education. These examples illustrate the versatility and effectiveness of utilizing a qualitative approach in examining the perceptions and attitudes of a given phenomenon.

One of the benefits of qualitative research is the ability to collect data through interviews. The use of unstructured or semi structured techniques for data collection methods in qualitative research gives researchers and participants the freedom to guide and revise the interview in real time (Creswell, 2013). The data collected in qualitative analysis sends a more compelling message than quantitative data due to its depth in seeking to understand the underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations of others (Lim, 2011). The limitations of qualitative research are that investigation quality can be impacted by personal biases and researcher presence, which can influence the subjects' responses (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis also requires more time due to the large volume of data that must be evaluated, and issues of anonymity and confidentiality can also present problems when presenting findings (Patton, 2015).

While these limitations present a number of obstacles, the use of a general qualitative framework is best suited in answering my research question of examining citizen perceptions and attitudes on the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration.

Research Tradition

The problem, theory, and research question dictated that I use an integrated qualitative approach (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003). There are a number of descriptions used to characterize research that does not conform within a traditional qualitative method such as basic, fundamental, noncategorical, generic, or exploratory research (Brink & Wood, 2001; Merriam, 1998; Sandelowski, 2000; Thorne et al., 1997). An integrated approach was appropriate for this study because it portrayed qualitative components, but instead of concentrating on a specific tradition, it focused on understanding the process, phenomenon, and the perspectives of the participants involved (Merriam, 1998).

The nature of this study, framework, and research questions contained a mixture of phenomenological, narrative, and ethnographic characteristics. Seeking to understand the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of citizens from different communities regarding the reintegration of ex-offenders back into their communities required several things from me as the researcher. First, it required attention to detail in capturing the stories of individuals who had previous experiences with incarceration, whether it was personal experiences or through interactions with other individuals. The nature of this study also required me to focus on the meaning of social justice, rehabilitation, reintegration, and resources among individuals from different communities. While English is the common language within the U.S., definitions as poor, rich, big, small are relative depending on the individual (Alexander, 2010). In order to do have a better understanding, a number of

follow up questions was used to clarify comments made by participants, which resulted in a better understanding when I conducted my data analysis.

In this study regarding public perceptions on issues such as immigration, social justice, and the criminal justice system, the results indicated that participants defined these terms differently depending on their own personal upbringing, experiences, and perspectives. For this reason, the flexibility of using a qualitative approach allowed me the option to combine several methodologies or approaches, or claim no particular methodological viewpoint at all if necessary (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003).

Differing Qualitative Approaches

Researchers can use many methods in qualitative research and each of these approaches is unique in their techniques for studying a central concept or phenomenon. A narrative approach is described as a spoken or written text from individual experiences and stories that describe a series of events or actions, and the significance of these developments (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Elliot, 2005). Narrative stories are often gathered through interviews, observations, or other sources of data, and often occur within the context of a particular time, place, or situation in an individuals' life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Elliot, 2005).

For this study, a narrative technique would have been helpful regarding interviewing people who have had personal experiences with the criminal justice system through incarceration or interactions with police officers. Narrative studies such as a biographical or oral history would be valid choices to capture the lived experiences or personal reflections of one individual or several individuals (Creswell, 2013). While I did

use aspects of a narrative approach, solely using this method would have been ineffective because it would have required a lot of time to devote on the lives of a single person or a small number of individuals. A narrative approach also would not have allowed me the time to interview 22 participants, which would have limited my sample size and findings. In addition, capturing the perceptions of individuals concerning their opinions on institutional disparities and the reintegration of nonviolent offenders would have mitigated the impact of my research by failing to obtain opposing perspectives from other citizens. Furthermore, employing only a narrative inquiry would have required the collection of a considerable amount time and research on the participant, and additional issues could have arisen regarding the perspective from which the story was written.

A phenomenological approach is useful in explaining the conventional meaning of several individuals and their personal experiences of a concept (Moustakas, 1994). Shavel (2017) employed phenomenological techniques in examining African-American males' lived experiences of fathering following incarceration. A sample of nine African-American fathers was taken from the Midwestern region of the United States, which found that parents' quality of life depended on their relationship with their children (Shavel, 2017). The relevance of the study's findings was to galvanize communities to bolster their support for African American fathers returning to society following a period of incarceration (Shavel, 2017).

I could have used a phenomenological approach in conjunction with a narrative for this study. However, the phenomenological approach could not serve as the sole method for this study because it was too narrow in scope. Participants in a

phenomenological method must have all experienced the phenomenon so that the researcher can transcribe an ordinary meaning (Creswell, 2013). Finding individuals who all fit the criteria of having experienced a similar phenomenon would have required a considerable amount of time and would have also produced results with limited perspectives.

The purpose of my research question was to understand citizen opinions regarding perceived disparities within the Louisiana criminal justice system and the reintegration of nonviolent drug offenders back into society. In the literature review, I highlighted that the RCI framework argues that actors utilize institutions to maximize their interests. The government is not only composed of individuals from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, but also persons who have their own opinions, incentives, special interests, and constituents that all factor into policy choices. It was important that this study captured perceptions from individuals who differed in values, opinions, experiences and who came from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, an integrated approach was the appropriate method for this study.

A grounded theoretical approach involves developing a theory for a process or action that is derived from participants who have all experienced the same process but requires similarities in perspectives for a theory to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The RC institutionalism framework provides the appropriate lens for my study to show the reinforcement process from perception to policy outcomes. When selecting a theoretical framework to examine a problem in society, it is important that researchers examine several theories. While some frameworks are more effective as a foundation to examine

a problem, complex issues often cannot be explained by a single theory. For this study, I found that using an integrated approach using characteristics of a narrative, phenomenological, and ethnographic method was more appropriate for this study as opposed to a grounded theoretical approach.

An ethnographic approach would be adequate for describing and interpreting the behaviors, beliefs, and values of a culture-sharing group (Kahike, 2014). Employing this method alone for this study was insufficient because it was too exclusive a method for my research question (Fetterman, 1998). Also, an ethnographic approach would have required extensive field time because of my unfamiliarity with the some of the different neighborhoods and the existing cultural groups that resided within those communities.

As I mentioned previously, an integrated approach that was a combination of narrative, phenomenological, and ethnographic methods was used in this study due to the nature of the research question. In looking at citizen perceptions I wanted to capture the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of individuals from different groups, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, which would make my results more comprehensive and transferable to other communities. To achieve this, extra time in the field with participants was required to establish trust.

Case study research involves a strategy of inquiry or methodology of a case within a real-life location, context, and setting (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). The case study allows for a more in-depth study of a phenomenon from a wider perspective because it is rich in context and draws data from several sources to build a complete picture of what is being studied (Kahike, 2014).

Within the political science realm, case study research has been instrumental in providing legislators, practitioners, and researchers solutions that have addressed policy deficiencies in areas that have impacted communities (Lewis, 2015). Stone-Cacari, Garcia, and Minkler (2014) used examples of two case studies to analyze the effectiveness of community-based participatory research. The case studies highlighted how the partnerships between civic engagements, the academic community, and political action over a consistent period influenced health policy to eliminate racial and ethnic health inequities (Stone-Cacari et al., 2014).

Kapucu (2016) also used a qualitative case study to examine the effectiveness of community-based research in bridging the gap between theory and practice in public policy and administration. The discussion centered on the argument that utilizing a qualitative design in community-based research was more effective in meeting the objectives of public policy (Kapucu, 2016). Kapucu explained that community participation was critical for public policy in defining issues, assets, and providing potential solutions so that citizens had a role in informing the policies and programs that affected their lives. These examples highlight the effectiveness of qualitative case study research when used with the appropriate research question.

One of the challenges for researchers with case study development is identifying a case that is appropriate for the study. For this study, there was no particular case that was used. Sometimes case studies are particular to one subject area, but the circumstances surrounding the case are limited to that particular time and place (Merriam, 1998). For example, during the interviews, a number of participants referenced the case of Alton

Sterling when discussing disparities within the criminal justice system. The complexities surrounding this case, in addition to the fact that the case was still ongoing, was too wide in scope to be considered as the sole reference for my research question. Therefore, the use of a case study was not applicable with regards to my central research question.

When considering case study research, it is important that researchers keep all these elements in mind to ensure that they are utilizing the appropriate approach (Merriam, 1998). Researchers must also decide if multiple cases are necessary while also considering the contextual factors of a case regarding events, time, people, and processes (Patton, 2015). The use of multiple case studies would have been very time consuming and unnecessary when taking into consideration the problem, research question, and theoretical framework for this study. As a result, I considered this method of approach was considered but ultimately did not choose it.

Another method that researchers are adopting as a means of investigation is the Q method (Cross, 2005) Discovered in 1935 by Stephenson, Q methodology is concerned with exploring and understanding attitudes and subjective opinion (Cross, 2005). The study of attitudes and subjective opinion remains popular in many disciplines, and more recently in the social sciences due to the interrelationship of attitudes and human behavior (Cross, 2005). The Q method has a unique method of data collection and uses techniques of statistical analysis, which involves a given set of statements that is interpreted as an expression of that subject's viewpoint or perception of the situation at hand (Simons, 2013). Each subject's individual understanding of the circumstance is

then operationalized as data by the behavior of rank arranging the statements in response to some condition of instruction (Wigger & Mrtek, 1994).

Some scholars argue that no other method or theory matches Q methodology's versatility due to its ability to be used in a variety of settings on the same individual (Brown 1996; Cross, 2005; Prasad, 2001; Wigger & Mrtek, 1994). While the Q method presents obstacles regarding bias, reliability, and over reliance on the researcher's analytical skills, the Q methodology stands on a platform of its own with its versatility and ability to provide a wide range of creative and innovative design and research opportunities (Simons, 2013). Due my unfamiliarity with the Q method, this approach was not considered. However, future researchers who would consider implementing a mixed-methods approach to similar studies should consider utilizing the Q method for further knowledge and understanding.

I sought to examine the perceptions of a small group of citizens in different communities regarding disparities in incarceration sentences of nonviolent offenders and their reintegration back into society. A multifaceted approach that blended elements of a narrative, phenomenological, and ethnographic study was the most suitable method because it captured the feelings, thoughts, and opinions of citizens from different communities regarding racial disparities within the criminal justice system.

To understand the reinforcement process of perceptions and institutions, I questioned participants from different communities regarding their viewpoints, on government, disparities within the criminal justice system, and the re-assimilation of nonviolent offenders back into the general public. Through this approach, I wanted to

provide understanding into perceptions, attitudes, values, and belief systems, and how they are reinforced through policy choices. These choices in turn have economic, social, and political implications for all communities. Doing this from an integrated qualitative approach not only provided the flexibility to combine a number of qualitative traditions, but also provided depth in understanding the study.

Alternative Approaches

While qualitative research is involved with understanding human behavior from an individual perspective, quantitative research is concerned with discovering facts and relationships about social phenomena through the use of numerical comparisons and statistical deductions (Carr, 1994). Employing a quantitative approach to this study would have allowed the findings to be generalized to an entire population (Patton, 2015). Because quantitative data is often structured and easy to analyze, it can be very consistent, precise, and reliable in research (Carr, 1994). For example, a quantitative approach could have been used to examine the cause and effect relationships between public perceptions, disparities in incarceration, and policy outcomes within the criminal justice system. Using this method could not only have provided understanding on public attitudes of the criminal justice system, but the results could have also been generalized to the population.

Some researchers who have examined minority populations and their perceptions of bias have used quantitative research in the American criminal justice system. Some of these authors have measured attitudes by cell phone (Gabbidon, Jordan, Penn, & Higgins, 2014), self-administered questionnaires (Roles, Moak, & Bensel, 2016), or surveys

(Manship, 2017). Specifically, (Gabbidon et al., 2014) found that there were substantive views on perceptions of racial bias in the criminal justice system that varied on factors such as age, education, income, and perceptions of opportunities for African Americans and European-Americans. This example provides an illustration of the effectiveness of a qualitative approach in research, and how the findings provide a deeper understanding of citizen perceptions on inconsistencies within the criminal justice system.

The limitations of quantitative methods is that related secondary data is sometimes not available or accessing available data is difficult, and the data may not be vigorous enough to explain complicated issues (Patton, 2015). For example, Manship (2017) found differences between African Americans and European-Americans in their perceptions of the criminal justice system, while (Roles et al., 2016) found perceptions of law enforcement among Hispanic immigrants to be predicated on residency status. The findings reflected sufficient information numerically but lacked depth in understanding the thoughts and opinions of African Americans, European-Americans, and Hispanic immigrants (Roles et al, 2016).

One quantitative study that could have complimented my study involved an online experiment that explored whether message frames influenced public attitudes towards policies that would eliminate the use of incarceration for select nonviolent offenses. Specifically, individuals exposed to message frames emphasizing the substantial financial costs of incarceration and the high rates of recidivism among individuals released from prison are more likely to support the elimination of incarceration for nonviolent drug offenses (Gottlieb, 2016). The results led Gottlieb

(2016) to suggest that appeals to self-interest tended to be more effective at shifting public support in favor of criminal justice reform than other types of rhetoric.

Employing a mixed methods approach integrates quantitative and qualitative data that is helpful for investigators who want to conduct in-depth research that will supply an essential understanding of the data and phenomenon being studied (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). However, conducting mixed methods research can be complicated and time-consuming, such as analyzing data in a mixed methods framework studied (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). With a thorough grasp on the qualitative approach and the objective of my research question, utilizing mixed methods was not applicable to this study, but could be implemented in future similar studies.

Argument for a Qualitative Approach

While the qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study, the decision on whether to take a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approach ultimately depends on the problem, theory, and research question (Creswell, 2013). The method that I choose for this study was grounded in the best fit for answering my central research question. Overall the dissertation is not only about a research question, but also about how the researcher addressed the research question through a theoretical lens and arrived at a new understanding that will contribute to the knowledge and understanding in the field. Ideally the researcher should be able to frame their research question and methodological approach in both a qualitative and quantitative manner. Researchers are not trying to fix the problem, just understand it. The first step is to understand the problem through as many viewpoints as possible, which provides the background and

rationale for the study. Next comes the methodology, which drives the data collection, analysis, and findings. Being able to answer questions regarding the variables that are being measured in a quantitative fashion, or the factors that are being considered in a qualitative approach, demonstrates understanding over alignment of the research study.

In a quantitative study on community resilience in Louisiana, Manship (2017) identified distinct differences between African-Americans and European-Americans when it came to perceptions of equal rights, law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and support for Government efforts to reduce racial disparities. The data in the report was collected from a randomly selected sample of adult (18 years or older) residents of Louisiana via telephone interviews conducted from January 8 through February 6, 2017 (Manship, 2017). The project included live-interviewer surveys of 418 respondents contacted via landline phone and 661 respondents contacted via cell phone, for a total sample of 1,079 respondents (Manship, 2017). Specifically, the results found that general opinion in Louisiana leaned toward more government effort to reduce racial differences in society. Among the findings, 62% of state residents said the government should do more to reduce racial differences in punishment for people convicted of similar crimes (Manship, 2017). Furthermore, half of the European-Americans surveyed in the state said the government needed to do more, while 86 % of African-Americans said so (Manship, 2017). In reviewing the survey questions, the results of the study provided valuable facts and statistics regarding citizen perceptions on some relevant topics within the state of Louisiana. However, the study lacked depth into explaining why residents held their respective views regarding the criminal justice system, systematic differences in

punishment, and government involvement in establishing equality.

A quantitative approach can answer the question of whom, what, or how many in regard to peoples' opinions and attitudes regarding a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The nature of this research question however was seeking to understand why people feel the way they do regarding disparities in the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration. The why questions can only be discovered using a qualitative approach with open-ended questioning that provides the author with the fundamental reasons, opinions, and motivations behind perspectives (Patton, 2002). The structure of the research question was qualitative because it sought to gain insight regarding people's motivations, thinking, and attitudes relating to the reintegration of nonviolent ex-drug offenders and inconsistencies within the criminal justice system. Using a qualitative approach from this angle provided more depth and understanding in my final results.

Role of Researcher

My role as the researcher was to observe, review, analyze, and document similarities and differences between the interview responses of participants. Questions to participants concentrated on their perceptions of government, institutional racism, media, criminal justice reform, socio-economic disparities, community unity, incarceration, prisoner reentry, and inequality. I had no previous relationships with the participants prior to this study. Before conducting my interviews, I anticipated that some participants would have views that were opposing to my own. This anticipation was confirmed as I began collecting my data. Before conducting any interviews I acknowledged my own thoughts and perceptions on disparities within the criminal justice system as an African-

American male in my personal journal that is referenced in Chapter 4. This was noted in order to provide clarity and fairness to my study.

Last year I participated in an organized group discussion called Dialogue on Race, which involved weekly sessions on discussing the issue of racism (Jones & Lau, 2016). The sessions were conducted in a manner that provided a safe place for honest discussion on matters of race from citizens of all colors. The objective of the class was to provide education and understanding on how racism came to be, how it was reinforced by the U.S. Government, and what steps could be taken to eliminate racism in our society (Jones & Lau, 2016). Going through these sessions in some ways strengthened my argument regarding institutional racism and its impact on minorities within the criminal justice system, including those who have been incarcerated for years for nonviolent drug offenses. However, as I noted above, taking note of my personal perceptions and biases provided me clarity in being objective while coding participant responses.

Although I have never been incarcerated, I do have friends, relatives, and associates of African-American descent who have been incarcerated and have shared with me over the years their own experiences and perceptions. In addition to my ethnicity as an African-American male, my exposure to television, radio, newspaper, and social media have also impacted my perspectives regarding the criminal justice system and its impact on minorities. Being an African-American male did strengthen my understanding of perceptions from participants who were of color in my study. However, in reflecting on my personal journal I understood the importance of maintaining objectivity in my interview questions and follow-up questions with participants. Failure

to do this could have been a hindrance in my study when trying to understand opposing attitudes from participants who were of different races or socioeconomic status.

The nature of my work and personal relationships has provided me with a lifetime of experience with individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures. I often partake in discussions with friends and associates of mine with whom I disagree in regard to topics such as race, government, politics, and the criminal justice system. From these experiences, I was confident in my ability to establish rapport with each of my participants' before conducting interviews. As I touched on briefly I kept a small personal journal that allowed me to reflect on my own biases and prejudices. I also attended a free training seminar at a major university on implicit bias, which further assisted me in managing my own personal biases as researcher. Attempts to address any potential discrimination and bias included several peer reviews of my research questions and findings by professional colleagues, participants, friends, and associates for feedback and clarity. Allowing other individuals to examine my work for errors adds integrity and thoroughness to my findings, which is critical for researchers.

Gender-biased, masculine, or feminine pronouns were replaced with nonsexist alternatives, and I also accurately identified individuals by race and ethnic group appropriately without using language that could have reinforced stereotypes or assumptions about either race or age group (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). I adhered to all ethical standards that have been laid out within the Walden Handbook regarding researcher and participant decorum. My area of research was conducted in a setting that was away from my work environment and did not involve co-workers, friends,

associates, or any other individuals with whom a potential conflict of interest could have occurred. This was done in order to maintain reliability and validity in throughout my research.

Methodology

The selection of the methodology and sampling strategy was based off of the research question, in which I examined community attitudes regarding ex-offender reintegration and disparities within the criminal justice system. After receiving IRB approval (02-15-18-0471755), I proceeded with my data collection plans. It was important that the methodology and sampling strategy be in alignment with the theoretical framework and research question throughout the duration of the study. In the last few sections I previously noted how there were multiple strategies and theoretical frameworks that could have been implemented in this study. In this section I will provide details about the method that was employed for this study. I will also discuss how I acquired contact to the setting and participants, as well as explain my justifications for my sampling size and strategy.

Participant Selection Logic

As a lifelong resident of N Parish, I am very familiar with the racial makeup of the surrounding communities. In order to explain my participant selection strategy, I must briefly discuss the current racial makeup of the population under study. As of July 2016, the most recent data available, City N Parish had a population estimate of 442,268 with 48.4 % of individuals classified as European-American, 46.4% of people being African-American, 4.0% Hispanic and the rest being split among those of Asian or Bi-

Racial descent (U.S. Census.gov, 2017). In my initial sample I selected two neighborhoods to study based on demographics, racial composition, poverty level, median income, home values, educational attainment, and crime rates. These factors were selected based off of my research question, RCI framework, and interview questions that took into account a number of these personal characteristics.

While I was able to obtain a few participants from these two neighborhoods, the total was not enough to provide a sufficient sample size. For this reason, I opened up the sample criteria for additional participants to individuals who resided in any neighborhood in City N Parish. The total sample number obtained was 22 participants, which was composed of individuals of European-American, African-American, and Hispanic descent. This ensured that I had appropriate representation of individuals from both communities and ethnicities.

My selection criteria were based on recent data from the used the National Survey on Drug Use and Health that was used in a recent report conducted by the community based organization Together City N (Together City N, 2017). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) is the national benchmark for data on substance use (SAMHSA, 2016). SAMHSA data provides rates of illicit drug use by racial group, age, region, and zip code in cities across the United States including in Louisiana (SAMHSA, 2016). This data provided the information necessary for me in selecting the particular communities under research.

Data was obtained from SAMHSA by accessing a report published by an organizational community called Together City N. Together city N is a broad-based coalition of congregations and community-based organizations in the area, that work together on issues affecting families and communities, while also training their members with skills and practices to get results and achieve change on social issues (Together City N, 2017). The intent of the report was to examine the proportionality of drug possession enforcement by comparing, for every zip code in the City of Parish N, the per capita arrest rate for drug possession to the prevalence of drug usage in that zip code between January 1st, 2011 and January 12th, 2017 (Together BR, 2017). By comparing zip codes, interested individuals could examine which neighborhoods were being targeted by law enforcement for drug possession.

The organization identified the location and scale of enforcement disparities and analyzed the extent to which those disparities correlated with neighborhood demographics, including racial composition, poverty level, median income, home values, education level and crime rates. The report was then organized into ten distinct observations about the extent, character, and likely consequences of drug possession enforcement disparities in City N (Together City N, 2017). For the purpose of the research question however, I initially accessed data from the zip code relevant to my 2 neighborhoods under research. As I mentioned before however, my participation level was very low so I expanded my selection criteria to citizens who resided in City N Parish.

The participants who did volunteer in this study resided in several communities across City N Parish including the two neighborhoods I initially selected for research.

The majority of volunteers resided in middle class communities and a small selection resided upper class communities. A selection of participants also mentioned during their interviews that although they now lived in middle class homes, they were raised in lower-class neighborhoods. This information was taken into account in my findings but did not impact the overall results of the study.

In my initial sample selection I selected two neighborhoods in one particular zip code to study. This particular zip code was small but was classified as an area of high poverty, crime, and low in education on the east end of the zip code, while the west end of the zip code was classified as middle class, with low crime and poverty, and higher in education. While there were many other zip codes from which I could have obtained valuable data initially, this particular neighborhood was be the most accommodating and safest to research due to my relationship with my barber. His business has been located in the middle of the neighborhood for over 20 years, and he is highly respected and trusted within this community. However, I only had two participants from this particular neighborhood that agreed to be interviewed. Because of the low participation I went back and expanded my communities under research to all of City N Parish and received interest from participants via social media and email.

Within the same zip code, there was another neighborhood that I had selected for research. This particular neighborhood was classified as a middle class suburb with low crime, poverty, and average education. This community is located within the same zip code as the other neighborhood under research, but is located seven miles away from the first neighborhood that I had planned to study. I gained access to potential participants in

neighborhoods for this study through the neighborhood homeowner associations.

Participation was established through the President of the neighborhood association who passed along my letter of participation via email to her master list. The same information regarding the particulars of my study and selection criteria was provided to participants in this neighborhood as well, but I received interest from only three participants. As a result of the low participation from this particular neighborhood, I expanded my sample and search methods to the entire parish of City N.

Sampling Strategy

For the sample design used a combination of homogenous, network, and maximum variation sampling, which both lie within the purposeful sampling technique (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling is a category of non-probability sampling that focuses on sampling techniques in which the units under study are based on the discretion of the researcher (Patton, 2002). In qualitative or mixed method research designs, the use of multiple sample techniques can be effective to develop a wider picture of the phenomenon (Burns, 2016). For example, Burns (2016) used a combination of maximum variation and criterion sampling, because it allowed a diverse population to share their dimensions of interests to discover or uncover central themes or shared dimensions. Using multiple strategies in this fashion adds more depth, versatility, and understanding to the study, which is always the objective in qualitative research.

In the case of this research study, the homogenous, network, and maximum variation sampling strategies all had the same objective, which was to provide different perspectives from a variety of individuals who resided in different neighborhoods within

City N Parish. Using each of these techniques provided a more in depth perspective from citizens. Before going into my specific strategy, I must first provide a brief explanation of each sampling technique, which will clarify my rationale for employing a combination of the three.

Network sampling uses social or other networks such as workplaces, organizations, support groups, etc. to locate hard to reach populations (Trotter, 2012). The use of a network sampling technique was necessary because of the circumstances surrounding one of my initial particular neighborhoods under research. This particular neighborhood had several socioeconomic challenges characterized by low education, high poverty, and high crime. Individuals in these types of target populations are oftentimes hidden and difficult to reach, because the population membership involves stigma, or the group has networks that are difficult for outsiders to penetrate (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017). It is important that researchers have alternative methods for obtaining samples from citizens who reside in harder to reach communities and populations.

To address this dilemma, snowball sampling is often recommended because it requests study participants to make referrals to other potential participants, who in turn make referrals to other participants, and so on (Trotter, 2012). This technique provides researchers with more participants, in addition to also saving time and money in having to recruit additional participants themselves. Snowball sampling however, is subject to numerous biases in that participants who are recruited may also have many friends who are more likely to be recruited into the sample (Trotter, 2012). Consequently, neither the

selection of the initial participants nor the selection of the next wave of participants is random, which makes it challenging to make inferences about the population based on the obtained sample (Trotter, 2012). While I was only able to obtain participation from two participants from this neighborhood, this sampling strategy was still useful in obtaining a more accurate sample.

Maximum variation sampling is a unique form of purposive sampling for researchers who want to understand how a phenomenon is seen and known among different people in different settings (Palinkas et al., 2015). When using this form of sampling strategy, the researcher selects a small number of units or cases that maximize the diversity relevant to the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). The purpose of utilizing the maximum variation technique was to not only gain greater insights from participants from various angles, but it also assisted me as the researcher in identifying common themes that became evident across the entire sample. With diversity in perspectives being an important trademark of a qualitative study, obtaining various descriptions of participants' experiences was critical for this study (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2013).

Homogeneous sampling in essence is the opposite of maximum variation sampling because it aims to capture units that have similar characteristics or traits (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). A homogeneous sample is chosen when the research question that is being asked is specific to the characteristics of the particular group of interest, which is subsequently examined in detail (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This is where the rationale of utilizing two sampling techniques intersects. The particular

research question for this study was looking at the perspectives of individuals from various neighborhoods in City N Parish regarding ex-offender reintegration. I examined individuals from similar communities who shared opposing views and I also examined individuals from different neighborhoods who shared similar views. Taking this approach allowed for comparison and contrast among perceptions, which added more depth to the study, and more comprehensive themes in the final analysis.

Participants were selected based on a criterion that is discussed further in detail in the next section. It is important to reiterate here that my qualitative study was a combination of narrative, phenomenological, and ethnographic research. The integration of these approaches allowed for a deeper comparison and contrast in my findings. For example, I had some participants who came from similar backgrounds and ethnicities have differences in opinion on the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration, while I also had individuals from opposing backgrounds who shared similar opinions. These differences in perspective were based on personal experiences that were shared by participants during the interview sessions. Taking these factors into consideration while also reflecting on my experiences from the interviews in my personal journal provided more clarity and depth into understanding the perspectives of each individual regarding ex-offender reintegration and the criminal justice system.

Criteria

Participants were selected based on age, race, and their residency within City N Parish. The age range was established as any individual 18 years of age or older. Regarding the question on criminal history, any participant who had previously been

incarcerated was not asked any specifics regarding the circumstances surrounding their arrest or crimes convicted. A simple yes or no response was only required in regard to the question of any past history of incarceration.

My justification for this question was to ensure that representation was adequately represented in my data collection and analysis. Participants were given the freedom to discuss these details only if they wished. Some did go into specifics while others did not. These experiences were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for coding purposes. All participants who contacted me for this study met the selection criteria based off of information that was provided in the letter of participation, social media post, and consent forms.

An initial sample size of 12 participants was proposed to guide this study, with six coming from one neighborhood and six coming from another neighborhood that is socially constructed differently. This proposed size was based off of previous qualitative dissertations that examined community perceptions and lived experiences (Bond, 2016; Jenkins, 2016; Shavel, 2017; Burns, 2016) each interviewed anywhere between eight to 25 participants before theoretical saturation. I sought to gain extensive knowledge on the process of understanding the interrelationships between perceptions, institutions, policy, drug use, incarceration of minorities, and community unity. As a result, I decided that 12 participants were a sufficient number to begin with to accurately assess citizen perceptions from two different socially constructed neighborhoods.

After I changed my area requirements to all of City N Parish, I received a larger volunteer response. As a result, 22 total individuals from several communities within

City N Parish participated in this study. Based on the findings, I believe the change in sampling resulted in a change in the findings. This can be attributed to the fact that my sampling criteria expanded from two distinct neighborhoods to an entire parish composed hundreds of neighborhoods. This resulted in a wider sample distribution in the data collection that captured various perspectives from individuals who resided in several different neighborhoods throughout the parish.

Procedures Recruitment and Participation

A letter of participation was sent via email to the respective neighborhood associations and community center contact persons. The letter provided details about my study. My contact person then sent out this information to individuals within their community contact list via email and social media. After expanding my search to all of City N Parish, 22 participants contacted me individually through my personal email, phone number, and social media.

Individuals who committed to participating were provided with an informed consent form. The consent form detailed to participants information regarding the purpose of my research, the estimated length of the interviews, how their information would be used, and the steps taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. My email and phone number were provided in the letter of participation for individuals who were interested or had additional questions. Individuals with whom I had a personal relationship with were excluded from the study. Participants with whom I had served in a supervisory or instructor role were also excluded from the study in order to add validity to my study.

Instrumentation

There are a number of instruments that can be used in qualitative research such as questionnaires, surveys, observations, focus groups, or documents and records (Creswell, 2013). The research data collection instrument that was used for this study was face-to-face interviews. The choice to utilize an interview approach over other methods of interviewing was that the interviewer is able to gather more in-depth, complex data that would have been hard to capture through question-and-answer interview approaches or questionnaires (Janesick, 2011). For example, several primary questions that I asked during the interview sessions lead participants to discuss additional related issues that I was able to follow up on with a secondary line of questioning. This ability allowed for my research to go more in depth with the participant regarding the phenomenon being examined.

Anonymous surveys are sometimes preferable to face-to-face interviews due to the anonymity provided for the participant (Patton, 2002). Face-to-face interviewing can provide discomfort to the participant, which can impact truthfulness in accurately answering interview questions (Janesick, 2011). While this was not personally observed as the interviewer, it is possible that having an anonymous survey instead of face-to-face interviews would have solicited more honest feedback from participants. While there are a number of methods for collecting data in qualitative research, face-to-face interviews provided more insight into understanding the thoughts and opinions of citizens regarding ex-offender reintegration. For this reason it was important that as the researcher I

established trust and confidentiality with each participant before conducting any interviews so that they were comfortable.

Data Collection

My primary data collection instrument was through face-to-face interviews, which included the use of a digital recorder and observation notes. After receiving approval by the Walden IRB (02-15-18-0471755), I began recruiting participants as noted above contacting those participants who contacted me with interest and making appointments for interviews at a location of their choosing.

Before starting each interview I explained to my participant the purpose of my study and what I hoped to accomplish. I reminded participants that taking part in the study was of their own free will. With the exception of bottled water and light refreshments, no promise of compensation was provided to any participant in any form. I also reminded each participant that his or her responses would be kept confidential and destroyed 5 years after the research was completed. I was the only individual collecting data from the participants, and I served as only an observer and not a participant in any community activities within the neighborhoods under research. Saturation of themes was detected by the 14th interview, but because I had already booked 22 interview appointments, I followed through on those as well. Following the 22nd interview I ceased exploring for additional themes.

I previously noted that if recruitment resulted in too few participants, I would take additional steps in gaining other participants. Through the use of social media, expanding my recruitment area to all of City N Parish, recruiting additional contact persons from

neighborhood associations, referrals from colleagues, and through additional volunteer organizations, I received response from 22 participants who agreed to take part in this study. Upon meeting each volunteer, I went over my consent form with them and had each person sign after reviewing. I then notified the participant that I was starting the audio recorder to begin the interview officially. The participants were documented and named in sequence such as Participant #1, Participant #2 etc. This method allowed me to quickly identify individual pieces for data analysis later in my study.

I started each interview by using semi structured open-ended questions (Appendix D for additional reference), which included a few subjects and topics (race, origin, employment, etc.) to explore and discuss. I then transitioned into more sensitive topics such as government, previous criminal history (if any), perceptions on media, and socio-economic differences. A total of 14 questions was asked and the duration of the interviews lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to one hour. The questions began with broad, open-ended questions that allowed for the participant to be relaxed and comfortable in maintaining a smooth conversation. As I progressed further into the interview, the questions became more specific to address the specific research question upon which my study was based.

Once I finished each interview, I formally ended the interview session, stopped the audio recorder, and allowed for the participant to ask any additional questions, concern, comments, or statements they may have had. Answers to each interview question in the transcript were covered following the conclusion of each interview for participants to affirm for accuracy and completeness. This served to mitigate the

occurrence of incorrect data and to provide findings that would be authentic and reliable. Any additional information was collected via personal notes and examined later for analysis.

Participants were reassured after the study that my handling of their information would be strictly private and confidential. Participants who may have had any additional information, insight, or opinions they wanted to share regarding the interview questions were encouraged to mail their thoughts to me upon completion of the interview. A copy of the transcript of each interview was then emailed to the participant in the event that they wanted to add more information. No additional information was added to the transcripts by any of the participants. The analysis from participant's responses will be covered in detail in Chapter 4. Following my interview session and follow-up, I immediately left the setting, transcribed, and reviewed each tape-recorded session.

Data Analysis Plan

The preliminary coding structure will be provided in this chapter. These codes served as the basis for my initial round of coding. As I continued to recode my data, a number of these initial codes ceased or were combined with other codes. For reference the preliminary coding structure is also provided in Chapter 4 to highlight the evolution of my framework from start to finish. Coding is a technique in which specific words or expressions from interviews, documents, surveys, and observations are organized into categories (Saldaña, 2016). Coding in fact is not only about labeling, but also about the connection between data and the idea (Saldaña, 2016). This includes the circular process

in coding that makes it easier to make comparisons and to identify any patterns that require further investigation.

For data analysis I used Nvivo qualitative data management software, which allows researchers to file and code videos, texts, and images. Due to the nature of qualitative research, the use of a pre-coded approach is often recommended and provides a foundation for developing effective coding groups (Yin, 2014). Utilizing pre-coded categories and emerging codes with the software allowed me to determine patterns in the participants' narrative. The data analysis process was a continual process of testing, analyzing, and refining that was done throughout this study (Yin, 2014). The purpose of data analysis refinement is to ultimately improve the quality and functionality of the design (Yin, 2014). No research design is exempt from flaws, and improvements can always be made. Going through the process of reordering and reorganizing my coding framework, provided more clarity and understanding when discussing my findings.

The pre-existing coding framework derived from my central research question that is connected to the RCI theory, which assumes that political actors within the institutional setting have a fixed set of preferences that can determine policy outcomes depending on personal costs/benefits, the institutional environment, and the interaction between other actors (Ostrom, 2007). These policy outcomes not only reflect current public attitudes, perceptions, and belief systems but also reinforce them. My justification for employing a pre-existing coding framework for participants' responses was that I was seeking to establish certain categories to understand whether citizen perceptions regarding institutional disparities and practices were developed through family, criminal

justice policy, conversation, education, or the media. The research question and coding design also consisted of a review of emerging themes, categories, and sequences. A copy of the preliminary coding framework is in Figure 1.

Table 1

Preliminary Coding Framework

Parent code	Child Code	Interview questions
Government (Institutions)	Actors, Self-Interest	3,4,8,9,10
Incentives	Decision-Making, Opportunity, Self Interest	8,10,11
Perceptions	World View, Media, Family Environment	1-11
Constraints (Rules)	Behavior	5,10,11
Pred. preferences	Opportunity, Self Interest	1,2,5,6,8,9,11

As I went through the coding process, any codes that emerged were added and included in previously coded data sets. These details will be covered in Chapter 4.

Following documentation of my interviews, and participant review of the verbatim transcript, I began the process of analyzing and transcribing each interview, which was reviewed for verification and consistency purposes. This included any comments, body language, or expressions recorded by digital recorder or by my personal

handwritten notes that applied to the topic being discussed. Interview documentation was analyzed for underlying themes based on participant response. These themes were noted and then recorded in the Nvivo software.

Patterns that emerged were identified by frequency, relation, and causation, and helped to connect the institutional impact on social change and what direction public policy should head (Saldana, 2016). This process was continuous and repeated throughout the duration of the study. Any discrepant cases that did not support or appeared to contradict patterns and explanations that were emerging from data analysis was documented and will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness and credibility of a study and its findings depend on the implementation of techniques used by the researcher (Anney, 2014). I as the researcher was the primary instrument in the study and analyzed and communicated the findings. A personal journal regarding my interview sessions with participants was maintained and allowed me to reflect on my own biases, experiences with interviewing participants, and possible emerging themes. Following data analysis and upon completion of the study I will provide all participants with an executive summary of the findings. This action provides transparency in my research and allows participants access to the entire study.

Transferability

Transferability applies to the extent in which the outcomes of qualitative research can be transferred or generalized to other contexts or settings (Anney, 2014). My findings will be peculiar to a small number of individuals from different communities

within City N Parish. However, my variation in participant selection in regards to race, socioeconomic status, political beliefs, etc. makes it is possible that my findings and conclusions could be transferable to other times, situations, people, and settings.

Therefore, I provided a detailed account of my field experiences, which included taking note of any patterns of cultural and social relationships. Some of these experiences will be documented and discussed in Chapter 4.

This research project is not seeking to find generalizable data, but could potentially be used in future studies. Incarceration is not just a Louisiana problem, but also a nationwide problem. In the past decade some states such as Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas, have instituted criminal justice reforms to decrease incarceration rates (Siegal, 2016). As a result, a large number of nonviolent drug offenders across the U.S. have been released back into their communities. Future researchers could utilize my findings to conduct studies in other communities, cities, and states from a quantitative or mixed methods approach, which could potentially further knowledge and contribute to positive social change. This dissertation could also lead to further evidence based practices that generate new policy decisions and increased partnerships between neighborhoods, communities, law enforcement officials, public, private sector leaders, and scholar practitioners.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the degree to which the researcher must account for any contextual changes within the research and how these changes affected the approach to the study (Anney, 2014). Audit trails were also used by

incorporating participants and previous studies as a means of crosschecking and corroborating evidence (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Individual viewpoints and experiences were contrasted with others, which ultimately provided a complete view of all communities under research. Utilizing past complementary studies of similar nature also assisted in ensuring reliability and validity in my study. A personal journal was kept to record the process of the survey in how the data was analyzed, reduced, and synthesized. Personal reflections, biases, and assumptions were also recorded for auditing purposes. A peer review of my research by colleagues was incorporated to provide honest feedback regarding my data collection, analysis, and interpretation due to my closeness to the project.

Conformability and Objectivity

Conformability refers to the extent in which others can corroborate the outcomes of the study (Elo, Kaariinen, Kanste, Polkki, Utriainen, & Kyngas, 2014). Several steps were taken to ensure that my findings reflected the perspectives and ideas of the participants. First, I documented my procedures for checking and rechecking my data throughout the study. I thoroughly explained each approach I took within my study, while also pointing out weaknesses that will be discussed in Chapter 4. Details regarding methodological decisions and procedures will be provided so that anybody can trace back my steps to understand how I formed my recommendations.

In Chapter 4 I also actively examine and describe in detail adverse occurrences that contradicted my prior observations. Throughout this research and in my personal journal, I am transparent in my report by acknowledging my own biases, experiences, and

perspectives as an African-American male. I also kept a written journal regarding anything I read in the newspaper, heard on the radio, or watched on television that I felt would be helpful in allowing me to reflect on areas where I may have been more prone to subjectivity in my research.

Other methods to establish reliability in my research included recoding each interview after my first round of coding was complete for all interviews. I mention here that coding is an iterative process that can often evolve for researchers as they go through data analysis (Patton, 2015). As a result, a re-coding process I believe was necessary to establish reliability in my research findings. My logbook detailing my reflections, biases, researcher and participant relationships was crosschecked with my notes from each interview session to ensure that only the voice of respondents was recorded before coding for themes. This technique also helped to establish comprehensiveness, coherence and trustworthiness of my research findings

Ethical Procedures/Considerations

One of the primary responsibilities of the researcher is to always act in an ethical manner (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Therefore, it is important before even collecting data to follow the ethical standards laid out by Walden University. Before conducting research, I attempted to establish some professional relationship to both subject matter experts for trustworthiness by telephone and email. During these informal times, I as the researcher discussed general information regarding my study. A letter of participation that contained additional information regarding my study was provided to both my contacts for each neighborhood to send out via email, post within their office of the

business, social media, or by word of mouth. My contact information was also provided on the letter for individuals who may have been interested in participating.

Following approval from my chair, committee members, Walden, and the Institutional Review Board (IBR), each participant with whom I received a verbal commitment was provided a consent form detailing my study, the name of my chair and contact information, why the potential participant was selected, time commitments, benefits to the study, potential risks, and how they would be managed. Meeting times and places were discussed and agreed upon with the participant before interviews to ensure the comfort and privacy. I reiterated to participants that their partnership was strictly voluntary with no promises of compensation (with the exception of bottled water and refreshments), and they were free to drop at any time from the study if they were uncomfortable. In the event of any cancellations, I attempted to reschedule with the participant at a more suitable time. One participant was a no show, while another participant had to change the time they could interview. After a brief phone conversation however, I was able to reschedule an interview time with each person. No individuals withdrew from the study at any time.

The participants were treated with respect throughout the study, and personal information such as names, employment, addresses, social security number, etc. were not asked of them. Any other personal information contained in my dissertation from their interview responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. I as the researcher was the only individual with access to the data throughout the entire study, and all backup data

was stored in my drop box folder. Written notes, observations, and other pieces of pertinent information were retained in a safe, which only I have access to.

Participants were informed that all information after the completion of my study will be kept for five years and then will be either permanently destroyed from my computer or physically shredded. The consent form was read and signed by each participant in its entirety before serving as a participant. After obtaining a signature, a copy was provided to each participant.

Summary

This qualitative case study was administered to individuals from different neighborhoods within a metropolitan city. It used semi-structured interviews with 22 participants to explore their perceptions regarding institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of nonviolent drug related offenders. Participants were accessed through open contacts in my community network, and I used a purposeful sampling strategy. I analyzed my data with qualitative data software using previous and emerging codes. Trustworthiness was established by peer-review from the dissertation committee and other Walden colleagues, while ethical considerations were addressed, followed by approval from the Walden University IRB.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand the individual thoughts and perceptions of citizens on institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of nonviolent drug related offenders back into the community. The primary research question for this study was: What are the perceptions of citizens from different communities regarding institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of nonviolent drug related male offenders?

Chapter Overview

In this chapter I present the setting, demographics, number of research participants, and the data collection procedures used to collect my data. In this chapter I will also discuss the data analysis and pre-coded categories. In addition, I will review the emerging themes that will be supported with direct quotes from interviews with participants in response to my research question. As part of the data analysis I will also offer a note on discrepant cases, and discuss what steps I took to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

Setting

After receiving initial contact from potential participants via Facebook message and email, I directly contacted all participants and invited them to participate in an interview. Appointments were made individually with each participant at a location that was comfortable and convenient for them. Due to the lack of interest among possible participants from the selected two neighborhoods under study, an invitation was extended

to participants in any community within City N Parish to participate. The expansion did change one parameter of the study from two neighborhoods to several neighborhoods within the Parish under study. This increased the chances of obtaining interest from a larger sample size of people from different neighborhoods and ethnicities. However, due to the demographics of the Parish under study, the additional parameters of the study, such as participants being at least 18 years of age and be of European-American, Hispanic, African-American did not change.

Initially I proposed that my interviews would be conducted within one public library and at an established business within the proposed neighborhood. However, some of the participants preferred to do the interviews at one of three public libraries within the community, while other participants requested conducting the interviews in their private offices or conference rooms.

Each participant signed an informed consent form prior to conducting the interview. All interviews took place in a quiet, private environment that was free from public interference, noise, and stressing elements. Every participant spoke freely as much as they wished to, and the interview was ended only when participants felt they had said everything there was to be said. Due to the comfortable setting and privacy of each interview, location was not considered to be a factor that would impact the results.

Demographics

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who represented the targeted community demographics. Of the 22 participants, 59.09% (13) were African-American, 36.3% (8) were European-American, and 4.5% (1) Hispanic. The gender of

the participants was 40.9% (9) female and 59.09 % (13) were male. The most recent data available for City N Parish had a population estimate of 442,268 with 52.2 % female, 48% male, 48.4 % of individuals classified as European-American, 46.4% of people being African-American, 4.0% as Hispanic and the rest being split among those of Asian or Biracial descent (U.S. Census.gov, 2017). In contrasting this data with my sample size, a 10-12 % difference can be seen in that I had more males than females, and I had more individuals to participate who were African-American, which was than any other race.

Among participants, the length of years as a resident of City N Parish resident ranged from 3 to 66 years. Participants included three teachers, one university professor, three military veterans, two program community leadership directors, one health care director, one communications director, one university athletic director, two practicing attorneys, one judge, one retired copilot, one pastor, one uniform patrol officer, one detective sergeant, and one maintenance technician. Three other citizens classified themselves as self-employed business owners, and two others were retired. This information was obtained from my initial interview questions.

Data Collection

After coordinating an appointed time, I e-mailed each research participant a consent form, which discussed the specifics of the research study. As I met with each individual face to face, and a copy of the consent form was provided to them again to explain the details of my study. Interviews were not conducted until each participant signed the consent form. The data collection consisted of 22 face-to-face interviews, and I used a self-developed interview questionnaire that took an average of 30 minutes for

each participant to complete. All interviews were digitally recorded, and the data was reviewed by each participant upon completion of the interview for accuracy of their responses. The data is stored under safe conditions as specified in my Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved application.

There were no unusual circumstances encountered during the data collection. However, as mentioned previously, there was a variation in the previous data collection plan in Chapter 3. Due to the low interest in participants from the selected two neighborhoods, I extended the invitation to participants in any community within City N Parish to participate in the study. This resulted in the participation of 22 individuals from several different communities within City N Parish.

A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix D) was used, but some variations in the questions were implemented. Some questions were formulated according to the participant response to provide more specifics to an answer, or to add more depth in order to ensure that the interview questions were appropriately addressed in each of the interviews. After recording the interviews, I took detailed notes and elements that I thought could be of use for later analysis. I also wrote in a personal journal in which I summarized my personal thoughts and experiences during the interview, and any other information I thought would be relevant for further analysis (see Janesick, 2011).

Prior to conducting my first interview, I also included in my journal any personal biases so that the data analysis stage would be completed with as much objectivity as possible. These notes and memos were all consulted when analyzing the data to ensure no

details were disregarded during the data collection. During each interview, I asked additional questions when clarification or conformation was needed from participants on something that was communicated during the interview (see Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

After the initial interview was ended, several participants continued to speak to me in sharing additional thoughts and experiences regarding my interview questions. After conversing with participants, some of these additional thoughts were included in my individual interview notes. Prior to analyzing my data, I contacted each of the participants who I had taken extra notes on to get their permission to use these additional notes in my analysis and findings, however I did not receive any responses back from these individuals.

Overarching Theme: Quality of Life

In discussing the process of how I arrived at the following themes, I will first provide a brief overview of the central theme that was discovered at the end of my analysis. This finding is an explanation of the evolution of the coding process from start to finish. As I went through the process of re-examining my research question, theoretical framework, interview questions, responses from participants, coding, final themes, documented interview notes, and personal journal notes, I begin to see an additional theme that emerged from combining the final six themes that will be discussed more in detail below.

In response to the research question of perceived disparities in the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration, *quality of life* became the central emerging theme.

Quality of life is measured by the conditions in which individuals physical, social, economic, and psychological needs are met. If decisions are predicated on the needs of an individual, then it is especially essential for formerly incarcerated individuals successfully reintegrating back into society. Recent literature on issues pertaining to quality of life point to certain needs that are critical for reentry. Doleac (2018) discussed strategies such as Housing, Mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, employment, as effective strategies in reentering formerly incarcerated individuals back into communities. Faller (2008) highlighted that ex-offenders being released into disadvantaged neighborhoods increased the likelihood of them returning to prison, significantly impacting recidivism (Bensel & Craw, 2018). The recent literature from both studies mirror the findings of this study in highlighting resources such as substance abuse treatment, employment, and housing within a stable community as critical for ex-offender reintegration. The findings of this study that will be discussed later in the chapter reflect similar themes that have been found in previous studies such as the ones just discussed. In looking at the totality of the responses of all the participants, the connections of all of these themes show that the selected sample of participants felt that addressing the physical, economic, social, and physiological needs of ex-offenders would be critical for offenders reintegrating back into society. The only outlier in the model is the theme of media, which had a negative connotation that participants felt impacted perception negatively when spoken of by 21 of 22 participants.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. As I previously mentioned in Chapter 3, qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used for codification and analysis. Prior to interviewing, I developed a preliminary coding framework (Table 1) that was based on my research question and theory RCI. Based on this preliminary framework, I reviewed each transcript and began coding. In addition, I also reviewed my notes from each interview participant and my personal journal, in which I circled key words and phrases during the interview that I thought could possibly serve as additional codes to my initial coding framework.

While coding, I began looking for emerging patterns and themes that were relevant to my research question and theoretical framework. I used descriptive coding to summarize words, short phrases, sentences, and paragraphs on the basic topic of the passage with the purpose of finding patterns and repetitions in the participants responses, as recommended by Saldana (2009). New codes were identified from the analyzed raw data, in addition to my preliminary codebook. These codes were then combined and placed into my codebook.

In my second round of coding, I begin identifying categories while also thinking ahead to themes that began to emerge. During this iterative process, several codes were dropped, while some codes were combined with others. When participants use similar words or phrases, NVivo software allows for the researcher to include a portion of the participant's dialogue into multiple categories if necessary, which frequently occurred during the analysis of my data. In reviewing the data, I identified several connections,

and was able to organize this information for cross-referencing using the NVivo software (Bazeley & Jackson, 2015).

As new categories and themes emerged, some initial codes were also recoded and placed in new categories. By the 14th interview, the majority of the emerging themes had appeared, and the rest of the interviews were composed of repetitions of those themes. After analyzing the data, some of these categories remained valid and were used consistently to make sense of the participants' discourse.

Other coding categories were changed into smaller codes and placed into other new emerging categories, while others were mentioned infrequently during the interviews. Integrating these categories into the research question, interview responses, notes from the interview, and theoretical framework yielded several themes. This process was repeated throughout the analysis stage until completion of the study.

As I begin combining and formulating new codes a number of similar themes begin to emerge from the process. Table 2 illustrates the final codebook with the preliminary coding framework, the emerging codes, categories, themes, and how the coding plan was deduced from the RCI theory with reference to the research question. Not listed in the Table 2 is the overarching theme that is a combination of the final six themes listed below. This will be discussed later in the chapter for the purpose of providing an overall view of the final themes.

Table 2

Final Codebook with Themes

Theory	Preliminary Codes	Categories	Emerging Themes
Rational Choice Institutionalism	Institutions Incentives Perceptions Constraints Preferences Environment	Volunteerism Socioeconomic Barriers Support Environment Media Perceptions Education Resources Rehabilitation Reintegration Public Leadership Poverty Structure Drugs	Cultural Community Exposure Effective Resources for Rehabilitation Educational Guidance and Instruction Environment and Family Support Effective Public Service & Legislation Inaccuracies of Media Communication

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As the primary instrument of the study, I ensured that every question that was listed in the original interview protocol was asked in the same approach in order to establish credibility. Although I had a preliminary coding framework, I remained open to exploring new avenues and obtaining new findings during the interviews even when the answers presented were on an entirely different topic. I also shared my findings with my participants who were not surprised by the results and thought that the findings made sense.

To help ensure conformability, all participants were emailed copies of the

transcripts a week after the interview was conducted for clarification purposes.

Participants were asked to review the information and delete or add any information they felt was necessary. Most of the participants did not respond back in regard to the transcripts. The ones that did respond back to me agreed with the original transcript that was sent to them. Therefore, no new information was added, edited, or removed from the transcript.

As noted earlier, I did ask participants who added additional comments after the interview was over for permission to include their comments in my results. However, I did not receive a response back from any of these individuals. In reviewing the field notes that I took on these off the record discussions, the information that was discussed had no overall impact on the final results, as many of the responses and stories were similar to ones captured on recorder and were coded as such. Any identifying information that could be traced back to a participant was made anonymous for confidentiality purposes. I also examined my collected data several times throughout this research study to identify any contrasting findings.

For transferability, I documented my data collection methods and analysis, which is provided in Chapters 3 and 4. The themes that developed from the data collection were like specific quotes from participants that will be referenced later in the chapter that authenticate transferability as well.

This research project is not seeking to find generalizable data; therefore, my findings can only be applied to a small number of individuals in particular neighborhoods. However, due to the variation in ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic

background, and experiences of interviewees, it is possible that these findings could be transferable to other studies related to perceptions of ex-offender reintegration and be used in other regions and community settings (Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

To verify this, a quantitative instrument could be developed utilizing the participant responses from this research and then distributed in survey form by email to a larger sample size in varying parts of the U.S. A mixed-methods study could then take the results of these two studies and combine them for a more comprehensive approach, which would further validate this study, and any future quantitative studies that utilize the findings in this study.

For dependability I examined complementary studies of similar nature to my study, and I went through the reiterative process of coding and recoding my data to establish reliability. During the re-coding process, notes from my personal journal and interview notes were crosschecked to ensure that only the voice of my participants was documented before coding for themes.

A personal journal was maintained regarding my interview sessions with participants that allowed reflecting on the research, and the research relationship with my participants. Included in my journal are personal reflections, biases, and assumptions that were made before, during, and after data collection. Appendix I contains an example of notes made on two different days of interviewing. Through these journaling techniques, I either took note of recurring emerging themes that were emerging or documented their constant repetition in each interview. These notes were also used for reference during data analysis and in writing my findings.

Results

The results will be displayed by theme in the order of frequency. These themes emerged from coded responses based off of the interview questions that derived from the central research question and theoretical framework. The data collected from participants did correspond to some of the codes listed in the preliminary codebook listed above. There were additional codes that emerged in addition to the other codes in the preliminary codebook. A number of these codes were direct responses from participants that supported the link between the research question, theoretical framework, and interview questions.

In the second round of coding, a large number of these codes were combined to form new ones, while others were dropped because they were mentioned very infrequently. The coded data was then advanced into themes, which connected to the theoretical framework and research question. The findings will be reviewed in order of the research question followed by terms of recurring topics, emerging themes, and non-conforming data, which will be supported by direct quotes from the participants.

Table 3

Note: Frequency table displays the number of occurrences of each theme in the participants' responses.

Themes	Number of times referenced during interviews	Number of participants who mentioned theme at least once
Environment & Family Support	96	22

Community Service & Exposure	96	20
Inaccuracies of Media Communication	85	22
Public Service & Legislation	72	14
Effective Resources & Rehabilitation	59	19
Educational Guidance and Instruction	45	14

The following themes listed were among the most mentioned by participants regardless of gender, age, race, or profession. Overall participants either discussed or mentioned Environment and Family Support ($f=96$), Community Service and Exposure ($f=96$), Inaccuracies of Media Communication ($f=85$), Public Service and Legislation ($f=72$), Effective Resources for Rehabilitation ($f=59$), and Educational Guidance and Instruction ($f=45$) as important topics when they discussed institutional disparities and their perceptions of nonviolent drug offenders reintegrating back into the community. I will discuss each of these in detail by theme, in conjunction with the research question and theoretical framework.

Theme #1 Environment & Family Support ($f=96$)

The theme environment and family support was the most prominent theme in this study and was mentioned at least twice by all 22 participants in reference to interview

questions #4 through #12. These particular questions centered on a number of topics pertaining to perception and the criminal justice system. The questions are as follows:

4. What are your thoughts on the perception that there are disparities within the criminal justice system in regard to sentencing, arrests, and convictions? Do you think other individuals within your community feel the same way you do? What about other communities? Do you think there is a divide between communities on this subject? (Prompt: Can you explain where you learned about this from?)
5. Do you talk about topics pertaining to the criminal justice system with people of other races? Why or Why Not?
6. What are your opinions regarding the current Edwards administration and the new criminal justice reforms that passed in June of 2017 within Louisiana?
(Prompt: How do you feel about individuals who were formerly incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses reintegrating into the community?)
7. What are your thoughts on the ability of those who were convicted of nonviolent drug offenses now having access to resources such as food stamps, welfare, and improved accessibility to employment opportunities due to the new reforms that were passed? (Prompt: Are the rules regarding housing, employment, insurance, and loans fair to those who have been formally incarcerated?)
8. Do you view differently between violent and nonviolent drug offenses? (Prompt: Should those with a history of non-drug violent offenses as opposed to those with a history of violent offenses be given a second chance? Why or why not?)

9. What role do you think the media (TV, Radio, Newspaper, Social Media) plays in your perception of those have been or are currently incarcerated?
10. What are your thoughts on the perception that some communities have economic and political advantages over others?
11. What are your thoughts on the opinion that institutions (schools, churches, gangs, neighborhoods) and the rules that govern them dictate perceptions and preferences? (Prompt: Does the environment within which an individual lives and works impact their behaviors, outlook on social issues, and preferences when it comes to electing public leaders?)
12. Are there any additional thoughts or comments you would like to add?

In general participants believed that environment was a critical factor when discussing ex-offender reintegration especially when it came to being involved with the criminal justice system. Participant 1, who currently works in the juvenile justice system in EBRP told me that from his experience of working with young people in the penal system, it is the impact of family and the environment that they come from that produces a learned behavior of criminal activity that continues into their adult lives. He said:

Regarding families, it's almost like a generational thing that my dad went to jail, my uncle went to jail, my big brother went to jail, and my cousin went to the jail. So what am I going to do? I learned this behavior. These kids are growing up in that particular environment and growing up in that environment right now 8, 9 years old you're a great kid, but if this is all I see. All I know is this then that's what I'm gonna [am I going] to do? (IP

1, personal communication, March 13, 2018)

Said Participant 22 who had been recently incarcerated relayed a similar theme to Participant 1:

When you look at it, you know, some people, this is all you [they] know. I know people that grew up, grew up in the streets... this is all they know.

(IP 22, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

This statement is further supported by Participant 15 who told me that as a law enforcement officer, his experience with individuals who were formerly incarcerated was that upon release they generally get back into trouble because of who they were hanging out with. Along with environment, family support and values was often mentioned among participants as factors that impacted an ex-offenders success upon release.

Specifically, Participant 21 said:

You know a lot of times people get out of jail, there's no family to take care of them, their family, either parents have passed away. Uh, there's nobody here left anymore, or their family has moved away and they got to stay here. [Parish N] (IP 21, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

Participant 1 shared with me a success story concerning one of the young juvenile ex-offenders he was working with in his re-entry program. He told me that despite this particular young man's background and the environment he grew up in, he was able to enroll in college at Louisiana State University and has been doing very well as a student. Participant 1 said that the young mans' college roommates were a major factor in

changing his mindset and becoming successful in college because they always encouraged and supported him.

Participant 10 told me that his parents always supported him and encouraged him to join clubs, get exposed to things outside of his world, and to do activities within the community such as volunteering. These experiences he said, defined who he is today, and played a big part in his success as an attorney. In reflecting back on some of these experiences, Participant 10 told me it was then that he realized how critical it was for ex-offenders to have a support system once they were released from prison. This particular discussion highlighted the connection of several themes in regard to family support, environment, and cultural exposure.

Participants 12, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22 all mentioned a number of similar themes by discussing how environment, family values, basic beliefs, and character all impact how individuals will respond upon being released from prison. Participant 20 told me he was raised in a rough neighborhood and had been incarcerated once. He also said that in his opinion, values determined where you end up regardless of the environment you were raised in. The emergence of environment and family support was a theme that remained as a consistent topic of discussion throughout all 22 interviews.

Theme #2 Community Service & Exposure (f=96)

Exposure was a common theme among 20 out of 22 participants, particularly when discussing personal perceptions of socioeconomic disparities. Most participants credited their personal experiences as a volunteer that exposed them to things that they were normally not exposed to. Participant 2 shared with me that her experience as a

volunteer for middle and high school students from impoverished communities during her college years at the boys and Girls Club helped her to see that many parents could not afford to send their children to a good prep school like her parents were able to do. She told me that it was this exposure that led her to believe that socioeconomic disparities did exist within her own community.

Participant 7 told me that she very much believed in the existence of socioeconomic disparities through her volunteer service as a board member for an organization that addresses homelessness within the community in City N Parish. In particular, participant 9 commented to me that that “there is so many people in this community with so much need” (IP 9, personal communication, March 14, 2018), while Participant 10 commented “I think it's important to get outside of yourself, but also see things you wouldn't usually see. I think that's important for personal growth and perspective” (IP 10, personal communication, March 14th, 2018). When asked about their thoughts on socioeconomic disparities within the community, Participant 17 had this to say:

I think it's really important that I give back to Parish N. I think that our entire society is set up, some of it I believe in intentionally, although not all of it intentionally, to give advantages to certain groups over others. The Fair Housing Act is a really obvious example of that, that there had been some systemic roadblocks set up. (IP 17, personal communication, March 14, 2018).

Each participant who told me that they volunteered, highlighted how these experiences

exposed them to different communities that they would not be familiar with in their everyday life. Participant's 1, 6, 8, 11, 14, 15, and 22, cited time, family obligations, and laziness as some of their reasons for not volunteering.

Participant 1 told me that he did not volunteer for an organization on a consistent basis, but does volunteer from time to time at his daughter's school, while Participant 6 cited his retirement and "catching up on fun" as his reason for not volunteering (IP 6, personal communication, March 13, 2018). Participant 8 told me family obligations kept her from volunteering, while participants, 14, 15, 22 told me they did not have time to volunteer. Although these individuals did not volunteer, all but one of them did believe that there were major socioeconomic disparities within in the community. When I asked where their opinions came from, they spoke of other personal experiences, things they had seen on TV, or through personal conversations with friends about the issue.

Participant 15 had a different perspective from all the other interviewees on socioeconomic disparities. When asked of his opinion on the perception of socioeconomic disparities here were his thoughts:

I pretty much disagree with that. I believe that no matter what your background is or your upbringing, if you work hard school and get your education, you can succeed. That's the American dream and we see it all the time. You know my sister and me [I] were born. Mom and dad had us very young. We were poor you know. Mom and Dad had to work hard. (IP 15, personal communication, March 15, 2018).

The difference in perspective here from this participant highlights the impact that growing up in an impoverished environment had on this participant. Despite his family circumstances, the participant commented that he witnessed his parents' work hard enough to the point that they were one day able to get out of poverty. This experience shaped this participants belief that all individuals have equal opportunities to work hard and support their families.

Theme #3 Inaccuracies of Media Communication (*f*=85)

Media was another important theme that emerged during the interviews with all 22 participants. For the intent of this study, media represents local and national news, radio, newspaper, TV, Internet, and all social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. Interview question #12 specifically asked participants their personal perceptions of the media.

All but one participant associated the media with words such as “biased”, “agenda”, “demonization” “perception”, “distrust,” “death”, “destruction,” “disaster,” “negative,” “clicks,” “advertising,” and “selling ads.” Based on the responses, participants overall perceived the media as inaccurate, whose agenda was financial in nature, and particularly selective in what they wanted viewers to see and hear.

Participant 16 told me that he felt the media blew things out of proportion, while Participant 19 characterized the media as demonization because it made the portrayal of some communities being infested with crime when in reality they were not. Some participants cited not watching certain news channels over others due to how they

portrayed certain races. Participants 3 and 21 felt that the media played a big role in formulating perceptions not only on ex-offenders returning to the community but particularly on people who lived in lower socioeconomic communities. Participant 3 told me that he does not look at channel nine news anymore, which is a local TV news channel in City N Parish. This participant felt that the channel nine-news outlet purposely selected individuals who were a poor representation of African Americans to interview and put on TV, which would further reinforce the belief that minorities were the main criminals. On this point Participant 21 was more specific:

You talk to all the people in media and it's all about hits. The story doesn't have to be true or not. So they want to make you look at a story or view a story or they'll go find the worst people to put on TV to talk. You want to interview witnesses. It's the worst people ok? And they do that, and then the perception of the people watching on TV is like, OK, these are, these are the type of people. I wouldn't be around those people. (IP #21, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

Participant 18's response to the question on the impact of media on perception followed a logic similar to Participant 3 and 21, but added that individuals with little or no exposure to different communities were especially influenced by media outlets:

If I live in a small knit community and I don't really go out a lot or you know, if I only. If I, if I don't venture out into other communities other than to go to the movie theater or do something else, then my perception is only going to be through those main stories that I get through the news

every day. (IP #18, personal communication, March 15, 2018)

Participant 4 felt that media outlets preferred putting the spotlight on negative issues because it served the financial interests of the media, while Participant 15, a 10-year veteran of a police department in the community, expressed his view that the media knows very little about what actually goes on crime wise in the community:

A lot more goes on in the streets and then what people hear. Like people think, you know, they're back home under little safe neighborhoods.

They're safe in their homes, you know, they can watch the 6:00 news or the Advocate and they read about a shooting or else some big major crime that's just happened to pick up and cover. But what people see from the, you know, the media reporting is just the tip of the iceberg of what goes on in the streets in our world. (IP #15, personal communication, March 15, 2018)

As participants were asked deeper questions about the impact of media on perception, a number of connections begin to emerge between the research question, framework, and interview questions. These responses highlighted the connection between themes Exposure, Environment, Legislation, and Education. The answers from participants in response to the interview questions illuminated the relationship between perception, cultural exposure, and the impact of self-interest on behavior and decision-making. The fact that a number of participants cited the media's drive to sell more ads for financial and political interests adds another dimension to the RCI framework.

When referencing environment and preferences, Participant 19 a current police

detective for the violent crimes unit at a law enforcement agency within City N Parish made this point:

People don't want those people [ex-offenders] out. And when they do want them out, they don't want them out where they can potentially come into my neighborhood. That's fine if they can go live somewhere else, but don't live next to.... they don't want them next to them. (IP #19, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

Participant 20 commented that the media not only serves its own interests, but also takes advantage of the fact that people often gravitate to the outlets that simply reinforces what they already believe. The overall response from participants on the topic of media highlights the impact media institutions have on public perception, that can be strengthened if citizens lack personal exposure, experience, or choose which media sources to expose themselves to.

Theme #4 Public Service & Legislation (f=72)

As the interview questions progressed and begin to center on specific topics pertaining to the criminal justice system, a number of participants begin discussing politics, leadership in the public sector, the new criminal justice reforms, and its impact on criminal justice policy. Particularly participants begin talking about the current state of leadership in the U.S. citing Louisiana Governor Edwards, United States President Trump, and former President Obama. In relation to the question of whether or not participants discussed criminal justice topics with people of other races, some participants replied that that they did and often brought up the Alton Sterling issue frequently.

Other topics that arose when discussing legislation included financial self-interests, preferences, agendas in policy decisions, and media. These topics tied into how participants perceived public leadership and the implementation of the new criminal justice reforms. The discussion of these topics tied back into the RCI framework that examines how environment, rules, and incentives shape actor choices in the policy realm.

Participants 1, 8, 14, 17, 20, and 21... each discussed the political nature of agendas and self-interest, and how these preferences played a role in policy choices. The following references in response to the interview questions tie back into the research question and RCI framework. On the subject of ex-offenders convicted of nonviolent drug offenses reintegrating back into the community, Participant 20 commented that society could not afford to keep these individuals incarcerated under the present conditions because of its cost in taxpayer dollars. This participant believed that from a political stance, conservatives looked at the incarceration issue from a fiscal perspective and not a social equality standpoint. In his opinion, self interests and the potential to save millions in taxpayers' dollars was the primary reason Governor Edwards was able to pass the proposed new reforms in the legislature:

Conservatives think money. They want to know how I can save money, and if you can convince them that this could save money without adversely impacting them, you know, you can sell it (IP #20, personal communication, March 16, 2018).

Some participants praised the new criminal justice reforms that were passed by the Louisiana legislature in the summer of 2017, while others felt like the reforms did not go

far enough. Participant 12 who is a retired judge and practicing attorney in City N Parish believed that the passages by the legislation was a good thing for Louisiana because it would not only reduce the prison population, but it would also allow a lot of nonviolent offenders to get out of prison earlier and have a second opportunity in life. Participant 17 a current professor at a major university also applauded the Edwards administration, but felt like the reforms didn't go far enough because of competing self-interests by opposing individuals within the legislature:

I applaud any sort of movement in the right direction. But I do think there was a need to compromise in order to get the legislation through. I think there were compromises made in the process to sort of appease sheriffs and appease DA's because jobs are critically important. (IP #17, personal communication, March 14, 2018)

On this same subject in reference to ex-offender reintegration, Participant 1 stated that:

If you're a Democrat, you're going to play to your base, which are African Americans. You're going to play to their base and we need to fix this and we're going to do something about this. You know for me, I'm going to help you do this. Yeah. If you are a Republican and you're going to say we got to stop that, we're not going to let that happen here. (IP #1, personal communication, March 13, 2018)

Participant 8 expressed the belief that culture and the way that people operated was based on their environment, experiences, and learned behaviors. This participant believed that these factors were critical in shaping individual perceptions and preferences when it came

to electing public leaders. Participant 18 further commented that the local and political climate resembled more of a “gang environment of Crips and Bloods” in which individuals choose party lines and public leaders based on personal interest, but without having any real understanding of how government worked and how those choices impacted all communities. (IP 18, Personal Communication, March 18, 2018).

Similar in scope, Participant 20 commented that when deciding whom to elect as a public leader, individuals generally voted for someone that could relate to themselves and their community. This stance was similar to Participant 14 who replied that as a person of Hispanic descent who lives in a primarily Hispanic community within City N Parish, Hispanics elect leaders based on their own interests which tend to be more concerning immigration and being caught in the U.S. as an illegal alien as opposed to criminal justice reform in Louisiana.

Concerning disparities in the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration, participants 3, 13, and 19 cited local and federal leadership and its impact on criminal justice reform:

In reference to President Trump...His attitude.... Leadership matters.

Leadership is a very, very powerful... a poor leader will only hear certain persons of his status, and then if he decides to reach out to only those and the only reason he's reaching out to them is because he needs to get where he's going, not necessarily that he actually cares for them. (IP #3, personal communication, March 13, 2018)

Participant 13 mentioned in his opinion the current state of public leadership this way:

I saw things get better in my lifetime because when I was born it was the height of the civil rights movement. Now, you know, we've heard it as a crunchy back to a lot of that ignorance, all the strides we may think we've taken a step back to the guy like Donald Trump. (IP #13, personal communication, March 15, 2018)

In addition to leadership in Washington, Participant 19 also gave his thoughts on leadership at the local level:

We have a very good dynamic city here. We've had two good mayors that are doing a lot of things to try to make things better. We have to set aside the party lines. You know, everybody, uh, President Obama made life so much better for so many people are the things he did in America, but people look at it, you know, he was just over here. And for the leadership that we have now, the chaos that's going on up on the hill. (IP #19, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

While the participants above cited public leadership as a factor in social justice issues, Participant 17 noted highlighted the importance of understanding the relationship between the healthcare system and education as an important supplement of understanding the criminal justice system. This participant said:

If we really want to get to an ideal state, we have to look at the way those three interact. Heck should probably should throw education in there too, but...healthcare, mental healthcare, the jail system and education. (IP #15, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

Theme #5 Effective Resources & Rehabilitation (f=59)

A theme that was most mentioned by participants was rehabilitation and the availability of resources. When participants discussed resources, specifically they referred to items such as food stamps, welfare, ability to obtain certain licenses or certificates for employment, housing, access to student loan for school etc. When participants mentioned rehabilitation they referred specifically to drug rehabilitation programs due to the fact that many ex-offenders struggle with drugs. Other topics discussed included mental health, education, training, and employment.

Interview questions #9, #10, and #11 asked participants their thoughts on ex-offenders convicted of nonviolent offenses having access to items such as food stamps, welfare, and other resources. Participants were also asked if they viewed violent and nonviolent offenses differently. A large number of participants viewed a difference between violent and nonviolent drug offenses.

Overall participants felt that nonviolent drug offenders should have their sentences reduced and have access to resources in order to reintegrate back into society. Participant 11 felt that nonviolent ex-drug offenders should have access to as many resources as possible to prevent them from going back into the same activities that landed them in prison. Mental health was specifically referenced by Participant 2 as an important aspect of rehabilitation for violent and nonviolent drug offenders.

Participant 13 pointed out that accessible housing was critical for people with criminal backgrounds to be able to assimilate back into society, while Participant 10 suggested soft skills and workforce development training as an important aspect of

reintegrating back into the community. Participant 21 told me that he read that one out of three ex-offenders ended up going back to jail not long after their initial release. While this participant could not verify where he read this from, he was aware of the importance of ex-offenders having adequate housing and employment. Participant 22 noted to me that individuals should have access to resources especially considering that some have been locked up for over a decade. Specifically he said:

I feel like they should at least be able to have some of it to help themselves rebuild to rebuild themselves, you've been taking, you've been incarcerated for 10, 12 years you come home to nothing. (IP #22, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

On the same subject of having access to resources and rehabilitation, participants responded somewhat differently regarding to ex-offenders convicted of nonviolent drug offenses and those convicted of violent drug offenses. Participant 18 gave this opinion on individuals convicted of violent drug offenses:

I view violent drug offenses increasingly differently... there's a difference between someone who's just standing on the corner, you know, selling something because they need money to feed their family rather than someone, uh, who a, who loves a, an identity as someone who is violent towards their community or terrorizes people based off, you know, being someone who is involved with drugs. (IP #18, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

This view was similar to those of other participants who drew a harder stance on violent offenders. Most participants felt that violent offenders should serve the time that was given to them, but should have the same access to resources once their time was served.

Participants 12,15, and 19 all work in the criminal justice profession as a judge, law enforcement officer, and detective. When asked about their thoughts on former violent offenders having access to rehabilitation services and resources, they all shared similar responses. Participant 12 commented that once an individual had served their time, they should have equal access to the same rehabilitation services and resources as anybody else regardless of the offense. Specifically Participant 15 who is a current law enforcement officer in an area of high crime, and Participant 19 who is detective in the violent crimes unit had this to say on the subject of violent ex drug offenders:

Violent offenders, those are the ones that are causing the most harm.

Whether to whoever their victims might have been in their crime or particularly if it's a drug dealer in my personal opinion, I hate drug dealers. Once they do complete their sentence, regardless if you're pleased with the results of them getting out from whoever makes the decision, they still have some work. They should still have the same access (IP #15, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

Violent or nonviolent, because there are people in jail for violent crimes, manslaughter that are going to get out and guess what? If there's nothing

there to help them fit back in, they'll slip back into criminal law. (IP #19, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

While the majority of participants differentiated in their opinions on individuals convicted of violent and nonviolent offenses, the overall response from the interviews showed that regardless of the offense, individuals should have the same equal opportunities to be rehabilitated and have access to public resources upon completion of their sentence.

Theme #6 Educational Guidance and Instruction (f=45)

The last theme that was most discussed by participants was education, guidance, and mentorship. Participants referred to education in a number of contexts as a critical component of reintegrating back into society. For the purposes of this study, credentials such as GED, high school diploma, bachelors' degree, vocational certificate, or training license for a certain occupation all lie under the theme education.

Participants 10 and 12 both spoke on the value of education as a preventative measure from individuals being involved in the criminal justice system in the first place. Participants 10 and 13 pointed to early childhood education and from their perspective, the failing public school system within City N Parish as a contributing factor in the number of kids entering the criminal justice system, particularly kids in schools that are located in lower socioeconomic communities. Participant 10 said:

The biggest thing that stands out to me is education and the

opportunities between private schools and public schools, and our public school system really kind of stands out the most to me.....I mean I think there's definitely a disparity in the level of education that you get based on where you go and obviously kind of your resources dictate where you're even able to get (IP #10, personal communication, March 15, 2018)

On the same subject Participant 13 told me that according to his estimates, he has spent nearly a quarter of a million dollars to send his kids to Catholic schools because he didn't want to take a chance on the City N public school system educating his kids. In his opinion, the investment on his kids education has been worthwhile, but was frustrating in a sense because that investment cost him opportunities to invest in other activities elsewhere. Concerning early childhood education Participant 7 took a similar approach from a racial point of view when she said that in her opinion white middle class kids were more privileged within the school system, which further marginalized and disadvantaged black children within the education system.

Participants' 9 and 11 viewed education as important tool from a vocational occupation for ex-offenders upon release. Participant 9 highlighted the need for ex-offenders to have access to credentials such as vocational training to become certified welders or plumbers while incarcerated, so that upon release an employer would be more likely to hire them. Participant 11 who has 30 years of experience within the correctional system shared with me a story that provided more insight into his views on the impact of vocational training programs:

Let me just say, when I worked in the juvenile system, we had a welding program. The guys who entered that welding program, it was hard. They really had to learn to behave and not be fighting, because they knew they would be kicked out if they didn't comply with what we wanted. Avondale's shipyard hired every last one of em [them]. On the other hand, the ones who didn't receive training, they returned they reentered. So the educational components very important in my opinion. Without a vocational educational point, they go all.... they go reenter. (IP #11, personal communication, March 15, 2018).

While participants had a number of different perspectives on education, all agreed that education should be a part of every ex-offenders re-entry into society, whether they were convicted of nonviolent crimes or violent crimes.

Discrepant Cases

While a number of patterns emerged from the above themes, there were a few discrepant cases that occurred in the data collection that will now be discussed.

Contradictions in the data that do not support or appear to contradict patterns or explanations that are emerging from data analysis can provide surprising findings that can ultimately revise, broaden, and strength the theory (Booth, Carroll, Llott, Low, & Cooper, 2012). Therefore, an active search was undertaken to find negative cases in regard to respondents' experiences or viewpoints that differed from the main body of evidence.

One of the discrepant cases was with Participants 15 and 20. Participant 15 is a current 10 plus year law enforcement officer veteran in an area of high poverty and crime. When asked what his thoughts were on the perception that some communities have social, economic, and political advantages over others, he responded:

I pretty much disagree with that. I believe that no matter what your background is or your upbringing, if you work hard school and get your education, you can succeed. That's the American dream and we see it all the time. You know me, and my sister was born. Mom and dad had us very young. We were poor you know. Mom and Dad had to work hard. (IP #15, personal communication, March 15, 2018)

All other participants agreed to some extent that there were some communities have social, economic, and political advantages over others. From participant 15's point of view however he felt that all individuals have an equal opportunity at being successful in life in spite of their background. His perspective was based on the fact that he himself grew up poor and yet saw his parents become successful anyway despite their circumstances. However later in the interview when asked his thoughts on the ability of formerly incarcerated individuals convicted of violent and nonviolent drug offenses now having access to resources such as food stamps, welfare, improve accessibility, employment opportunities, housing, loans, he acknowledged that some assistance would be necessary so that these individuals could get back on their feet:

- Participant 15: 11:38 I think that as part of their probation need, a little assistance getting on their back, on their feet. But it should just be temporary. Yeah.
- Researcher: 11:45 So in your opinion do you think there is barriers that offenders face when they come out?
- Participant 15: 12:00 It's possible. It's possible. I know it has to be very hard. (IP #15, personal communication, March 15, 2018)

Despite the discrepancy with the interview question, this acknowledgement further highlights the fact that some individuals will face barriers as they reintegrate back into the community and that resources, which was an emerging theme from the interviews, would be necessary.

Another discrepancy that was noted was Participant 20 response to interview question #13. When asked what his thoughts were on the opinion that institutions and the rules that govern them dictate personal perceptions and preferences, Participant 20 had responses different from all other participants. Participant 20 told me that he was raised in a community of high crime and poverty, and had been involved with the penal system several times in his life. Today he is a successful practicing attorney for a prominent law firm in the community. Due to his rise to success, his thoughts were that environment may shape your beliefs, but they don't define a person. Participant 20 noted that coming from a stable household in which both his parents encouraged him to volunteer and expose himself to different environments was instrumental to his personal growth. During the interview he twice referenced parents as an important aspect of development. The

following provides a few separate examples:

I had a two parent family, mother and father, who made me go to school and you know, church, the whole thing, basic understanding of what was right and wrong and how to have respect for people, and then sure, I grew up in an area that was under privileged and all these other things happened and yeah, I kind of got involved with some crazy stuff, but I knew what was right and what was wrong and eventually, I mean I grew beyond that. My parents had enough sense to get me out of certain schools and get me to integrated schools, which exposed me to a broader view of things (IP #20, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

I mean I grew up a certain way. I grew up understanding a respect for people, I grew up understanding the respect for the community, that you have a responsibility to the community and I still believe that. So I think the same thing applies today. It all starts with your parents, how you grew up within your home and then it broadens out to your neighborhood and it should carry on. It should extend beyond that. (IP #20, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

We were exposed to things outside of the everyday community stuff. But there's, as I was saying earlier the basics of who you

were are instilled from your parents. (IP #20, personal communication, March 16, 2018)

While participant 15 and 20 responded differently from other participants on different questions, both mention parenting in their responses and how it was critical to shaping their own perspectives and choices in life. The similarity of these responses further reinforces the importance of environment and family support (Theme #1) for personal development and being a productive citizen in society.

When asked whether they discuss topics pertaining to the criminal justice system (crime, incarceration, drugs, arrests, sentencing) with people of other races? Participant #14 who was the only participant of Hispanic descent in my sample responded that in her community being deported was more of a concern than crime:

The Hispanics more like...[pause] they, uh, illegal, illegal people so I don't know, that includes a whatever you associate, but the Hispanic people, they're more worried about illegal, it's not robbery and the murder and you don't care that much about that, it's more about being illegal in this country. (IP #15, personal communication, March 15, 2018)

While this response was different from the other 21 participants, and had nothing to do with the criminal justice system, the above example further highlights the RCI framework in which self-interest plays an impact on decision making in policy choices. However as mentioned before, I argue that the RCI framework can be applied at the community level by illustrating that personal preferences and interests dictate choices

when electing public leaders. This conclusion is also supported by other statements within the same interview with participant 14:

- Researcher: 14:45 So I'll go back, for example. So in some communities that there is a concern for crime. Some other communities they could care less about it. The Hispanic community, from what you're saying, more of the concern is from is for immigration?
- Participant 14 14:59 Yeah. That's what I see around.
- Researcher: 15:07 Um, that's based in that space in your community, so when it comes to voting what influences in the Hispanic community, let's talk about the presidential election in Hispanic community, what did you find? Who, uh, who were mostly Hispanics voting for?
- Participant 14 15:32 Whoever talk the most Hispanic, Hispanic for whoever, um, whoever say they going to help the Hispanic countries.

The last discrepancy was a question regarding the criminal justice system with Participant 16 in regard to perceptions on disparities in sentencing, arrests, and convictions. Every participant who was of African-American decent agreed that there were discrepancies. However, Participant 16 who was also African-American and was born and raised in a community of high poverty and crime felt that African-Americans

had themselves to blame for being placed in the criminal justice system.

Well we our own [pause]....how should I say this? We are our own devil so to speak... They don't think before they do anything. And you can't blame the police you have to blame yourself. So you can't get mad. When I come up [grew up], [pause].....police was bad. Stopped you dead in the streets, take everything you got you know stuff like that. So for people like me den [then] grewed up and then made it this far, it's like some are not as bad, but the ones that was doin [doing] it back at the time. They have like ummm they sons or they son in laws or daughter in laws on the streets now and some of them try to play off what they used to do [their parents used to do]. So you know...black people they their own worst enemy (IP #16, personal communication, March 15, 2018)

The discrepancy in these findings were actually noted later for reflection in my personal journal which is cited for reference below:

I had an African-American male participant who was born and raised in a community that was high and poverty and crime, with very little education, and yet had never had experience with the criminal justice system in anyway shape or form. He felt that African-Americans in general make poor choices that that makes it worse for them when they come out of prison as opposed to

blaming the criminal justice system. (Hinton, 2018, unpublished raw data from journal)

Despite the discrepancies, later in the interview Participant 16 reiterated the fact that some of the individuals that used to live a life of crime passed down these habits to their family members and children, further perpetuating a generational cycle of poverty and crime. This finding again highlights that the theme of family support and environment can not only have a positive or negative role not only in childhood development, but also in determining an individual's level of success upon reintegrating back into society.

Other Findings

Other findings relevant to the research question centered on questions of race and equality as it pertains to the criminal justice system. Participants were asked if they discussed topics pertaining to the criminal justice system with people of other races (Interview Question #7). Participants 3,4,5,9,12,15,17,18,20,21 responded that they did have these discussions, but mostly among their own circle of friends, colleagues, and associates with whom they felt comfortable discussing social issues. As a follow up question to all of the participants that did engage in these discussions, I asked them to explain some of their experiences and how these discussions went. Participant 4 told me that when he had these discussions with people of other races, many of his European-American friends were surprised. He also told me that in his opinion, there was a disconnect between the African-American community and law enforcement and other communities of different races:

They're surprised and I've had cases where they apologized and said, I'm sorry, you had to go through that. And uh, so, um, I think overall it was positive. There's a communication gap that exists between the African American male in law enforcement. And then there's another communication gap that exists between a non African American communities and, uh, in African American communities as to what's taking place, uh, as far as how incidents are handled based on race (IP #4, personal communication, March 13, 2018)

Participant 8 told me that she does talk with her colleagues of different races at work about particular criminal justice cases that is in the news, but she felt that those conversations were “a little bit sheltered” especially when discussing the Alton Sterling incident that occurred in July of 2016. (IP #8, personal communication, March 16th, 2018). Participants 1 and 13, felt that having honest discussions about the criminal justice system with people of other races was positive for race relations and critical for social change:

I just think we gotta [got to] come together and be open to discussing this however harshly that may be, you know, it's going to hurt some people on our side of the aisle and it's going to affect some people on your side of the aisle, But at the end of the day, if we truly want change, we've got to come to the table and be

honest with each other. (IP #1, personal communication, March 13, 2018)

After this response, I asked participant 1 a follow up question for clarification that asked if he felt that in order to have any kind of social change citizens would have to get a little uncomfortable on both sides, and he responded:

Absolutely, absolutely, {shakes head in agreement} and be willing to speak some truths on both sides of the equation because at the end of the day, again, unless you walked in my shoes, you can't tell me I should feel a certain way (IP #1, personal communication, March 13, 2018)

Participant 13 was the only other told me that he not only actively looks for opportunities to discuss topics pertaining to the criminal justice system with people of other races, but he also speaks about other social justice issues that African-Americans face within their communities. He expressed to me that he felt these discussions were positive for race relations in general:

Having a conversation about hand speak freely and tell you how it really is at my house and my society know what is their friendship to grow, what is the for respect to grow. If I got to hide the fact that I'm afraid of you, I'm afraid of law enforcement, I'm afraid of getting fucked over by some bank or some mortgage broker or some, you know, whatever. So for me, I look at each opportunity

as an opportunity for racial relations. (IP #13, personal communication, March 15, 2018)

One note that I found interesting was the number of participants that wanted to continue speaking about my research project after the interview was officially over. With the exception of Participant 21, every participant spoke with me for at least 10 to 15 additional minutes on my research question.

In these discussions, participants told me additional information on their thoughts and feelings of disparities within the criminal justice system and race relations in City N Parish. Most of the information did not reveal any new emerging themes, but the additional experiences, stories, and perspectives that participants shared with me further supported their personal stance on formerly incarcerated individuals reintegrating back into the community. I noted some of these discussions in my personal journal each day after collecting data from participants:

Wonderful experience in getting that face-to-face interaction while interviewing interviews on my dissertation topics. My first impressions are that people find the topic interesting and engaging. Most individuals want to provide additional thoughts and comments after the interview has completely ended leaving me to wonder if I should have given them more time or perhaps let them read over the interview questions before. (Hinton, 2018, unpublished raw data from journal)

The biggest thing I am finding is that every individual continues to speak about the topic even after the formal interview is over. The average discussion is another 15 to 20 min after ending the recorder. Some of the best stories have been told then so I am making a recollection of them afterwards. (Hinton, 2018, unpublished raw data from journal)

Every single participant continued talking about the topic at least 15 min after the interview ended. In those off recording sessions I learned of more stories and experiences that further explained why the participants felt the way they did on criminal justice reform in LA. (Hinton, 2018, unpublished raw data from journal)

Participant 8 in particular provided me with additional insight into her own personal thoughts on incarcerated individuals. I added these to my notes and reached out to her to request permission to use this additional information in my findings assuring her for confidentiality purposes that that her information would be presented anonymously, which she agreed to allow me to do so.

After the interview was officially over and the recorder was turned off, Participant 8 told me that looking at prisoners nauseates her. To clarify I asked her why she felt that way, and she responded that during her personal experience of touring a prison with her volunteer group she saw all of the prisoners behind bars and felt in general that they were mistreated and abused. She provided no further clarification of this, but admitted that that was just the way she felt in general about individuals who were incarcerated. I

choose to include this information because it re-introduces the overarching theme “Quality of Life” that was discussed in the beginning of this chapter.

Summary

In this chapter the results of this research study were presented. The interview questions were derived from the RCI theory that was closely related to the central research question. The interviews indicate that the perceptions of disparities within the criminal justice system and the re-entry of nonviolent drug ex-offenders back into the community is a complex process that is based on a number of factors, particularly when discussing environment and personal experiences. These experiences and observations are also impacted by communication with individuals within their community, as well as from individuals from different socio economic, political, and racial backgrounds. However, perceptions can be limited due to little or no exposure to different environments and communities. These findings highlight the importance of diversity and multiculturalism.

While the patterns showed that the participants have an overall distrust and skeptical view of local and national mass media, they acknowledged that media has a big impact on public perception. The results show that overall participants believe that ex-offenders deserve another opportunity to reintegrate into society and become productive citizens. However, education, availability of resources, rehabilitation, effective legislation and leadership, and exposure to a constructive environment with a support system all play a crucial role in determining personal success for ex-offenders upon release from their prison sentence. When combined, these themes provide a positive

quality of life for ex-offenders, which is not only good for ex-offenders, but for the communities that they return to.

These facets of criminal justice form are integral for criminal justice reform policy. However, through the RCI framework process, participants believe that these same entities have structurally, and systemic implications caused by internal and external factors within the public sector. If certain communities are influenced by financial incentives, political agendas, and other self-interests, then this will impact behavior and personal choices, which ultimately affects policy.

While participants acknowledged how effective criminal justice reform policy could be, they perceived that self-interest by the community, media, and government only reinforced public perception. In order for public perception to change on ex-offender reintegration, participants believe that honest communication, sympathy, exposure to different communities through volunteering, and education is the key to social change within the City of N community.

These findings may be only applicable to the 22 participants of this research, but they may lead the path for future investigation involving the city of City N Parish and other cities and states as well. In Chapter 5, I will present an explanation of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, along with the potential implications of social change for my research study, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand citizen perceptions on institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of nonviolent drug related male offenders back into the community. This chapter presents a summary and interpretation of the findings. In the first section of this chapter, I provide an interpretation of the findings, including any limitations related to trustworthiness as they were identified in the data collection and analysis. I will also provide recommendations for future research and discuss implications of the study. I will conclude with discussing the connection between this dissertation and potential impacts for social change.

Summary of Findings

This study consisted of interviews with 22 participants from several communities within City N Parish. The data was analyzed using pre-coded categories and themes were allowed to emerge in order to detect patterns and repetitions in the discourse of interviewees. The most frequently occurring themes are discussed in Chapter 4, but a complete frequency table can be found in Appendix G. The six emerging themes are:

- Environment & Family Support ($f=96$)
- Community Service & Exposure ($f=96$)
- Inaccuracies of Media Communication ($f=85$)
- Public Service & Legislation ($f=72$)
- Effective Resources & Rehabilitation ($f=59$)

- Educational Guidance and Instruction ($f=45$)

Environment & Family Support was the most mentioned theme discussed 96 times by participants. Throughout the interviews, participants continually mentioned environment and family support as a determining factor on the success former offenders would have reintegrating back into the community.

Community Exposure & Service was one of the most frequently mentioned themes throughout all 22 interviews. Participants were constantly talking about how their life experiences of being exposed to different communities and cultures through volunteering or working with individuals from different socioeconomic, racial, and political backgrounds served as common source of formulating their own perceptions of disparities within the criminal justice system and ex-offenders reintegrating back into the community. Participants discussed that being exposed to environments that differed from their own, gave them a different perspective on social issues.

Inaccuracies of Media Communication was another main theme. Participants expressed that the media played a major role in shaping public perception on disparities within the criminal justice system, crime, law enforcement, prisoners, and ex-offenders. Participants believed that ratings, advertisement, and other financial incentives leads the media to provide pre-established narratives to the public on topics that simply reinforce what they already believe whether it was perception or reality. While most participants felt that media heavily impacts public perception, they also said that they build their perceptions and ideas through their own personal experiences and daily interactions with friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors.

Regarding *Public Service & Legislation*, participants felt that public leadership from the President of the United States to the Mayor of City N was critical for social reform and change within the criminal justice system. Participants indicated that leadership within the government would set the stage for how the nation would evolve as a community and country.

Effective Resources & Rehabilitation was another theme that was discussed by participants. When discussing topics related to ex-offenders, participants believed that the availability of resources such as housing, food stamps, health insurance, drug and mental health rehabilitation were critical for reintegrating back into society.

Educational Guidance & Instruction was another theme that was prevalent throughout the data collection and analysis. Participants said that the ability to obtain vocational licenses or other certificates to become eligible for employment would be important for ex-offenders reintegrating back into the community. Participants also expressed that resources, rehabilitation, education, and employment were important for reducing the recidivism rate in Louisiana.

Interpretation of the Findings

The results show that perceptions about institutional disparities within the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration are formulated through a complex process that is defined by how one was raised, personal experiences, exposure to different communities, and by daily interaction with family, friends, coworkers, clients, neighbors, and associates. This process also includes elements of media whether it is through television, radio, newspaper, or social media.

The findings of this study confirm my choice of the rational choice institution framework that discusses how the unification of norms, practices, preferences, and personal interests impact actor behavior, policy choices, and policy outcomes. For example, Participant 20 noted during the interview that media was a powerful driver of reinforcing perceptions among citizens. From this perspective, individuals would simply choose to view social media or news outlets that held views like theirs irrespective of whether or not it was perception or reality.

These processes at the individual level can also be applied at the community and political level where people tend to congregate and form relationships with others who hold similar values and beliefs. These relationships can be seen in the form of voting for political figures, town hall meetings, community groups, and social media. Through this process, the concept of social change can be challenging due to the circular process that the environment and relationships reinforce.

The responses from interviewees also showed that their perception on the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration largely depended on their own experiences, how they were raised, and the current environment in which they reside. While personal interests played a role in the interviewee's perception, personal experiences through exposure to individuals from different socioeconomic environments also played a role in formulating their perceptions. Whether it was through media, family, friends, employment, or volunteerism, it was these experiences that shaped participants views on inconsistencies within the criminal justice system. These experiences further supplement the RCI framework by highlighting that exposure to different social environments can

alter the reinforcement of one's perception of social issues in addition to the criminal justice system and community reentry.

Although the results of this study are limited to a small number of participants within City N Parish, the findings may have a few different implications. In Table 3, 20 participants referenced or credited extracurricular activities such as volunteerism and community service as experiences that exposed them to different neighborhoods and environments. These experiences not only impacted the way some participants viewed the criminal justice system and individuals reentering society, but also who they choose to vote for.

These findings from these participants further extends knowledge of the RCI framework to suggest that on the community level, individuals who expose themselves to communities that differ socially, racially, culturally, and economically from their own could impact personal perceptions, preferences, and behaviors. This impact can lead to changes in what citizens believe and understand about institutional disparities within the criminal justice system and ex-offenders reintegrating back into society. These changes could also possible lead to more informed choices from citizens when electing public leaders.

On the political level, the findings of this research could possibly assist policymakers in making more informed choices within the criminal justice system as it pertains to former offenders reintegrating back into society. Understanding the socioeconomic barriers and challenges of ex-offenders in addition to the perceptions of citizens from all communities on criminal justice reform will be critical for improved

policy and social change.

In the literature review I discussed the progression of the institutionalism framework from its early stages during the Great Depression era that analyzed the structures and guidelines of governmental institutions to its contemporary age, which focused on how decisions were formed within individuals, groups, organizations, and companies. More recently scholars have noted that the complexities and contextual circumstances of societal problems requires additional perspectives not only within the institutionalism framework, but also within the social sciences concentration.

Freil (2017) argued that because institutions construct norms and values that structure choices, they are difficult to change because they shape the very choices individuals make when attempting to change them. These norms and values at the community level include the environment within which individuals live, work, and play which includes personal interactions, experiences, and exposure to different environments (Freil, 2017). These factors ultimately impact perceptions and ultimately define individual choices when it comes to who people vote for and what they choose to expose themselves to.

In other recent research, Gwiazda (2017) adopted insights from public policy literature and RCI to shed light on the effectiveness of gender quotas to argue that effectiveness depended on institutions (policy design) and the preferences of political parties. This analytical framework was implemented for this research based on RCI because it provided a systematic methodology for studying preferences of political actors involved in policy implementation and the role of institutional constraints.

By drawing on RCI Gwiazda (2017) showed that institutions and preferences of political parties matter for the effectiveness of gender quotas. While the results raised an important question about policy evaluation as it relates to gender issues, these findings can also be applied to policy choices within the criminal justice system in addressing incarceration in Louisiana.

First policymakers must examine criminal justice reforms to ascertain if current policies have attained its objectives. The passing of the new reforms through the Louisiana legislature in the summer of 2017 was the first measure. Current policies however have failed to address the current in ensuring that ex-offenders are equipped with the necessary resources, knowledge, and support to be successful upon reentry. From the RCI perspective, leaders must now ask if the failure to meet these policy goals is related to the initial design of public policy or by its implementation by political actors? Critical evaluation in examining the motives behind policy choices within the criminal justice system is necessary in order for social change to take place.

Education and involving civic and community leaders, scholar-practitioners, lawmakers, law-enforcement, citizens, and ex-offenders can only address these questions. Honest discussions and dialogue about the barriers and stigmas upon men and women with a criminal background history must also be addressed for improved policy. While the RCI framework has been used in the political realm to understand policy making, I argued that this framework could also be used within the context of perceptions and how cultural norms and personal preferences within a community environment can impact citizen perceptions and voting preferences that impact policy decisions and outcomes.

From the community perspective, the overarching theme that emerged from the findings in light of the central research question was Quality of Life. This suggests that these participants perception of ex-offender reintegration was favorable, but that having the necessary resources, rehabilitation, environment, family support, exposure, education, structure, guidance, and effective public leadership was critical for providing a quality of life that would reduce the chances of recidivism.

At the political level, the RCI framework and its stipulation that established rules and norms of a particular environment impacted behavior and decisions that determined policy outcomes were presented (Ostrum, 2007). The integration of the RCI framework into the final themes and overarching themes highlights the relationships between people, environment, processes, policy, and outcomes. The Model of Institutional Reinforcement that I discussed in chapter 2 also describes how these processes run together in a continuous cycle, further supporting the utilization of this framework for this study.

Limitations

This study is the result of interviews from 22 participants who reside in different communities throughout City N Parish. Assuming these findings could be generalized to the entire state of Louisiana or other regions in the United States would be misleading as these findings only represent a very minute proportion of the population in City N Parish. Initially I proposed having an equal number of participants from two different socio-economic communities. However only a few individuals within these two targeted neighborhoods volunteered for this study.

To obtain additional participants, I developed a research strategy that included

using the creation of a new Facebook page to identify volunteers who were qualified to participate. This gave me the ability to connect with other community groups, non-profit organizations, and local leadership organizations within the City N. 22 qualified individuals from different communities throughout City N Parish contacted me regarding interest in participating in my study. This limited my ability to collect data from individuals within one select community. These communities that the interested participants reside in closely resembled the initial proposed communities in terms of population and racial makeup. However, the majority of these participants resided in mostly middle class neighborhoods, with only one participant actually residing in a lower class community.

A number of the participants interviewed, grew up in lower class neighborhoods within the City N Parish community, but now currently reside in middle to upper class neighborhoods. I remained open to accepting additional participants from the proposed neighborhoods under research should they reach out to me after the deadline to volunteer. This was done in the event that other participants would drop out, which would impact my proposed sample size. I did not receive any additional volunteers from these two initial neighborhoods, but I did receive interest from other individuals who resided within City N Parish. By the documented deadline I had a total of 22 participants, which exceeded my proposed sample size. Per protocol standards, I interviewed every qualified volunteer who offered to participate in the study by scheduling an interview time and date.

Prior to starting each interview, I had potential participants sign the consent form

and then proceeded to the formal interview that was done with a digital recorder and handwritten notes. While all participants responded to interview questions in a similar form, which established saturation with this sample, it would be constructive to have an equal proportion of individuals who currently reside in both lower and middle class neighborhoods. Having an equal number of participants would have provided equal insight and participation from individuals of both low and moderate to high socioeconomic status.

While I was not able to capture an adequate sample size from the initial two neighborhoods under study, the actual sample size that was captured was composed of individuals from over 15 different neighborhoods within City N Parish. The wide distribution of citizens from different communities was not intended initially for this study, and the results cannot be necessarily generalized to any particular community. However, the results of this study may provide a broader spectrum on the perceptions of citizens who reside in City N Parish on the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration.

Limitations to trustworthiness that arose from this study were my own racial identity. I noted in chapter one that as an African-American male I have my own biases and preconceived beliefs regarding the criminal justice system. I also noted my own opinions regarding the social and economic impact on minorities who make up a large portion of ex-offenders and current offenders in prison. I made note of these issues in my personal qualitative journal prior to collecting my data. To prevent this bias from carrying over into my questioning, sampling, my committee members and colleagues

reviewed my interview questions and provided feedback on suggested modifications.

To further improve my research study, I had additional doctoral candidates with whom I met with at a public policy conference in Chicago examine my interview questions for bias before using them for my actual participants. Colleagues noted some inconsistencies in my questions, as well as my initial style of language. A number of suggestions assisted in formulating questions that were language neutral. For example, one colleague suggested that using the term individuals who were convicted of nonviolent drug offenses was a better term to use as opposed to using words such as ex-convicts or prisoners. These suggestions were all noted and I made the necessary adjustments to my interview questions.

I also conducted three practice interviews with family members and changed the order and format of some my questions for clarity. NVivo was used to assist in data management including sorting, coding, and conducting more advanced analysis. I identified patterns and themes in my data as I analyzed it. Taking note of my own biases, this process of coding and reorganizing was continued throughout the study to ensure that I was only analyzing and reporting the themes that were identified from the responses from participants.

The last noted limitation to trustworthiness in this study was the one on one interview format that was used. It is possible that the European-American participants might not have felt comfortable in a face to face interview setting providing me with honest answers in regard to their views of racial disparities within the criminal justice system due to the fact that I am an African-American male. African-American

participants felt comfortable telling me how they felt about these same issues in a face-to-face setting, but this could be attributed to the fact that I am African-American and they assumed that I had opinions similar to theirs. Quantitative research done in the future could benefit from conducting online or telephone surveys, which would add more privacy for participants who are of different races.

Recommendations

This qualitative case study was designed to understand the thoughts and perspectives of citizens regarding institutional disparities within the criminal justice system and the reintegration of nonviolent drug offenders. The results of this investigation suggest that studies similar to this one could yield similar results inside communities similar in size and population to City N Parish.

Recommendations for future research may include a more focused ethnographic or phenomenological approach in selected low income and or middle class communities that may provide deeper insight and understanding to show how personal experiences, family upbringing, and observations impact perceptions on social issues such as criminal justice reform. These findings should be shared with and distributed among external stakeholders within the criminal justice system such as elected officials, local businesses, social media, schools, the media, and surrounding communities. The results could also be disseminated to special interest groups, community group forums, clubs, and committees.

Other for future studies include projects that center on education, and training courses within in the penal system. A number of offenders have mental, social, and psychological challenges in addition to structural, socio-economic, and educational

barriers. More time, education, assistance, and resources maybe required earlier during incarceration to assist offenders who will eventually be returning back into society.

Addressing some of these barriers and preparing current offenders for their future outside the criminal justice system upon entering the prison system may reduce recidivism rates long term.

Case studies could also be conducted on past criminal justice reform bills that addressed ex-offender reintegration, to examine how these laws have impacted former offenders returning back to the community. These findings should be shared with internal stakeholders within the criminal justice system, which include parole, correctional, and probation officers, judges, court personnel, and former and current ex-offenders.

While internal and external stakeholders within the criminal justice system have different objectives, they are all connected with one another. The findings from this research study and recommendations for future research could possibly help stakeholders effectively execute their jobs better in properly preventing future crimes, and treating offenders.

On a larger scale this research could also be replicated by using a quantitative study with random sampling within a city that utilizes questionnaires, emails, or telephone surveys to access citizen perceptions on issues within the criminal justice system. This quantitative instrument could also utilize variations that were detected among participants of different age, socioeconomic status, race, and professions in this investigation, to find out whether those variations can tell us more about the demographic sectors of the population. These results would have a larger sample size, which could

possibly be generalized to the population. It is also more likely that citizens who choose to participate would be more honest in their responses due to anonymity.

Social Change Implications

This investigation provides significant knowledge related to social change on several levels in Louisiana. First this research allows scholars to focus on certain subjects within the criminal justice that require further research regarding perception and ex-offender reintegration in a state where the incarceration rate is still the highest in the world. Examining these subjects on an individual and family level will provide researchers more insight and understanding into how family upbringing, environment, and personal experiences can shape individual perceptions and preferences.

Addressing the structural causes of disparities within the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration will provide a useful foundation for scholars to utilize the RCI framework at both the institutional, organizational, political, and community level in understanding how environment, experiences, rules, and regulations shape personal incentives and preferences. Understanding the motives behind these preferences could possibly assist researchers in understanding how policy choices are made within our public institutions, as well as how policy choices are made within our communities.

The local and mass media might also do well in implementing a different kind of coverage in regard to crime in a community that provides more objectivity, knowledge, and context to the situation. This present study also provides an effective avenue to be replicated in other areas of the City N Parish community, the state of Louisiana, or the United States, by qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods methodology. Using

multiple methods could provide multiple perspectives in understanding why citizens perceive the criminal justice system the way they do.

Conclusions

Policies that provide opportunities to individuals with a prior criminal history to have an improved quality of life is a key component of social change. The data collected in this research illustrates that there are numerous social, political, and economic challenges and obstacles at the community, regional, and national level related to inconsistencies within the criminal justice system and ex-offender reintegration. These social issues are not only limited to City N Parish, but within other communities, cities, and states. These issues are also deeply impacted by policy, personal experiences, public perceptions, and the media.

Criminal justice policies such as mandatory minimums and the three strikes law led to increasing incarceration rates within the United States (Nellis, Greene, & Mauer, 2008). Policies such as Senate Bill 139, which expands probation eligibility to offenders with substance abuse problems, provides a positive step in the opposite direction for providing former offenders with another opportunity.

Thousands of former offenders are now returning back to their communities due to several states undertaking criminal justice reform initiatives similar to those of the Louisiana Task Force. Attention must now be geared toward assuring that restorative citizens are provided and exposed to the necessary education, resources, training, workforce development, and rehabilitation services critical to re-entering society.

Personal experiences play a major role in decision-making down from the

smallest individual tasks to making decisions that impact entire communities. Behind every decision is a story, and it is important that individuals are given the platform at both the community and political level to have their stories told.

Depending on the community an individual comes from, how they are raised, whom they associate with, and what they are exposed to ultimately impacts perception, preferences, and choices. Because individuals bring with them their own biases, perceptions, and experiences, it can be challenging to examine and change old attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, it is important for both citizens and public leaders to not only become cognizant of their own values, beliefs, and thought processes, but also to allow room for reformed perceptions and beliefs.

Media outlets that are subjective in what is shown on TV, social media, radio, and the Internet can often reinforce these preconceived beliefs and decisions. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders within the criminal justice system and community to challenge inconsistencies, rumors, and half-truths put forth by the media, by properly disseminating information objectively and frequently through regular community meetings, town hall briefings, and intercity community group initiatives and projects.

This research study is limited in scope and sample size to 22 participants from one city. However, the results of this study provide readers more depth and understanding into the thoughts of the participants on one small aspect of the criminal justice system. Additional studies could further clarify why individuals think and feel the way they do about criminal justice reform and ex-offenders reentering society.

Change does not necessarily require a radical new way of thinking, but rather a

change in the way of thinking. Social change in particular, begins with actively listening and understanding others who we may disagree with on societal issues. Only after these things take place can effective communication and solutions take place.

With personal experiences come perceptions that are based on what an individual is exposed to. The rational choice framework was used as the basis of the central research question, which examines the motives behind actor decisions in policymaking. The results of this study highlighted that individuals who had exposure to communities and cultures that differed from theirs, had a better understanding of the disparities within the criminal justice system and the obstacles facing individuals with a criminal history. The findings suggest that opportunities such as community service offer all citizens the chance to connect, be exposed to, and learn from others who come from different environments.

If environment and lived experiences shapes individual perceptions, preferences, and choices, then exposure to individuals from different cultures, norms, and environments, could possibly change perceptions, thought patterns, and preferences. Interacting with individuals who come from different socioeconomic communities and lived experiences provides knowledge, insight, and understanding for policymakers in understanding complex social issues that are not necessarily shown objectively in public. Gaining these perspectives not only brings knowledge, but also understanding, bipartisanship, unity, and social change.

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Appendix A: Louisiana Task Force Report Weight Threshold Chart

Weight	Possession	Commercial	Possession	Commercial
	Policy Recommendation 1		Policy Recommendation 2	
<i>Marijuana + Synthetic Marijuana</i>				
0 – 2.5kg	<i>Unchanged</i>	D Felony	<i>Unchanged</i>	D Felony
2.5kg+		C Felony	C Felony	
<i>Schedule I Controlled Substances (excluding marijuana)*</i>				
0 – 2g	0 – 2 years*	Heroin: C Felony**	0 – 2 years*	Heroin: C Felony**
2g – 28g	D Felony*	Other: D Felony	D Felony*	Other: D Felony
28g+	<i>Unchanged</i>	Heroin: B Felony Other: C Felony	Heroin: B Felony Other: C Felony	
<i>Schedule II Controlled Substances</i>				
0 – 2g	0 – 2 years	D Felony*	0 – 2 years	D Felony*
2g – 28g	E Felony		E Felony	
28g+	<i>Unchanged</i>	C Felony*	C Felony*	
<i>Schedule III Controlled Substances</i>				
Any	E Felony	D Felony	E Felony	D Felony
<i>Schedule IV Controlled Substances***</i>				
Any	E Felony	D Felony	E Felony	D Felony
<i>Schedule V Controlled Substances</i>				
Any	E Felony	D Felony	E Felony	D Felony

*Excluding phencyclidine, which, for possession offenses, will be a C felony.

**Production or manufacture of methamphetamine or amphetamine in front of a minor will maintain the existing penalty range and will not be included in the felony class system (15 – 30 years, with a minimum 15 years without probation, parole, or suspension of sentence).

***Excluding flunitrazepam, which, for possession offenses, will be a D felony, and for commercial offenses, will be a C felony.

Appendix B: Reforms passed into law

Retrieved from

http://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/politics/legislature/article_168c6d6e-5089-11e7-a0d6-7f67135f59a4.html

Senate Bill 139 by Sen. Danny Martiny, R-Metairie: Expands probation eligibility to offenders, expands eligibility for substance abuse probation and drug courts, creates a medical furlough policy allowing temporary release of inmates with significant medical costs so they can be treated in a facility, allows parole consideration for select inmates with life sentences.

Senate Bill 220 by Senate President John Alario, R-Westwego: Tailors drug sentences to the weight of the drugs, raises the felony theft threshold to \$1,000, merges redundant property crime offenses, creates a Louisiana Felony Class System Task Force, that will make recommendations about overhauling felony offenses in 2018.

Senate Bill 221 by Senate President John Alario, R-Westwego: Reduces the minimum prison term for a second felony conviction and restricts life without parole sentences imposed for third- or fourth convictions -- to those convicted of multiple violent or sex crimes. The law also shortens the timeframe that a criminal defendant's prior drug or property crime convictions can count for imposing a habitual offender sentence from a decade to five years.

Senate Bill 16 by Sen. Dan Claitor, R-Baton Rouge: Pares back life without parole sentences for juveniles so it is no longer allowable unless it's a first-degree murder case. Most juveniles sentenced to life would be granted opportunity for parole after serving 25 years.

House Bill 249 by Rep. Tanner Magee, R-Houma: Allows judges to tailor court fees and restitution payments based on a person's ability to pay after leaving jail.

House Bill 489 by Rep. Walt Leger III, D-New Orleans: Establishes that 70 % of savings will be allocated to public safety programs. The breakdown of the savings is 30 % to grants for prison alternatives, 20 % to support victims' services and 50 % for the Department of Corrections to offer programming to inmates. In the second year, Office of Juvenile Justice will start to receive 20 % of the pie.

House Bill 116 by Rep. Stephen Dwight, R-Lake Charles: Improves victim notification system to allow people to receive notification about an offenders' release or parole hearings.

House Bill 519 by Rep. Julie Emerson, R-Carencro: Expands opportunities so people with criminal convictions can apply for and receive occupational licenses.

House Bill 680 by Rep. Joe Marino, No Party-Gretna: Suspends child support payments for people who have been incarcerated for more than six months, unless they have a means to pay.

House Bill 681 by Rep. Helena Moreno, D-New Orleans: Lifts food stamp and welfare ban for drug offenders returning home from prison.

Appendix C: National Institute of Health Certification



Appendix D: Data Collection Tool: Interview Protocol

Walden University

Date:

Time:

Location:

Interview Candidate #:

Research Question:

What are the perceptions of citizens in two distinct neighborhoods regarding institutional disparities and practices related to the reintegration of males who were convicted of nonviolent drug related offenses?

Opening Comments:

Good morning (afternoon). My name is Terrance Hinton and I want to thank you for coming. Our discussion topic is examining citizen perceptions of Institutional disparities and the reintegration of nonviolent drug related offenders back into the community. I will begin by asking a series of questions to gain a background and understanding of your overall experience and perception with the criminal justice system in Louisiana. As a reminder, you do not have to answer any question that you choose not to and you can also ask to return to a question later during the interview if needed. Our discussion should last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. However, more time will be available for you to provide additional thoughts and opinions on our discussion topic if you choose to do so.

As a reminder, I will be tape-recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can get all the details but at the same time be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. There are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable with saying what you really think and how you really feel. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. I will be compiling a report which will contain all participant' comments without any reference to individuals. Do you have any questions before we begin?

CONSENT FORM INSTRUCTIONS Before we get started, please take a few minutes to read this preamble (read and sign this consent form). (Hand R consent form/preamble.) (After R returns preamble/consent form, turn tape recorder on.)

Opening Questions:

1. Where are you originally from and how long have you been a resident of City N Parish?
2. How often you volunteer in the community and why?

Interview Questions:

3. Have you ever been incarcerated or had an immediate family member, friend, associate, or distant relative who was incarcerated? If any of the following apply, can you share your thoughts and experience?
4. What are your thoughts on the perception that there are disparities within the criminal justice system in regard to sentencing, arrests, and convictions? Do you think other individuals within your community feel the same way you do? What about other communities? Do you think there is a divide between communities on this subject? (Prompt: Can you explain where you learned about this from?)
5. Do you talk about topics pertaining to the criminal justice system with people of other races? Why or Why Not?
6. What are your opinions regarding the current Edwards administration and the new criminal justice reforms that passed in June of 2017 within Louisiana?
(Prompt: How do you feel about individuals who were formerly incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses reintegrating into the community?)
7. What are your thoughts on the ability of those who were convicted of nonviolent drug offenses now having access to resources such as food stamps, welfare, and improved accessibility to employment opportunities due to the new reforms that were passed? (Prompt: Are the rules regarding housing, employment, insurance, and loans fair to those who have been formally incarcerated?)
8. Do you view differently between violent and nonviolent drug offenses? (Prompt: Should those with a history of non-drug violent offenses as opposed to those with a history of violent offenses be given a second chance? Why or why not?)

9. What role do you think the media (TV, Radio, Newspaper, Social Media) plays in your perception of those have been or are currently incarcerated?
10. What are your thoughts on the perception that some communities have social, economic, and political advantages over others?
11. What are your thoughts on the opinion that institutions (schools, government, communities, churches, gangs, neighborhoods) and the rules that govern them dictate perceptions and preferences? (Prompt: Does the environment within which an individual lives and works impact their behaviors, outlook on social issues, and preferences when it comes to electing public leaders?)
12. Are there any additional thoughts or comments you would like to add?

Closing Comments:

This concludes our interview today. Thank you for participation in this research. Within one week from today, I will provide you with a copy of the transcribed interview questions and responses via email for your review. Please review the transcription and let me know if there is anything that needs to be revised, edited, or clarified from today's interview.

Appendix E: Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections Services 2017

**Louisiana Department of Public Safety
and Corrections
Corrections Services**

James M. Le Blanc
Secretary

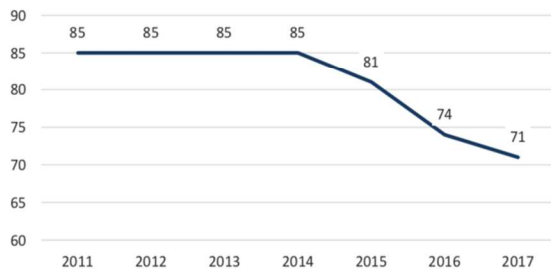
FACT SHEET
December 31, 2017



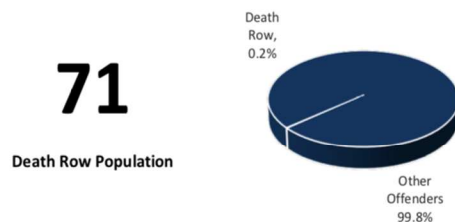
This document represents a demographic snapshot of the adult offenders in the custody of the state correctional system on December 31, 2017 serving death sentences.

Presently there are 70 adult male offenders and 1 adult female offender incarcerated in state prison facilities, who received death sentences for violent crimes.

Trend

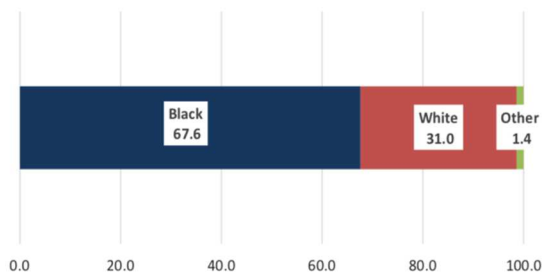


Demographic Profiles of the
Death Row Correctional Population

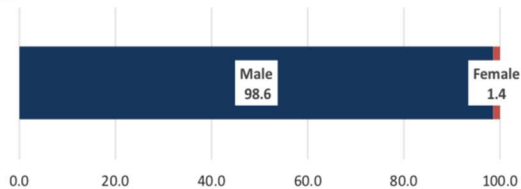


Death Row Population

Race



Sex



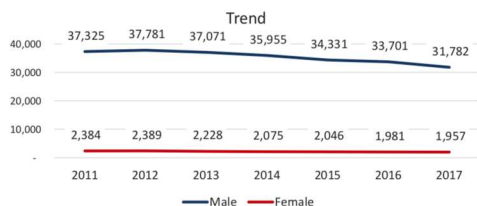
Louisiana Department of Public Safety
and Corrections
Corrections Services

James M. Le Blanc
Secretary

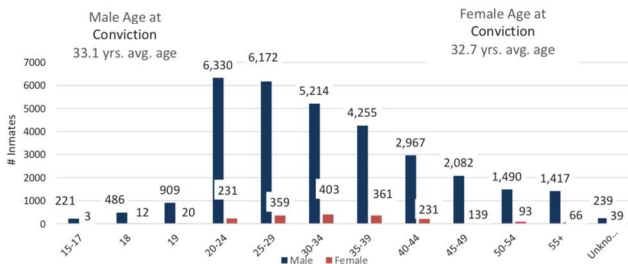
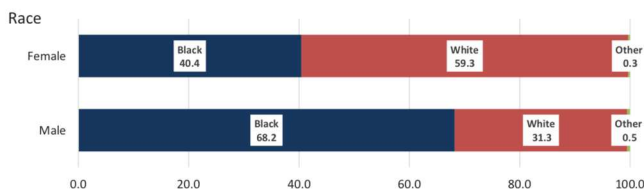
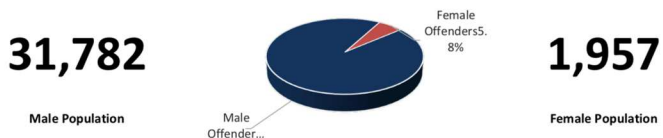
FACT SHEET
December 31, 2017



This document represents a demographic snapshot of the 31,782 male offenders in the custody of the state correctional system and the 1,957 female offenders in the custody of the state correctional system on December 31, 2017.



Demographic Profiles of the
Adult Male and Female Correctional Populations



Louisiana Department of Public Safety
and Corrections
Corrections Services

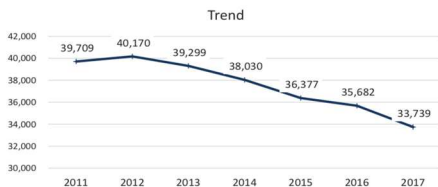
James M. Le Blanc
Secretary

FACT SHEET
December 31, 2017

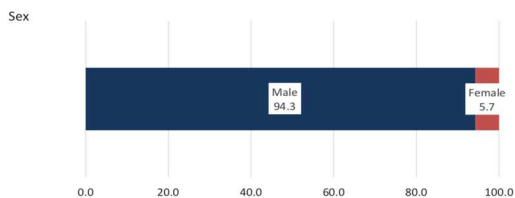
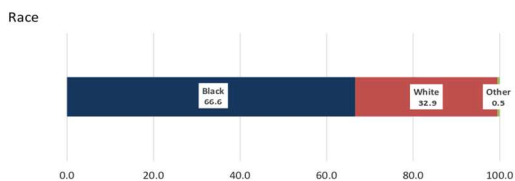


This document represents a demographic snapshot of the adult inmates in the state correctional system on December 31, 2017

Presently there are 15,152 adult inmates incarcerated in state prison facilities, an additional 18,587 adults, which includes 1,680 adults in non-contract transitional work programs, sentenced to the Department's custody and housed in local jails, and 993 adults in contract transitional work programs for a total of 33,739 DOC offenders.



Demographic Profiles of the
Adult Correctional Population



**Louisiana Department of Public Safety
and Corrections
Corrections Services**

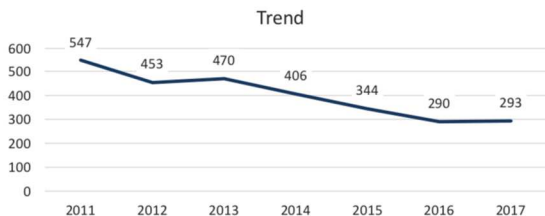
**James M. Le Blanc
Secretary**

**FACT SHEET
December 31, 2017**



This document represents a demographic snapshot of the youthful offenders in the state correctional system on December 31, 2017.

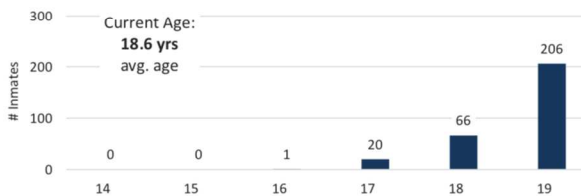
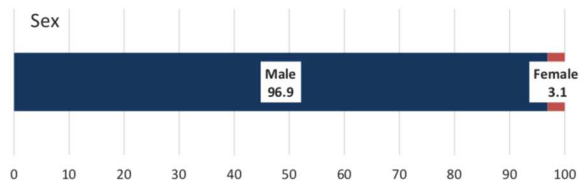
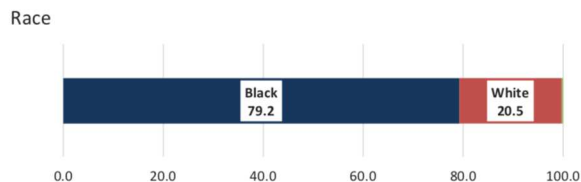
Presently, there are 293 offenders who are youthful offenders housed in state prisons. The youthful offender population is composed of offenders who are currently 16, 17, 18 and 19 years of age and who were convicted in criminal court and sentenced to the custody of the Department.



*Demographic Profiles of the
Youthful Offender Population*

293

Youthful Offender Population



27

**Louisiana Department of Public Safety
and Corrections
Corrections Services**

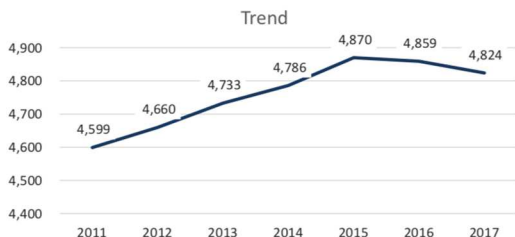
**James M. Le Blanc
Secretary**

**FACT SHEET
December 31, 2017**



This document represents a demographic snapshot of the adult offenders in the custody of the state correctional system on December 31, 2017 serving natural life sentences.

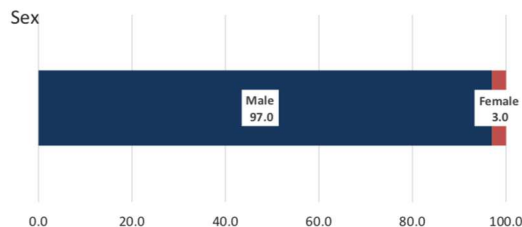
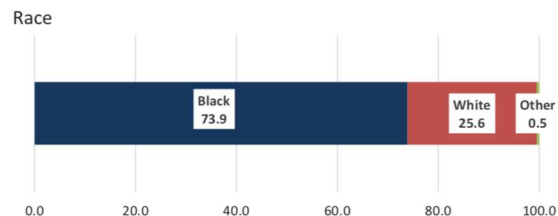
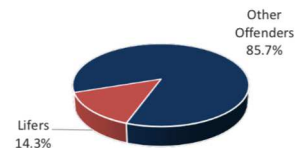
Presently there are 4,838 adult offenders incarcerated in state prison facilities with life sentences.



*Demographic Profiles of LIFERS
Adult Correctional Population*

4,824

Lifer Population



Appendix F: Complete Frequency Table

Frequency Table

Themes 1-6	No. of times referenced during Interviews	No. of part. who mentioned theme at least once
Environment & Family Support	96	20
Community Service & Exposure	96	20
Inaccuracies of Media Communication	85	22
Public Service & Legislation	72	14
Effective Resources & Rehabilitation	59	19
Educational Guidance and Instruction	45	14
Perceptions	25	12
Choices	24	11
Awareness	21	7
Experiences	20	7
Responsibility	20	12
Religion	17	8
Circumstances	16	8
Compassion	10	10

Influence	11	9
Reintegration	8	6
Comfort	9	8
Mental Health	8	3
Survival	7	4
Drugs	6	6
Punishment	6	4
Addiction	5	5
Equality	5	2
Availability	4	4
Brotherhood	4	2
Serve and Protect	3	3
Secondary Education	3	3
Vocation	3	2
Critical Thinking	3	3
Burden	3	3
Civil Unrest	3	3
War on Drugs	2	2
Fairness	2	2
Behavior	2	2
Deception	2	2
Groups	3	3

Luxury	2	2
American Dream	1	1
Distrust	6	5
Patriotism	1	1
Self-Worth	1	1
Economy	15	10
Opioids	4	1
Physical Appearance	1	1
Gun Control	1	1
Proactive Policing	1	1
Consequences	1	1
Double Standard	1	1
Fiscal Responsibility	1	1
Public Safety	1	1
Accessibility	1	1
Political Correctness	1	1
Criminal Justice System	15	15
Immigration	1	1
Laws	6	5
Leadership	10	10
Power	2	2

Policy	4	4
Law Enforcement	5	5
Military	4	4
Social Change	2	2
Institutions	5	5
Negative Experience	6	6
Respect	1	1
Serve and Protect	2	2
Social Change	1	1
Government	10	10
Violent and Nonviolent Offense	9	6
Assistance	5	5
Communication	4	4
Dialogue	3	3
Immigration	1	1
Incarceration	11	11
Interaction	3	3
Distrust	6	6
Temporary	3	3
Rehabilitation	9	9
Abuse	1	1

Poverty	12	10
Welfare	3	3
Barriers	10	8
Reintegration	2	2
Employment	2	2
Opportunity	11	7
Information	1	1
Research	6	5
Criminal History	8	7
Cognitive Behavior	1	1
Personal Development	1	1
Security	1	1
Knowledge	2	2
Workforce Development	1	1
Training	9	7

The complete frequency table indicates every code that was mentioned at least once by participants from the initial round of coding. The top six represent the themes most mentioned by participants.

Appendix G Journal Notes

The following are two examples of notes that I took after reflecting on two different days of interviews with participants:

I had a great experience interviewing today. I think people generally care about what's going on but like anything else they have some different opinions in regard to violent and nonviolent offenders. With each interview I am getting better in regard to my listening, communication, and questioning skills. I am getting a good feel for each participant with each question and then taking it from there. The biggest thing I am finding is that every individual continues to speak about the topic even after the formal interview is over. The average discussion is another 15 to 20 min after ending the recorder. Some of the best stories have been told then so I am making a recollection of them afterwards. I think my questions are thought provoking and take individuals sometime to process so that by the time the interview is over, there are a number of additional experiences, cases, and memories that come to mind that they want to share. I have been surprised about some of the responses I get. I admit that I am making pre-judgments on what individuals will say based on their color. But I have had individuals who were European-American impart new knowledge to me on issues regarding the criminal justice system that I didn't know about, and I have had African-American

individuals who have had little experiences with it. One small example is I had an African-American male participant who was born and raised in a community that is high and poverty and crime, with very little education, and yet had never had experience with the criminal justice system in anyway shape or form. He felt that African-Americans in general make poor choices that that makes it worse for them when they come out of prison as opposed to blaming the criminal justice system. And then I had another participant who was a European-American female who was highly educated and considered to be upper-middle class who was on the other end of the spectrum and felt like there were a multitude of barriers facing ex-offenders who were reintegrating back into the community. It just reminded me of the importance of maintaining objectivity as a researcher and making no assumptions. In general I am seeing not black and white but more shades of grey in what individuals are saying. So I am going to go slow and take my time to ensure I capture everything, which I believe adds more depth and value to my study. Looking forward to Day three! (Hinton, 2018, Wednesday March 14th, unpublished raw data from personal journal).

Another great day, I am seeing some common themes in each interview in regards to education, environment, resources, family support, choices, barriers, and opportunities. I believe I have the information I need to

begin coding and analyzing my data, but just to be sure I have an additional 2 interviews tomorrow. I am exhausted but at the same time invigorated by speaking to individuals on this topic. It has been a wonderful experience and I am interested to see what I come across in my coding (Hinton, 2018, Thursday March 15th, unpublished raw data from personal journal).